



ROY GUMPEL

## **AT THIRTEEN, I WANTED TO BE A FATHER.**

Our failing family farm had two trailer homes sitting vacant. To make ends meet, my parents rented one to Valerie, a pregnant, unwed twenty-three-year-old with tomato red hair who worked at the Kroger deli, where my mother was the manager. The day Valerie moved in, I watched from my bedroom window as she toted a suitcase up the three steps to the trailer. That's all she had: a faded pink suitcase, the vinyl peeling. I thought her hair looked pretty. A small herd of Holsteins, my 4-H project, bawled at her from behind a fence. It was springtime but still cold out, and from my window I could see Valerie's breath escaping her body. My mother, who'd opened the door for her, patted Valerie's swollen stomach. I stopped spying from behind the curtain and went to the stereo to put on Air Supply's "Lost in Love." Then I lay in bed and thought of how I would propose to Valerie: I'd tell her the baby needed a father. I would get down on one knee, my hair feathered just right for the occasion, and present her a ring. Maybe my sister Dina would let me borrow one of hers.

My father and mother had been renters all their lives. Then, in 1980, both of them forty years old, my parents had signed a mortgage agreement with Dennis Rice, a farmer nearing retirement who wanted to sell his place to a “hardworking family.” My father was tired of renting run-down homesteads, doing all the work, and splitting the meager profits from the corn and soybeans seventy-thirty with the landlord, who got the lion’s share. The problem was he couldn’t qualify for a regular bank loan with what he earned from his union job at the ceiling-tile factory. So Mr. Rice, playing the role of benevolent father figure, had agreed to be the mortgage lender himself. He’d arranged for a lawyer to draw up a contract, and my father had signed it. The interest rate was nearly 18 percent. If we missed more than three payments, Mr. Rice would be able to evict us and repossess the farm.

The day we moved in, Mr. Rice stood in the bare kitchen and went over the terms of the loan with my father. “Of course, Dan,” he said, “I know we won’t ever need to think about this last part” — the part about evicting us. “My lawyer made me put it in.” Before he left, Mr. Rice invited us to come to his church in town. He was almost seventy but strong and lean, and he hugged us all, reminding us kids to pray to the Lord Jesus Christ. My older brother Darren, who was fifteen and wore a black Van Halen T-shirt over his long-sleeved thermal underwear, just rolled his eyes.

Each evening, as darkness settled over the farm, I’d watch Valerie’s mobile home from my bedroom window. My mother

house as she walked across the verdant yard.

“Hi,” she said, her flaming hair lifted by the breeze. The sky was bright blue, the trees tipped with red buds, the green daffodil shoots that my mother was ecstatic about forcing their way up along the garage. Valerie smelled of cigarettes and perfume. She shook my hand and crinkled her button nose. “Your mom showed me your picture at work, but you’re even cuter in person.” I thought I’d pass out. She had on her Kroger uniform, the dark blue polyester like armor. The top was cut to fit to her growing belly, and her soft-soled shoes — for standing on her feet all day — broke my heart. She looked at her watch. “Oh, fiddle,” she said. “I’ve got to go. My shift starts in ten minutes. I don’t want the boss getting mad at me.” She winked. We both knew my mother was her supervisor. Valerie dashed across the gravel to her car, a 1970 Ford Maverick, rusted and tilted to one side, that I viewed as exotic. She climbed in, fired up the engine, and rolled down the window. “Since it’s Saturday night, why don’t we play some cards when I get off work,” she said, a cigarette dangling from her mouth, blood red lipstick on the filter. The car tires spit gravel as she tore out of the drive. I was so excited, I forgot about the chore I’d been doing until Darren approached me: “Did you get the ether?”

“Huh?”

“The ether, dimwit. I can’t get the MF started.” We called the Massey Ferguson tractor the “MF.”

“I guess I forgot.” My face was flushed.

“You look weird,” said Darren, smirking. “I saw you talking to her.” He punched me in the arm.

# FORECLOSURE

DOUG CRANDELL

had sewn Valerie some drapes from leftover U.S. Bicentennial material: the words “Don’t Tread on Me!” with an eagle soaring above them and flags of all sizes raining down. I had drapes of the same pattern in my room, and I fingered the cloth. I’d not met Valerie yet, and I was afraid that when I did I might lose the ability to speak.

A knock rattled my bedroom door, and my father said, “Let’s go. We’ve got chores to do.” The paddock where we exercised the livestock was a mess. Old Man Rice had not kept up with repairs or manure removal. We’d been breaking our backs patching, painting, hauling, and making the place respectable. My hands were blistered and torn, and I don’t think my parents, who held down full-time jobs, slept more than a couple of hours a night.

It was in the middle of a long Saturday of chores, after I’d greased the two planters and prepared the tractors for the fields, that I ran into Valerie. It was the first warm day of spring, birds twittering in the trees, and I was jogging toward the

The fields seemed as limitless as the canopy of blue sky above them. While our dad planted corn with the John Deere, Darren and I disked and harrowed another field, getting it ready for the eight-row planter. Darren drove the MF with the disk behind, and I followed with the harrow on the old Allis-Chalmers, a tractor so slow you could walk alongside it. Both tractors had AM radios, and we listened in tandem to wowo. Every so often, Darren would rev the MF’s engine to get my attention, or hang halfway out of the cab, whistling and acting the nut — anything to make the time go faster. We went up and down a field with no apparent end under a beautiful spring firmament, the air so crisp it hurt our lungs.

At lunchtime a familiar truck rolled across the flat land: red and spotless, stark black tires glistening with Armor All. Mr. Rice had started showing up at all times, even during supper or in the morning, making my siblings and me late for school. He made many suggestions, sometimes turning sour and bossy. It was clear he still saw the place as his own and my family as just borrowing it, but my father was polite to him and

expected the rest of us to be as well. Now Mr. Rice waved me down, and I pulled over, the harrow fishtailing behind, thinning the rich loam like chocolate cream. The earth smelled ripe with the scent of decay from last year's clover.

I left the tractor idling and climbed down from the cab. Mr. Rice walked up and pointed a finger at my chest. "You're not going fast enough out there to break up all the clods. Quit daydreaming and give it some horsepower." His eyes were watery and cast a notch too far up, as if he were reading the words he spoke from a sign above my head.

"That's as fast as it goes," I said. "It's a slow tractor."

"Don't lie to me, young man. Get moving." He spun around and walked back to his truck, whose radio blared the voice of a preacher getting all worked up. As Mr. Rice sped to the next field, a flock of Brewer's blackbirds exploded from the tangles of fescue he drove over, their nests likely crushed by the old man's tires. I thought of Val, her little baby growing inside her belly. My brother and I finished up the field just past sunset with the tractors' lights on. It was tilled in perfect concentric circles, like designs left by aliens.

I rushed through dinner and showered until my skin was red, steam rising from the tub as if a fire had been doused. Then I put on Mitchum deodorant and sat by my window to wait for Valerie to get home from work. It was past 10:30. Luckily Darren, who shared my room, was playing euchre at a friend's house. A swath of yellow-blue light cut across the yard, headlight beams tracking the east side of the garage. I could tell by the thump of the motor it was Valerie's Maverick. My mother wouldn't be far behind, maybe thirty minutes, the time it would take her to do some light shopping. We mostly ate from our freezer and pantry, making do with the preserves she'd put up the year before, eating canned vegetables with pork shank.

I raced downstairs and bolted toward the back door, then slowed to a stroll, nonchalant, as if I were leaving the house to check on the paddock as part of my Saturday-night routine, having forgotten about playing cards with Valerie. I shoved my hands in my pockets and kept my head down. The night was cold and quiet except for the pings of Valerie's motor settling.

"Hey," she said, "are you ready to play cards?" She tossed her baggy denim purse over her shoulder and snapped her gum. "I need to shower first, though," she said. "I hate the way that deli makes me smell." A faint aroma of basting barbecue surrounded her.

"OK," I said, "I'm just making sure the tractors are locked." I kicked the ground, my armpits heavy with Mitchum.

"Great. Come over in fifteen minutes," she said.

Sixteen minutes later I knocked on the door of Valerie's trailer. I'd opted for some Big Red gum, the cinnamon burning my chapped lips. She opened the door, and I stepped inside to the sound of "Crazy Little Thing Called Love," by Queen. The interior of the trailer was dimly lit, lamps casting pinkish light onto the sagging couch and tattered La-Z-Boy. Valerie wore a robe that didn't quite cover her knees, and she gave off the scent of balsam and Ivory soap. Through the bathrobe, it was difficult to tell she was pregnant.

"You look nice," said Valerie, struggling to pull a comb through her wet hair, which appeared brown instead of red. "I've got a rat. Will you help me?" She turned around and backed up, handing the yellow comb to me over her shoulder. I was confused, but I took the comb and began trying to fix her hair. The teeth caught in the tangles, and she yelped, then giggled. The long, wet strands were still warm from the shower. Finally, after I'd made her cry out several more times, the comb slid through easily.

We sat down in the kitchen alcove. A candle flickered on the table as Valerie dealt the cards. "Do you know how to play two-man euchre?" Her agile fingers shuffled the deck, first overhand, then in a riffle, the cards flipping faster than I could see. We played several hands, and I lost. Valerie laughed and winked a lot. When she crossed her legs, the robe slipped up, exposing a freckled thigh that scared me. All of a sudden, she tossed the cards on the table and said, "Let's pig out!" She got up and yanked open the freezer door. "Frozen pizza! Pepperoni!" she cried, trying to sound Italian.

We sat on the sofa and ate Hershey's Kisses while we waited on the pizza. I'd never been out on a date, but I assumed this was what a first date felt like. Valerie turned the music down so that it crackled softly from the speakers. She put her feet in my lap and leaned back. "God, my back hurts," she said. Her bare toes wiggled. In the watery light she looked like a girl I knew in study hall.

"When is your baby due?" I asked.

"Not until October," she said. "What do you think about 'Rolin' if it's a boy and 'Taylor' if it's a girl?"

"I like them both," I said, feeling grown-up.

"Do you know I'm ten years older than you?" Val said, puckering her mouth. "God, that sounds so weird." The timer on the stove dinged, and she pulled her feet from my lap and shot into the kitchen. I breathed into my cupped hand and smelled melted chocolate.

While we ate, she told me all about the guy who'd gotten her pregnant and then run off: a Hormel-chili truck driver named Randall. They'd met at Kroger and dated for almost a year. When she told him she was pregnant, he said, "I'm not wanting a family." The next week at work, another truck driver delivered the chili — and the news that Randall had quit. Valerie tried for a while to find him, then gave up.

"I can raise this baby myself," she said, a scared smile on her cherry red face.

*(end of excerpt)*