**Lifesaver**

Linda C. Wisniewski

I almost died in Partyka’s Market, right in front of the meat counter, but I don’t remember that. I heard the story in my mother’s words, deep inside a trauma-free part of me that still echoes there, a lifetime later.

Outside, sweet pea vines climbed white strings toward the sky in a garden lush with snapdragons, zinnias, peonies, and hollyhocks. My father often sent me there for a pack of Lucky Strikes, and the grocers, brothers named Bill and Ray, made me promise they were not for me. Sometimes it was a loaf of white Lady Betty bread I was there for, always slowing my steps beside the garden, enchanted by its messy wildness.

The grocers’ sister lived above the store. As a little girl, I was fascinated by her, leaning out the upstairs porch, pegging clothes to a line that stretched across the yard and down to a cinder block shed. Sometimes she was down in the garden, smiling shyly among the summer blossoms. She never spoke. When my mother was with me, she told me not to stare, because the sister was simple. I never knew her name, but I would say, even then, she looked safe and happy.

Inside the market, Bill and Ray smiled down at me from behind the counter. I stared into a glass-cased display of pimento loaf, bologna, and the liverwurst I still love. They teased me about my Luckies and gave me a free slice of bologna. We called it “baloney” before I knew how to spell it. I felt safe inside their little store, blocks from home, where my father could start yelling at any moment. A dropped spoon, spilled milk, or noisy piano practice could bring on a tirade and where would I hide? Down at the corner store, nobody yelled, ever.

Until I left home for college, that little corner market was a touchstone of my familiars. I passed it on the way to grade school and met my friend Franny on that corner. Sometimes on Saturdays we took the bus “downstreet” to department stores.

I must have been about four the day I stood with my mother in front of the meat counter, sucking on a Lifesaver candy. Suddenly, I choked and wheezed and struggled for air. Before my mother could move, a traveling salesman grabbed both my ankles in one hand, turned me upside down and clapped me sharply on the back. The Lifesaver popped out onto the hardwood floor, she said, but I only remember her telling of it.

I drove past Partyka’s Market the other day. The windows were covered in cardboard. The garden is a plot of grass. Bill and Ray are gone. Maybe, like me, they didn’t remember that choking incident. I bet the salesman did. I hope that, as the world grew more complicated, he recalled, like me, the simple kindness inside those walls and the glory of color behind them.