

Fertile Ground

by Gerri Giovanelli Bauer

Florida, Winter, 1893

The dinner included turtle soup, scalloped oysters, larded partridge, quail, and slices of tongue garnished in aspic. By the time Miriam cleared away sweet potato soufflé cups and served tangerine slices in sugar syrup, her feet throbbed and her shoulders ached. The blister that had risen where her thumb touched a soup tureen already threatened to pop.

She had just lifted a plate of half-eaten soufflé from a table when she heard the hotel owner's daughter caught between loud demands at two tables in the south end of the dining room. Miriam hurried over to help. Ada signaled her thanks with raised eyebrows before she leaned toward a frowning elderly couple, nodded, and rushed off toward the kitchen.

The upstarts at the problem table appeared to be a family: mother, father, and a son and daughter who couldn't be mistaken for anything but siblings. Miriam did a quick assessment. Riched satin, starched collars, a watch with diamond trim that glittered in light from the lantern in the center of the table. This family was wealthier than most who found their way to Ponce Hotel. They also looked somewhat familiar.

"How may I help you?" she asked, and smoothed her apron with her free hand. "Would you like to try the special dessert, sweetened tangerine slices in"

"It's about time," the boy, a teen, interrupted. "That's just what we were trying to ask for. I hate sweet potato soufflé."

"Really, we are surprised it was even served to him," the woman added.

"What are you waiting for? Bring us some of that fruit before we expire from the heat in this backwater place," the girl snapped. She appeared close in age to her brother.

The man continued to read an advertising circular whose exterior page extolled the fertility of land in the area.

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“A serving for everyone?” Miriam asked the woman, since the man paid no attention to them. She wanted to slam down the half-empty plate of sweet potato soufflé in front of the siblings and tell them to eat that. Yes, it was hot. Didn't she know it, far more than they did. She stifled the urge, and instead tried to place the family's familiarity. She must have seen them before. Maybe they'd vacationed here last year. A lot of the winter folks were repeat visitors to Ponce Hotel. Some even requested the same rooms year after year. Or maybe she'd seen them at Mr. and Mrs. Brock's house. Those two always had people come and go, and Mrs. Brock loved to entertain the overflow guests when Ponce Hotel was full.

The woman parted her lips as if to answer, then stopped. Her hand fluttered to her throat. Her face flushed, then paled, as though she'd seen an apparition. Miriam glanced around to see if anything had come up behind her. No. Was the woman sick?

The lace that covered the woman's bodice started to rise and fall. “Herbert,” she said finally, and placed her hand on the man's arm while keeping her gaze on Miriam. Herbert continued to read the circular.

Talk at nearby tables dwindled. The boy and girl stared back and forth from their mother to Miriam until they locked their gaze on Miriam. She read confusion in both their faces, followed by a malicious glint in the boy's eyes. She studied them in return, refusing to lower her eyes. A slow horror began to fill Miriam.

Seconds ticked on the grandfather clock against the wall, but each seemed a minute long. She took a step backward, and feared she'd drop the plate despite how hard she gripped it. The boy and girl shared the same shaped nose, mouth, and eyes. And so did she. She was face to face with her nose, her mouth, her eyes. The three of them even had the same hazel eye color. Miriam and the girl could have been twins. Only the girl was pink and fleshy like her mother, and Miriam was thin and dark, as her own mother had been. Mama, who had always urged her to sit out in the sun without wearing a bonnet.

“Herbert, I beg of you,” the woman said, her voice an octave lower, her eyes hard. “I believe the servant” — she lingered on the word servant — “has asked a question.”

“What?” he grunted. “*What* is so important?” He looked at his wife, then followed the line of sight of everyone else at the table.

* * *

Earlier that day

Miriam wrung another towel from the washtub rinse water and hung it on the line. The Brocks' house hulked over the horizon, over the surrounding orange groves and woods. It dwarfed the small cabins that made up her corner of the world.

The Brock house had 10 rooms, with real glass windows in every one. The water closet was indoors. The cook could even pump water right inside the kitchen sink. Surely something to appreciate right about now, Miriam thought, as she bent forward for another towel.

“Moses, hush that racket,” she grumbled. “It's bad enough Miz Ponce cut my work hours, but why didn't you do any picking today? It's the closest we'll come to finding money growing on trees and all you can do is sit there and make noise. Ain't you heard the talk? The Brocks are fixin' to start charging us land rent.”

“Don't fret,” Moses called, and nodded yes without breaking the rhythm of his drumming on an upturned bucket. “We're holding off so the oranges can gain an extra day of sweetness. Good weather for it, even if old man Brock does fear a freeze will hit. If it does, I'll work the grove all night. Else I'll pick tomorrow. Either way, money'll come in. This here is too glorious a day to fret about it.”

Miriam envied Moses his youthful buoyancy, though she was hardly an elder herself: 20, to his 14. He had been too young to feel the fear when the Brocks bought up the land after Mama and the others couldn't meet the tax bill. She wasn't sure Moses understood he picked citrus, for pay, from trees that once had been partly his. She hung the last towel. “Do me a favor,” she said, when she noticed how far the sun had moved above the longleaf pines. “Pour this rinse water on the garden. I've got to get to work.”

Shadows cast sharp lines as she reached for the cabin door. Shade from the tallest pine crossed half of Black Bear Trail. She remembered how, as a little girl, she used to sit under that tree and watch winter folk ride by in carriages with matched horses, and wonder about their destinations. She wondered where the road led after it curved around the live oak in the near distance. She used to pester Mama with the question. Mama said she sometimes wondered, herself. Other times she told Miriam to stop wasting time seeking answers to things she couldn't see. "Some things are better left unknown," she'd once said. "Like what?" Miriam had demanded. But Mama was gone now, and she'd taken her secrets with her.

Inside the cabin, Miriam squeezed past the dry sink so there'd be enough space to close the door. Kneeling, she pulled a pine chest from under the table and lifted the feed sack laid across the top. Her clean, lace-edged work cap, shirtwaist, and apron with neat hem lay underneath. She rolled them into a bundle and smoothed it before putting it inside the sack. Miz Ponce was particular about proper clothing on her servants.

"I'm going, Moses," said Miriam, as she walked back outside. The breeze picked up and made the pines rustle. Needles dropped and slid from the tin roofs on the cabins that formed a semicircle embraced by the grove that surrounded it. Brockville. That's what the Brocks called it now. She thought it a fancy name for a handful of shacks with brick steps, crooked shutters, and walls that had never seen a paintbrush.

"Check on Mr. Jenkins in a bit," she said to Moses, who nodded OK with a goofy grin that made it impossible for her not to smile. "He's been ailing. Help him catch up on the weeds in his greens." She saw Miss Mabel seated outside the farthest cabin with a bowl in her lap, and waved. With slow determination, the old woman shelled the meager harvest of peas Moses had picked that morning.

Moses stopped drumming. "Want me to borrow the Brocks' wagon and carry you down to the hotel?" he asked.

"Uh huh, like they'd loan their carriage for you to fetch me to work," she said, and imagined Mr. Brock puffing up like a partridge

at the idea of it. "Well, now," he'd say to Moses. "That's not how we do it up North." And he'd take another puff on his pipe, brows drawn together in concentration at the thought required for the answer. Mrs. Brock would be shiny with astonishment. "You give them the wagon now and they'll be asking for it for every little thing," she'd warn, affronted by such forwardness. "We let them keep their houses on our land, didn't we? And not a word of thanks from any of them."

No, Miriam thought. Let the Brocks be, snug in their winter home large enough to fit at least three families, and then some. She helped with the laundry there once a week, and never could get over the size of the place. They'd built it right after they came to town and took over the land. She wondered if they knew they'd broken an ownership pact that had been in place since just after the war: Mama and her kin, the Jenkinses, Miss Mabel's family, and others now gone had shared the land peaceably for almost 20 years.

"Well," Moses said, and he drew out the word. "I wasn't going to ask." He gave Miriam a quick glance, no longer smiling.

"They may be from the North, Moses, but they aren't any different than most other white folks. The last thing I need is for you to get in trouble." She lashed him with her tone. "You could be locked up, put on a chain gang, or worse. Plus, it isn't right, what you're thinking."

She'd lost her mother. She wasn't going to lose her brother. Her father, she'd never had him. Miriam had no idea who'd given her half her being. Mama had never spoken of him. Moses, now, everybody knew his daddy was Big Moses. He'd been off two years working turpentine to help pay the tax bill when word came that he'd died in camp, trying to organize men to ask for wages enough to live on. Mama seemed to give up hope after that. Then the Brocks showed up. Folks started to drift away, including the boy she'd set her heart on. He'd promised to come back for her. It still hurt.

* * *

Miriam thought about Mama as she hiked toward town, keeping the sack tucked under her arm so dirt wouldn't filter through its

rough weave. Mama had worked almost until the day she died, and had trained Miriam to take her place at the hotel. "It's the best way you can make a living in these parts, honey," she'd said. "Easier than doing wash, and a sure sight better than the fields. You've got to work, lest you starve, especially now with the men rounded up in the camps. Nobody's going to give you anything. You do what you have to do, y'hear?"

Mama had been like an anxious wren, tending the rich folks at Ponce Hotel like they were family and like she was honored to see them. She'd run to and fro caring for their needs, getting clothes pressed for the ladies and shoes shined for the men and who knows what else.

Miriam tried, but she didn't have the same servile touch. Folks didn't cotton to her as well, neither, especially the women. Ladies in finery loaded with lace and hats decorated with dead birds always fanned themselves when they got to looking closely at Miriam. Miz Ponce had finally put her to work in the kitchen. "Don't go out to the dining room unless I tell you," she instructed.

Miriam dawdled to inspect the tiny blooms of a clamshell orchid, fragile and hidden among oak leaves and branches. She plucked a bloom stalk and twisted it into her hair.

* * *

"It's about time you arrived. Iron those and be quick about it." Miz Ponce nodded toward a pile of table linens. Miriam barely had time to duck into the pantry and change into her shirtwaist. She removed the orchid and tucked her hair underneath her cap. The flowers had already wilted.

"Every room is full and Mr. Ponce rented all four cottages without telling me so we've got extra mouths to feed and Sarah has the misery again and went home. You'll need to wait at table."

Miriam nodded as though in sympathy with problems of overabundance and missing servants.

"Some of the guests are important men, very important. They haven't been down in years or they've skipped us and gone instead to hunt in Enterprise. We must give them impeccable service. Mr.

Ponce is trying to sell them land." Miz Ponce peeled boiled sweet potatoes with sharp, stabbing moves as she chattered.

Miriam folded a rag around the iron's handle and lifted it off the wood stove. She put a cooled iron in its place, and wiped a smudge of ash off her hand. "Get away from that stove! Don't get dirty!" Miz Ponce snapped. "Never mind the ironing. Help me here. Ada! Finish the ironing. Where is that girl? Miriam, you never gave your mother the problems Ada gives me."

"Yes'm," Miriam said.

"I'm worried we won't have enough sweet potato soufflé," Miz Ponce fretted.

"The tangerines are weighing down the two trees out front, if you want to serve something extra," Miriam offered. She sat down and spread an old towel spread across her lap, and started peeling potatoes.

"Not sweet enough," Miz Ponce said. She set down her knife, picked up the potato masher and attacked the peeled flesh. "These people expect perfection from Florida citrus. Heaven forbid a taste of something tangy crosses their lips. Everything has to be just right. Especially today."

"I could boil the juice into a sugar syrup to sweeten it," Miriam said. "If we pour it over peeled sections and add a sprig of mint, the plates will look mighty nice."

Miz Ponce peered at Miriam over the top of her glasses. "You've got good sense, Miriam. Your mother raised you right. After your work is done take home enough leftovers for yourself and your brother."

Miriam's hand faltered. Miz Ponce wasn't usually that generous. She started to rise to fix the tangerine dessert, but Miz Ponce tapped her on the arm. "You stay here. Lacey, go pick and section the fruit and start the syrup," she said, nodding her command to the servant who had started ironing in Ada's absence. "Miriam, I told you to stay fresh for the dining room. Ada will need your assistance out there. You work the north end of the room, not the south side, understand?" She looked around. "Where is Ada? Sweet Jesus, give

me strength. Ada! It's almost time to start serving. Miriam, remember what I said. Stay on the north side."

* * *

Miriam stood on the south side of the room. She had never touched a chunk of frozen water in all her life but she had a sudden understanding of what the winter folks meant when they talked of ice, of its chill, its hard edges, its brittleness. Tentacles of it coursed through her right now. Her skin felt clammy, while underneath, there seeped a fast, cold current.

Miriam's gaze locked with that of the man named Herbert who had finally looked at her.

His eyes widened, then narrowed and darkened. Miriam saw that any shock to him had been momentary. He had already recovered. Her own breath was so short she feared she'd strangle trying to get enough air. Anger started to burn atop the dull ache that twisted in her stomach.

She wanted to ask him how it had happened. Where? When? Dared she think there was some kind of affection involved? Or was it something brutal? Had he known the outcome? Did he care? Would he care now, this man, who could make her life so much easier? She and Moses could eat for a year, and store-bought, too, and pay taxes for all of Brockville, for the price of that watch hanging off the fob that dangled from Herbert's suit jacket, all sparkly with diamonds.

Herbert threw down the circular and tossed his napkin over his plate with a jerk of his hand. He half rose, then sat back down. "Leave us," he ordered Miriam, with no trace of compassion or hint of acknowledgment. He spoke in an even tone but his eyes were like slits of gray stone in a hot summer's moonlight. He snapped his fingers at Ada as she returned from the kitchen balancing a tray of coffee pitchers and cups. Ada took in the scene, nearly dropped the coffee tray, and squeaked out that Miriam was needed in the kitchen, right away.

Miriam forced herself to focus on the kitchen door and on putting one foot in front of the other.

"Is everything alright?" she heard Ada ask the family.

"Of course, everything is fine," the woman said. "What could be wrong other than the impossible service and inadequate help at this second-rate hotel?" The boy snorted a laugh.

Two men at a table just outside the kitchen cast bold, knowing glances at Miriam. Next to them, a woman fanned herself as though she could blow away unpleasantness. "You do what you have to do," Miriam heard Mama's voice chirp inside her head, as clear as a mockingbird's high note, as she pushed open the door and escaped into the kitchen.

She'd starve before doing what Mama had had to do.

* * *

"Leave. Leave right away," Miz Ponce said. She paced and rubbed her hands, then stopped and hovered where Miriam had set down the plate. "Go out the back and be gone before he or any of his family or friends have a chance to see you again. I cannot believe this is happening. I told your mother not to keep you. But no, she insisted. 'Jesus sent her to me for a reason,' she kept telling me. Now look at this mess. They'll never buy any land."

Miriam wordlessly started fixing a tin pail of food to take home with her. Her hands trembled.

"I said leftovers!" Miz Ponce flew at her. "Oh, never mind. Take some. Just leave. Don't return until I send word. If I send word."

Darkness had fallen, and the temperature with it. Miriam tasted a coming freeze on the air. She yanked off her cap anyway, and tossed it aside before thinking better of her foolishness. She picked it up and brushed the sand off it. She made up her mind as she plodded home. Come daylight, she'd see where that road led.

As she reached Brockville, the temperature had fallen enough for her breath to form puffs of white fog. She heard the rumble of men's voices deep in the grove, heard the clunk of logs being piled atop one another, smelled the charred wood from the smoke pots, and saw flickers of flames from bonfires set to keep the cold at bay. Moses was out there, so young, yet already trying to be a man. Who'd keep track of him if she left? And Mr. Jenkins, always coming

around sniffing for a hot meal the likes of which he'd been missing ever since his wife died. Who'd feed him?

Miriam put down the pail and stood on the edge of her cabin's crumbling step. She felt the chill of the brick on her heel where the shoe leather had worn thin. Not a single cabin was straight. She had a crazy thought of them leaning toward the center of the clearing for protection, like a ring of wagons in the stories Miz Ponce's son told about his early days in the Western territories.

A lantern light flickered in the farthest cabin, and Miriam wondered if Miss Mabel had enough quilts for a night like this. Probably not. She could hardly hold a needle anymore in her bent fingers, and would bless a visitor who came bearing an armful of kindling right now. Mr. Jenkins' cabin was dark. He'd be up at first light, as if he had somewhere to go.

She turned away, and studied the sandy trail, bleached white in the moonlight in parallel paths bisected by fogfruit and clover. Her gaze followed the road north, to the bend that curved at the live oak and was lost to sight. A cloud drifted in front of the moon, and even the bend was swallowed in shadows. The entire road melted into the darkness, as though it didn't exist. Miriam picked up the pail, stepped off the brick and headed east into the grove, carrying food to where she knew there was hunger.

