Farrow

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Read by Molly Holohan

Earlier, the gardener had woken to a break in the weather, the pale sun struggling through. He had fed the dog, made coffee, got on his jacket and boots and gone outside to work. He did not intuit anything or have a special feeling; it was merely a case of getting something done as long as the rain held off.

All morning he worked hard restoring order, for the summer had been unusually wet and now his garden dripped with foliage that was altogether rampant. It had always been abundant – since moving here he'd grown things without effort, even the okra and avocadoes he had struggled with in other places. But the wet had made it wild. Thuggish blackberries and nettles crowded out the veggies. Errant herbs self-seeded in the cracks. The slugs were growing fat and shiny and the soil was dark and moist.

It became hot and steamy in the garden. Convinced of itself, the sun shone fully on the rain-jewelled leaves and things were freshly bright and urgent. The gardener settled into his work and felt like he was making progress. Things were getting neater. By midday, he had cleared a decent patch of weeds and dumped them in the compost. It was overflowing, emanating a thick, distracting smell.

His phone rang. 'Hello?'

'It's time now,' his uncle said simply. 'The doctors said it's time.'

The gardener rested on his heels a moment to recover. Damp earth stained his pants at the knees and he felt the chill of it wind through him.

‘I can’t believe it,’ he said.

‘I know. Tough old bird. Do you think you’ll make it out to see her?’

‘I’m in the garden,’ he said. It wasn’t really an answer, but he was having trouble concentrating because of the smell coming from the compost. The word he thought of was *fecund.* It didn’t match what he was hearing. It didn’t match what he knew of death, or the sterile room in which his grandma laboured, or her ragged breathing punctuated by the hum and beep of hospital machines. It didn’t match anything. It bordered on obscene.

His grandmother was the only parent he had really known, and the gardener did not know how he’d feel once she was gone. There was a hardness in her, he thought, which had always made it seem like she would live forever.

‘You know she never once said she loved me,’ he said, before he knew what he was saying.

‘I know,’ said his uncle. ‘I know what she was like.’

When his grandmother arrived from Ireland, she suffered for want of green. She had no people either here or there and everywhere she went the colours of the landscape struck her as unfeeling. To her surprise she missed the dense, wet closeness of her home, even though she knew that home had a tiresome way of holding people and resented its embrace.

A year passed. In Melbourne she found work at an Anglican girls’ school, where her accent made her feel like an outsider and she didn’t tell them she was Catholic. Although she’d done it back in Ireland she did not like teaching, for she had a hatred of banality and no

natural ease with children. It had always been her dream to study medicine, having seen, as a girl, the body of the neighbour McKinnon laid out in the house next door.

It had made an impression – the two lit candles at the bedhead, the curtains drawn and mirrors covered and the man's huge, heavy face. 'Are ye frightened at all,' her mother had asked – but no, she was not frightened. She had looked upon the dead man wondering what it would be like to unbutton his waistcoat, his shirt and then his skin to look inside. In her heart of hearts she knew she would have made a fine doctor, but it was not so easy for a woman of her time.

After about a year she accepted a position at a rural school north-west of Melbourne. The town was small and unfamiliar and the people were unfriendly. Running through it was a river which looked innocent enough but seemed to rise without the slightest warning at the mere mention of rain. That winter, there were floods. The town was thrown into a state of emergency and in the excitement she agreed to marry a local farmer's son.

It wasn't the worst thing that could have happened. It got her out of teaching, and she figured that if she wasn't going back to Ireland she might as well put down her roots. Her husband was a soft touch and she reckoned he'd allow her certain freedoms; he would tolerate her longing to engage her hands and mind with something more than folding sheets. They were married at St. Patrick's in December, she with her bouquet of yellow roses, delphiniums and hydrangeas and just three people on her side.

Their wedding night was spent in town and then she joined her husband on his parents' farm. The Waters were hard people who had been in town since it was settled. They extracted what they could from the land and only mixed with other families who had been around as long as they had. In the first months of her marriage she would often walk the boundary, wondering about the names of things.

‘What is this one called?’ she asked her husband, spreading her hands over the rough hide of a tree, where rivulets were carved as though by many streams.

‘Maybe some kind of box,’ he said. ‘All I know is that it burns hot and long and clean.’

‘And these?’ she asked of flowers, the petals white and pink and waxy.

Her husband looked at her strangely. ‘Why do you care, anyway? You won’t find anyone round here who bothers much with flowers; our time is taken up with more important things.’

So she stopped asking questions and learned to treat the land as criminal, an errant force that needed to be disciplined. They cut down trees, ploughed paddocks and sprayed weeds. Her husband showed her how to ride the four-wheeler, drive the tractor and put the feed out for the cows. He showed her how to turn the sod, plant seeds and grow crops of canola, lucerne and wheat. He showed her how to slash the blackberries and nettles which grew thick along the driveway, and with all these things to do she had no time to walk the boundary; her days were full of more important things.

When the two old Waters died, the farm was left to them. She and her husband kept the dairy cows and later she convinced him to invest in pigs. Their short gestation meant a high return on their investment. If she could make them farrow twice a year, with ten to fifteen pigs per litter, that meant paying off the mortgage with some money left over at the end of each month. When she suggested it, her husband looked at her like she’d been given him by God.

‘We’ll be rolling in it if your scheme comes off,’ he marvelled.

‘Let’s not count our chickens before they’re hatched. The hard times are with us yet.’

‘You always know what’s best. That’s why I married you.’

‘That’s why you married me,’ she echoed, though her husband’s adoration had begun to grate on her. She took on more responsibilities: helping with the farm work, balancing the accounts and keeping house. By the time her duties were over for the day, her husband had long gone to bed. In the morning she rose early, before it was light, and went out to the animals. She discovered her own skill attending to the ones that were sick or new or labouring, especially the bellowing sows whose births she’d oversee. It was not quite medicine, but it was something. The farrowing went beautifully. Just as she had promised, she coaxed her sows to give birth twice a year, and by Christmas they had more piglets than they knew what to do with.

‘You have the gift of fertility!’ her husband beamed, surveying the farrowing crates. ‘My very own Ceres!’

‘Enough, away with you. ‘Tis only in their nature.’

Her husband took her by the hand. ‘You’ll make a wonderful mother,’ he sighed wistfully and smiled.

But her pregnancies exhausted her and made her sick. She bore a girl and then a boy and decided enough was enough. Even as they grew, her children disappointed her. There wasn’t any reason. Her husband tried to compensate by playing cards with them and taking them out fishing, answering their painful questions, buying them milkshakes and driving places on a Sunday. He longed for a large, boisterous family but every time he pestered her to have another baby her response was just the same.

‘Breeding is for animals,’ she would say. ‘We had better leave it up to them.’

When her husband died of heart failure at the age of fifty-five, she felt herself exhale for the first time since they married. She was a widow before she went through menopause,

but even though she had been left with grief and debt and running the farm she had also been given her livelihood. Finally master of herself she swore not to remarry, and what's more, to never give her love again.

She cut her hair and wore the same blue tracksuit every day. When it rained she swore, and when it was dry she swore again. Attending to the animals slowly lost its magic. She cursed the cost of feed, the weather, the bank, her daughter, the neighbours, politics, the times, becoming hardened like the family she married into. By the time the gardener came to live with her, his grandmother's heart was flinty. She had become… what? Not harsh, exactly – caring in her way. She raised him the same as she raised her pigs and cows and cattle dogs: looking after them, making sure they were fed and housed and given purpose. She was not affectionate. She had lost her feeling for it, even if there was enough to go around.

Now she was dying at a nursing home in Clayton, the farm sold to move her into residential care. His grandmother was dying… he tried to let this fact sink in. His grandmother – the woman who took care of him when his mother fell in love with an American named Mark, moved there and started a new family. The woman who raised him when his disconsolate father couldn't cope. Who once revealed that when she first received him, he unnerved her.

'Such a strange child,' she had said. 'Away with the fairies, always covered in dirt.'

He looked down at his hands, which were muddy from gardening, and fought a wave of nausea. It was true he had been dirty, and had suffered from a dearth of love. His grandmother's farm had been a place of exile, and although he came to love the shuffling wombats and the herds of kangaroos, the Friesians roaring at the fence when it was time for milking, the blackwood and the box, the sudden floods when water burst the levee he was haunted by abandonment, the ease with which his parents gave him up.

He had not been back since it was sold but now the memories rose in quick succession: the farmhouse sinking on its timber struts, lace curtains stained with age and cooking, the yard hen-pecked and muddy, his grandmother's hydrangeas changing colour based on ions in the soil. He was fascinated by these flowers, their clouds of tiny petals which would morph from blue to pink to white according to no reason he could see. It seemed mysterious, and when he asked her how she made her flowers change she winked and said it was a secret.

'Magic. If I told you I would have to kill you.'

He believed her. He had seen her bring a stillborn calf to life by pouring water in its ear. She could make things grow by simply willing it and he was conscious, too, that she could take all this away. For there had been a day when he had followed her to the farrowing crates and learned what she did to her piglets, the ones she didn't want. Even now, he shuddered to recall the way she cracked their baby skulls against the slate, the sound so routine and efficient, *thwack… thwack…* but muffled, like being stuck inside a jumper you'd been struggling to take off.

'It's more humane this way,' she snapped. 'Otherwise the little ones'll be crushed or eaten by their mothers.' She placed a hand on his cheek, a rare gesture of affection. Her tone softened. 'You'll understand some day. Nature has no kindness for the weak.'

Her logic made a brutal kind of sense, although the gardener always felt that it betrayed a lack of love. His childhood lacked intimacy. But then sometimes a sharp, unseasonable frost would freeze the water in the dog bowls, and there would be the wonder when he rushed outside first thing to crack it like a crème brûlée.

Which is to say, he thought of the farm, then and always, with mixed feelings.

And then there was the thing he dared not remember, the thing which reared up in him now. For he was often lonely at the farm, the only child for miles around, and lacking interaction he developed strange habits and ways of passing time, including a fascination for dirt.

The gardener hung up the phone and put it in his pocket. Urged by the memory, he leaned forward and pressed his hands into the soil. He leaned in close, recalling the strong desire to have some in his mouth. Not to eat, exactly, but to see how it would taste and feel.

Black soil tempted him back then, as did red and yellow clay. He preferred dense, compact types which he could hold without them breaking down, although he also loved to feel the soil getting slack as his saliva rushed into his mouth. He liked it when the dirt he held would smell like minerals and shit and sometimes he would shiver with an ancient pleasure when he sensed himself connecting to the leaves and bones and flesh which centuries of life had left behind. The best dirt was found around the compost heap, where the earth was rich and life sprung from decay. There was a kind of magic in its mysteries. It's aliveness while appearing to be sleeping. Its quickness while appearing to be dense.

At first he was young enough that his dirt-longing did not warrant much interrogation. He was simply following an instinct, paying attention to the world. Sweeping back the topsoil to expose the dark, wet layer beneath, everything felt suddenly more attuned; he moved in congruence with the earth's deep sighs and transports. The minute he put the dirt inside his mouth a great peace would overcome him, as though in containing the earth, he somehow felt contained.

This was reassuring in a time of neglect, for his grandmother refused to acknowledge the circumstances in which he'd come to live with her – refused even to mention, after she went to America, her daughter's name.

But as the gardener grew into puberty, his relation to his appetite became confused. Sex was another subject on which his grandmother was reticent, and being ill-informed about desire, his dirt-longing got all muddled up with nascent sexual knowledge. He began to suspect it was wrong, although thinking it perverse had no effect on his restraint; the more he tried denying it, the stronger his lust became.

He learned to be secret and even devious, figuring out ways to indulge his dirt-longing in secret. One memory pierced him now, of a period in which he was compelled to undress, apply mud to his entire body and wear it home beneath his clothes. The triumph was in covering himself completely, so that even while appearing clean he could smell and feel the mud all over him. He imagined it like a forcefield, protecting him from all the questions he did not know how to answer. But his grandmother had a keen sense of intuition. It upset him still to think of how she made him strip off in the kitchen, her cold efficiency, her ugly tone. How she quickly bundled up his clothes and took them to the laundry, how she made him stand there on the lino as she scrubbed him roughly with a face washer, every inch of him despite his being much too old. Her unbearable scrutiny. The cold, his shame, the lemon-scented soap. How she called him dirty – *a disgusting, dirty boy.*

After that, he tried to tamp his longing down. He discovered normal pleasures – masturbation, reading, video games – and gradually replaced his desire for dirt with desire for these other things. He made friends with some boys from town with whom he'd ride bikes and make prank calls; later, they would get drunk in paddocks and listen to 50 Cent. His grandmother was still watchful, but his behaviour convinced her he had gotten over his odd

phase. It was a relief to them both. Growing up meant getting away from the ground – things had to become hygienic.

But oh – he felt it coursing through him now, after all these years lying dormant! Today should be a day of mourning, he thought, ashamed that it had loosed in him a strong desire to be free.

Dirty boy, he heard his grandmother say.

There came again the smell of compost. His grandmother once said that if she had her time again she never would have married, would never have had children, should not have settled on the farm. 'I only did what was expected,' she said. 'I thought I had no other choice.'

With these words racing through his blood he rose and walked toward the compost. There were the weeds he'd pulled this morning, mixed with kitchen scraps. There were the beetles and the fruit flies, whirring as he approached. Up close the smell was sensational, eye watering; he blinked back tears. Saliva rushed into his mouth, the kind which usually meant that he would vomit, except that now he felt ecstatic. His heart, he noticed, was beating very fast.

With strong, broad strokes he swept aside the surface layers of the compost to reveal what lay beneath. Steam rose up and when it dissipated, the gardener saw a dark cacophony of life. Everything was spoiled, but this spoiling, oh, how awesome! Again that word, *fecund*, a word he'd been avoiding because he thought he didn't have a choice.

Now it was all before him.

The tea-stained sludge glacially moving. The worms devotedly churning. The flies haphazardly scattering. The eggshells artfully breaking. The lemons slyly oozing. The tomatoes softly slumping. The foundered seedlings failing. The nasty nettles lingering. The

weeds expiring bravely. The wizened flowers wasting. The putrid petals mouldering. The radish serenely sinking. The beetroot pinkly staining other scraps. The eye of a crinkled old potato opening and closing – winking, if you like. The slugs going cross-country. The enzymes working thanklessly. The thuggish blackberries with their vinegary drupelets, plunging deep or climbing high to spill their last seeds on the mound.

And – why not – the seasons ever changing.

Yes – the turning of the sphere. The deaths both small and little, unexpected and observed. The banalities in extremity, the uncommon days of mourning, the animals to slaughter, skull-crack against the slate. And elsewhere in the future, as much as in the past, the cervixes dilating and the babies sliding out. The journeys and abandonments, the children growing painfully, the summer wet, the river floods, the soil getting slack. The waste all decomposing, the spoiling made extraordinary, the shame and the humiliation mingling with the lemon smell. The loneliness, the rages, the passions he'd forgotten; how they lived inside him, how they lived beneath the soil.

The soil! The gardener dropped to his knees beside the compost heap and started digging. The ground was soft and wet and gave in easily. He made a hole the size of his hand and then the size of his knee. Soon, or so it felt to him, he had excavated a space roughly the size of himself. As he lay down, the ground received him openly. It transported him. That's how he felt – transported to a place he'd always longed to be.

Tears ran down his face and wet the soil. The gardener felt strangely porous, as if the earth's deep energy were running through him. He closed his eyes and thought of his grandmother, her unease with children, her hardness and her constancy, her longing and regret. She had let the life in her go stale. Opening his eyes, he sat up slowly.

He scooped some dirt. Then, he opened his mouth.