

Flo's Gold

by Jennifer Audette

Tomatoes didn't seem like the kind of thing you'd bring to a woman on a first date. Francis hadn't considered this until the moment he passed in front of Florence Kitchell's house, maneuvered the station wagon through a 3-point turn and did a second, cautious, drive-by. His boss's wife had orchestrated this whole mess, using her tennis club connection with the girl's mother to leverage a date for Francis. She'd proposed the idea at the Company's summer picnic a few weeks earlier. "I don't know about that," he'd said. But the boss's wife said, "You need to have some fun, Francis. Trust me." He didn't, but agreed to this and so now, here he was with the tomatoes and a date.

The stone driveway arched through the deep-pile lawn in front of the Kitchell's house. Francis could not bring himself to drive upon the stones so small and white and precise. His father used to be the Kitchell's gardener. Mrs. Kitchell always needed something weeded, dug, purchased, planted, removed, watered, or trimmed; she was his best client. Every few days someone (not his father anymore) raked the driveway's stones back into perfection. It reminded Francis of the Zen gardens his father had dreamed of visiting in Japan and he wondered if the driveway's design had been his dad's idea. Or maybe the desire to visit the Japanese gardens grew from this driveway. Francis had never thought to ask about the dream's origin.

Francis parked the old woody wagon at the curb and studied the page from his pocket notebook, checking and double-checking that this was, in fact, the correct house. He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and snugged his favorite purple tie against his Adam's apple. With a series of short coughs, Francis prepared to practice saying hello. He peered into the narrow rearview mirror. Trying to achieve something casual, he held the smile too long. His mouth looked like a stranger's. The mirror creaked on its old ball joint as he swiveled it for a better angle and moved closer to inspect his teeth. Breath fogged the glass. When had his roots begun to show so much? When was the last time he had a cleaning? He bumped the mirror up to look into his own eyes. Separated like this from the rest of his features, Francis thought that maybe he didn't really know what he looked like. If his face were broken down into its requisite parts, not literally of course, but

in photos, say, would he be able to identify his own eyebrows in a lineup of nothing but eyebrows. Did the curve of his lips come from his mother or his father, and why hadn't he figured that out before they were gone?

"Come on Francis. You can do this. Just smile," he said, patting his cheeks—right left right left right left—the way you'd rouse someone from torpor or for another round in a fight. He forced something big and toothy, willing it up toward his eyes, hoping to see the kind of twinkle his father had. But nothing happened. He closed his eyes and let the smile vanish. It would never work. He didn't have it.

When Francis opened his eyes again, the brown paper bag waited there for him in the passenger seat. He felt a wave of delight roll through him. It swelled up from his heart—no, even deeper down than that—his stomach, his bowels! (He'd read somewhere recently that ages ago, the bowels, not the heart, had been considered the seat of human emotions). Feeling the warmth of the smile radiating to every extremity, Francis looked at his eyes one last time in the rear view mirror. "Close enough," he said to his reflection. Francis stuffed the notebook into his shirt pocket and made his way toward the front door of 332 Gentian Drive with the brown-bag tucked under his arm.

The last syllable of the chime still hung in the air as Florence Kitchell let him in. They looked at each other—Francis slightly up, Florence slightly down. Even in a pair of flats she had an inch and a half on him.

In the grips of his rear view mirror distraction, Francis had failed to practice a proper hello. Now his mind shuffled through possible ways to ease the awkward distance separating two strangers: a wave, a handshake (firm or delicate), a hug, a small nod of acknowledgment. No, none of those options seemed right. He considered the way he'd seen suave foreigners in subtitled movies invade each other's personal space, embracing with a touch of cheek to cheek. No. Too many ways he might botch that sort of thing. He pushed his glasses back up his nose.

"So, you're Frank," she said.

His ears cringed against the hardness of the *k*, the honk of the diminished form of his proper name. Often, he'd correct people, saying, "I strongly dislike that nickname and ask that, henceforth, you call me Francis. Thank you." Today he said nothing, just offered Florence a nod and that was it; there'd be no going back. He'd be Frank to her now.

Her eyes lingered on his purple tie. She laughed a little. He knew the design had lost its style credibility a decade ago, but as far as Francis was

concerned, a gift from his mother never went out of style. He ran his hand across the tie, smoothing it against his chest. His glasses would not stay in place. Florence drummed her fingers against the curve of her hip and nudged the air with her chin toward Frank's tie. He thought maybe she wanted him to remove it, the article offending her that much. But no. Her drumming fingers called Francis's attention to how she'd cinched the waist of her pale yellow dress with a long, sheer scarf the same purple paisley as his tie. Francis, under normal circumstances, did not believe in signs.

Florence was a knockout in that dress with the scarf tight around her waist. He wanted to un-cinch her and pull the silky material through his fingers. A rope of pearls covered the hollow of her throat. The multiple strands clicked together as Florence worried them between her thumb and index finger. Florence lifted her chin in the direction of the station wagon parked at the curb.

"That thing yours?" She paused, looking out the window, away from him, toward the car. "Or your parents?"

"It's mine now, I guess." Her question bothered him. She must have known about his parents, that they were gone. She must have seen his father arriving for work in that car hundreds of times. People were always saying stupid things to him after their death: *a blessing they never had to suffer through old age, at least they died together, they were doing something they loved*, (this one patently false since they'd been killed in a motel fire while visiting their daughter and son-in-law out in California. The son-in-law's new mutt went crazy trying to attack Francis's father and jumped right through a screen door to get at him, then howled for two hours straight until Francis's father left the house, with all his stuff and his wife, for the Motel 6 across town. There was no way anyone could've known about the drowsy smoker in the room next to theirs, but it seemed like someone—management at least—should have known about the faulty sprinkler system). But the stupidest of all the things people said to him was—*they're in a better place now*. Francis thought that one took the cake.

"So you must be Florence. Nice to meet you." He offered his hand but she shook her head, negating his gesture.

"No. I hate that name. Don't call me that."

"So Flo, then?" Francis asked. *What an ugly name. Worse than Frank*, he thought. He adjusted his glasses again, pushing them up higher on the bridge of his nose. He knew how the thick lenses made his eyes seem to jump around in their sockets, grow big and then small, shift from left to right too quickly. Florence looked away. When nervous, his oil glands were

effusive; already he could feel his glasses retrace their downward slide. He remembered how, after he'd gotten home from his parents' wake, he'd taken off his glasses to rest his face from their weight, but still kept reaching up, poking himself between the eyes, to push back against a phantom descent.

"That'll do, I guess. I'm going to change it to something completely different when I get married," she said.

"Oh. Well, why don't you just change it now? What if you don't get married for a long time?"

"Do I look like the kind of woman who might not get married for a long time, Frank?"

"No, you don't look particularly unmarriageable. It's just, why wait?" Francis shifted the paper bag to his other hand.

"I'll wait. It has to be the right match with my husband's. A name has a lot of power, don't you think? I mean, hasn't it been awkward, all your life, having a girl's name?"

"Frances with an *e* is the woman's name. Francis, with an *i*, is the male version. That's the distinction." He smiled a little as he corrected her. *So much for those two years of liberal college education out west*, Francis thought. That's all his boss's wife would say about Florence—that her friend's daughter had dropped out of Reed College four years ago. It had bored her.

"Well jeez, Francis-with-an-i, I know how they're spelled, but they don't *sound* any different when you say them out loud, now, do they?" She sighed and crossed her arms against her chest. "I don't know about this date, Frank. Damn mother's friends! I told her this was a bad idea."

Francis could see into the living room. It was a formal type, for showy guests, the ones who parked their Mercedes and Audis in the white-perfection horseshoe out front. A composed family portrait decorated the space above the mantel. Francis could see the rope of pearls resting expertly against Mrs. Kitchell's airbrushed throat and Dr. Kitchell's scrubbed, white surgeon's hands claiming one shoulder each of his wife and daughter. The room itself was done up in hues with names he imagined like Jersey Cream and Harvard Crimson. Everything about the place felt hushed, pristine and expensive. You'd think it might comfort and reassure with its certainty, its depth; it was a confident house, for sure. But Francis felt cold and pressed-against, like the edges and angles wanted to cut into his skin.

"What's in your fancy package, Frank?" Florence asked.

He opened the bag and looked inside, wishing he'd brought something else—a bouquet of pink roses or one of those yellow, faux-needle-worked boxes of Whitman's chocolates—something that wasn't such a part of him,

didn't give away so much, so soon. But then, the heady scent of perfectly ripe tomatoes drifted out.

"I made these," he said.

"You made them for me?" She took the bag from him. She peered inside.

"Well, no, not specifically for you. I mean, it's just something I do. A hobby, I guess."

"Tomatoes?"

Francis grew tomatoes. His 15' x 25' heated greenhouse started producing perfectly ripe beauties sometime in early June and didn't stop until late October. Crossbreeding for size and flavor had been last season's focus. He

They had no time for domestic perfection, no time to put things back where they belonged, easy for the next person to find. When Francis moved back he let everything stay as it was. To him it looked like love and passion. It looked like life.

described the tomato breeding process: emasculate the flower of the plant you want to fertilize so that it can't self-pollinate, then carefully collect pollen from the donor plant. "There's even a special pollen vibrator for that job," he told her and then felt embarrassed, perverse. The color climbed from his cheeks toward his forehead, as he told her how he lovingly, delicately, went from flower to flower doing what the bumblebees were meant to do, brushing pollen from one plant against the waiting pistil of another. He told her how he'd do this for as many of the yellow blossoms as possible and then identify them with tags so he could collect the seeds from the fruit. The next season he'd plant his hybrid seeds, wait several months and only then would he get to taste his creations. This is what he'd brought to Flo - his experiment, his treasure.

Francis felt like a locomotive picking up steam. Flo held one of the tomatoes in her hand. She sniffed at it. He told her how he hoped these might be a prized hybrid, maybe even good enough to market once he'd found the right name for them. Francis told his date all this and before he lost momentum, even though he couldn't be sure she'd say yes, he asked her to take him to the kitchen. Florence shrugged and led the way.

Francis rolled on, unstoppable now, his passion for pollination, for

tomatoes, for patience and persistence, carrying him along on an inevitable wave. He didn't think about the likely crash at the end: the looking up, the refocusing of his eyes and mind back to the present where Florence was, the possibility that her face would look just as bored as when he started to talk or even worse, scornful. He didn't think about how his breathlessness seemed ridiculous to her, or how the beads of moisture formed and collected in the divot below his nose. He wiped the sweat from his upper lip with his lower teeth, tasting salt. Could he feel Florence leaning in, wanting to get close to his passion, to catch her sleeve in it, to feel it dilute the boredom that coated her? He would not look at her. It would be too easy to get derailed.

In Florence's mother's kitchen everything was white: white cupboards, white walls, white porcelain sink, and white architectural shelves for holding white gee-gaws—tasteful, elegant gee-gaws. Francis rummaged to find what he needed, disturbing the hush of the spotless kitchen, jostling dishes out of their nested security. The white salt shaker and white china plates camouflaged themselves in the kitchen's background, purity within purity. When Francis found what he was looking for, he laid out an oval serving platter and placed the salt shaker offset like an apostrophe.

"Maybe you shouldn't use those. They're my mother's favorites. I could get you a paper plate from the pantry instead." Florence offered. She glanced over her shoulder toward the stairs to the second floor of the house.

He looked at Florence but said nothing, just shook his head, *no*. Frank pulled several knives from a drawer and ran his thumb against the edge of each one. He asked for a sharpener. Florence found it in the first drawer she opened. He thought of how different this house was from where he'd grown up and where he lived again now after his parents' death. Creative chaos still tumbled from every space—his father's library of dreams and plans for gardens and travel, the mad-scientist bottles of tinctures and essential oils his mother extracted from the things they grew together, the overgrown potted plants indoors and the wild outdoor gardens. They had no time for domestic perfection, no time to put things back where they belonged, easy for the next person to find. When Francis moved back he let everything stay as it was. To him it looked like love and passion. It looked like life. It kept him company.

Francis pulled the Kitchell's best knife across the sharpener's abrasive surface with several deft strokes and tested its edge again. Florence watched him. Her hand rested against the red curve of a tomato.

"You're not going to make a mess of things are you?" Florence said, but

she didn't tell him to stop and so he put the knife against the fruit, ready to slice.

He began with a gentle pressure, feeling the give of taut skin, the give but not the break, like a body pressing down on a trampoline's surface before being shot back into the air. But then the knife's sharp edge broke through and a slice fell onto the china platter. Red pulp and gelatinous yellow seeds spilled into a small pool.

Juices ran onto the counter. The flesh yielded easily and the plate filled with thick, fragrant rounds. Francis halved a slice, sprinkled it with salt and watched the crystals dissolve into the surface. The salt's susuration against the ceramic drew out unexpected memories of mealtime with his parents. He remembered the way his father would shake the salt over his food, as if sodium chloride were its own food group. His father never tasted first, just *sprinkle, sprinkle, sprinkle*, with a specific wrist action and pinky tapping against the upended shaker. Francis felt himself doing the same motion now with Mrs. Kitchell's streamlined ceramic shaker, nothing like the crazy collection his mother kept. They came

in tacky pairs: two ears of partially husked corn, a lighthouse and foamy ocean wave, prince and princess frogs. And then, of course, all the holiday couplings: Mr. and Mrs. Claus, Peter Cotton Tail and his bunny honey; two ghosts that could twine together. When Francis was ten years old and tasked with setting the Thanksgiving table, he'd reached way into the back of the



lower hutch cupboard groping around for the turkey/pumpkin pair and the Pilgrim boy/girl pair. What his hand pulled out made it burn with embarrassment. Instead of children dressed in buckled shoes and hats, he held something that looked like the bits between his own pale legs—the bits his mother called his *dinkle*. The other half of the salt and pepper duo was a voluptuous pair of breasts. Francis scrambled to shove them back into the

depths of the cupboard, moving all the other salt and pepper sets to cover his shameful discovery. When his mother called from the kitchen, he'd jumped, slamming the hutch door on his fingers. He'd hid his throbbing right hand behind his back all night, eating awkwardly with the other, so no one would see and ask him about the marks. Even now, fifteen years later, in the Kitchell's dazzling kitchen, his date standing hipshot against the counter giving him the skeptical once- and twice-over, Francis couldn't stop the childish flush that fired his face red from chin to hairline as he glanced at Flo's breasts and remembered how that XXX salt shaker's ceramic nipples felt under his fingers.

“What the hell is wrong with you? You're all red and, Jesus Frank, your face. It's so greas—“

Francis shushed her and said, “Ready?”

He scooped the salted tomato half-moon into his hand, cupping the other hand below. A drop of juice leaked between his knuckles and splattered on the floor. Florence sucked in a breath as if she'd pricked her finger.

A small O of panic took shape on her mouth and her glance darted to the doorway as if expecting to see her mother there. She drew her hip into alignment, stood straight and moved toward the stain, with a white dishcloth in her hand, ready to wipe the mess. Before she could reach it, Frank stepped into her path. More tomato juice seeped between his knuckles.

"Florence." he said and then again, "Florence." He felt the warmth in his voice and it surprised him. She stood right there, within a half-arm's reach, he could smell the Dove brand soap on her skin. Her mouth was open just a little and so Francis slid the tomato slice right in. She had no choice but to chew.

The tomato's flavor seemed to dawn on her slowly as it met first her tongue and then her palate, and then finally the message reached her brain. Color rose into her cheeks. She put one hand over her heart and the other on the edge of the counter for support. The tomato's aroma filled the kitchen: vegetal, acidic, heavily ripe, and edging toward the line of inevitable decay.

"Good god damn, Francis. I've never tasted anything like this," she whispered.

Oh, his right and proper name from her lips! He held another slice ready, not bothering with a cupped hand to catch the drips. Juice fell to the floor making small explosions across the tiles between them, collateral damage spotting the mop boards. With her eyes still closed she waited for more. Francis cut and fed into her mouth, slice after slice of the tomato that would make him famous for its unmatched qualities, the tomato that would provide the down payment on their first house, the tomato he would name in honor of his future wife.

When the brown bag was emptied, Florence sighed and her eyes worked open with effort, coming out of a dream. And she saw. Wet, red droplets and puddles dotted with yellow seeds spread over the counter, the floor, and the baseboards. Steel-gray scratches from the knife marred the white platter. She pulled at the pearls around her neck. Francis could see a flake of tomato skin stuck to Florence's eyetooth and wondered if it might still be there when he kissed her goodnight.

Mrs. Kitchell called down from the upstairs hallway in teasing tones about it being "too quiet down there" and "up to no good". Florence reached behind her neck and unclasped her mother's pearls. She lowered them into a coil. The pearls clicked against the counter with a hard sound like teeth falling into a porcelain bowl. Francis shivered. All his dreams after his parents' death ended with his teeth coming loose, then tumbling into his cupped

hands, a madness of ticking and clacking, so many more than the "32 white horses on a red hill" his mother used to riddle him with as a little boy.

"C'mon, let's go somewhere." Florence said and took Francis's hand. She pulled him away from the mess and out the back door. She ran around to the front of the house with Francis stumbling to keep up, trying to push his glasses back up to their proper spot. He felt sweat gathering on his palm and barely resisted the urge to pull his hand away to wipe it dry on the leg of his pants. At the car, she let go. Florence slid in across the vinyl seat, her yellow dress sweeping sideways so that Francis had to rearrange it back into the car before closing her in.

As Florence settled back into the passenger's seat Francis thought he could smell his mother's scent—a homemade blend of heliotrope and lemon verbena—wafting out the window. There wasn't much left in the house now that still smelled like his parents. Time passes, the look and smell of grief changes, seems to fade. No one asked him anymore how he was doing. For several months after their death, people he barely knew would ask—voices like libraries or church—"How *are* you, Frank?" It used to drive him crazy, all that asking. Now, he'd give anything to have an excuse to talk about their being gone.

Florence smiled at him out the open window, her tooth still smudged with tomato skin.

"Where do you want to go?" Francis asked.

"Hey! You could show me your greenhouse, your tomatoes." she said.

The glow fired up again way down deep in his guts, spreading outward. *Here we are back at my bowels!* he thought, barely stifling a giddy laugh. "It needs a name, you know, the tomato. And I've been thinking..." Francis paused.

"Something good, Francis. The name of things is important." She said.

Francis pushed at his glasses. "What do you think about this? Flo's Gold!" He moved his hand across the sky as if he could see it on a marquee in Broadway lights.

Florence let her head fall back against the seat and laughed. Francis marveled at the delicate distance from the underside of her chin down to the top of her shadowed cleavage.

"C'mon, let's go." She patted the driver's seat.

He hurried around the front of the car, drummed his hands on the faded blue hood and then on the roof before sliding in next to his date. He caught his reflection in the rear view mirror, surprised to see in his own eyes the familiar twinkle of his father's. He wondered if his father had felt this kind

of happiness all the time. Those sparks, that shine, had almost always been there.

Francis started the car. He turned to look at Florence, remembering what she'd said to him back at their awkward beginning. "But, if we name them Flo's Gold, I think you'll have to promise not to change your name when you get married."

"A promise? Oh, I don't know, Frank. We'll have to see." Florence looked out the window. Her fingers fiddled with the memory of pearls and then settled down to rest against her pale throat.

Francis put the station wagon into gear and lumbered out of the Kitchell's neighborhood toward his home, his tomatoes.