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Exposed Roots

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By

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Abstract

"Exposed Roots" is a collection of seven interconnected short stories following a farming family, told through the perspective of middle daughter Anna. The stories reflect the shifting uncertainties of their narrator, weaving the past and present together and, on occasion, blurring the lines of reality. Characters include a grandfather single-mindedly dedicated to his farm, an aunt whose resentment drives her from her family, a father who simultaneously wants his children to have their own lives but also stay within the family business, and a mother and grandmother who have come to this family farm as "outsiders." The farm is not an idealistic, pastoral location; it is a place of hardship and uncertainty, where nature works for, or against, success as much as the people do. The farm represents either a solace or a cage for each family member, and at times both for Anna. My essay, "Stunting Growth: The Narrator's Liminality in 'Exposed Roots'" explores Anna's position through the lens of liminality, as she is caught between family members, between her responsibilities and desires, and between childhood and adulthood. Anna's role is as both narrator and protagonist who exists inside the family conflicts, yet fears failing her family's expectations. As the central figure between the reader and the story, she is the means through which the reader accesses the characters surrounding Anna, and the world they all occupy. Anna, thus, must come to terms with her familial and independent positions, and learn how to take control and act for herself.

Dedication

To my sister, mother, father, and grandma.

Thank you, for everything.

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The Greenhouse Cage

I pick a single yellow grape tomato and three others tumble to the ground. Scatter on impact, one rolling between my feet, the other two disappearing behind the line of black pots. Of course they're beautiful, the tomatoes, the skins not so dark that they're almost orange, but not streaked too heavily with pale green. Perfectly bright yellow, without a single wrinkle.

Quick glance at the door to make sure no one's passing by, then reach down through the leaves and behind the plants, snatch the two runaways and drop them into the half-full basket. I try keeping my head low, outside the plants' reach, but it's impossible to keep my face clean around here and I can feel the leaves and stems brush against my face. No doubt I'll find a streak of greenish-yellow residue on my cheek when I wash up later. Cheeks, nose, chin.

Should I have put the stray tomatoes in the garbage bucket? Or did I do the right thing retrieving them? They weren't damaged, and frankly the tarp-covered ground isn't any dirtier than the plant, but I'll ask later to be sure.

The tomato plants loom—a lacy wall of leaves heavily embellished with round yellow gems, the hub of flies and cabbage moths alike. Up higher, they arch parallel to the rounded top of the greenhouse meeting the tips of the plants on the opposite side in an almost perfect semi-circle. Each plant held in place by a single pink string tied around the base of the main stem, then wrapped loosely around the plant up, up, past the top and tied the long metal bar at the top of the greenhouse. Like an acrobat wrapped in aerial silks. Untied, the plants would collapse under their own height and weight, and we'd lose most

of the tomatoes—I imagine the ground covered in a rolling sea of yellow tomatoes, how much money lost with them. Two or three every other plant was bad enough.

But hell if it wouldn't make an outstanding picture, aesthetically. I brought my camera out to the farm a few times—Aunt Leslie poses if she spots me, and Dad likes me taking pictures of the produce, so it's not like anyone really *minds* so long as I'm still working—and now that the tomatoes have ripened up some more, the contrast would be much better. Gives me more to work with than green-on-green. But my camera's at home, and I can't afford to waste time running to grab it when I need to finish here.

"Come on, you're my last basket. Work with me," I mutter at the towering wall of tomato plants. Imagine them mocking me, preparing to let loose another waterfall of tomatoes at the slightest touch.

It'd be so much easier if we could snip these tomatoes off the plants like we do with zucchini, or patty pans, or yank them off like the field tomatoes. But the stems would be left on, and then there'd be twice as much work picking those off, so I'm better off gathering tomatoes off the ground every once in a while than standing in a barn plucking stems.

I put the basket on the ground, and begin using both hands to pick, watching for fat green caterpillars around the stems. We kept a separate bucket solely for those, bugs thick as Dad's thumb.

"Why are you only picking with one hand?" Mom asked the other week. She came in to check if it was too hot for me. Even she'd been getting pretty warm in the neighbouring greenhouse, her green bandana soaked with sweat along her forehead,

ponytail stuck to the side of her neck. “You should do what I do, put the basket on the wheelie box, kick it as you move down the row, and pick with both hands. You’ll get done a lot faster. And then you can help your grandmother.”

“I thought I was supposed to leave the wheelie box with the cherry tomatoes?” I asked. Why hadn’t I thought of moving it myself? Damn—lost my place. Which plant was I picking again?

“No! Take it with you, no sense making things harder,” she laughed. “Now get back to work, you wanna be done before twelve, don’t you?”

I waited until she left to grab it, huffing and scowling as I tried to find where I’d left off picking before she came in. Even with the wheelie box, I finished 15 minutes late.

I forgot it again today in the other greenhouse. It’s not hard to carry, just a milk crate Dad attached wheels to, to give Mom an easier time picking. Too late to grab it now, just a waste of time to grab it with less than a half basket left to fill.

I hope she doesn’t surprise me today. I’m almost done, I just need to concentrate, pluck one, two, one, two, until the basket’s full. With no distractions or pressure—she’d have finished long before now, why did it take me so long?—I might get to lunch early for once.

Mom’s probably busy picking peppers—hot ones, not the bell peppers. Just as hot in those greenhouses as in this one. Aunt Leslie might be in the bells instead, if she decided to help today. Mom would never let her near the hot peppers—not her babies, hell, the whole family considers it a miracle when she lets any of us water them.

Aunt Leslie barely lasts a minute in the greenhouses, anyways. Whenever we used to recruit her, it always ended the same.

"It's too hot in here, why can't I turn the fan on? I just had my hair done the other day. Don't even know why I bother anymore, it only ever gets ruined. Look at me, I'm sweating like a hog!"

Why bother with a radio when we have the Aunt Leslie Show running full volume 24/7? Not that I'd ever say that aloud.

Then she'd turn to my mother, "Bev, we can turn the fan on for a little bit, yes? I'm feeling faint. I'll have to lie down if we don't."

A heavy sigh. "Leslie, the fan *is* on. We can't turn it up any more, it'll get too cool for the plants."

Followed by a row of grumbles, more cries of "I'm feeling faint!" Eventually she'd wander away to sit outside the doorway, pouring everyone else's water into her own emptying bottle. After Mom got fed up enough to take the issue to Grampa, Aunt Leslie just works in the barn, and, when we can wrangle her up, in the fields.

Hm. Water. I need to water the tomatoes too. Good thing I remembered that now and not later—nothing worse than thinking I'm done only to have Mom storm in announcing she's saved the plants from my attempt to kill them all, and now she has to work past dark to get all her other picking and sorting and washing and etcetera done.

I'll water after I take the baskets of yellow over to the barn.

I should have done it earlier, but then the pots and plants would be wet—but of course now it's too hot, and I'm sweating and picturing my red face, and the pots are drying up. I hope I don't get a migraine, the last thing we need is to be down yet another person. Gramma can't help—no, much too hot for her, she'd feel a lot sicker than me, and I don't want her to feel any worse, on top of her arthritis flaring up.

The greenhouse is too hot for me, so there's no question of asking anyone else to suffer. Sun beams through plastic, burning my skin because I forgot sunscreen today. The rumbling, shrieking fan at the back helps about as much as someone blowing air from their mouth from across a room. Loud enough to make the radio pointless, but definitely not windy. Mom said to start at the back and move up as I'm picking, work towards the door where it's cooler, and I at least managed to listen to that advice.

Plop. Plop. The tomatoes barely make a sound as they hit each other dropping into the basket. Slipping out of my fingers, through the air and into a nest of shifting gold. I like the sound they make when the basket's empty, the gentle thud, or when I drop a handful at once making a brief rainfall.

Other sounds become clearer as I move closer to the door, the fan a little more out of hearing. All the insects. They make decent practice for action shots. Butterflies, moths, bees, flies, and most irritatingly wasps, all fluttering around smacking against the plastic trapping them inside. Sometimes only one kind, sometimes all kinds. They see the sun and sky through the clear plastic, blurry and mostly clouded, but still bright.

Sometimes, I'll get real close with my camera to the ones resting on the surface, taking a break from their endless escape attempts, and capture the most detailed pictures.

The fractal wings, the many thin legs, all on a hazy backdrop of blue and green. Imperfect subjects with their inability to stay still, but when I get a good shot, it's worth the patience.

Basket's almost full now. Maybe a couple dozen more tomatoes and I'll—

"Hello? Anna, you in here?" Aunt Leslie's shrill yell precedes her step into the door. Then she immediately backs out. "Oh god, how can you breathe in here? No, come here, get some air for christ's sake." Sunglasses wiggle as her nose wrinkles. She gestures me over, and with a sigh of barely-contained frustration, I comply.

"Aunt Leslie? Mom's not here." I assume that's what she wants.

"Oh no, I don't need her. Seriously, it's worse than last year, you look like you'll melt any second." She pauses to dig a water bottle out of her satchel, takes a few gulps. "No, I wanted to know if you'd like to join me for ice cream?" she asks, her tone clearly indicating this as a supremely generous offer.

Well, she didn't usually ask before taking off, let alone say where she's going.

But what the hell, why turn down a fun, and more importantly *cold*, lunch break? "Sure, I'll just finish up. Shouldn't take more than a few minutes."

"I'm leaving right now. Just put all that down, it'll be here when you get back! Who'll know?"

I pass the basket from one hand to the other, back and forth. "It's fine, I'll just be a few minutes. I don't want to leave work unfinished."

She purses her lips. “You know you’re allowed to take a break, right? You’re a teenager, you’re not invincible! It’s not healthy for you to stay out here so long, especially in this heat. Bev and Joe should know better.”

“I want to finish,” I reply, not sure if I’m trying to convince myself or her. “But if you can’t wait, thanks anyway for offering.” I really want ice cream.

“Suit yourself,” she says. “Finish picking, I guess. You brother’s waiting in the car, I couldn’t find your sister. Thank god one of you kids still has sense to know when to stop. Least I won’t spend my break alone.”

And as quickly as she came she’s gone. I’m left standing in the middle of the greenhouse, thinking of cold, sweet vanilla ice cream and the stale beauty of car air conditioning. Of course Jack wouldn’t turn her down. I wish I hadn’t. But I do need to work, even if my brother won’t.

Somehow, I manage to shuffle back to the plant wall—lost my place again goddammit, try to find the last one with no yellow tomatoes. Oh whatever. I drop my basket onto the ground and start picking at random.

I imagine the insects think maybe if they keep hitting one spot, they’ll break through. Lots of dead bugs along the wooden bar running along the side, and on the ground especially in the back. They never learn. They never find the open door just two, five, ten feet away from them. A flutter to the left or right and they’re out.

Sometimes, if the adults aren’t around, I try to free them myself—especially the butterflies and dragonflies. It’s sometimes hard to spot them higher up behind the plant

wall and the thick bunches of tomatoes, but for the erratic movements. They're all jewel-tones and colourful patterns, a shame to walk in and find one too late. Cup one in my hands, try not to drive it farther into the folds of the plastic where the wings get stuck as it buzzes and hums. I try not to hurt them, cupping, or carefully pushing them towards the doorway. Once I managed to coax a red dragonfly onto my finger and it sat there as I took it back outdoors. Then it wouldn't leave my hand until I pushed it off.

The greenhouse like a cage in that way, one filled with life, but will kill the inhabitants eventually if they can't leave—through heat, exhaustion, lack of food or water, whatever does them in and leaves them curled up on their backs to be swept away in the spring or fall cleanout.

Not just insects either. Curious animals sneak in through the open doors at night, like the groundhog that lives somewhere in the bushes behind the red barn—or maybe under the skids beside the office barn? I'll come in some days and find half-chewed tomatoes scattered on the ground, and Dad will curse and set up a trap again, even though he's already caught it once and ferried it away in the back of his truck, and it only waddled back.

Coyotes come in too, though for what reason I can't imagine besides simply to ruin our mornings when we walk into the greenhouses to water and find a line of pots knocked around, plants in disarray. If they're hunting the groundhog, they're certainly not doing a good job of it. There's nothing much we can do to stop them because we can't close the doors at night or the cage will become an oven, and what would we do with wilted dead plants and overcooked tomatoes still hanging on the vine?

I'm sure the weeds would survive. Always growing in the cracks along the sides against the plastic walls—they can't grow in the middle because the greenhouse floor is gravel and stones covered in tarp beaten into an almost cement-like hardness by dozens of boots, walking a thousand times over, including my own. The weeds would be picked out again in the fall, like they'd been in the spring. The pots, the fruitless plants, the buckets and baskets and broken bamboo sticks, trash that builds up through the summer, all of that gets cleared away too. Nothing left but a hollow, empty metal cage blanketed in plastic.

I reach for the—now slightly overfilled, I admit—basket carefully, one hand gripping the flat wooden handle and the other hand holding the bottom steady so no more tomatoes jump out and away. Carefully maneuver the basket into the flat containing the other three baskets. Checking the handles to ensure they won't break and drop all my hard-picked produce into the mud outside, I lift and carry it off.

I'll pick up the garbage on the floor when I come back—can't encourage any more pests, or flies. "What's this?" my mom would jokingly bark, pointing around at the tomatoes lying behind the pots, ones definitely still on the fronds when I left, the sneaky devils, and with a sigh of "Yes mom," I'd crouch down with my garbage pail—an empty black pot, the holes in the bottom too small to let any rogue tomatoes slip through—and round them up and away. One bucket to another, eventually discarded onto the old trailer fenced by rusty metal walls to hold in the toss-aways. Grampa transports it all to the dump site, empties the trailer's contents out where other rotten and misshapen and rogue vegetables and flowers pile up to decompose.

Soon enough, I hope, I'll be transported away too. To school, then to another job away from here, maybe even out into the world away from the bubble of farm-life I inhabited only every summer now. I don't want to stay forever, but who will pick tomatoes when I leave? Jessie maybe, but she's not much younger than me, and then what? Grampa, Dad and Mom have other work, and it's too hot for Gramma. Aunt Leslie—ha! She likes to say she's got a life outside the farm—and honestly, I'd almost envy her for it if it didn't cause such a mess here, picking up the slack. She's already taking Jack with her. What mess will I cause when I leave?

I enter the empty barn, and check my phone to discover it's just past twelve. They'll all be gone for lunch now. Deposit the flat of tomatoes onto the counter beside the red grape and cherry tomatoes, and peel off my gloves. The inside of the fingers drip with sweat, but the outside of the gloves are coated in stiffening tomato residue, turning the bright blue into a swampy brownish-green, riddled with cracks where my fingers bent and stretched. I drop them on the windowsill next to the door, and turn out the light. I'll clean the greenhouses after lunch. If I don't, who?

Who would, who would. It's bothered me more lately, when I think of all the things I do: seeding, transplanting, packing, picking, peeling, cleaning, selling. That's just a small part of the farm work. How they'll all get done without me if I do leave? I complain sure, but if I leave and there's no one to pick tomatoes when Mom can't, then it's my fault for them all falling—how could I let it all rot on the plant, split, break apart, and wilt away?

I told my dad once, one day when the worries grew too tall in my head, bursting out of my mouth and sprouting everywhere. Just me and him and all my worries, alone in front of the brown barn. He continued rinsing out dirt-caked pails, eyes fixed on the swirling water. “Get your education, Anna. Don’t be a weed-puller. We’ll just have to figure a way to manage without you, somehow.”

The Palace of Rye

Every year Grampa chooses a section of field to plant rye on, in order to give the ground a break from the vegetables. *Eeny-meeny-miny-grow*. Through spring and into summer, the rye grows from tickling my ankles, up to my waist, and finally tall enough to cover my shoulders. When I stand out in the middle of the field, I look like a floating head, disembodied on a landlocked sea of gold.

At least, most people think of rye fields as golden. Wheat fields too—rye, wheat, they all look the same, right? I think the colour is too pale, too dull, and a touch too brown. More of a knock-off gold. The kind you'd see at a run-down shop alongside a pearl necklace that weighs just a little too light, between shelves of designer handbags for half price. I *could* say it's gold, but it's not.

Jessie and I try to keep out of everyone's way today. Jack's not invited, obviously, because he's boring now that he's in grade 6.

"Who cares?" he wrinkles his nose at us, his so-called annoying little sisters. "I'm too old for that make-believe stuff anyways."

But it matters that we let him know he's not invited. "Matter of principle," Grampa says, which means it matters a lot for a good reason, and that reason is because we say so. Except when Grampa says it, it's because *he* says so.

Frayed-laced sneakers knotted tight, hats covertly abandoned, and palms and shorts covered in dust, Jessie and I are the perfect picture of eager young explorers. Pretending to drive tractors isn't as much fun when we've been banned from honking the

horn—"Making a racket," Grampa says—and with Jack hogging the ancient box TV in the farm office—ha! good luck to him, trying to find anything fun on the whole 5 snowless channels—we race down the dirt driveway with an explosion of overlapping shouts to our parents, past the brown barn and the big steel barn, and into the open fields.

"Be careful out there!" Dad shouts, so far away now it's a whisper.

I listen, barely. It's true, there's lots of things in the fields besides vegetables, rocks, and occasionally one of Aunt Leslie's compact mirrors. But Jessie and I know what we're doing, and we'll stay safe together.

We come out here to visit Gramma's tree, an enormous maple on a small hill, stretching up over the centre of the farm. Gramma says she planted this tree before she and Grampa even got married.

"High school sweethearts," she told us. "Knew I was going to marry him the day we first laid eyes. So I planted my roots here, and that was that."

The branches hang just out of reach, so Jessie and I each hook one arm around the trunk as best we can and run, swinging around the tree in circles until we tumble down.

A hollow at the base of the tree formed by roots is the perfect spot for hiding the glittery stones and bits of glass and metal I discover while wandering the empty fields. Poking aside the leaves I placed on top of them, I check that everything is accounted for—the split rock with the golden flakes, the china shard with red vines below the rim, the teacup handle, the big green metal bell that looks like something Santa's reindeer might wear.

Dad showed me how to break the rocks open, search for gems. Sparkling shiny crystals—diamonds, better than diamonds! Gonna get rich, a million dollars and never ever work again and go to the movies every single day. I told Dad my plans, and he laughed—in agreement, he said. "That'd be the dream."

Not just my dream. That's my future, one hundred percent.

To find crystals, search for the ones that don't look like crystals—they like to pretend to be boring, grey rocks. In disguise.

Dad gave me my own goggles, took me to the cement-floor barn. Plucked a hammer from the tool-wall and *crack-crack* broke open the rock—under the flickering barn lights, the inside glittered like gold. He told me it wasn't real gold.

I think it's still beautiful, even if it is a trick.

Dug a moonstone out of the dirt before too—flat perfect circle, pitted white golf-ball surface—but I made the mistake of showing it to Jack. He said the stone meant good luck. He took it, held it up to the sky, threw it far, far away across the field. Said he made his wish, and now it'd come true—I was so mad he stole my wish, I told him I didn't need a moonstone to wish he'd die. I didn't talk to him for a whole week—but I took my wish back secretly.

Never told him.

Never found my moonstone again either. Tip-toed up and down every millimetre of that field. Must've disappeared back to the moon to make more wishes.

Satisfied that my sister hasn't stolen anything from my stash of treasures, I give the order to move on.

She darts ahead down the path and I struggle to catch up. I know she's heading towards our secret spot, and the thought forces my legs to move faster.

My sister is the more athletic, always running and climbing and swinging off things she shouldn't. Even when Mom and Dad told her to stay inside and off the trees, she still broke her ankle slipping off the shelves in the barn. Nothing holds Jessie back. Dad pretty much gave up on trying to keep her grounded after finding her crawling back up the shelves once she'd healed. Mom showed her where they keep the ladder, but she's stopped falling so much these days.

The endless wall of rye grows taller with every step we take towards it. A long rectangular shape, which reminds me of a picture I found once of a Russian palace, even if it's not the right colour. A couple of weeks ago, the rye finally stretched up over my head, and I could no longer see over it.

Who needs a palace of gold though, when there's an endless field of mystery and danger right in my backyard? And I don't have to share it with anyone but Jessie.

Jessie stops in front of the looming mass, while I walk past her a few metres farther, enough that we have to talk loudly to hear each other. We always start at different points, so we can't cheat by taking the same course, and we never run together, because that takes away the fun of not knowing who's won until we both get to the other side. Just run and run, until we're though. If one of us gives up, or gets lost, then that person has to

sit in the dirt outside the secret spot. So no matter how scary the run gets, we always aim to finish, if not be the winner. Neither of us wants to be barred from the secret spot.

Facing down the impossibly wide and long field, we crouch into our best runners positions. Counting down, ready, set—and with screams of "GO! GO!" we take off, headfirst into the rye.

The stalks smack me in the face as I race in, stinging my eyes and mouth. My swinging arms struggle to clear the way. I can still hear my sister's own crashing entrance, but the thumping of her footsteps fades away until I can't hear them under my own. I slow to a jog, not wanting to tire too much. Better save my energy for the final sprint, snatch victory at the last moment.

Moving steadily, I try not to think of how quiet the air has suddenly become. My breathing quickens and I'm not sure it's just from running. Not being able to see anything around me, or hear anything besides my own clumsy feet, my hands push away the fog of thin stalks in front of me but it never ends. A few minutes pass, I think, but I don't know for sure.

Part of the thrill of racing through the rye. We never know what might be waiting inside for us.

The rye shifts around me, hissing. I feel unsteady and trapped, like I'm stuck under muddy water and everything looks the same around me and there's no clear path out, no exit sign. I know there's a way to reach the surface, but I can't see it. No one here to tell me I'm going the right or wrong way, just the hiss of rye turning me in circles.

Can I hear coyotes running alongside me, hidden mere feet away behind the stalks? Eyes squinting, straining to see through the rye around me, I move a little faster, just in case. I saw a coyote once, slowly weaving across the field with its head low, far enough away it seemed the size of a toy but close enough I could feel teeth on the back of my neck as I ran away. *Coyote catch me by the toe*.

Faster now. No closed doors for safety out here. What's racing me now?

Lightning shoots under my skin and my heart jumps up my throat. The fibrous walls around me snap and sway, angry at my attempt to escape. They close in on me, the stalks wrapping around my arms and legs. Wrenching, I yank them out of the ground in a panic, roots and dirt hitting my ankles as I charge on, desperately fleeing. I can't tell if the panting is me or something else. How many coyotes might be following me? Just one I might be able to outrun, but three? Or more?

All alone, no sign of Jessie, of safety. Maybe they'll catch her once they're finished with me. *Faster, faster, let me go!* Are they circling me now, cutting off my escape?

Am *I* running in circles? It seems horribly possible, with all the thousands of neverending identical shoots surrounding me. Shouldn't I have reached the other side of the field by now? But it's so dark here, I might not even be past the middle. We should have stayed on the path, walked around the field, not bolted through it, no matter that we race this race every year. Where's my little sister? I try to remember where I last heard her.

I want to stop but I don't dare.

So I keep running until I see a thinning ahead. Yes! Light! With a gasp and a last lunge forward, I break through the last barrier between me and the outside.

The ground thuds uneven under my hands, maybe splitting the skin, but I'm safe out of that rye, away from the monsters. Out in the clear open air. I have bits of rye in my hair, and probably more than a few bugs on my shirt, but I can breathe.

My sister hunches over a few feet away, laughing, red-faced and sweating. Crouched on the ground, I'm angry at her laughter. A few breaths later, my head clears and I realize how silly chased by monsters sounds. Snorting turns to laughter and my voice joins hers in giddiness.

Once we can talk again without bursting into giggles, she helps tug me off the ground and we walk over to the narrow path in the rye we'd made several days ago. We'd each conquered the test of bravery with our runs—now we can properly re-enter together, and complete our secret journey.

I find the path first, a thin section of pressed down rye no one else would ever notice if they weren't looking. Nudging my sister over, we file in sideways, so's not to make the entrance any bigger and invite unworthy strangers like our parents into our spot.

After a few more steps, and a near trip when my foot catches on a hidden rock, we manage to step into our cozy little clearing. Carefully constructed over the course of a day, my sister has her half—which she darted to instantly, shoving me out of the way—and I have mine, with the addition of a smaller patch like a closet for when we brought bags or toys with us.

We sit down and eat our snacks and complain about the unfairness of not being able to stay in the house by ourselves—"I'm old enough, right? Or Jack, he's *definitely* old enough. S'no different, he'd just watch TV while we have fun, like we already do!"—and my sister agrees, but adds, "Sometimes is okay. I like playing outside." Until our parents deem us old enough, we play and bicker and hide around the farm. Stay in the fields until Mom and Dad shout to come home, but not so long they drive out to get us.

My sister and I lie back on the ground, cushioned by the soft mat of flattened stalks and weeds. Above our heads the rye bends forward, the tips of the wall surrounding us coming together to create a dome barely veiling the glowing blue of the sky. Count the tallest stalks arching over us—*eeny-meeny-miny-grow*. In the filtered light this place makes me think of the painted inside of a palace, summer sun shining golden through narrow windows. Camouflaged even from the sky, the rye keeps out all sound and worry, a barrier against everyone and everything but the smell of dirt and the soft constant hush of shifting rye in the wind. We lie alone in the world, our palace the few feet around us.

Peel Bunch Wash

Bunching green onions feels similar to bunching peonies. A certain number bound together with elastic bands, any dirt or other browning bits cleaned and peeled away; a certain number of finished bunches placed together in their respective containers, carried away to the cold darkness of the cooler until market day. Me, Jessie, and Gramma standing at our assigned tables gradually covering the concrete floor, and ourselves, in dirt.

Mom joins us when she doesn't need to water in the greenhouses, or pick peppers, or beans, or wrangle with Aunt Leslie. We rarely get Jack. Only if we can drag him away from whatever menial, all-consuming task he's found to waste away time until lunch.

Yesterday he hid beside the brown barn, washing the stacks of pails that I'm fairly certain Grampa already finished with. I don't know if anyone else noticed, but I said nothing. Jack staying outside meant I wouldn't have to listen to him complain all day about eye-watering onion smell. Grampa hates it when he slinks off, and Jack only gets away with pail-washing because Grampa's too busy mowing, Dad's in the beans, Mom thinks he's in here, and Gramma's too focused on fussing over me and Jessie to care where her oldest grandchild's gone.

I'll give him credit, he knows enough about the workday to slip around everyone.

The green onion in my hand is about the thickness of my thumb at the end, a good size, but not the biggest we've gotten—some get the size of leeks, it just astounds people on the market—"I didn't think onions could get this big! What do you do to them?" I shrug. "Little bit of luck, and a lot of dedication. Helps having the best-kept soil in

Ontario. But that's our secret—can't have Jamison's down the way growing them this size!"

Honestly, we've never put anything on them, besides whatever pesticides Gramps and Dad use in the fields, but never anything to make them the vegetable equivalent of a steroid-fueled decathlete. Great soil, my theory.

I pull the filthy outer leaves down, like yanking off a tight pair of jeans that break apart at the ankles. Use my nails to scrape off the bits that stick on, make the end all even and shining white. Jessie doesn't polish the ends or pluck off the yellowed tips—not as particular about the details as I am, or Dad is. Each time, I trim the layers 'til they're even. When my siblings and I were younger we slipped the discarded chopped-off leaves over our fingers and ran around, trying to grab each other or our parents. On the market, we grabbed at random strangers until we got too old for that to be cute instead of rude. "Witches fingers," we'd crow, flexing our newly extended, slimy green appendages.

The roots themselves won't be clean until they're pressure-washed, but at least for now I can pick out the small clumps of dirt knotted in them. Doll's hair poking out from the pale end. Dirt on the floor, caked onto my shirt, under my nails, that last little bit of field stubbornly hanging on to the ends of the onions.

Satisfied, I drop the onion onto the growing mountain of cleaned ones. Soon on to bunching.

Gramma's burrowed herself away in here since before lunch, and she's finished filling up one orange box. On her second. Even Jessie's half-done bunching her pile—managed to move quick today, probably hopes she can quit early. She's on the opposite

end of the barn, red hair wrangled into a sloppy bun and wearing a sweater even though it's August and pushing 30 degrees outside. A resounding thump echoes through the air as a bunch drops from her hand to her table. Too heavy.

"Those look a little big, don't you think?" I ask, lightly. *Way* oversized, but I didn't want to jump straight into an attack.

Jessie spins around, thin blue elastic in hand, a scowl on her face. "Well that's how I've been doing them. Gramma hasn't said anything about them being too big."

Probably because she's finishing her own bunches and you should know better, I don't say. "Well, maybe you should go down one or two. Here, take a look at mine if you need," I offer, holding out a bunch. She starts snapping the rubber band against her thumb, scrapes her heel against the cement floor.

"But people buy more if they get more for their money."

"Sure, until everyone sees we're underpricing and then we have less to sell because you keep lumping ten onions in one bunch," I say, snappier than I intended.

"Girls, please." Gramma turns around, and I step back. Let her take over. "Jessie, your sister's right, you've got too many in that bunch."

She huffs. "So what, you want me to undo them all?"

"Yes, that's exactly right. You don't have too many done yet, it won't take long," Gramma says. "If you're not sure how big to make them, just ask me."

I turn away to face my table. Jessie'll think I'm smug about getting her in trouble, but I just want to get this right so they don't have to redo everything at the market. Mom's busy enough, setting up the tents, the tables, the till, not to mention unloading and arranging the produce. She doesn't need to also fix pre-bunched bunches.

"But I already—are you serious?" Jessie starts, when she's cut off by the barn door. Mom, a basket of field tomatoes gripped in each hand, her old baseball cap covered in yellow tomato flowers and residue. I snatch another green onion to peel. Mom places the baskets on the longer table in the back, grabbing one fat tomato off the top and checking the bottom for blackened splits. "I picked the rest of the half-ripes so we'll have some extra this week. How's everything in here?" she asks. Then, "What's the matter?"

"Ask them," Jessie yanks the elastic off one of her bunches. The elastic breaks with a sharp snap, and she drops the green onions onto the floor. "Shit! Cheap-ass—" For a second, I wonder if she'll kick them across the room, the way she's stiffened up, her fists clenched.

"I can never do anything right, can I? Anna's telling me I'm not bunching good enough, Gramma's taking her side *as usual*, and I'm standing here with my eyes burning!" she spits, nearly stepping on the dropped onions. "Why can't you let me go water? Or how about I pick tomatoes instead, and you stand here peeling stinking onions?"

Mom's eyes close, and I wish I hadn't said anything in the first place. Head down, I start picking at another leaf only to notice the root end of the onion missing. Cut off,

probably, by the pitchfork pulling them up. Into the bin it drops. The brewing stand-off behind me boils over.

"Jessica. I've told you, our priority today is to finish prepping for market. Nothing needs watering, and there's no point in asking to do tomatoes now. You knew what needed doing today, and you are getting paid to help." Mom gestured to the pile of finished bunches haphazardly stacked in the orange box beside Jessie's table. "And please pick those off the ground before they get wrecked."

Jessie snatched up the onions and smacked them down onto the table. "I *was* almost done, until *she*—" I can feel her point at me, "—decided I wasn't up to her standards!"

"All we did was let her know she was bunching too many together," Gramma came to my defense.

"So, you take a few out, what's the big fuss? You'll still be done before it's time to quit," says Mom, voice strained. Should have kept my mouth shut.

"I can't wait until I turn fifteen next year, then I can get a real job," snaps Jessie. "Where I won't be stuck in a barn getting dirt all over my glasses, and I won't have to be around you all the time."

"Go ahead." Gramma, again. "You won't make as much money as you will working with family. Try getting a promotion with that sweet attitude."

Jessie's face reddens, and she opens her mouth, closes it, huffs. "Whatever, you always take her side. Don't talk to me." Turning with as little movement as possible, I watch her yank her headphones out of her pocket, put them on and flip her hood up.

"If your grandfather heard this," Gramma mutters. "You know, he used to give your Aunt Leslie a smack for that kind of behavior. You kids are lucky he's gone soft."

Mom shakes her head, takes a few steps toward Jessie, stops, then moves back over to the door, pausing beside me.

"Where's your brother?" she asks. "He's supposed to help you start washing."

She had to ask *me*. I shrug, muttering, "Think I saw him over by the other barn." I avoid mentioning the pails. God I hope he's moved on from the pails. I try to shrink into the shadows, my stomach presses against the table edge.

Only takes a few minutes before Jack slouches in furrow-browed and arms still soaked, Mom marching behind him.

"How about you can stand at *this* tub and do something useful," she says, directing him over to the grey tub by the barn's larger main door. "If you want to wash so badly, do the green onions. The pressure-washer is set up, and the girls have tidied the bunches. Just spray, and pack them into the cooler."

"There's three people in here already. None of you can do it?" he sticks his wet hands into his pockets. "Everyone allergic to water all of a sudden?"

Jessie glances over at him, not smiling at his snark.

Mom grips the rim of the tub. “Your other option is going out and picking beans with Dad for the rest of the afternoon. You’ve slacked off this morning, so now get productive, got it? Unless you suddenly don’t need a paycheque.”

A few silent seconds, before Jack drags his feet over to flip on the washer. The dull, rumbling roar fills the barn. Back too straight, he moves slow and stiff as a rusted machine, nowhere near pleased to be stuck inside. Mom hoists the box of onions Gramma finished earlier, and dumps them into the half-filled grey tub, before striding out into the sunlight. The door shuts with a bang.

* * *

Mom at the table to my left; Jack to my right. Three in a row, peeling to the tune of the radio crackling top ten latest pop hits, on repeat. Aunt Leslie joined us, sort of. She’s piling beans into quarts at the back table—Dad’s idea to make market set-up faster for Mom—and humming off-beat.

The onion I’m peeling is filthy, the leaves withered no matter how many layers I peel away, and the only pile growing is of the discarded bits at my feet. The floor around my brother is barely marked.

“I’m quitting full-time.” Jack announces, dropping his bunch. Everyone stills, even Aunt Leslie quiets down with a *hmm?*

Mom tears a leaf. “What do you mean, quitting?”

“Tyler’s dad says he can get me a job at the shop. I’m gonna fix cars.”

“You have a job here already. One that pays pretty well.”

He shrugs, stiffening up instead of relaxing. “Sure but I’d get better experience there. Don’t you want me to get more experience? For when I move out?”

“Why don’t we discuss this later, with your father.”

“I think that’s wonderful news, don’t you Bev?” Aunt Leslie pipes up, and any hope of ending the conversation evaporates. “Kid’s opening his options, networking. Building a proper résumé.”

“That’s not the point, Leslie. He can’t just decide to stop working. We need to plan hours, figure out who’s going to take over helping Dad and your father, who’ll drive the tractor for them in the mornings. It means we’d be down a worker going into market season, and that’s not a small discussion.”

“Oh let the kid have a little freedom. You take this to the boss and he’ll pop a fuse.” Aunt Leslie walks over to put her hand on Jack’s shoulder. “Good for you, Jack.”

Mom abandons her station, moves to stand beside me. I slump forward out of her way, trying not to check my watch for the third time, and end up fixated on the disastrous scene before me. “Stop making it about sides, this is about springing this kind of news on us!”

“I can’t keep playing with tractors the rest of my life Mom, I’m an adult! I need a real job now.” Jack says.

“Why’s he bothering to go to college, if you’re just going to drag him back here every time the semester ends? And this is his first year. He’s got to move on sometime, and he’ll need real references. Besides, he’s not the only one who’s thought of quitting.”

"And where exactly would *you* go? With your many degrees? You got a job at the mechanic's lined up too?"

Aunt Leslie reddens. "Not my fault I've stuck in this shithole my whole life. He's *your* kid! Shouldn't *you* want better for him?" she walks right up to Mom, nose-to-nose right in front of me. Jack her shadow. "But I was born here, just like Jack. You wouldn't understand, you chose this. We didn't."

Mom doesn't flinch. "Jack, we'll discuss this later. Neither of you's quit yet, so get back to work. You're still on farm payroll." Then turns to me. "Anna, grab some of the onions off your brother's table, he's not going to finish that pile before dinner."

* * *

Honestly, I'd rather Mom got Jack to peel while I washed. He never manages to get all the dirt off, and I don't mind washing the vegetables to look all rich and colourful. With him half-assing it, the leaves might get crushed.

Wiping the dirt off my hands on the somewhat-clean sides of my shirt—not that there's any point, I still have to sweep off the table later, leave me resembling a dust-pile more than a teenage girl—I try to shake my thoughts, stay focused on peeling. An erratic hissing joins the rumble of the machine as Jack starts spraying the onions. Pausing every few seconds to shift the coiling hose from around his leg.

I read somewhere once—some psych article found diving into the Wikipedia rabbit-hole—that workers are more unsatisfied with their jobs if they don't get to see the finished product of their labour. That's what it feels like to me with Jack taking up washing. Doing all the dirty work—literally, the dirt filling my nose and ears and under-

nails—but I don't get to see it through to the finish, don't get to make the onions all shiny clean. Jack splashes around, doesn't appreciate what an *easy* job it is. He's basically doing the same thing he did outside, so why's he so moody? He'll go back to college with a decent amount of money to blow, he should be glad.

My turn to leave is coming. No more arriving home after school to "You got homework? Want to make some extra cash? Help out your poor old grandparents for a bit?" Unless I go to university somewhere close, somewhere I can live at home, drive once I get my full license, back and forth, no fast food job. Never doing *that*. It'd be nice, to keep this job. Something familiar, people I trust, people I don't have to awkwardly get to know, customers that don't tear my head off for cutting their sandwich the wrong way.

Wouldn't be one less person on the farm either. Not that Mom and Dad would ever admit it, no. Dad may prefer that I move to the other side of the world, but he also needs me to stay here. I know Grampa's gunning for at least one of us to stay—does he still think that person's Jack?—and it sucks to feel like I'm abandoning them. I wish I could grow a few clones, leave them here so I could get my own job—maybe see where photography take me—*and* keep the farm running. Especially whenever it hits me how Jack and Jessie skip work, or toss around the onions and cauliflower like trash. They don't appreciate what we've got, the open fields, the beauty of the home we've grown up with. Or maybe they've got it right and I just can't grow up.

Peeling, peeling, start to bunch. I measure the size by making a circle with my finger and thumb—no bigger. Resist the urge to check the time. Wait and see if I'll be surprised by how much we got done, or disappointed by how much there's left to do. I

don’t smell the sharpness of the onions anymore, can’t taste them in the back of my throat. Too clogged up with dirt.

Jessie finishes her oh-so-agonizing task of remaking her bunches in less time than it took her to complain about it in the first place, and drops the box by Jack’s feet. For a second she hovers at the door, clenching the handle, watching Jack through the mist off the sprayer, chewing her lip.

But instead of leaving, she lets go. Brushing past me, she walks all the way to the back and grabs the baskets of tomatoes to continue sorting where Mom left off. Headphones still in place.

Once I’m finished, I similarly deposit the box where my brother can reach, and move to help Gramma finish her pile—her breakneck speed finally giving out, she’s started to stop-and-go-and-stop, rubbing at her hands and eyeing up the ratty stool in the corner she rests on during breaks.

I grab the bag of elastics, begin binding the onions.

Her lips purse, but then she flexes her hands. Concedes, returns to simply peeling.

Twist and twist and *snap*. Seems every other elastic breaks, and I bite the inside of my cheek to avoid cursing in front of Gramma. Don’t need a repeat of Jessie’s outburst. Not that Gramma never lets out the occasional “shit” or “Christ-on-a-fucking-stick” herself, but she’ll call me out. The little old lady who wears cartoon goose-patterned t-shirts and owned real geese as pets when she still had the energy to keep

ahead of them. Three fat white geese storming around her front lawn, chasing joggers and dog-walkers alike. “Best security anyone could ask for,” she’d recall.

* * *

The pile in the orange box grows, rows of ten on ten on ten. I get a feeling like I’m being watched, but Gramma’s looking past me. Towards the wash-tub, where the hissing has stopped, replaced by the telltale crunch of someone pressing way too hard on onion leaves.

“Jack, how many are in that box?” she asks, as Jack starts folding close the top of the brown cardboard box. Wet leaves jut out of the handle hole on the side.

“Whatever you guys gave me. I dunno. Probably enough for Friday, I guess.”

“Friday? What happened to Wednesday’s? You keeping count?” she presses. “Tell me you’re not trying to put sixty bunches in there, oh, your mother will have a fit!” She reaches for the box but Jack throws himself onto the top of the box, grabbing a hold of either side. For a moment, I think he’s going to throw that whole box of onions.

That’s when his boots get caught in the hose.

He falls, landing right on his ass, and the box tumbles down on top of him, pinning his legs.

“You all right?”

Jack shakes his head—hell his whole body shakes, his cheeks turning bright red. “Know what? I’ve got better shit to do than waste my life counting vegetables. We’re never gonna sell all this garbage, what does it matter if there’s twenty on one day, sixty

on another?" He shoves off the box, and it scrapes against the concrete as he scrambles up without bothering to dust himself off. "I'm going to town, you can tell mom to shove these up her ass." And then he's gone.

Gramma stands very still. Jessie's even pulled out her headphones. The machine rumbles away, the only sound filling the barn.

The box is a lot heavier than I expect when I pick it up. I'd almost be impressed that Jack managed to wave it around with those skinny arms of his if I wasn't ready to throw him off a damn roof. I manage to set it right-side up, and unfold the top. Beside me, a second, empty box drops to the ground.

"Get started on the next batch. I've got this one."

Jessie crouches next to me, nudges me out of the way. She reaches into the too-full box, starts transferring bunches over to the new one. Under her breath, she's counting.

One, two, three…nine, ten. She's nearly done the second layer by the time I start dumping another pile into the tub. Gramma steps back to her table, and leaves fall into the bin beside her.

Grab the hose. A deceptively misty spray of water hisses out, spattering over the onions sloshing around in the murkening water, waiting.

Jessie sorts. Gramma peels. I aim the nozzle and begin to wash.

Pepper Birds

Rotten green bell peppers fly through the air, falling with a bounce and a dull thud into the dirt. I pick, inspect, then collect or toss mindlessly, while the crows laugh hoarsely in the distance. In this business, if a product doesn't appear commercial-level impeccably flawless, customers will sniff and complain, and shove it aside unbought.

I discard more peppers: sick spots that turn brown and melt the marred shell from the inside out; a few plants, dried up in the scorching sun, which hardly produced a thing to begin with; and worst of all the holes, so many holes! Great gaping mouths emerging from the sides and around the stems, long cracks, and—most infuriatingly—tiny pecks barely breaking the skin but damage enough to prevent selling.

Bending in the heat for more than a few minutes while the sun burns my back makes me long for the cold shadows of the barn. I didn't expect field work today—Aunt Leslie was supposed to help out here, but apparently she had an emergency optometrist appointment she forgot about, so she sent Mom a quick text and never showed. Not expecting this, I wore a tank-top instead of a t-shirt.

"Well, at least she texted," I point out. Mom doesn't look any happier.

Thud. Ka-thump. The few peppers I've managed to salvage bounce into the bucket and against the bottom and sides as I heave it up, over to the next plant, and drop it down again. Once the bucket gets full, it becomes a lot heavier, like hauling around an old microwave, and I'll have to carry it all the way back down the row to dump it into the bigger box in the truck. Worse, I need to pass all the discarded peppers on my way.

Feeling my feet sink deeper into the mud, I grimace about how long it will take for the mud to flake and wash off. The dirt sinks into the mesh fabric of the sneakers, covering my feet in dust and sending another pair of socks to the wash prematurely. Well, that's what I get for forgetting my rubber boots in the garage, and for choosing to pick from the downhill half of the row after a rainstorm. A much needed storm, I'll admit, given the wilting crops in the field. Rain doesn't help heal broken shells though. Or chase away crows.

My hands fumble for a large, firm pepper that feels perfectly unbroken until I spot the hole near the bottom. I chuck it into the next field but it lands only a few feet away—my throw falling short of my aim. The pepper settles into the dirt and as I move forward the empty field gradually breaks out in greenish spots.

* * *

I wander out into the fields after work, a little time left before the sun sets too low. In between rows of leeks—leeks beside the currants beside the peppers beside the end of the farm and after that it's just the soybean farm Grampa grumbles about all the time. Cauliflower, broccoli, sprouts and onions fill the other sections of fields.

The quiet tends to clear my mind, and even though I'm wary of coyotes, the idea of seeing one doesn't bother me as much as when I was a kid. It's nice to be alone out here, when it's cooler, and I don't need to keep my spine bent, head bowed, eyes down for work. In these moments, I love the farm.

A glitter of light from the ground, the ache in my neck fades instantly. I swoop down to inspect.

Stuck beneath a clump of dried mud, the bright white edge sticking up, flashing like a knife but not nearly as sharp.

"China shards," Mom told me when I showed her the first piece I ever found.

This one's a big piece, the size of a toonie. Bone white marked with rich blue flowers, blurry-lined like a drawing left out in the rain. A single soft line of blue drips across the rim, not curved like a teacup, but a plate? Shattered—knocked off a table, against a wall, dropped in fright? By a grandparent, great-grandparent, the first ancestor to sow the fields of this farm? Can only imagine the history this broken piece's endured, mixed in the dirt by ploughs and cultivators. We ate off this china, then planted in the ground we worked. The farm swallows even our shards.

One, two, three—crouch and shuffle, pluck it out, wipe away the earth. A hole in the ground marked where the shard once lay. I pocket my new treasure, careful not to step on the leeks when I rise—Mom and Dad, and especially Grampa, would raise hell if I did.

My feet continue to take me along the path that outlines our farm, and within a few minutes I'm at a mood-sinkingly familiar place. Any calm I felt breaks when I spot *them*.

Crows. Fluffing their black feathers as they perch on dead tree branches and worse still on the bars of unused hundred foot greenhouses running parallel to the peppers. The greenhouses make me think of giants' ribs, with crows like flies landing around them. Frustration boils in my stomach, and I wish my parents would just sell the

structures already. Grampa wanted Dad to take the frames down last year, and now what? They're housing vandals.

The bars act as the birds' resting points, and their diving boards into the endless feast pit below. They're picky eaters, these capricious crows, never consuming the whole pepper, or even any of the seeds inside. They nibble and peck, then leave the majority behind on the stem; like toddlers whining for cookies only to eat one bite before discarding the rest. No reasoning behind their destruction. Unless it's to torment me. Smart crows, I wouldn't put it past them to deliberately taunt me with their leftovers.

Why couldn't the brutes steal from the currant bushes?

* * *

I remember Mom on her stool in the currant bushes. If she leaned forward, the bushes made her disappear—but even healthy, they weren't super leafy. I tried crawling into them, and met with poking twigs and branches, a spiderweb made of sticks catching hair as easily as bugs. I'd scare the sparrows that hid behind the leaves.

Aunt Leslie sat on the opposite side, always picking red while Mom picked black. The red ones popped between my teeth, but the black ones looked dark and speckly, the colour of crows, and peeling away skin they were sickly green.

When I was younger, I'd weave between the bushes, scaring the sparrows away from the currants. "Anna, can you come over here for me?" Auntie Leslie called once, catching my attention. Stumbled over to her—she grasped my wrist in her hand, soft but long-nailed.

“Yes Auntie Leslie?”

She smiled sweetly. Eyed up Mom, much farther down the row than her, not watching us. “Can you do your Auntie a great big favour?”

I nodded. “Yes Auntie Leslie!” A favour? Assumed that meant a prize at the end, like when Mom gave me allowance for helping make my bed.

“Can you carry these pints back over to the truck for me? You know I have trouble getting up, and you’re so fast and strong.” Made me feel more important than Grampa, the boss of the farm. “You can do it, right?”

Of course! Picked up the two pints of red currants one in each hand like carrying two full glasses of water. Thought if I upset Auntie Leslie in the slightest, she’d never ask me to help her again.

“Good girl! Go on now, let’s see.” Clapped gently once, then shifted around on her short wooden stool to face the bushes again. Never considered how she’d see me, with her face in the bushes.

I walked over to the truck and placed the pints on the tailgate, then pushed them into the shade as far as possible—shaded or else they’d get wrinkly. Tough, dried berries that slide around the tongue and don’t burst when I bite down, not when I grind my teeth, or gnaw. Responsible girl.

Twice more I travelled down the centre of the rows back to Auntie Leslie, helping her carry her pints—well, she filled them up with careless fistfuls of berries and stems,

while I carried them. Plucked the bushes clean—only torn dark green leaves and sticks remained.

"Leslie, what are you doing?"

Momma stood above, holding a box of eight pints. Auntie Leslie wouldn't have thought of a box, why bother when it's easier to carry one light load back and forth—and why use a box at all, with free labour around?

"What do you mean?" Auntie replied, pluck-plucking the bushes.

"Anna, go back to the truck, your Aunt needs to do her own work." Mom's face pinched up, like a dried currant.

"But I'm helping!" I whined.

"You can help later, right now Aunt Leslie needs to learn how to do her own carrying."

Auntie Leslie's face scrunched up and she stood on her side of the bush. The two women face-to-face, separated by parallel lines of currant bushes.

But Mom's warning voice left no room for argument, so I ran. Down the middle of the bush rows, branches scratching my legs, to the very far end and out, scattering sparrows with beaks full of berries. Far away from the truck and Mom and Aunt Leslie.

* * *

We stopped harvesting those berries years ago when we began to have less and less help, yet somehow never got rid of the bushes, if one can call a brittle, leafless

structure of twigs a bush. I can't remember when most of them stopped growing green. Bright red and matte black currants still grow sparsely on them though, in alternating untouched clusters left to wither into mummified raisins. The crows seem to know that my family doesn't need the currants, and spitefully ignore them.

I stroll on slowly down the patch, refusing to look up and give my shadows the satisfaction of having caught my attention, of spoiling my walk. I don't look down either, almost afraid of the sporadic lines of broken peppers I feel flattening under my shoes.

Behind the crunch of drying dirt and pepper remains, the sound of croaking and a flutter of leaves compels me to whirl around, ready to catch one vandal in the act—only to find empty air and greenery behind me.

The line of crows on the greenhouse stays oddly parallel to me, despite my pace. I wave my arms at them. One bird calls out mockingly. Impulsively, I throw stones hoping to scatter them. They refuse to be moved, their feathers still and glossy as pepper skin.

I leave the fields before sundown, unsatisfied. A china shard weighing down my pocket; pepper entrails stuck to the soles of my shoes.

The days pass quickly, and with them the rich green leaves grow wider, along with my own hopes that the fragile canopies will soon spread out enough to cover the peppers, keep them hidden from the creatures long enough to pick. The smallest peppers grow faster. The dual lines of plants extend across the earth forever.

I wish I could put an enormous net on top of them, like Gramma puts over her little tomato plants in her garden. I wish the crows would fly away to some other farm, go

into the soybean and cattle corn business like everyone else these days. I wish I could steal away their beaks.

I can smell the bell peppers, their bittersweetness breaking open around me. From the field to the washtub, and even after they're locked away in the cooler, thoughts of waste and lost product still follow me with a sharp scent. At night I swear I hear crows cawing, beating their wings outside, while I remain unable to chase them away because the farm after dark is a forbidden and dangerous world for softer things like peppers and people.

In my dreams, crows swoop down, pecking holes in my head, their beaks as sharp as broken china. The rotting shells of peppers ruined before their prime smash upon the ground at my feet, melting into the fields.

* * *

Snap! Off breaks a bell pepper, a nice fat one—Mom'd get mad if I picked them too small, unripened, but she trusts me.

An earwig crawled off the hidden side of the pepper, up my fingers towards my sleeve.

I screamed.

Mom flipped from business to comfort, trying to stop my flailing arms from hitting her once she reached me. Ran as soon I started screaming. "It's gone sweetie, see?"

What if it bit me though? "Am I gonna get poisoned?" I wailed.

"No sweetie, earwigs aren't poisonous."

"But they're gross and nasty, worse than worms. I hate bugs!"

"Well don't worry, birds eat the bugs. And there's plenty of birds around who'd love to eat that earwig you just threw away."

"Will they eat *all* the bugs?" I sniffled.

"All the bugs."

But our crows don't eat bugs. They devour peppers.

* * *

When enough time passes for the tiny round bells to grown fat enough to harvest for the next market, I go out with Mom, and Jessie joins us, the three of us squashed into the cab of the rumbling old truck, bouncing over every hill and pothole on the farm's dirt road as we drive out to the field. I grab a bucket and wander into the field.

No crows, I exhale. The first few plants don't yield much at the end of the row, where the ground sinks in. But surprisingly soon the bottom of my bucket is covered, and a mountain slowly rises within. My fist clenches tight around the thin metal handle as the weight increases. For the first time since last year, I must remember not to fill the bucket too much, or I won't be able to haul it over to the truck.

Moving farther up the row to pass the empty greenhouses, my delight is punctured and I let the bucket drop with a heavy thud. The holes crop up again, showing up in the plants as if there had never been any peppers without them. One pepper rests in my hands, the cavity a small but damning flaw punched into the surface. Teeth clenched, I fling the pepper away with every furious bit of force I can muster.

Every time I go to harvest and never get more than twenty peppers, a single bucketful, feels like a bitter failure. Mom and Dad insist the plants will grow and

eventually the crows will move on—but beneath this logic festers the thought that the plants aren't growing fast enough, and the cursed crows will never leave.

My flung pepper hits the ground halfway across the next field, and I feel a small sense of satisfaction under the bitterness. Moving onward, I finally drop another pepper into the bucket. A crow swoops overhead to land on the greenhouse.

Heads

Smack! Thud.

The head of broccoli hits my palms, then the bottom of the stiff cardboard box. Six more until it's full, if I manage to fit them in the way I want. Sixteen's the most I'm able to maneuver together, a 3-D puzzle, like those Lincoln logs Gramma and Grampa kept in their basement toy-box for us kids. If one head isn't placed in the right position, the whole set-up is thrown off and I'm stuck either rearranging things while still trying to catch, or letting a box of only fourteen slip through and ruin my perfect streak. I told my parents every box would have exactly sixteen, every one, to make keeping track easier. Dad replied, "Don't shove them, only put in what will fit properly!"

Piled up on the back end of the wide, wood-plank trailer are more waxy boxes, all folded together into their cuboid forms and ready to grab. A stack of unassembled pancake boxes sits in the corner, only for if I run out. I really don't want to have to start assembling boxes while catching—pry apart the stack, pull, fold, *wrong fold*, unfold, push the tabs into the right openings—then the broccoli isn't positioned right. And I'll only have fourteen in a box. Mom and Dad will be waiting for me to finish folding another box together, waving broccoli hands, waving knives.

Jessie lifts her foot off the tractor brake too quickly, and the attached trailer lurches forward almost sending me onto my back. Heels lift, toes barely clinging to the vibrating planks below. "Sturdy sea-legs," Grampa says, "You'd belong on a boat if you weren't such a farmer!" Laughing, hacking. He assigns me to catch every time, sending

me up to replace whichever wobbling predecessor couldn't handle the tractor's unpredictable motions.

"Easy!" I yell at her, as if she'll hear me over the engine.

Can't imagine Aunt Leslie up here, handling vegetables thrown at her face though the situation is funny enough to picture, and even Mom stumbles around more often than I do. Jack could probably do it, but he cries he'd rather be down on the ground swinging the knife, doing the fun bit, than packing away someone else's work. He's stuck in the beans with Grampa today. I can't help feeling a little sorry for him. For both really.

Jessie actually likes driving the tractor. Not all that surprising to me, even if Mom and Grampa are still shocked at her sudden voluntary spirit. Here she can practice driving—she's still a year away from starting to get her license, but she'll take any opportunity to get behind a wheel—and she can listen to her music. Not sure how she can hear anything over the constant roar of the tractor, but whatever makes her happy. I don't mind driving the old blue mechanical terror, but keeping the brake pressed down, lifting my foot off it ever-so-gently, slowly, so's not to send whoever's on the trailer careening off the edge, makes my leg ache. Gramma stopped tractor-driving for that reason, once her hip got bad enough. Dad badgered her for ages beforehand to quit.

"I've driven this tractor with your father for thirty years!"

"Yes, Mom, but thirty years takes a toll on you. You're not going to be able to walk at this rate, let alone drive tractors. And that'd be the end of you working. Bev'll give you something else to do. You can still man the greenhouses, right?"

"Of course I can. I'm not bedridden yet!"

"I'd never think you were even close to it."

Mom and Dad walk slowly beside the rumbling trailer, wading through the hip-high plants in their rubber pants and coats, scouring two rows each for broccoli big enough to harvest. Dad swings a knife. Mom swings a knife. Up, down, up, down. Chop the leaves short enough to see the florets, not so much there's no protection. Toss and repeat. Severing heads while I box them up.

Another broccoli flies into my hands, spattering me with dew. My sleeves soaked with water and we're not even halfway down the field. We're not running out of boxes already, are we? No, not yet. But getting low.

Little dark green flowers—is that what they're called? Flowers? I just think of them as the little round things that stick in your teeth—wedge under my fingernails. No point digging them out. Stuck there until the field's harvested and the boxes packed away into the cooler.

Pay attention! I'll get hit otherwise, it's happened before—Mom felt awful about it, I felt worse seeing the head crushed under the slow wheels of the trailer along with the rotten ones. A perfectly good waste. Pay attention!

Another thing I like about standing on the trailer. The open view. Not much, but several feet higher than what I'm used to, and makes the farm seems so much bigger. High enough to see over the line of overgrown hedges covered in vines of wild grape that Gramma keeps telling us not to eat. Over the hedges and to the other field: a line of

lettuce, then beets, then lettuce again. Aunt Leslie's standing in the lettuce past the beets but before the peppers, some way down. She's about the size of a bug, and human-shaped beetle. Bends up and down and up and down like one of those office drinking birds. Keeping time—*catch the broccoli!*—only breaks the pattern when she finds a lettuce head, wanders away to drop it in her own box. I think she kicks one as she walks back to her spot, but maybe she just tripped.

A whistle. Turn just in time to catch another head close to my chest, fingers fumbling to grip the stalk.

"Almost gotcha!" Mom laughs, arm still outstretched. "Better pay attention!"

Dad hides a smile, leaning down to check another plant.

I used to think Aunt Leslie glamourous—and she still is, in her own way, parading through the mud in heeled boots, polished nails never tearing or chipping, buying her own brand of gloves instead of just using the blue ones we keep in the supply closet. Directing us kids from greenhouse to greenhouse, fetching snacks and water bottles, carrying her trays and buckets—like the self-appointed ringleader of an undersized circus. As a kid, that's how I imagined myself on the farm: productive, but unruffled. Now she's more like an ageing magician, whose grand illusions and fancy words that once made such sense, are outdated, funny in a foolish way. But who still manages that occasional perfect disappearing act.

Catch another head, close the box, shove it to the front with the others, yank another empty from behind me. Can't stay distracted when there's work, if we don't want to be here all morning. What else needs doing?

Jessie speeds up the tractor, Mom and Dad getting ahead.

Still need to pile these new boxes of broccoli into the cooler I guess, wash the lettuce if Aunt Leslie ever finishes—will Grampa and Jack have the beans be picked by the time we get done? Need to wash those, hope Gramma doesn't get started without me, she doesn't need to be lifting bushels of beans—then beets still need picking, though Mom might save that for tomorrow, and what else now? There's always something I'm forgetting. Wonder if we'll have time to sit for a coffee break.

Trailer's catching up to them now. Dad's tossing broccoli back to me, steady, arching the throws so I catch them neatly, so they don't fly into my stomach. Water drops through the air, a millisecond rainfall. Mom's fishing her phone out of her pocket—elbows up, twisting her gloved hands under the thick straps and down into her giant rubber overalls.

Tractor creeps forward, Jessie leaning back in the driver's seat with one hand on the wheel, the other holding her phone. Paying just enough attention that the tractor doesn't veer into the patch and run over the plants—no, she wouldn't risk getting skinned for that—but still letting herself escape from the mundane broccoli-picking.

Mom's talking furiously into her own phone now, probably yelling but the roar of the tractor drowns her out. Strain my ears to pick up the words but she's still just far enough away, and I can't afford to split my concentration too much while the other parent is still tossing heads. Dad's knife cuts through the air alone now, through the broccoli stalks. *Thwack.* Lift, trim the leaves, then heave-ho! Destination? Me. He sends four more

my way, going into Mom's rows, before I'm finally brought close enough to hear that Aunt Leslie's the one calling.

"She says the patch is rotten," Mom says loudly to Dad, as he stops beside her.

Shakes his head. "I just checked them yesterday, they were coming up beautiful!" he responds.

"She says they're all garbage, she's wasted her time."

Dad's brow drops, shoulders lifting and I'm glad I'm not on the ground with them. Wouldn't want to be Aunt Leslie when he sees her next either. "Ask her what patch she's in—Anna!" he turns to me, "Can you see what patch she's in?"

"Far one, other side of the beets," I answer immediately. No messing around now, he's gone all stiff and rubbing his temple with the hand not holding a knife.

He swears, "Tell my sister she's an idiot," but Mom's already telling her she's in the wrong patch, the one Dad's going to rototill with the other tractor later.

"Well you told me this one!" I imagine Leslie insisting. She's pacing in circles around the lettuce patch. Maybe stomping on the rotten ones, crushing heads underfoot.

Where I'm standing on the trailer now is right even with them, and even over the tractor I can hear Aunt Leslie screeching over the phone.

Without any heads thrown at me, I start making boxes. I wish Leslie would just get her act together. A bitter woman, boxing rot, stuck on a farm and blaming everyone else.

Dad grabs the phone from Mom, and his thumb must have hit the speaker button because now I can hear her going off.

"—ot my fault no one knows where the hell anything is! You *said* by the beets, I remember!"

"You've been working here your whole damn life, you should know a rotten lettuce!"

"*You're* a rotten lettuce!"

"Jessie, shut the damn tractor off!" Mom yells, over Dad, over the passing tractor. The tractor roars on.

So does Aunt Leslie. "—wasted enough of my time. You can pick it yourselves since I clearly can't!"

She must've hung up because Dad doesn't say anything back. He stands there, staring in the direction of the lettuce patch. Aunt Leslie's bug-ish silhouette disappears into her pickup truck, and speeds off back towards the barn.

He finally speaks. "Anna, stop making so many boxes, we won't use them all anyways. Christ on a flaming stick."

Isn't it better to have extra just in case? Be prepared? But I won't argue, not now.

Jessie mustn't've heard any of that—*I envy her*—because the tractor keeps rolling on and I'm past everyone now. Mom carefully pulls the phone from Dad's hand and puts it away. Pats him on the shoulder. Gets back to work.

She tries to lighten the mood, spinning a broccoli head as she throws like a football. Did she used to play football? Or other sports, before becoming a farmer, with hours so long and consuming she couldn't have joined a proper team even if she wanted to? Did Dad have any hobbies? I know he wanted to be an accountant, once, but he never talks about it. I can't picture him working in an office—it's wrong, my suntanned, sun-wrinkled father, at a corporate 9 to 5. But would he have been happier? I don't know what Aunt Leslie wanted to be, but she seems to feel cheated by not getting it. Can't hear them now again, only the rumbling engine and popping of broccoli remains underwheel, but Mom must have said something to calm Dad down because he bends right back over and starts cutting heads again like nothing happened. Like normal.

The Break

Every morning the two birds settle down, huddle together on the maple branch outside my window.

Two mourning doves.

Two mourning doves.

Two mourning doves.

Two mourning doves.

Two mourning doves.

Two mourning doves.

One mourning dove.

I open the curtains, smile blearily at them in greeting until them becomes singular.

Mourning doves mate for life, or at least that's what I've read, and when I realize the dove recently started showing up alone because its mate probably died, I nearly cried. Cried for a bird experiencing loss I'm not even sure it feels but surely it must have on some level, *surely*, because they'd flown through each morning, settled on that same knotted branch together until one didn't. A broken family.

Alone.

I'm alone right now, inside the house where I shouldn't be because, because, I don't really have a migraine.

"Well now that your high school's let out for break, I guess you can work outside at the farm now, regular hours and all. No excuses about homework!" Grampa said the other day, chipper as a polar bear while working outside seven days a week in negative temperatures. "No school projects to worry about."

He's wrong. Sort of. I've got final exams to study for, only a month away. With January comes the first final exams of my last year of high school. Trying to absorb *anything* in class at this point is like pitching bowling balls at a cloud and expecting them to land on top. And stay there. My notebooks more full of flowery doodles and exquisitely detailed cabbages than chemistry or algebra. Textbooks shoved into the corner of my desk between the computer and the wall and the snowboarding boy on one cover laughs mockingly, knowing I won't touch them until January. I hate snowboarding.

"It's up to you," Mom said, shrugging one shoulder—that tells me I don't have to if I really don't want to but I should, and it'll be worth it 'cause I'll get paid. Get the work done quicker, get the family back inside sooner. Then we break for two or three or so weeks. Then on to the cabbage bins, already waiting, filling the barn cooler.

"Just say no. It's not *that* hard, and it's your break too," Jack wrinkled his nose at my sulking in the kitchen yesterday night. "What, they think high school's a vacation?"

"Wish they hadn't asked me in the first place." Parents not home, no need to whisper.

"It's almost Christmas, they should've been done by now anyways. What, just 'cause they're stuck with leeks still, we don't get a break either?" Jack scoffed,

nevermind we're supposedly talking about *me* right now. What does he mean by making it "we"? He gives himself breaks all the time.

He dropped a mug of black tea on my placemat and slumped out to the hallway, car keys jingling. I waited until the front door shut before getting up to add sugar and milk, his words stirring in my head.

Jack's started to say "no" a lot more. Even after he successfully petitioned to work only part-time—ultimately threatening sabotage if they made him stay—Grampa managed to wrangle him in for at least half-days, Monday to Friday during school breaks and summers. But today, Jack's gone as well. I don't know where, if he's at the shop or crashing on someone's couch. Think the only reason he still lives here is because he doesn't pay rent. Ever since The Fight, since Aunt Leslie left, Jack's surfing on the tip of a tsunami wave. Crash land to come. Scattering, choking inevitable aftermath.

Curtains closed today. Mostly. Leave a two-inch crack for that perfect view of the leek barn from my window. I'm supposedly bedridden. Not working. Can't look at the maple branch either, that one lonely dove.

Glad Jack's not home because he'd know right away.

"Migraine my ass." I can see him grinning, arms crossed, assuming a solidarity among siblings of farming hatred.

"This is different," I mutter back to empty air. Feel guilty enough without being reminded that escaping work is the sort of thing he'd do. "Not like I do this all the time."

“Feels good though, yeah?” he says—brotherly encouragement. “Staying in, no school, no leeks. Christ, thought my fingers were gonna snap right off they got so frozen last time they pulled me in there.”

“I just need to recharge. I’ll help later!” I insist. Trying to convince myself or him? Slouch against the wall beside the window, the barn in perfect view if I turn my head right. Wrong.

I could go downstairs and watch TV. But what if I lose track of time? They hear some cartoon, history channel, reality noise-bomb going off when I’m supposed to be migraine-ridden in bed, pillows wrapped around my skull? Too risky. Best to keep upstairs.

Laptop’s quieter, find something online. Do something fun. Mom left the camera in the house, right? See if any flowers are salvageable, touch them up a little. Something to do, something fun.

“Sure. Don’t think of the movies, or those winter craft markets you could be at with your friends right now. Or hey! Why spend the summer travelling when you could be—wow, think of this eh?—hunched over bean patches?” Laughing Jack, lose the sarcasm, this is serious business. “Keep helping until you can’t get out.”

Snap. “Do you want out Jack? Why don’t you just leave then, like Aunt Leslie?”

“Aunt Leslie was the only one around here with sense. Maybe I’ll give her a call, check how she’s doing, since no one else cares.”

"I care!" But he's gone. My words sound weak anyway, he'd never believe me. I care. How could I call her though, let alone meet up, without betraying Grampa? Or Dad? All I know is that they're hurting, and maybe Leslie too, on some level, but they're still here and I'm here and she's not. Not like she doesn't have my number, nothing stopping her from texting if she really wanted. But she left.

I should be in the barn helping Mom and Dad peel leeks. Or washing them with Grampa. Or heck, even boxing them with Gramma—always fun when she turns in into a competition between the two of us.

"Which one of us is the teenager? Hurry, I'm catching up!" she'd laugh. I'd stick out my tongue and send leeks flying into the boxes.

But I can't, not today. Just one day of rest, please. Not ready to wake up at 6am, scarf down toast, and wade into the smell of leeks and mud. Slap and crunch of peeled leaves hitting the ground, leeks hitting the table. Buzz of the leek tops trimmed evenly to fit into boxes. Mud creeping over my boots, sucking me into the earth, concrete soles. Dark and cold and close to tears. Not today.

Jessie's gone too. Out on a ski-trip with her friends this weekend, lucky goose. I'm stuck here, cheek stuck against the window again, counting doves in maple branches. Solidarity with a bird in shared loneliness I guess—oh, no. Empty frame. The dove's left too.

Not much snow on the ground, but they've gone to some resort in the States. Drove away right after school ended. Since she's younger, Jessie gets a pass from leeks. But, she works a couple hours after school now, starting after summer ended. For all I

know, if she *were* here, she'd have gone out to the barn today, broke her nails peeling and boxing. So now I feel glad she's not here to dig the pit in my stomach even deeper.

"I'd say I'm doing more than you lately." She'd lounge on her stomach across the end of my bed, deadpan expression broken by raised brows. "Better watch out."

"Watch out for what? Think Dad'll hand the reins over to you now?" I bite back—not so much bite as nip.

She rolls onto her back, face upside down. "Maybe. Jack's a write-off. You're saying you still want to take the ol' tractor wheel? Hard to plough a field from inside your room."

"I'm not saying that. Not saying I couldn't." Not really answering the question.

"I guess Dad would need to take it from Grampa first," she muses. "That's never gonna happen. He'll be the world's first ghost farmer at this rate."

I can imagine that. As much as Grampa talks about "one day you'll take over, and you'll run this business" it's hard to get him to ease up. Dad's managed to wrestle a lot of the heavier manual labour, cutting cauliflower and broccoli and cabbage, plus a lot of the late night—early morning more like—driving to Toronto. Sheer practicality won out, and Gramma started practically barring the door at night after one too many near-accidents. But damned if we can drag him away from the tractor.

"I'm sitting on my arse. Can't do any less than that," he'd snapped when Dad suggested Grampa let him drive for the first part of the morning, let Grampa come out later with Gramma. Then clambered into the tractor cab, cranked the radio way up.

"He lets me drive the tractor sometimes," Jessie pipes up.

After I ran it into a ditch—*one* time, almost two years ago, not that they'll ever let me forget it—I'm not surprised he'd let her drive over me. Given Grampa's ironclad control, she may have a point. Not that I'll concede.

"Only because he hasn't figured out how to be in two places at once yet. As soon as cloning's mainstream, the rest of us are out of the job."

"Mm, sure. Jack's basically his clone, look how well that's turned out."

No movement from the barn. Step back from the curtain, flop onto the bed. Still mid-morning, won't see anyone 'til lunch. But Gramma's surprised me before. No, they all trust that I'm sleeping, no one will spring a surprise check-up.

Wrap the blanket around my shoulders, scuttle out towards the bathroom, or rather, the bathroom window. No car in the driveway. Jack's driven to town, probably stayed out since last night meeting up with old friends. Everyone I know from school is definitely enjoying their break, not hiding indoors faking a migraine to get out of work. Acting out years of experience, head-in-hands squinting and hissing at every fast movement. Work needs doing, and I'm not there to do it.

I *do* deserve a day's rest. Or did something my brother said, worm into my brain, chew through reason and responsibility?

No, can't blame this one on Jack. Playing "sick," that's on me. But with the slog of exams approaching, worrying about marks with university applications, and that's only

school stuff, who knows what Christmas will be like, I can just imagine what might happen with all of us crammed into each other's space all day, even minus Aunt Leslie.

"What do you have to be so overwhelmed about? How do you think we feel, being down another person?" And there's Grampa now, gravel-voice rushing in to take the spotlight. "You know how much we got left to do before the holidays?"

Backtrack quick, don't need to hear another lecture, a list the length of our fields. "I know, Grampa, I just—"

"Your Dad's running around trying to help your mother and me, one person's not enough to get the peeling or washing done—Cora's arthritis is acting up again, she could use a break a hell of a lot more than you—"

Wince, try not to picture Gramma pushing herself too hard, hands burning, aching, get the job done.

"—cabbage still needs to be sorted out, that's if we don't have to deal with that sonofabitch Burghoorn missing payments. The least any of you could do is step up after Leslie ran off, but I guess the family, the business, it just doesn't mean much to you kids these days."

"I know, I'm trying. But it's just one day! Is that really too much?"

"You're lucky to have this opportunity at all, don't have to work at some burger joint." Shakes his head. Might've spit if outside. "Only good thing to come out of losing a worker was no one has to take a pay cut next year. Still afford to take time off, buy those fancy electronics you keep asking for."

Another thing to feel guilty about. Do I really *need* a new drawing tablet? It makes photo-editing so much easier, cleaner, and something to look forward too, my photography teacher says my work's "promising," but what does that matter here? What's my worries about grades compared to the Aunt Leslie drama? Which tools of the trade do I pick up, a camera and tablet or leek elastics and boxes, boxes, boxes?

"Worrying about school when you know you've got it set here. Bad enough your brother's making trouble after all the shit we went through in September."

No doubt Grampa would implode if he saw Aunt Leslie again. The way she left, the way Jack's acting. Basically still here, in all but person. Certainly feel strange, not having Aunt Leslie around for Christmas, but I don't expect they'd invite her. Holiday's already tense in this family, no need to actively invite trouble.

My brother. "What do you think this year, blowout or freeze?" Him trying to bait Jessie and me into betting how the holiday drama will bloom. Will Jack make a snide remark, admiring Aunt Leslie for forging her own path, in earshot of Grampa? Will Jessie or I get into it with Mom over hours and "you're putting too much pressure on me?" Doesn't happen every time, but enough. Splintering off into different rooms, or sitting in silence, or worse, each of us talking to ourselves pretending the others are playing along.

Only three months since The Fight. Maybe this year it'll bring us closer together, maybe Jack and Jessie's bet won't pay off. Maybe.

"You need to give me room to breathe!" I snap, and march right through Grampa.

Out of the bathroom, back into my room, close the door tightly behind me. Curl up on the bed fingers gripping a glass of water, the soft blanket a cape, a shell. A beetle scuttling around. Am I angry? Angry about feeling guilty? Maybe.

Maybe?

Yes.

What's so wrong with not wanting to get stuck on the farm again? Just wanting a second to myself to breathe? But god forbid I say anything otherwise. They'll compare me to Aunt Leslie like they do with Jack now, ask if I want to leave too if that's how I really feel *well you can just pack right up and join her, you—*

"Damn. And here I thought you felt sorry for me."

I don't want to face her. No way.

"Don't care enough to give your favourite aunt a call? Ask how she feels about all this? Think I can't get lonely too?" Upward pitch and sigh. She's not going away.

Try to sink into the pillows without spilling the water. I can hear her nails clicking against the doorframe. "Should be thanking me. I did you kids a favour."

Seriously? "How is any of this a good thing? Grampa and Jack are at each other's throats—last week I swore Dad nearly had a breakdown when they got into it over who was washing again. Mom and Gramma are trying to organize positions, keep them separated to stop them from breaking off entirely, and you're alone and cut off from your whole family. How is this good for anyone?"

"Your dad. Now *he's* the farmer. He can handle all that dirt and shit. Stress. Numbers." Makes a noise in her throat, like she's choking. Red gel nails dig into the doorframe. "Christ, farming's a lot more numbers than you think kid, just wait 'til you start taxes."

"This was your home, your family."

"This was a job. My dad, my boss. You like working here?"

I should say yes. Out of principle. "I don't know."

"Look around, you can already see what's happening. I got out."

Yeah, no kidding. "And your point?"

Click, click. Moving closer. "You've got *options*. Jack sees it—not that I don't think he'd have figured it out eventually. Jack's bullheaded, knows what he wants. He's gonna tear this place down, brick by pole, if he can't slip away, he hates it as much as I do. You don't *have* to stay. I got out. You can get out."

And what a way to get out she picked—but it wouldn't've been Aunt Leslie if it wasn't dramatic.

She continues. "How much longer d'you think you're gonna last, stuck with the same people, day in, day out?"

I know. Hard enough skipping out today, thinking up an excuse. When your supervisor is your mom, you can't use the old "family emergency" excuse. I barely faked

a headache, something reliable, usual—anything more might've gotten me hauled off to the doctor.

Leave the house with Mom and Dad. Picking or peeling with Mom and Dad. Washing with Mom and Dad. Walking home again with Mom and Dad. Day in and out. When school starts there's a break, but in the summer? During holidays, and after school? Constant, constant listening to problems when I'm not working alongside them, what broke today, what needs repairs? Who ordered the wrong seeds? Who left the greenhouse door open? No reprieve. I can see it wearing on Mom and Dad, the lines in their faces, sloop of their shoulders. I could hear it in the heightening shrillness of Aunt Leslie's voice, and still in the hacking gravel of Grampa's with every pack. Which one am I going to grow into?

Then when the tension breaks. There's no escape. No reprieve. Aunt Leslie's last moments taught me that.

* * *

"I did what was best for you!" Grampa hollered, smacking his hand against the barn wall. They'd collided out of nowhere, the two of them, leaving me trapped—like standing frozen in a pool, watching a live electrical wire being thrown in with me. Dad hovered by Grampa, and I wondered if he felt the same. "Doesn't this farm mean anything to you?"

"A waste! That's all this is, a waste of time!" she'd screamed. At Grampa, who raised her here, raised her into a job she hated. At Dad who stayed and made her stay too.

“Three generations before me farmed this land.”

“You care more about those three dead generations than you ever did about me.”

“Our whole family’s got this soil in their blood, and you’re just going to uproot us all?”

“What’s gonna be left in a few years? A miserable, soul-sucking money-pit. If you really wanna do those kids a favour, you’ll sell this place to some developer and give them a good inheritance. Give them a damn life!” She pointed at me then, in her billowing silver sweater and dishevelled curls, and I felt like she’d nailed me to the wall.

Dad said nothing. Grampa never had issue fighting back.

“Ungrateful! The only thing wasted here is all the chances I kept giving you. You hate the heat, I let you stay in the barn—zucchini giving you rashes, I let you wash—water’s ruins your skin, I let you sort. Years of handouts, only for you to whine and bitch about how unfair life is, the good life your mother and I wrecked our bodies to give you!” Christ, he’ll give himself a heart attack. Maybe Aunt Leslie knew too. Maybe that’s exactly what she counted on.

“Handouts? Yeah, here’s a couple seeds kid, go plant them for mommy and daddy, put your homework away you won’t need it.”

I remembered his words during every school break, every weekend—“Come out to the fields! You can do that other work later, come make some money, be with your family!”

“We never did that.” Grampa insisted, breathing heavy. Seed-spitting mad.

"You call this a good life? You're as miserable as I am. So's the kids! At least Jack's got spine enough to wriggle out early. Wish I'd done the same at his age."

Identical overripe tomatoes, ready to burst. They swelled up to fill the whole barn. I'd cowered by the barn door, ready to bolt.

"Go on then," he yelled. "Go on, get out!"

Yelling at her, or me? Didn't matter, door flew open and I ran, ran all the way to the office to Mom. Pointed towards the barn, without a word, but she guessed by my face, and she left me there alone.

* * *

"He wasn't yelling at you." Mom sits perched on the corner of my bed. "He wouldn't yell at you."

I raise myself slightly out of my slump. "Unless I wanted to leave." I'd wanted to leave then, run far away, off the farm, off to anywhere else.

Instead I ran to the house to grab my camera. I'd gone back out, snuck past the barn, amazed the walls still stood, and took solace in the fields. The sky should've been cloudy, miserable as I felt, but it was a clear deep blue. Given an indigo filter, set at 25%. Silence, but for the wind—not a voice in earshot. I walked through every single vegetable patch, up and down every field, and I snapped pictures of it all. Close-ups of pale cauliflower florets, dutch angles of hungover leek leaves, panoramas of the line of wilting, yellowing zucchini plants spotted with stinkbugs and flies, overflowing into the peaking green onions. Maybe they'll end up on the wall of my photography class, best of

the week. Maybe they'll stay on my computer. I didn't want to focus on anything but the nature spread out around me—not my family, not myself. I stayed out there until the battery finally died, and my camera card was full of farm.

"You want me to stay." It's not a question. I flick through the photos now, erasing the too blurry, or the too exposed to save.

"Yes. But I'm not you." She shifts forward. "I'm not Jack either. I should have realized how badly his heart wandered from here, should have helped him. I overwatered, tried to stop the drought that Leslie caught, the lack of love, but I drowned him anyway with too much."

"Maybe you should let me water myself."

"You know I hate letting anyone else do the watering. But you're right."

Dad kneels on the floor, resting his elbows on the mattress beside me. "Hell of a job getting your mother to back down. Be good to have her behind you if you go, to hold back your Grampa."

"You think he'll be that mad?" Imagine Grampa turning that red face towards me, dragging me out off the sidelines, throwing me into the dump pile with Aunt Leslie and Jack. With the tractor, running over his memories, grinding me into the mud and dirt, then covering me up with broccoli sprouts and bean bushes and all the things he really loves. The plants won't leave him. The roots hold down all the people who left, under the soil and out of sight.

"I think by the time you're off to college—finishing college at least—he'll be too tired. He's a tough weed. He's put his whole life and soul into this business, trying to keep it running through tax hikes, bad prices, bad weather. Watching soy beans and cattle corn creeping closer. Wondering if he should grow them too, hating the thought. What's it all for, if not us?"

"Is that why you didn't leave?"

Dad could've gotten out. He earned a degree in accounting, diploma boxed somewhere in the basement. Mom too—she moved from teacher to farmer, trading classrooms for barnyards. Would Dad be less stressed as an accountant? Maybe more stressed. But what do I know about accounting? I know the wrinkles furrowed into his brow get deeper every year, his blood pressure spikes with the changing seasons.

"Maybe. Probably. Leslie always made such a stink, kind of felt like one of us needed to have his back."

* * *

Slide off the bed, walk over to the curtains again. Raining now, if you can believe it. Rain in December, dissolving the remnants of snow clinging to the ditches and shadowed sides of houses. If I stand on my toes and lean a certain way I can see past the trees and barns and greenhouses, all the way out to the open fields. Still and mottled brown, a wasteland devoid of growth now they've pulled up the leeks. Anything could fill the empty space next season. I capture coyote prints in the mud and snow, the only remaining signs of life.

Still nothing from the barn. Wonder if they'll have a coffee in the office, or if they'll skip it hurrying to get leeks packed and done. Quieter in the office, without Aunt Leslie to fill the time commenting flippantly on various ads in the paper, then handing it over to Dad to check the obituaries. Less tense than when building up to The Fight, but also just *less*. "I've started on that new British show, that detective one you kids like? But it's so fast, I can't tell what's going on," Gramma says, a reprieve from farm-talk during breaks.

"Glad I could make it out today at least. Can't stand staying in, I get too cagey." She shudders beside me now, plucking the empty glass from my hand. "Might feel better if you went out, got some fresh air."

"But you'd catch me." I point out. Grab the camera, use the zoom to hone in on the office windows. Try to catch a silhouette, a shadow of her.

"Rightly so. You're not sick, and you could be helping me out. I'm more likely to get sick working than you."

Stiff hands, aching knees. Is she remembering not to lift anything too heavy, to ask Dad for help? She's stubborn. Without me around to remind her, probably not.

"You'll get hurt."

"If you're not there, maybe."

"How'd you get to love farming so much? You and Mom. It's not your business, you could've done something else, something that doesn't strain you so much."

"I wanted to stay with your Grampa. Every day, through dust and rot. I've helped him through more broken equipment and bad seed batches than you could imagine, and I love it all because I get to spend time with him. Growing his business, our farm."

No shadows. They're still in the barn, out of range. No candid shots today—no proof I stood here at the window, watching them. "I guess I don't understand."

"No. But you could find your own reasons."

What if I went out now? Claim my migraine went away, so I bundled up to lend a hand for a while? Can't say I like the idea, hands aching just thinking about it. I deserve not to go out today.

I won't fake sick again. Probably.

Aren't parents supposed to know when their kids are faking sick? I expected Mom to know right away, catch me out and march me out the door before I could loll my head and press my hand over my eyes, unpleasantly familiar actions. No less unpleasant than freezing my ass off in the barn though, filling my nose and ears and throat and nails with dirt, choking on leeks. But she didn't. Never said a word otherwise, just winced in sympathy and sent me up to bed, "See you at lunch, if you're awake by then."

Another twinge of guilt. Not so bad now. It's worth it, to breathe and stay warm and safe inside where I can be alone. Getting bored, but the closer it gets to noon, the less I want to risk turning on the computer for anyone to sneak up and catch me awake and well. At least if I'm in bed I can pretend I've just woken up.

“Pretend all you want, I always know you’re faking. You sway around too much, never grab both sides of your head like when you’ve really got a bad migraine.” Mom sighs, not disappointed.

“So why’d you let me off?”

She slips off the bed, standing beside me at the window, watching the barn where she’s working. “Honey, I could tell you needed a break. Like I said, no more overwatering. But next time, just be honest. I trust you to make your own decisions, trust me to have your back.”

Mom and Dad deserve a day off. Leeks should be done after this weekend. If we’re lucky, and they’re quick, soon they can sit inside and rest too, and Christmas break can really begin. A couple weeks without harvesting or packing or shipping: there’s nothing more inviting, more beautiful.

Maybe for Christmas Day, smiles will replace stress. Will we ignore the empty chair where Aunt Leslie used to lord over us? Who will insist we open presents before breakfast? She’d hand us hers to open first, every year—“Start off with the best.” Bark at me to “get that camera! Oh, there’s a smile, Anna did you catch that? Do it again Jessie, so she can send me the photo!” Suppose Mom and Dad’ll recruit me to take pictures again this year—less a requirement than a request.

Will there be another empty chair next year, Jack’s? He’s a lot like Grampa in his stubbornness—no reservations about doing what’s best for him. When he finally takes off, I hope he doesn’t do so much damage we can’t ever speak again.

Wait, I'm planning for cutting off branches of the family tree? Looks more like a family telephone pole in my opinion. Better to prepare now, stay out of the crossfires and quietly keep my own peace with each side. Won't get blindsided again.

It's not that I don't like and sympathize with my brother. Or my aunt. I get where they're coming from, kind of. Sometimes, I wonder if I'm more like them, deep down. One day it'll be me Grampa, or even Gramma, is screaming at, slamming the door on. Or not? Am I embittered enough for that? Enough to skip out on one day's work, but forever?

Well, I've got school. I want a job—not a farming job. But what'll happen if anyone else leaves? Jessie's stopped complaining about how boring peeling is, mentions aches less and less, but I doubt she'll want to take over.

Raindrops slide down the window-glass, distort the farm and sky into a blurry, wavy sea. I know I love my home. I know I can't imagine never coming back here, never scouring the fields for pretty stones and broken china. The lack of people, the private openness, it's all too precious to me to let go. So how to have my own life and still keep this one? At seventeen, there's not much time left to decide. I'll never shrivel away, poisoning the world around me until I'm uprooted, until I drag myself out like Aunt Leslie did. Like Jack will. I can't take the wheel like Mom and Dad've already begun to for Grampa and Gramma. Jessie and I, we're half-way out the door but clinging to the frame.

Aunt Leslie called the farm a great big cage once, stuck behind bars her whole life, but now she's gone and so's the cage she spoke of, and I don't know what to do now but wait.

The clock ticks closer to noon, and I wait, watch for Mom and Dad to leave the barn and walk to the house. Wait for Mom to come up to my room, check on me, ask how my head feels.

What's a few more days of leeks?

Curling back into bed, I pull the blankets up and savour the warmth, the soft flannel sheets. My back to the window, my face to the door. Waiting.

To Market, To Market

"No, sorry ma'am, we don't have a machine."

We're supposed to be getting one next year, with more and more people starting to come around asking if they can use credit or debit instead of cash. I've been suggesting we get a portable machine to Mom for a while now, and frankly Dad should have thought of it first, but no point grumbling now that market season's nearly over.

The woman hefts her handbag onto the table, digging through it while her sunglasses slip down her nose. The bag bumps against the tomato pints, knocking them out of an even line and I fight the urge to reach over and start readjusting them before she leaves.

She crows, "Got it!" Slaps the change into my waiting hand, and I carefully lift the plastic bag of cucumbers and zucchini over the rows of tomato pints to her side of the table.

"Have a great day!" I say, smiling. Check up and down the table. All clear.

I lean over and fix the crooked row—cherry tomatoes roll off the overfilled pints as I shift them, scattering onto the table. One rolls out of reach, slowing for a brief moment before plummeting over the table-edge into the grass below.

Whenever I get the chance, I should pull out my camera, take a few pictures for our Facebook page. Ever since I set it up for us, Mom and Dad keep asking me to put more pictures up, show off our fields and produce. Make the veggies look picture-perfect. I don't mind—they've always been great models, and it's nice my work's appreciated.

Vendors line this section of the park in two rows, facing each other with a walkway aisle down the centre. Other farmers of course, some fruit some vegetable, but also ones selling eggs, flowers, honey, meats, pierogis, ice cream, crafts, and baked goods.

I can't help sneaking glances at the baker, down the way. Barely hear the music playing from the speakers behind her table—some days foot-tapping fiddle, other days movie soundtracks, always instrumental and upbeat. Jessie's caught me before, teases me about being too chicken to go talk to her. I *have* talked to her—just not socially. Occasionally, Gramma or Mom asks me or Jessie to grab some treats from her, so the most I've said is, "I'd like this!" or "Busy day, right?" and "Thanks!" She offered me a free piece of shortbread one time, though I can't remember seeing any other samples set out. A whole summer almost gone, and I don't even know her name.

A few people walk by, but not the swarming crowds from earlier in the morning. People'll be eating lunch now, maybe enjoying themselves elsewhere in the park, taking the kids over to the swing sets, a short break before they remember they've forgotten to pick up spinach for tonight's dinner party, or whatever, and all rush back.

The lull is both the best and worst part of a market day. A small reprieve from the busy go-go-go of selling—rushing up and down the stall keeping track of totals, smiling through a groan when they start grabbing bunches of the $1.75 items that I'll have to try to add up before the customer starts calling out numbers themselves and throwing us both off—I'm a photographer, not a math major. I mean, I'll need *some* financial smarts to run

my own photography business, but right now my brain's on summer break, enjoying the last bit of relaxation before college starts up again.

Jessie slumps forward, elbows against the table, sweatpants rolled up to her knees, and I don't care enough to tell her to straighten up. She's been running around more than I have at this point, driving down here with Gramma early to get things set up—I show up half an hour late with coffees and breakfast—making sure the broccoli's standing up straight in their clear, water-filled bins, grabbing boxes off the van when we run out. She deserves a break. We've only got one chair though, and by default it's Gramma's—"perfectly fine" as she insists she is, her eighty-one-year-old arthritic knees can only handle so much standing around. We used to just sit in the back of the van, before the market or the park or some official changed the rules and we couldn't have vehicles on the grass anymore—now we haul stuff from the parking lot to our spot. Gramma's complained—rightfully—about it with the other vendors more than once—"It's those soccer moms, we're nowhere near the pitches but they'll still whine about lumpy, torn-up ground just to be spiteful"—but there's not much we can do. Just adapt.

Gramma glances up at Jessie. "Your elastic's broken again." Jessie's once-ponytail now flaring out across her neck, the remains of a pink band stuck to the back of her t-shirt.

"Here, use mine, my hat's keeping my hair back anyways." I pull apart my own ponytail and toss it over—Jessie smiles, happy not to resort to using one of the tougher rubber bands we use for holding bunches together, the ones that rip your hair out if you try using them. Not that that's ever stopped us.

With the table already fairly stocked up, the three of us lounge quietly, Gramma sipping her water, Jessie and I our long-cold coffees. There's a kind of peacefulness in the repetition of a market day—setting up, selling, refilling, more selling, packing up and driving home. The relief and calm and pride as the produce sells and the table gets emptier, the thought of nothing but empty boxes and bins to take home.

I grab my camera from the crate we keep hidden under the table, storing our purses and keys out of sight. Snap the photo of Gramma and Jessie at ease before they catch me.

"At least take one of me in action," Jessie complains, and starts shuffling the onions. To appease her—and get some family shots for the page—I duck around front and say, "Say beets!"

* * *

Not a bad morning overall, though I wouldn't mind a breeze to fight off the sticky, post-rain late-summer heat. Standing around in it feels no better than running, and sweat keeps dripping down my neck no matter how many times I wipe it away. Not hot enough to worry about heatstroke, or drive away customers, but just humid enough to stay annoyingly wet and make me regret wearing jeans instead of the cargo shorts I'd dismissed as ugly and unflattering. I could almost see Mom rolling her eyes at my choosing style over practicality, but markets—unlike the farm which offers fashion privacy—are public, interactive spaces and I can't stand appearing less than polished and semi-professional around strangers. The stains under my pits and behind my knees prove that a futile attempt.

At least I can't exactly *smell* the sweat—thankfully the tang of chopped-off green onions and beet tops covered that nicely, though I don't much appreciate the red stains on my hands.

Leaning against the white canopy tent legs—barely, don't need to collapse the thing—, I'm actually proud of our set-up. While the leafier, larger vegetables side of the stand generally stays the same—one can only do so much with green, green, and dark green—the end I stick too is a neatly patterned delight, the result of the balancing and careful organization of vegetables highlighting the shades of green and yellow and red and white while keeping them out of the creeping sun. Tomatoes, zucchini, eggplants, currants, hot peppers, beans—the works. Most in pints or quarts, easy enough to construct ahead of time, and make up extras for the inevitable rushes.

Down at the opposite end the rough dark green tablecloth stays soaked underhand from the water-filled spinach, broccoli, and kale bins. The bottom of Jessie's t-shirt is still damp from a larger order of kale earlier.

Set down my emptied coffee cup, check the spinach. One bunch drooping like a pair of wet cotton gloves. Flip it around in the water, relocate it behind the still-crisp leaves of the newly-placed bunches. Grab the spray-bottle from under the table, spruce up various other vegetables threatening to wilt—beets are similarly notorious for this.

Once the crowds pick up again the setup won't matter as much. As vegetables are placed out, they're picked up just as quickly, no time for anything to slump. Any smaller or thinner vegetables that are left over slowly migrate to the bottom as the fresher, bigger ones are piled on top and then quickly snatched up and then re-piled on again. Run back

to the truck to pull more boxes out of the dark and into the fray—boxes dropped under the table and pulled open to be emptied of their innards and discarded. Even as the day winds down and the pickings grow scarcer, people scavenge the remains on the table, flipping and poking and prodding.

Older couples mostly—they're the most common customers, no surprise since there's an apartment building beside the park where a lot of seniors live, makes an easier trip for their groceries. Moms too, pushing strollers and herding those kids that dart around the stands grabbing at the produce and sneaking berries off the quarts—"Gavin! We—I'm so sorry about that—Gavin we don't take!" An Indian couple, friendly regulars picking up their pre-ordered heaps of hot peppers, for sauces and jellies. They usually gift us a jar at the end of the season, not that anyone other than Mum and Dad can stand the heat. I've served this vegetarian chef more frequently over the past few years who also orders, picks up anything from zucchini to green onions to eggplants. Admittedly, the sweetest is when little kids get to pay—proudly holding out a fistful of change, eager to play the responsible grown-up while mom or dad fumbles with the bags. Jessie and Gramma always go nuts over how cute the kids are.

Stuff like that makes me realize how starkly opposite these sunny, daytime markets are compared to the midnight flower markets in the spring in Toronto. Not just because of the customers or time of day, or it being at a terminal instead of a park, but the overall environment is so different, going with Grampa and Dad—as a replacement for Gramma or Jack—the way it's kind of a men's club. The way I'm there to be the teen girl who laughs with the guys, and the occasional older woman, and convinces them to take a

cart of sunflowers instead of just a shelf. Who smiles and takes cash and writes up the bills in the dark.

Here with Gramma and Jessie, things are busier, but more open, lighter. Less bartering and scribbled calculations, more asking "How's school going?" and "Have you gone on that vacation cruise yet?" Plus the neighbouring vendors here are a lot nicer. But the night market suits Grampa and Dad. Grampa always shines when he gets to argue people into giving him more money, and they're both what I'd call social mayflies. Their extroversion comes to life twice a week for the midnight market and dies sometime during the drive home.

* * *

"Anna?" Gramma's voice jolts me from my thoughts and I almost drop the spray-bottle. "Since it's not busy now, do you want to pick us up a pie from that baker on the other end?"

The baker. Five stalls down and across from us, just within eyeshot, with the pretty pink and turquoise banner in front of her table. Her neatly arranged, carefully organized table of delicious baked goods. Head bobbing, to fiddle music today. That baker.

"Sure thing!" I say before I can stop myself. But it's too late, Gramma's handing over the money and Jessie's snickering behind me.

"Oh! And if the apple guy is there, pick up some mcintoshs from him too," she adds, snatching back the five from my still-open hand and replacing it with a twenty. "Just. Go on, I've got Jessie here, we'll be fine. Take your time!"

Stepping out from behind the table, out into the middle of the aisle, I freeze. The few customers still around pass by me, water around a stone.

On the one hand—I am absolutely down for taking a break, since she's already made up extra pints and quarts, and Jessie can handle selling and refilling anything else up. I also absolutely expect it to get insanely busy while I'm gone, because, despite all appearances of a barren walkway, that's what happens every single time anyone leaves the table for more than a minute. Market rules.

On the other hand—ten feet, five feet away from the baker's stand now. Behind the table stands the tall, icing-smeared baker, hair thrown up in a bun, wearing her usual white t-shirt with a swirling turquoise logo on the front. Abstract cupcake? I can feel my sister watching me from our stand, hear her snickering. The most I've done is stolen glances during the lulls, barely spoken three words to her, and now I'm supposed to what? Play customer and buy pie?

Her head stops nodding and she straightens up, bumping a hand against the table as I approach.

"Hey—hello there! Anything in particular I can help you with?" she asks, sounding a lot more cheerful than even I could pull off. That's good, she seems in a genuinely good mood. Hopefully I don't embarrass myself and ruin it.

"Hello!" I echo safely. Avoid eye-contact, locate nearest pie.

Unfortunately she's talkative today. "You're just down the way, right? The vegetable stall? With the quarted up beans?"

Blueberry or rhubarb? Shit, Gramma didn't say which one. "Yep, that's me—us, really. I mean, I just helped do the quarting, but the set-up's all me."

She nods. "Looks really pretty. Like it belongs in a gallery, you know? Alternating colours, that's a good idea. Professional." Nudges some of the pies forward, a pumpkin, the rhubarb. "Helps draw people in?"

"Exactly! Seems to work anyway, lots of people compliment it. I'm a photographer, colour's kind of a thing for me."

This is going on too long, I'm going to screw up. I need to buy something quick. Maybe the rhubarb? If we save enough to bring home, Mom'll probably devour the rest. Oh and she's got butter tarts? I try not to stare too longingly at the positively mouth-watering tarts.

"Neat!" the baker exclaims. Leans one hand on the table, the other on her hip. "Bet you get lots of good shots on a farm. You know, I've got a shop I help run with my sisters, a small place. Just started out last year. Anyway, I think it's time for some new shots of the place for my website, something a little better than what I whip up with my phone."

"That's not so bad, I've caught some decent shots with my phone. Most of the time it just takes a little practice to get the framing and lighting right. Seems like you've got a decent eye already," I gesture to her table, the neatly arranged pies and circular patterns of cookies. Colourful cupcake frosting. Butter tarts.

She pretends to wave away the compliment, but smiles. “Flattery will get you—well, everywhere with me, actually. Remind me I owe you another shortcake square when I’ve got some next week, yeah?”

“Sure!” Grin and nod, hope I don’t look too eager. All this progress, don’t want to trip up now. Get a pie, and get out of here.

“Anyways, what was I saying—pictures! Maybe you’d like to come by the shop, help me out with that? And you’re always welcome to take any pictures of my stand here. Promise I’ll be a good model, perfectly posed as a cake topper.”

“I’d like that” I reply immediately. She laughs, loudly—she even *sounds* pretty. “Right now I think I’ll just have this,” grabbing the rhubarb pie, holding it towards her. I can’t even buy the tarts, left my wallet at home and there’s no way I’m using Gramma’s money for my cravings. Wait, the money! Oh, now I’m holding both hands out at her. This is a nightmare.

“Alrighty, one rhubarb pie for the lovely lady.” She takes the twenty, and her hand touches mine and I hope to God my face isn’t as red as it feels. “Not getting the butter tarts?”

She noticed that? I must be the least subtle person in the world right now. “Not today.”

“Next time then. I’ll be here!” she says. I manage a normal feeling smile, then wave before darting off to the apple stand as she calls out wishing me a “booming afternoon!”

* * *

Buying from the apple seller's much less stressful. He's a nice older man who asks how college is going, tells me he likes the print I made of his orchard from spring, with all the trees in lovely blooming, that his wife hung a framed print in the living room. I think of warm bakeries, prints of bread loaves and fancifully decorated cookies.

Eventually manage to slip away, apple-laden and pocket clacking with change, start heading back to Gramma and Jessie and—oh dear. Even from the other end, I can see the swarming mass of customers making their way down the market aisle, and right dead centre of the crowd I know is our stand. I run.

The two race up and down the table, plastic bags snapping off the hooks at a furious rate as they battle the hectic rush—skirting around the table I jump right in to join them.

"Do you have any leeks?"—"No sir, not yet."

"You've got red onions, right? You had them last week?"—"Sorry ma'am, we don't sell red onions, you can try next door."

"Wow! I've never seen such huge green onions!"—"They're our specialty!"

Piling vegetables into bags, making sure tomatoes don't end up crushed, directing lost and desperate customers to their desired foods, filling, refilling, restocking, where are the bags? The rush of it all manages to make the next hour fly—by the time the rush is over, the air's cleared and the grass is nearly mud it's so trampled down. Already long past noon.

Market going well, I text Mom as Gramma shuffles items over and Jessie starts taking down one of the tables at the end. The more we get down one at a time, the less there is to pack up overall when market ends. *Out of broccoli no surprise!*

Good!! How's peppers doing?

A few big buyers, pretty low on cayenne.

The back and forth texting with Dad and Mom keeps them updated on inventory and how busy or not the morning was and how Gramma's faring. Mom grumbles about missing out, but with Jessie volunteering to go to market now she can stay at the farm to help Grampa and Dad—not entirely selfless on Jessie's part, as market *is* preferable to harvesting, and it gives her the rest of the afternoon for volleyball practice or running laps. But still, Mom's better help at home, and it's good of her to offer unprompted, what with everything getting thrown off since Jack finally left.

I say left, but he more sort of dropped off—not a blow-out like with Aunt Leslie, but no less cutting. Not to mention inconvenient, given the spring flower markets had just starting to pick up, but honestly I'd expect nothing less. Jack checks in every once in a while, or at least he did. Not as much lately.

Mom and Dad still care enough that he's not strung out dead in a gutter somewhere but Grampa refuses to acknowledge he even had a grandson—much like he never had a daughter. Gramma won't talk about Aunt Leslie anymore either, I expect it'll stay the same for Jack. Dad's less upset about him leaving because it was so obviously inevitable, and after Aunt Leslie left, it was less a shock. And Dad never pushed Jack to stay on the farm as much as Grampa did, never gave him ultimatums or guilted him with

speeches about the "family tradition" and "letting the family history die, sold off and bulldozed into suburban townhouses" and "killing off another piece of Canadian agriculture, just like everyone else." I guess even if they stopped expecting the first-born, their son, to take over the business, it still stings to have Jack cut and run like that.

I try helping out where I can, keep my head down, not make a scene, going along with things. But I've started making it more obvious that I'll not stay to run the farm. Going to college full-time, I'm around less, so I don't hear a lot of what goes on, but I hope they've come to terms with me leaving. Mom's mentioned putting out ads for extra help. Grampa may have his head in the dirt, but everyone else knows the end is coming, eventually.

Jessie and I think Jack's got a job at a garage somewhere, from the couple of snaps he sent a few weeks ago—but nothing since. Maybe I should care more. Jack and I were never really that close, and if he's happier doing his own thing—he'd just be miserable if he stayed here, and we'd all suffer for it even if Grampa can't see it—then that's fine. Just, fine. If the farm goes, at least it won't be by being torn apart and trashed.

Of all of us kids, Jessie seems the most happy to help out lately—or at least not as miserable as years past. Says she's only helping to earn money and stay in shape for volleyball, but I've caught her asking Dad about the business side more than once, how they order the seeds, wholesale selling in Toronto, how they know what sprays to use.

"Jack talked to me, before he left," she'd confided to me privately, after he moved out. "Said if I ever wanted to get out, he'd fix me up with a place to crash."

She fiddles with the strings on her hoodie, brow furrowed slightly. “But you know, I really didn’t want that? I thought—you know, any opportunity to go I’d be—it didn’t feel right. Not the way I thought it would. I like being at home,” she’d concluded. Then shrugged, grabbed her headphones, and left for her daily run.

She surprises me, how much she’s grown up. Watch her now, shooing Gramma playfully away from the last box of spinach, hauling it onto the table herself. Makes me wonder, if they might still end up getting someone to take over the business after all.

Jack never made any offer to me. But he probably figured I wouldn’t take it. And I wouldn’t. Much as I’m pulling away now, I don’t think I could bear disappointing Mom and Dad like that—sure, they encourage us to get jobs outside the farm—“Don’t be a weed-puller” Dad often says—I’d never just abandon them, but I can’t stay forever. Being away from home, starting college, starting to actually see a future for myself that doesn’t in some way involve the family business—but I’d never cut them off forever.

Green, yellow, red, white. Rows of neatly separated vegetables, dwindling away.

The farm originally inspired my photography. So I’m grateful for that—the irony of the job I might have taken on inspiring the hobby that would eventually lead me away from it. I walk over to Jessie, start helping her arrange the spinach in the bins, make sure they don’t fall over into the water.

Around 2:30pm, with the sun beating down the wind thankfully, *finally*, picks up—but annoyingly just as we’re trying to pull down the tents, not earlier when we were standing around. The crowds vanish. Vendors, sensing the imminent end of business, start to pack up.

Three limp beets stretch their leaves across the tablecloth, stems swinging like overcooked spaghetti when picked up, *slap* against the bottom of the box. End of the market week—they won't last over the weekend to be brought back on Monday, they'll end up tossed into the dump trailer, driven out and deposited in a rotting, stinking heap at the far corner of the farm. Eventually mix back into the dirt, refueling the field.

Table empties, cloths roll up. Flip, unscrew legs, *clatter clank* into the empty pail in the van, tie metal cylinders together with bungees so they don't rattle around. Jessie on one side, I on the other—lift! One by one the tables slide in, rest bare against the walls of the van. Bungee-held down. One by one the market disappears.

CLATTER. thud.

The baker—or rather, the large rolling cooler pulled behind her on the way to the parking lot, now knocked onto its side—hit a stray rock perhaps?—scattering across the grass all the little boxes and plastic containers that had been carefully piled on top. She's crouched over now—pink-faced—gathering them into her arms.

"Are you okay?" I ask, turning, tripping over my own feet to help—start picking up containers.

She laughs it off, drops a rescued box. "Oh yeah, no damage done, I think. Thanks for the hand."

Offer to take the boxes from her arms, leave her free to resettle the upended cooler, and she agrees, relieved to hand over the awkward stack. As she pulls the cooler

towards her own truck nearby, I follow—half-ignore Jessie's yells for me to stop wandering around and help her instead.

Carefully lower the teetering tower of containers onto the ground beside her truck. "Sorry, think I've got to get back," I say, almost apologetically. She waves me off.

"No worries, and thanks again, for the emergency clean-up assistance…ah?" looks expectantly at me.

"Anna."

"I'm Cheryl, nice to meet you. I mean, properly. I promise, I don't usually fling my goods around like this." Flicks the grass off her hands. "Mind's been pretty off-planet today."

I snort. "Same here. Guess we took the same rocket."

Last to go are the canopy tents—Gramma grabs the black bags, holds them open while Jessie and I fold the white tents into them. Zip up, ready to go. Jessie gets into the back, I lift the heavy bags up to her to tuck away.

Finally, the back doors slam shut. "Meet you at home, yeah?" calls Jessie, striding to the passenger's side, Gramma already claiming the wheel.

A tap on my shoulder stops whatever reply I'd planned.

"These are for you." Cheryl's behind me, holding out a container of butter tarts. "I mean, you eyeballed them earlier, so my gut figured you were craving them hard. And I wanted to thank you again. So, yeah."

I should probably take them instead of staring. “You didn’t have to.”

“Don’t worry, I promise they’re not the ones that fell on the grass!” she says, pinky up. “See you Monday, Anna.” She heads back to her truck, and I with my newly gifted butter tarts get into my own vehicle.

The car door shuts out the clattering, revving din now filling the parking lot. Jessie and Gramma pass in front of me, playfully honking the van’s horn as they leave, and then *she* drives away. Reaches the edge of the road, stops, turns left. Looks like we’re heading the same way.

Pop open the plastic container, pick without looking, take a bite. Slide the rest off my lap, over into the passenger’s seat. Sugary-sweet tart crumbles on my tongue.

Stunted Growth: The Narrator's Liminality in "Exposed Roots"

"Exposed Roots" is comprised of a connected series of short stories highlighting the way that, throughout her youth, the narrator Anna is caught in various states of transition. Each of the stories works together to follow and explore the transitionary periods of growing up, and to probe her place in the world, and the position that Anna occupies in her family. Most significant is her indecision about whether to stay on her family farm where she grew up, joining the business she was raised into and remaining attached to her childhood space, or whether she should move on to build something new for herself and leave the attachments and responsibilities of the farm behind. The liminal concept of the "middle," is applicable to Anna in each of the stories, as she hovers between active and passive in her actions and behavior towards her family, and her emotions and indecisiveness about her place in the family, the business, and the larger future. Throughout various aspects of Anna's role as a narrator, I focus on the way she views and observes the people and places around her as both a participant and as a more removed observer. For example, in "Heads," she overhears the main conflict between her parents and aunt but never joins in, and the events in "To Market, To Market" revolve primarily around her work-related actions, her emotionally-motivated actions, and show Anna participating more than in other stories and making choices that set a trajectory for her future.

Multiple points of conflict for Anna include the internal vs external, such as her indecisiveness about working in "The Break"; the direct vs the incidental, such as her active argument with her sister over how to bunch onions in "Peel Bunch Wash" and her overhearing her mother and aunt arguing over using Anna to carry currants in "Pepper

Birds"; and her general lack of control over her own life and decision-making, a running trope in all the stories. Most obviously, the bulk of the stories takes places during a period of transition for Anna age-wise. The stories primarily offer Anna's teenage years, the time in her life where she experiences rapid changes emotionally and physically as she moves from childhood to adulthood. The pressures of high-school and social life are foregrounded in stories such as "The Break," where they contribute to Anna's decision to temporarily try taking a step back from the farm and her family in an attempt to figure out what she wants, only to have her solitude removed and invaded by the imagined figures of her family anyways. By placing the narrator in this tumultuous liminal state over which she has very little control, the narrative explores the broader external situations in which she is also caught: a confusing and rapidly changing home-life, which eventually leads to being forced to make a decision about her future and place in the world. Anna is literally the middle child, coming between older brother Jack—who, by leaving the farm, defies his elder family's expectations that he might take over—and younger sister Jessie—who, despite very much resisting farm work throughout the beginning of the collection, eventually comes around to wanting to take a more active role in the farm.

Anna is primarily caught between staying on the farm, the family home and heritage she grew up with and has been actively encouraged to take over, versus leaving to build something new for herself and to gain a new independence at the risk of losing touch with her family, home, and the childhood she still feels very much attached to. The OED defines the liminal as "being on a boundary or threshold, esp. by being transitional or intermediate between two states, situations, etc." (OED 2), a definition which fits

Anna in regards to both her uncertain emotional state, her position between family members and expectations which often contrast her own desires, and her physical state as a growing girl moving from childhood to adulthood. Liminality in a more specific, state-of-being sense, the OED defines as a "transitional or indeterminate state between culturally defined stages of a person's life; spec. such a state occupied during a ritual or rite of passage, characterized by a sense of solidarity between participants" (OED), solidarity which displays in the dedication of her family members to stay committed to the business, and in other members wishing to break away and follow their own paths. The farm is a location that serves as a focal point and primary point of liminality in Anna's experiences: it is a place she can't yet move on from for the majority of the stories' timeline, and yet eventually she must advance from that murky position of indecision and choose how she wants to position herself in relation to the farm in her adulthood and long-term career. Anna's liminal transition from her family-dependent childhood to an independent adulthood consists of confronting many questions and decisions in choosing whether her future will involve the farm or not. What are her life, career, and romantic goals? Will she take up the family responsibility of picking and ploughing and marketing, filling the position her brother left empty and that her grandfather expects her generation to maintain? Or will she embrace her passion for photography, follow her own career path? Is there a way for her to keep the farm in her life without allowing it to consume her? One wrong decision risks the idea of the farm rotting from a place of growth and family strength into one of suffocation and resentment, as it does with her Aunt Leslie; alternately, Anna also risks losing ties with the farm altogether by allowing the connection to wither as she grows emotionally

distant. Gilead's article refers to Victor Turner's discussions of liminality, when focusing on the transformation an individual undergoes when transitioning from one stage—of life, society, etc.—to another (183). Anna, over the course of the stories, follows this basic structure in transitioning not only into adulthood, but also into a more independent and self-assured person, similarly to, as Gilead notes, the way Turner's idea of a liminal individual becomes "detached from a prior condition of membership in the social structure" (183). As Anna gradually detaches herself from her role as a presumed life-long labourer on the farm, she undergoes what Turner (qtd. in Gilead) calls a "transitional ordeal in which [her] structural attributes are neutralized or made ambiguous," which Anna encounters through her externalized internal conversations, and physical distancing from her family, "and then re-emerges into social structure, usually with enhanced functions, status, or class" (Gilead 183), as seen at the end, when Anna embraces her desires. She finds a way to not only combine her photography interests in a way that benefits her position in the farming business, but allows her to take firm steps towards a future running her own photography business. By the end of the overall transition, Anna, as a "liminal passenger thus "loses" [her] identifying characteristics (name, roles, affiliations, even sex) only to be newly inscribed with a higher, more authoritative set of meanings" (Gilead 183). Anna's liminal journey ends with her valuing her own desires over her family's pressure, and placing herself as the authoritative figure in her life, rather than her parents or grandparents. Within the stories themselves, Anna's internal back-and-forth narration with herself as events unfold contrasts with her external inaction, placing her in a limbo of avoiding taking sides or allowing herself to do what she wants. This "limbo" is an internal space centralized in this transition, where Anna's

development to independence is unclear and stagnant; no growth can occur until she seizes the initiative to exit limbo, and re-emerges into the world with a decided future. The limbo is not just self-imposed through her indecision and freezing in the face of direct negative conflict, but is imposed upon her by the pressure her family places on her to join them, either on the farm with her parents and grandparents, or in escaping the farm with her aunt and brother. Eventually she has to make a choice of where she wants to be, who she wants to be, and who she wants to be with, and it is only by the final story—chronologically and positioned last in the collection—that she finally begins to step out of psychic paralysis and act for herself.

This idea of being caught between staying and leaving is most visibly illustrated in the various conflicts amongst family members, in which Anna is again placed in the middle, caught between parents and siblings and other relatives as they push and pull her around as their ally, pawn, or enemy within their interpersonal tensions. Anna's situation is essentially a Schrödinger's paradox: by remaining in stasis, she is simultaneously poised to both leave and stay, but the second she bends towards either her business-oriented family or pleasure-oriented family, the decision is made, and she loses that position of being able to both leave the farm *and* stay on the farm. In "The Break," Anna experiences and examines the consequences and aftermath of leaving collaterally—primarily with her aunt's explosive departure (62-4), and again over time through her brother's more gradual one (53, 69). In both incidents, the character leaving has cut themself off from the family entirely, whereas the narrator has no wish to do this. Even in her indecision, she still holds a desire to reach compromise, to have her independence without the cost of cutting contact, despite knowing the strong feelings of family

members such as her grandfather might make this compromise impossible. By the end, in "To Market, To Market," her role as a produce photographer for the farm is only temporary—ultimately she decides her goal is to build her own, separate business (73-4). She chooses to leave, but expects that she will manage to do so in a gradual way which retains her relationships with her farming family.

Anna's other family members have taken a one-or-the-other route approaching their responsibilities towards the farm or their personal desires, and Anna is the first family member to attempt to have both without a major sacrifice—forging a new path between the two established options. Grampa chooses the farm above all else and actively campaigns for others to do the same, but holds on so tightly he prevents the next generation from taking their place running the business (56). Dad commits to staying on the farm at the risk of his health and better talents as an accountant, but makes his decision to take over from Grampa because of his ingrained loyalty and love towards his home and family (66); however, Dad quietly encourages Anna to take up other work instead, telling her "Don't be a weed-puller" (11), demonstrating an understanding that the children might want to leave, but not so encouraging that he would stand up to, or argue with, his father about such an exit. Ultimately, the same dad who quietly encourages his children's independence does not forgive them when leaving involves cutting out the farm entirely. Aunt Leslie's choice to blame the farm for all her faults and wasted life (62), and Jack's lashing out and total disinterest in staying to take over the farm (26), are a step too far in Dad's eyes; he reads his sister's and son's acts as disparaging the business that he gave up his own interests to invest in. Mom represents a unique perspective for Anna, having come from outside the farm, deliberately choosing

the farming life with her husband. She actively involves herself with running the farm, despite not growing up in the business or undergoing any pressure to take over, and is the character who most directly clashes with Aunt Leslie in terms of their degrees of commitment and investment towards working on the farm. Anna's grandmother shares her husband's opinions on the importance of the farm to the family, and continuing on the business, and reacts negatively to Aunt Leslie leaving (83). In doing so, Gramma aligns herself with her husband, and not her daughter, and Anna absorbs this "lesson" of family loyalty. Aunt Leslie spends most of her life being pressured into staying on the farm, a job she is clearly ill-suited to, and refers to as being "stuck in this shithole my whole life" (28), presented with no other options or encouragement from her parents. Eventually she snaps and embraces her desires entirely, cutting off the farm and family in an extreme response to the constant pressure and increasingly hostile environment brought about by multiple arguments with family members: the disagreement between Aunt Leslie and Anna in "The Greenhouse Cage" (6-7), the blowout over the phone between Anna's parents and Aunt Leslie in "Heads" (47-9), and the multiple separate arguments involving herself and her sister, grandmother, mother, aunt, and brother in "Peel Bunch Wash" (22-5, 26-8, 31-2). Jack follows the same pattern, growing up under the expectation that he will follow his grandfather and father in running the business; like Leslie, he shows no personal interest in farming, and is ill-suited to the job. He rebels at a much earlier age than Leslie, and acquires his independence more gradually—Leslie provides both the precedent of escape, and gives his parents an idea of what could happen if they try to keep him there (something his grandfather can't understand) so they allow him to go with less of a fight, but with more resignation. They do what they can to prevent Jack's

departure and keep him working on the farm, but the resistance he puts up, such as deliberately avoiding the senior family members in order to have less work, then leaving as soon as he's criticized in "Peel Bunch Wash," straight out saying he has "better shit to do than waste [his] life counting vegetables" (31), makes them less unwilling to let him go. Anna finds two precedents of a family member leaving, both of which give her more hope of being able to leave herself, but also more pressure to do so in a way which doesn't repeat the pattern of disappointment and disownment. Consequently, there is now more pressure on Anna to stay, with the loss of two workers and a diminishing chance of someone from her generation staying long enough to take over the business. By depicting Anna at the crossroads of multiple, overlapping, emotional choices, I emphasize the difficulty she has navigating her way towards a future that will make her happy. In the beginning, she is presented with essentially one option: stay and work on the farm. There is no middle ground, no other choice. Once Aunt Leslie and Jack leave, her options suddenly increase, complicating her thought processes and the manner in which she makes her decision. The more choices she has, the more the text illustrates how centralized she becomes—she can move one way and stay on the farm, or another and leave. Each choice personally connects her to different family members with different goals, and the more choices she's offered as time passes, the clearer it becomes that she will inevitably have to sacrifice something she values.

Being constantly caught in partial transitions leaves Anna in liminal in-between states in her relationships with the other characters and their identities. She doesn't connect fully to any of her family members, but instead feels partially in alignment and out of sorts with them—Aunt Leslie is the strongest representation of Anna's back-and-

forth perspective, being a figure whose actions Anna agrees with because of what they symbolize in terms of reachable freedom, and disagrees with in terms of the way Leslie went about taking that freedom, by making a scene and leaving behind so much emotional fallout. Anna spends the stories teetering on the edge of making a decision, keeping herself out of the way, and putting a final decision off as long as she can, even as she's continually asked by her bickering family members to pick a side and declare her loyalty. Ultimately, she chooses the more gradual exit, similar to Jack's, but without the resentment and running away. In "To Market, To Market" she still returns to the farm in the summer, but chooses to go away for school to help build her own business (73-4). While the ending remains open to her future actions and position in regards to the farm, she is happier accepting the notion that, "[she] just can't stay forever. Being away from home, starting college, starting to actually see a future for [her]self that doesn't in some way involve taking over the family business…" (85). The example of her acting on her desires, rather than continuing to passively watch the world around her as she has in preceding stories, demonstrates that she is finally on the path to finding her own way in the world. She's letting go of her childish attachments to her home, and to her obligations to a business she sees as fading, even stagnant, and ultimately unsuited for her. Returning to the concept of Turner's liminal passenger, who is "metaphorically assigned a position prior to, transcending, or below the social structure" (Gilead 183), Anna's position primarily "transcends" her current social structure, that of both a child under her parents and grandparents, and a worker under her employers. By continually distancing herself away from the family in times of conflict which might otherwise force her to choose a side, she becomes "[t]emporarily freed from role-playing structural boundaries and bereft

of group privileges and attributes…" (Gilead 183) Anna retains her entire family's support by not acting against any one of them, but also fails to solidify that support by not actively placing herself on either side. Turner's passenger within this transitional state is characterized by "passivity, powerlessness, humility" (Gilead 183), and Anna undeniably embodies these traits during her time inhabiting the limbo of her teenage years—passivity in avoiding choosing a side and going along with what she's told; powerlessness to act on her own desires; and humility in that she lacks pride in herself and her own choices.

Liminality also presents as a space, typically more so than as experiences. Liminal spaces are found in the physical space of the farm itself, the places mainly where Anna finds herself alone or otherwise isolates. The rye field in "Palace of Rye" presents a place where the danger is perhaps more imaginary but certainly unknown, turning from "gold" (12) to "fog" (16), and foreshadows the chaotic desolation. Anna experiences in the future. It also introduces the imaginary as a mechanism for provoking Anna to some form of action. The merging of the imaginary with reality appears previously in the pepper fields of "Pepper Birds," inhabited by creatures trying to destroy the family's livelihood, against which Anna tries to fight back, throwing "stones hoping to scatter them" (39), but fails, and can't get rid of because it's out of her control. Most significant is her bedroom in "The Break" where she encounters all her family members manifesting through her own suppressed and conflicting emotions, again in isolation. By depicting Anna emotionally sparring with family members who are not actually in the room with her, I present a glimpse of how Anna interprets each member's viewpoints and feelings towards both the farm and herself, and this situation gives Anna an opportunity to express her uncertain emotions and difficulties towards them in a safe situation with no real

consequences. She can receive validation, or anticipate rejection, from various family members, including ones she no longer has contact with, in a way that better prepares her for any conflict she might encounter whether she decides to stay or leave. In this situation, the imagined family members act as soundboards for her, off which to bounce ideas, to help her find her footing and move towards leaving limbo, and making a final decision. Liminality does however occur in a more internal sense in places where her family is present. The barn in "Peel Bunch Wash" is one place where, though interrupted at several points by her family, she isolates herself. Within that structure, she withdraws from, and observes, the fights around her, and watches her family squabble, all while helpless to step in and resolve things without feeling like she's making things worse by interferring. Isolation in "The Greenhouse Cage" occurs because she chooses to be alone, and feels suffocated and thrown off when other people (the oppositional figures of her mother and Aunt Leslie) enter the greenhouse and immediately cause a deterioration of work quality and productivity—"lost my place again goddammit…I drop my basket onto the ground and start picking at random now" (7)—which is only resolved once she's alone again. In "Heads," Anna is with her family, and Aunt Leslie is the physically isolated figure (46)—but in this case, physical isolation doesn't create order or peace, as it did for Anna in "The Greenhouse Cage," but instead invites more chaos. Aunt Leslie's misinterpretation of instructions while on her own in "Heads" leads her to gather rotting lettuce instead of good produce from a newer patch, and leads to more fighting while Anna listens from above, distanced from the action (47-9). Anna is the only one who can see Aunt Leslie from where she's standing, "the size of a bug" (46), and has a clear view of both family parties, but remains distant from them, purely an observer. This physical

position reflects her metaphorical position, as a neutral party in the family's clashing opinions of, and actions towards, farming. Even as Anna stands on the trailer, grabbing broccoli out of the air and arranging them into boxes, only the tractor and the attached trailer moves, while she stands still. She can only hear her parents' words when the trailer passes their position (48), and loses the details of their conversation when her sister drives on (49). Anna is a bystander who takes in information, watches how each side reacts to each other, and the consequences for the members on each side of the conflict. She continues to form her own opinions, without having to declare her loyalty, and without shifting one way or another from her position in limbo. Kroetsch's *What the Crow Said* features a limbo in the form of neverending winter, simply introduced as "the year the snow didn't melt" (14), but constantly affecting the inhabitants—even in June: "the tumbled and whirling flakes fell into [Liebhaber's] face, onto his mouth and eyes, closed him against the inviting world; the flowering snow grew over his hands" (26), consuming him, forcing him to close his eyes to attempt some escape. Similarly, Anna futilely locks herself in her room in her attempts to escape the encroaching farm but even in her dreams, the "crows swoop down, pecking holes in my head" (40). By never melting past winter, Kroetsch's environment keeps the community unchanged and inhabitants locked in a static, bitterly snowy limbo, and not allowing for forward movement. This lack of movement highlights limbo as a place of stasis, and reflects how in "Exposed Roots" Anna is similarly in stasis for much of the stories, never moving too far one way or the other. The unnaturalness of a space, external or internal, that never changes—beyond allowing for eerie or magic realist adjacent events, such as the crows, both in Kroetsch's story and in Anna's field, or the imagined family—must be overcome

and switched back into motion in order for the protagonist to continue moving forward in their journey. While Anna can contemplate her options in limbo, no real-world change will ever be made until she leaves that limbo and translates her thoughts into actions. In "To Market, To Market" the liminal space is the aisle between the stalls, where Anna moves forward from her family's stall across and over to the baker's stall—her desire (79). This space is where she must choose whether to return to the family, or continue forward to meet a different future outside farming. Here, out from behind the table barriers of business, the baker approaches her as well, offering her tarts and a reciprocation of desire (81, 87-8). And it is when Anna leaves her stall that she brings up photography and begins establishing a clientele and experience in a profession outside of farming (80). Thus, Anna as a liminal figure ultimately emerges as a künstlerroman protagonist.

Anna, following the artist's journey as a künstlerroman protagonist, is an artist through her photography, an interest that grows as she comes of age through her teenage years into a passion she wants to pursue not just as a hobby but as a career. Anna, as an already "self-conscious outsider…runs the risk of non-being, non-identity" (Malmgren 9) by caving to her family's assumptions that she'll join the business permanently, losing her individuality and becoming just another labourer under the larger entity of the farm. Alternately, she risks losing herself—as a member of a community—if she chooses the opposite option of cutting ties, rejecting her family heritage and connection. She comes into her identity by weaving her own interests and skills into the options she's presented, aligning with the way "the twentieth-century künstlerroman necessarily interrogates the problematics of identity, not resting with the somewhat facile answer 'I am an artist,' but

submitting that statement to a vertiginous examination" (Malmgren 9). Anna doesn't just say "I'm a photographer," she accepts this new identity and expands it by putting it to use, reconciling it with her former identity as a daughter and labourer. As an artist figure, Anna holds the unique position of viewing the world around her and interpreting it in her own way, similar to how she functions as a narrator interpreting the events in her life. She develops an ability to use "the photographic medium as a means of constructing (inter)subjectivity, particularly…desire to use photographs as portals into the Other and the past" (Rugg 73), in the same way her narration provides views of her family through contrasting events she experiences during the stories, and into flashbacks, and even imagined encounters brought on by her own memories and opinions. In all regards, she functions as a "middle-man" between the people, world, and events around her, and the audience to which she presents her interpretations. Anna is mainly an observer and relater of events, as much as an active participant. She is positioned in the middle-ground, liminal space between the real-life context of events happening around her within the stories, and the records and memories of those events as she recollects them afterwards as stories, whether through her photography or her more direct and constant narration. The reader comes to know the farm, the family, and the events occurring over the years, through Anna, who moves between the reader and other characters, observing their actions and behaviours and thus their consequences and various meanings for the other characters and herself. Throughout the stories, Anna finds ways to slowly integrate her photography, her true passion, into the farming business she currently inhabits, through the photos of vegetables for class projects in "The Break" (64-5), to taking more professional photos for website and advertising, as she offers the baker in "To Market, To

Market" (80-1). Anna feels stuck between being the artist figure and the business figure, a struggle which emerges through her passion vs her responsibility, her sense of herself as an individual vs her sense of herself as a part of her family and home. The idea grows to create her own new business out of her art, rather than being forced into an already established business in which she has no rooted interest. Gradually she finds a way to combine the two Annas, at first to get around having to choose, by using photography to contribute to the farm via social media and art.

Using her photography and her narration to express her perspective of her surrounding world, Anna demonstrates a "use of other framed and permeable spaces that depict liminality—borderlands between the created world and its creator, the real world and the created world, and the created world and the spectator" (Rugg 78). As both narrator and photographer, Anna is positioned between the reality of her family and home, and the created world of her imaginative perspective and interpretation of those things around her. The liminal space she inhabits gives her a unique view of events, one that has her simultaneously more removed from the world as an observer relating events, and closer as a participant inevitably pulled into those events whether she likes it or not. In her moments of retreat into her internal liminal space, Anna follows Turner's concept of individuals in a liminal space using, "their human capacity to step back and think about their situation, considering consciously what regulates their behavior. It is here that people can 'talk about how they normally talk'" (Howard-Grenville et al. 525), and Anna takes advantage of this freedom in stasis, away from the multiple constraints of her family members, to explore herself while digesting the events occurring around her and how they could affect her choices. Liminality in its definition as a traditional, in-between

space, doesn't require a strict adherence to reality. Throughout the collection, Anna encounters an underlying sense of things being a little "off," such as the ever-lurking crows' deliberate sabotage of the peppers in "Pepper Birds" as they "nibble and peck, then leave the majority behind on the stem; like toddlers whining for cookies only to eat one bite before discarding the rest" (36), or when she first encounters imagined family members, starting with Jack (53), in "The Break." Even the repetition of the word "heads" (45, 47, 48, 50) in "Heads" carries an unsettling quality that moves the reader's association of the word further and further away from broccoli. Mom and Dad move through the field, "cutting heads again like normal" (50), distorting the image of vegetable harvesting into something more sinister, reflecting Anna's increasingly negative feelings towards farm work. This unstable, liminal space of the farm, and of Anna's position in it, merge the real with the imaginary or uncanny in a way similar to the magic realism in Kroetsch's *What the Crow Said*, in which crows carry an unsettling vocal presence, and the men play a neverending card game, all in the space of a self-contained, and isolating, rural setting. Kroetsch's crow speaks directly to Liebhaber and the others, "'Liebhaber,' the crow said. It had never spoken before that moment…After that there was no keeping it quiet" (Kroetsch, 64-5). His crow provokes and berates the men from then on, becoming a character itself, whereas Anna's crows remain chaotic and almost unnatural forces, not recognizable characters. While Anna's crows never speak with human words, both she and the reader are able to interpret their croaks and caws as "torment[ing]" and "taunt[ing]" (36) her attempts to stop their deliberate sabotage of the pepper fields, haunting her both at work and in her subconscious even when she's in her home away from the farm (40).

Each family member has a place in the family and on the farm—Grampa is the head, the elder figure in charge, with Dad gradually taking over as boss from him. Gramma and Mom run things alongside them, taking charge of everyday business including supervising the three kids, maintaining the greenhouses, preparing for market, and contributing labour in the fields. Aunt Leslie is the outlier, who has no strong say in running the business, but nevertheless is supposed to show up and do her job. Jack is initially positioned to take over, he's supposed to learn how to run the business while gaining practical experience. Anna and Jessie are also labourers, with Jessie as the youngest occupying the lowest rung on the ladder and expected to do the least work as a child. Anna works throughout the stories to navigate her position in relation to each of them as time passes and things change. She is expected to help out when she can, to learn from her parents so she can continue working there when she becomes an adult. To her grandparents, and to a lesser but still substantial extent her parents, she is part of the future of the farm, and she'll continue to dedicate herself to it for life. To Aunt Leslie, Anna is at first a tool she can use to lessen her own workload, and then a figure potentially similar to herself, another daughter pressured into staying in the family business and wasting her life in the process, a view which comes out during Leslie's explosive exit (62-4), and which Anna must consider when deciding what to do with her future. Up until family members begin leaving, Anna's role has been flexible, putting less pressure on her to decide her future. When Aunt Leslie and Jack leave, Anna's position drastically shifts, as she's now the oldest child still around with the potential to one day run the farm—regardless of her own feelings, most of her family now sees her as their continuing legacy. If she were to leave, Jessie would be left alone to shoulder the burden

of expectations, and be isolated as the only child of her generation working on the farm, after the rest having moved away. Anna's ties to the family would also consequently be jeopardized, given her grandfather's hostility and rejection of anyone who, in his eyes, abandon the family and the farm. Anna fears losing her family if she decides to leave, and this fear consequently paralyzes her, eventually putting her in a self-isolating stasis where the only people she can express her true desires to are the versions of her family she imagines, and until she overcomes this fear and allows herself to explore her desires, she cannot leave her self-imposed limbo. Anna is reaching a point where she still needs to find her place: in or out. If she can learn from the splintering conflicts in her family, and replicate Aunt Leslie and Jack's escapes in a way that anticipates and then avoids dissidence, then she will succeed in being free to pursue her own career and maintain contact with the past. In this way, her position in the family itself remains liminal, shifting in response to others' actions, but never because of her own, and never settling permanently. Anna isn't untethered so much as she is bound too much, to too many people at once. She remains caught between what other people want or expect of her, and, until the end of the collection, isn't able to escape from this middle position. When she is able to shift out of a liminal position, she will be able to affect change, both for herself and for her younger sister. In regards to how individuals moving on from the liminal enact change, Howard-Grenville et al. conclude that, "Rather than seeking to replace one set of new norms for another set governing the larger setting or organization, our analyses show people bringing about fundamental change by bringing the existing and new symbols into contact and recomposing them" (525), and Anna attempts the same reconciliation between her desires, and how she can finally reach a position to act on

those desires, with the established norms of her farming family. She opens herself and others to more options, and takes herself out of the bystander/pawn position she's spent most of the stories occupying, and assuming a more active role establishing herself as a grown adult pursuing her own desires and dreams, rather than falling into the established rut of the family business, always tethered to the will of others.

One of the most significant events in the collection occurs in "The Break," with Anna's imagined dialogues with each of her family members, brought to life by her internalized fears and desires. Her lack of a clear path, and her indecisiveness come to a head as she starts to realize she can't remain stagnant—eventually she must make a choice, and so her family members arrive like ghosts pulling and pushing her one way or the other as she tries to work around making her choice. Looking at the article, "Ghostly Visitations in Contemporary Short Fiction by Women: Fay Weldon, Janice Galloway and Ali Smith," I found examples in other stories of young women being visited by ghostly figures, imagined or real, during times of distress or preceding some significant change, relying on the Lacanian "notion of the 'encounter with the real' as an encounter with what is 'unassimilable'" (Sacido-Romero 92) in this case, Anna's inability to confront her family in person, which she must do in order to escape her liminal position and move forward in life. Anna gets this opportunity to express herself when her interpretations of her family manifest in her solitude, her physical, liminal space, because "'[i]t is only in the dream…that this truly unique encounter can occur'…For, in Lacan's view, the ghost is a 'screen' produced by the dream 'that shows us that *it* [the Real] is still there behind'" (Sacido-Romero 92). Anna's subconscious summons these ghost-like figures, as both substitutes for and practice for the real figures currently out of view on the farm, the only

way she can confront them in her current uncertain and unconfident state. Anna's internalized doubts and uncertainties come out in the isolated, liminal space of her home, outside the farm and the world beyond, where she is both physically alone, but now haunted by her family in other ways. Stepping back from her expected duties peeling leeks, Anna achieves a temporary "reduced social responsibility [which] earns them greater freedom to observe safely, to speak freely, to nourish purely personal relationships" (Gilead 192) through her interactions with the imagined family. Her home becomes a kind of limbo, where spectres reside and where she is able to interact with them in a way that holds no real-life consequences. She can talk to her Aunt Leslie who hasn't been on the farm in months (60-1), or argue with her Grampa who she'd never stand up against in any other situation (58-9) because "ghosts…undermine the alienating solidity of a status quo whose preservation, we are made to understand, is undesirable" (Sacido-Romero 94). By forcing her to confront face-to-face the conflicting perspectives she's picked up over the years and struggled to fit into her own life, Anna can start to make progress towards committing to her choice. In Christine Jackman's essay "*What the Crow Said*: A Topos of Excess," she notes that in Kroetsch's story, "The ghost of Martin Lang appears, perhaps to remind the players that they have really won nothing. He is the visible consequence of not winning" (101). The family Anna summons are likewise representative of consequences; consequences of either abandoning her dreams and staying on the farm, like her father (66), or "cutting off branches of the family tree" (70) and losing contact with her family forever, like her aunt. By hiding inside, avoiding a decision, Anna hasn't really won anything—she's simply putting off the end of her own game for as long as possible. This liminal space provides her a safe, and consequence-

free means to "express hostility toward social power structures and authorities conceived as having rejected them. The liminal gesture secures a new measure of autonomy" (Gilead 192), allowing Anna to parse through her criticisms and indecision. She is free to express her true emotions towards her family—unobserved and free from the established family and work structure—and test anticipated responses or reasonings, essentially give herself time to prepare emotionally to make her decision, and finally leave that safe, liminal space. Anna, particularly in this story, resides in a kind of limbo, and that limbo-like space allows her to work through "arguments" with family members, and pushes her towards making a final decision. The effects of this decision are found later in "To Market, To Market," with Anna's more certain mindset, clearer goals, and willingness to act on her desires rather than avoid avoiding them entirely, as she has in the past.

Interspersed with her ghostly conversations are flashbacks with the same family members, placing Anna not only in the liminal space between the real and unreal, but the past and the present as well. Amy Hempel's short story "The Harvest" balances the narrator's hazy shifts between flashback and present, that reaches an unreal sense of meta as the narrator refers to writing the story, addressing the reader with, "I'm going to start now to tell you what I have left out of "The Harvest," and maybe begin to wonder why I had to leave it out" (Hempel 3). Anna certainly leaves things out; there are gaps between the stories, but she fills these with flashbacks. The gaps are significant, but more so in relation to the events that come after them than on their own—it's the aftermath that matters most in these stories. There's an emotional and personal distance in the narrator's voice that positions her as more removed from her injurious situation, one that Anna in "Peel Bunch Wash" reflects as she removes herself from the arguments between her

family, slumping out of the way (27) and retreating into herself. The difference, for Anna, is that she starts off as involved, even provoking her sister (22), but over the course of the story readers notice her become more and more removed until she's essentially an observing voice—she's physically still in the barn, but she's ceased verbally interacting with anyone, except as a narrator, until Jessie addresses her by the tub in the end (32). The ending of that story leaves Anna in her liminal position, caught between being an active and passive character, a narrator and participant.

Anna, by residing throughout most of the collection in a transitional space, hasn't actually done anything significant yet. In fact, she spends most of the collection not making decisions on taking actions that will lead to emotional fallout, going out of her way to avoid any actions that might cause emotional ripples. This inaction inhibits her emotional and metaphorical growth, and has the potential to create either resentment (as with Aunt Leslie) or resignation (as with Dad) if she doesn't break her cycle. Stagnation causes withering and stunting, preventing her from achieving her full growth and bloom. Aunt Leslie is an embodiment of both the positive and negative struggle that Anna undergoes throughout the collection, making the decision about whether or not to leave, and how to leave, a question of right or wrong. On the positive end, Leslie manages to get out, something that Anna wants to do but can't yet commit to pursuing (10). Leslie shows that the farm isn't an infallible trap, and that the option to leave and pursue one's own passions is reachable. On the negative end, the explosive way Leslie leaves causes a split in the family, leaving her with no further contact with any of the family, and no indication that this will change in the future—something which is unacceptable to Anna, who "can't imagine never coming back [home]…it's all too precious to me to let go"

(70). Anna wants to pursue her desires but not at the cost of losing her family and connections to the childhood home. Leslie provides the blueprints and test-run of leaving, which leads to the second example of Jack leaving in a way that creates fewer ripples, an improvement, but still not perfect. Eventually, Anna becomes the third person to try, and will presumably get it right this time—a matter of striking the balance of desire and duty. In terms of parallels between the generations, Jack as the eldest son is supposed to reflect his father in taking over the farm (84), but instead follows his aunt away from it. Jessie, the youngest daughter, at first reflects her aunt in her reluctance to work (24), but by "To Market, To Market" she has changed her attitude, "asking Dad about the business side more than once" and now actively invests her time in the learning about farming from her father (84). Anna, as the middle child, has no one to reflect, leaving her without an established example to follow or be constrained by. Anna's liminal position extends beyond her internal conflicts; the liminality encompasses her position within the family, and emphasizes how her means of solving the stay-or-leave problem, which has torn the family apart, can be resolved. Distancing herself from a values-driven standpoint "outside the group, the liminal figure is actually its moral representative and, in fact, exists to serve the social structure…The liminal figure provides for his audience a vicarious experience that offers a kind of safety valve for the hostility or frustration engendered by the limitations of structured life," (Gilead 184) which Anna encounters through both her grandfather's obsessive adherence to the business, her aunt's furious rejection of it, and the other family members' viewpoints between those respective sides—never as entirely centred as Anna's. Through her acceptance and decided pursuit of her own desires, while never entirely rejecting her responsibilities, Anna's middle road choice leads to an

"assertion of values and behaviors unattainable in structured roles, [in which] hostility not only against society but between different segments of society may be alleviated, and the society as a whole stabilized" (Gilead 184). She creates a solution for the problem of family needing to move beyond the farm, one her younger sister—or any future working family member—now has the option to take, rather than facing the polarized choices of abandoning family or abandoning independence.

Anna is a liminal character, inhabiting multiple forms of liminal spaces, by her positions as both observing narrator and participating character; teenage middle child; wanting to both leave and stay; caught between responsibility and desire, between her various family members, and between the past and future. As an artist figure, she is caught between the external world as it is around her, and the internal world she captures, both in narrative and in art. Anna hovers in her in-between position for much of the collection, wanting to move forward, but afraid that taking any action will result in her world falling apart. As family ties shift, she gradually learns to become an active participant, realizing stagnation isn't a viable long-term possibility. Most of the stories centre around Anna's position mid-transition, the most significant stage for her as a growing character, one that highlights both her gradual internal changes as she moves toward adulthood, and the changes in the world around her. Her journey is one of hesitancy, struggle, and gradually leading herself beyond that mid-point, liminal space, and into her own, unique, future.

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