

Visit Camille's

Jack runs his fingers through the ruff of the squirming dog's neck, above the chest but below the throat, where the blood runs warm. "For crap's sake, Schlitz, settle down," he complains. He drawls out the name, accent long on the middle syllable. *Sch-lee-litz*.

The dog is named after a third-rate beer, Jack's dad's favorite and the apparent hands down libation of choice by anyone over twenty-one who lives in this drag of a town my mother has forced me to visit this summer. I stand by with a pack of matches stolen from her purse. *Visit Camille's* is scripted in silver across the purple cover.

"Ah, *yeah*." His fingers settle on something found in the fur. He pulls off a tick, bulbous and grey as death. Its legs wriggle like tiny eyelashes. "Damn, this sucker's huge," he says, dropping the parasite next to the firecracker laid out on the patio. I watch it scuttle in circles, confused. Jack digs back in the dog's neck and pulls off two more.

The ticks stagger about, a blood drunk conga line. I shove them into place with a stick, orchestrating a perfect symmetry of destruction versus destruction.

“You ready?” I ask, striking a match. “Battle stations,” he says and grabs the dog by the collar.

The fuse lit, we run like crazy and as if preordained, turn to watch the second the ticks blow sky high. The blast yodels off the hillside, a single contrail of varying pitch. Jack slaps Schlitz on the backside, setting the dog off in chase of the bouncing sound. We trail the scent of phosphorus back up to the blast site.

Three wet circles and a scorch mark is all that’s left at ground zero. Jack gives me the thumbs up, satisfied with the outcome. A few days earlier, he had found me sulking on the couch, scheming how best to fast track it back to Florida. He told me life could be a lot worse, I could be a moose with one hundred thousand ticks sucking my husk dry and proceeded to fill me in on his personal vendetta to take out any tick he came across during his watch here on this mighty Earth. To prove his point, he showed me a photograph torn from some magazine depicting a morbid tick-on-moose cluster feast, quite the convincing coup de grace. I spit in disgust just thinking about it and Jack spits with me, once, twice and again and again until we are parched in our tandem retribution for the besieged moose.

I look at Jack and watch a tick crawl from beneath the neckline of his shirt to negotiate his carotid. I flick it off before realizing my hand has moved, before the tick takes hold. *Hey, what the hell*, his eyes question before

the dawn breaks and he's off jiggling across the sweet summer grass, his feet lit up in revulsion. He tears the shirt off, shaking it out like a filthy carpet. "God dang dirty good for nothing piece of crap!" he yells, rubbing beneath his arms and behind his ears, turning his back on me to look down his cut-offs and feel between his thighs. I watch his shoulders relax with an all clear.

I feel suddenly sorry for him, this ten-year-old tick slayer, sorry that he lives in a two-bit town that literally sucks. "Hey. There's more where those came from," I say, pulling a M80 from my back pocket. "Call back the dog." Jack throws on his shirt and whistles between his teeth the way I never learned how. Schlitz comes running and I tear a match free from the book of Camille.