Gum

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IT STICKS TO EVERYTHING. STAINS YOUR SKIN, cakes under your nails and makes them crack or tear or bleed. Cleaning yourself hardly helps. You scrub long enough and the grime might wash away but the odor lingers. Sun-ripened raspberry and honey vanilla soaps can't quite cover it up. It stays with you. A year might go by, a decade. You get caught in a cloud of cigarette smoke one day and you inhale and there it is. Motor oil and tractor exhaust. The sun beating down on red clay fields. You in rubber boots, thick pants, and a hat, sweating, swearing, standing among rows and rows of tobacco. The brown gum covering its

yellow-green leaves. The brown gum smeared all over your hands. I still smell it in my sleep.

Every spring, summer, and fall from my sixth birthday to the day that I packed up and left for college revolved around tobacco. It was the same for my mother and her mother and hers. My family could mark the passage of time by matching it to the growing cycle. I lost my first tooth shortly after my grandfather sewed seeds into frost-kissed earth. I got my first period the evening after a morning spent on the planter: the rusted metal seat staining my clothes. Every cycle was the same. I woke up, got dressed, went to school, came back, went to the fields, wished for winter to come. Every day was the same.

The only thing that got me out of the fields, aside from the period, was schoolwork. My grandmother worked as a teacher's aide when she wasn't working on the farm. She expected excellence. Sometimes I'd bring my books to the fields. I'd work through math problems while sitting in my grandfather's rickety pickup truck. Switch with my sister when it was my turn to prime the leaves and her turn to do worksheets. Sometimes I turned in papers that were sprinkled with dusty red clay. I live on a tobacco farm, I'd say if anybody asked. Their eyebrows would lift a little. They always looked surprised. Little black girls don't live on farms anymore, I guess. It's algebra two, I'd say if anybody asked. For some reason, the looks that I got were the same.

As I grew, I wanted less to do with fertilizer and plows and spent more time on my assignments. I got bigger. I could snap the pink and white flowers from the top of the tallest stalks. I started a project on photosynthesis. I got stronger. My cousins and I piled brightleaf on burlap and heaved the giant sacs onto trailers. I toted thick textbooks home from school every day. I applied to college. Of course I did. I got good grades. I had more options than just the fields and Liggett factories. I left before the harvest. My grandfather watched me go. Tears in his eyes and mud on his boots and tobacco gum underneath his nails. My grandmother watched me go. She looked less sad than determined.

It is strange to go into the healing business all the while knowing that the thing that has killed so many people is the thing that fed you, clothed you, got you to school. I sat in biology classes, learned about what tobacco does to you, saw blackened lungs and cancerous mouths. I stopped saying that I lived on a tobacco farm. I left that part out, let my roommates imagine dairy cows and bright red barns. My mother sent care packages after the auctions ended and all of the money had come in. Each cardboard box was full of snacks and sweets and smelled like old pine walls and sunbaked earth and dried leaves and burlap and home. I filled my belly and choked a little on my lies.

I got older. My grandparents did too. It got harder for my grandfather to climb high up in the tobacco

barn and fill the rafters with leaf-laden sticks. My grandmother got arthritis. Each knuckle creaked and curled. She stopped working. She grew tomatoes instead. When I was eighteen, they took the buyout. That was smart, wasn't it? To keep your land and be paid not to grow. To move away from tobacco and help usher in a healthy new age for North Carolina. Smoke free. My grandfather never did smoke. My grandmother quit in her youth. My grandfather quit going to the Farm Bureau and auctions and warehouses. Didn't see Roger or Leroy or any of the other farmers, the workers, the people he had known since my mother was a girl. Didn't see them for a while. My grandmother didn't stop going to church. She didn't talk about the harvest. She told Miss Irene, Miss Melba, and Miss Alease about how well my sister and I were doing in school.

At some point, farming became fashionable. I grew up on a farm, I'd say if anybody asked. My colleagues' eyebrows would lift a little. They'd tell me about sustainable practices and backyard chicken coops. They'd tell me about homesteading and potager gardens and Pinterest. You don't know anything, I wanted to say. I grew up on a farm. I grew up with tobacco in my hands and red clay beneath my feet and Carolina blue skies above me and that means something. The white couple that moved into the house where my schoolmates used to play grew a patch of greenwood tobacco in their front yard. For decoration, they'd say. Heirloom seeds. I'd say nothing.

I wrote a report in graduate school about green tobacco sickness. It took me sixty-five-hundred words and a poster presentation to say that a plant that can kill you from the inside out can also kill you from the outside in. Or at least give you a nasty headache. I scanned medical textbooks, saw pictures of men who looked like my grandfather standing in rubber boots, thick pants, and hats. The symptoms are worst when the skin is wet. I pictured him on the tractor, sweat sticking his shirt to his skin. I tried to remember if he had ever been nauseous or crampy or weak. All I could remember was the scalding metal seat, the mud on his hands, the splinters in my hands from hoisting tobacco sticks loaded down with fresh leaves over to him. Some splinters he removed with his knife. I got an A on the report.

At some point, it occurred to me that I wanted to go home. I'd said that I would never go back. I'd promised Mama that I would always go back. I spent eighteen years getting one degree and then the next and the next. I lived in cities so big you couldn't see stars in the sky. Went to libraries big enough to get lost in. I thought that was what I wanted. One day I got caught up in a cloud of cigarette smoke. I inhaled and there it was. The sweat on my skin and the ache in my back and the gum on my hands and the place that I am from. And there I was. ⊙