

1ST PLACE
FIFTY-FIFTY FICTION AWARDS*

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MAN LEARNING MYTH, MAN LEARNING FOREPLAY

WHEN I WAS EIGHTEEN, people told tales about a man in our county who was on the loose. My dad, Gerald Bancroft, a scrawny inept pig farmer, bragged that he could catch him. My dad lied about everything: new tractors that didn't exist, sperm from one of his lame boars he'd supposedly been offered \$3,000 for an ounce, all lies to make him feel bigger, more important. Willard Poor, aka, The Corn Belt Lord, was rumored to have killed men and seduced wives; after all, he was said to be from the big city of Kokomo, Indiana, on the run from the state pen.

In the parked truck, Lucy reached over and patted my hand. "Hey, my dad's a weird shit too. I just thought we had something in common. Just forget I said anything." She'd just asked me why my dad lied so much. "Really, I'm sorry. I take it back." Lucy waved her hand in the air as if erasing her words from the interior of the truck.

She scooted over next to me. We stared out the windshield at the low field before us. The sun had fallen behind a broken line of pine scrub; it glowed through the limbs, the blaze there looked as if it were truly on fire. Out of nervousness, I reached into the soggy paper bag and snagged another beer, popped it quickly and slurped loudly on purpose. Lucy worked in the county hospital as a CNA and was three years older than me. She smelled like bleach and iodine and smoke; calamine was also there, sweet and medicinal. Lucy put her hand on my thigh and snuggled under my chin. For a moment, it was like she was a relative,

maybe an older cousin or young aunt, needing some tenderness after having been dealt one of life's simple little tragedies, perhaps a divorce or a DUI. But then, in one passion charged move, she untucked her head from my chin and had her lips scrolling along my neck to my earlobe, back down again to my chest and then onto my mouth where she used the tip of her tongue to pry my teeth apart. We kissed and groped, spilt our beers onto the floorboards of the truck; my feet slipped and slid in the mess.

WE SAT HEAVING AND STRAIGHTENING our fronts. Lucy smiled and kissed me again, only this time it was planted on my cheek, meant to say she'd known all along I was trying too hard. The sun was now completely down and a sliver of moon had taken hold over the trees; a blinking airplane droned past a similarly blinking electrical tower. Lucy took her place once more on my side, soft and full of subsiding fire. I smelled her hair. I felt love for her then; it'd all changed so quickly, the way early lust does: one minute your picking on each other, making fun, and the next it's fumbling heat. I felt close to her, and wanted to give her something in return for her generosity. I stared straight ahead. "Lucy?"

"Yeah, what?"

"I saw that Corn Belt Lord guy. This morning, out in the cornfield. He knew my name." I waited for her to respond, believing she'd see my confession as a sign of trust. She lifted her head from me, used her moist hand to turn my chin toward her. She looked into my eyes; her face was negligible in the dark.

"Shit, really?" She didn't have a trace of disbelief in her voice. She pursed her lips, shivered. "You sure it was him?" I told her yes and went on to exaggerate the scene, recounted for her how he ripped an ear of corn from a stalk and how he looked like he was going to crack my head open with it, about the way he sounded when he told me he knew who I was. I made myself go further. I told Lucy he said, "I'm going to make love to women right here in this corn field. The dirt will cling to their bodies when we roll between the rows."

All the hair-raising talk got me some more kisses, ended up with us going at it again, this time ending with me awkwardly slipping my hand up her dress. She was mushy at her thighs, but the trip further up was solid and full of wetness, as hot as a tailpipe. When she came, I was uncertain of what to do next; it held both the dreadful possibility of never happening again and the awful obligation of never going away. But it was enough. Two days later, in the same spot, after her work at

the hospital, I'd tell her more lies about seeing the CBL, a term I'd come up with to move the story along quicker, and she'd finally let me have sex. And I would do it quickly and poorly, without anything more than lies as foreplay.

But this night, before we'd tried anything else, as we drove toward our separate houses, I felt my life was changing for the good. I began to think I was not going to end up like my dad, that my brother and I could run the farm well enough to put us through college. A sense of confidence came over me as I watched the woman I'd just frisked into a heady state of pleasure glide the truck along the torn up back roads with a faint but definite smile on her parted lips. At that moment, had the Corn Belt Lord leaped from the tall fields or swooped down from one of the oak trees we flew under in the truck, I knew I would beat him down with my two manly fists. I reached over and touched Lucy's knee, she smiled and winked. It was for sure: I was not Gerald Bancroft's son, not right then, no way, no how.