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TRANSPLANT

Peter Grimes

The protocol is for us to follow behind the transplanter, crouching above black plastic; we must cover the strawberry roots Mr. Tomlinson and Pedro drop into the machine-punched holes. Riding six inches from the ground, with a double wheel of puncturing cogs between them, they toss the stock crown-first into each fresh rupture. Fish emulsion from the tank above sloshes on top. In my opinion, they should leave the roots beside each hole since we always have to dig deeper: it's necessary to create a more secure place in the fishy soil. Until we arrive, the roots stick out of the plastic holes like starved arms reaching in the wrong direction.

I joined the workers at Gates Farm last summer after spending many years at Arnest International, a company specializing in industry-related physical therapy. I entered patient information and still remember some of the more gruesome injury codes: 802.6 for fractures of the skull, 944.3 for burn with full-thickness skin loss, 986.4 for degloving of the hand. The codes were as close as I got to the mutilations—very often farm-related—because therapists seldom attach photographs to their descriptions. I'd planned to quit on my fortieth birthday. Instead, I met Randy Jameson.

One afternoon, I stopped at a fruit stand situated on the highway from Arnest back to the city. Randy, a long-haired, peaceful intern at Willow Branch Farm, insisted I taste each organic berry before making my decision. He spoke of the different soil conditions that gave each fruit its distinct flavor and texture, how the farm used natural fragrances to ward off pests while attracting pollinators, how they utilized only animal labor, never machines. I was suspicious at first, taking him for an out-of-touch granola. But when he found out what I did for a living, he boasted that Willow Branch workers had suffered no injuries during the young farm's first five years. That was something, I thought.

Randy was half my age, and we dated mainly out of loneliness at first, but we cultivated our relationship with care—no TV while we ate together, just conversation; walks through the woods, noticing the trees and animals; equal contribution to expenses, though I made much more. All this in stark contrast to the decade of dead hours I spent at Arnest, cataloging injuries. This contrast in my life remained after we got serious and decided that I would continue at Arnest, where my salary could support us both until Randy got through his bachelor's program. Then I would leave the office for good, and we'd start our lives together in the fresh air in a place like Willow Branch, a farm of our very own.

Three weeks before Randy's graduation, he was decapitated when a semi jackknifed in rainwater on Interstate 76. No code for that. In line with his wishes, his liver was donated to a boy in Houston. Even with immunosuppressive therapy, the boy's body rejected the organ. It seemed Randy's sacrifice meant nothing. Quitting Arnest was automatic. With the money I'd saved I could afford to take a break from salaried work, so I sought employment as a farmhand. I wanted Randy to live on in what I did with my days, but Willow Branch had no openings. Their workers were happy. I could only secure a position at Gates, a more conventional farm, one with chemicals, machines, and injuries. The transplanter was the machine that most of all reminded me that, to fulfill Randy's dream, I had far to go. A puncturing, twisting, creeping parasite on the landscape, it must have certainly mangled a few limbs in its tenure.

My sowing partner behind the transplanter today is Mrs. Tomlinson. Kevin, the overseer, told us this morning in the barn that the quickest way to get the root stock out of the baking sun is to match up and keep pace with another of the women. We squat on opposite sides of the plastic and dig in our respective holes, starting about five behind Encarna and Inez, five in front of Sarah and Consuela. Each time we reach roots already covered, we skip into place at the front of the line. In this way, the group of us moves worm-like behind the

machine.

Mrs. Tomlinson works only two days a week compared with my five. She and Mr. Tomlinson, the root-dropper ahead on the left, are retired farmers from Illinois who came to Pennsylvania to be near their children. They'd thought they were through with farming, but, when they found a long road of empty years stretching through the farmland north of Philadelphia, they had to get their hands back in it. Their years of familiarity with the soil make them the people even Kevin turns to with questions about Japanese beetles and misfiring tractor engines.

Being around such a veteran of the fields and her husband, I can't help but think of Randy and our plans. When he disappeared in a crush of metal, I felt like I'd lost half partner, half child. I lost the child that would have been our marriage, the marriage that might have soon produced an actual child, connecting me—us—with a chain of others to come. Company of our own making. Lately I've thought of telling Mrs. Tomlinson my own ideas about how farm work might heal my loneliness, how digging my hands in the same earth that conceals Randy forty miles away might help me to let him go, a seed left in the earth.

"A scorcher today," she says, as she must have a million times in the last thirty years.

I nod, watch her dig and tuck, trying to match the dexterity of her fingers. She squats flat-footed, allowing flies to rest on her arms as she works. Most of the other women came today wearing cotton white shirts and hats, but Mrs. Tomlinson wears what must be her everyday style of clothing—tennis shoes, some khaki shorts, and a multicolored T-shirt that says *Spain!* No sunglasses. No hat. No bandanna. She works as she lives, lives as she works. Maybe she's found that all the accoutrements Gore-Tex or Banana Republic can come up will never stand up in the end between us and the sun. Indeed, despite various precautions, many farm injuries start with heat exhaustion. I still remember a case of a woozy farmworker who was pulled into the

tailgate area of a hay baler: 897.2 for a unilateral amputation of the leg below the knee.

A practiced sower, she moves quickly, but—for the good of the whole operation—I’ve determined to keep up. Still, it takes some willpower to forgive myself the roots I’ve imperfectly sealed when I move on to the next hole. I’m still very detail-oriented, a demand of my job at Arnest. I wanted to get every injury code right to avoid any loopholes insurance companies would seek in a worker’s comp case. I only manage to keep pace now by focusing on the 500 waving roots still wilting in the sun.

“I’ve been thinking,” I say, “about how much I’ve missed this in my life.”

“What’s that, honey?”

“Farming. Planting, weeding, harvesting. The whole process, I suppose.”

“You aren’t missing nothing. Dave and I are back at it just because we’re crazy.” She glances to the side to locate her husband, riding low behind the transplanter. He and Pedro are flinging the roots down frantically, as if they’ve been behind from the beginning. I share a knowing smile with Mrs. Tomlinson, but, when I look back at the men, I decide that, rather than frantic, their motions are simply fast, as precise and effortless as the dropping of road cones. We stand and move to the next empty holes. At the end of the row, Kevin’s already turning the tractor to work down the third, coming at us head-on and two feet to the left.

“I don’t think you’re crazy,” I say. “I think something like this is really the only sane thing to do. You can’t imagine what it was like being in an office all day, away from everything that truly sustained me. The sun, the air, the earth.”

When I put my thoughts into words, they seem silly, dissolved into romantic ideals. They glance off the on-coming machine like glare. However, as with the flies, the swirling dust, the monotony of farm work, Mrs. Tomlinson doesn’t seem to notice.

“Earth, sun, air,” she repeats. “Tell me about it.”

My calves have grown tight from squatting on tiptoe so that I might always be on the move. By the time the worm of women reaches the row’s end, my fingertips throb where dirt has gotten packed under the nails. It would all be worth it, I think, if I could go home to Randy. I’d push through the front door and find him at a desk, reading entomology. I’d hold my hands out to him, bleeding and smelling of fish.

But Randy’s gone. Even the kid he tried to save, the transplant recipient, has gone, taking a part of Randy to a different place. A grave in Texas.

We start the next row without taking a break for water or stretching, the Gates way, and I change tactics. I’ll do it my way, Randy’s way: concentrate on every hole, making sure to fold and press each beginning of a plant into the earth without worrying about the hundreds yet to come.

“I just want to feel like what I’m doing today will have some effect in my lifetime. I’d like to see these strawberries grow, taste them, make a pie, whatever.”

“We better.” Mrs. Tomlinson chuckles. “If Kevin announced he’d given us dead roots, he’d have twenty madwomen after him come fall.”

Fall. I chuckle to match her but feel a sudden confusion, as if the world has just begun spinning in the opposite direction. Dizziness from fume exposure: 780.4. Randy brought home cartons of strawberries from Willow Branch in summer. They must have been planted in the spring, not on a July day like this one. I feel as if a small miracle has descended upon my understanding, as if Randy is speaking through me to correct a mistake here. Aren’t we planting too late? Isn’t this just another wasteful oversight, labor without the reward of life? But surely the Tomlinsons would have noticed. This past year I’ve developed a tendency to wreath even the most light-hearted chats with black ribbons.

"These berries are late bloomers, I take it?"

Mrs. Tomlinson waits while I press dirt around the crown. The women have bunched up behind us, discussing the hold up. My partner doesn't answer until we move up front again.

"These are an autumn variety," she says, flipping one over and cupping soil over the roots in one fluid motion.

Strawberries in fall. Her words are ripe with an automatic meaning for her that I can't yet comprehend. Her fingers tuck in another crown. Yellow, cracked, they tell me the answer must be in me, too, waiting for the right time to show. Maybe I'll see 50 first; maybe I'll understand by morning.

Speeding our way down the fourth row, Kevin and his low-riding assistants drop the endless roots into their unready holes.

"How's it coming, girls?" he shouts over the throttle of the engine.

Mrs. Tomlinson, our spokeswoman, gives him the thumbs-up and then flicks off her husband, who rides comfortably in a slight breeze. He replies with an obscene gesture using his tongue and two fingers. They cackle, and Mrs. Tomlinson resumes her work.

Amazing, these two. How could they love each other? I imagine them having sex, their heavy, 70-year-old bodies sweating with the honesty of pigs, rolling around the bed, snorting, her spider-veined legs rubbing across his hairy back. Another thing I'll need to learn.

With the tractor moving farther and farther ahead, we work in silence for a while, only interrupted by sporadic conversation in Spanish to our left and right. I sneak a glance at my partner's knee, listen for the hum of her husband's drawl.

"That is one hell of a machine," Mrs. Tomlinson says, calling me back from a place she'd never suspect.

I follow her gaze to the transplanter and its three passengers, chugging along. At this rate, it seems the last roots will be long dried out before we ever get to them. Likely, though, they're more resilient than I give them credit for.

"I don't think I've seen something quite so lazy in my whole life," she says. "You'd think that with all those wheels and hoses and levers, they'd have one little mechanism to finish the job. It doesn't seem hardly worth it to have us crawling through the fields."

The men reach the end of the row, fan their faces with hunting caps. I agree there's something not quite right about the setup. We'll always be needed to follow behind on our knees. I move to the next spot, opposite Mrs. Tomlinson, and reach into my hole. No root. The droppers have missed this one, as they're bound to do sometimes. A second miracle, or a mistake? Kevin told us this morning to mark these empty holes with red ribbons he'd stuffed in our aprons. We'd come back later with leftover root stock.

But I don't mark it.

I reach instead into the earth, turning it over, feeling dirt jam into dirt under my fingernails, the small rocks and hard clumps making way for my insistence. I crumble up every stubborn piece I find, preparing a place for something. With none of the other holes have I taken so much care. I churn until Mrs. Tomlinson waddles over to the next hole, and then I leave the empty one, unmarked and ready.