

## Chainsaws and Cardboard Boxes

As soon as I see the ewe hunched in the corner of the barn, I know she's lambed. Know there's trouble, too, with that freeze in the air. It's the kind of cold that rattles in your chest. The killing kind, if you're careless.

The ewe bleats, stamps her foot and shakes her head. I take it as a sign.

"Easy, girl," I say, "Take it easy."

As I come near, I see one lamb, all legs and twitching, head darting for a teat. The ewe stamps her foot again.

"Just one?" I ask, then see the still puddle of skin crinkled in the corner, hard as ice and just as dead. That's the way of things. The living lamb fusses, jerks toward mama's teats again. She stamps, pushes the lamb away.

"You idiot ewe," I say.

She swings her head, catches the lamb's side and knocks it over. It flounders, legs kicking, then twists to its feet and makes for mama's teats again.

"Enough," I say to those rectangular pupils, her face veiled in thin blue behind every breath.

I shuck off my boots in the mudroom, call for Jess to grab blankets for the bummer lamb as I unfold a cardboard box. I set the lamb inside. It bleats against the sudden walls, and I shush it with a soft tap on its nose. When I pick up the box, the lamb tumbles over, shifting the weight in a rush that almost slips the box from my hands.

"Little shit," I say, fumbling to keep the lamb from spilling out.

I open the door, the sizzle of bacon a sweet warmth in the air, and set the box by the kitchen stove. Jess walks in, blankets in arms.

“Hello little lamb,” she says. Her belly is swollen, and she swivels as she walks in that leaning-back way that’s almost elegant, for a pregnant woman. “Prefer warmth to the cold, do you?”

I kiss her on the neck. She shivers against the cold stubble on my face, but her skin is warm on my lips. I leave her to pad the inside of the cardboard box with the blankets.

Outside, the chill smacks me sharp again, stiffens my lungs. In the barn, the ewe sniffs the second lamb, and you know, maybe it’s me, but it’s almost funny how she seems to favor the still lamb over the one that was jawing for her teat. Funny in that dark kind of way that tastes bitter and weighs heavy in the gut.

I crouch and pry the lamb loose from the floor. It rips away with a squelch, like sod being torn from its layers. My God, it’s cold. The lamb’s legs are tucked underneath and rigid, and I imagine that it was praying when it died. I carry the lamb by one of its legs, let it hang stiff from my hand as I walk through the field to the edge of the woods on the hillside.

I reach the fence and toss the dead lamb over and into the woods. Foxes got to eat too, after all, though it’s no pleasure. Then I walk back to the house, hands in my coat pockets, my steps crunching through snow the only sound in the cold before the sun rises.

There’s a memory like this, a foggy day when I was all knees and elbows. Dad and me, we’d found an old Hampshire early one morning, its head sticking through a square in the wire fence, maybe reaching for grass on the other side. Poor thing had gotten stuck and was strangling itself, and

Father said there's a lesson here, though he didn't explain it to me then. We tried twisting the sheep's head, yanking and pulling against the wool, but it was good and stuck, and we couldn't get under the wire with cutters to cut it loose, and it just couldn't breathe.

So Dad took a pistol, told me to look away. Then he shot the sheep in the forehead. When it stopped kicking, he took a chainsaw, pulled its string and waited as the saw whizzed to life, then he teetered through the bones in the sheep's neck until its head and body snapped. He carried the head by the ear, I remember how it sagged like a grocery sack from his hands, how he was a silhouette in the fog as he carried it to the edge of the woods on the hillside.

Now there was a man who understood the bittersweetness of the world.

Jess has warmed some powdered milk in a pan on the stove. I find a suckling bottle, fill it up and top it with a rubber nipple. I take the bottle, warm against my hands, now, and sit on the floor next to her. She guides the lamb's head while I hold the bottle to its mouth. The lamb jerks forward, sucking the nipple hard and fast, its tail wriggling in excited anticipation.