The Farm

Houston hadn’t come to Gil’s birthday party the day before. For that, Ruth was grateful. But he appeared on her front porch the next morning, with a lumpy, clumsily wrapped present in his blackened hands.

“G’morning, Ruth. Mind if I come in?”

Asking was a formality. This was her husband’s house, and he was her husband’s brother, so it was his by extension. Ruth shuffled to the side to let him in, avoiding eye contact. He stepped into the kitchen. It was cloudy with steam from the pots hissing on the stove. There was a single window above the double-sink, but it was narrow and stained blackish-brown from smoke and grease, and too high up Ruth to open without climbing a chair. Normally she’d ask Gil or her husband to open it for her, but her husband was out on Farm business, and Gil was still asleep.

Ruth gestured to some newspaper she had spread beside the door as a make-shift shoe mat. Houston looked at it, shook his head and said, “I ain’t staying long anyway” then proceeded to walk across the kitchen in his dirt-caked rubber boots, which, having mixed with the morning dew from the front yard, left faint muddy imprints on the recently mopped floor.

He pulled out a chair at the worn kitchen table and flopped into it. There was a small container of toothpicks sitting on the table next to the bowl of fruit. He shook a toothpick out of the container into his dirty, callous palm then stuck it in the side of his mouth to chew. Sometimes it was tobacco. Sometimes a thin stalk of grass. Sometimes peppermint gum. But always he was chewing like a mangy old cow.

 Silently, Ruth returned to the counter, where she had been chopping up the vegetables for Gil’s omelette. He sat comfortably in the silence, leaned back in the chair, his right leg propped horizontal on his left one, the muddy sole of his boot brushing the white table cloth. Houston didn’t mind the silence. They were like that, both he and her husband. They didn’t like her to talk very much—not that she had much to say.

She heard the clatter of the toothpick against his teeth as he switched it from one side of his mouth to the other, felt the frostbite of his gaze.

Finally, Ruth said, “You've gotten breakfast yet, Mr.Kennedy ?”

“Oh no. Came straight from The Farm.”

“I’ll fix you some breakfast then,” she said.

“Why don’t you do that.”

Ruth resumed mincing the vegetables as he got up and walked around, examining the medium sized kitchen as if it was his first time here. Examining his handiwork, perhaps.

Both he and Ruth knew what he was there for, but perhaps he was waiting until breakfast to ask. That way it would feel more natural, more conversational, less repulsive. Or perhaps he enjoyed seeing her in the listless state she was now in, her hands trembling as she minced the sweet peppers, her shoulders tensed, her lips drawn thin, her eyes moving back and forth, searching for a way out.

The floorboards above her head creaked, from left to right, and then from right to left, then heavy footsteps thundered down the stairwell. Gil appeared in the kitchen, dark body gleaming with sweat, a grey shirt draped around his neck. Gil always slept shirtless because he sweat like a hog during the night. When he saw Houston, he looked dazed, and then embarrassed, and then a bit afraid.

 “Morning, Mr. Kennedy,” he mumbled.

 “Put a shirt on, boy.”

 “Yes’sir.” Gil fumbled to pull the shirt on, though he had been on his way to take a shower so he could put the clean shirt on a clean body. He cast a helpless look at his mother, who had turned away from her mincing and was facing him, her eyes glossed over.

 “You’re up just in time, Gil. I just came over here to talk to Ruth about getting you a job.”

“A job?” Gil sounded slightly intrigued.

“Yep. At The Farm.”

“Eggs.”

“What?”

“I need eggs. For the omelettes. Go outside and get me some eggs, Gil.”

Gil had gone out the day before and gathered up two cartons full of eggs, most of which Ruth had used to bake his birthday cake. They had stashed the remaining eggs in the pantry on the opposite side of the room. Gil nodded, excused himself, and went nonetheless. Ruth hadn’t expected Houston to let Gil go so easily, but he simply watched as Gil went out the back door into the yard where the hens were pecking about.

Ruth held the cutting board over a frying pan and slid the minced vegetables into the oil with her knife.

“Gil’s a man now. All grown up. Can you believe it.”

“Hm.”

“When I was eighteen, Pa introduced me to Farm life. Never looked back since. Good money in that business. . . as you know.”

“Hm,” she said, lifting the cover from one of the pots to check the porridge.

“Eighteen years.” He whistled. “But look—it’s like you haven’t aged a day.”
 That was a lie, and a cruel one. The dark-circles, the matronly fat, her weak, thinning hair made her look old. Even older than forty-three year old Lydia, a skinny blonde whose eyes were always bloodshot, who smoked and drank almost as much as her husband. Who, when she felt like it, also barged into Ruth's house and harassed her.

“Mr. Kennedy, with all due respect, I don’t want Gil working at that. . . farm.” It pained her to even call it that.

“And why not?”

“Just want him to do something different, is all.”

“Like what?”

“He’s got a kind heart. He couldn’t handle it. He would hate the sight of it. It would ruin him.”

It was gruesome, bloody, depraved. When Ruth had worked at The Farm—been *forced* to work at The Farm—she had felt like the worst human being alive, seeing them crowded in those small spaces, eyes wide and pleading, always dirty, never fed enough. Ruth was there whenever one of them gave birth. That had been her job. To take the young ones and make sure that they were healthy. The newborns went for higher prices. The mothers often died while giving birth. Ruth had to help purge the pens of the carcasses. There were buyers for the dead ones as well as the live ones. A witchdoctor, mainly, who drove all the way up from Connecticut and paid a good price for what they didn’t want.

“I hated it too, at first. Everyone does. Nothing a little time and exposure won’t fix. It grows on you.” When she didn’t reply, he said, “The town’s gotta get money somehow.”

Ruth clutched the knife tighter in her hand. Once upon a time, she hadn’t been allowed to use a knife around him.

 “He’ll come to like it. Men always like working The Farm. Women, not so much.” He half-laughed, half-wheezed.

 “He wants to join the military,” Ruth said.

“The military?” Houston rolled the toothpick around in his mouth. “Oh no, he ain’t leaving. I won’t allow it.”

 “Well” she said, her voice thin as an insect’s wing. “I heard Steward and Consolata are looking for blueberry pickers this season. That’s what he’ll be doing all summer.”

 “This is pretty funny,” he said, unamused. “You think the boy is too good for The Farm? He was born there, but we gave him to you. Don’t you think I can take him back if I want?”

“Please—”

“When you think about it, he’s my property. I guess you could say I gave him to you on a *loan*. You knew this day was coming.”

Ruth opened her mouth, but couldn’t speak.

“Let’s not forget, Miss *Ruth*, that *The Farm* puts food on your table and clothes on your backs. *The Farm*, the men of *The Farm*, built this house. Most importantly, *The Farm* spared your life. You wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for us.”

 “Sure,” Ruth mumbled.

 “You wouldn’t have all this that we’ve given you. You’d still be living and working at The Farm. But lucky for you, Miss Priss, we allowed you to retire and take the boy with you. You owe The Farm for its kindness. *Gil* owes The Farm for its kindness.”

 “I know,” Ruth muttered. “I know.”

 There was a heavy silence, then the backdoor flew open and Gil shuffled backwards into the kitchen, carrying eggs in a pouch he'd made with the front of his shirt.

“Glad we understand each other, Ruth,” Houston said with a smile, catching Gil’s eye. “Gil, son, looks like you’ll be working with me and your Pa over at The Farm this summer.”

Gil was about to mention the blueberries, but seeing his mother’s slumped, shaking shoulders, he said, “Yessir” instead, and silently unloaded the eggs from his shirt into the egg tray on the counter. One of the eggs slipped and exploded on the floor. Like so many other things in her life, Ruth did not acknowledge the broken egg.

Ruth reached for one of the whole eggs. Gil excused himself and retreated up the stairs. Houston leaned back in his chair in silent repose, satisfied that he had won.

“Maybe if you’d just let go, you wouldn’t have to worry so much. Attachment ain’t good. Not in our profession, at least.” He paused. “We had a woman come in, you remember. She thought Gil was a *real* fine one. R*eal* exotic. She was willing to pay double the amount. But I didn’t go through with it, so the least Gil can do is work his worth at The Farm. . .”