

The Raisin Effect

by Karen Eileen Sikola

Strengthen me with raisins. —Song of Songs 2:5

FACT: The employees in food dehydration plants are required to wear metal-plated Band-Aids when they injure themselves so that in the event that the bandage falls off, it is “more likely” to be detected before the food is packaged and distributed.

I know this because the man I recently began seeing, only two short months after officially ending a three year relationship with an anthropologist, works at a raisin plant on the outskirts of Fresno.

“Do you like my blue collar uniform?” he asked me once upon dropping by my house after work.

“I do,” I answered honestly. Not so much because of the red and white embroidered patch that displayed his name in cursive just above his heart, or because the faded navy fabric contrasted in a way that made his topaz eyes appear more genuine, but because the uniform signified that he made decisions based solely on his own needs and desires, never on someone else's expectations.

He told me about the Band-Aid during our third conversation, when he recognized me from behind and I noticed the thick, blue gauze wrapped around his knuckle when he sat down and smiled at me from across the table.

“I knew it was you,” he said, and I pretended not to be flattered. We talked Sedaris, Chbosky, and coffee.

Raisins are meant to dry naturally in the sun, to accept the warmth of undeterred light. A grape has no defense against the sun's rays; it absorbs them willingly despite the consequences. His grapes, however, are at the whim of dehydration technology, forced into the vacuum of dryness, their juices sucked from them without warning. There is nothing natural about their transformation. And when he is done with them, they are distributed everywhere, to no one place in particular.

I had wondered why he didn't want to sleep with me, why he would confuse me by wrapping his hands in my hair, his mouth at my neck, breathing "I want you" just before turning back over.

"Patience" he had called it.

"A tease," I had teased him.

The first night he went limp in my hand, I whispered, "Tell me what you like," but he replied with only, "I like you." And I believed him, despite the warnings, because I literally held his vulnerability in my hand, felt it brush up against my eager body, useless for my intentions.

The thing about raisins is that although they're made from real fruit, they hold little of the fruit's nutritional value. A fruitless fruit with a limited shelf life. They are sweet due only to a high concentration of sugars, sugars that if stored for a long period of time will crystallize, making the raisin gritty, but not entirely unusable. The sugar grains dissolve if the raisins are swelled in hot water.

I wonder what happens when the bandages do fall off, if a giant metal detector heaves over the harvest, its programmed mission to eliminate contamination. I imagine diving into a vat of dried fruit, enjoying the unmistakable sweetness in each shriveled morsel, until I find myself biting into an undetected metal shard.

"How do you feel about Karen?" is the question I heard was asked.

"I feel about Karen the same way I feel about every girl," is the answer I heard was given.

When I was a little girl, I danced on the driveway of the house I grew up in, letting the rare Bakersfield snow fall on the dome of my California Raisins pink umbrella. I licked the icy crystals from the screen-printed vinyl, humming "Heard It Through the Grapevine," with all the expectant hope of a child.

