

Tomato Soup

It's only been a few days since we arrived here at Uncle Joey's place, but I don't think I like it all that much. Dad says he loved growing up here as a kid, but I'm still not so sure as to why. All of the open space outside kind of scares me, and the not so open space inside Uncle Joey's cramped little cottage does too. It's all pretty scary if I'm being honest, even Uncle Joey. He's out back with Dad right now, they're fixing something in the yard. I'm sitting on the front porch. I like it out here. It's the perfect balance of scary, at least until the odd gunshot beams out from the woods behind the house and startles me. I just heard the loudest one yet about half a minute ago. It sounded so close I thought the bullet might whizz out from the trees and hit me. Dad says it's people 'hun-tin'. I'm not so sure what that means yet, but I know it has something to do with shooting guns. He says soon I'll be old enough to find out, though.

I had lunch not long ago. Mom brought it out here for me. She made me a BLB, which is just a BLT sandwich with extra bacon and no tomato. I *hate* tomatoes. It's funny, though, because I really love tomato soup. I'm the only one in my family who doesn't like them. They remind me of medicine, and not the kind of medicine that Mary Poppins lady sings about either, because not even all the sugar in the world, and most certainly not a single spoonful, could help that medicine go down. Speaking of food, Uncle Joey says that he's in charge of dinner for tonight (which is odd because I've never seen him cook before). But he says that we're having a very special dish: 'rabbit cacciatore', which is apparently just a fancy Italian way of saying of tomato soup, only with rabbit. The tomato soup part sounds amazing, but I'm not so sure about the rabbit. I've never had rabbit before, and I've never seen it in any of the grocery stores back home either, so I didn't even know you could eat it up until he told me. I wonder where they get it from out he-

'Ow!'

Just then, something digs its way into my back and pushes me forward off my stool.

‘C’mon sport, get in the truck, we’re goin’ fetch us some dinner.’

It’s uncle Joey, or more specifically, his boot.

It felt like his whole leg would have gone right through me if he’d kicked me any harder.

‘Dinner?’ I say. ‘But it’s lunchtime.’

‘Exactly,’ he chuckles, ‘it’s gettin’ late so we better hurry on up.’

Not looking to appear any more clueless than I already had, I promptly comply. I follow him around the side of the house to where his truck is parked. The old thing has to be at least five-hundred years old. It’s faded and rusted and red like a rotten tomato. Gross.

‘Isn’t anyone else coming?’ I ask.

He points to the front seats of the truck, and, with only his eyebrows, says, ‘No space.’

‘Oh-’ I want to inquire further, but as I struggle to find the words, he creaks open the passenger door, boosts me up onto the seat, and slams it shut so fast it doesn’t even have a chance to creak again on the way closed. I start to feel a lot like that car door.

His truck smells like he smells: a funky mixture of wood, dust, and something else I can’t quite identify, and frankly, don’t want to. The truck sputters awake with a cough that would put any smoker to shame, and as I turn to reach for a seatbelt that isn’t there, the speakers let out a racket that make me wish the radio wasn’t either.

We whisk out the drive and onto the road, although it’s hard to tell where the one ends and the other begins—it all just looks like dirt. I watch as the already tiny cottage grows even smaller in the side mirror. I think I notice a figure standing out front in the reflection for a second. It looks like Mom or someone

is flailing their arms up at us from the front porch, but before I can tell for certain, a cloud of dust crowds out the house completely.

Uncle Joey turns the radio down a couple clicks, but not nearly enough to benefit conversation. 'You know where we headed, bud?'

I pause for a second, not wanting to get the answer wrong. 'Yeah... yeah I do.'

'Ah, so ya Dad told ya then,' he says. 'I knew he would, dammit'

'Uh, yeah... yeah he did,' I say as convincingly as possible.

He looks at me, squints, and smiles. He knows I'm bluffing. 'Alright, so where we goin' then, boy?'

'To get some, uh, to get some dinner' I reply desperately.

'Well I already done told you that much,' he says, rolling his eyes. 'Where we goin' pacifically?'

'To... ' I pause. 'The grocery store?'

He laughs. 'The grocery store! Ye that sounds 'bout right.' He laughs again.

We keep driving on for about ten minutes or so until we near a long stretch of forest. Uncle Joey hops out.

I look around, trying my best to be casual. 'Where's the grocery store?'

'The grocery... It's uh, just on the other side of them woods,' he says, pointing to the dense forest ahead, 'can't get to it by car.'

He walks around to the back of the truck and reaches for something tucked away in the corner of the truck bed. He pulls out a long stick draped in a small blanket and carefully unravels it in his hands. He chucks the dirty cloth back into the bed of his truck, and there in his hands, is the biggest gun I have ever seen. In fact, it's the only gun I have ever seen, but it would have to be one of the biggest in the world.

I stare at the gun.

He's going to kill me! I feel like I've already been shot. I can feel the bullet right there in my throat. I gulp and swallow but it won't go away.

‘Oh don’t you worry ‘bout this here now,’ he says, holding up the gun. ‘It’s just in case we run into any trouble ‘long the way. To the uh, the grocery store.’ He chuckles.

‘Truh... Trouble?’

‘Y’know,’ he says, pausing for a second. ‘Wild animals and such.’

‘Like... Like what?’

And with the slyest, proudest smirk I have ever seen on a man, he says, ‘Rabbits’.

I follow gingerly behind as we walk through the woods towards the grocery store. Dinner at lunchtime? The gun? The rabbits? Something doesn’t feel right. Then it clicks.

We aren’t getting dinner from the ‘grocery store’ at all!

‘Uh, Uncle Joey?’

‘Ye boy,’ he says to the trees ahead, still walking.

‘Uh...’

I need his attention. I stop. He keeps on for a couple paces until he finally senses I’ve fallen behind.

He turns and faces me. ‘What’s goin’ on, boy?’

‘D-do you think, maybe, I-I could, uh,’ I pause.

‘Well spit it out, son.’

‘Uh, try and uh...’ I swallow. Hard. ‘Sh-Shoot the gun?’

He pauses, then laughs, then pauses again. ‘You serious, boy?’

‘Yes, I, uh...’ I panic. ‘Hun-tin! I, uh, I want to do the ‘hun-tin’ thing Dad told me about.’

‘Goddammit, so he really did tell ya what we was doin?’ He looks confused, but at the same time disappointed.

I don't say a word.

Uncle Joey swings the gun off of his shoulder, clicks it together, and turns directly towards me, gun still in hand. My heart sinks. He's called my bluff once again. I close my eyes wait for a bullet to find its home somewhere in my chest, or to join the one already occupying my throat, but it never comes. Instead, I'm hit with the words: 'Ah, what the hell!'

Uncle Joey grabs left hand, wraps my stubby little fingers as far around the middle of the gun as they will go, and then gently positions my right hand a bit further back, a few inches from the trigger.

'Now, when I tell ya,' he says, with his right hand still faintly guiding mine, 'slip your finger in there,' now pointing to the trigger, 'and squeeze.'

He slowly steps back, leaving me to solely wield what I now gather to be a shotgun.

'See that tree over there?' he says, pointing with his finger, 'That's your target'

So this is what 'hun-tin' is? Shooting trees?

'Where do I aim?' I ask.

'Aim for the trunk.'

I look at him. 'What if I see a rabbit?'

He laughs. 'Aim for the head.'

As soon as he confirms what I already think to be the best target, I spin around, aim the barrel as best I can at where I think Uncle Joey's head to be, and as Uncle Joey's eyes widen, mine clench shut, and I squeeze.

When I open my eyes, I'm on the ground. The shotgun is lying beside me, and beside it, Uncle Joey. I stand up slowly, and creep towards him, taking my first glances at his motionless body. Starting at his feet, my eyes trace their way up his dusty overalls to where his head is supposed to be. It's leaking blood into

a thick red pool—it looks like tomato soup. I feel sick, and the BLB sandwich I'd had at lunch makes its way up and joins the soup on the forest floor.

I turn around, my head spinning, and run straight back to Uncle Joey's truck. I stretch out on the front seat (which I now realize could most definitely have fit three people) and sob. I sob and sob until I don't remember sobbing anymore.

I wake up to a frantic knocking on the window after what feels like a week's worth of sleep. The sun's rising. It's morning. I look up. There's Mom. She's crying and yelling and smiling all at the same time. I open the door and she wraps her arms around me. 'I thought I'd lost you!' she says, squeezing me tighter.

I start crying too. 'Don't worry, Mom, I'm okay.'

'Is Dad alright?' I say.

'What, sweetie?' She looks confused.

'I heard the gunshot yesterday on the front porch, Mom.'

'Honey, what are you talking about?'

'It was so loud, and it sounded so close by, so I knew it had to have come from the backyard—where Uncle Joey and Dad were. And then when I saw you waving us down from the front of the house—something felt off—and so I thought about it all, and it just clicked.'

'Honey, what on earth are you talking about?' she asks, even more frantically.

'I know Uncle Joey killed Daddy!'

Completely baffled, her crying turns into hysterics. But before she has a chance to respond, I hear a car door slam behind her. I look left, and there's Dad, hopping out of the driver's side of their car, rushing over to us.

'What the hell's goin' on?' he says, rushing towards me. He puts his hand on my shoulder and draws me in close. 'Son, what's happened?'

I can't believe it. 'B-B-But the gun shot...' I say, looking up at him. 'I thought...'

'What gunshot?' he says, almost immediately.

'T-The one, the one from yesterday... out back...'

'What the hell are you talkin' bout, kiddo? At home? You mean when Uncle Joey and I were fixin' up his shotgun for y'all little huntin' trip?

'Wh-What?'

'He let me shoot a test shot for old time's sake, sport. Now where's your uncle?'

'B-B-But Mom!' I say, panicking, directing my focus to her. 'Why'd you c-come out front and try flag us down when we were driving away...?'

'Sweetie...' she murmured through her tears, 'I'd packed you and your Uncle some snacks. And you'd left before I-' Her cries drown out the remainder of the sentence.

There's a thousand bullets in my throat now, and a thousand more in my heart.

Dad, now completely baffled, looks me in the eyes, as serious as I've ever seen him. 'Son... Where Is Your Uncle Joey?'

I lead them to the body, sobbing the whole way. The pool of blood around his head has partially dried up, like the ring of soup that collects around the sides of the bowl as you eat it.

Mom weeps uncontrollably, while Dad paces back and forth, riddled with confusion and disbelief.

'I-I-I can explain,' I say. 'I thought he was going t-to... to kill me!'

'What! Why in the hell would you think somethin' as stupid as that!' Dad says.

‘W-Well, he, he said we were getting dinner from the grocery store and—’
‘Son, there ain’t no grocery stores out here for fifty miles! Y’all were goin’ rabbit huntin’!’

‘I... I didn’t know...’

‘Well for Christ sake, didn’t he tell ya?’

‘W-Well, no... No, Daddy, he didn’t.’

‘Goddammit!’ he yells, breathing heavy. ‘So that’s why he made me promise not to tell you,’ he says to himself. ‘He said *he* was gonna tell you, but he probably just wanted to scare ya, kiddo. Shit!’

‘I’m sorry, Daddy, I...’

He holds his head in his hands for a minute or so. ‘So where’d y’all go huntin’?’

‘What?’

‘Well you’d be hard pressed to find a rabbit ‘round this side the forest, so you musta gone huntin’ someplace else first.’

‘N-No... Daddy, we didn’t.’

He looks at me, now the most puzzled I’ve seen him all morning.

‘Then what in the hell were y’all doin’ out here?’ He starts looking around, eying the trees up and down, scouring the forest floor.

‘Honey, what is it?’ Mom asks him.

Dad looks at me with serious eyes. ‘Son, which way were y’all headed?’

I point up ahead. Dad starts walking, Mom follows close behind him. I slowly fade back and watch as they stroll up about thirty feet in the distance, and then, stop.

I look back towards Uncle Joey’s corpse in its pool of tomato soup once more. I can feel the rest of the BLB trying to make its way up past the bullets in my throat again, and so before it has the chance to I run after Mom and Dad. They’re standing shoulder to shoulder—almost lifeless themselves—staring down at something on the forest floor. And so I squeeze myself in between

them to take a peek, and there, in the middle of the rabbit-less side of the forest, on the way to a grocery store that doesn't exist, are three freshly dug graves—two big, and one small.