

The Good Farmer

by Maura Fitzgerald

Barry stands beside the bed railings and drags a big yellow comb through my hair like it's a thresher plowing through the winter wheat. Over and over again he hauls the scratchy tines through the remaining gray tufts, but my scalp is not a soft field that yields to machinery. The comb digs as he pulls it across, my skin tearing like rose petals.

I say to him, "Watch that comb, Barry."

"Pound cake? No, you can't have pound cake yet, Ma. Doctor said so."

My hair should be smooth by now, but Barry keeps combing, scraping. My head probably looks like the aftermath of a bird brawl, downy wisps scattered about, matted together with sticky blood.

"Now just stop it, Barry," I say. "You're going to scrape down to bone if you keep it up." I reach up to feel my hair, but knock off his glasses instead.

He leans in close then, close enough that when he speaks, his words tiptoe out and tuck me in. "It's okay, Ma. Don't talk. I'm right here. It's okay. Rest now. Rest. Rest. Rest."

I do feel tired, so tired that I lie perfectly still, and my eyes close. The comb tills my scalp, turning over slivers of skin into threads of silver hair and flakes of dried blood until it is rich enough for planting. Barry stops combing and I feel his steady hands on my head, gently pressing the wheat into the field, carefully covering each seed. I hear water drip onto the soil in slow, measured drops that swell into a downpour. If the water doesn't flood the field, we will have a good harvest.

