

Drift River

Leslie Barnard

For the first time in a long time, we had money that was just ours. We'd earned it doing odd jobs all summer, bucking hay bales at the Grimshaws', running a four-wire fence around the Barrys' west pasture, re-roofing the Havermans' barn.

Mom had let us keep a good chunk of it. We were becoming men, she said, and it was time we started working and buying for ourselves. I was only fourteen. It was Joe who'd started looking like a man. He was seventeen and had thick shoulders, stubble along his jaw and over his lip, a pale slash through his left brow from a fight with the Klein brothers two summers back. I was a full head shorter and worried I'd always be if I didn't shoot up soon.

Driving to town in Dad's pickup – Joe behind the wheel, me hanging one arm out the window – I started thinking about what I wanted. Maybe a cap like Joe's. It would take time, though, to get it to look like his, worn out in all the right places. Maybe a dartboard, then, or a good pair of snowshoes, or a knife. My knife wasn't anything special, just something you could pick up at any hardware store. Dad had passed his custom-made Randy Lynn along to Joe. It had an elk-antler handle trimmed with African Blackwood and a four-and-a-half-inch drop-point blade made of gun-blued carbon steel.

I told Joe I wanted a Huskers cap or a dartboard or a pair of snowshoes or a knife.

Joe nodded, eyes on the road.

I asked what he was thinking he'd get, and he said maybe a new pair of waders if they had something cheap. His had a leak he couldn't patch.

"Yeah, I was thinking of that, too," I said.

"What's wrong with your hip boots?" he asked.

"I can't go as deep as I want."

"You don't like going deep."

"That's cuz I don't have waders."

Joe didn't agree or disagree. The landscape blurred past, wheat fields a yellow haze blotted by the occasional shock of color. A red feed shed, roof giving way. Farther on, an abandoned sedan, rust-blotched body pocked with bullet holes, tires gone, crumpled door propped open; where cushions had been, a nest of tumbleweed. Then a massive aspen, white bark gathered like flesh, leaves turning silver undersides to the wind.

Finally Joe said, "Most of the big fish hang along the bank, anyhow."

In town, the main road was blocked. There was a stock show going, a banner strung across the street, horses and cattle displayed in trailers. Joe pulled into Big Jud's, a burger joint with a pair of smiling cartoon milkshakes painted above the front door. "Hungry?" he asked.

"Hell yeah," I said. But the words must have come out awkward because Joe laughed through his nose.

It was dim inside and the big square windows along the

far wall glowed white. Dust caught the light, churned in the air. When the waitress came by with menus, we told her we didn't need them. Joe ordered the Knockout Burger with tots on the side and I said, "Same here."

It was good, being there with Joe. We didn't have to talk all the time. For a while, I stared past him at the silent movie playing through the glass, a movie about men buying and selling and arguing, hats shadowing their faces, mouths hidden behind beards.

Then I said, "We going out to the hills opening day?"
"You bet," said Joe.

I imagined the two of us following a high, whistling bugle, then Joe veering off, me hiking a cliff band, winding between slick walls of limestone, slowly crawling to the crest, hunkering in the weeds. Across, in a patch of meadow between pines, the bull's massive rack suddenly visible; his dark snout, broad chest, coming into focus. Me firing a single shot, hands steady this time. Later, Dad turning from the television, watching me climb the front steps, noticing the difference right away.

I'd never taken an elk before, or even a deer, just turkey, pheasant, and grouse. But both Joe and I had big game tags this year, and he'd been working me all summer, honing my follow-through, reminding me to breathe.

"You think I'm better, don't you?" I asked Joe. "Better than I was before, right?"

"Sure."

"I fill as many cans as you do most days."

"Hey," said Joe, tilting his head, "see who's over there?"

I looked, then quickly looked away. It was the new art teacher, Ms. Bishop.

"Yeah," I said. "So?"

She was only twenty-two, not a real teacher yet, not officially. Since last February, when the regular art teacher, Mrs. Goddard, had a stroke, Ms. Bishop had been covering the south river circuit, coming out to Draper K-8 twice a month on Tuesdays, like Mrs. Goddard had as long as I could remember. But Ms. Bishop didn't teach us how to make yarn dolls or God's Eyes or salt-dough Christmas ornaments. She rambled on about Chagall, Monet, Picasso. She made us discuss Romanticism, Cubism, Abstract Expressionism, assigned essays on "the ultimate purpose of art." She wasn't at all like Mrs. Goddard, she wasn't at all like anyone.

I twisted toward her again. Alone on the other side of the restaurant, she picked at a near-empty plate. Her pinned-back hair looked brown in the low light. She closed her lips around her fork, pulled it out clean. Then she looked up and saw me, saw us, looking at her. Smiling, she started walking over. She was wearing high-heeled shoes and a flowy yellow skirt that just covered her knees. She always looked like that, all dressed up like there was somewhere else she was going right after she finished being wherever she was.

Joe stood and she shook his hand. "Hayley," she said, "Hayley Bishop. I teach -"

"I know who you are," Joe interrupted. "Dwain County specials teacher, as of last year. Born in Fargo, currently living in Merriman, taking weekend classes at Oglala."

Her pale chest speckled red. There were freckles along her collarbones, across her cheeks, the backs of her hands. "Well," she said.

"Town of eight hundred and fifty-six, remember?" Joe said, sitting down. "And I'm pretty sure that includes a few who have already kicked the bucket."

She smiled. "I guess I'll introduce you too, then. Joseph Walsh, former top student at Draper K-8, wrestling star at Dwain County High. And of course, big brother to Carter, here." She touched my shoulder, lightly, there then gone. "How are things?" she asked.

"Fine," I mumbled, sniffing. Her perfume always did this, pinched my sinuses, made my eyes water.

"You okay, Carter?" Joe teased.

Ms. Bishop laughed her smooth, muted laugh, then tapped a hand to the table. "A pleasant surprise, running into the two of you," she said.

Joe glanced across the room. "You here with anyone?" he asked.

"My girlfriend had to run, actually. I was just finishing up."

I tried to give Joe a look, but he avoided my eyes. Pulling out the chair next to him, he said, "Why don't you finish finishing up over here?"

So I had to eat my whole meal with Ms. Bishop jabbering about how she used to live on a farm with goats and chickens and a few milking cows. How she'd loved having animals around, especially the goats because they had so much personality. These days, she said, she was stuck in a one-room apartment, kept company by only a pair of goldfish and a half-dead houseplant. Her folks and older sister, she told Joe, were killed in a car crash the year she turned eighteen.

"Nothing left for me in Fargo after that."

"Sorry for your loss," said Joe, and when he glanced at me, one eyebrow raised, I mumbled the same thing. Jesus, I wanted to scream, you don't have to do that. I know what to say.

"Thanks, Carter," Ms. Bishop said, smiling gently from across the table. Then she turned back to Joe. She pressed a hand to her breast. "Carter tells me you got a heart of gold."

Joe laughed. "How's that?"

"Always helping him with his schoolwork, taking him fishing. Hunting, too, right? You're teaching him to hunt?"

Teaching me? I *knew* how to hunt. I'd been cutting grouse from buckbrush since I was nine. She'd completely misunderstood whatever it was I'd told her - before - when I used to tell her things. Joe needed to correct her, set the record straight.

But instead, he picked his hat off the table, turned it in his hands. "I got a lot of sides to me," he said. Then he looked up, met her gaze. They were silhouetted against

the glass, white light pouring through the narrow space between them.

I sucked down the rest of my Coke and stood. "We'd better go," I said.

"Oh, God, I'm so sorry to have kept you," said Ms. Bishop.

"It's us who kept you, us who should be apologizing," said Joe.

"Why don't you, then?" she said, pulling her purse strap over her shoulder.

"Cuz I ain't sorry," Joe said quietly as he pulled out her chair.

On the street, she told us both goodbye, then smiled at Joe – a strange half-smile – and walked away, her skirt swinging against the backs of her knees.

"Why'd you do that?" I said to Joe.

"What?"

"Act like that?"

"Like what?"

I couldn't explain it, this burning sick feeling in my gut. But I did have my money. A hundred dollars I'd earned. "Forget it," I said. "Let's go."

We hit the hardware store, the tack shop and Charlie's Hobby City, but Joe wasn't interested. He'd walk around once, pick up a few things, then put them down and stand near the door, waiting for me to finish. It made me not want anything either.

Then, leaving Charlie's, I told Joe I knew what I needed. Waders. A pair that fit good, a pair that would last.

"All right," Joe said, breathing out like he was exhausted. We started down Main Street to L & M Sports. Then something caught Joe's eye and he veered toward one of the stock-show trailers. From a ways off, the one he was aiming for looked like it had nothing in it, but when I got closer I could hear them bleating.

"No you ain't," I said, glimpsing the goats through the slats.

"We both should," he said, full of energy now. "We should split it up the middle. It could be the start of a little business."

"Some business."

Hunched at a card table set against the tailgate, the old man selling them glanced up. "Low investment, high-profit," he announced flatly. "The newest and fastest growing small-acreage industry in America."

"You gotta be kidding," I said to Joe.

"Kidding," the man said, finally smiling, revealing large yellow teeth. "Get it?"

Joe checked the price list hung on the side of the trailer and said he wanted to take a closer look. The old man nodded, subdued again. We climbed in and the goats swirled around our legs, crying and grunting and riding each other's rear ends. One rammed my thigh with its horns.

Joe started going through them one by one, checking their eyes, their ears, the feel of their coats. I just tried to hold onto my balls without looking like that's what I was doing.

"This fat girl here," Joe said, his hand resting on the head of one of the bigger goats.

"She's a registered Nubian, that one, dual-purpose meat and dairy," the old man said. "Dam's on her seventh freshening and still milking over a gallon a day."

Between its shoulders and along the underside of its round belly, the doe's smooth, rust-brown coat darkened to black. Two thick black teats hung between its hind legs and a white diamond crowned its debudded head. Its eyes were alien: gold irises slashed horizontally by long, narrow pupils. It was leaning against Joe now, letting him run his hands up its hocks.

"It ain't worth nothing," I said. "What you gonna do with it?"

"Not me, us. It'll take the two of us."

"I ain't spending my money on that ugly rat," I muttered.

The old man gave me a look, spat into a can at his feet.

"We'll start with this one," said Joe, "then we'll save up and get more and pretty soon we'll have ourselves a little business. Then we won't be spending money, we'll be making it. We'll get our investment back a hundred-fold."

"That's right," the old man said, smiling again with all his teeth.

I don't know why I caved, except that I started to imagine Joe and me having a business, maybe a business we'd start now and have going our whole lives. And I liked the idea of being a businessman, of being able to explain things to people. Goats, I saw myself saying to the guys at school, are the next big thing. Low investment, I'd explain. We've made our money back a hundred-fold. And if that actually happened, I could get whatever waders I wanted. In the meantime, my hip boots worked fine.

But heading home, I got the same sick feeling I'd had outside the restaurant. I started thinking I could have something in my hands right now, something to show for all the mornings I woke at dawn to dig postholes or pry up shingles layered three-deep. But instead all I had was a cranky, ugly, knob-kneed rat that was only half mine. Then I thought about Ms. Bishop and the way Joe had acted around her.

"She ain't a good teacher," I said after a while. "She just talks about bullshit." *Starry Night*, she'd told us once, is not meant to be a perfect rendering of a night sky. It's more than accurate, she'd explained, it's true. She'd led us all outside. So? she'd said. What's it feel like? What's it do to you? Not just the colors, but the wind, the smell of the grass. That's what you have to paint.

So I'd painted what I felt, I'd painted her, from behind, the wind pulling her skirt to her body, its slender, curving shape. I'd slipped the simple watercolor in her desk and she'd

slipped it back in mine. Explore some other subjects, Carter, the attached note read.

“Oh yeah?” said Joe, but I could tell he hadn’t heard what I’d said. He was smiling and listening to the radio, tapping out a rhythm on the wheel.

At school it turned out no one thought much of the newest and fastest growing small-acreage industry in America. The guys asked why I didn’t get a decent hunting knife instead.

“You’ll see,” I told them, imagining my brother and me in ten years time, shoulder to shoulder by then, a sign hanging behind us, bearing both our names.

That afternoon, when the bus dropped me, I was thinking I’d ask Joe if he wanted to go to Drift River like we did off and on. We had a secret spot along the western meander, a little outcrop of scoured bedrock you could only get to by picking your way across a wide, pitted marsh, then tunneling through a wall of stickers on all fours. The water was clear there, the fishing easy. When we discovered it as kids, we made a pact to keep all the fish in the family, spat on our hands and swore we’d never tell a soul. It was where Joe had started me sight fishing, shown me how to rig up my own gear. Where once, I’d hooked his neck with a spinner and torn a track to his chin before I realized he was calling my name. Where I would sit for hours when something was nagging me, warmed by the fires Joe made.

When we were kids we kept things there, in the hollowed-out stump we’d lean against to fish the channel. It still held a toolbox filled with our old treasures: a penny that had been run over by a train, a rattlesnake rattle we used to take turns wearing for luck, a bear claw, a bedspring, three buffalo vertebrae, a yellowed Polaroid of our mother, sixteen years old and laughing, a brass skeleton key we’d once believed could open doors to other universes. I figured while we were there today we could talk about our business, draw up a plan, then sign it, fold it into fourths and stow it in the box.

But walking up our long dirt drive, I noticed a silver sedan parked at the top of the hill. I couldn’t place it at first. Then I saw her, standing at the edge of the yard, wearing the same pink dress she sometimes wore to school, but with her long hair let loose over her shoulders, glinting red in the

afternoon light. Joe was there, too, leaning against the fence in a way that made him look bigger than he was.

Leashed to a post, the goat stood between them, its nose under Ms. Bishop’s hand.

I walked past, eyes on the dirt drive.

Ms. Bishop called my name first. Then Joe waved for me to join them, saying she had some pointers for us. “She’s something of an expert,” he shouted across the yard.

“Maybe later,” I yelled and kept walking.

That night at supper Mom and Dad wouldn’t stop talking about it.

“It ain’t conventional,” Mom said.

“But that don’t mean it won’t work,” said Dad, indicating the fridge with a jerk of his chin. “No other use for a plot the size of a piss pot.”

We had a secret spot
along the western
meander, a little outcrop
of scoured bedrock you
could only get to by
picking your way across a
wide, pitted marsh, then
tunneling through a wall
of stickers on all fours.

Mom held a stiff smile, pulled a can from the fridge, passed it across the table. Dad cracked the tab, slurped the foam. It was his first day back from a two-week haul east, almost clear to the ocean.

Dad had once run five hundred head of cattle on the four thousand acres his dad left him. He was a different man then, Joe said. This other man showed up in photographs looking surprisingly tall and slim, his stomach tight to his body, not sagging over his belt buckle as I’d always known it to. In one shot, he appeared alongside a gap-toothed six-year-old Joe at Upper Cut Meat Creek, both of them hoisting full stringers, me toddling at their feet, pointer finger poised just

inches from a flapping tail fin. In another, taken a few years later, he and Joe knelt behind a downed six-point whitetail, Joe smiling wide, Dad gripping Joe’s shoulder, eyes saying, this boy’s my son.

I didn’t remember the man in these pictures, though. What I remembered was dry country. Dust rising like fog off the roads, buffalograss crunching underfoot, hoppers chewing paint off cars. A bare, cracked trail where Upper Cut Meat Creek had been. And increasingly, notebooks spread across the dining room table, my father bent over them, head in his hands.

The seven straight years of drought following my birth eventually pulled the ranch under. By the time I was old enough to shoulder a rifle, Dad couldn’t afford to spend days chasing game in the hills. Later Joe told me the story: We portioned our land away to neighbors until all we

owned outright was the house and a few acres where the old three-rail corral still stood. In retrospect I realized I'd seen it happening, seen our father coming back after signing the latest papers. His eyes glazing as he slumped in front of the TV, watching anything, watching nothing. Then the clink of bottles in the morning, the look on our mother's face when I'd come downstairs and find her clearing them away.

Joe was saying we'd get a male next, breed them, then once we had a sizable herd, we'd make our money milking the females and butchering most of the males. There were some restaurants in Rapid that might be interested, an independent grocery in Omaha. "I'm looking into it," he said. But I was sure contacting those places was her job. She was the "expert," after all.

Joe misread my expression.

"Don't worry, I'll do the butchering," he said. Dad laughed and Mom ran her hand through my hair.

"Now don't tease him," she said.

I jerked away. "Get off me," I snapped.

"You talk right or shut your mouth," Dad said.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean –"

But it seemed he'd already forgotten. Face flushed, he stretched an arm around Joe. "Boy's a regular entrepreneur," he said, speech slurring. "Just like his granddaddy."

"Carter too," Joe said.

Dad swung his gaze across the table, eyes skimming over mine, failing to focus.

"Carter too," Dad repeated, slapping Joe on the back.

Ms. Bishop started coming over regularly. They replaced the rotten rails along the south end of the fence. They lined each side with woven wire, secured the gate with a goat-proof latch. I'd walk past them on my way home from school. At first they'd wave, smile, invite me to join. But I knew they didn't want me there from the way their laughter followed me down the drive and trickled into the house while I sat with my books open, trying to study, wishing she was gone, that it was me outside lifting lumber and pounding nails beside him.

I started feeling sick every other Tuesday. Mom let me stay home but insisted I drink orange juice each morning, convinced I wasn't getting enough vitamin C.

Opening day came and went. Joe said the hills were probably crawling with orange-vesters right now, anyway. "Later is better," he told me. And Dad wasn't there to contradict him – to say we were letting the best weeks of the season slip away – because he was on the road again, running a reefer from Joliet, Illinois to Rio Rancho, New Mexico.

Meanwhile, that goat was doing nothing but eating the yard clean and smelling like shit and sticking its nose under Ms. Bishop's hand all the time like it was a dog.

She called it Nellie, like it was hers and she had the right.

I called it the goat.

She told Joe to put an old cable spool inside the pen and he did and the goat was always on top of it, as if there was something important off in the distance it had to keep an eye on. When it stood like that Ms. Bishop would sit on an upturned bucket, sketching furiously. Sometimes, I noticed, she sketched Joe, too. Joe forking hay into the goat's pen. Joe pounding another T-post, sleeves rolled to his biceps, back soaked with sweat.

Inside, I'd stare at the ticking clock, praying our mother would come home early, see what I was seeing. But most days Ms. Bishop would slip away too soon. "See you, Carter," she'd call. Then I'd peer out the window and watch them say their goodbyes, the way he hung on her car door, the way he smiled to himself as he walked back toward the house.

The few days she and our mother overlapped, Ms. Bishop appeared simply to be giving Joe advice, like any friendly neighbor might do. Mom would even invite her in for soda, scold me with her eyes when I refused to sit and put up with their talk.

One day I saw him lining up cans against the bare shale bluff behind the house. I watched through the window as he draped his body over hers, hips pressed to the small of her back, hand running hers up the forestock. Exhale while you squeeze the trigger, he was probably saying. And be ready for the kick, don't flinch, follow through. I closed the blinds before the first shot rang out.

That night, I dreamed a bull elk was rushing toward me, its crown of tines white in the moonlight. A hunter's fantasy, only it wasn't because suddenly I had no gun, and the elk wasn't an elk at all, but some invisible monster I couldn't outrun. I woke sweating, tried to make out Joe's shape in the next bed. But his blankets were thrown back. I didn't have to peer out the window to know the station wagon was gone.

Dad got in the next evening, in time for supper. He told a few stories about the people he had seen. New Mexico, he said, was crawling with scrawny, smelly, hippy types who went shoeless and braless and wore dreamcatcher earrings and ratted their hair into knots. Said maybe he should give up trucking and start a roadside bead stand. He could burn his face red, stick some feathers in his hair, then charge people twenty bucks to snap a photo of him clapping his hand over his mouth while waving a plastic tomahawk.

"Harold, please," said Mom.

"What?"

"Can we talk about something else?"

"You know what?" Dad said. "Forget it."

He angled his chair toward the TV, aimed the remote.

"Come on, Dad," said Joe.

But Dad was somewhere else. The weather report blared.

A cold front spiraled over a map of the country. Our forks clinked against our plates. No one spoke.

“Hope our tags don’t go to waste,” I said, finally. Joe looked up from his food.

“What’s that, Carter?” said Mom.

“We haven’t been out to the hills yet,” I said, watching the back of Dad’s head.

“Well, why not?” Mom asked Joe.

“Busy,” Joe mumbled.

“And tired, too, right?” I said. “You seem really tired.” Joe stiffened beside me.

Mom looked back and forth between us. “You do look tired, Joseph.”

His jaw muscles flexed. “Like I said, I been busy.”

“Maybe if Ms. Bishop didn’t come over so much,” I said, amazed my mouth was actually forming the words I’d rehearsed, “maybe then you’d have more time.”

Mom’s brow had begun to pinch in the middle. “How much has she been coming over, Joseph?”

Dad turned in his chair.

“What’s this?” he said.

“You know what?” said Joe. “Let’s go out to the hills tomorrow.” He locked a hand on my shoulder. “Let’s get you your first wapiti.”

“Wouldn’t that be something,” said Dad, tousling my hair as he stood. Then he crossed the room, started digging through the fridge.

“Marie,” he said. “God damn it, Marie.”

“Now don’t start. You know I – ”

The front door slammed, cutting her off.

Joe started stacking plates. I gathered a few wadded napkins. “That’s all right,” she told us. “You boys go on, get some rest. You’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

I did as she asked, hurried to bed. Joe clunked up the stairs after me, flipped the lights, climbed under the covers without a word.

After a while, I said his name. I said it again.

Maybe he was already asleep.

We got a slow start because Joe woke late, then messed with the goat half the morning, changing its water, adding scraps to its feed. On the ridgeline, heavy snowflakes fell through the trees, landed wet on our necks, burned our ungloved hands red. Joe didn’t signal me to stay low or keep quiet. He didn’t signal at all. Every once in awhile he stopped, turned his binoculars to the sparsely timbered gorge below, then without glancing back, started walking again.

This continued for hours, which gave me time to think about how stupid it was, coming out this late in the day, this late in the season. By now all the trophies had probably been taken or at least trained to keep out of sight. Staring at Joe’s broad back, at the flakes funneling between his shoulders, I willed him to turn around, willed him to apologize, or at least speak, at least say my name. But he didn’t, he just slogged on, like this was torture, his personal hell – a Saturday spent in the woods with me.

“You got somewhere else you’d rather be?” I mumbled.

He whipped around, gripped my collar, the cold air rushing in. I could see he was ready to hit me, ready to do whatever it took.

Then suddenly, his expression changed. He was looking past me, down the draw. “Now,” he mouthed.

I turned and saw it, browsing at the edge of a ponderosa grove less than a hundred yards off. A bull elk with a monster rack. A Leroy, our dad would have said. I dropped into position, snugged rifle butt into shoulder, braced elbows against thigh and calf, just like Joe had taught me. But my heart was racing, I couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t hold the crosshairs steady. Ms. Bishop was suddenly in my head, her pretty lips smiling slyly, and my father was there too, saying, wouldn’t that be something. Even my mother flitted through my mind. An image of her on her knees, begging me to make the shot. For once, she begged me, please.

I jerked the trigger back and blasted a slug into the snow. The animal immediately took off, sprinting for dense cover, too fast to track.

Instantly, another shot sounded. Then the crunch and snap of brush as the bull’s massive body crashed downhill through the trees. It emerged at the foot of the gorge, then knelt and collapsed in the stream below.

We walked the slope in silence. When we got to the bank, Joe said, “Your turn,” and handed me his knife.

While he went to take a piss, I crouched beside the animal, watched its stomach rise and fall, its nostrils flaring, puffing faint clouds into the cold air. Its big wet eyes rolled and twitched and finally hardened into fixed black marbles bearing the image of my pale face. I put my hand to its chest and felt the warmth beginning to drain away.

Joe came back and found me like that.

“That’s what I thought,” he said, dragging the knife through its throat.

After supper that night, Joe left. He told our mother he

Instantly, another shot
sounded. Then the
crunch and snap
of brush as the
bull’s massive body
crashed downhill
through the trees.

had a school project that needed finishing up. "Might not be back 'til late," he said.

Dad passed out on the couch, drunk, happy, belly full of meat. Mom helped him up the stairs. When their bedroom door closed and the line of light along the floor went black, I set out.

I took one of Joe's shortcuts, rode my bike along an old railroad bed that led straight to the north end of the marsh. The wind sliced through my jacket and the flashlight I gripped against the handlebar was already beginning to dim. But I had to get our toolbox, had to bring it home, spill our things over Joe's bed, show him I didn't care anymore, that it all meant nothing to me.

Crossing the marsh on foot, I dropped my light, raked through the cold muck for it, then gave up, kept on, one arm now gloved black to the elbow. Finally, the thicket appeared ahead, a jagged silhouette against bruised sky. I could hear the steady rush of water on the other side. I found our usual entry-point, ducked under an arc of bramble.

I was on my knees in the dirt when I heard her voice.

She was giggling and saying, "No, no, he didn't."

I inched closer, and an orange glow filtered through the weeds. The fire he'd built for her, the fire I could now hear crackling, could now smell on the wind. I should have realized.

"He did," my brother said, "I swear. I come back and he's got his hand on its heart."

They laughed.

"Such a sweet boy," she said.

Then two metallic clicks followed by the creak of rusty hinges yawning open. Our toolbox, she had her hand in it, and he was letting her.

"Cute," she said. Was she piecing and unpiecing the vertebrae? Tying the rattle around her neck?

Stomach turning, I realized she would soon find the watercolor I'd done of her, buried at the bottom where I'd thought it would be safe.

But I didn't stay to see it happen. I couldn't. Because the next thing my brother said was: "I don't know that that kid's ever gonna learn to shoot." Then the light shifted, and I heard a quick intake of breath, saw a flash of flesh through the weeds.

"You on the other hand," he continued, hand to her exposed breast, mouth to the glowing curve of her throat, "you might have what it takes."

Sloshing through mud, trampling reeds, I staggered back the way I'd come, fumbled for my bike in the dark, then sped down the railroad bed, chest heaving, vision blurred.

Home, I pulled my rifle from the rack, stood a good distance from the goat's pen. My breath remained steady, my hands didn't shake. Perched on the cable spool, it stared my direction, like it knew. Exhaling, I fired once. I watched its legs buckle, its rag of a body tumble into the mud.

I couldn't have known they'd bred her because he never told me anything anymore.

All I knew when I was slicing through her flesh with my brother's knife, splitting her, sternum to anus, was that there was another one inside her, a small curled figure, smooth as a fish, with tiny crumpled legs and soft fleshy hooves and see-through eyelids without lashes. And even then, I didn't stop and I didn't put my hand on any hearts. For a second, though – before letting the steaming organs spill onto the grass and pool there, a stinking, shimmering murk of red and green and gold – I thought the little one inside was beautiful and that it was a shame.