

1,000 Colors.

Peering over a log, the man raised his hand and covered the boy's mouth. His fingers were rough and calloused and smelt of dirt and oranges. The rough skin on the man's fingers tickled the boy's face and the boy smiled and quieted what he was saying to watch his father. Wet snow began to fall between the treetops and a light breeze blew the canopies back and forth gently. The boy looked up and watched the treetops dance in the wind. Thirty yards in front of them something pushed through the bushes and stood brilliant and strong in the grey snow.

The man removed his hand from the boy's mouth and placed a finger against his lips.

"Quiet," he mouthed.

Nodding, the boy watched the animal move forward slowly, its coal black nose rising into the air and twitching one-way and then another. The buck, with its bulging chest and long thick neck, was by far the largest the men had seen on their trip. The animal's antlers stretched from its skull and rested empty in the air like tree branches in the winter. His left antler held a prong that was stubbed and broken short. The boy watched the animal with the broken antler and looked to his father who was studying the animal in his own way. Walnut brown fur covered the animal's body and glistened from the falling snow. The animal's large black eyes darted from place to place; searching the forest as snow began to come down in heavy bunches. The man, who was resting on the balls of his feet, shifted his weight to his front knee and pressed the snow and leaves below him flat with a crunch.

"Shit."

The animal shifted nervously in the snow and pulled its ears forward. Its eyes were black voids the size of baseballs and his nose began twitching again. The boy and his father sat waiting, heavy snow raining down. The snow brought with it a rich smell of pine as it fell through the treetops. The animal turned and moved a few steps forward. Its body was something out of a fairy tale. The boy studied its large pulsing legs, its uneven antlers, and the arch of its back as it moved through the woods and drank slowly—raising his head every few seconds—from a small creek that cut through the trees. The boy suddenly felt an overwhelming love for the animal. He imagined sitting on its back and holding its strong, mangled antlers in his tiny hands.

The man pivoted again, this time raising his knee and lowering it softly onto the soil. Red, wind chapped skin pressed against the wood grain of the rifle handle and the man found his place in the eye of the scope. He waited, breathing slow and steady in the cold evening air. A foot forward and the barrel that was the animal's chest would be clear of the trees. The buck raised and lowered its hooves crunching snow softly behind the pines. Snow that was falling steady had let up and stopped in the time the buck had moved from the creek. The boy shifted glances between his father and the animal. He watched the buck dancing in the snow and watched his father waiting. Steam pushed from both of their nostrils. Great plumes from the large animal, and small streams from the man. In their unseen standoff the forest sat muted with each party lost to its own world. Wind—which had been whistling in the treetops—slowed and shifted, sweeping up from behind the men and pushed forward towards the animal. Hooves that were crunching snow slowed and stopped completely. The boy watched his father pull his face from the rifle and lower the

gun across the arch of his knee. He looked up in time to watch the animal evaporate silently—like a vision—through the trees out ahead of them.

“What happened?” the boy said.

“The wind,” said the man.

“Oh.”

The pair sat watching the forest where the buck had stomped snow into mud.

“Did you see the broken antler?” the boy said, after a moment.

“Yes,” said the man.

The man stood and pulled a backpack from the ground. He swiped the snow and mud from the bottom of the pack and tossed it over his shoulder. In the other hand he held his rifle. Above him a blanket of clouds rolled slowly in a turned off TV gray. He stood watching them roll above the treetops.

“Come on,” he said to the boy, “it’s gonna be dark here in a minute. Let’s get back to camp before it starts snowing again.”

The man started walking through the woods following the tracks they had made on their way in. Watching him as he passed the boy stood to follow. He turned and stared at the empty chunk of woods where the buck had been. Everything seemed still for a moment and he watched for any sign of the giant buck. After a moment the boy turned and followed his fathers tracks in the muddy snow.

The campfire had burned down to cinders and lay glowing orange in the early evening. The man hung his backpack and rifle on a low branch near the camp and built the fire back up until it was crackling and burning hot. Great white flames had started rising

quickly and danced, licking up towards the treetops. An old Buick Sport Wagon in Fire Engine red sat beside the camp. Next to the wagon was a tarp, which lay draped and lumpy over supplies. The man moved the pack and rifle placing them under the tarp and laid several large rocks on the ends to keep the tarp from blowing in the snow. The boy had opened the back hatch and sat wrapped in a pile of blankets in the low bed of the station wagon. He watched his father warming his hands over the newly built fire.

“Do we have to kill the deer?” the boy said.

“If we kill a big one we’ll have meat for the whole summer.”

“Can’t we buy meat?”

“It’s not the same,” the man said, “it’s good to learn to do things for yourself.”

“Oh,” said the boy. The man turned back to the child for a moment and studied him wrapped in blankets. He was playing with something under the sheets. “I just like them,” he said after a moment. “I would rather not hurt them.”

“You’ll learn,” said the man.

Night came quickly and the pair ate beans on toast, which they heated over the fire. After they ate the man laid back against a log resting near the fire and read a paperback novel while the boy played with toy race cars in the bed of the station wagon. After a while snow began to fall lightly and gradually increase until the fire grew shallow and eventually was only smoke. A rich smell of burning wood carried and lingered in the small campsite after the fire had fizzled. The man and the boy watched the snow fall over the windows of the car until the interior grew dark and the windows fogged. They fell asleep inside listening to the warm hum of the radio.

Morning came bright and cold. Sunshine fell through the treetops and melted the snow from atop the car. In the morning light the forest bloomed with bright, garish hues. The man woke before the boy and watched him sleeping quietly for several minutes before he opened the back hatch of the station wagon and felt the cool morning air sweep in and bite softly against his skin. The man moved from the bed of the wagon and wrapped his sleeping bag around the boy and built the fire back up. Snow had fallen most of the night and lay piled softly on the ground.

The sun was slowly climbing above the trees and the snow was forming a thin layer of crust. It was early in the year for snow to stay on the ground and the man hoped it would all be melted by mid-day. The boy had woken up and was peeling oranges in the bed of the station wagon. His father had boiled coffee and was drinking it near the fire.

“Morning,” the boy said.

“Morning, buddy,” said the man.

The pair packed up camp early and began hiking back to where they had found the buck the previous day. The sun was high and warm against their faces as they walked. The trees looked alive and new in the morning sun. Their canopies swayed in the breeze and shook the shadows on the ground as the men walked. Snow was crunching softly under their boots and they hummed a song together as they marched.

“We’re going home tonight?” the boy said.

“Yeah. After we get something to take home.”

“What if we don’t shoot anything?”

“Then we go home defeated men,” said the man.

“What does that mean?”

“It means that we failed,” the man said, turning to the boy. “We lose.”

“Oh,” the boy said. “I don’t want to lose.”

“Me either,” said the man.

They walked steadily not saying anything for a few minutes. The snow was melting quickly leaving a thin layer of mud on the ground and speckling the pair’s pants legs as they walked. The boy jumped every few yards splashing mud.

“I don’t want to kill anything, though,” said the boy, after a few minutes.

“Well,” said the man, “it’s one way or the other.”

“I wish we didn’t have to kill them. I want to ride one like a horse. Like that horse I rode at the fair.”

“They’re not the same as horses,” said the man.

“Oh,” the boy said. “Well, I still want to ride one.”

The man and boy had reached the clearing and been sitting on the backside of a large fallen tree for a little over an hour. Out ahead of them a small creek was running cold and fast through a clearing of trees. Snow lay on the bank of the creek in the shadows of the treetops. The man had pulled a bag of walnuts from his pack and him and the boy were eating them absentmindedly, staring out into the clearing. The boy was watching the small creek, which was shimmering like diamonds in the sunlight.

“I’m bored,” he said after they had finished off the bag of walnuts.

“Play with your cars,” said the man.

“I left them at the camp.”

The man turned and looked back at the path in which they had come in on. Most of the morning snow had melted in the sun and only small patches remained where the shadows kept the ground cool.

“Do you remember how to get back to camp?” said the man.

The boy looked back in the direction of the station wagon. “Yes,” he said.

“Go quickly and come back on the exact same path.”

“Okay,” the boy said.

“It’s dangerous. Other people could be hunting near by,” said the man. “You have to come back on the same path. Do you understand?”

The boy nodded and watched his father.

“Okay. Hurry then,” he said, and watched the boy until he cut around a bend of trees.

The boy had been walking for several minutes, leaping into shallow puddles of mud when he heard the shot ring through the woods. The resounding sound pulled through the trees and hung empty and hollow in the boy’s ears long after the shot had faded away. He turned back towards the clearing and ran back to meet his father. By the time he reached the clearing he found his fathers rifle resting on top of the fallen tree where they had been waiting. Out ahead of him in the clearing a man stood hunched over a large buck that had partially fallen into the small creek.

“Come help me,” said the man, looking up at the log from the creek.

The boy climbed over the tree slowly and made his way into the clearing towards his father and the fallen buck. As he walked his hands began to shake and his heart beat in his ears as though it had replaced his brain. The man was pulling the deer from the shallow creek by the antlers.

“Is it the one with the broken antler?” the boy said. He had stopped several yards off, visibly shaking.

“No,” said the man. “He’s small but he’ll do for now.” He looked at the boy whose eyes had grown red and swollen. “Come help me,” he said. “You’re going to have to carry the pack and the rifle back to camp.”

The boy stood just on the other side of the fallen tree. He was weeping silently now and staring at the mud about his feet. He ground his feet into the mud with his hands in his coat pockets. The man looked down at the deer, let go of the animals twisted antlers and walked over to the boy.

“I need your help,” he said, placing his hand on the boys shoulder. The man’s hands were red with blood from the deer and smelt overwhelmingly rich. “Can you help me?”

The boy raised his arm to his face and wiped his nose with the sleeve of his jacket. After a moment he nodded and climbed back over the fallen tree and swung the backpack onto his shoulders.

The boy followed his father silently. The man had swung the deer carcass over his shoulders with its front and rear legs hanging on either side of his neck. The animal’s head hung hauntingly against the man’s back as he walked. The boy watched the hollow black eyes sway, and tongue fall from the animals open mouth before stepping around his father and hurrying forward. By the time the man reached the campsite the boy was curled up in a cocoon of blankets in the front seat of the station wagon. The pack and rifle had been carelessly tossed in the bed of the wagon and he could hear the child crying as he strapped the animal to the roof of the car.

It was still early but the sun was already beginning to be lost when the pair began their car ride home. As they made their way out of the woods the streets were empty in a crumpled darkness. The man had switched on the radio, which hummed songs by Otis Redding and Roy Orbison in the late afternoon. Extending his hand, the man reached across the cabin and squeezed the boy's shoulder as they drove. The boy was quivering and sobbing softly under the man's touch.

"It's okay, buddy," said the man. "It's okay."

The streets were black except for the headlights, which stretched out in front of the car searching for something in the night. The boy had fallen asleep weeping. The man turned the radio dial and drove on in silence.

When the boy woke he was alone in the cabin of the station wagon. His heart beat against his chest like a boat against a dock during a storm. Stretched out ahead of him the lights illuminated an empty stretch of road. Trees rose up on either side of the road and stood black and imposing in the night. Snow was falling slowly in the wagon's headlights. The boy heard his father cutting the ropes at the rear of the station wagon and the hollow sound of him dragging the carcass of the deer from atop the roof. In the darkness he could make out the outline of his father fading slowly into the void of trees, dragging the animal through the snow. The boy pressed his face to the window—hoping to see his father emerge. Snow sparkled like stars in the ditch, catching light from the cars headlights. The boy sat watching the woods until the blanket of black that enveloped them began to fade and he could make out a thousand different colors resting in the dark. Each of them was a new shade of blue. The boy watched them grow and fade, waiting.

