

The Glaistig
By Grace Evans

Fran left, and then she left again.

Her anger broke her wide open. She caught some curse in muddy field water, when her blood ran hot through her veins.

By the time the fire happened, my sister was no longer an earthly woman. I wish she had said goodbye.

*

The day before Fran disappeared, a steel milking machine had arrived at the farm. We saw it before we disappeared into the garden. A cylindrical tank and solid metal pump sat on a cart, with brown rubber hoses coiled around the frame.

It's all a big experiment, Fran said. On our knees in the garden we knelt to pluck tender skinned parsnips and collect the last tomatoes for our mother to turn into dinner. Some of those machines insert tubes right into the teats, said Fran. Or clamp too hard. Or use so much suction they cause congestion. She'd read the trade magazines that came for father.

I don't think it's right, Fran said.

Why can't we keep milking by hand? I asked.

Because farms are growing bigger and busier, to make enough money. She sat upright. It's greed.

Is father greedy?

Fran's face flushed and she said: Humans are greedy.

Oh.

But a cow doesn't know any of that, said Fran. She only knows how she's treated.

The sky darkened during dinner, a storm coming in. The table held pork chops and sweet pickles, tomato jelly salad, creamed parsnips, scalloped cabbage, clover leaf rolls, and flickering candlelight in front of us

but Fran wasn't eating because she was upset, and when she was upset I was upset so the food on my plate was untouched also.

It's cruel to use machines, she told our father, who sat stiff over his plate at the head of the table.

It's modern, he said. We need to keep up.

I don't care about keeping up, Fran said, and then she slapped the edge of the table. I couldn't breathe. I watched the milk quiver in every glass and tears collect in the corners of her eyes. She cried when she was angry. I'll milk every cow twice a day myself, she said. Animals shouldn't suffer just so this invention can be refined.

It's none of your concern Frances, my sunburnt father said in a quiet voice, his eyes down on his dinner. The oldest of our three brothers would inherit the farm: the barn, fields and business. John would assume Elsie, Martha, Bessie, Audrey, Lucille, Vivian, Edith and Marnie. Their sisters. Their offspring. The food their bodies produced for their offspring. John would own a whole family tree.

My brothers guffawed when Fran pushed her chair back from the table and knocked over her glass of milk. She flew out the side door into the dark alfalfa fields. My mother closed her eyes.

The only sound was my father's jaw clicking while he chewed. No one said anything when I left the table to look for her. My damp hair stuck to my skin while I searched from the borders of the moonlit fields. It rained harder, cold drops slapping my face and arms. I tasted salt. I figured she'd come back, she always did. She wouldn't leave me alone.

I saw her once more before she disappeared for good.

*

In the weeks that followed, I knelt in the dying garden alone.

We used to compare the leaves and stems imprinted into our flesh from kneeling on weeds and dirt. Temporary scars left on our bodies as we laboured. Feeding the family was invisible work, Fran told me one spring day over our weeding hands, three years ago. We planted the seeds, watered, weeded, plucked, cleaned, and often chopped. Milked cows, fed chickens, collected eggs. Our mother cooked and it was all eaten within minutes, before it passed through our bodies and back into the earth. Then our father and brothers churned the fetid earth, the privy, the compost heap, manure. But across the grid of Beverly Township, neat tracts of farmland were like a patchwork quilt, created and worked by *farmers*. Their names on the land registry records. Not women. Not gardeners or cooks or egg collectors. Let's get more invisible, said Fran.

So we planted a hiding spot in the garden. We'd arranged the garden so that a trellis of string beans, wide fragrant tomato plants and bushy raspberries created a private place unseen by the kitchen window, the gravel road, the barns. We laid in the middle and read books and magazines and ate raspberries. Inhaled the perfume of leafy fronds. Each year we made it better. It wasn't fully hidden until mid-July, and then for a couple of months we had secret space to ourselves. Now the coverage was skeletal, dried out stalks and decaying foliage. I laid among the dried plants anyway, feeling the crunch of dead leaves under my limbs.

*

The first frost came, and the search parties dwindled. Then it snowed, a white cloak that covered our crops under a heather-grey sky.

Strange things started to disturb farms within the township. In the morning escaped calves were found corralled in their pens. Sixty cows had already been

milked before Glendon Sherry arrived at his barn at dawn. At the Buchanan's someone had cleaned out the stall of an ornery heifer overnight and laid fresh straw.

Other farmers found empty bags of grain feed slashed through, or dozens of milk cans dented and ripped open, metal twisted into terrible holes.

*

Our mother and father decided Fran had run away in the night and didn't want to be found.

Over a milking machine, people in town said. What an odd girl.

Mrs. Buchanan speculated that Fran was *in trouble*.

Mrs. Mackenzie thought she'd be back in nine months.

She ran off and got married, you watch, said Mrs. Miller. She'll be back.

People didn't utter these things to me, but my friend Annie's parents ran the store in Troy, and her mother accumulated gossip the way farm women collected fat, the runoff of all kinds of cooked meat mingling in a jar, the glass slick with grease. Annie told me and I didn't tell my brothers.

I worried about my sister but I knew she wasn't married.

I knew she was gone because of her anger.

She was hunting power.

*

Farms with so many cows their names were numbers, tags punched into their ears, were most targeted. The Bryant dairy found their milking machine with gashes in the steel cans, hoses ripped from the rubber-lined cups, violent dents in the metal pump. Earl and James Miller found their dairy cows sucked dry in the morning.

Once Isaac Mackenzie found his prize mating bull castrated – turned into a stag, with a neat incision and a bloody knife nearby.

The word around town was that Fran wasn't gone. She'd been changed into a ghostly creature. People called her a glaistig.

What's that? I asked.

They say it's a kind of spirit that cares for cows, said Annie. Like a banshee, or a ghost. They live in ravines and come out to protect cattle. Or suck them dry. Or make things hard for farms they don't like.

I felt a glow inside my chest: Fran was finally a cattle woman.

After her change some families called her a guardian angel; others a curse. The affection she formerly had for cows and all kinds of cattle stuck to her as an otherworldly spirit. The Buchanan's, who believed Fran to be their protector, left fresh cheese or bread near a heifer before she gave birth, an offering for Fran to watch over her in the night. While the Miller, Mackenzie and Bryant farms where Fran wreaked havoc, shuttered their barns, paid a hand to keep watch, or padlocked their gates. But eventually when they felt safe enough to relax their measures, Fran broke through.

Fran never caused any pain to the cows themselves. If destruction she caused meant a delay in milking that day, the cows were found milked. If she let calves loose in the road, she shepherded them out of harm's way until farm hands came running.

I missed her. At home no one talked about her and in town everyone talked about her but never with me. For the first time, I dug the garden alone in the stink of springtime, ripe manure spread over the fields. I planted the seeds and soft, tiny plants that would form our secret cave again and feed our family. When I weeded I tattooed my limbs with stems and leaves. I bled for the first time, waking to sheets stained the colour of rust. I was cross at Fran for missing it, but glad she'd explained it was coming. I missed the rhythm of doing our chores

together, the way she patched her dresses in contrasting colours, her laugh, the way she threaded Black Eyed Susan's through the fence, and the way she made our mother smile.

*

Annie said they swore she shared the buttery colostrum with newborn calves. We were in the coatroom at school. Annie whispered: She stays alive by sucking the teats of her favourite cows while they graze in the fields. Annie said that Isaac Mackenzie swore up and down Fran fed on warm and bloody afterbirth. The placenta delivered with calves in spring.

No one else told me anything.

Our mother disappeared too. Inside herself. She didn't talk much before and now her voice was barely above a whisper. Our inflamed father nursed a glass of rye in his callused hands each night. Once I saw tears leak down his face.

I missed Fran so much I sobbed myself to sleep some nights. But I believed in her anger.

Her mission.

She was a farmer now.

I knelt in the garden every day, let the top of my head get hot in the midday sun. Observed delicate buds unfold. Tender seedlings grow whole inches in a day. I pressed my knees into severed dill heads, traced the umbel patterns on my kneecaps.

*

I saw Fran once, in the foggy fields of Sherry's place, five years after the fight.

A bruise spread across the sky, violet and plum and smoke against a pale horizon. I was walking to school beside tangles of damp golden grasses. A few months after Fran left I told my father that I wanted to finish school. Fran hadn't. I saw her gliding in the middle of a herd, as if to supervise their long jaws chew cud. Her feet were still clad in thick-soled rubber boots but her silvery gossamer curls floated in the air around her.

I raised my hand to her and started to run.

Fran!

I darted off the dirt road and through the ditch, cutting a diagonal line to her.

Fran!

But her body melted into mist. Gone again.

*

One dark, autumn night a fire started at the Mackenzie farm. They had three hundred Holsteins crammed into two different barns. Fran had made things difficult for them over past six years.

In Mackenzie's north barn, the west section housed sixty-four cows. After the fire entered a stall and spread to four feet, most cows were injured. The dry bedding reached a burning temperature of three hundred degrees.

I heard my brothers talking about it when I collected eggs the next morning. It happens so fast, John said. Never forget how fast a fire can move, he said.

By the time flames spread to six feet in diameter, the cows' lungs were scorched.

By eight feet of fire, animals started to suffocate.

By ten feet, they were dead.

The fire spread to the east section of the barn. Isaac got forty-one out, John said. Then his neighbours wouldn't let him go back in.

They were quiet. I was quiet.

That's his livelihood, said John.

I passed the Mackenzie place on my walk to school the next day. The barn was just crumpled metal and charred, upright beams.

*

Days later the cause of the fire was revealed: electrical.

It wasn't the first time a large, modern farm had found their milking machine unplugged, wires gutted, cups torn out, cords ripped from sockets. In this case the machinery was unplugged but small appliances were left connected to power. A light, used by farm hands in early morning hours, when their breath made shapes of frost in the air. The electrical current overloaded, and issued sparks.

Eighty-seven cows with seared lungs, suffocated to death.

There was no sign of Fran after the fire. She abandoned the cows, like she abandoned me. She was gone for good.

*

Milking machines caught on.

They were common by the 1950's. The one my father had become universal. A pulsator compressed and relaxed the liner in the cups, so the suction was intermittent and didn't cause congestion.

My daughter just had an expensive machine installed in the barn so cows can wander up when they're ready to be milked and a robotic manipulator does

the work. She calls it an automated voluntary milking system. It doesn't hurt and its lower stress for the animals.

They say it's better; the cows get to choose.

My daughter manages 400 biodynamically farmed acres. 70 dairy cows.

She doesn't have a garden.