



First prize: 'Farmer Wife'

OCTOBER 10, 2020

By Chris Kennedy

She woke in their bed, where she always woke, and rolled over to Husband's side but he was not in the bed that they had shared for nine years, Husband was, in fact, in the overly mechanical hospital bed by the window, where he had slept for the past sixty-four days,

she rose, stretched her body to its fullest, then immediately felt bad about it and went to his bedside and thought "how could a man who was in bed so often sleep so long", then Wife checked his bag; it was half full and this didn't warrant waking him to change it, instead, she put on her shit-stained jeans, her socks, his socks over her socks, and one of the shirts that she had commandeered from him years prior, and finally, she put her hair in a tight pony,

a February frost littered the gardens outside like glitter, the garden that was just big enough for the dog they never got around to getting which was high on the list of the things they'd never get around to and low on the list of the things they could never get around, and Wife went about her morning routine, which meant getting the house ready for Nurse, starting a fire, and making sure that she stayed within earshot of



or you know, we have a culture here / treating the time between roads

enough to hear over the boiling kettle, and quiet enough that it didn't wake him; fights, which had intensified as they became less frequent, would ignite from the spark of Husband being woken abruptly,

she wasn't in the mood for small talk when Nurse pulled into the driveway, so Wife quickly put on the wellies she had bought years ago for a festival and an old sleeveless to be ready to go the minute Nurse walked in the door, and after their quick greeting, she went to the tractor and just sat in it, it needed to heat to clear the windows and she also just wanted to sit in it - the tractor's cab was her bubble: safe, occasionally warm, and high above all of the mundane shit she routinely had to march through.

Wife spent the day in the shed, even though it wasn't a day's work, even though she used to hate it, used to hate the smell, the lingering smell that would sink its way into her skin, her hair, every article of clothes she owned, even those that she didn't wear farming, those that she didn't wear at all anymore, but she liked to take her time doing the work, because work expands to fill time and the slower she did things, the better able she was for when the literal hit the proverbial,

it was the change of pace that catches people out here, she thought, the sudden shift between a death march tempo and eye-melting speed that catches them out, like how people get done in their cars, travelling the main roads and not slowing in time when they come to a little shit of a village or worse a speed van, you make mistakes with that sudden kind of shifting and it wasn't good for your gears, wears out the clutch, and what a clutch it had, yeah, it was the change of pace that could catch



you forget the reality of the job at hand: pushing shit around in an area

designated for cattle to shit in, that sound, and the heady stank of ammonia when a cow cocked her round and pissed down beside you, the cow that had just cocked her tail and hunched her back as she pushed out a stream of steaming piss beside Wife, was The Cow, The cow, the Cow that did the damage, the cow that when Husband tried to cross between her and her new calf to better prepare the calf's bed, had kicked him, with such force that he was lifted off the ground, with such force that he travelled three yards across the cattle pen, but not with enough force that his spine was severed, that important detail was the work of a metal upright upon which a gate hung, the sharp corner of which broke Husband's fall, and broke his hopes of ever walking again,

and speaking of cow's calving, here was a red Limousin who has just passed the first water bag, so she's gonna do it any minute now, and Wife clears off the shitty straw that was in the pen meant for new calves and bedded down new straw, then moved the cow over to "the maternity ward" as she called it, careful that she made the cow feel like it was her idea to be moved, not Wife's, as some women want to be lead and some want to lead, and you need to know the difference, but once the cow was in the pen, she passed the second water bag, and had started to push, so Wife watched her a while, then put her up the chute, into the sculling gate, to try and go about pulling the calf, because now an hour had passed and the calf wasn't out,

she was determined to pull the calf on her own: it was tight and she threw her whole body, her whole being, into the jack because she didn't want to get The Vet; he had been out before, too often, even, and she



place for the farmer - He is a miracle worker, He is the father, the Son you never had, and the Holy Spirit, the rural farmers' priest and his word is blessed sacrament but she refused to be fodder for his homily or farm-yard, church-gate conventions, where farmers buried both their failures and their successes to appear humble and able, oh she knew there was talk, alright, especially from the few bastards who said they'd take the farm from her, she, she didn't know nothing about farming; the only grape she'd handle would come in a long stem glass, but, she did like The Vet; a Good man,

the calf hit the ground, harder than Wife would have liked and she stuck her fingers in his throat (she knew it was a bull calf because she had caught sight of its balls) to clear its airways, and then threw a dash of water in his ears and a spray of iodine on his navel, then dragged him over to the new straw and waited for him to sit up a little, before letting his mother out of the sculling gate, she ran to him, licking him clean of her own after birth, until he was shivering with warmth, steam rising, and he let out a little sneeze, cute as a kitten,

Wife stood rooted to the ground for the next hour, until the calf started to rise up onto his feet, shakily at first, obviously, but with more confidence after every failure, like the bankers or finance wankers that she knew back in Dublin, and then she washed herself and the calving equipment, before going back in to make sure the new calf had figured out how to suck milk before she could go to bed,

out of the shed, the air cooled her down, the sweat nettling her back, from where she stood, she could see the light of the pub down the village, down there she had witnessed men stab each other with sharp



down the pub anymore: she felt she had no barrier for the looks that

were thrown at her — get the Caretaker six pints in him and, as he'd stare at her lips or her tits, he'd breathe the words in her face: ah he'ded be bettther off ded - that's the fucking church Caretaker, mind — the only other light she could see was at home; the blue glow of the telly, where Husband sat as Nurse'd left him,

walking home was better than driving home because it took longer, and it allowed her to cool down, not bodily but mentally, but then again, she was going home to her problems, not to shelter away from them, but then she shouldn't think like that, y'know, she shouldn't think of home as a problem, or home problems, or Husband as a problem, and fuck it, here she was doing that,

she stops at the back door to clear the pebbles out of the grips on her wellies: first she tries scraping them against the footpath but that sound, that sound would make you bitter, many days you'd have a lovely day done and that sound could turn you, the country was full of these little grievances, be they nature or neighbour that'd turn your head odd - for some it's the wind, and there was serious, academic talk of how a bad wind could turn your mind, and for Husband, it had been a drip noise in the gutter downpipe; a little pit-pit-pause-pit sound that'd do his nut at night, it came from leaves blocking the gutter, so he'd be out with a chair from the kitchen table at least once a week, Marigolds on, and up to his elbow in the downpipe,

Husband didn't say a word as she started to move him from in front of the telly to the kitchen table where she dollied up a baby dinner for him and a reheated lasagne for her, then spoon fed it into both of them,



she lifted him from the chair into his bed; despite his circumstances, she felt like he wasn't really helping her and as she lowered his head down, she took the pillow up, holding it up in front of him, thought about the comfort she could bring to him with this one pillow, this bag of synthetic feathers could give him flight, could lay him down to his eternal rest, could send him somewhere where he had more of a backbone than he had ever had, but she fluffed it, and gently slipped it under Husband's head, he looked at her and whispered, "Thanks, for everything, it's just until we get the cattle sold and you can go back to your life", she smiled hard to hold back her tears, and she kissed him on the mouth, "Goodnight", she said.



PREVIOUS

Runner-Up: 'Envy'

