

It is unfortunate, that out of all days, May's birthday falls on Changing Day. The sun shines in through the broad windows, casting a light onto Gracie's bed. She begins to stir in her sleep, pulling the sheet over her head. The branches of the oak tree outside sway softly in the wind, brushing against the window.

May peels back the thin sheets and slides her bare feet her boots. With a yawn she moves over to Gracie's bed and shakes her shoulders softly.

"What time is it?" Gracie asks as she rolls over to face away from May.

"Way past up-time, that all you need to know," May replies, "the others are probably already done they mornin' chores." Gracie, surprised by this throws the covers back and jumps out of bed, almost forgetting her own boots.

"Why, why don't you wake me later next time?" Gracie says, staring at May as if she could kill her, but then smiles. May laughs and grabs Gracie by the hand, pulling her out of their small room and into the common space. They stand in the kitchen and watch as the other children move busily about. Brody is standing at the sink, washing dishes.

"May, Gracie, get over here!" Brody shouts over his shoulder at them while continuing to scrub the flowered dish he is working on. "Didn't you see the postin'? You two are on chicken duty today! How lucky, to get that task on such a day!" Both girls groan and exchange a look of disgust, glancing up at the posting board on the wall beside the sink to confirm. Brody finishes his current dish, then smashes it on the floor.

"You seen Thomas and Jules?" May asks.

"They out back too, you'll see em" Brody replies. "I be out there soon too. You all better wait for me to get started." May and Gracie both nod, and turn to head out the back

door. As they pass through the wooden doorframe, May nearly runs into Mallory, who is hurriedly running into the house.

“Those chickens ain’t gonna collect they own eggs, girls” she says as she brushes past them. Gracie and May share a look and remain silent until Mallory is out of earshot.

“I’m still not used to younger ones talkin’ down to me like that. She only nine years old! I know everyone here is younger, but she ain’t gotta be like that,” May says, crossing her arms over her chest.

“I know, but remember, we ain’t got to deal with her much longer,” Gracie replies and begins to laugh, running ahead of May and toward the shed-like chicken coop. May pauses, looking around at the farm. She sees Jules and Thomas, just as Brody said, tending to the vegetables on the left side next to the well. Both of them look like they are slacking off, which most do on this day. She nods, takes a deep breath, and makes her way over to join Gracie.

“I can’t believe you 16 already, May,” Gracie says to her as she picks an egg from under a chicken.

“Well Gracie, you 6. Time’ll fly and you be 16 too,” May replies looking down at Gracie lovingly and laughing. “That is if you don’t get picked before then! Then you be old right away!” May continues, and their laughter comes to a halt. The two continue picking up eggs and putting them in the baskets. Gracie throws every second egg on the floor, making sure it cracks open completely. May does the same, smashing her eggs as hard as she can. A sound at the door of the coop startles both of them. May and Gracie turn and see Brody crack the door open and squeeze inside, shutting it behind him.

“You ain’t started yet, have you?” he asks as he comes to stand beside May, cautiously stepping around the yolks and shells covering the ground.

“Why of course we ain’t, do you see Jules and Thomas here?” Gracie fires back derisively. May shoots a look at her, but then smiles. As she and Gracie begin to laugh, the coop door creaks open again. Dirt-clad Jules and Thomas rush inside, unbothered by the crunching of shells underneath their feet. The five of them stand in a circle and look at each other.

“So, what did we all do today?” May asks, “Me and Gracie, we smashed almost all the eggs we were told to harvest.”

“Jules and me, we tore up the lettuce and squished every tomato,” Thomas chimes in proudly.

“I smashed my dishes, but you all know that already. You must’ve heard me doin’ it!” Brody exclaims. “I also put extra clean laundry in Mallory’s chore pile.”

“We been doin’ things all month to make sure she look the best. I think it will be enough. It worked last time, with John, didn’t it?” May replies, everyone looking down at their feet. There is nodding from each member of the group. “As long as we look as bad as usual, it will be enough,” May finishes, nodding. A silence falls over them.

“You know, I don’t think we ever had someone so old, it’s almost like you already been pic-“ Brody starts but is interrupted by the chime of the bell. The group proceeds silently from the coop back through the oversized door into the common room of the house where the line of the others stretches from wall to wall. May falls into line beside Gracie, and Jules, Thomas, and Brody beside her. The silence that fills the space is deafening.

The front door opens abruptly, exposing a tall man. The man strides through the doorway and stops in front of the line of children. He simply stands there, watching, assessing.

“So, have you all been good kids this month,” he says, beginning to move slowly down the line. “You been makin’ enough food for us? Been doin’ all your chores proper?” he interrogates. There is no answer.

May looks down at Gracie, who has grabbed onto the hem of her dress tightly, wrapping it around her hand. The man continues to walk down the line, looking over each candidate as he passes.

“Which one of you is Mallory?” he asks. Jules and Thomas turn quickly and look at each other, and finally let out their breath. “Mallory, it looks like you have been the best this month,” the man says and he walks further down the line to the girl next to Gracie who has begun to shake.

Mallory begins shaking her head back and forth, slowly trying to back her way out of the line.

“No, no that can’t be right, I ain’t been that good! I swear! I ain’t ready to change yet!” Mallory proclaims as her voice rises.

“Oh, cmon dear, bein’ old ain’t so bad! No more chores for us oldies!” the man continues as he moves closer to Mallory. “Really, you deserve this, you been the best, you know I can only take the best of you, there too many of us anyway, if you jus-”he continues but is stopped when his eyes land on May, surveying her up and down. He motions for Mallory to leave, and she exits nervously. “How, how old are you now?” he asks.

“I’m, I’m 16, 16 to-day,” May replies nervously. The mans pauses, swallowing hard as he moves away from Mallory.

“Ain’t no one here ever reached that age before, have they?” he asks, his eyes unmoving from May.

“No, I the first one,” May says, maintaining eye contact. She turns to look at Brody nervously.

“And how is it that you got to be so old? You ain’t never been good enough to be changed?” the man asks. Gracie moves closer to May, looking up at her.

“I guess not, no. I never been very good at my work,” May replies, her voice beginning to crack. The man gives a cold laugh, and shifts his eyes to Gracie.

“Oh, don’t look so scared! We had a sixteenner up in the North just last week, we all know what gotta happen,” the man said slowly, looking back at May and beginning to grab her arm.

“What, what gotta happen May? What gotta happen?” Gracie asks urgently, unsuccessfully trying to break the mans grip on May. Before May can respond she is pulled by the man, her mouth covered by his harsh hands. The movement has made a rope in his pocket visible. The others watch in stillness as she struggles, not able to overcome his strength. The two exit and continue to the front yard. They slip out of view behind the big oak tree. Gracie is crying, and runs into her room.

Gracie is joined by Jules, Thomas, and Brody, but no one says a word. The fingernails on the limp hands scratch the window of the room, as the wind sways the body back and forth.