

# SHORT FICTION/ESSAYS

## GROCERIES

**Susan Bryant**

Each morning, as soon as she was awake, Molly thought about groceries. Sipping coffee at her kitchen table, she might gaze at the pots of herbs on her windowsill and think, "I should pick up a pound of tomatoes today, to use with the basil. And a little piece of Parmesan cheese"—imagining the tomatoes, deep red, swimming in vinaigrette, sprinkled with the green and gold of basil and cheese. Maybe in a shallow black bowl. And she'd feel her heart grow light, as if someone had pulled out a heavy weight from somewhere deep inside her. Then she'd dress in something loose and comfortable and twist her wiry hair into a knot. "Brillo," Elliot used to call it. "Can't you do something about it? Find a decent hairdresser, for God's sake." But the hairdressers couldn't do anything about it, and neither could she. Through a series of sometimes disastrous hairstyles, it sprang back into Brillo-like exuberance. Eventually, Elliot stopped complaining about it, just as he stopped complaining about her slapdash housekeeping, her taste in clothes, her choice of friends, her girth, her inappropriate comments at dinner parties.

The day he moved out, Molly drove, as usual, to Furmano's for groceries. Up and down the aisles she went, weeping. What was she to put in her empty carriage? There were no children or grandchildren to shop for; they were scattered around the country. And what could she possibly want for herself? Eventually, she picked an eggplant, a perfect eggplant.

At home, she crawled into the attic to find her easel. It was there with her canvases, paintings of Elliot, of the children in various stages, of their dogs and cats, of the refrigerator door plastered with drawings and notes, even of a sixth-grade math textbook lying open on the kitchen table. She had painted anything she could find, until Elliot announced that she was a "dabbler." He did so at a dinner party they were giving for some of his clients.

Her friend Clara was there with her then husband. Molly could no longer remember who else was at her table, but she did remember Clara saying, "Very nice painting of the girls you've got in the hallway, Molly." Molly had recently painted her two little girls, head to head under a lamp, playing Chinese checkers. "Reminds me a little of Mary Cassatt." Something warm and delicious spread inside Molly, the way it did when she pleased Elliot. Clara, who volunteered at the local art gallery, was said to know "*quite* a lot about art."

"Molly's an amateur painter," Elliot explained to the other guests. "Just a dabbler, really. Helps fill the time when the kids are in school. Right, Mol?"

Molly, her face burning, smiled and nodded. Furious with herself.

"I wonder," Clara said, innocently, "If there had been a *Mr. Cassatt*—do

you suppose he might have called Mary a dabbler? Possibly, wouldn't you say?" She swallowed a dainty forkful of *pommes de terre dauphine*. "Fantastic potatoes—Mol."

"Oh, Molly's a great cook. No doubt about *that*." Elliot got in the last word, after all.

Late that night, when the last dish had been dried and put away, Molly carried her paints and easel into the attic, placed them alongside her canvases, and shut the trapdoor behind her. Over the years, she learned to ignore that corner of the attic.

Now, she set up her easel where it belonged, near the kitchen window, and painted her beautiful eggplant. She was pleased with the result—very pleased. But was it any good? She'd have to ask Clara. (Clara, no longer a volunteer, ran her own very successful gallery, and everyone now said she knew "a *helluva* lot about art.") Clara would hear about Elliot; surely she'd drop by.

And Clara, having heard about Elliot, did drop by, a few days later. Gratefully, Molly breathed in her wonderful perfume, her air of "Don't-worry-whatever-it-is-I've-got-it-under-control." Clara gave Molly her customary air-kiss near each ear, adding a surprisingly strong hug for one so slight. "I've only just heard, Sweetie. How are you doing?"

"Not bad. Okay, really. But I'm so glad you came. And I want to show you this." Molly indicated the canvas. "What do you think? Of course—well, you know I haven't touched a brush in years, so I don't—I mean, I just wonder if it's any . . . It's an abstract," she added, unnecessarily.

"Hmmm." Clara peered closely at the canvas, stepped back, tilted her head to one side. She wore a pale gray sheath, chunks of gold earrings, and a long scarf that matched the eggplant. Molly wished she could paint them both, together.

"Hmmm," Clara said again. "It seems to have a face."

"It does? I didn't mean it to."

"Yes, it does. Look at those shadows, like eyes and a mouth. It may be an abstract, but I think it looks like Elliot. That pig. What do you call it?"

"Aubergine."

"Well, I love it! I'll take it."

"For your *gallery*?"

"But of course, what else?"

Clara hung the painting in her gallery over the title "Elliot." It sold at once, and fetched a not-bad price.

After that first day, buying groceries was a snap. Browsing up and down the aisles of Furmano's, Molly examined the labels of foreign condiments, sniffed the baguettes and cheeses, fondled the red and yellow peppers (under pretext of testing their firmness). What bounty! How beautiful everything was! Furmano's was expensive, all right, but worth every penny.

She brought her groceries home—just a handful—and painted them.

She thought about what she'd seen and heard, what she had touched. Friends stopped by to chat while she painted, or to share one of Molly's excellent meals. What was the matter with Elliot, they said, walking out on a marriage of thirty-seven years? And for what? A hard-boiled CEO miles younger (though probably not as young as she looked, thanks to surgery. One friend even showed Molly a photo from a magazine article, "Ten Young CEOs to Watch!" and pointed out the taut cheeks and careful smile, sure signs.) She'd make mincemeat out of Elliot—not that he didn't deserve it, the louse.

Molly knew that most of this was probably untrue, but kindly meant. Concentrating on her work or her cooking, she nodded. From time to time, when her friends became agitated over Elliot's sins, she said "Mmmm" in a comforting tone.

Only Clara, cool as ever, knew exactly what was going on.

"You don't give a damn, do you?" she asked.

"Not now. At first I did. For about a week. But then I realized how relieved I was. It was like taking a big, warm, soapy bath in pure *relief*. For the first time ever, I don't feel *fuddled* about myself. Do you know what I—well, of course you don't, Clara. You've never been fuddled. I always used to think my life would be so much better if only I could be like you. Pulled together."

"Nonsense!" But Molly could see that Clara was pleased. "Anyway, I'm glad you're okay."

"Oh, I'm much better than okay. I really love my life now. So what do you think of this bowl of peaches. Interested?"

They both turned their attention to Molly's painting of peaches and a spray of jasmine.

"Hmmm. No, I don't think so. It doesn't have the pizzazz of the last one."

"Carp with Brie?"

"That's the one. Sold right off the bat, if you recall. Knock off something along those lines, why don't you?"

The great challenge about grocery shopping was avoiding Elliot or—worse—Elliot with "The Lady Friend," as Clara dubbed her. So Molly was careful to shop on weekdays, in the mornings. Never on Friday evenings, when commuter shoppers, smartly turned out after their day in the city, raced through, ticking off items on their shopping lists. Never on Saturday mornings, when they all seemed to come back again, this time in jeans and sweatshirts. They'd tear past each other in the aisles, shouting greetings and shorthand news about schools and lawns and village politics.

Around nine-thirty or ten was a lovely time to shop, because young mothers were in Furmano's then, with their babies and toddlers. Like the commuters, though, they were always in a rush, grabbing groceries and tossing them in the carriages at top speed. When Molly was young, when Furmano's was just an ordinary supermarket, she and the other mothers would gossip in the

aisles and admire each other's children. Not these mothers. They had no time to spare, and certainly no time to notice her, an unlikely figure eavesdropping in the Peanut Butter section.

Sometimes, exasperated, they'd round on the children.

"What did I *te//* you!" they'd shout, or "Do you want me to smack you?"

"Don't shout! Don't hit!" Molly wanted to plead, although she'd done both. Worst of all, she'd sometimes threatened: "Just you wait till your father comes home." Then Elliot, tired from work, irritated with her, wanting nothing more than to change out of his dark suit and mix a drink, would punish or spank, taking it out on the child. When she thought of it, Molly burned with guilt (even though her children seemed to have forgiven her).

But sometimes she saw a mother and child exchange a moment of love so intense, so private, that the rest of the world didn't exist. Molly remembered that, too.

Later in the morning was just as good. After the mothers rushed off to unload groceries and give their children lunch, the elderly shoppers would arrive in the Senior Citizens Van. They shopped for one or two items, choosing slowly, looking around, enjoying the outing. Unlike the mothers, they loved to talk. They would stop Molly for her opinion about a product, or to ask if she would reach something for them. Eager to hold her attention, they told her about their aches and pains and operations. Except for Mrs. Myers.

Mrs. Myers entered Molly's life in the Cereals section, where she gave Molly a poke with her cane. Molly looked down to find a crab-like woman with fiercely dyed black hair. She wished at once to paint that elegant face, and the eyes, especially the eyes. Like immense Greek olives they were, swimming in their brine of grief.

"Please, Lady." Mrs. Myers had a slight, indefinable accent. "The raisin bran flakes." She lifted a peremptory cane and pointed to the box.

Mrs. Myers wore a dress from some period Molly couldn't place. The thirties, maybe. Made of beaded silk, it had long, loose sleeves with slits. As she lifted her cane, the sleeve fell away, revealing a number tattooed on her forearm.

"My son usually reaches such items for me. Sadly, he hasn't visited lately."

And so began the endless tale of Mrs. Myers' faithless son, Ira. He never wrote, he never called, he rarely visited. Yet Mrs. Myers adored him. Each time she went to Furmano's, she sought Molly out to recite the latest disappointment.

"Still nothing! Not a sign. I write and write, and never an answer." And Mrs. Myers' eyes would begin to fill. "What do you say to that, Molly? A child who forgets his mother!" Thumping her cane for emphasis, Mrs. Myers would repeat, "*A child who forgets the mother who loves him* (thump!)." Molly always nodded sympathetically, saying, "How awful, how terrible for you." Sometimes, when Mrs. Myers began to weep, she patted her gently and repeated, "Oh, I know, I know," or, "It's all right, all right, all right," the way she did when her children were small.

Once, one of the Seniors grabbed her by the arm in the Rice-and-Pasta section and whispered, "Listen, it's all in her head." He tapped his forehead. "She's never had a son, she just makes it up."

"Well, what *difference* does it make?"

At the counter, the Seniors watched anxiously as the clerk registered the price of each item. Molly imagined them at home, carefully checking their sales slips. And then, their outing over and the rest of the day to kill, slowly putting away their groceries.

Inevitably, she grew careless and ran across Elliot and The Lady Friend. Late on a Friday afternoon, she thought she'd dash to Furmano's to pick up mushrooms for an omelet. She imagined painting little mushroomy chunks wrapped in a brown-and-gold blanket. She'd have to work quickly, of course, while the omelet was straight out of the pan, to catch its hot, buttery gleam. "Chrome yellow and yellow ocher, that's easy," she was thinking—though the mushrooms might be trickier—when she spied the two of them at the Health Foods counter.

The Lady Friend was slim and smartly turned out in a pale peach silk blouse under a pinstriped suit. Her skirt was very short, allowing plenty of air for her legs, which seemed to take up most of her length. A long blond bang fell rakishly over one eye. More or less what Molly had imagined. The big surprise was Elliot, in his Italian silk suit and fuchsia shirt, and his brand-new haircut. He, too, had a long bang, which he tossed back boyishly from time to time. He looked lean and surprisingly young, as if *he* were the one who had undergone surgery. The two of them were discussing something—maybe their dinner menu. Then they bent their heads, bang to bang, over the tofu and yogurt. Molly, afraid of intruding, quietly backtracked and headed for the parking lot.

Instead of the omelet, she painted a melon, from memory. Hanging over the melon was the face of a baby. He appeared to be reaching for it from the arms of his mother, whose cheek lay on his round head. Molly painted everything—the melon, the two heads—the same rosy tone, flecked with pale green and yellow. She enclosed the painting in an oval, like the inside of a locket.

In the other half of the locket she painted Mrs. Myers. Mrs. Myers wore a vintage black velvet gown, with a black ribbon around her neck. Floating above this outfit, as if dislocated, were her mournful face, her enormous eyes. One hand gripped her cane, while the other offered a pomegranate. Just below the sleeve of her outstretched arm Molly had painted a few indecipherable marks. She called the painting "Diptych."

"What's the story on the pomegranate?" Clara said, when she came to see it.

"Is it symbolic in some way? Is she bribing you to find her son? Or did

you just need a splash of color?"

"I don't know, myself. I just knew it had to be in there."

"Hmmm. Well, it's not like anything you've done before, and I'm not at all sure it'll sell. But let's give it a try. I'll put it next to 'Ratatouille' and see what happens."

It sold within the week. "That shows how much I know," said Clara. "Okay, Sweetie, let's round up all the paintings we haven't hung. Even 'Peaches and Jasmine.' We're going to have us a *vernissage*."

"You mean a showing? Of *my* work? Oh, Clara!"

Clara made it clear that she herself would choose Molly's new dress, to go with the Champagne and canapés and carefully selected guest list. Molly agreed, provided Mrs. Myers could come, and provided she, Molly, could do the food. And so it was that Molly finally bumped straight into Elliot.

She was wheeling her carriage through Furmano's the day before the vernissage, loading it up as she dreamed of watercress in pinwheel sandwiches . . . pâté with truffles . . . olives stuffed with pimentos and wrapped in bacon . . . baguettes, hot and crisp, waiting in a basket by the cheeses. And the cheeses! French and English and Italian, and one big Edam, scooped out and refilled with crabmeat. And caviar, of course—both kinds—swirled like a red-and-black meteor in a creamy dip.

Molly turned sharply left, into the Canned Soup section, to pick up some bouillon, and banged her carriage into Elliot's.

"Oh, sorry, Elliot," she said, as she had said so many times over the years.

"Ah, Molly," he replied, as if he'd been expecting her. He sneezed. He looked awful, she thought, old and tired under his youthful bang. "How are you?" His voice was hoarse.

"Wonderful! But *you* don't sound so wonderful."

"I have a terrible cold." Elliot sneezed again and groped for his handkerchief. "A stinker. I really should be in bed, but I thought hot soup might help." He gave her a look so pathetic that for one awful moment Molly thought he was going to ask her to take him home and look after him, tuck him in, heat the soup, feed it to him by the spoonful. But Elliot added quickly, "This is just a fluke; I never get sick. Just about impossible, with our lifestyle. Careful about what we eat—everything organic. Exercise like crazy. Never felt better in my life." Elliot sneezed yet again. "Just a fluke," he repeated. Molly wasn't sure whether he meant his cold or the canned soup.

"How are things at the office?"

Elliot brightened. "Fabulous! Leaner and meaner. Cleaned out the deadwood. Nothing but old farts, anyway, waiting to retire." Molly, concentrating on Elliot's zippy new language, knew better than to ask why he didn't consider himself an old fart. "Bottom line? Company's really charging ahead. Result? A big, fat raise for yours truly." Elliot blew his nose. "Not bad, wouldn't you say?"

"Not bad at all."

"Of course, I'm putting in a lot more hours than I used to, and it pays off."

Did he think that fewer hours had been her fault? It was hard to tell. "Manage to jog, though—three miles first thing in the morning. Exercise bike in the evening, Stairmaster whenever I can." Another sneeze. "Great life, I tell you."

"What else do you do?"

"What else? What do you mean, 'what else'? Jesus, Molly, isn't that enough?"

"No, of course not. Not nearly enough . . . Oh, poor Elliot, this is terrible! What a shame!" Molly said this in the same tone she used with Mrs. Myers.

"What? *What?* Are you crazy? God, Molly, you're even more . . . Since when do you—*you*, of all people"—Elliot interrupted himself with a series of sneezes—"And what the hell do *you* do, I'd like to know?" He pointed at Molly's loaded carriage. "Shop for groceries and cook, I suppose."

"Well, yes. But a lot more than that. There's my painting, of course—which is why I'm here. I mean, not today, exactly. But most of the time. You see, Elliot, everything is right here."

"In *Furmano's*, for God's sake?"

"Yes, of course! Just look around you . . . look at all this." And Molly plowed ahead of a sneezing Elliot, charging through to the Antipasto Bar (pointing, as she passed, at Kalamara olives in their glistening black brine), then to Cheeses (pointing at green-marbled Gorgonzolas, red-and-gold Edams), on her way to Fresh Produce, where she could turn to Elliot triumphantly and say, "You see?"

But Elliot had made his escape to the express checkout. Molly, stopped dead by a pomegranate—coral-red, perfect—hardly noticed. Would she paint it in Mrs. Myers' old hands, she wondered? Split open, its luscious red seeds pouring out of their nests and growing larger and larger—the largest seeds becoming faces, maybe? The faces of children! She could think about it while preparing for the vernissage. And later, at her easel, it would come to her.

Humming, she wheeled her grocery cart, with all its riches, to the checkout counter.