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Nests

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“CLOSE THE GODDAMN DOOR, Silas,” Mr. Moon says to me.

“The door is closed,” I answer him. Mr. Gus Moon is sitting at his kitchen table with his back to the door. The cookstove is fired up until the stove lids look dull red, the color of some of the leaves that are blowing around the yard.

“Made a hell of a draft when you came in. I’m freezin’ all the time,” and he shake his hunched-up shoulders and take a big drink from a heavy white coffee mug. He is wearing a black sweater that somebody knit for him, the wool is thick and look like little links of logging chain. Under that he got on a plaid work-shirt, buttoned right up to the neck, bib-overalls, and I’m pretty sure that underneath is some of that Stanfield’s Underwear, the thick kind, the color of barley and just about as scratchy.

“Have some coffee, Silas. It’ll warm you up.”

“It’s pretty warm out today, Mr. Moon. See how nice the sun’s shining.” In that kitchen it must be a hundred above, or more. I start to sweat as soon as I step inside. “Tell me what you’d like done today and I’ll get started,” I say. This is, I guess, the third weekend I been working on Mr. Moon’s farm. He is a white farmer, live down toward Ponoka. I seen his ad in the *Wetaskiwin Times*, want somebody to help out on weekends. His house is big, and old; it ain’t painted but he got inside plumbing and electricity, though he heats the place with a big wood stove. Mr. Moon been sick for a while and not able to do his own work.

“Have some coffee, Silas,” Gus Moon say to me in a voice that don’t leave me no choice.

“Where do you want your mail?” I say. I’m holding two newspapers I pulled out of the metal mailbox down by the road.

“Just put them there on the sideboard.”

I pour some coffee from the blue-enamel pot that stands on the back of the stove and sit down. There is a can of Carnation milk on the table, got a triangular hole punched on each side of the lid, but the sugar bowl is empty. My coffee is boiled and bitter; I like it with lots of sugar. I unzip my jacket, take it off and hang it on the back of my chair. I’m too hot even in just a tee-shirt and jeans, but Mr. Moon sit hunched over the table the way cold people do. Mr. Moon used to have a wife, named

Jessie, I know because he talks about her once in a while. But I can't figure out whether she's dead, run off, or just away somewhere. Only other person live with him is his daughter, Danielle, who is about fifteen.

Danielle is the kind of white girl I have dreams about just before I go to sleep at night. She have dark blue eyes in a tanned face, long black hair that come down below her shoulders when it straight, but sometimes she curl it and twist it and pile it up on top of her head. Her teeth are shiny white. She is slim and have nice breasts, look like apples under the yellow sweater she usually wears.

That remind me of the funniest thing about this here farm, they grow apples. You can grow apples in this country but they is hard and bitter and not much good for anything but feed hogs or make home brew. But down about a hundred yards in front of the kitchen window is a patch of apple trees, must be over a hundred of them, the leaves mainly gone this time of year. Them trees is scrunched up as crippled men, some of their trunks twisted like a chicken neck that been wrung.

"They was *her* idea, them trees," Gus Moon said to me the first day I was here, after he seen me staring out the window at them. "Bringin' *them* in here was her idea too," he say, and point to where there is two wasp nests each hanging by a thread from the ceiling, twirl first one way then another. They is dark as clouds hanging there in the room full of bright fall sunlight. Gus Moon hardly let me get any work done that day. In fact, I have hardly done any work at all. Mainly I just sit in the kitchen and listen to him talk. He cusses out the wasp nests and wasps in general and the apple trees, and worries out loud about what Danielle is doing that she shouldn't. He sure does hate them wasps. Parasites is what he calls them. "Go down to the orchard and see what they do," he says to me in a loud voice. And later the first afternoon I do. All around was apples rotting on the ground. I could hear wasps buzzing but mainly couldn't see any. Then I noticed that those apples each got a hole in them, one hole like it been made with a bullet. I picked one up and it was light as paper, been hollowed out by them wasps. Another one I pick up be almost alive—I could hear them buzz and feel the vibration, a thrill like holding my hand close to a power saw.

That first day I come to work here, Mr. Moon sitting just like he is now; he was watching somebody moving around down among the apple trees. I didn't know it was Danielle until she come into the house a few minutes later. He introduce me to her, but she look at me like all she seen was the chair I'm sitting on.

"I've been watchin' you," Mr. Moon says, "You know that?"

"I know," Danielle says in a real snotty voice. "I see you there. *We* see you there."

"Then why don't you stay to hell out of that orchard, like I've told you?"

"I wasn't doing anything," she says, this time in kind of a dreamy voice. Then, "Did the newspapers come?"

Mr. Moon got his head slumped over his coffee almost like he was praying.

"They're on the sideboard there," Mr. Moon says. Danielle start across the kitchen.

"Don't you go cuttin' them up until I've had a chance to look at them," Mr. Moon says.

"You never look at them," says Danielle as she picks up the papers and begins pushing stuff around on the sideboard.

"What are you lookin' for, girl?"

"The scissors. Here they are." She picked up a big pair of silver scissors and started right in cutting them newspapers, not like she was cutting out pictures but big stabbing cuts in all directions.

"I told you not to do that," Mr. Moon yell. "All you do is make scraps." I sure wish I was someplace else.

"They're not scraps," Danielle says real calmly. "They're clippings. I like clippings, they make my room nicer."

"It ain't your room you put 'em in. Ain't your room you do all that cuttin' and pastin' for. And look at the sideboard and the table and the floor . . . whole place stinks of glue."

"It's a nice smell. Clean . . ."

Mr. Moon is right about the smell. The whole room is filled with the odor of glue. And I notice now that the sideboard have bits of paper stuck to it, and the table have gluey patches.

"The whole place stinks. And don't tell me about cuttin'. Why look at that piece in your hand you cut that fellow's . . ."

"Don't upset yourself, Father. I know what I'm doing. *I* cut and paste things and *you* stare out the window . . ."

"At least I know why I'm here."

"Sometimes I think you do," Danielle says. I sure don't know what they're talking about. Danielle gathers up the papers and scissors and a big bottle of glue and starts toward the stairs when all of a sudden she drops the glue. The top comes off and it spills on the floor.

“Now look what you done. Get a cloth.”

Danielle gets a dirty cloth from beside the old black and silver stove, but instead of wiping up the glue she spreads it out in a sticky circle.

“Hey, stop that. You’re makin’ a bigger mess.”

“Am I?” she says, and stares up at him with a real strange look in her eyes. Then she stands up and walks back and forth in the sticky patch she’s made.

“Stop dancin’ in that muck,” her father yells.

They fight some more and she finally goes upstairs. After that Mr. Moon put some more wood in the stove, cook himself up more coffee, and about the only work I get to do is to wash up the sticky mess from the floor.

The next week when I get there, the kitchen is as hot as ever, Mr. Moon is in his same place and I swear the argument has taken up where it left off.

“Why haven’t you been at school?” Mr. Moon yell at Danielle.

“I have. You know I’m a very good student, Father.”

“You lie. The principal phoned and said you haven’t been but about one day a week since the term started.”

“He must be mistaken, Father. You know how schools get their records mixed up.”

“And you shouldn’t oughta take that dress Martin and Maggie bought ya. I heard you lyin’ to them on the phone about how well you was doin’ in school.”

“They bought it for me because they like me. It’s yellow, they know that’s my favorite color. Uncle Martin says I’m pretty. Do you think I’m pretty, Father?”

“Sure you’re pretty. You’re just like your mama.”

There is a long silence after he says that, as if they’ve both agreed not to talk about the mother. They live too far from the reserve for any other Indians to know them and I don’t know any white folks way down here, well enough to ask about the Moons.

“Mama was beautiful, wasn’t she?” says Danielle, and she walk across to where there is a small mirror on the wall. She taken some yellow ribbons and weaved them in and out of her hair what is piled up on top of her head today. “Do you like my hair like this, Father?” she say. He don’t answer right away. I sure do think she’s pretty. I don’t know whether to tell her so or not. I would, but I can see her eyes in the mirror and there is something not right; her eyes is bright and clear, but they are too bright, almost as if they are a few degrees out of focus.

Gus don't ever answer the question. He get distracted by how cold he is and for the rest of the afternoon he have me nail weather stripping around the door both inside and out, and around the big bay window that look out on the apple orchard.

It don't look like this week is gonna be any different. The room is boiling. Mr. Moon is cold. And he is still mad at everybody, especially Danielle. I don't figure I'm gonna come here any more. I'd rather do hard work than sit around listen to white people argue. But I hardly get started on my coffee when a truck pull up in the yard, and Mr. Moon's brother Martin come into the house.

I can tell they is brothers. Gus Moon look older, though I don't know whether he is or not. Both of them got short hair, windburned skin, and each of them got big ears stick out from their heads like tea cups.

"You cold, Marty?" is the first words Gus say after he introduce me.

"The only reason you feel cold is because you keep it so warm in here."

Mr. Gus Moon just point out the window. "Marty, you see them few leaves flutterin' on the branches? I tell you, when the wind's strong enough to move them stocky little trees around why it's cold out there. Wind seems to blow right through the house these days," his voice trail off and he shiver.

"Come on, Gus. You got to make some effort. You want to play cards? Or maybe we could go into town later; there's some Golden Glove Boxing at the Legion Hall tonight."

"No. Thanks, Marty, I don't feel good enough to go out."

"Well, pour me some coffee then."

"You can't have it the way you like it. There's no sugar. The kid eats it all up. Got a powerful cravin' for sweets, just like her mother."

"You worry too much about Danielle," says Martin. "She seems fine to us. It's only natural for you to worry after what happened, but Danielle's fine—she's a real little princess."

"You don't have any idea what's goin' on, do ya, Marty?"

"Let's stop beating around the bush, Gus. What's wrong with you? I talked with Doc Fowler in Ponoka and he says there's no reason you can't go back to work. You should be outside getting exercise."

"It's too cold."

"What the hell are you talking about, Gus? Why are you afraid of the weather? Hell, we got Indian summer coming up yet." After he say that he look over at me and his eyes get big. "No offence," he say.

"No offence," I answer.

"Winter ain't far off," says Gus in his tired voice. "Plenty of work needs doin'."

"The place is starting to look rundown," says Martin. "Why don't you put this kid to work outside instead of keeping him sitting in here?"

"I was gonna have him cut down them apple tress, stack them and burn them. But don't expect it makes much difference now."

"I can think of a lot of things that need doing worse. Them trees were Jessie's, and Danielle loves them. Why don't you let me come over and help out for a few days. Maggie and I would both come over. Danielle needs a woman to talk to . . ."

"No she don't."

"We just want to help."

"I can do for myself. For us. I just need to get the tractor fixed."

"What's wrong with it?" says Martin.

"Parts missin'. Indians I figure. Them buggers will steal you blind if you give them half a chance." Then he looks at me. "Sorry Silas, I didn't mean you."

"You got some work for me to do, Mr. Moon?" I ask.

"Yeah, in a while. Have some more coffee."

Then Mr. Moon stare hard out the window. "Look, way down at the far end of the orchard. There's somebody there, I know it."

"What if there is?" says Martin, squinting up his eyes. "It would only be Danielle."

I look out the window too, and I think I spot something yellow moving way at the end of the orchard.

"Only," yell Mr. Moon. "I've told her never to go down there. Never to hang around them . . ."

"Come on, Gus. It's nothing to get excited about. Let's play cards."

"Ain't got no cards."

"You always got a couple of decks on the sideboard there," says Martin and starts across the room.

"Danielle took 'em."

"Danielle doesn't play cards. Maggie and me couldn't even get her to learn rummy."

"She takes 'em up to that room."

"What are you talking about, Gus?" Martin Moon even looks over at me in case I know what's going on, but I just shrug my shoulders.

Martin stops and examines the wasps' nests; he watches them twirl

slow in the heat of the room. "Why have you still got these things around, Gus? These, you should get rid of."

"Danielle about throws a fit every time I mention it. God, but it's cold, Marty," and I think I can hear Mr. Moon's teeth chattering. "Ever had a close look at one of them things, Marty?"

Martin got a big, sausage-fingered hand on each side of one of the nests.

"They sure are a work of art, ain't they?" Martin says.

"You know what they do, Marty? Wasps kidnap bugs and ants and spiders, stuff them into those little sections to use for food later on."

"Yeah? Look at all the compartments in this thing, and it feels like real paper, like cardboard. I wonder how . . . ?"

"Goddamn wasps," yell Gus Moon. "It was them caused all the trouble. There are other nests down in the orchard. If she hasn't moved them already."

"Easy, Gus. Jessie wasn't well, we all know that. You can't go blaming yourself. You got to think about going back to work."

"I ain't never goin' back to work. Don't you understand? First Jessie and now Danielle."

"Danielle? There's nothing wrong with Danielle. And you got to stop blaming yourself for what happened to Jessie."

"I should have done somethin' or told somebody, way back when she started fixin' up that spare room . . . for whatever it was she was . . . expectin'."

"For Danny?" asks Martin.

"No. No. She started turnin' that spare bedroom into a . . . a nursery maybe. She papered the walls, and then papered them again, and again. Cats, ducks, lambs, elephants, one layer on top of the other. And furniture; jammed in until things had to be piled on top of one another. And curtains; cut the room up like it was a checker board, cords runnin' every which-way each one holdin' up curtain material. And never a word of explanation. She just stared at me with that far-off look in her eyes, just stared at me like she was doin' me a favor."

Gus Moon stops talking and lets out a long sigh, like he's glad he's finally told somebody about what is bothering him. His brother just sits, looking a little like he's been punched real hard. Martin takes his coffee cup, lifts it half-way to his mouth, then sets it down on the table with a clunk; the reason he set it down was because his hand was shaking so hard.

“You sure, Gus?” Martin finally says in a small voice.

“Goddamnit, Marty, you don’t believe me do ya?” shouts Gus.

“I don’t”

“You want to see it, Marty? Top of the stairs, first door on the left. That is if Danielle will let you in. She practically lives in there. Bassinettes and curtains and cardboard and junk, and yellow dresses. You want to see in there, Marty?”

“I know it must be right, if you say it is?” says Martin. If a person’s voice can be pale, his sure is. By accident, I know that what Gus Moon says is true. First time I asked to use the bathroom, Mr. Gus just pointed to the upstairs. Looking for the bathroom, I opened the door he is talking about now, and it was just the way he describe it, all full of cloth and furniture and smelling of glue. And I think just from the quick look I had that some of them rows of cloth been joined together with glue and paper so the room is divided up in little sections just like a bee’s nest.

“You’re damn right I’m right, Marty. It started with Jessie wantin’ another baby. I mean, I thought she’d get over it. Other women do.” He stop for a minute, take a drink from his coffee cup. Shiver and go on. “You aren’t cold, are you, Marty? How about you, Silas?” We both shake our heads. “You know, sometimes I stand here at this window, and I see her down there among the apple trees. See her plain as day. There was more to it than her just bein’ crazy. The things she used to do” While he is talking I see a little motion in the corner of the room and Danielle comes in from the back of the house. She is wearing a yellow dress. It look like the kind I’ve seen at high school graduations in Wetaskiwin, lots and lots of layers of stiff, lacy-like material. She look really beautiful, but kind of scary too. She stands listening to her papa and I sure don’t like the look on her face or in her eyes.

“You know, towards the end she’d stay down there all day long. Spend all the daylight hours just watchin’ them do whatever those, those bastards do.” Martin catches sight of Danielle and motions for Gus to stop talking but Gus don’t pay no attention until Martin breaks in on him.

“Well, here’s Danny, and don’t she look pretty in that dress. Your aunty will sure be proud of how you look.”

Danielle doesn’t seem to hear him. Her eyes look at and through her father. She speaks slow and careful but I can tell she is so mad she holding her hands together to keep them from shaking.

"Why don't you tell Uncle Martin how you hated them, Father? Tell him how you tried to make them go away, how you sneaked down to the orchard in the night with a torch and tried to destroy them. Tell him how Mother threw herself on you and saved them."

"Danny, what is this?" says Martin.

"Am I right, Father? Didn't you always hate them, call them . . ."

"Parasites," yell Gus Moon in a loud voice. He stands up from the table, tip over his coffee.

"That's right, Father. Parasites. 'Predacious bastards,' isn't that what you always said?"

"Yes. Bastards! Parasites!" yells Gus Moon. "Marty, you believe me now, don't you? She'd go right up to them. Right up close. Right to the nest; she'd stand there and rub her cheek on it. She'd hum and sway and they'd, they'd . . ."

"They'd swarm her," says Danielle, crossing the kitchen and staring across the table and out toward the rows and rows of twisted trees. Her father is standing too, glaring at her, his cheeks and chin covered in gray stubble; his eyes hid deep in his face look glazed like a sick animal. "It was a ritual. She was the host. You couldn't stop it. You did all that was required of you, Father. You shouldn't feel bad about anything. You've served your purpose . . ."

"What the hell are you talking about, Danielle?" says Martin.

"She believes all the stuff that her mother told her. It's all crap. Jessie was crazy. She'd stand there swayin', them yellow things crawlin' across her skin. She took off her clothes . . ."

"They never hurt her," says Daielle. "There was never a mark."

Mr. Gus Moon's shoulders are slumped even more as he stares at his daughter. "Sometimes when I think I see Jessie down there in the orchard, I expect it's Danielle I'm seein', though I don't want it to be."

"We see you watching from the window," says Danielle, her voice excited, like she just won an argument.

Martin just sits shaking his head; his lips form words he wants to say to Danielle, but no sound comes out of his mouth.

"Who can survive it, Marty?" Gus Moon says in a kind of a croak.

"They survive, Father," says Danielle.

"First snow, Marty," says Gus, "I'm a dead man."