

IN MODERATION

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Oh, we're only fooling ourselves when we say we've changed. The human race, that is. We're the same rotten, dirty, hopeful, naive, sick, strong, learned and confused race we always were.

But sometimes, it feels like we've changed.

This evening, sitting on my wooden porch with hand-machined rails and spindles, I look out over the western rolling hills, half-hidden in the mists of distance, and see the rounded edges carved out of the sunset. The day is already starting to cool, like a good autumn day should, and the iced drink in my hand is dripping into my dirt- and sweat-stained breeches.

There, half a mile into the orange haze of evening sits the Cooper house, quiet and solemn. It's a little cleaner than mine, I'll give you that, and a little larger. A little colder too, some would say. A little harder.

The Coopers came to Fair Rock on the good ship Sanctification VI, still run by the firm hand of Nehemiah Jasper, if memory serves me right. And we all know what that means ... The Coopers believe that most things in life are sins. And sin is wrong, they tell me.

But they work, hard, I'll give them that. All 13 of them. Mishael Cooper with his close-cropped iron-colored hair and tightly packed body, he's a workhorse. Even now, I see him, just barely, in the northern section of his acreage, following the automated harvester, sifting through the leavings, making sure the robotic machine hasn't left anything behind. His wife, Elizabeth Cooper, with her high-necked blouses and dresses and long sleeves, is sweating inside, cleaning and cooking in the absence of the automatons we had on our home planets. I have the feeling that even when the Coopers can afford all those machines we used to have that they won't buy them. Through the kitchen windows, even at this distance, I see her shape flitting about inside. Their 11 children are scattered about the property, but not haphazardly. Each one is engaged in a duty that's been specified ... tending to the cattle's evening feed, cleaning chicken houses, helping Elizabeth in the kitchen, scrubbing floors ... Two of the older ones I can see following their father, carrying a bin to hold the leavings that the elder Cooper finds in the dirt behind the robot harvester.

Without being able to see or hear inside their house, I know down deep in my bones that they'll all be scrubbed clean before supper, and that they'll all bow their heads for Mr. Cooper's solemn prayer before digging in to Mrs. Cooper's perfect and filling meal inside the clean house surrounded by the neatly organized rows of produce that's ready for the harvest.

I smile, thinking about it. Those folks don't smile much, but I know that they're happy, in their own way. The strict controls they place on themselves and tight

guidelines for living life ... well, that's just their way of keeping out of trouble. No, they don't smile like idiots, but they've got a deeper satisfaction.

Speaking of smiling ... I glance over to the other side of my modest house, toward the east where the strange constellations that surround this planet are already becoming visible in the deep navy blue sky and the darkening plains of Fair Rock stretch away to what seems like infinity.

That family to the east of me, the Crinshaws, well, they smile a lot, and even now, in the cool of the evening as the sweat of a hard day's work dries on my skin, I can hear their tinkling laughter floating along on the breeze, accompanied by the sounds of music from their entertainment center. It's like this every evening ... the quiet and orderly Coopers to my left, and the boisterous Crinshaws to my right.

I feel my wife's hand on my shoulder.

"About ready for dinner, Honey?" she asks me. I can hear the smile in her voice.

Turning my head up and backward, I see her leaning over me just in time, and I meet her descending lips with my own, giving her a quick peck.

"Is it ready?" I ask her.

"About five minutes," she says. "I'll warn you now, though, it's not nearly as fancy as your dinner was last night. Just beef tips in gravy, beans and buttered hot rolls."

I shrug, still leaning my head back to see her beautiful oval face. "We're not in competition, Baby," I say with a grin. "I have a feeling that if we were, you'd win every time."

"And we'd spend so much time cooking that nothing else would get done," she adds. "Okay, I'll see you in five." She leaves.

More noise from the Crinshaw house catches my ear. This time, it's the scratchy, irritating noise of a child crying. I hear that a lot too, from over there. Like the Coopers, the Crinshaws have a full quota of children ... seven of them, I think, much more than they would be allowed back on the home worlds. But I get the feeling that the two families have their children for different reasons. Or rather, that the Coopers have a reason for all of their children, whereas the Crinshaws don't. They just had them as a by-product of their incessant copulation. I even doubt if Mr. Crinshaw is father to more than three of the seven.

Is it my place to judge? No, I don't believe so. I observe, with my eyes and my ears and my soul as I sit on my porch, now noticing that the sunlight is almost gone. Stars shine directly above me while I sip again from my drink. No, I don't judge the Crinshaws or place the label on them, like the Coopers do. Mr. Cooper has more than once said to me that the Crinshaws are the "vilest of infidels" and that they will one day "be the scum upon the floors of Hades." Is it Mishael Cooper's place to judge the Crinshaws? Maybe it is. But he also prays for them; he told me that, and the firm steadiness of Mishael Cooper's jaw and the unwa-

vering gray eyes tell me that he's serious about it. I assume he prays for me too and I'm glad for it.

I doubt the Crinshaws pray for me, or Mr. Cooper, or anyone else, not that that means anything. No, I won't judge. They just live a little differently, that's all. With the constant stream of people through their doors, the jilting music late into the night, the irregular meals at varying hours, and the wilting, weaving rows of crops surrounding their house, the Crinshaws have their own sort of satisfaction. At least, they're always smiling.

But sometimes, I don't think their smiles mean that they're happy. Not that it's any of my business.

Like that time, three weeks ago, when Mrs. Crinshaw came to my house at dusk, asking for a loaf of bread. It was one of those rare times when her house was dark and quiet. Her husband was visiting FR3, one of Fair Rock's orbital stations, for an interview, she said with a half-burned cigarette hanging from her full lips. She just wanted a loaf of bread, she said, because her kids needed to eat. I didn't ask her why her husband didn't buy her children a loaf of bread; I could see by the condition of their crops that there wasn't much money in the household. I also didn't ask her how they could afford all the partying, drinking and carousing that went on day and night; it's none of my business.

But I did look at her eyes through the veil of smoke from her cigarette until she looked down at the ground, and I saw the hollowness there in her soul for just a moment, but when she looked back up, she was smiling. "I hate to ask," she had repeated.

Well, that night, I went into the house and got her a loaf of bread, and brought it back out, along with a jug of well water. I'd seen their well, and I'd seen that the water-drawing unit was in ill repair. I'd also seen some of their partygoers relieving themselves in the vicinity of the well. So I gave her the loaf and the jug, and just for a moment I saw the watering at the edge of her eyes, before she thanked me and scurried back to her house. I don't know if the watering in her eyes was from sadness or from being scorched by the smoke.

Now, I find myself thinking about that day, and thinking about Mrs. Crinshaw. I don't even know her first name; I've never been introduced to her or to her husband. But I've seen them enough. Mr. Crinshaw's been over several times, shyly and quietly asking to borrow rental credit on the automated harvester, or looking for me to lend him a tool here and there. Those are on the days when he's sober and realizes his farm isn't in tip-top condition; he's not shy or quiet at the parties -- I can hear him across the quarter mile. A few times, I've lent him things, and other times, I've told him I wasn't able to. He's never brought anything back, I can tell you that.

And Mrs. Crinshaw still manages to love him. In fact, one afternoon, on the way back from the city, I saw her loving him right there on their front porch. I'll admit that I watched, as long as it took for me to drive by. She's a gorgeous woman, especially when making love, and I'll bet she's even been called sexy. But I don't think she's happy. No, I don't think she's been happy for a long time.

But the Crinshaws sure sound happy at night.

Me? Well, I live my life by a little phrase my father taught me so long ago. "All things in moderation." That was back on Theory, the little world where I grew up, surrounded by factories and outlet stores. My father was assistant foreman at a weapons factory, every week pumping out tons of heat blaster rifles and particle accelerator weapons for starships. He never seemed to get uptight or "stressed" like the other managers at the plant. "All things in moderation," he would tell me with a wink. "And that includes worry."

So, that's how I grew up. I dabbled in football and a few other sports, and dated a girl here and there. Then I met Christine -- my wife -- in college, where I studied first to be an architect, then to be a teacher, and then a business executive. None of them really fit my personality I guess. None of the professions I mean. Christine fit my personality just right.

We dated some, had a few dinners and a few drinks, and one day realized that we loved each other. It wasn't a crazy, passionate love that blew its fuse every so often, like how the Crinshaws loved each other. And it wasn't a solemn, very exclusive, chaste and jealous love like what the Coopers had. No, we just loved each other and tried to make each other happy. And we succeeded most of the time, I guess.

Not that I'm saying we're better than anyone. No. Just observing.

And I'll tell you this: sometimes I'm jealous of the Coopers, with their completely paid-off house and property, and the largest rows of crops in this sector, and their 11 perfectly-disciplined children who carry a large part of the work load. And, well, I'll admit that I'm a little jealous of Mishael Cooper for his completely uncomplicated view of the universe, where everything's either good or evil, and there's no in-between.

And, hey, who wouldn't be jealous of the Crinshaws' wildly blasting parties? Everyone likes to have fun, right? I know I do. I can be a fun guy. Hell, they party all the time, and I very rarely see them breaking their backs to get the farm in condition for the harvest. It's got to be a little embarrassing to have the least-producing farm on this side of the city, but they seem to know everyone, and everyone seems to go to a Crinshaw party at least once. They know all about the finest wines, the strongest beers, the newest and most popular music, and all of that I can see and hear and smell from my front porch where I'm still sitting.

I know that five minutes has passed without checking my watch, so I get up, take a last gulp from my glass, and wander inside. I can smell the gravy that'll soon smother the beef tips, and of course, the homemade hot rolls fight for their place in my nostrils as well.

Looking at the table, I see that my oldest, John, is helping Christine set the table. He's 11 years old, and looks just like me. John looks up at me and smiles. "Smells good, doesn't it, Daddy?"

I can't help but smile back at his enthusiasm. "Sure does son. I'm going to wash up," I say. "Make sure and leave some for me."

On the way back to the bedroom and shower that I share with Christine, I pass by the bedroom of my daughter, Sarah, who's eight years old. She's reading a book as she lies on her back on her bed, the words scrolling by in the air above her. That holographic reader cost me a pretty penny, but I figured it was worth it.

"Ready for supper?" I ask her.

The words stop scrolling when she looks at me. "Is it ready?"

I see that she looks just like her mother. "Almost," I tell her. "Do you have a minute to help your brother and mother finish up the preparations?"

She nods, and tells the holo reader to shut itself off. With a bounce and a smile, she's off her bed and past me in the hall.

After my quick shower, a wonderful meal, and a nice dinner conversation, John is in his room reading about starships on the Fair Rock computer network, and Sarah's back to her book. With drinks in hand, Christine and I settle into our chairs on the porch. My back aches, from where I dug out two stumps this morning, and my left shoulder is throbbing ... the signs of a hard day's labor. Christine's hands look a little worn; she was gardening today, as well as watching the harvester drop off each load, making doubly sure the right crops went into the right bins.

"Do you think we ought to start going to church?" she asks me, after a sip from her glass.

After a pause, I look over at her. Her dark hair, pulled back loosely, glistens in the moonlight that's rising over the Crinshaw house. Her almond eyes twinkle at me. She's a warm love ghost and I'm happy to have her haunt me.

"Do you want to?" I ask her back.

"Not really," she says, but nods toward the Cooper home. "It seems to keep them in line, though. All their kids are neat and orderly, and they do a lot of work. Discipline can be good."

I shrug. "I'm not really into that much devotion," I say.

"But they belong to something," Christine insists softly, with a slight hint of longing in her voice. "They're a part of the church, and they all believe they have a purpose."

"You're saying that living in moderation can be a little empty?" I ask her with a smile. "A little dull?"

She grins back. "Sometimes. The Coopers have the devotions and prayers and catechisms. And they have all those children and all that order in their lives. The Crinshaws, well ..." She laughs.

"Well, what?"

"They're living it up, burning the candle at both ends, and they seem to be happy too. They have all kinds of friends who're always stopping by. Their parties sound fun." Christine sighs tiredly, looking up out of the porch into the star fields above us.

"I guess we're stuck in between," I tell her.

"But are we happy?" She says back, and I can see the dimples in her smooth cheeks.

"I am," I state clearly. "You?"

She nods. "I think so. I'm not sad. We have everything we need."

"And, I love you," I remind her.

"Oh, that," she grins back. "Yes, I suppose I love you too, you moderated man."

We giggle together softly, and sip from our drinks.

We're happy and we're in control. All things in moderation, and that's the way we like it.

I guess the human race has changed a little bit, after all.

Instead of crowded onto just a handful of planets, we're spreading like wildfire out through the galaxy. If I remember correctly, Fair Rock was the 210th planet on which humans stepped. By the time Christine and I finished building our home here, humans were on more than 300 worlds, riding the magnificent starships of our generation. We farm with computers now, instead of scraping the dirt with our fingernails like our ancestors used to do. And our wars devastate planets now, instead of little countries.

But, in other ways, we're still the same.

We still eat, and learn and love. And, sometimes, we still fight. I'm okay with that; it's not my place to judge.