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An excerpt from the novel *Flowers Passing By*:

I used the stale coffee grinds from the back of the cupboard, as to not waste our good stuff on visitors. I gave Horace's cup a hefty hand of milk to turn it to his favorite beige color for drinking. Grandpa's and Rueben's were left black, for my stress over the peculiars of how people take their drink spurred inaction. Why does everyone require such precise measurements of dairies and sugars in their hot beverages? Drink it or don't.

Rueben was hunched over in the porch chair separate from the group—his elbows indented into his knees, and his eyes falling solemn as ever—while Grandpa and Horace sat in opposition to each other, battling in a mock-competition of dignity. If one old man bettered their posture, then the other followed, and if Horace twirled his mustache hair, so did Grandpa, to the point both men's cheeks were adorned with curled tufts of springy grey whiskers.

“Martha,” Horace and Grandpa said over the top of each other.

“Gonna join us for a spell?” Horace asked.

“Just bringing coffee.” I placed the three cups on the table. Grandpa reached for the coffee mixed with milk. “Sorry, that one's for Horace.”

“Oh, that's alright,” Grandpa said with a forced smile. “I'm content with any old brew.”

“I can get you milk,” I suggested.

“I'd rather you sit with us and talk.” He kicked out a chair from the table. “It's been a while since I've heard about the comings and goings of your life.”

“I’m fine,” I said and situated myself.

“Fine? Better than foul,” Grandpa said.

The three men didn’t follow-up with further commentary—opting for silence—notable exception being to their disturbingly loud slurps of coffee and subsequent burps. I don’t understand this phenomena, but every man I’ve ever known has exhibited an odd behavior of pretending to be in solitude even while in the company of others. And in this quiet state of contemplation, they follow a pattern, which can only be described as the man smirking—to no clear exterior amusement—followed by a slight inward jolt of his belly, and lastly, a soft grunt to release his gaseous coffee (or liquor) infused breath. Rinse and repeat.

“Isn’t it odd how men and women distance themselves in social situations like this?” I asked to cut the tension.

Rueben repositioned himself to face me. “That’s so true. I’ve often wondered about the same thing.”

“I don’t think men and women should mingle, current company excluded, Miss Martha,” Grandpa said.

“How do you figure?” Horace asked.

“Men and women, they just don’t get along,” he said. “Me and Margaret, boy oh boy, leave us in a room together and it’s nothing but fight, fight, fight.”

“I know. It’s annoying,” Rueben interjected. “Especially when they’re fighting about me.”

“We don’t fight about you,” Grandpa dismissed.

“Yes you do.”

“This is getting pretty awkward, buds,” Horace said and looked down to his swirling coffee.

“He’s exaggerating,” Grandpa said. “Maybe your name gets mentioned—sometimes—but I try not to incorporate the children into our discussions.”

“That’s the thing, though,” Rueben said, “I’m not a child. I’m an adult, and that’s what you two argue about. *I should be married. I should start my own farm.* Tell me this, Mr. Gardner, how old were you when you first got married?”

“Oh, let’s see, I must have been twenty-four,” the old man answered.

“See Dad, I still got time to settle down. Even now, despite Mr. Gardner being your age, he still has the spirit to bring up a kid.”

“That’s under some disturbing circumstances though,” Grandpa countered. “I hope you don’t wait until you’re sixty to marry someone a third of your age.”

“When you put it like that, it does sound alarming, doesn’t it?” Horace entertained.

“All I’m saying is, it isn’t a race to the end,” Rueben said and sipped his coffee. “Bleh, it’s gone cold.”

“Take too long: the whole cup gets spoiled,” Grandpa replied and swilled the final splash of his.

“Either of you boys play cards?” Horace asked.

Neither answered.

“Anyway,” I sighed, eyeing my escape down the stairs and into the grassy patch where Syd and I liked to play.

“Have you heard about the Bonawitts’ divorce?” Grandpa asked.

“Alright,” I declared, “I have to go to the outhouse.” I started in that direction, but quickly veered off toward the field when they weren’t looking. Syd stood inside my bedroom, peering out the window to scan the horizon. “Come here,” I mouthed. She fell from my view and in the blink of an eye toppled me over to the ground. Her fur had gone completely matted, and parts of it looked to be almost shorn. “What did my aunts do to you?”

She whimpered at my feet.

“You’re still more beautiful than the moon, the stars and the sun combined,” I said and kissed her waxy, black lips. We laid side by side in the grass, letting spiders and other bugs crawl over our collars and wrists. “I hope nobody finds us.”

The old men’s conversations rode the wind to my ears, which I tried to block out, but some still penetrated my mind. “You’d be proud of your granddaughter,” Horace said. “She’s been a quick study and a real valuable asset to the farm. I’m lucky to have her around.”

My cheeks went flush. A Gardner compliment was few and far between. Henry once told me he’d only received one piece of praise from Horace in his entire life. Something to do with his tidy haircut after finishing primary school.

“Miss Martha is built tough,” Grandpa said. “Her father was a hardy man. Had a very pronounced jaw, if I remember correctly. She must have got his firmer qualities.”

“Square-faced or not, she can light up a room with her imagination.”

“Really?” Grandpa asked—his surprise reverberating the earth beneath me. “Good to hear. I feared about that when she was younger, because she seemed denser than a cattle iron.”

“Hmm, some people never outgrow that denseness, even when they’re damn near my age,” Horace said.

A spike of guilt stabbed my heart over calling Horace an old goat to my aunts. He may have been old and crass and married to someone far behind his age, but his dignity shot valleys beyond the territory of old goats. Men like my grandfather wished they could fly so far. Maybe the bearded men in his stories who achieved great feats—like felling fictitious monsters—were nothing more than the simple aspirations of an unhappy man stuck in a loveless marriage in the bland Ohioan flats. If those stories were modified to resemble an ounce of truth, they would tell of men—certainly bearded (to their detriment) and flabbily unfit—who partook in rounds of stale coffee and conversation, and on occasion of silences, would bear a suspicious smirk, jolt their belly and grunt out their pungent breath.

Me, dense? Good riddance.

GRANDPA’S STORIES

Stories — in every sense —
smell, taste, etc. —
are more obvious than life.

Whether they fall
down the well
defined traps
of literary tropes

or

senseless morals of Aesop’s
Fables — the animals play foul

in their bitter game
of beasts and men —
although in such stories
they are one in the same —

foxes mislead
monkeys wearing crowns
not out of evil
but jealousy
for the feast
mankind desires —
morsels of smoked meat —

every animal licks their jowls
at the sight.