

Humping the Boonies

The first time he watches his father skin a rabbit, Luke feels nothing but shame.

It's been a long hike, the old army-issue tent weighing him down, and his legs ache as he crouches to watch. Dad's big hands flash the knife with ease, and sinew snaps against the blade.

"Blunt again," Dad mutters, rubbing a big, thick thumb along the edge. Luke feels uncomfortable, the return of those hormonal stirrings, and the shame burns his throat. "We'll make a good stew with this." Dad hands him the knife. "Go on, like I showed you."

He takes it with awkward fingers, fingers that don't want to behave. Dad is silent. Luke swallows. He tries to control his chest which seems to start heaving for anxious breath, and grips the knife more firmly. Luke angles the blade and starts to separate skin from muscle, but his stomach heaves and he turns aside, flinging himself to his hands and knees to retch on the ground. Dad retrieves the knife.

When Luke looks up finally, the job is done. Dad cleans the blade on a rag. As he scrubs at his face with the back of his wrist, Luke wishes his father would hold him and rub his back the way Mom does.

"Better?"

"Yeah."

Dad smiles like breaking an egg: splintered, over in a second.

It's just the other side of dusk. The campfire they build is small and steady. Luke hovers by the fire, letting the smoke fumigate him. Dad says it's the best way to stop the mosquitoes biting. The heat pulls his skin tight, makes him feel like he's expanding. His face feels stretched. He leans back, listening to the cool chuckle of a nearby stream while he waits for his skin to loosen.

It's not quiet out here, not the way he expected. No music, no purr of the car's engine, no voices yelling; Luke had expected to hate every second.

Scrape, scrape.

Luke jumps at the sound. Behind him, Dad's laugh rumbles in his chest.

"Only me, kiddo."

Luke feels his cheeks flush as he stares into the fire. He'd forgotten about the knife. He listens to the chalkboard shear of his Dad sharpening it. Scrape, scrape.

The smell of the rabbit stewing makes his belly clench, hunger surprising him. His stomach has been burned out all afternoon, the taste of bile lingering despite the gum he smuggled in his pack. He helps himself to a small portion of stew, burning his lips when he brings the tin spoon up to his mouth. It's delicious and rich, filling his throat with the green bite of the herbs Dad brought from home. Nothing like the food he and Mom eat on their knees in front of the TV.

"Is it good?"

Luke nods. His father joins him at the fire, ladling a good portion into his own mess tin. They eat in silence, surrounded by noise. Luke can hear movement in the trees and the air; the gut-clenching terror of rustling leaves and underbrush when something big lumbers past their camp. Birds, bears: Luke doesn't know what might be out there. Nature's not his strong point.

"You done?" His father holds out his hand for Luke's tin. While Dad rinses the tins in the water they collected from the stream, Luke roots through his backpack for the bag of marshmallows.

"You want one, Dad?" he calls.

There's no reply. He spears a marshmallow on a thin, sturdy stick collected specially, and settles, contented like a hen coming to roost. The stick sits warm and comfortable in his hand while the stream laughs away. He holds the marshmallow over the flames, watching it blacken, sugar crimping. He pinches it with thumb and forefinger. Nearly. Luke glances over his shoulder, trying to see Dad's

face. With the fire behind him Luke can't see anything but Dad's outline strong against the darker shade of the trees.

A log cracks, pops bright in the fire and falls deeper in. The sound startles Luke, and the marshmallow, heavy with melted sugar, drops into the fire. Dad's hand falls heavy on his shoulder. Luke feels very small, clutching the stick like he's been caught at something.

"That knife still needs sharpening."

"I'll do it."

Luke lets the stick burn, opening his palms to receive the whetstone and the small-handled knife. Dad crouches behind him, warming his cold back and placing his big hands over Luke's. Without speaking, his father guides their movements; the slow scrape, scrape fills the clearing. Luke can't help worrying what Mom will say if she finds out. Dad pulls his hands away but stays close, heavy breath dampening Luke's neck.

"Enough," his father says after a minute, getting to his feet and taking the knife back. He tests it against the hairs on his arm. The campfire makes his face glow and darken; a caricature, orange and misshapen. He glances back at Luke. "Time for bed, kiddo."

Normally Luke loves the comfort of his sleeping bag, but the forest is nothing like camping in Leonard's treehouse. He lies awake feeling sweaty and cold all at once, while claustrophobia makes him fidgety. The tent stinks of a damp garage. He can feel its weight pressing down on him, and he imagines his father hauling it through the jungles of a far-flung country.

Dad started telling him about it once. *When I was In country*. That's what he calls it.

Out on the mountainside a creature screams. Luke wonders if it could be a fox. They pick through the garbage outside his apartment block. The first time he heard a child screaming outside his window he had to change his wet sheets after. Mom was working. He didn't know until after that it was a fox. He huddles closer to his father's sleeping form, trying to block out the sounds of the outdoors.

He wakes some time later, confused to find the tent still dark. A tree root has nestled up to his side and Luke shifts until he finds a more comfortable spot. The darkness weighs in, pressing him down. Sleep wraps warm arms around him, but as his eyes close again he's startled by a noise. The sound whirrs beside him like the cough of an engine struggling to start.

"Dad?" There's no response but a repeat of the soft, arrhythmic sobbing. Luke starts to reach out, but hesitates. "What was it like over there?" He whispers. He doesn't mean to say it, and his mouth falls open as if he can just let the words march back in. Mom made him promise never to ask.

Dad doesn't reply, so Luke moves closer, letting the tree root get cosy, and pushes his face against his father's back. He breathes in woodsmoke, sweat, old spice. For the second time this trip, unfamiliar feelings stir in his belly: hormones pushing at his senses, testing the boundaries. While his father cries in his sleep, Luke lets go in a sleepy haze of warmth, arousal and shame.

Dad's quiet the next morning. More than usual.

Luke talks more, trying to compensate. He packs up the tent by himself, the way Dad showed him in the park before they left. It's wonky and loose, guts trailing down his back, but his father just nods and packs up their food. When they're ready to go, Luke holds his hand out for the compass and map.

"Let me go first today."