

Early Frost
By Jacob Duarte Spiel

I wish I knew what the weather had been like on the day my grandfather disappeared.

Was it raining? Overcast? Did he feel the sunlight warming the dark, corkscrew hairs on his arms? Was the day clear enough for him to see across his fields of garlic, wheat, corn?

Could he see what took him?

It wasn't unusual for me and my family to not hear from him during the harvest. Most of the year, my grandfather was a kind man, with sparkling green eyes and laugh lines an inch deep. But endless hours of hard, physical work will whittle down even the vivacious person until they can't do anything except eat, sleep, and stare. From September to November we'd sometimes go weeks without a word. We were used to it.

But it was a different kind of silence that year. The tension spiked after Thanksgiving passed without so much as a phonecall. My parents tried to hide it from me, but I was 12, just old enough to understand why my dad's eyes were swollen and red. Why my mom squeezed his hand throughout the day, and rubbed his hunched back.

Gramps always said that farming is the unfair kind of fair. The land gives, sure, but just as easily it'll take everything from you.

After a week, one of the search parties found a single work glove. It was lying in the fields beneath a rotting lettuce head my grandfather never had a chance to harvest. The glove was tough leather, made smooth and pliable from years of use. No label, because he'd had them specially made by a craftsman in a nearby town. My grandfather's glove.

And inside it: his hand, terminating in jagged, bloody bone where it had been snapped off at the wrist.

Years later, these were the memories that swirled in the back of my mind as I drove through Simcoe County towards his farm.

I was driving the old pick-up he'd left me in his will. Thanks to an arrangement made with a local auto shop, it had been kept in working condition on the off-chance I ever decided to quit the city life. My grandfather was a perceptive man.

I certainly never saw myself continuing in my parents' footsteps. Criminal law didn't interest me. The concepts were too flighty and immaterial. In my mind, they required a willingness to compromise on the "hows" and "whys" of reality. I mean, "motive"? What even is that? An

attempt to label a single thought as the definite cause of calamity. Like pointing to a single beat of a butterfly's wings and blaming it for a hurricane.

No. I needed a concrete existence. Earth, seeds, water, green, aches, pains, harvest. I pursued agricultural sciences, knowing that at the end of the road the family farm waited for me, as it had waited for my grandfather.

But I wouldn't make the same mistakes he'd made. In the backseat of the pick-up, I'd piled a library of state-of-the-art agricultural textbooks along with my digital irrigation apparatus, GPS trackers, and, of course, my laptop, which itself was loaded with farm management apps. Where my grandfather saw farming as an unfair deal with nature, I saw an opportunity I could exploit.

My tech would help me conquer droughts. My knowledge would pre-empt stem rot or any other disease. And vermin? Not on my farm.

My overconfidence made it hard for me to listen to advice. I barely paid attention when my dad took me aside the week before I left.

He told me I didn't need to work the same land where the old man had died. That we could sell, there were interested buyers in the area, neighbouring farmers who wanted to expand.

I laughed it off then. He didn't know what I knew about modern farming. I left as scheduled.

The air was crisp with the smell of early spring when I parked the truck at the end of the farm's access road.

Puddles dotted the dirt path that led to my grandfather's farmhouse and I skipped around them, cursing myself for forgetting where I'd packed my galoshes. The driveway itself was crammed full with rented farm equipment that I'd had delivered earlier that day. I squeezed past the tiller and the seed drill and finally set eyes on the farm for the first time in over a decade.

They say stuff from your childhood looks smaller when you see it as an adult. Yeah, that doesn't apply to 200 and some-odd fallow acres that you're about to farm yourself.

Unkempt fields stretched as far as the eye could see. Farther, in fact, because the crest of a low hill protruded in the middle, blocking my view of the entire property. For the first time since I'd set my plans, I felt intimidated.

My grandfather had also left a line of trees a hundred metres deep which rimmed the entire farm. Perhaps this outline is what kept me from feeling completely overwhelmed in that moment. The fields were large, but not endless.

I stopped by the house and grabbed my grandfather's ancient, rusted shotgun from above the door. I cracked it and loaded two rounds of birdshot. No telling what kind of wildlife you might run into on an abandoned farm.

I walked the grounds. There was overgrowth, as I expected, weeds and saplings and the like. Most of that could be pulled and used for compost later. I took note of some unusual patches of bare earth where grasses and wildflowers hadn't sprouted. I say patches, but each one must have been fifty yards or more, squared. The entire lot should have been overgrown by then: I guess some of the soil hadn't received the memo about my grandfather's passing. It was good news for me, less weeding to do.

As I walked, I bounced on the balls of my feet and felt the pleasant springiness of the earth. It was soft enough to start sowing and I silently thanked God for the early warm weather and rainfall. Then I realized how alone I was and thanked him out loud.

The drive had taken most of the day so, with the horizon bordering on twilight, I jumped back in the truck and gunned it to the nearest village for a beer. I would drink it alone, like I imagined my grandfather must have drunk before the planting season, a man filled with equal parts rumination and excitement at the prospect of the harvest to come.

I was heading to the town of Walter's Falls. It's about as small a town as they come but it's got what people call "the essentials". You can learn a lot about a place by what the folks there consider "essential". For the citizens of Walter's Falls that amounts to one general store, one church, and one bar. End of list.

The bar catered mostly to the farmers who worked the surrounding land. On some level, I must have known what I was walking into, but it was still jarring to open the bar's stained door and find myself confronted with faces I'd last seen at my grandfather's funeral.

There were five of them, huddled silently at one of the tables, each clutching tight to a pint of beer like it was a torch in a pitchblack labyrinth. I debated walking out before they noticed me but then thought better of it. Since they'd seen me last, I'd grown about a foot. I'd lost my baby fat, I'd switched to contacts. To them I would be just a stranger in town.

I pulled up a seat at the bar, putting my back to the farmers, and ordered a beer. I hadn't even taken a sip before I felt a heavy hand on my shoulder.

"Come," said the farmer, gesturing to the table loaded with his staring compatriots. "No sense in drinking alone. Th' name's Kostock."

Great, I thought, another victim of village hospitality.

I pulled up a chair and immediately made an ass of myself by leaning on the corner of the table. One leg was shorter than the others, a detail these regular customers likely knew, so my weight sent the beer sloshing out of every glass and onto denim jeans and polyester windbreakers.

One of the farmers wore a flannel shirt, unbuttoned down to the middle of his chest. When he leapt up to avoid the spray something unusual slipped out from beneath his shirt and into the low light of the bar. He tucked it back in quickly, but not before I got a good look.

It was a handcrafted pendant, and a bizarre one at that. It appeared to be made from wicker, woven into a sort of spherical cage. Inside that cage was a small, white bone. The pendant was threaded with a length of rustic twine that hung down to just above his naval.

I went back to wiping up the beer.

Drinking with the farmers was surprisingly simple. They had a perfect rapport with one another, chiseled, I imagined, from countless nights just like this one. They could finish each other's sentences with a consistency that bordered on disturbing. For all the attention I was getting, I might as well not have been there. As the conversation flowed around and through me, I considered the pendant. I glanced around the table and clocked the same strange twine resting against the neck of every farmer. Every farmer except for me.

But before I could ask about it, I felt that same heavy hand on my shoulder.

"So," said the farmer I now knew as Kostock and the rest of the table went silent as he continued. "Why didn't you take our offer?"

"What?" I replied.

"When your grandfather died we put a mighty generous standing offer on his land," said the farmer. "Why didn't you take it?"

So they knew who I was after all. Not that it mattered all that much. But then... why was I sweating?

The farmer must have seen the look on my face because he went on:

"You rented that equipment from Isidoro over there," he gestured broadly to the farmers, but none of them took ownership of the name. They were silent, waiting, even their breathing seemed synchronized.

The farmer finished his thought: "The last name on your credit card clued us in. So... why didn't you take the offer?"

The heavy hand still sat on my shoulder.

"I guess... I guess I always wanted to be a farmer."

I expected laughter, but instead the silence plunged deeper.

"No," said the farmer. "You don't."

I stared into my beer, trying not to make eye contact. He continued.

"The vermin, the too-small harvest, the too-big loneliness, up before dawn, asleep after dark. The forces of nature and God bending you to their will. Breaking you. And of course, this part of the country is prone to The Early Frost."

At this, a couple of the farmers reflexively reached down to where those ugly pendants hung. One whispered something I couldn't hear under his breath.

"It's no good here," the farmer concluded. "Sell."

I should have been scared, but the beers dulled the impact of his implied threat. I turned to face Kostock, to rebuke him, but I was caught off-guard by what I saw. His eyes were dark and deep and still, but, for a moment, I could see something violent flicker behind the lens. Like seeing a massive shadow writhe beneath a frozen lake.

I ignored his order and changed the subject: "An early frost? This far south?"

"Every goddamn year," he replied. "Your grandfather knew."

The evening wound up shortly after, as you probably guessed.

The other farmers left me alone after that. For a little while.

The following months were the hardest I'd worked in my life. My studies had taught me the theory behind farming, but no amount of theory can prepare you for when your seed drill breaks down two clicks from the nearest shelter with thunder rolling in the distance. Do you make a run for it and risk getting your rented equipment stuck in the mud for good, or do you stay and attempt to fix the giant hunk of metal and risk getting vaporized by lightning in the process? Didn't see that question on any of my exams.

I know what my grandfather would have told me: put your head down, forget about the world, ignore everything but the work.

But that wasn't me. Instead, I embraced my tech, I asked questions online, I re-evaluated my strategies, I found efficiencies that would improve my yield.

I turned the soil, front to back. I tested it. I fertilized it. I implemented my irrigation plan and then threw it away when it flooded the farmhouse basement. I stratified thousands of seeds in three old refrigerators. I sowed for three days straight and, yes, I stayed with the seed drill through the thunderstorm with a socket wrench in one hand, the rain-soaked manual in the other, and a flashlight in my mouth. That was what it took to yank the reins of those wild acres back from the clenched fist of nature.

But even with all my modern solutions, the job still took its pound of flesh.

My back and arms burned, peeled, and then burned again. The soles of my feet flattened out from the stiff rubber in my boots. A few months in I discovered I couldn't reach the top shelves in the farmhouse; my back had developed a permanent stoop. I was changing the land and it was changing me right back. I wonder what my grandfather had looked like in his youth, before these fields had had their way with him.

But I did it. I fucking did it, and for all their threats and hostility there was nothing Kostock and those other farmers could do about it.

On my regular trips to Walter's Falls I would always see at least one of them - and it was impossible to know which one - sitting out front the general store, a bottle in one hand while the other fiddled with that damn wicker necklace. They even kept their post on Sunday mornings when everyone else had piled into the church pews.

I'd rub their noses in it. No matter how exhausted I was I'd always give them a cheery hello or a mock salute, complete with clicking heels, so that they knew I wasn't just getting by, I was thriving.

They never said anything back, but they would stare as I passed and the fiddling would grow more frenetic, like they were rubbing a magic lamp.

It was a few weeks into the growing season when things started to go wrong.

The May air was still crisp from the previous night's rain as I made my morning rounds along the property. I'd stayed up late checking and rechecking my spreadsheets, so my tired brain almost didn't notice the change to the crops.

The change was that there were less of them. A lot less.

My boots sank deep into the suddenly empty earth. Where hundreds of plants had once grown, there was now nothing. I stared down, trying to comprehend. The vast majority of my yield was

still intact, but all across the field there were large patches, some the size of a basketball court, where not a single plant remained. I paced the border of one of those empty spaces, feeling the loose soil beneath my boots, almost as if it had just been turned.

Each patch was another hit to my budget, another 4 hours spent revising my spreadsheets. I'd basically sunk a mortgage down payment into that farm with the expectation that I'd be profitable.

But, over the next few weeks, the mysterious patches kept appearing and my margins kept vanishing.

Finally, after the disappearance of a large swatch of healthy garlic, I decided to stay up and keep watch. The full moon sowed the field with pale light, just enough to see by. The evening was still, even the crickets held their peace.

Around 3am, a dog howled in the distance. I turned off my reading light and threw down my book, screwing my eyes shut to help them adjust to the darkness. When I opened them, I saw, for just a moment, the outline of five shapes in the distance, half-obscured by the crest of the hill.

Five men and women, standing hunched in a semicircle, heads bowed, conspiring. There was no question in my mind: it was Kostock and his farmers.

As I watched, the figures seemed to sink behind the hill. They were on the move.

I grabbed my grandfather's shotgun and rushed into the night, carefully running between the rows of cabbage and garlic in order to protect my ever-diminishing profit.

But I was far too late.

As I crested the hill, I was met by another patch of nothing. The loose soil flew as I kicked at the ground in frustration. Kostock and his weird fucking... cabal. My rage wasn't just at the dead earth they'd left behind: it was because I now knew who'd left my grandfather's severed hand lying in his own field, who'd let his blood curdle beneath a rotting crop.

Those monsters.

The fields were high and yellow about two weeks before the start of harvest. In spite of everything, I was still on track to rake in a decent chunk of cash. To celebrate, I'd gone out to buy a small bottle of champagne. On my way back, I decided to stop at the general store for some ice cream. That's when I saw Kostock.

He was sunk low in a canvas folding chair outside the general store. He seemed to be waiting for someone. For me. I tried to walk by him, but when I got close he snatched my wrist in an iron grip and used it to hoist his hulking frame to its feet.

I whirled to face him, barely noticing when the champagne fell from my bag and smashed on the gravel.

"Son," he said, tightening his grip on my wrist. "It's nearly harvest. Have you thought any more about selling? I'm willing to improve on the offer."

"Oh so now you're trying to intimidate me?" I spat, and it was like four months of anger and frustration spilled out of me at once. "I saw you and your cronies out there a few days ago. What're you using? Acid? Herbicide? Based on the damage maybe it's some Agent Orange shit."

Confusion flashed across Kostock's face. He looked over my shoulder to where the other farmers were sitting, briefly shook his head, and then looked back at me.

"That's right," he said. "All of that's right. And if you don't sell, well, you know what we'll do."

"Fuck you," I replied. "If my grandfather didn't cave then why would I?"

I tried to tear my arm away, but Kostock's fingers were thick as tow cables. With a casual tug he reeled me in close, giving me a full view of his yellow, corn kernel teeth.

"Then stay out of the fields, little one," he said, his words spiced with the scent of chewing tobacco. And then Kostock said something truly strange.

He said: "Please."

Before I knew what I was doing, I'd already thrown him back into his folding chair and started running for my truck. The other farmers had moved to the front of my bumper to stop me from leaving for the farm. They stood in tight formation, like a line of knuckles. I revved the engine and flipped them off until, one by one, they backed away.

Seconds later I was doing 140 on the road out of Walter's Falls and even though I was angry, even though I was scared, the only thing I could think about was the sad, sad way Kostock had uttered that word.

"Please."

I resolved to stay awake for as many nights as it took to catch them in the act. All evidence of the murder had vanished over a decade ago, but a small justice is better than none at all.

For a week, I patrolled the fields every night and for a week the nights went by without incident. I say without incident, but that's a half-truth. *Something* was happening out there. As dawn broke each morning, I would find more empty scars in the fields, just no sign of Kostock or his followers.

It didn't take long for the lack of sleep to drive me up the wall. By the third night my patrols became erratic. More than once I found myself dozing as I marched, lulled to sleep by the rhythm of my own footsteps. Sometimes, it seemed as if the ground itself was rumbling beneath my feet. But still, my flashlight beam found nothing.

And then came the full moon.

It was the first clear night in ages. Early-September. Maybe later. I'd lost track of the days by then. All I knew was that I could see from one end of the field to the other. I couldn't make out details, but I wouldn't have to. This was the night. I could feel it.

I hoisted the shotgun and began my walk around the perimeter.

It wasn't long before I saw movement in the distance. Squinting, I could barely perceive the dark outlines of five bowed figures near the back of the field. I couldn't make out any identifying features, but they seemed to be huddled together, perhaps in the midst of some sort of ritual. As I watched, they began to move as one, prostrating their bodies in such a tight formation that they seemed to blend into a single mass.

I shouted after them and stomped across the rows of cabbage in pursuit, not caring about the profit I was trampling.

But when I reached the end of the field I found I was alone. Instead my flashlight only illuminated yet another empty patch of earth. I whirled the beam around the deserted field, finding nothing. No retreating hooded forms, no bootprints besides my own. No human beings except myself.

For a moment I thought I'd lost them for good, but soon the clouds parted just enough to let a little more moonlight through.

The five figures had huddled together once again. Only now they were somehow back in the direction I'd come from. I turned the flashlight on them in case they attempted to slip back into the darkness, but I fumbled it. Cursing, I dove to the ground and snapped the flashlight up. However, the beam once again found nothing. They were gone.

I cracked. I spun in circles, flinging oaths and curses into the night like spears, hoping one might find a target. I even pointed the shotgun into the air and pulled the trigger. I half expected the

ancient ammunition to fizzle. Instead, it boomed across the night sky, startling the birds from their nearby trees.

And then, the earth moved beneath my feet.

I stumbled, jabbing the shotgun barrel into the earth to steady myself, as the ground jerked violently. Then, the tremor seemed to move on ahead of me. I peered through the darkness.

Just a dozen yards away, I saw the five figures rise from the ground. They were far larger than I'd thought when seeing them from a distance, each of them at least fifteen feet tall. They towered, staring down at me with blank faces in the dark.

I staggered back and turned, only to be face to face with the shadows of another five figures who had materialized behind me.

The night had gone silent.

Trembling, I flicked on my flashlight, looking for Kostock among these gigantic figures. I could reason with him. But he was nowhere to be found.

Instead there was something that defied reason. Something inhuman.

My beam illuminated yard after yard of filthy pink flesh. The five shadows that had haunted me resolved into massive fingers that were peeling and bloody and topped by thick yellow nails encrusted with dirt and animal bones. They met in a palm, creased and recreated by uncountable years under the earth. The hand ended in a wrist covered by a web of thick, rope-like veins. They drew the eye down to where an arm plunged straight into the ground. How deep it went, I cannot say.

I turned the flashlight back around and was met with the same sight. Another hand, poised high above my head. They were both utterly still, frozen in an open-fingered grasp like a hideous caricature of a tree.

I swept my meagre beam from grotesque hand to grotesque hand. No thoughts ran through my head. Exhaustion and fear had emptied it of anything that could explain this.

And then, slowly, the hands began to move. They reached down to the fields and scooped up earth, grasping huge handfuls of my crops, but also dirt, rocks, and clay.

I felt a slight movement behind me and barely managed to throw myself out of the way as one of the hands scooped up the patch of earth from directly where I'd been standing. Then, it slithered back beneath the earth with its bounty.

My bounty.

Slowly, my rage began to outweigh my fear. After everything, this - *this* - was too unfair.

I still had the other barrel. I pointed the shotgun at one of the disgusting, thieving hands and opened fire. The boom echoed in the night air. The hand writhed in silent agony. Small rivulets of yellow blood spurted from a dozen holes. A direct hit.

And then a horrible sound. A moan so low it wasn't heard, but rather felt in the bones.

A thunderclap burst through the night air as the hand slapped at the ground in front of me. I turned to run, but my boots had sucked down into the wet, muddy earth. I pulled my feet free and took off towards the farmhouse, feeling the slap, slap, slap of my wet socks.

I scrambled over the lip of the hill, dodging and weaving as the earth shifted and stirred beneath me. Even then I knew it was pointless. Whatever these things were, they were ancient and fast and they knew these fields better than I could ever imagine.

The farmhouse was just barely in sight when I heard a high-pitched whistling, as something sliced through the air at terrifying speed. The last thing I remember was a bright burst of pain and a weightless sensation as my feet left the ground. Then, nothing.

Kostock found me at dawn. I was crumpled against a tree, covered in blood, piss, and morning dew. He drove me 100 clicks to the hospital, racing against what turned out to be a pierced lung.

I woke up two days later feeling like my body was held together by nothing but gauze and spit. Kostock was standing in the doorway to my hospital room. It seemed like he'd been there for a while.

Neither of us said anything for a few minutes.

"So," said Kostock. "You've seen the early frost."

I would have burst out laughing if Kostock hadn't looked so serious. Instead, I nodded.

Kostock's tongue worked along the inside of his lips, as if it was slowly working out how to speak after years without practice. After a few moments, he replied. Softly.

"Been here all my life. All 72 years of it," he said. "It comes every harvest, no telling when. God, I wish you hadn't seen it. I wish you didn't have to know it."

Kostock turned to face the window. The morning sun traced all the wrinkles time had furrowed along his tanned face.

“Sometimes they skip my crops altogether, an’ sometimes... sometimes I’m unlucky. It’s a fair deal, or at least...”

“At least the fair kind of unfair deal,” I finished for him. A smile tugged at Kostock’s lips, revealing laugh lines an inch deep.

“Figger I take what I can from the land. Makes sense the land would take some back. Not more complicated than that.”

We were silent for a few moments before Kostock spoke again.

“Never told you how sorry I was about your gramps. Good man. Good farmer. Sometimes the deal is more unfair than it has any right to be.”

Kostock brushed his fingers along his shirt, playing with his pendant for a moment, before walking to my bedside. He glanced around the room, struggling to meet my eyes, before pulling another wicker pendant from his dusty jeans pocket. He pressed the second pendant into my open palm.

I put the gift up to my one good eye. It was newly made, the wicker cage still smelled of straw and, inside, a white sliver of polished bone glinted in the sun that filtered through the hospital window. Two letters had been engraved on it. My grandfather’s initials.

And then he left me to heal.

My doctors say that if I’m careful and do all my physio then I’ll be back on my feet by April. Just in time for the start of planting season.