

Are Doughnuts a Vegetable?



Feather would never have gone to the Mall, except for the doughnuts. If not for the doughnuts, he would have stayed home. This was because Feather was a Muse, and Muses try to keep clear of Human Beings as much as possible. Humans can be so rude. They have a strange way of opening their mouths wide when they see you. They gasp out loud and stare at you and drop their packages, if they have packages. You would think they had never seen a broad orange beak, feathered headdress, fringed overcoat, or oversized wings before.

To be fair, thought Feather, not all Humans lacked manners. There were a few faces in the crowd without bulging eyes or gaping mouths. Some looked

perfectly normal. Others avoided his eyes. Still others trembled with suppressed amazement, laughter, or even fear, but managed to keep themselves under control. And one face gazed at him calmly, with frank curiosity: a child's face framed by tangled, curly dark hair, a small, sad face that quickly turned away when he met its eyes and melted back into the throng.

Meanwhile, all around him, packages were falling to the floor with a thud or a crunch (that one sounded like a set of dishes, thought Feather with something like satisfaction), and people were muttering and nudging their friends. "Why do I put up with this?" he asked himself, and his stomach growled back the answer: for the doughnuts.

Feather was a strict vegetarian, but sometimes he craved a change from his sensible diet of steamed vegetables, tofu, and brown rice. To put it plainly, he craved doughnuts-aren't doughnuts a vegetable?-and doughnuts were found at the Mall. So, with clenched beak, he waited in line for the Krusty-Glop DoNut Shop at The Great Buy and Buy, a sprawling mall complex at the intersection of Anonymous Road and Generic Highway.

The line was long. If Feather craned his neck, he could see it snaking far ahead into the distance, past Starbucks, Video Villa, Pizza Pit, Pretzel Pavilion, Origami Barn, and another Starbucks, before finally entering the far-off Krusty-Glop. At the moment he was standing outside Gender Gap, a store

which, despite its name, sold trendy clothes.

Even at this distance, Feather could smell doughnuts. And what a smell! It was enough to cloud the mind of even a strong-minded Muse, and Feather was anything but strong-minded.

How, he wondered idly, did Krusty-Glop produce that perfect combination of maple, vanilla, and chocolate, with a hint of raspberries and plum? And how did they spread it over the neighborhood? Was it their recipes, or was it, just possibly, some special bricks? Bricks with millions of little holes that let the doughnuts' sugary essence seep through to the outside air...



He imagined acres of glistening pastries, vast trays of them rolling out of the kitchen, fresh from their bath of hot fat-Kranberry Krullers, oozing yellowish, custardy, berry-studded goop and exuding that glorious whiff of fried dough and burnt sugar... Pumpkin Puffs, so very... plump... and Sinful Cinnamons, so extremely... round... His head swam. Should he order a dozen all alike or a mixed lot? Or two dozen and save some for later? Even stale doughnuts were better than fresh broccoli. He stood paralyzed, licking his lips, or rather the rim of his beak.

“Long line,” said a voice over his shoulder.

Feather ignored it. The voice was speaking to someone else, he thought. He had never known a

Human to make small talk with a Muse. The voice must be addressing someone else.

He felt a sharp poke between the shoulder blades, just above his wings.

“I said, long line,” repeated the voice.

Feather wheeled around. Behind him stood a girl about twelve years old. She had curly, tousled, dark hair and a sad, though slightly assertive, expression-strange... it was the same face he had seen earlier in the crowd. She had just given him a hard nudge in the back, and now she wanted to talk? Feather felt a rising sense of panic.

“Is this a Halloween costume?” asked the girl. She was actually fingering the fringes on his robe! Stop it! “Because if it is, you should know that Halloween was months ago.”

“Uh... ah... er... It’s not a Halloween costume,” mumbled Feather under his breath.

“Hm? Are you a superhero?” Her large brown eyes looked at him intently, as if his answer meant the world to her. This was bad. She was much too interested. Feather wished he knew how to lie, but he was always terribly truthful. He decided to say as little as possible.

“No.”

Her face brightened. “You’re an alien, aren’t you?”

Feather groaned. Why wouldn’t she leave him alone? He wanted to flee, but that would have meant

giving up doughnuts again. His stomach whimpered like a lonely puppy.

“You don’t have to answer that,” hissed the girl in his ear. “I can tell you’re something special. Something more than human. So I wonder... please... can you help me?”

The word “help” works magic on a Muse. They live to help. Feather relaxed a little.

“What kind of help do you need?” he whispered, trying to keep their conversation from anyone else’s ears.

“It’s hard to explain in a minute or two. Can we go somewhere else to talk?”

Feather thought long and hard about doughnuts.

“That depends,” he replied at last. “What kind of problem is it? Is it about plants?”

“No... not really... it’s more of a family problem... something has happened... and I’m scared...”

She was interrupted by the sound of breaking packages. This could mean only one thing: another Muse was at the mall. Feather cocked his head and listened. The crashing sounded muffled. It seemed to be coming from inside a nearby store, in fact, just beyond the display window beside him. Feather leaned his face against the glass and peered in.

He saw a tall, angular female figure with a triangular head and triangular ears and four elongated triangular spikes of—was it hair? feathers? a bizarre hat? Feather was never sure—rising from her forehead.

This was Mimi, the Muse of Getting Along With People. Mimi was the only Muse who really liked the Mall, because she loved to shop, though it was hard to understand why. Nothing she tried on ever fit. Just look at her shape. Even her torso was triangular, tapering to a waistline barely four inches around. Her arms and legs were like sticks.

She was holding a tee shirt up to her shoulders. Of course it was much too wide at the waist.

Feather felt a jab in his ribs. Luckily, he was well padded, because these fingers were sharp.

“I asked you a question,” said the curly-headed girl testily. “Can you help me?”

Feather shrugged. “I’m terribly sorry,” he replied politely, “but I can only help with problems about plants.” The girl scowled. “But,” he continued hastily, “there’s someone in the store who may be able to help. She understands Humans much better than I do.”

Just as the girl pressed her face against the glass, more packages crashed somewhere off to their left. There was a murmur, a commotion, a stir. Feather turned. A majestic female figure in a long, lavender dress swept through the crowd. Her blonde head was held high, and the red ribbons that bound her hair streamed behind her. She drew a great, gray cloak tightly around herself, as if to shield herself from the lowly masses. This was Urania, Muse of Astronomy, who never mingled with Humans. Odd...

“Have you seen Mimi?” she asked Feather in a voice as icy as the winds of outer space. He pointed inside.

Urania entered the Missile Gap (that was the name of the store, you may recall), and began a whispered conversation with Mimi. Feather and the girl beside him peered in, following every move. At first, Mimi tried to ignore the Astronomy Muse and concentrate on shirts, but after much talk from Urania, Mimi finally looked up. They exchanged a few more words. Mimi backed away nervously from Urania. Urania tried to approach her.

“Get away from me!” Mimi shrieked.

Mimi ran out of the store, with Urania hard on her heels. They almost collided with Feather. “Wait, Mimi!” said Urania. “You can help-”

“Look out!” screamed Mimi. “Look out for the pies from the skies!” She charged straight at a crowd of bystanders, who stood aside to let her pass, and she was gone.

“Was that the one who could help me?” the girl asked Feather pointedly.

“I’m afraid so,” he sighed.

Feather heard a whooshing, whistling sound. The girl looked into the sky. She pushed Feather in front of Urania.

Feather felt a hard, wet smack on his face. Then a burning sensation. Was it hot or cold? Cold, he decided. And why couldn’t he see? He tried to open



his mouth, but it seemed to be glued shut. Something, apparently, was stuck to his face. He raised his hands and felt-what? His fingers sank into a cold, sticky, pastelike material... sticky

and fluffy and lumpy... and sweet, he could taste it now, sweet in a yucky way, like artificial bananas... and some crumbly-hard bits, too... and on top of everything, a lightweight, metallic plate, which came loose and clattered to the floor.

“I’m sorry, Feather,” said Urania, sounding very far away. “I think that was meant for me.”

Feather wiped away the banana cream and pie crust (for that is what it was) and tried to flip it to the floor with several ineffective waves of his wrist. A good deal of goo still stuck to his hands. His feathers were a mess. It was hard to get this stuff off. He scooped it out of his ears and wished he liked pie half as much as he liked doughnuts. Somehow the soft, wet texture of cream pie could never match the chewy heft of a fine, cakey, frosted old-fashioned.

When he finally pried his eyes open, Feather saw Urania standing over him. She seemed to be looking at him and over her shoulder at the same time. The Human was gone.

“Quick!” said Urania. “We’ve got to get out of here!” Feather staggered to his feet, and together the two Muses headed for the exit.

They emerged into the vastness of the Mall's outdoor parking lot. The sun was just setting. The sky was blazing pink. Here and there a windshield reflected the sun's rays like brilliant lighthouse beacons. Streams of humanity emerged from the mall and divided into smaller rivulets that trickled into the ocean of cars. These streams were not flowing smoothly. People seemed to be tripping, slipping, and falling down. Cooked fruit and crust were everywhere, as if a bakery truck had crashed and deposited half its load on the pavement.

A fresh blueberry pie hurtled overhead and exploded with a pof against the windshield of a Chevrolodge Exploiter S.U.V. The two Muses began dodging and cutting back as they crossed the lot. Feather stepped in a gluey mass attached to a pie plate, but he hurried on as best he could, with a lopsided *galumph-clack galumph-clack galumph-clack*.

They zigzagged out of the lot and into the surrounding desert. Within minutes, they were in a cactus-covered landscape of saguaro and prickly pear. The Mall disappeared from view behind a jumble of boulders. The Muses walked (actually, one of them went with a rolling limp) until they came to the base of a high, vertical cliff. All was quiet. Urania pressed an inconspicuous stone, no different, apparently, from any of the other scabble of rocks that littered the foot of the escarpment.

A door opened in the rock face.

They hurried through; the door closed silently behind them; and they found themselves once more in the familiar, arid landscape of Kokonino County, land of the Muses. A rising moon lighted their way through dry gullies and over stony hills.

Soon they parted. Urania strode off toward her mountaintop observatory, while Feather clumped ahead toward his modeest cottage. At last it came in view, a snug little building shaped like an onion, nestled among neatly tended and productive gardens. He paused to admire the view. He waggled his foot. The pie refused to come off.

He heard a tiny squeal of laughter.

The Muse spun around. Behind him on the path was something dangerous. Something disturbing. Something that should not be.

He saw a small, familiar, moonlit face framed by a tangled, curly mat of dark hair. The face was laughing at him.

A Human had come to Kokonino County.

