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Deerslayer

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Deerslayer

The doe is coiled up in the snow and still breathing. Fallen here in the hollow of an elm uprooted is the deer, with a fine steam rising from her flank, tawny and slick with wetness.

The boy is twelve years old today, and he carries on through the woods to where the doe has fallen behind his father and his older brother, a soft whine resonating deep in his temples. He has the stock of the shotgun in the crook of his arm and he cradles it tight to his chest. The gun is not made to be carried this way. The sling nips at his ankles, the weight sends him off kilter. He goes slowly and he measures each step. Lifting one boot out of a drift, pausing, plunging it ahead. Passing a bare right hand across his face to wipe the fluid from his eyes.

The boy's brother has stopped at the base of the elm. There is the deer, lying crescent-shaped in a cove of tangled roots, ears twitching, dark dorsal fur pulled tight on the ridges of her spine, the swept grooves of her ribcage. The brother is seventeen and knows with a man's surety of the absolutes of nature and life's passage into death. He waves to the father, who has slowed to let the boy catch up, and sinks to his haunches, clicks his tongue, regards the doe where it lies. Boy if you ain't unlucky, he says.

The father watches the boy's back as he passes and eyes the narrowed shoulders under the overlarge coat. He is nearing fifty and with the clarity of age he recognizes the beauty immanent in life's natural cycles. As such he sees in his sons the amelioration of his own self, like the widening rings of an elm tree, and understands the doe to exist under no different principle and for no different purpose. When he reaches the doe he whistles low under his breath and motions for the boy to come close. See the way she breathes shallow and quick like that, he says. Looks like a lung shot but not quite both. The boy stares mutely, still clutching the shotgun. He has circled around to the doe's

head to watch the weak flaring of her nostrils but finds himself looking into the eyes of the animal. Black eyes from rim to pupil, reflecting back his own face undistorted. He breathes in the sharp winter air and with it the rank, wild smell of her fur, cloying and sticky. How long's it take to die? he says.

Turn her over and we'll take a look, says the father. Take a look here, he says. This is the most important part.

The boy thinks to sit but will not set down the shotgun to do it. He looks again into the doe's eyes as if to find some difference from before, but the brother steps in front and seizes her by the forelegs. The doe writhes listlessly, head lolling, neck dragging in the snow like a thing already dead.

Easy. Easy, the father says. Hold her still now, watch she don't kick you. Now flip her on over.

Oh ain't that a sucker, the brother says. Boy if that ain't an ugly one.

Well don't let go of her. Where's your knife at.

Uh. Here.

Hey, look close now. Do it this way she won't feel any pain.

The doe seizes once and sags into the snow, neck gouting. The blood stomped into the snow from its killing is bright and steaming hot. The boy's brother carefully wipes his knife off on the carcass then folds it away. The father sits on the elm stump next to the doe's head and lifts it by an ear to examine it. The boy watches the doe's eyes as the head lists gently.

See that, the old man says. Don't it put things into perspective?