

## THE HUNTER

The hunter wakes before dawn, a strange dream fading from mind.

From where he lies in his bed he can see the faint graying of the light in the east, the trees reaching up to the flat full moon. He swings his legs off the side of the bed and sits up and makes the early morning noises he never notices he makes, rubbing the back of his neck and casting off his sleep. There are things to do today—there are things to do every day—but he has set aside this day for checking his far-off traps. He straightens the blanket over the bed and pulls on his clothes, the thick denim jeans and long-sleeved shirt and the wool buffalo-check jacket that belonged to his grandfather. The old man had worn through the cotton lining the cuffs and carefully clipped out the ragged pieces; a delicate green fringe shows as he rolls up his sleeves. He likes his forearms to be free, so until the bitter weather chokes the woods he will go out like this.

He takes up his rifle, his dad's old Winchester, the cold air pooling around him. Nothing moves except the sun slowly pushing its way past the line of the valley cragging its way north. He has the whole forest in his mind, the ways and wends of it, and he pieces it all together in the dark ringing stillness. He makes up his mind and moves, his bootfalls loud and heavy as he slams through the back door to a sharp lungful of winter air. This first breath always reaches deep inside him, coiling cold around his stomach, burning the inside of his nose. His eyes well up and his view of the valley is blurred until he blinks and lets the frigid tears dry on his face. It snowed yesterday and a dusting of white lays over the spreading land, but he feels that the rising sun will be strong and it may all be gone by later today. He sets off across the meadow to the valley, which he will follow to a strong, clear stream in the very deepest places of the woods.

The snow is thin, and he leaves behind boot prints of slush. They crisscross with those of the deer that venture out onto the moon-blue plane of the snow in the thick of the night. He has woken before and watched them graze, their solid bodies turned to black carvings in the darkness. Steam rises off their haunches and they turn their heads towards his window where he sits in bed. If someone is with him he makes a show of creeping slowly across the room with his rifle, though he has never shot a deer in the deep night.

The walk over the meadow is long and by the time he comes to the slope of the valley the sun has reached the tops of the trees, warm on his face. His breath mists out and drifts aimlessly in the still air. The sky is striped with gentle colors stacked close on each other, and the whole land is blushing above the valley, the white hills and sketched black trees unfolding with an aching slowness. He begins the walk down into the valley, which is still in shadow. The morning is a great familiar quiet refracting with the wet crunch of his boots in the snow and his snuffling breathing, and his running nose. Birds start from their hiding places as he walks past, loud and unexpected every time. The light is thin and sharp and the details of the trees become clearer and clearer as he walks on. He reaches the rise at the far mouth of the valley, climbs up a hill, and enters the pine forest.

The snow is caught in the upper branches of the trees growing tall in orderly rows from a carpet of brown needles. He hears a *snick* and turns startled to the east. He stops, struck, as a beam of golden light shoots through the trees and makes the pines a cathedral.

He sees the sudden flicker of a shadow in the far trees, and then he is surrounded by shadow movement he cannot place. The hill beats a pattern of snowfall and birdflight, like heavy drums sounding from the other side of the earth.

There is just now another shadow, but not darting like the birds'— it is smooth, measured. It moves swiftly from behind one tree to another, deep back in the rows of pines and long shadows. He takes a step towards it and waits for it to spook and run. He cannot see anything there, just the trunks of the trees standing in lines in the growing light and the silver mist of snow slowly drifting from the treetops. Just as he turns away a bird bursts from cover and he flinches. He feels the Winchester in his hand, well-oiled, the hammer smooth and familiar.

Nothing moves. He hefts the rifle and continues on. The pines give way to elms on the banks of a small creek slicing black through the snow. He is close now, and needs only to cross a small break in the trees where a misplaced patch of prairie grass grows before he reaches the other side of the woods, where his traps are set. He cannot shake the feeling that something else is with him, the shadow that crossed at the trees.

The snow is gone off the short grasses and nestled deep into pockets in the tall grasses and the birds continue to burst from their hiding places in the closely-growing stalks. Quails now, and if he had brought his shotgun he would have shot a brace for eating tonight. The hip-deep grasses whisper all around him, a dry and foolish language he cannot understand, which does not stop him from listening hard.

He is missing someone, although they are not actively on his mind. The fact of his empty house is always at the back of his thoughts, the ringing empty kitchen filled with pale blue light. He carries these cold rooms with him as he walks in the mornings, and they make his tasks seem longer and the snow seem wetter. He never used to mind late autumn showing its temper, a blanket of small golden leaves atop pristine and blinding white, but now he hates these early snows.

He stops. He was distracted, by the quails and maybe by the burden of his empty rooms, and forgot that he had set a trap back at the mouth of the smaller creek. He rests the rifle against the front of his shoulder and turns back to the line of the elms he had just left.

Crossing his tracks in the slush at the line of the elms, he pauses. Running parallel to his own, and headed in the opposite direction, lays a set of tiny barefoot tracks. Human prints that had not been there when he passed this way before. He follows the footprints for some time as they run along the tree line and then move suddenly into the shadow of the woods.

He is puzzled by how far it had gotten in such a short time. He wonders why the child did not call out to him, ask for help, as it surely would have seen him in the clearing. He keeps his eyes on the black roots and stones breaking through the snow and follows the marks it left behind. It seems to have been running, and leaping from stone to stone.

He follows the winding prints until they suddenly stop in a patch of scuffle marks in the middle of a thicket. He looks carefully at the underbrush, the twigs and the dead leaves dusted with a powdering of snow...and there she is. Looking up at him from within a curving bower of slender branches, a fawn's sleeping place.

Very small but still too big for the den, she is crouching awkwardly and craning her neck to stare at him. Her red-rimmed eyes are large in a round face with a high round forehead covered by matted wet hair. Her nose is a mess, crusted-over and looking painful. She is breathing heavily and when he reaches down to her without saying anything she thrashes backwards through the underbrush until she is backed against a tree.

He starts to murmur nonsense things, crouches down in front of her with his arms outstretched. She shakes and makes no sound besides her heavy breathing, but she is not moving. Whatever she is wearing—brown, rotting, of an indeterminate shape—is not enough, and he

slowly, slowly eases his jacket off and extends it out to her and when she does not move he drapes it around her thin tawny shoulders. He pulls it tighter around her and when she still does not move he rises a little from his crouch, picks her up in a woolen bundle, and stands.

She struggles a little inside the jacket, and works a foot free. Her ragged toenails scratch his arm. He is a big man and her efforts do not faze him but he does stand there for a while, just holding her. She stops wiggling, which helps, but he is uncomfortable as he sets off, cold without his jacket and his arms full of this strange child, his rifle strap pinned to his arm.

The walk back is very long, and he is grateful that the sun has fully risen and that it is as strong as he thought it would be. Every time he looks down the child is staring at him. She has a curiously blank expression, neither fearful nor glad. She just stares and blinks slowly and holds completely still, never once uttering a sound. They crest the final rise of the valley and start over the wide meadow to his house, and just seeing it again helps the blood start flowing back into his arms.

When he reaches the back door he shifts her weight to his right arm and jostles the rifle free and leans it against the side of the house and then opens the door and walks in without stomping the snow from his boots. He tracks mud and leaves across the floor and sets her wrapped in the jacket on the cavernous old leather armchair before the fireplace. Her eyes never leave his face. He starts a fire, careful not to make too many sudden movements.

The room starts to grow warm. He gets a pan full of water, a bit of soap, and a rag and comes over to the chair and crouches in front of her. He is still wearing his boots. He takes her foot and washes it slowly and carefully, knowing he can grab things too hard sometimes. Some of the dirt is ground into her hard little heels but he does what he can. He washes her other foot, and then her hands, and goes and gets fresh water and cleans off her face. She remains marble-

still until he moves the rag to the top of her head, wanting to smooth down her tousled hair and get away a bit of mud and twig caught up in it. She snarls—silently—and throws herself against the back of the armchair.

He raises his hands, the dripping rag held aloft, and backs away. The anger fades from her face and she stares up at him.

Shaking his head, he goes to get her a blanket from the closet. She lets him take the jacket away and wrap her in the blanket, and he picks her up in this new cocoon and lays her down on his bed. He does not know if she is tired but doesn't know what else to do for her. He puts his hand to the side of her head, hovers it just above the shell curve of her small ear, but then steps away and walks over to the sink.

He stands there with his hands gripping the edge of the basin, and looks over his shoulder at her. She lies unmoving with her head on his pillow.

“Where are you from?” he speaks suddenly into the room. He does not know why. He knows before he opens his mouth what her reaction will be—more blinking, more staring, more nothing. He turns back to the sink. He begins to clean himself up, washing his hands, taking off his boots, changing his jeans, which have become sodden with mud at the cuffs and knees. He brings in more wood and stokes the fire before cooking for them: rabbit, some coffee, and potatoes. In listening to the sounds of the cooking he forgets she is there. He likes the clang of tools on pots and the chatter of meat in a hot pan, his large dull knife crisping through potatoes on a wooden block. While he works he drinks the coffee, scalding hot and thick with cream.

He makes himself a plate and turns around, surprised to see her on his bed, wrapped in his blanket. She seems, miraculously, to be sleeping. Walking over, his plate in his hand, he sees she is breathing slowly, her face unguarded. It is strangely shaped, with that vaulted forehead,

and her mouth is very small but perfect. Her nose is still running. He takes his plate over to the table and eats while watching her sleep. He has worked up an incredible appetite over the day and he gets up for a second helping and later goes back to finish it all. When she wakes up he can make her something else.

He finishes eating, does the washing up, pours himself an amber glass of whiskey and sits in his old armchair before the fire, stoking it again. One of her hands has worked free of the blanket and she lies with it curled under her cheek, her fingers twitching. She is sleeping deeply and he is happy to be free of her staring eyes and her blank expression, which is vaguely accusatory. Her breathing rattles faintly due to her stuffed-up nose. He doesn't mind the sound. He is, in fact, glad that someone besides him is breathing in this house, and when he turns his attention from her and focuses on the almost-shapes in the fire, her breaths turn to the breaths of someone else. He remembers those sounds well.

All the sounds he never paid attention to through the years, all the attendant noises of a human being, these come rushing in on him and fading and rushing in, an ocean of breaths and heartbeats and footfalls beside his own. He lives among these sounds for a while, letting all of them surround him and bear him away to some far land where his body is sleeping but his mind is not alone. Familiar smells and sounds and half-remembered feelings are keeping him company this evening as he sits in the circle of warmth cast by the fire.

He wakes to a touch on the side of his neck. Her hand is small and hard and freezing, resting on his skin like a digging hoof. The fire has died to embers and she is standing beside his chair, her skin pale and glowing in the light from the moon reflected off the snow. She has let the blanket fall off the side of the bed and she is wearing only that tattered and shapeless garment he found her in. He stares at her in the darkness and cannot find it in himself to speak. He wants to

ask if she is hungry, if she wants a potato, if she is cold, if he can get her different clothes, if she can tell him where she comes from.

Her eyes are wet and bright in the darkness and her tousled hair is limned in moonlight. They lock eyes for a long time listening to the noises in the night until, unaccountably, he finds himself fading slowly back into sleep.

Sounds float to him through the deep water of his dreams and he wakes, very suddenly, cold.

She is not in the house.

He lurches to his feet and is abruptly dizzy. He pauses to let his mind settle back into his body and he searches for her. He can see all of the small house from where he stands, but he walks along each wall and lifts every blanket and peers behind every piece of furniture. The blanket lies in a heap on the floor by the bed, there is little nest in the sheets, and some dirt and shed hair on the pillow. The sound that woke him was the clunk of his whiskey glass falling to the floor—the spill has not had time to soak into the floorboards and sits in a glimmering pool beside the chair.

He checks that the front door is still locked and then sees that the back door has been opened since they came home; it has pushed aside a pile of fresh-fallen snow. He steps out in his socks and walks into the shining spread of the ice over the meadow, and when the shadow falls just right he sees a faint impression of what could be tiny footprints, since snowed over. He follows them out into the middle of the meadow, stumbling occasionally on the unseen ground.

Any trace of the trail vanishes halfway out into the meadow. He stands there, unable to fool himself that he can discern any meaningful dimple in the ice. His eyes are tired from staring



at the snow turned blinding by the moon; he thinks that if he wishes hard enough the frozen land will offer up its secrets, the departure it witnessed in the deep of the night. He looks up.

A stag stands at the ridge of the valley. Sixteen points form a heavy crown that seems to graze the moon behind it. It huffs thick clouds of steam and as the hunter watches it is joined by a doe that wades out into the snow further towards the man. All of them breathing together out on the plain makes three distinct clouds of vapor drifting above the snow in the tight press of the snapping cold night. The doe lowers her head as the stag keeps his eyes on the man standing frozen with his feet numb and wet.

So slowly he can hear each vertebra creak, he turns his head to look at his back door. The Winchester is gone from the side of the house.