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The Cherry

by Gracie Morrison

I walk the path through the trees, a full bag of coffee cherries slung across my chest. The day is easing into its end, sky flaming with sunset. I am still sorting through the trees for cherries to sell, ensuring that they are not diseased, that they are of good quality. This can be tedious. However, I have tricks to keep my mind occupied throughout the day. I like to make stories out of the cherries, imagine them as different people in my life.

There is an especially large cherry: this is my round, laughing wife. Usually, she would be doing the cherry picking and the bean sorting, but today she is at home.

The tiny, shriveled one is my young son. I imagine him also at home, tripping me as he runs around underfoot asking questions. So curious, so young. I pity this little cherry. But it is damaged by fungus, hence its size—worthless to buyers. I should toss it out. My chest pangs. I tuck it into my shirt.

Here is a large, healthy cherry. This one is an older version of my son, sometime in the imaginary future. I imagine him at his wedding, marrying a sturdy young girl. He would complete his bride-service with her and—well, I have gotten ahead of myself. I must live in the present: I have just completed my own bride-service working at my wife's parents' home, and the wealth from my family and my wife's family will come to us and our children.

Yet, if I am to remain under my in-laws' roof, I still have much work to do. Soon the beans will be removed from the cherries, dried, sold to places far off. Soon, the farm ground will be scorched until nothing grows there. Soon, the coffee plants will be cut and will not yield again for some time. This is done when they are five years old. These things sound counterproductive, but everything serves a purpose. Scorching will aerate the soil, preparing and cleansing it for new growth. Cutting will keep the plants producing fruit abundantly for longer. Destruction makes way for new creation. I must constantly remind myself of this, as a farmer, as a father.

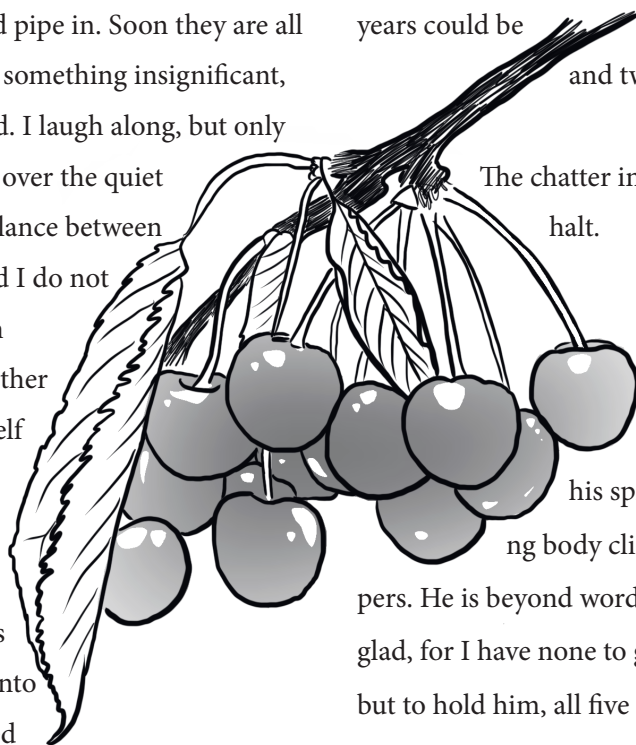
It is easy to forget.

It is getting dark now. I finish up with the cherries and go home. Home to me is a group of houses belonging to my wife's family. Some of us gather to talk before dinner and sleep. My father-in-law talks about his day, about friends out hunting and catching grasshoppers. My mother-in-law and my father-in-law's wives and other affines, brothers and sisters, listen and pipe in. Soon they are all bickering amicably over something insignificant, laughing. I am distracted. I laugh along, but only half-heartedly, too-loud over the quiet talk of the room. They glance between each other, and I pretend I do not see the glancing. My son whines softly from the other room, and I excuse myself from the conversation.

Entering his room, a gust of heat hits like a wave and I break into a sweat. My boy is soaked in it. My boy and his five years, shriveled, curled into the tiniest ball on the corner of the bed and obscured by shadow. The chatter rises like heat from the other room, continuing without us, as if we were in another world altogether, a secret world in the heat and shadow. I sit beside him as quietly as I can manage, and stroke his scorching forehead.

My boy. My boy of five with his imaginary cherry future stretched far before him, like roads and roads and

roads untrodden by little feet. In this secret world, he could walk down each row of cherries, past the farms and into the village. In this world his five years could be twenty, and forty five, and two hundred thousand.



The chatter in the other room comes to a halt.

He groans, and I grip his tiny right hand foolishly, as if my grasp could bind his spirit down. The small, heavy body clings to my chest and whimpers. He is beyond words, and a sick part of me is glad, for I have none to give. No comfort to offer but to hold him, all five of his years tucked against my chest. I carefully take him up. He breathes into my neck.

My boy goes slack, and I feel a pain where he is pressed against something bead-like and hard in my shirt. I look down. It is the cherry.