A Cantaloupe and A Connection

On Saturday mornings, the distribution site fills with the sound of rolling carts, rustling bags, and different languages I can only half recognize. I am fourteen, standing behind a folding table stacked high with cantaloupes, handing them one by one to people who carry them away like they are holding something precious. The rough, netted skin of the cantaloupe feels cool in my hands as I pass each one across the table. Most clients move through the line quickly, eyes down, bags open, a nod or smile of thanks.

But one man just watches me.

He is maybe seventy, small, standing about twenty feet back. He sees me and steps out of the line. He is not waiting for his turn to pick up the fruits and vegetables laid out on the tables. He is just watching. He has the kind of grin that takes up his whole face, ear to ear, completely unselfconscious. Every so often he wipes his eyes with the back of his hand. Once he chuckles to himself at something I cannot hear. I do not know what to make of him, so I keep handing out cantaloupes and try not to stare back.

Eventually he gets back in line when almost everyone has been served. It is his turn.

He looks up at me, and I realize I am already taller than him. In slow, careful English he asks, “You Chinese?”

Automatically, my chin drops slightly and my head tilts forward, the way my mom always told me a younger person should stand before an elder.

I tell him I was born here in the United States and that I am half Korean from my mother’s side and half Burmese from my father’s side. He nods slowly, still smiling, like he heard me but I do not think he understood me.

“You my grandson,” he says. “In China.”

He did not need to say anything else. At that moment I understood everything.

Somewhere there is a boy who looks like me, maybe my height, maybe my age, and this man has not seen him in a long time. I do not know how long. I did not ask. But for a few minutes on a Saturday morning at that distribution site in San Jose, handing out cantaloupes to strangers, I gave an old man something to smile about.

I thought I was volunteering to give food. I did not realize I could also give something else: the comfort of seeing a familiar face in an unfamiliar place.

Sometimes a healthy connection does not need the same language, background, or explanation. Sometimes it begins with something as simple as handing someone a cantaloupe and realizing you reminded them of home.