

QUIRK

Grey clouds were heavy with rain - a shiny, grey rain, feebly attempting to cleanse grey streets and walkways. Buildings loomed up against a dull sky, and only faint pricks of light managed to pierce the cloud shield. Cars stopped only momentarily, as pedestrians crossed the street, hurrying from one shelter to another. The rain drizzled onto the regimented rectangles that lined the city blocks. In the midst of uniformity, was a flatter, elongated building. It was about two hundred feet long, and half as wide, with a height the equivalent of two stories. It was unique - an oddity that stood curiously apart from the buildings surrounding it. This was the St. Lawrence Market. Open to enable farmers to sell their smaller produce, it possessed several large doors, like those used in garages - one of which was used as the main entrance. Beside this opening stood a middle-aged man, hands thrust deeply into the pockets of an all-weather coat.

His was an extremely plain face at the best of times; thin, as was every part of his anatomy. If he chose to portray disapproval, or annoyance, he would acquire an almost ugly look - as if what he was dealing with was too trivial, or too ridiculous. He had a large ski nose that backed into a receding forehead and a scarcity of hair. A prominent jaw did little to improve his appearance. His coat was open, reaching slightly below the knees, from which point, brown pants led down to brown shoes. A belt was loosely clasped at the waist.

He was still uncertain as to why he had chosen to come to the market. The produce found here could scarcely appeal to one like himself. He decided to leave but made no move to do so. He had heard of this place but had never been here. A detached curiosity kept him postponing his departure. It was only early afternoon - why not enter? At least it would allow him to dry out. Although not precisely wet, he felt generally damp and uncomfortable.

Upon entering, the first thing that struck him was the earthy, muggy scent. He gazed around, letting his other senses become involved. The place wasn't terribly crowded. The inside consisted of one large room, divided only by numerous tables, upon which the produce was being displayed. Most tables had a covering of newspaper, and the concrete floor was swept with earth. The mumble of voices from sellers and customers was low and constant.

It was an odd place to be sure - not at all worthy of someone of his talents. He dug his hands further into his pockets. His nose wrinkled his disdain as the fingers of his left hand clutched his wallet. A smile, devoid of honest amusement infused his features. Perhaps, after all, he could accomplish something today. It could prove interesting.

Casually, he walked over to the nearest counter, deafening his ears to the hollow echo of muted conversations. He gently dislodged a bag from the interior of his coat and glanced around. Where to begin? An excellent question. He meandered aimlessly among the tables for several minutes, watching the progression of foods on view -

apples, peaches, tomatoes, carrots, beans, parsnips - piled into wooden quart baskets. There was no particular order or unity. To find what one wanted seemed more a question of trial and error.

As he glanced at various homemade sausages and cheeses, he felt that, indeed, every food imaginable and unimaginable was on display. What was it his wife had mentioned? Oh, yes - even squid and pickled eels. She had come here a few days before their separation...but he had promised himself he wouldn't think of that. It was soon after her departure that he had begun his hobby. It was almost a compulsion then, and...fresh carrots - he always did have an affinity towards fresh carrots. With a professional calm, he picked one up and began examining it.

"Oh, you'll be findin' them about the freshest you can buy, mister. Picked them just yesterday. Like them?"

The open friendliness of the voice cut through his calm and he fumbled, dropping the carrot back into the basket. Why on earth did the old guy come up and try to start a conversation - he hadn't even tried to get the fellow's attention. He edged sideways to escape further notice.

"Er...sure...ya...well, I'll be going...hmmm....bye..." A toothy grin and nod acknowledged his words.

He walked on. Odd that he should get so nervous. He'd been under far sterner scrutiny than that before. The old geyser didn't seem too wary, what with his wide grin, and fringe of white hair around the sides and back of his head. Queer though - talking out like that. After replacing the bag the pocket inside his coat, he returned his hands to the depths of his pockets. The day was still young.

"Grand day, eh? That rain. Can I help? Want anything?" Startled, he glanced up to see a smile stretch across the face of a young, scrawny girl. With jerky, uncoordinated movements, she was emptying a basket of tiny cucumbers into a paper bag.

"Er...no...no thanks."

Hastily he turned away. It seemed that everyone here came from the same nuthouse. Everyone wanted to talk and he wasn't in the mood for talking. As he continued his slow steps, he found his mind dwelling on the girl's smile. There was something he liked about it - it was - yes - it was sincere - that was the word he wanted and it surprised him.

His unhurried walk halted when he found himself facing a counter with fudge of all shades and shapes. He eyed the candy. It wasn't his favourite food - but perhaps he could...but no...there was the woman who was obviously in charge of the counter. She was looking at him and smiling. Her very appearance halted him in his thoughts. A short woman, about five feet tall, with an immense girth. He guessed her weight to

hover around the three hundred pound mark. Overcoming his first shock, he bent his head slightly, on the pretext of examining some fudge. His gaze strayed back to the woman and her enormity. Noticing his glance, she gave an enthusiastic grin that enhanced her double chin. She waddled towards him, her grey hair straggling from its bun, and the red and white polka dot dress swaying alarmingly. She introduced her goods with a strong, germanic accent.

"Very goot--iss ver-ry goot. You like? No calories! No fat! Iss very, ver-ry goot, ja?"

A reluctant grin interrupted his face. He tried to remember the last time he had been so amused, but couldn't. Hardly aware of his actions, he pulled his wallet out, and transferred money enough to buy half a pound of fudge. She smiled her thanks and nodded vigorously - her whole body obeying the motion. He completed the transaction, then turned away, abruptly, the package of fudge in his hand.

As he walked, an inexplicable cloud of depression bent over him. He moved quickly, bumping into several people on his way out, but not pausing long enough for excuses. Somehow, he felt like crying, but there was nothing to cry about. Laughing would probably have better results, but there nothing to laugh about either.

Once across the street, he paused and looked back. In the middle of a city like this - a grey, neat tucked away city. He shook his head, as if to get rid of an uncomfortable thought. Raising the fudge, which was wrapped in brown paper, he stared at it, his other hand gently massaging his ear. He was used to taking things - it had never bothered him before. But somehow or other he wasn't able to do it today - instead he had actually bought something he didn't want. He started at the package for a moment longer, then, with an impatient jerk, deposited it in the waste can and shoved his hands into his pockets.

The heavier rains finally broke through the clouds. He pulled up his collar for added protection and began a slow walk.