

“How to Earn Sugar”

The creaking of the stairs felt inappropriately loud in the cool morning air. Tori Beth stepped gingerly, trying not to wake the household. Her efforts were in vain as her cat, Hermione, barreled down the stairs in front of her in her eagerness to be fed. The orange tabby stopped at the bottom and chirruped, pacing back and forth with her tail held high. Tori Beth smiled as she wrapped an oversized flannel shirt around her skinny body and bent down to greet her adopted companion.

“You know the rules,” she said. “I have to feed the wood stove first.”

Hermione complained, swishing her tail back and forth and promptly tried to trip Tori Beth as she made her way across the living room.

“Do you mind!” she laughed.

The cat watched her open the wood stove’s iron door. Flecks of orange peeked out from amongst gray ashes, hinting at warmth. Protectively tucking her hair into the collar of her shirt, Tori Beth donned the large leather gloves sitting on the wood pile and used a poker to stir the coals back to life. It seemed anachronistic to be tending a fire for both heat and cooking in the year 2044, but things hadn’t been as they were for quite some time now. As she worked, her father’s form came to the forefront of her mind, her own body mimicking his movements. Growing up, her family maintained a camp in the mountains that used a wood stove for heat. The fire at camp was a responsibility he monopolized, although not at the expense of teaching his five children how to maintain a fire.

“In case things go south,” she heard her father lecture, “you need to know how to survive. The adjustment from oil to renewables is not going well up here. You see it. One of these days it’ll catch up with us.”

Neither Tori Beth or her siblings had taken him seriously until the first revolt had sparked in northern California. It became much easier to listen to him after they watched the separatists die to the last person on TV to defend a dam they were intent on blowing up. Now, trapped in this place after the rebels sacked her city and shipped her and her boyfriend to this labor farm, she found her father’s lessons kept the bonds of home alive.

Once she was satisfied the fire would be ready for breakfast, she moved into the kitchen. Hermione stood on her hind paws and batted at Tori Beth’s calf. Tori Beth laughed and retrieved the bag of dried chicken livers the distribution clerk at the Community Commons had provided.

“It’s all you get for a month,” the old woman with a turkey neck had warned. “Stretch it, give the cat ya’ leftovahs if ya’ have any. We can’t be wastin’ resources on pets.”

Tori Beth had bitten her tongue, instead snatching the bag to show she disagreed with the old woman’s assessment. It was nearing the end of the month and it looked like she was gonna make it, despite Hermione’s relentless complaining.

With the cat fed, Tori Beth moved onto human food. Despite the fact they were in the middle of harvest, the menu had not changed. Breakfast was the same it had been since Tori Beth had been brought to the farm two months ago: brown bread and oatmeal. A fan of neither, she was sick of it but it was all their jailers would give them in their weekly rations. Once the distribution clerk had run the harvest calculations that would change but who the fuck knew when that would be. She put water in the oatmeal and, along with the bread, put them on the stove to warm to a palatable level.

The floorboards upstairs began to shift and talk as the others woke. The first downstairs was Anna. With her loose, curly, frizzed out hair, she reminded Tori Beth of her sister. She was also just as skinny, having been here since March. Anna grunted a greeting and moved through the kitchen to fetch her tea.

“I don’t even know why I bother,” she said. “End of the month. No flavor left in them at all.”

“Soon,” Tori Beth replied.

Anna nodded and poured the water over the same tea leaves she’d been using for almost four weeks.

One by one the other people in the house came downstairs. Tori Beth’s boyfriend Harrison, having hopped on his one good leg downstairs, sat at the kitchen table to attach his prosthetic leg and kissed her as she ladled out the oatmeal into his bowl.

“Hey, no buttering up the chef,” she teased.

She and her housemates ate mostly in silence around the huge table in the kitchen. Since there was no electricity, there was no murmur of a radio or television in the background and they’d learned long ago newspapers were not for farms like theirs. Normally the silence was filled with chatter about the usual things: the weather, any chores that needed to be done, memories from home. Memories from before.

To prevent the conversation from curdling into melancholy, Tori Beth seemed to have an endless supply of funny family stories. At times her housemates wondered if all of them were true. It didn't matter because they always ended up laughing. The humor made them forget the long day ahead, at least for a moment. Tori Beth gathered such moments like jewels.

This week was different because of the harvest. Day after day it was sun up to sun down work, few breaks, dead tired sleep, repeat. Her housemates' sluggish movements informed Tori Beth that a story was not welcome this particular morning. Clinks of silverware matched clicks of the clock until the sound of a bicycle skidding to a stop signaled that breakfast was over. Everyone stood and brought their dishes to the kitchen before trudging towards the door. Tori Beth followed them out onto the porch. Their overseer Dominik was waiting for them, his work gloves in one hand and the other hand resting on the pistol in its holster.

"Mornin'," he grunted.

Like most native Vermonters, he was not particularly talkative. Tori Beth's housemates returned the tone in their greeting.

"We're diggin' potatoes today," he said. "So you're gonna be trailin's the machine and sortin'. A freeze is comin' soon and we need'a gett'em in. Tori Beth, you're on lunch duty. Let's move."

Dominik stood to the side and watched as the occupants of the farm shuffled up the road towards the field off in the distance. He followed them, hand still on his pistol.

Tori Beth sighed and returned to the house. To keep herself company in lieu of music, she sang. Soon she was dancing in the kitchen. She forced herself to remember her mother doing the same thing in the kitchen, singing along and dancing to internet radio back when that was still a thing. Without the music the lyrics came in fits and starts. She fought through the blockages, substituting words if she couldn't remember the right one. Her steps bounced to the silent beat as she washed the dishes and began work on lunch. She peeled and chopped the potatoes and, thanks to there being no electricity, stoked the fire to bring it to temperature. There were chores to take care of while the potatoes roasted. After that, apples needed to be cored and doused in vinegar to halt browning. To prevent potential theft by Dominik and whoever was running the harvester, she made sure to create individual lunches. Then there was the loading and, thanks to all the draft animals being used in the fields, pulling the lunch cart by hand to the field itself. Depending on the day, this was a pleasure or a pain. Today it was purgatory.

Everyone was filthy per usual when she arrived and Tori Beth was a sweaty mess. She put on a smile and handed out the lunches to her housemates. One girl, Bri, who was missing two fingers off her left hand from a grenade blast during her capture, sat heavily on the ground and began lifting the potatoes into her mouth with her dirty hands. Tori Beth squatted down and held out a fork to her.

“Hey, don’t give in,” she whispered. “You getting the shits isn’t going to get you home faster.”

Bri smiled glumly. “You really think we’re gonna see home again?”

“Absolutely.”

Bri noted the certainty in Tori Beth’s face, a face she’d borrowed from her benevolently imperious mother. Bri took the clean fork and began spearing the potato wedges.

On her way back to the house she spotted a bicycle coming up from the direction of Lake Champlain. Tori Beth sighed. Cindy, the supervisor for this collection of prison labor farms, was early for her daily visit, probably because of her duties on the surrounding farms. Tori Beth adjusted her hold on the cart and squared her shoulders. Cindy coasted on the bicycle to Tori Beth and drifted to a stop.

“How’s everything today?” she said.

“Same old, same old, ma’am,” Tori Beth replied.

“No issues in the house?”

Tori Beth shook her head. “Everyone’s waiting for the end of the month when the food might change, ma’am.”

Cindy laughed. She pulled her thick salt and pepper hair out its elastic and began fixing it.

“You and everyone else.”

“If I may, ma’am, could we get some sugar so I could bake a dessert?” Tori Beth said.

Cindy regarded Tori Beth with bemusement. “You already talked me into giving you a cat. What makes you think prisoners deserve something that’s actually valuable, like sugar?”

“Is that the ‘communal spirit’ you keep preaching?” Tori Beth snapped. “I know we’re prisoners here, but if that’s how you treated outsiders before this all started, no wonder you had to drag us up here to repopulate this area.”

The words came out before she could stop them. Tori Beth clenched her jaw and immediately looked to the ground. Cindy smirked as she finished fixing her ponytail and put her foot on the bike pedal.

“Like always, Ms. Velente, you’re not wrong,” Cindy said.

She began to pedal and waved goodbye as she took off.

Harrison was working on the woodpile, his missing leg precluding him from labor in the fields. The maul flashed in the sun when he swung it. Pausing as Tori Beth approached, he noted the sourness in her expression.

“What’d you say now?” he asked.

Tori Beth tossed the firewood he’d split into a wheelbarrow.

“The truth,” she said. “The big truth.”

Harrison nodded and Tori Beth related her encounter. Harrison listened without reply. Tori Beth hefted the wheelbarrow and lugged the firewood to the garage. With cars not allowed on the prison farm (lest they get the urge to escape), the garage was the most logical place to keep the firewood dry. She stacked the wood in the rows while Harrison chopped, knowing she had several hours before she needed to start dinner for everyone. As she attempted to close the garage door it stuck and despite her hanging from it, it would not budge. Harrison approached to offer help.

“No, I got it,” she said.

“I’ve done it before...”

“I got it!”

Harrison, having encountered an immovable object, backed away and headed back to the woodpile. He’d learned his lesson long ago. Tori Beth would accept his help only when she was good and ready.

Tori Beth examined the garage door. It was an old fashioned pulley system and the wheels appeared to be pinched against the curved top of the slider. Running into the house, she came back out with Harrison’s tinkering kit from the living room. She tried wedging the track open with a screwdriver first. When that failed she used a hammer to amplify her strength. Nothing. She changed angles and the same result. Tori Beth huffed in frustration and went through the toolkit. She picked up a wrench and locked it into the lip of the track. Slowly pulling

down, the metal creaked and slowly opened. Trying the garage door again, this time it worked. Tori Beth let out a breath.

“We’re getting there,” she told herself, repeating one of her father’s maxims.

She smiled as she packed up the toolkit. She began lugging it back to the house. Harrison set down his maul and offered his hand. Her mission accomplished, Tori Beth handed him the toolkit and he walked stiffly with her towards the farmhouse.

“I have an idea,” he mused.

Tori Beth glanced sideways at him. “What.”

“You want them to give us sugar so you can give everyone hope,” he said. “Maybe we need to give them a reason to give us sugar.”

“What do you mean?”

“What do they prize here above anything else?” he said.

Tori Beth’s forehead furrowed. The answer was labor. It was the only reason this separatist enclave had lasted as long as it had. You don’t work, you don’t eat. Simple.

“What if we could show them a way to save labor? Something repeatable? Accessible?” Harrison continued.

Tori Beth took the toolkit back from Harrison, walked onto the porch, and set it down by the door. She turned to him, arms crossed.

“Aiding the enemy,” she stated. That’s collaboration.”

“It’s what’ll keep us alive,” he replied. “You’ve said it yourself - hope is as valuable as calories.”

Tori Beth smiled and nodded her head. They spent the time after dinner brainstorming what they could do. Options were limited. It was like one of her father’s lessons where he’d give her a selection of seemingly unrelated objects to work with to obtain a goal.

“The best tool you have is this,” he said, pressing a thick finger against her forehead.

Smiling, she repeated the gesture with Harrison, who shook his head and complained he was sleepy. Tori Beth stared into the darkness, eyes flickering back and forth for hours before sleep finally ambushed her.

By the time her rotation for lunch duty had come around again it was a week later and harvest was nearly over. Anna was so tired she fumbled and dropped her spoon into her

lukewarm oatmeal. The silent trudge to the fields was punctuated now by barks from Dominik, who insulted their urban roots.

“No wonder you people are losin’ this thing,” he growled. “Apparently you got no stamina cause you were ridin’ those trains we never got up here.”

Harrison put his hand on Tori Beth’s shoulder to keep her from calling out.

“Later,” he said, “we’ll show ‘em after lunch.”

Tori Beth put together lunch angrily; however, she was her usual chipper, determined herself when she delivered it. Her housemates, housemates, could hear the edge in her voice.

“What are you up to?” Bri asked wearily.

Tori Beth smirked. “Nothing horrible. Yet.”

Even Cindy, coming across Tori Beth as she neared the house, noticed a difference.

“Should I be suspicious, Ms. Velente?” she said, half teasing, half serious.

Tori Beth invited her for dinner in response, surprising the older woman. Cindy nodded and continued by bike towards town.

Tori Beth set to work with Harrison. It had taken almost a week to find everything they needed for the project and even then it wasn’t what she wanted. She’d wanted PVC pipe but plastic was just as valuable as sugar and just as scarce. Undeterred, she’d trudged her tired body after a day in the fields to a stand of saplings near the house, saw in hand. As each one came down, she repeated her father’s mantra: “We’re getting there.” Harrison in moments of free time stripped the saplings of bark and cut them into foot long lengths.

Fasteners were as much of a problem. The scarcity of metal had been apparent on the long march north as they witnessed church bells being towed away from town centers. So nails or screws were out of the question. She spent days wrapping her head around the problem, weighing and considering labor intensive options that she and Harrison didn’t have the time (or energy, honestly) for. Exploring the barn during another evening, she’d nearly shouted with joy when she stumbled upon a large baling twine sitting on a shelf.

She felt a little like a kid on Christmas seeing everything assembled on the garage floor.

“Let’s do this,” she said.

Using a hand-powered drill, Harrison made holes through the centers of saplings and inserted greased metal rods. Tori Beth took the ball of twine and, using knots learned from her father, lashed together a pair of ladders from sticks. To these she lashed four poles, two taller

than the others. They placed the end of the metal rods across the open space. The result was a tilted table with rollers. Placing the lower end at the foot of the garage, Harrison sped a freshly split piece of firewood down from the top. The rollers whirred with a dull, hollow sound and the firewood landed with a thunk on the concrete of the garage floor. Tori Beth laughed. Harrison rested his forearms on the top roller, shaking his head.

When their housemates, accompanied by Dominik and Cindy, returned from the fields, they were drawn towards the garage by the strange wooden sound. They gathered around the contraption that Tori Beth and Harrison had created.

“Would you mind telling me why you were bein’ Boy Scouts ‘stead of workin’? Cindy said.

Tori Beth swallowed.

“Well, that’s why we made this, ma’am. Calories equals life, right? Why spend them dragging stuff around when we have this...” she said, pointing at her head.

Cindy smirked. Tori Beth watched as Cindy circled the contraption slowly, brown eyes calculating.

“I could dock your two’s food for tonight given that you clearly weren’t on task,” Cindy said.

Tori Beth closed her eyes and willed herself into holding her tongue. Cindy waited, hands on her hips.

“Just think, ma’am,” Tori Beth said calmly, “less energy spent gathering and hauling the wood by hand. Less time spent as well. Finishing it faster means we can do other things, things that need to be done.”

Cindy nodded in agreement. “How long it take ya’ make this?”

“Two hours, ma’am,” Tori Beth explained, “but that was with two people using minimal equipment. Imagine what you could do with better tools and lighter materials, like PVC pipe.”

Cindy spun a roller, the dull noise making her smile.

“Low-tech, repeatable, economical,” Cindy thought aloud. “Clever.”

Tori Beth crossed her arms and smiled. Cindy knew it was a grin of triumph, but she had to admit it was a triumph that was earned.

“Okay, Ms. Velente, you win this round,” Cindy said. “I can spring a pound of sugar for this. It’ll be in your allotment for the month.”



Tori Beth's housemates gathered around the table of rollers, whispering amongst themselves. Cindy motioned to Tori Beth to follow her.

"You rode the line today, Ms. Velente," Cindy said. "Close enough to consider yourself warned. Ask next time or there will be a correction."

Heart thudding in her ears, Tori Beth could only nod submissively.

Cindy swung her leg over her bicycle. "Thank you and congratulations, Ms. Velente."

It was only after the bicycle had disappeared around the corner that she felt her stomach unclench. She joined the rest of the prisoners who were her housemates returning to the farm house. For the first time in a month Tori Beth spied a smile on Bri's face. Warmth filled Tori Beth's limbs. Despite their fatigue, the knowledge that soon they would have sugar was a jolt of energy. Stories began to fill the dining room, no one caring if they were if they were true or exaggerations.