

The Summer People



Fran's daddy woke her up wielding a mister. "Fran," he said, spritzing her like a wilted houseplant. "Fran, honey. Wakey wakey."

Fran had the flu, except it was more like the flu had Fran. In consequence of this, she'd laid out of school for three days in a row. The previous night, she'd taken four NyQuil caplets and gone to sleep on the couch while a man on the TV threw knives. Her head was stuffed with boiled wool and snot. Her face was wet with watered-down plant food. "Hold up," she croaked. "I'm awake!" She began to cough, so hard she had to hold her sides. She sat up.

Her daddy was a dark shape in a room full of dark shapes. The bulk of him augured trouble. The sun wasn't out from behind the mountain yet, but there was a light in the kitchen. There was a suitcase, too, beside the door, and on the table a plate with a mess of eggs. Fran was starving.

Her daddy went on. "I'll be gone some time. A week or three.

Not more. You'll take care of the summer people while I'm gone. The Robertses come up this weekend. You'll need to get their groceries tomorrow or next day. Make sure you check the expiration date on the milk when you buy it, and put fresh sheets on all the beds. I've left the house schedule on the counter and there should be enough gas in the car to make the rounds."

"Wait," Fran said. Every word hurt. "Where are you going?" He sat down on the couch beside her, then pulled something out from under him. He showed her what he held: one of Fran's old toys, the monkey egg. "Now, you know I don't like these. I wish you'd put 'em away."

"There's lots of stuff I don't like," Fran said. "Where you off to?"

"Prayer meeting in Miami. Found it on the Internet," her daddy said. He shifted on the couch, put a hand against her forehead, so cool and soothing it made her eyes leak. "You don't feel near so hot right now."

"I know you need to stay here and look after me," Fran said. "You're my daddy."

"Now, how can I look after you if I'm not right?" he said. "You don't know the things I've done."

Fran didn't know but she could guess. "You went out last night," she said. "You were drinking."

"I'm not talking about last night," he said. "I'm talking about a lifetime."

"That is—" Fran said, and then began to cough again. She coughed so long and so hard she saw bright stars. Despite the hurt in her ribs, and despite the truth that every time she managed to suck in a good pocket of air, she coughed it right back out again, the NyQuil made it all seem so peaceful, her daddy

might as well have been saying a poem. Her eyelids were closing. Later, when she woke up, maybe he would make her breakfast.

“Any come around, you tell ’em I’m gone on ahead. Any man tells you he knows the hour or the day, Fran, that man’s a liar or a fool. All a man can do is be ready.”

He patted her on the shoulder, tucked the counterpane up around her ears. When she woke again, it was late afternoon and her daddy was long gone. Her temperature was 102.3. All across her cheeks, the plant mister had left a red, raised rash.

On Friday, Fran went back to school. Breakfast was a spoon of peanut butter and dry cereal. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d eaten. Her cough scared off the crows when she went down to the county road to catch the school bus.

She dozed through three classes, including calculus, before having such a fit of coughing the teacher sent her off to see the nurse. The nurse, she knew, was liable to call her daddy and send her home. This might have presented a problem, but on the way to the nurse’s station, Fran came upon Ophelia Merck at her locker.

Ophelia Merck had her own car, a Lexus. She and her family had been summer people, except now they lived in their house up at Horse Cove on the lake all year round. Years ago, Fran and Ophelia had spent a summer of afternoons playing with Ophelia’s Barbies while Fran’s father smoked out a wasps’ nest, repainted cedar siding, tore down an old fence. They hadn’t really spoken since then, though once or twice after that summer, Fran’s father brought home paper bags full of Ophelia’s hand-me-downs, some of them still with the price tags.

Fran eventually went through a growth spurt, which put a stop to that; Ophelia was still tiny, even now. And far as Fran could figure, Ophelia hadn't changed much in most other ways: pretty, shy, spoiled, and easy to boss around. The rumor was her family'd moved full-time to Robbinsville from Lynchburg after a teacher caught Ophelia kissing another girl in the bathroom at a school dance. It was either that or Mr. Merck being up for malpractice, which was the other story, take your pick.

"Ophelia Merck," Fran said. "I need you to come with me to see Nurse Tannent. She's going to tell me to go home. I'll need a ride."

Ophelia opened her mouth and closed it. She nodded.

Fran's temperature was back up again, at 102. Tannent even wrote Ophelia a note to go off campus.

"I don't know where you live," Ophelia said. They were in the parking lot, Ophelia searching for her keys.

"Take the county road," Fran said. "129." Ophelia nodded. "It's up a ways on Wild Ridge, past the hunting camps." She lay back against the headrest and closed her eyes. "Oh, hell. I forgot. Can you take me by the convenience first? I have to get the Robertses' house put right."

"I guess I can do that," Ophelia said.

At the convenience, Fran picked up milk, eggs, whole-wheat sandwich bread, and cold cuts for the Robertses, Tylenol and more NyQuil for herself, as well as a can of frozen orange juice, microwave burritos, and Pop-Tarts. "On the tab," she told Andy.

"I hear your pappy got himself into trouble the other night," Andy said.

"That so," Fran said. "He went down to Florida yesterday morning. He said he needs to get right with God."

“God ain’t who your pappy needs to get on his good side,” Andy said.

Fran pressed her hand against her burning eye. “What’s he done?”

“Nothing that can’t be fixed with the application of some greaze and good manners,” Andy said. “You tell him we’ll see to’t when he come back.”

Half the time her daddy got to drinking, Andy and Andy’s cousin Ryan were involved, never mind it was a dry county. Andy kept all kinds of liquor out back in his van for everwho wanted it and knew to ask. The good stuff came from over the county line, in Andrews. The best stuff, though, was the stuff Fran’s daddy made. Everyone said that Fran’s daddy’s brew was too good to be strictly natural. Which was true. When he wasn’t getting right with God, Fran’s daddy got up to all kinds of trouble. Fran’s best guess was that, in this particular situation, he’d promised to supply something that God was not now going to let him deliver. “I’ll tell him you said so.”

Ophelia was looking over the list of ingredients on a candy wrapper, but Fran could tell she was interested. When they got back into the car Fran said, “Just because you’re doing me a favor don’t mean you need to know my business.”

“Okay,” Ophelia said.

“Okay,” Fran said. “Good. Now mebbe you can take me by the Robertses’ place. It’s over on—”

“I know where the Robertses’ house is,” Ophelia said. “My mom played bridge over there all last summer.”

The Robertses hid their spare key under a fake rock just like everybody else. Ophelia stood at the door like she was waiting to be invited in. “Well, come on,” Fran said.

There wasn't much to be said about the Robertses' house. There was an abundance of plaid, and everywhere Toby Jugs and statuettes of dogs pointing, setting, or trotting along with birds in their gentle mouths.

Fran made up the smaller bedrooms and did a hasty vacuum downstairs while Ophelia made up the master bedroom and caught the spider that had made a home in the wastebasket. She carried it outside. Fran didn't quite have the breath to make fun of her for this. They went from room to room, making sure there were working bulbs in the light fixtures and that the cable wasn't out. Ophelia sang under her breath while they worked. They were both in choir, and Fran found herself evaluating Ophelia's voice. A soprano, warm and light at the same time, where Fran was an alto and somewhat froggy even when she didn't have the flu.

"Stop it," she said out loud, and Ophelia turned and looked at her. "Not you," Fran said. She ran the tap water in the kitchen sink until it was clear. She coughed for a long time and spat into the drain. It was almost four o'clock. "We're done here."

"How do you feel?" Ophelia said.

"Like I've been kicked all over," Fran said.

"I'll take you home," Ophelia said. "Is anyone there, in case you start feeling worse?"

Fran didn't bother answering, but somewhere between the school lockers and the Robertses' master bedroom, Ophelia seemed to have decided that the ice was broken. She talked about a TV show, about the party neither of them would go to on Saturday night. Fran began to suspect that Ophelia had had friends once, down in Lynchburg. She complained about calculus homework and talked about the sweater she was knitting.

She mentioned a girl rock band that she thought Fran might like, even offered to burn her a CD. Several times, she exclaimed as they drove up the county road.

“I’ll never get used to it, to living up here year round,” Ophelia said. “I mean, we haven’t even been here a whole year, but . . . It’s just so beautiful. It’s like another world, you know?”

“Not really,” Fran said. “Never been anywhere else.”

“Oh,” Ophelia said, not quite deflated by this reply. “Well, take it from me. It’s freaking gorgeous here. Everything is so pretty it almost hurts. I love morning, the way everything is all misty. And the trees! And every time the road snakes around a corner, there’s another waterfall. Or a little pasture, and it’s all full of flowers. All the *hollers*.” Fran could hear the invisible brackets around the word. “It’s like you don’t know what you’ll see, what’s there, until suddenly you’re right in the middle of it all. Are you applying to college anywhere next year? I was thinking about vet school. I don’t think I can take another English class. Large animals. No little dogs or guinea pigs. Maybe I’ll go out to California.”

Fran said, “We’re not the kind of people who go to college.”

“Oh,” Ophelia said. “You’re a lot smarter than me, you know? So I just thought . . .”

“Turn here,” Fran said. “Careful. It’s not paved.”

They went up the dirt road, through the laurel beds, and into the little meadow with the nameless creek. Fran could feel Ophelia suck in a breath, probably trying her hardest not to say something about how beautiful it was. And it was beautiful, Fran knew. You could hardly see the house itself, hidden like a bride behind her veil of climbing vines: virgin’s bower and Japanese honeysuckle, masses of William Baffin and Cherokee roses over-

growing the porch and running up over the sagging roof. Bumblebees, their legs armored in gold, threaded through the meadow grass, almost too weighed down with pollen to fly.

“It’s old,” Fran said. “Needs a new roof. My great-granddaddy ordered it out of the Sears catalog. Men brought it up the side of the mountain in pieces, and all the Cherokee who hadn’t gone away yet came and watched.” She was amazed at herself: next thing she would be asking Ophelia to come for a sleepover.

She opened the car door and heaved herself out, plucked up the poke of groceries. Before she could turn and thank Ophelia for the ride, Ophelia was out of the car as well. “I thought,” Ophelia said uncertainly. “Well, I thought maybe I could use your bathroom?”

“It’s an outhouse,” Fran said, deadpan. Then she relented: “Come on in, then. It’s a regular bathroom. Just not very clean.”

Ophelia didn’t say anything when they came into the kitchen. Fran watched her take it in: the heaped dishes in the sink, the pillow and raggedy quilt on the sagging couch. The piles of dirty laundry beside the efficiency washer in the kitchen. The places where tendrils of vine had found a way inside around the windows. “I guess you might be thinking it’s funny,” she said. “My pa and me make money doing other people’s houses, but we don’t take no real care of our own.”

“I was thinking that somebody ought to be taking care of you,” Ophelia said. “At least while you’re sick.”

Fran gave a little shrug. “I do fine on my own,” she said. “Washroom’s down the hall.”

She took two NyQuil while Ophelia was gone and washed them down with the last swallow or two of ginger ale out of the refrigerator. Flat, but still cool. Then she lay down on the couch

and pulled the counterpane up around her face. She huddled into the lumpy cushions. Her legs ached, her face felt hot as fire. Her feet were ice cold.

A minute later Ophelia sat down beside her.

“Ophelia?” Fran said. “I’m grateful for the ride home and for the help at the Robertses’, but I don’t go for girls. So don’t lez out.”

Ophelia said, “I brought you a glass of water. You need to stay hydrated.”

“Mmm,” Fran said.

“You know, your dad told me once that I was going to hell,” Ophelia said. “He was over at our house doing something. Fixing a burst pipe, maybe? I don’t know how he knew. I was eleven. I don’t think I knew, not yet, anyway. He didn’t bring you over to play after he said that, even though I never told my mom.”

“My daddy thinks everyone is going to hell,” Fran said from under the counterpane. “I don’t care where I go, as long as it ain’t here and he’s not there.”

Ophelia didn’t say anything for a minute or two and she didn’t get up to leave, either, so finally Fran poked her head out. Ophelia had a toy in her hand, the monkey egg. She turned it over, and then over again.

“Give here,” Fran said. “I’ll work it.” She wound the filigreed dial and set the egg on the floor. The toy vibrated ferociously. Two pincerlike legs and a scorpion tail made of figured brass shot out of the bottom hemisphere, and the egg wobbled on the legs in one direction and then another, the articulated tail curling and lashing. Portholes on either side of the top hemisphere opened and two arms wriggled out and reached up, rapping at the dome of the egg until that, too, cracked open with a click. A

monkey's head, wearing the egg dome like a hat, popped out. Its mouth opened and closed in ecstatic chatter, red garnet eyes rolling, arms describing wider and wider circles in the air until the clockwork ran down and all of its extremities whipped back into the egg again.

"What in the world?" Ophelia said. She picked up the egg, tracing the joins with a finger.

"It's just something that's been in our family," Fran said. She stuck her arm out of the quilt, grabbed a tissue, and blew her nose for maybe the thousandth time. "We didn't steal it from no one, that's what you're thinking."

"No," Ophelia said, and then frowned. "It's just—I've never seen anything like it. It's like a Fabergé egg. It ought to be in a museum."

There were lots of other toys. The laughing cat and the waltzing elephants; the swan you wound up, who chased the dog. Other toys that Fran hadn't played with in years. The mermaid who combed garnets out of her own hair. Bawbees for babies, her mother had called them.

"I remember now," Ophelia said. "When you came and played at my house. You brought a silver minnow. It was smaller than my little finger. We put it in the bathtub, and it swam around and around. You had a little fishing rod, too, and a golden worm that wriggled on the hook. You let me catch the fish, and when I did, it talked. It said it would give me a wish if I let it go."

"You wished for two pieces of chocolate cake," Fran said.

"And then my mother made a chocolate cake, didn't she?" Ophelia said. "So the wish came true. But I could only eat one piece. Maybe I knew she was going to make a cake? Except why would I wish for something that I already knew I was going to get?"

Fran said nothing. She watched Ophelia through slit eyes.

“Do you still have the fish?” Ophelia asked.

Fran said, “Somewhere. The clockwork ran down. It didn’t give wishes no more. I reckon I didn’t mind. It only ever granted little wishes.”

“Ha ha,” Ophelia said. She stood up. “Tomorrow’s Saturday. I’ll come by in the morning to make sure you’re okay.”

“You don’t have to,” Fran said.

“No,” Ophelia said. “I don’t have to. But I will.”

When you do for other people (Fran’s daddy said once upon a time when he was drunk, before he got religion) things that they could do for themselves, but they pay you to do it instead, you both will get used to it.

Sometimes they don’t even pay you, and that’s charity. At first, charity isn’t comfortable, but it gets so it is. After some while, maybe you start to feel wrong when you ain’t doing for them, just one more thing, and always one more thing after that. Might be you start to feel as you’re valuable. Because they need you. And the more they need you, the more you need them. Things tip out of balance. You need to remember that, Franny. Sometimes you’re on one side of that equation, and sometimes you’re on the other. You need to know where you are and what you owe. Unless you can balance that out, here is where y’all stay.

Fran, dosed on NyQuil, feverish and alone in her great-grandfather’s catalog house, hidden behind walls of roses, dreamed—as she did every night—of escape. She woke every

few hours, wishing someone would bring her another glass of water. She sweated through her clothes, and then froze, and then boiled again.

She was still on the couch when Ophelia came back, banging through the screen door. "Good morning!" Ophelia said. "Or maybe I should say good afternoon! It's noon, anyhow. I brought oranges to make fresh orange juice, and I didn't know if you liked sausage or bacon so I got you two different kinds of biscuit."

Fran struggled to sit up.

"Fran," Ophelia said. She came and stood in front of the sofa, holding a cat-head biscuit in each hand. "You look terrible." She brushed her knuckles over Fran's forehead. "You're burning up! I knew I oughtn't've left you here all by yourself! What should I do? Should I take you down to the emergency?"

"No doctor," Fran said. "They'll want to know where my daddy is. Water?"

Ophelia scampered back to the kitchen. "You need antibiotics. Or something. Fran?"

"Here," Fran said. She lifted a bill off a stack of mail on the floor, pulled out the return envelope. She plucked out three strands of her hair. She put them in the envelope and licked it shut. "Take this up the road where it crosses the drain," she said. "All the way up." She coughed. Dry things rattled around down inside her lungs. "When you get to the big house, go round to the back and knock on the door. Tell them I sent you. You won't see them, but they'll know you come from me. After you knock, you go in. Go upstairs directly, you mind, and put this envelope under the door. Third door down the hall. You'll know which. After that, you oughter wait out on the porch. Bring back whatever they give you."