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Buckyboy

Marissa Canarelli
SUNY Geneseo

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Buckyboy

Buckyboy was lame so Father was going to shoot him. He planned to do it behind the barn so that Hattie didn't have to see and the stallion would be closer to the fields where he was to be buried. Hattie was understandably upset. Mother explained to her that Father was being generous; it was a kindness for him to do it behind the barn, when he could make money by selling him by the pound. Buckyboy weighed just shy of a ton so Father's good nature was costly.

There had been a snow storm last night and Hattie was not in bed. Being the eldest daughter, I was sent out to find her by Mother, who woke me with a touch to the shoulder. I had been under the covers, curled in a pocket of heat with Hattie's empty space against my back. My eyes adjusted to the dim light and I made out Mother's stern-set mouth as she cast me out of my nest of sheets. She had the baby, Beatrice, fat and gurgling, awake and bright-eyed, set on her hip. Father's snores rolled through our home like a crashing wave; he slept like the dead after a day in the field and would be up and gone before breakfast. Just as I was about to leave the room, Mother held me back and using only her single free hand, pulled a hat down over my head.

I traversed our property in my thick leather boots with a shawl wrapped around my shoulders and the hat shielding my ears. In my left hand I held a lantern; in the right, my pocket knife. I had only ever used it to gut fish, but its familiar weight felt good to hold. Coyotes weren't uncommon on our land.

First, I searched the shed that housed Father's equipment: the plows, Buckyboy's harness. I jumped when eyes flashed from underneath the broken frame of a wagon wheel leaning on the wall, but it was only Sheba, Mother's mutt, watching me. Usually she slept near the chicken coop and guarded it from foxes. Tonight, she had tucked herself away from the bad weather and was buried in a pile of empty feed bags. She was a shaggy mass of dark fur

that blended with the shadows. Her pups were due any day now; her appetite was off, and she was being even more unapproachable. Just that morning, she had barely been interested in the bits of charred bacon that Mother tossed her. Sheba watched me with sleep-heavy, yellow eyes as I examined the shed, but there was no Hattie. Feeling the weight of Sheba's gaze on my back, I left the shed behind.

Outside the wind was picking up, the gusts having gained momentum over Otisco Lake not five miles off. There was no fresh snow falling, but the overactive currents lifted heaps from the ground and hurled them into the air. The white flakes made the black sky flicker. Hattie's escapes were routine, but usually she had more sense than to run out into bad weather. The chicken coop was quiet, all asleep. I wrapped myself tighter in the shawl. The lantern's light wavered with the wind, and I slipped into the barn before it could be extinguished altogether.

Considering the age of the wood, the barn wasn't drafty; it had been crafted with expertise by the hands of my grandfather and great-grandfather. The animals that filled it gave off a comfortable heat. I heard movement as I slid the door shut, the iron squealing. The darkness made my skin prickle. I reached out with a hand and felt the wall for another lantern. I lit four in total, and the barn glowed. Surprisingly, the animals were all awake. There was the milk cow in her stall; in the next was her yearling calf, who we planned to sell in the upcoming spring markets. The mule flicked his ears backward in irritation. When I came closer he turned his face away from me and stuck his hind end into the light. The last stall was Buckyboy's. His large head hung over the stall door and the tips of his ears grazed the rafters. They flicked attentively in my direction but after a few seconds focused on a sound behind him.

Even after my most recent growth spurt, I stood just under Buckyboy's shoulder. Years ago, Father had placed Hattie on Buckyboy's broad back before she could hold a conversation. This past autumn, the stallion had even carried little Beatrice with our Father's hands clasped tightly around her abdomen. Buckyboy's whiskered muzzle twitched as he took in my scent, his hot breath warming my chilled fingers. I was not yet six when he had arrived at the farm. I remembered him as a giant, but when he took oats from my cupped hands he was always gentle. That seemed a world away from the here and now. Under his dark forelock, his eyes examined me carefully. I looked over his stall door and scanned the piles of bedding. There, curled by Buckyboy's massive hooves, was Hattie.

"What do you think you're doing?" I asked.

Hattie squinted up at me, her eyes adjusting to the light of my lantern. "Ida?" After a moment her brown eyes widened and she scowled. "Oh, Ida, just go away." She was squatting in the straw with bandages beside her and Mother's sewing scissors teetering on her knee. Buckyboy's lame hind leg was

nearest to her. He was favoring it, keeping as little weight on it as possible, the toe of his hoof cocked as to minimize touching the ground. Several inches up from the hoof, his whole fetlock was swollen into a meaty mass, bulging out from his cannon bone. A thin layer of bandage was wrapped just below his hock.

“You’re not a vet.”

“I said go away, Ida. Nobody asked you.” Hattie cut a strip of bandage with the sewing scissors and set them on the ground.

“You better not lose those.” Mother wouldn’t be happy, even if she was always sympathetic to Hattie’s silly causes. Like the time she tried to heal a robin’s wing or nurse the orphaned rabbits under the shed. She didn’t understand the workings of the world. I watched her ignore my warning and wrap the linen carefully around the stallion’s leg. He flinched at her initial touch, but otherwise was motionless. Her tongue stuck out as she focused. I said, unable to bury my frustration. “That’s not going to help anything.”

Hattie spun around to glare at me and snapped, “You just don’t care if he dies. None of you do.”

Mother said that Hattie was too passionate. On hot summer days, she exerted herself so much that her entire face would burn crimson; she radiated like an ember.

“You’re being unreasonable,” I said. Hattie glared at me and I realized then what she must have noticed earlier—I sounded exactly like our parents.

Buckyboy sighed and his hot breath let out a cloud of steam. Hattie saw and giggled. She began to exhale large puffs of air as well, the billowing vapor an amusement. Like ghosts, the white sheen floated upwards and then disappeared.

“Let him sleep, Hattie. We’ll put a rug on him before we leave.” I saw her pause for a moment, then unclench the scissors and shiver. “Come on,” I continued. “I can’t go to bed until you do.”

She fell to my reason, and together we threw a blanket around the stallion. He had a full winter coat; his hairy feathers were as thick as muffs around his legs. He barely felt the chill, but it was more for Hattie than for him. After some coaxing, I was even able to convince her to undo her knotted wrapping. I went into the stall to help her and felt the heat rising from the limb. I ran my hands down the bone as Father had shown me to do and kept a watchful eye on the stallion’s expression, wary of the telltale pinning of the ears or a frustrated swish of the tail. But Buckyboy seemed merely curious of my sister and me, and examined Hattie for treats, nuzzling his muzzle into the pockets of her skirts.

Tucked there beside my sister in the bedding, I noticed braids tied in Buckyboy’s feathers. I felt the thick strands of hair with the pad of a finger and followed a single track as it twisted under and over. I had forgotten how

Hattie and I used to tie clumsy braids in the volumes of hair coating Buckyboy's sturdy legs. We never feared being so close to his powerful hooves.

"He'll get better," Hattie insisted as we walked out of the barn, extinguishing lanterns as we went. "He just needs more time."

I nodded, but it was just to humor her, as I was already thinking of being back in our warm bed. As I opened the barn door, I realized that we were being watched.

"Sheba!" Hattie cried. The mutt was always wary of Hattie's brazenness. She never showed my sister anything more than tolerant indifference. Instead, she was watching me. She had followed my tracks in the snow; her prints paralleled mine.

I closed the barn door, trapping its heat, and pulled Hattie forward past the mutt. "Go away, dog. I don't have any food." She blinked, hunched in the snow, with her ruff thick and shoulders braced against the wind. She followed us back to the house, ten or so feet off, until we were on the porch and then she returned to the shed.

Inside, Mother was waiting. With Beatrice finally asleep, she had two free hands to smack Hattie with. Mother made her take a bath to wash the smell of the barn off her. I set aside my hat, shawl, and boots and slipped under the bed's thick blankets. I looked away as she bathed; unlike our early years where we were one and the same, I now felt like my body had left hers behind. Into what, I could only guess; I was as little like Mother as I was like Hattie. Mother said that I could expect more changes to come, and while her words were spoken with the insight of experience they only made me more cautious of the body underneath my cotton nightgown. Silently, I listened to Hattie chatter to Mother in excited whispers. Mother's replies were low hums. Even in my uncertain age, her voice was like a soft hand running over my hair, comforting and sure, even in its invisibility.

Once Hattie was clean, she crawled into bed by my side. There was no kiss goodnight from Mother, as it was too late and she was tired. She merely blew out the candle and left us in darkness.

The next day was warm for early February. The sun could not escape the thick clouds, but the wind had ceased. The snow barely sparkled in the mid-morning dim, making it the same shade of gray as the sky. I could hardly tell one from the other. If it got any warmer, all the snow would melt. Hattie caught water droplets on her tongue from icicles dripping off the porch.

Today, Father would not shoot Buckyboy as the storm had damaged our neighbor's fence, and Father had offered to help him repair it for six jars of beets and a rabbit. If the fence was not repaired quickly, our neighbor's sheep

could be preyed upon by coyotes. So Father left with the mule, Hattie played in the melting snow, and I stayed with Mother and Beatrice in the kitchen.

Beatrice slept in her bassinet as Mother taught me to skin rabbit. I had only ever watched Mother prepare the meat—I knew little of how the blade sheared just below the skin or where to cut the abdomen as to not damage its liver.

Mother was a calm tutor. She seemed to enjoy our quiet hour together, even if she did not say so. I used to think it was hard picturing Mother as a young girl, as soft and lanky as me. Before my cycle began in the last days of the previous summer, she had prepared me for the event and told me a story from her childhood. She said that when she was young she had long, dark hair just like me. But that was impossible, her hair was the color of adler. Sun bleached, she said. And age, she added with a smile. Her mother had not told her about the bleeding at all. Mother woke up and thought she was dying, and my grandmother had laughed when she ran to her in tears. Mother added at the end of her story that many things seemed less scary in hindsight.

I watched Mother chop vegetables with her skilled hands. She sliced beets into clean rounds, revealing the inside of the bright magenta root. The purple coloring stained her hands.

She cast me a sideways look. I dropped my gaze back down to the rabbit carcass and returned to ripping flesh from the bone. “You’re doing well,” she said.

I nodded. Even from inside the walls of our kitchen I could hear Hattie giggling outdoors. My hands were slimy from the viscera and I wiped them on a towel. “Hattie was hiding in Buckyboy’s stall last night.”

“I know. She told me.”

I scrunched my nose. “Why do you let her do things like that? I wouldn’t.” I thought of Father and firmly believed that he would agree with me. He would, if he had time to be bothered with such silly things. “You treat her like she’s a baby, and she’s not a baby.”

Mother wiped her purple hands on her apron but it did nothing to remove their color. “You’re all my babies,” she explained. She laughed and went to hold my face in her hands.

I shied from her reaching fingers.

“Ida,” she said, her voice strained.

She looked at me like she didn’t recognize my face, even if it bore the same long, dark hair she once had. But I couldn’t see any bit of myself in her either. It was an unsettling foreignness. I swallowed down a habitual apology and returned my attention to the rabbit.

When Mother’s head shot up I assumed that I had not heard Beatrice let out a cry. I looked to her, but she was still bundled tight and asleep. No, there was something outside of the window. I followed Mother’s gaze a dozen

yards away from the house. There, a weathered coyote was stepping toward the chicken coop. Mother grabbed a pan from the sink and a wooden spoon. I brought the knife and followed her as she charged out the door. We scared Hattie, who was still licking the icicles on the porch, unaware of the threat. I grabbed her elbow to hold her tight and watched Mother march up to the coyote with the pan and spoon held over her head like a sword and shield in her purple hands.

The coyote was slim, with large ears. It moved in jerking, anxious steps. It held its ground.

Mother began to bang the pan and spoon together; she began to yell, shout, and dance a madman's jig. The chickens screamed in their coop. The coyote leaped into the air, took a few steps back, and then stared at Mother, hackles raised. Mother was undeterred. She beat the pan like it was a drum and hollered curses with the passion she reserved for prayer. After only a few seconds, the coyote spooked and darted into the bushes from which it had first appeared. It was not alone in its retreat. There were three others with it, a small pack.

Hattie ran to Mother, and I followed feeling silly still clenching my knife. She finally lowered the pan and spoon and let out a haggard breath. "You saved us," Hattie squealed.

Mother smiled gently as Hattie embraced her.

"What are they doing so close to the house?" I blurted.

Mother looked down at me. Her hair had fallen out of her tidy bun. "This is the first day of good weather after many days of bad. They're hungry."

"I'm hungry too," Hattie said.

"Well, good. Ida was just making us a delicious lunch." Mother smiled at me. There was no heaviness in her voice from my cruelty. It was forgiven, a blemish healed so well that it left no physical defect. But I felt its ghost. I averted my gaze from her and toyed with the kitchen knife. It suddenly seemed very blunt and small.

Together we walked back into the house. I ignored Hattie's giddy exclamations at seeing the dent that Mother had bashed into the pan. I saw Sheba laying in the entryway to the shed in a rare patch of sunlight. Her posture was relaxed, but her ears were focused. They were fixated on the far edge of the fields, where I saw a band of four gray dots disappear into the tree line.

After lunch, once Hattie and I helped Mother with the dishes, we were allowed to do as we pleased. Father had not yet returned from the neighbor's, so Mother let me do some shooting practice as long as she could see me through the kitchen window. She never minded when I shot at the crows. They were a nuisance.

Father had taught me to shoot the fall before last. At first, the rifle had felt far too long and too heavy for my arms. Now, I could raise it to my chest in one flowing motion. I imitated Father's posture, the sureness of his gaze, his resolute stance. The kickback was still jarring and made me wobble on my feet, but Father said that I had plenty of time to improve.

I never actually killed any of the crows. They were not for eating, and Father emphasized never killing for sport. Father had painted cans and targets for me to practice on. Only occasionally did I shoot at the tree line, when the crows were getting too cocky with their loud, jarring cackles. The birds would flee the trees in a black cloud, as if they were dark leaves and autumn had happened all at once.

Hattie ran off again, and with Father still not home and dusk approaching, Mother was more nervous than ever. This time, I knew to check the barn first. It was warm, so I didn't need the shawl and hat, but I still wore my boots. As predicted, the heat had turned many patches of snow to slush. Mud and murk appeared as brown sores. As I passed the sodden soil, I checked for sprouts of new green grass. There were only the dull remains of the summer before.

Hattie was not in the barn. The cows were antsy. With Father's delay, feeding time had come and gone. I threw a flake of hay or two in their stalls, skipping the absent mule's, until I reached Buckyboy's and found it empty. His stall was a dark cavern without his massive girth inside. I half expected to find him dead on the ground, as improbable as it was. I only discovered a nearly empty roll of bandage and sewing scissors in the straw.

I left the barn, slamming the door behind me so hard that the wood trembled. Looking back at the house, I contemplated telling Mother. Light illuminated the curtains in her and Father's bedroom. She would be awake, tending to the baby or waiting for Father's return. He'd said that he would be home before nightfall.

The only thing I could do was keep looking. I stepped forward, only to find my boot stuck in a fresh pit of mud. I snarled and with both hands grabbed my boot and yanked upward. I nearly fell onto my back, but not before noticing the extra large set of hoof prints that had torn at the earth.

The size and disfigured gait labeled the prints as Buckyboy's. They were paired with footprints several sizes smaller than mine. I followed the tracks, and they led me around the barn and continued on, pointing towards the fields. I paused at the edge of the lot, where the corpses of last year's corn crop extended into the daylight. For several acres there was nothing but slush, snow, and mud until the fields reached the tree line. There, the barren limbs of tree branches clawed at the encroaching dusk.

I squinted into the distance to try and spot the pair but was unable to see anything amongst the rolling hills. Instinctually, my gaze fell on the section of trees where the pack had fled. But the distance was too far; nothing could be distinguished except for the sharp transition from white snow to blackened bark. Before I began my search, I returned to the barn and grabbed my gun.

Buckyboy and Hattie left an easy trail to follow. It was mostly a straight path, only occasionally meandering around a ditch or deep puddle. The stallion had plowed these fields every spring for half his lifetime. Where I stumbled on uneven, thawing earth, his steps would have been surefooted, but Buckyboy's lameness would no doubt hinder his and Hattie's progress. I expected to run into them soon. The clouds dulled the glow of the setting sun, but I could still sense it falling as the air chilled. Marching briskly, I clamped the gun against my chest. Beneath the cool metal of the barrel and the warm flesh of my breast, my heart pounded with brutal intensity.

The break of a corn stalk from behind caused me to spin around. I fumbled with the gun in my arms, the shape suddenly bulky, my arms weak. Before I even had the barrel raised, I noticed that the intruder was only Sheba, her large belly making her almost wobble side to side as she walked towards me. "Damn, dog," I said as we regarded each other. "You shouldn't be this far away from the coop." I waved an arm in the air to try to chase her off, but she merely licked her jowls, obviously unimpressed. With a scowl, I turned away from her only to hear the gentle sounds of paws crinkling dried vegetation. I paused and the sounds stopped. I looked over my shoulder and found her just as close as before, looking up at me impatiently. "Suit yourself," I said. We walked the rest of the way together, always staying several paces apart.

I found them at the far edge of the field, only a few hundred feet from the line of trees. Buckyboy was refusing to move any further and Hattie, tugging at his lead, was using all of the weight in her body to try and pull him forward. She was talking to him sweetly before she noticed my arrival, but after she saw me she began to tug harder and harder, her feet slipping into the mud. "Come on," she cried. "Come on, Buckyboy, or you're going to die."

I grabbed the stallion's lead from her, pushing her away, causing her to slip down into the murk. "Why do you always have to be so stupid?" I snapped. Hattie stayed on the ground, sobbing, her skirts becoming flaked with mud and dampened by the snow. "You're hurting him!" I continued.

I looked at the spooked stallion and found his head thrown high, his eyes wide and bulging from stress, pain, and uncertainty. I placed a hand on his shoulder and felt him tremble at my touch. Behind him, Sheba stood a safe distance away, her ears pricked forward, subtly changing angles to hear things I could not. Behind her, I was able to see just how far Buckyboy had walked to get to where we were now. His injury was no more healed than it would ever be, but still, he had walked because Hattie had asked him to, and did so

faithfully until he reached the edge of his only home. He let me gingerly feel along his swollen limb. Under his thick feathers was the burning heat of pain.

"Come on, old boy, let's head home," I murmured as I gently guided him to turn around. Every step he made was precise and seemed painful. Hattie began new sobs as she watched. "You too," I said, ushering her up with a nod of my head. For a moment, I thought that she would refuse me but then she slowly teetered upright.

"I never meant to hurt him," she said with a snuffle, shuffling towards me. She clenched my skirts as she did Mother's. "I just thought...I just thought that we could hide out in the woods until he was better. So that Father wouldn't have to shoot him." The mention of shooting set her off once more. I let her cry. I was too focused on watching Buckyboy carefully place each hoof into the snow, as the light dimmed and the division between field and forest became muted by shadow.

As the sun set behind the line of trees, the shadows of tree trunks stretched across the field like dark snakes. Buckyboy was stumbling worse than ever before. His breathing was rough and shallow, coming in abrupt, inconsistent jerks. Hattie hummed to him, her voice breaking every few moments from the heaving of her chest as she held in tears. I let her hold the stallion's lead. She clung to it desperately. I wanted both hands free to hold my gun. We were just under halfway there.

Sheba was staying at our perimeter, to the back and to the side so that I could still see her from the corner of my eye. She paced anxiously every time we paused to allow Buckyboy to rest. I tried to ignore her, but my body was picking up on her tension.

"Oh no, oh no, oh no. Ida! Ida! He's laying down!" Hattie cried. I turned and saw my sister struggling to keep Buckyboy standing as his body collapsed under the weight of itself. His whole bulk heaved as he fell to the ground. I took the lead from Hattie and pulled, dropping the gun to use both hands. Hattie stood behind him and pushed, smacked, and clucked to urge him forward. Sheba paced.

Buckyboy would not budge. I gave up, stumbling backwards as I released the tension on his lead. "What are we going to do, Ida?" Hattie asked.

I shook my head. I didn't know. I was tired. I was cold. I was supposed to be eating dinner around the warmth of our family table. I placed my hands on my knees and exhaled, my breath escaping my chest unevenly. Then a sound, deep and throaty, caught my attention. Sheba had moved close to me, so close that I could touch her. She faced away from me and growled.

I stood upright and stared down the trail that we had made in the snow and shadows. Four coyotes stood barely fifty feet behind Hattie.

Hattie had not noticed Sheba's warning. She was wiping the tears from her face and then moved to the stallion's neck to cry into his mane. "Please. We have to get you home." The stallion hardly noticed her touch. His ears were forward and alert. The whites of his eyes rolled, bloodshot and bulbous.

Very slowly, I crouched down and retrieved my gun. "Hattie," I said, just above a whisper. "Stay between me and Buckyboy." Before Hattie could question me, I moved in front of her. My feet were heavy, as if they had been swallowed by the mud and buried. I pressed my back against her, forcing her to take clumsy backward steps. Sheba stayed at my side, her teeth bared.

The pack was quickly ensnaring us in a tightening circle. I stood motionless as they moved closer. They weaved in and out of the shadows. A corn stalk snapped in one direction, then the opposite. With numb fingers I clenched my gun, but I could not get myself to release it from its position clamped at my chest. Hattie's breathing grew frantic. We were so close together that I could feel the pulsing of her heart against my spine. I heard her say my name, muted and faint with fear, the syllables out of place with her tone, as if she were calling out for Mother, not for me.

The pan. The spoon. I lifted my hands in the air, raising the gun high. It felt as if I was underwater, my arms unbearably heavy and just as slow. I attempted to shout. My words were caught in my throat. A couple of the more cautious coyotes had paused. Sheba's growls radiated up my legs, stirring the terror in my belly. I raised my arms again and yelled; the sound was hollow and hoarse, but it sent the wary members of the pack back. Before I tried to spur my voice again, a coyote sprung forward and latched its jaws around one of Buckyboy's thick legs.

I pulled Hattie away as the stallion attempted to leap upright. He did not have the strength to raise his hind end out of the mud before another coyote leaped onto his broad haunches and dragged him back onto the dirt. Hattie screamed. In the dim light, Buckyboy's blood was the color of ink. For the first time, I raised my gun, but the end of the barrel bounced this way and that from the shaking of my hands. One coyote clawed at Buckyboy's haunches; another had his lame leg between its jaws.

I felt a tug at my sleeve. Hattie. She frantically directed my attention to a coyote that was nearing, body crouched, compressed like a spring. I was about to try and shout to scare it off when it sprinted toward us. I had always mocked Mother's chickens for being so dumb and still when danger was upon them. In that moment, I had no ability to do anything else. I had my gun, but my finger was frozen on the trigger. No crow had ever come after me before.

One moment she was at my side, the next Sheba was charging at the much smaller coyote. They collided, Sheba's black mass pummeling the creature into the ground. It yelped and before it could lift itself off the ground, Sheba was at its throat. Her upper hand was quickly lost. Another coyote leapt onto

her back and began to rip at her head, her ears, and her thick, dark ruff. She could not fight both at once, and I found enough voice to cry out as the two coyotes began to attack her in turn.

My gun was raised before I was aware of it. The sounds of the carnage around me was deafened only by the pounding of blood in my ears. My knees felt weak. Had my feet gone numb? I could feel nothing, only the cool trigger under the tip of a finger.

The recoil woke me up. That and the single uninhibited yelp of a coyote before it dropped.

The blood formed a small pool the color of beet juice.

The three remaining coyotes had frozen, one over Sheba, two over Buckyboy. The gun was still braced against my shoulder, the end of the barrel was still shaking. I waited for them to run. Why wouldn't they run? Instead they stood and watched me. All three, silent judges. With unblinking eyes and twitching noses they asked, *what are you made of, girl?* Then, one cautiously sniffed the now open wound on Buckyboy's leg and began to teeth at the flesh.

In a frantic rush of movement, I pointed the gun upwards, closed my eyes, and fired. When I opened them the rest of the pack, minus one, scattered. With fresh blood staining the fur of their jowls, they ran back into the safety of the forest. My arms shook. The gun had tripled in mass; I could not bear it but neither could I let it go. Sheba's body was still in the snow and Buckyboy, trapped in a sopping mess of hoof-torn earth and blood, was struggling to stand.

His strength had long left him. He rocked to try to put weight onto his legs but they could not support him. Taking shallow breaths, the stallion dropped back to the ground, head falling back into the mud. Things weren't going to get any better, I recalled my Father saying the day Buckyboy's fate was sealed. It's our job to keep things from getting worse, whatever that may mean.

I heard sobs and didn't realize they were my own until tears froze on my cheeks and snot hit my lips. Father wasn't here. Mother wasn't here. It was just me, a gun, and a dying horse trembling in the mud. How I wished that things were just as easy as Hattie had wanted them to be; just run to the woods, leave the bad things behind. Instead, I raised the gun as I had always practiced.

At the end of the barrel was the stallion's skull. Hattie was calling out to me but her words were unintelligible. I wanted to cry with her and beg with her and curl into Mother's lap with her, but that wasn't an option anymore. The gun was already raised and there was no one but me to do it.

"Ida!" a voice called, too low and deep to be Hattie's. Suddenly, a hand reached from behind me and grabbed my gun out of my hands. Suddenly, I felt so weak I believed that I might collapse.

“Father!” Hattie exclaimed. I turned and found Father holding his gun in one hand and mine in the other. His face was as grave and pale as the landscape. Standing not far off was the mule, pulling a small sled behind him that held Father’s tools. Father ignored most of Hattie’s rushed, nervous prattle. He looked her over, grabbing her chin to turn her face one way then the other. Still, she blabbered. He had her hold the guns. Father made his way across our small battlefield, where the snow and mud churned into a filthy brew. Buckyboy nickered when he saw him. With his back to me, I saw Father pause in front of the ruined stallion. He crouched and ran his hand over the stallion’s muscled, trembling neck and topline, stopping before he reached any areas flecked with blood. He ushered him to stay down with a calm word and an open palmed gesture. Then he moved to Sheba and her limp body. Her belly was swollen. It rose and fell as she breathed, but she did not move. I watched Father pick up Sheba, careful of her wounds, and he carried her towards us. He asked me to move aside his tools on the sled and then set Sheba down upon the faded wood.

“Take her home,” he said. “Be quick about it.”

My body eased, welcoming a task I could accomplish and the prospect of home. Grabbing the mule’s lead, I waited for Hattie to appear, but she was lingering in Father’s shadow, still holding the guns. They were as large as ship oars in her small arms. I wondered if I had looked half as ridiculous, a pathetic mimic of strength.

Father coaxed Buckyboy to stay down as the horse again tried in vain to stand. “Rest easy, old boy. That’s it. That’s my boy,” he said softly. Father knelt in the dirt and with a great heave the stallion was resting his head on my father’s knees. His breathing slowed as Father gently ran a hand over his cheek.

“Hattie, go with Ida,” Father said after a moment. For once, my sister was silent. The only sound was the breathing of Buckyboy, each breath like broken bellows. Before we left, Father took his gun from Hattie and a shovel and lamp from the sled.

Hattie and I guided the mule back toward the house. Sheba was a quiet passenger. The mule shied as a gunshot pierced the still air. I expected to hear the earth quake, for the tilled dirt to tremble, for the corn stalks trampled beneath my feet to quiver like bowstrings. But we were too far off and heard nothing. The sun had set completely now. I could see a lamp on in the kitchen. I could almost see Mother’s shadow.

The attack had prompted early labor and Sheba had no strength for it. After stitching up the back of Sheba’s neck and the tattered remains of her right ear, Mother stayed awake to assist with the birth. Hattie and I were determined

to help as well. But the process was long and we were exhausted. We slept in shifts. Mother did not seem to need sleep at all.

After several hours, Father returned to the house. He explained everything to Mother from out on the porch. From behind the kitchen window, the porchlight etched their faces and shoulders in silhouette. The darkened shapes moved soundlessly and blended together into one. Eventually Mother came back inside with Father following slowly behind. His shirtsleeves were heavy with dirt and moisture. He made no comment about how comfortable Mother had made Sheba in front of the fireplace. Father had a strict rule that she was never to be in the house.

Mother awoke Hattie and me when the first pup was born. I had never seen life so small. Five more followed. Two were dead, born not breathing. I rubbed one's chest as firmly and as gently as I could. I cleared out its tiny nostrils and mouth just as Mother showed me. Still, it wouldn't take a gasp. I warmed it between my palms, breathing a hot breath onto its fur as I had done hundreds of times before to warm the metal bit before putting it between Buckyboy's teeth. After several minutes Mother took the pup from me and wrapped it in a towel and set it aside.

After the birth was over, Mother brought over a basin and I washed my hands in the cool water. Blood washed off my skin in clouds. Mother emptied the basin and filled it once more, dampening a towel and offering it. Hattie and I washed our faces. The water that fell onto my lips tasted of salt.

Sheba had little energy to tend to her pups, but she relaxed as they curled up into her side and began to nurse. Father picked one up, the pup fitting in his hand as perfectly as a teacup.

"Coydog," he said as he assessed the pup he held. They were small, with slim muzzles, their fur light, with black tipped tails. Father set the pup down as Sheba began to growl at him. He chuckled. "Easy, Mama."

Tomorrow, Father would go to the nearest town to purchase a new plow horse, but daylight was far off. I watched Father slip something out of his pocket and cup it in Hattie's hands. One of Buckyboy's braids rested between her fingers. Tomorrow, Hattie would go with Father to market and name this new horse, as I had named Buckyboy all those years ago.

Even though we were all tired, no one mentioned going to bed. Mother sat in her rocking chair with Hattie nestled in her lap, clutching the tattered braid. Father tended the fire burning under the mantel. His eyes gleamed as if stung by the smoke and his hands trembled around the fire iron. I remained on the floor, close to the pups. No one spoke. The pups whimpered. Sheba's breathing was deep and even. In my palms I felt the ghost weight of the dead pups. I tucked my knees under my chin and placed my head on Mother's knee and rested there until she woke me to say that it was time to go to bed.