

*Unfamiliar Aisles*  
*From "Starsky's Lady"*  
*by Brit*

I couldn't find the blasted begonias.

For the last fifteen years they'd always been in the same aisle, separated by color and variety, right here next to the impatiens and pansies. Been that way for going on fifteen years.

The aisles are unfamiliar now. See, last fall, the nursery got bought out by some big chain, and they come through and moved things around. Brought in their fancy new cash registers and such. Let most of the staff go and brought in their own staff. The good people who'd worked at this store for as long as I can remember either took an early retirement or found work somewhere else. Folks that knew me by name were all gone now, but here I was back again, looking for the same ruby red begonias with the dark leaves I buy every year. Found the asparagus fern. Added some marigolds to give the planter a little extra color that I know she would have liked. I'd already found everything else I wanted, but still needed to find them blasted begonias.

I got tired of wandering around and stopped a clerk. At least, I thought he was a clerk. It was an easy mistake—he was wearing some old jeans and a denim shirt, and stood staring at a cell of pansies. I figured he was somebody who worked out back, but I realized I was wrong when I asked him where they'd moved the begonias.

It wasn't the apologetic way he said he didn't know, but the pain that held on around his eyes that told me everything. He looked—well, *haunted*—and I could tell he was hurtin' right down to his core. I understood that look clear as day—there's only one thing that'll make a man hurt like that. Don't ask me to explain it—it's just something you know in your gut when you've been there yourself.

"This the first year, son?" My question startled him a bit, and he looked at me funny like. He was a pretty sharp kid though, because he figured out what I was asking right quick, and nodded after a moment.

"I've been doing this for going on fifteen years. How long's it been for you?" He blinked a bunch of times, and I knew he was fighting those tears burning behind his eyes.

He fiddled with the container a bit, studying it hard, and simply said, "a few months." I remember how much I'd been hurtin' that first year after Erlene died. Actually, that's about all I remembered for quite some time—the hurtin'. I nodded, trying to let him know I understood. "Probably don't have the headstone on yet?"

He shook his head and glanced back up at me. I wonder if I had looked as lost then as he did now. “You got one of those planters or urn things? You’ll need something at the grave site to put the plants in.”

He looked at me like I was speaking a foreign language until it musta sunk in. He nodded again and kinda whispered, “Yeah, you’re right.”

Then he just stood there, staring at the flowers. I probably should have just moved on—it wasn’t none of my business, anyway. I started to turn around when he spoke up quiet like, saying how “she” liked pansies—whoever she was. He went on to say that she always thought that their little faces looked like the smiles of children. That made me chuckle a bit. Erlene would have said something like that, too.

He looked so sorry; I couldn’t help but reach out to him. “Son, you gonna be okay? You want some help?”

The boy’s voice caught in his throat as he put the pansies down. He said “no”, and something about getting his friend to help him with it tomorrow when they got off their shift, and that this friend knew about flowers and plants and such. I just nodded, knowing he was just shoving away the inevitable for another day. I figured he’d be okay since there was still a few left before Memorial Day.

He didn’t look me in the eye as he thanked me. Just stuffed his hands in his pockets and left. I watched him walk down the unfamiliar aisle like every part of him was grieving. It wasn’t hard to remember how I’d felt back then, and knew he still had a long way to go. I was glad he at least had a friend that could maybe help him through—a friend could make all the difference in the world when you had such a hurtin’.

I thought again about what he’d said about the pansies looking like the smiles of children. Yep, Erlene would have liked that. I picked up a flat of pansies and forgot about the blasted begonias.

*5/31/02*