

Crown Glass

Some distant ancestor had chosen the farmhouse door, now a winded wooden sentry letting guests pass with grudging hinges. It itself betrayed no glimmers of otherworldliness. Only its window, old and leaded, inset, crowned it with something like splendor. Diamond glass panes, clear to the edges, where vaguely smoky lavender stained the rim. Its center held delicately worked colored glass: a circlet of flower blossoms with faint silver stars woven among them, barely visible until you stood close.

The woman who lived there had never met the one who chose that door and its odd portal. She loved it. She took a mug with her in the mornings before the sun rose and stood by the panes, running her fingers over them, over the leading and the silver. The glass, thin and brittle as seashells toward the top, settled like cobalt at the window's base. She imagined the pane scavenged from a church somewhere, ancient, old enough to have melted down with the years. She treasured it like a secret held against the world: glass, she felt, must not be solid but liquid, a talisman for her of humility. For the things we see as solid unveil their liquid natures, given time, and we ourselves do not own our world but merely live with it as in the midst of mystery.

The door admitted visitors to a plain home with cramped hallways and low ceilings, strange meetings of walls without architectural sense, and wide board floors smooth and dimpled with years: light children's feet; blocky work boots;

wrung mops. The skin of the house, like a man's, held all its years in texture and lines.

She was called Ruth, the woman who lived there.

In her sixty-second year on the earth, Ruth took another boarder. She had had many. The rent planted her seed potatoes, kept her fences green, and furnished forth faces to sit opposite her over cider, when she wanted it. This one did not stay until cider-making. Eighteen, working the summer before an old New England college claimed her.

Ruth had long since mounted to peace, to a collection of simple habits and tasks that enveloped each boarder in turn, a faded quilt cupping their bodies without much fuss. The new boarder Jaimie took to that staid atmosphere with a breath of relief. In her own world, she outran cougars; the bones of her mind ached.

They sat together in the early mornings. Ruth accepted this anomaly in the string of young folk inhabiting her second bedroom—impressed, but not showing it. Most others slept in. She brewed deeper pots of coffee without comment.

"I wore pants plenty, when I did the field work," she told Jaimie. "Digging stumps out in a dress makes no sense at all when there are pants to be had. My parents dressed me practically, as a young girl. But now that I hire out, I find I like the feel of dresses. Plain ones—I make most of them. Something to the way a whoop of fabric round you feels like—like a statue in a pagan temple. One open to the wind."

“You could have been a nun instead of a farmer,” Jaimie said. “Skirts every day.”

“Or I could have been a witch.” Ruth grinned slowly over her mug. “Same uniform. Different aims.”

“Are they, though?” Jaimie said, grinning back.

Ruth laughed, then paused. “Perhaps not,” she said, and smiled to herself.

There had been no siblings, for Ruth. Her parents had had one miracle child in later life and none beyond. The noise the house had enclosed in generations past had quieted to two parents and their one daughter, who never married. Jaimie had grown up in suburbia, shouting for the salt among six sisters and brothers, two dogs, and one no-good uncle. Their worlds did not much overlap. And so the morning conversations were to her like days spent gazing at the pyramids, punting the Thames.

“And what is it you’re going to this college to be?”

“A physicist,” Jaimie said.

“My,” said Ruth.

“Mom’s one. She had all us kids going with IQ stuff from day one, trying to spot talent. Honors classes, college prep courses, later. I’ve got almost a semester of credits already. She’s pretty proud. The crazy thing is, her own mother never even graduated high school.”

Ruth, who had never graduated high school, made a sound like astonishment.

“It’s a lot of work, but the program’s supposed to be the best in America.”

"You love it?" Ruth asked.

"Well, yeah. You know, out of the options. I care a lot about being successful. Like Mom. She's consulted frequently by all kinds of big names, and she's been practically everywhere."

Ruth took her mug to the sink and started on a pot-pie pastry she had in mind for lunch. Two pies, one to freeze, the other to eat fresh. The butter crumbed into the pale flour, silk and pebbles against her hands. "You'll do well. You're a clever girl," she said.

"I hope so." Jaimie drained her coffee, set her mug next to Ruth's in the sink, and left for her internship.

Successful, Ruth thought. She smiled.

"No," Jaimie said the next morning. "That's a common misconception, actually. There's debate as to how to classify glass as an element, but it seems clear it's not a liquid. An amorphous solid, is as far as we've got."

Ruth's brow furrowed. "And the melting, then? How does it get so thick at the bottom?"

"It's not melting, per se. It's supposed to be due to an old process of flattening glass to be cut for panes—the Crown glass method. They spun it out thin, so with centrifugal force, the glass to the edges and towards the center would be of different thicknesses. They set old windows with the thick portions of the panes toward the base of the window."

Ruth turned this over in her mind: amend her own private, beloved thoughts of her window and its humbling glass? If it were solid all along, exactly what her eyes had predicted...? She felt an unaccountable stab of loss, of some holy place traded and paved over. Why had she made the exchange? She shook her head and laughed softly. Truth-lovers had to make their peace with such revelations. She glanced back at the leaded panes with fondness. In any case, they would still carry the memory of her first belief in their liquidity, and remain thereby a talisman of sorts, just as she pleased.

“So, physics,” she said aloud, cutting a square of fragrant spice bread for herself from the breakfast tray.

“Physics,” Jaimie agreed. “Did you study it in school?”

Ruth laughed. “Heavens, no. I went through the eighth grade and then left to work full time on our farm.”

Jaimie looked at the old woman, silent for a moment. She said, embarrassed, “Oh.” Mentally she raked through her glass speech, worrying over any pomposity. She thought of the narrowness of a life lived on a handful of acres, a life whose opportunities were mapped out early, unyielding as fate. She pictured her own mother, the granddaughter of such lives: her mother’s passport pages each thrice-stamped, and her hotel memberships in a half dozen European countries, and her hands so accustomed to packing that she could have a roller bag neatly filled for a week’s journey in less than fifteen minutes.

Ruth had finished her spice bread and coffee, risen with a contented grunt, and gone to the island counter. “Another pie today,” she said. “Blueberry. We’ll have a good crop of them this year. There’s a church bake sale coming up; I always do them a pie. Want to roll it out?”

Jaimie joined her at the board, awkwardly handling the rolling pin. They laughed at the uneven result, which Ruth smoothed out with a couple of swift strokes. “Not bad,” she told Jaimie. “Things take time.” She cut the dough, fitted it to the pie plate, and filled it with rich bursting blueberries in syrup. A lattice-top and egg wash later, the pie hummed cozily at the center of the oven.

It was Saturday—no internship—so the two women, old and young, shifted between household tasks and sitting over meals or tea. Jaimie took the pie from the oven, but her finger slipped and touched the hot ceramic. She pulled back involuntarily, dropping the pie top-down on the tile floor. She swore. Ruth laughed. “Good occasion for a word like that,” she said. She rose and went to the kitchen’s side door that gave out onto the yard and garden. “*Someone* ought to have joy of this,” she said, whistling out the frame for one of the farm’s collies, who came bounding through to make the acquaintance of the ruined pie.

After making a replacement pastry for the sale, Ruth and Jaimie sat down again at the worn kitchen table, tall glasses of iced tea in hand now against the growing heat of the day. Jaimie was still seeing her mother in modest heels, rolling suitcase following her through the airport. She looked at Ruth and swirled her drink around in its glass.

“Do you—” Jaimie paused. “Have you traveled much?”

“Not much. Went up to Canada once to visit some cousins one Christmas.”

“Do you wish you had? Traveled, I mean, to other countries?”

Ruth tapped a finger against her glass, thinking. “It’s a nice thought,” she said finally. “I do love reading about places. Never much imagined going there, though. Don’t know why. I’ve been pretty settled here.”

“But do you think you’ll wish you had gone? If you’ve lived your whole life in one place...”

Jaimie trailed off, feeling reluctant to strike nearer the heart of the question she was faltering to ask.

Ruth looked at her with sudden perception. “Ah,” she said. “You want to know if I regret my life. If I’ll look it over on my last day and find it a flop, a waste. A missed chance.”

Jaimie laughed uncomfortably. It sounded rude to her ears, now, and she wished she could take it back. She stared down at her drink.

“It’s an important question,” Ruth said calmly. “I’m not like your mamma. I didn’t need to be. It’s hard to set two things side by side that are so different, and find them the same in the end, but that’s how it is. Could be she’s just as glad in her skin as I am, and will be, come the last day.”

“Doesn’t it matter, though? College, a career?”

“Sure,” Ruth said. “If it’s yours, it matters.”

“Mine?”

“Yours to do. If it’s your work, you’d better do it. I’m just saying, there’s work *and* work. None of it deserves disdain.”

The ice in Jaimie’s glass settled with a gentle tinkling sound. She did not speak for some minutes. “So,” she said slowly, then stopped.

Ruth leaned forward and took the girl’s hands. “There’s been no lack, for me,” she said. “I’ve met life here.”

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The last week went by quickly. The blueberry crop came in; the internship wound to a close. Jaimie answered several emails settling administrative matters before driving up to college. She and Ruth said goodbye at the open farmhouse door, its window glinting in the afternoon light. Ruth kissed her cheek with an easy affection, and Jaimie took in the sight of her: bare feet, patterned dress, flyaways at the ears, and the countenance of her joyous.

She studied straight through to a Ph.D—hers in sure strokes, as pies were not. But when she took the letters to her last name, she did so thoughtfully—and winking.