

**Princess Puffs**  
Jennifer Monroe

Rebecca marched around the corner of the cereal aisle, a woman on a mission. When she didn't see what she was looking for the first time, she turned her cart around and began again, her eyes flitting past the Frosted Flakes and Froot Loops, searching for the familiar bright pink box with the words "It's a Royal Treat!" ballooning from the mouth of a large-eyed princess. Still, her second, slower walk yielded no results. She sighed with irritation and narrowed her eyes. Okay then, be methodical. She halted down the aisle, scanning every single box, beginning on the top shelf with the boutique granolas, the jars of wheat germ, the slender boxes with names like "Whole Grain Harvest" or "Fiber Flakes." This time she forced herself to look at every single package. By the time she got to the end, disbelief warred with desperation in her mind. How was this even possible?

A week ago, picking up a box of Princess Puffs would have required exactly nothing of her. They had always been on the second shelf from the top, in between the Lucky Charms and the Cocoa Pebbles. But that was in Foodland where she had danced through her grocery shopping choreography for almost twenty years. There, she knew exactly where to find the garlic, next to the tomatoes and not the onions, like you might expect. She knew that the English Muffins came on sale, buy one get one free, every few weeks. She knew where to find the carts full of discontinued items, and if she had the time, she'd always stop to look, picking up a package of red quinoa or a jar of extra spicy mustard. Even if she was in a hurry, she could move with grace, and she worked the self-checkout like a pro. But now, here she was, staring at the wall of cereal, in a strange store, in a strange town,

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surrounded by strange people. She bit the inside of her cheek as she felt her eyes start to burn. "I am not going to cry because of Princess Puffs," she told herself. "I am not."

"Can I help you find anything?"

The friendly words startled Rebecca and she turned around to see a teen-aged boy, wearing a bright red FoodWorld T-Shirt and a name tag that said "Hi! My name is Todd."

"I'm looking for Princess Puffs," she said, trying to even out her voice.

"Princess Puffs?" Todd looked puzzled.

"Yes. The cereal?" Rebecca gripped the handle of the shopping cart as she suddenly had a feeling of vertigo, like she had somehow entered a whole other space-time dimension, not simply moved to another state. "You know? Pink, sparkly box? My daughter loves them and won't eat anything else for breakfast."

"Oh!" Comprehension dawned on Todd's face. "Right! I'm pretty sure that we used to carry them, but no one ever bought them, so we stopped. We haven't had them for a while."

Todd gave her teary face a look of genuine concern and then offered, "We do have lots of other kinds. My little sister loves Fruity Pebbles. Or maybe Captain Crunch?"

"No, thanks," said Rebecca. "I'll just, think of something."

Todd gently shrugged his shoulders and continued walking down the aisle with the ease of someone who knew exactly where he was.

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Jennifer—

I love the way you use something as mundane as a trip to the grocery store as a way to talk about homesickness. You do a great job of using concrete specifics to render the scene, and I also like the way you use the language of movement. Our heroine is always in motion in this piece.

A grocery store is a place where you walk up and down long rows and see one thing, then another thing, then another thing, then another thing. The cereal aisle is long, but it's pretty straightforward. It is very appropriate for sentences about the cereal aisle to feel long but straightforward and uncomplicated. Like this sentence:

She halted down the aisle, scanning every single box, beginning on the top shelf with the boutique granolas, the jars of wheat germ, the slender boxes with names like "Whole Grain Harvest" or "Fiber Flakes."

That sentence feels just right. It's almost three lines long, and yet it's quite simple. Most of it is just a list.

Here's another long but straightforward sentence. It's a tad more complex than the one quoted, but it's not hard to follow.

She knew where to find the carts full of discontinued items, and if she had the time, she'd always stop to look, picking up a package of red quinoa or a jar of extra spicy mustard.

(By the way, those extra details like "red" quinoa and "extra spicy" mustard add to the verisimilitude).

One more longish but straightforward sentence:

But now, here she was, staring at the wall of cereal, in a strange store, in a strange town, surrounded by strange people.

Your repetition of the word "strange" nicely emphasizes the parallel structure—again, you've got a sentence that feels more like a grocery store aisle than a labyrinth. *Side note: a lot of writers are under the impression that repetition of words is somehow bad, but repetition is one of the most important tools in the writer's tool box.*

Now, having said all that, the following eight numbered notes correspond to eight places where your prose could have been just a little bit better. The fact that these are all very small things is a testament to how strong your writing is. As I often say, this piece is too good not to be a little bit better.

**Note 1.**

When she didn't see what she was looking for the first time, she turned her cart around and began again, her eyes flitting past the Frosted Flakes and Froot Loops, searching for the familiar bright pink box with the words "It's a Royal Treat!" ballooning from the mouth of a large-eyed princess.

This long sentence is considerably more complex than the sentences I quoted above. It consists of an adverbial clause (yellow), then the main clause (green), then a nominative

absolute (pink), then a participial phrase (gray), in which is nested a prepositional phrase (“with the words...”) and another participial phrase (“ballooning...”). Sorry to get so technical. But each of those colors represents one action. The most straightforward way to construct a sentence, even a compound-complex sentence, is to give every action its own clause. That’s what you’ve done in the yellow and green third of the sentence. But after that, things start to get less straightforward. I’m not, of course, suggesting that straightforwardness is the only thing to strive for in prose. But when you choose not to be as straightforward as possible, you should probably have a good reason. In this case, it feels like a lot of the complexity grows from the desire to get all this information into one sentence. Break up the sentence, and things start to fix themselves:

When she didn’t see what she was looking for the first time, she turned her cart around and began again. Her eyes flitted past the Frosted Flakes and Froot Loops, searching for the familiar bright pink box with the large-eyed princess.

Now, we’ve still got to decide what to do with that word-balloon. It’s awkward to say “the words ‘It’s a Royal Treat!’ ballooning from the mouth.” You might decide you don’t need it. If you decide to keep it, I think I’d try something like this:

“It’s a Royal Treat!” says the cartoon Princess from a cartoon word bubble. But there is no Princess, no word bubble, no pink box. A second, slower walk comes up empty again.

#### **Note 2.**

She sighed with irritation and narrowed her eyes.

This is a tiny thing...but are you sure you need that phrase “with irritation”? When you say she’s irritated, you’re telling rather than showing. If I were in the cereal aisle, I would see a woman sighing and narrowing her eyes. Then my judging faculty would kick in and I would think, *She seems irritated*. That’s the way experience comes to us in real life: as sensory images that our judgment then goes to work on. If there were some mysterious feeling going on inside the woman, it might be helpful for the writer to announce it; but in this case, I think I would just show what’s happening on the surface and trust the reader to know what’s happening inside the grocery shopper.

#### **Note 3.**

Okay then, be methodical.

This shift from close third-person to first-person is jarring. Jarring isn’t always bad, but you need to have a good reason. Do you think the shock of this one-sentence shift into first person is worth it? That’s a real question, not a rhetorical one. If you think it’s worth it,

that's your prerogative. I just don't want you to do it without thinking about it. (For what it's worth, I wouldn't do it.)

**Note 4.**

There, she knew exactly where to find the garlic, next to the tomatoes and not the onions, like you might expect.

Again, I'm being very picky, but I would tighten the parallelism by inserting "next to" in front of "onions." Also, technically you should say "as" rather than "like"...I'm not a stickler about that technicality, but I do think "as" sounds better here.

There, she knew exactly where to find the garlic: next to the tomatoes, not next to the onions, as you might expect.

**Note 5.**

The friendly words startled Rebecca and she turned around to see a teen-aged boy...

Here two clauses are joined into a compound sentence. In the first clause, friendly words startle Rebecca. In the second clause, she turns around and sees a boy. These two ideas don't feel to me like they should be joined by "and." The conjunction "and" suggests that two ideas exist next to one another, but it avoids commenting on the relationship between the ideas. But here there's a clear cause-and-effect relationship. Furthermore, the fact that Rebecca is the object of the first clause and the subject of the second is a little disorienting. Here are a couple of ways to polish this up:

The friendly words startled Rebecca. She turned around to see a teenage boy.

Or

Startled by the friendly words, Rebecca turned around to see a teenage boy.

**Note 6.**

...wearing a bright red FoodWorld T-Shirt and a name tag that said "Hi! My name is Todd."

Just something to consider... Do you need to quote the name-tag. I think I would do something like this:

... wearing a bright red FoodWorld T-Shirt and a name tag. His name was Todd.

You lose the humor of the “Hi,” but you do give the reader the small pleasure of putting together “He wore a name tag” and “His name was Todd” to realize, *Oh, his name tag must have said Todd*. Very small, and probably a matter of personal taste rather than an actual writing principle.

**Note 7.**

Rebecca gripped the handle of the shopping cart as she suddenly had a feeling of vertigo, like she had somehow entered a whole other space-time dimension, not simply moved to another state.

Two things about this one. First, it feels like you’re overstating this case to compare this grocery-store disorientation to being in a time-space warp. In the rest of this piece, you do an excellent job of getting the reader to take this seemingly minor predicament seriously by actually making us look at what is happening. Here the reader might get the impression that you’re exaggerating in order to inflate the significance of the experience. It doesn’t fit with the tone of the piece.

If, however, you want to keep the vertigo-time warp, I recommend losing that “as.”

Rebecca gripped the handle of the shopping cart. She suddenly had a feeling of vertigo...

**Note 8.**

“I’ll just, think of something.”

I think you’re using the comma there to suggest a little pause. The comma has pretty specific uses, and suggesting pauses isn’t one of them. If all you’re doing is showing a pause, I would use an ellipsis or a dash:

“I’ll just — I’ll think of something.”

Okay. That’s probably more than enough attention to detail on my part. I told you these were all small and very picky suggestions.