

Excerpt from *The Blueberry Years* by Jim Minick

Prologue:

The Pickers

They come to fill buckets and pans, canning jars, freezer bags, pie crusts, and always, the ever-waiting tongue. They come to visit and eat, to sate the hungers of loneliness and body. Though we offer only blueberries, they come wanting more.

They come from the American Dream—CEOs and wealthy realtors, two kids piling out of just-washed SUVs, wives stylish in their special picking outfits.

They come from communes named Left Bank, Abundant Dawn, and A Light Morning. They come tie-dyed, shoe-less, bra-less, bath-less.

On a good day, thirty cars of pickers fill our one-acre field, strangers and friends all picking side-by-side. Most come from a distance, driving twenty miles or more just because we're organic. They negotiate the winding dirt road into these Virginia hills, the directions taped to the steering wheel, their vehicles grinding the last half-mile of steep lane. Often they step out of their cars and ask, "How did you ever find this place?"

They bring their children, wild or well-behaved, all fascinated for a little while by a bush with a sweet berry. The toddlers hide in the maze of canes while six-year-olds sneak fruit from their mother's buckets. When scolded, they sit and fill their pails with leaves and green berries. The infants go home pooping blue.

One picker travels with her daughter all the way from North Carolina, three hours away. They are reading *Blueberries for Sal*, the mother tells me as she pulls up, and "We just have to see a blueberry bush." The wide-eyed daughter strains in her baby seat and points to the field.

Many pickers come five times a season, year after year. Others come only once. Some come in Cadillacs and Land Rovers, their cars pitching and scraping on our lane, the hubcaps sparkling like newly minted coins. Some drive twenty-year-old Dodges and Fords, the rust as hungry as the driver.

They come from France and Germany, Korea and South Africa, Ecuador, Costa Rica and Japan. Once a writing group of Japanese women spill out of three cars to cover the field with

quick voices and beautiful smiles. Because it is the last day of the season, they find only two or three pounds apiece, but still they laugh and sing. One shares a blueberry haiku and says we should open a restaurant here, sell hot dogs.

Before any foreigners leave, I ask them to pronounce “blueberry” in their tongue, and then write in our notebook: paran dalgi, fresa azules, blaw beeren.

Most harvest for themselves, but some pick for us on shares, a bucket for us, a bucket for them. We’ll sell these at market and be glad for the help. Others harvest for restaurants, markets, or CSAs, Community-Supported Agriculture farms. These pickers come the same day every week, rain or shine. I pick with them through soaking rains, our slickers and wool sweaters useless. After awhile our fingers wrinkle and numb, too cold to pluck even the biggest berry.

Others come to barter, with chickens and eggs, lettuce and tomatoes, fresh milk and goat cheese. With one I trade berries for massages, with another, a year’s supply of berries for our website. Once I even barter berries for a truck-load of fleeces. I want to try wool as a mulch for the bushes, as if to warm them, as if to make socks for these baby blues.

They come bringing recipes and gifts of home-made soap, a blueberry cookie jar, a straw hat from Hawaii. Sometimes they bring us lunch or a bag of cookies, water or a jar of just-canned jam. One time they even bring sushi. They offer us home-made blueberry beer, or a mason jar of moonshine filled with blueberries. We call it “Blue Shine” and sip it behind the shed.

Usually they come early in the morning, but some come in the middle of the hottest afternoon, the picked berries baking in their cars. Most use our buckets, but some come with their own cut-off milk jugs or special berry baskets. A few bring their own stools.

One dowdy picker carries her purse into the field where she inspects her one-pound harvest berry by berry. Her lanky husband waits by the checkout and cleans his pistol. Thankfully, they never return, and everyone else comes unarmed.

Previous owners of our farm come, like Jesse Moore, surprised by a new road and pond. Or Mary Lewis, a spry woman in her seventies, who tells of her honeymoon working in this same field sixty years ago. She is amazed to pick berries where once she hoed corn. Older neighbors come, like Daniel Hughes, who drilled oats here in the early 1960s. He is the last farmer to work this land before the field was abandoned to pines.

Some come wearing t-shirts proclaiming “God is Dead,” and others hand us leaflets of doom. Sometimes they invite us to their houses of worship or swimming holes or geodesic domes.

They come single or divorced, widow or bachelor, coupled, gay and straight, married and not; they come celebrating their sixtieth anniversary or their honeymoon, feeding each other gentle pinches of blue. On the day before their wedding, one couple picks for their reception, their eyes shining like each berry.

They come crawling behind their parents or walking with canes or rolling in wheelchairs, a companion dog helping over the bumps. Some who came regularly will never come again, like Greta, killed in a car wreck, or Tim, at forty sucked away by skin cancer, or Ruby, whose generous heart laughs no more.

At the end of the season, they come as gleaners for local soup kitchens, beating the blue jays for the last berries. We let them pick for free, and then close the gate, hang a sign that reads “Season’s Over. See You Next Year.”

And every day in every season, Sarah and I, we too come to this field—as pickers, as pilgrims, as gleaners of whatever we find.