

Skagit Spring

Who had ever seen freckles like that, my mom said. *Who*.

It was hard to say. I certainly hadn't.

The day he came up into the Skagit valley was in late spring. The fields were still wet. We got sunbreaks every now and again, but still, it was plenty damp. The flat ground squelched and swelled up under our feet as we walked between the rows of the bulbs.

We had to check the bulbs every year after they went in, to make sure they didn't mildew or rot in the mud. *It's a fine line between swamp and fertile soil*, my mom said. She was right. Once the sun came out and began its march to midsummer, the shoots quickly came up, and the tiny light green blades seemed to lengthen overnight.

I was wearing my work boots, black and permanently smudged with manure and mud from walking the bulb rows. I walked back toward our house, its grey silhouette dreamlike in the early dusk light. The light was on in the kitchen, but not in our living room, which meant my father had not yet returned from the shop. I adjusted my gritty topknot and sat down on our front steps to pull off my boots. To my left, I saw as I put my dirty boot down, was a bag. It wasn't mine.

"Hello," he said. I turned around. He was sitting on one of our porch chairs, very calmly, looking out over the field.

"Do I know you?" I asked him.

He met my gaze, but did not return the squint.

I looked down at his bag and up and up at him.

"Rory," he said. "Name's Rory. I came up from Seattle, on the bus." He paused. "I saw your ad for seasonal help," he added, gesturing in the air at the invisible ad.

“Where are you from?” I asked him. “You’re not from here.”

He smirked. “Ireland. West coast.” When he said *Ireland* the *r* took so long to say that it looked like he had a golf ball in his mouth.

“Never been there,” I said.

“My mom will be out,” I said. “Was she expecting you?”

“Not sure,” he replied. “I sort of came up on a lark. Had to get out of the city, was getting to be too much for me.”

The screen door opened and my mother stepped out of the house. A kerchief was knotted at her nape.

“This is?” she asked.

I looked at him. “Rory,” I said.

He held his hand out. “Ma’am, I saw your ad for the seasonal help, with the bulbs. I’ve some experience working outdoors, my brother’s a farm outside of Galway. So I don’t mind the mud either.”

I saw the corner of my mother’s mouth twitch. She took his hand and briefly squeezed it.

“Rory. So glad you’ve come.” She paused. “Glass of wine?”

I was surprised. That was unlike Mom. Wine?

She disappeared into the house and returned with three glasses. She set them down on the wooden floor of the porch, and went back inside for the wine. She came back out with an open bottle of chardonnay, and gave us each a generous pour.

We held the glasses up for a toast. The sun slanted sideways from the horizon, finding its way out of the underside of a cloud. It backlit his hair and his freckles, for a moment making him seem almost translucent, like the golden wine in the glass.

“To Ireland,” she said.

“To Ireland,” we said.

I heard his round *rrrr* again.

I had never seen freckles like that. But it seemed, for a moment, that maybe my mom had.