*The Lower Left of Nowhere*

When people say *the middle of nowhere*, they don’t realize that they are not using a hyperbolic phrase to indicate the irrelevance of a location, but are instead referring to a small cornfield with a very malnourished looking scarecrow who is very bad at his job that is the exact center of Nowhere, Oklahoma. Whenever people stop at Nowhere, Oklahoma to use the bathroom or get a dry sandwich for the drive (because lord knows their final destination isn’t Nowhere), the minuscule amount of Nowherians who exist are terrorized by sad pieces of jokey small talk they’ve heard a million times before. *Wow, I can’t believe I’m actually* in *the middle of nowhere! I never knew it was actually a real… et cetera, et cetera.* Today, there have been no visitors. Dakota is grateful.

 Dakota is *not* in the middle of Nowhere, but rather in the lower left of it, parking her thrice-dented silver Honda Civic in the Honeybear Farms gravel parking lot. She brushes her bangs from her eyes, adjusts her tortoiseshell sunglasses with the broken left temple, and sighs. It’s not a sad sigh, or a relieved one. It’s just a sigh. Dakota hates it when people try to read her based on her sighs.

 After slamming the car door shut three times until it finally stays, she walks up to the familiar rust-red building and takes in the unfamiliar sight three feet in front of her.

 “Yams! Get your fresh yams here!” Robin yells to no one before turning to face Dakota. “Is fresh the right word to describe a yam?”

 “What is?” Dakota asks. Robin just shrugs, his faded t-shirt creasing at the shoulders, and pulls out more produce from behind the booth, carefully piling up tubers like a house of playing cards. If yams could be fresh, these would be, Dakota supposes.

 “So.” She reads the large orange bubble letters paint-penned onto the slab of wood above Robin’s head. “Katya and Amy’s Yam Stand.”

“Yup. Made the sign myself,” Robin says, slapping the wood in front of him like it’s a new car he’s trying to sell, or a son he is especially proud of. The cheap charm bracelet he got as a prize for winning bingo down at the old folks’ home (again) jangles as he moves. It’s truly unnerving how good he is at bingo. Dakota almost feels bad for the old folks.

“Don’t you have homework to do? Calculus, or AP Lit or whatever?”

“Nope. It’s summer,” Robin says. “Got plenty of sign-making and yam-selling time on my hands.”

“Whatever they’re paying you, it’s not enough,” Dakota says. Robin’s cheeks are sun-dipped and freckled. They drop as he loses his smile.

“Paying me?”

Dakota must change the subject. Quickly.

“When did this begin?” she asks, gesturing toward the rustic-childhood-lemonade-stand-but-for-yams of it all. She picks up one of the yams closest to her and lightly squeezes it. It feels what Dakota would assume is appropriately firm. She is not very well-versed in how yams should feel.

“Well, it was Amy’s idea—”

“Of course.”

“And we planted them last winter, but Katya said to keep quiet about them in case things didn’t work out.” Robin taps on the stand absentmindedly as he speaks.

“Well yeah, you wouldn’t want to disappoint. You know how people get about their yams.” Dakota puts the vegetable back on the stand, and Robin is about to respond when he is cut off by the large slam of the barn door behind him. The crunch of gravel beneath worn cowboy boots crescendos.

“Hey, speak of the devil!” Robin yells, not bothering to turn around.

“You know I don’t like being called that,” Katya says, and chuckles as she walks up to the stand and leans against it. The wood creaks beneath her solid frame. Her red flannel is rolled up to just above her elbows and Dakota notices one of the buttons on her overalls is missing.

“I see you’re checking out the yam stand,” Katya says, picking up the same yam Dakota did and throwing it in the air a few times, squeezing it after the last catch. She looks like she is much more knowledgeable of proper yam density.

“I am,” Dakota says, smiling. “It looks like a lovely little business venture. But I’m actually here for the—”

“Right! Yes, yes,” Katya interrupts. “Ames should be out with ‘em any second now.” She gestures in the direction of the now-open door, her ring glinting in the sunlight. Katya and Amy began dating in the eighties and began wearing rings three years later. Though the rings themselves never changed, they had been upgraded to legitimate wedding bands a few years prior.

“Congregating at the yam stand, are we?” A muffled voice comes from the doorway. Amy is waddling along the gravel path, a precarious, Seussian stack of crates obscuring everything but legs and eyes; her hooked nose rests on the top crate in a futile attempt to stabilize the heap. For every place where Katya is muscly, Amy is not. She is mostly wiry limbs and knobby joints, and her shock-white pixie cut bounces as she makes her way to the group.

Katya lifts the top crate off the stack as Amy sets the remaining ones down on the stand with a loud exhale. The contents of the crates are now clear—a mass of tightly packed jars of varying sizes, filled with a variety of maroons and magentas.

“Jesus, Amy. How much jam did you make?” Dakota asks. She takes a step closer to the gelatinous hoard, observing it as one would a museum exhibit or a newborn. As Amy digs through the jars Katya holds, their tinkling conjures wind chimes or a dainty silverware collection.

“Enough,” Amy says. “Me and Katya figured that if the yam stand didn’t work out, we could just slap a little paint on the sign and switch over into the spread business.”

“Hey, we don’t need any of that pre-meditated yam negativity,” Robin says.

“None here!” Amy replies. “I just think that jams are a good backup plan if the yams go awry.”

“Well they won’t,” Robin says. He picks up a yam and cradles it. It is reminiscent of high school health class projects where teenagers are instructed to care for a baby that is not really a baby, but rather some kind of inanimate object with a face drawn on it. Dakota would not trust Robin with a baby, inanimate or otherwise. He drops the yam and barely catches it.

“So,” Dakota says to Katya and Amy, who are now somehow both wrapping their arms around each other in an endearing show of affection that also looks physically uncomfortable. “How much do I owe you for these?” She begins to pull out her wallet—peach print, purchased from the artisan fair they host on October Saturdays after bingo—from her back pocket when Katya stops her.

“No, no. Free of charge.”

“Are you sure?” Dakota asks. Katya and Amy are lovely people who run a lovely farm. There are simply not enough people that reside in Nowhere, Oklahoma for them to be able to make much profit.

“Yeah, are you sure?” Robin adds. “Apparently you guys are supposed to be paying me and passing up a sale like this doesn’t seem great for my salary.”

“Who told you *that* lie?” Amy says, roughing up Robin’s hair. It now looks a different orientation of messy. “Besides, you barely do any work. You just sit out here, yelling to no one.”

“It worked on Dakota.”

“Dakota wasn’t coming here for yams, she was coming here for jams,” Katya says.
 “Speaking of which, I’m really willing to pay you guys for those—”
 “Naw, girl, you’re family! Family gets free—”
 “But what about my paycheck?”

“You were fine with no paycheck yesterday.” Now Amy’s interjecting too.
 “Yeah. That was before Dakota told me you guys should be paying me.”

“You know what?” Robin, Amy, and Katya stop and turn to Dakota. Starlings call out to each other from the trees. “I’ve got a twenty and a ten in here. Robin can have them as a tip, so he can get his paycheck and I can still get the jams for free.”

Katya thinks for a second. Amy looks for her response. Robin crosses his fingers. Thirty dollars must be integral for conquering whatever eclectic post-yam-peddling goal he has his sights set on.

“Fine,” she says. Robin cheers. “And tell the elderly that the jam they love so much on their toast in the morning is from their very own Honeybear Farms. You can pay us in publicity.”

“Absolutely,” Dakota says. “Though I don’t think the elderly are the ones that tend to have all of the hot news.”
 “No, the old folks are where it’s at,” Amy says. “They hear about it and then gab to their middle-aged kids and then they talk about it to their twenty-somethings until everyone’s buzzing. That’s how Sia got famous.”

Dakota is sure this is incorrect. She stays quiet.

“Hey, use this for textbooks or mechanical pencils or something,” she says as she hands over the ten and twenty Robin is foaming at the mouth for.

“Yeah, sure,” he says. He will not use it for anything of the sort. Dakota sighs. It is a smiley sigh, tart as blueberries.

When the road-trippers pass by looking for lunchmeat to-go and make jokes that Dakota has heard a thousand times before, she will laugh like she always does. Then she will get in her Honda Civic—which will likely have gained even more battle scars—and putter off to whichever part of nowhere she is needed. Right now, she is on her way to the Elderflower Retirement Home, where she will announce her bounty of jams and will be welcomed warmly (and where she will desperately avoid Mildred, lest she get trapped in another three-hour crochet lesson that amounts to two braids and holey pot-holder).

After her shift is done, she will pull Katya and Amy’s gift to her from the now-empty jam crate, then drive back to her apartment and go to the right drawer beneath the kitchen counter. She will rummage for a sharpie—no good, all dried up, oh here’s one that works—and carefully draw dot-eyes and a toothy smile on her new yam before propping it up on the windowsill where it can bask in the light of the setting Nowhere sun.