



FATHER, SON, HOLY RABBIT

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By the third day they were eating snow. Years later it would come to the boy again, rush up to him at a job interview: his father spitting out pieces of seed or pine needle into his hand. Whatever had been in the snow. The boy looked at the brown flecks in his father's palm, then up to his father, who finally nodded, put them back in his mouth, turned his face away to swallow.

Instead of sleeping, they thumped each other in the face to stay awake.

The place they'd found under the tree wasn't out of the wind, but it was dry.

They had no idea where the camp was, or how to find the truck from there, or the highway after that. They didn't even have a gun, just the knife the boy's father kept strapped to his right hip.

The first two days, the father had shrugged and told the boy not to worry, that the storm couldn't last.

The whole third day, he'd sat watching the snow fall like ash.

The boy didn't say anything, not even inside, not even a prayer. One of the times he drifted off, though, waking not to the slap of his father's fingernail on his cheek but the sound of it, there was a picture he brought up with him from sleep. A rabbit.

He told his father about it and his father pulled his lower lip into his mouth, smiled like the boy had just told a joke.

That night they fell asleep.

This time the boy woke to his father rubbing him all over, trying to make his blood flow. The boy's father was crying, so the boy told him about the rabbit, how it wasn't even white like it should be, but brown, lost like them.

His father hugged his knees to his chest and bounced up and down, stared out at all the white past their tree.

“A rabbit?” he said.

The boy shrugged.

Sometime later that day he woke again, wasn't sure where he was at first. His father wasn't there. The boy moved his mouth up and down, didn't know what to say. Rounded off in the crust of the snow were the dragging holes his father had made, walking away. The boy put his hand in the first footstep, then the second, then stood from the tree into the real cold. He followed the tracks until they became confused. He tried to follow them back to the tree but the light was different now. Finally he started running, falling down, getting up, his chest on fire.

His father found him sometime that night, pulled him close.

They lowered themselves under another tree.

“Where were you?” the boy asked.

“That rabbit,” the father said, stroking the boy's hair down.

“You saw it?”

Instead of answering, the father just stared.

This tree they were under wasn't as good as the last. The next morning they looked for another, and another, and stumbled onto their first one.

“Home again home again,” the father said, guiding the boy under then gripping onto the back of his jacket, stopping him.

There were tracks coming up out of the dirt, onto the snow. Double tracks, like the split hoof of an elk, except bigger, and not as deep.

“Your rabbit,” the father said.

The boy smiled.

That night his father carved their initials into the trunk of

the tree with his knife. Later he broke a dead branch off, tried sharpening it. The boy watched, fascinated, hungry.

“Will it work?” he asked.

His father thumped him in the face, woke him. He asked it again, with his mouth this time.

The father shrugged. His lips were cracked, lined with blood, his beard pushing up through his skin.

“Where do you think it is right now?” he said to the boy.

“The—the rabbit?”

The father nodded.

The boy closed his eyes, turned his head, then opened his eyes again, used them to point the way he was facing. The father used his sharp stick as a cane, stood with it, and walked in that direction, folded himself into the blowing snow.

The boy knew this was going to work.

In the hours his father was gone, he studied their names in the tree. While the boy had been asleep, his father had carved the boy’s mother’s name into the bark as well. The boy ran the pads of his fingers over the grooves, brought the taste to his tongue.

The next thing he knew was ice. It was falling down on him in crumbly sheets.

His father had returned, had collapsed into the side of the tree.

The boy rolled him in, rubbed his back and face and neck, and then saw what his father was balled around, what he’d been protecting for miles, maybe: the rabbit. It was brown at the tips of its coat, the rest white.

With his knife, the father opened the rabbit in a line down the stomach, poured the meat out. It steamed.

Over it, the father looked at the son, nodded.

They scooped every bit of red out that the rabbit had,

swallowed it in chunks because if they chewed they tasted what they were doing. All that was left was the skin. The father scraped it with the blade of his knife, gave those scrapings to the boy.

“Glad your mom’s not here to see this,” he said.

The boy smiled, wiped his mouth.

Later, he threw up in his sleep, then looked at it soaking into the loose dirt, then turned to his see if his father had seen what he’d done, how he’d betrayed him. His father was sleeping. The boy lay back down, forced the rabbit back into his mouth then angled his arm over his lips, so he wouldn’t lose his food again.

The next day, no helicopters came for them, no men on horseback, following dogs, no skiers poling their way home. For a few hours around what should have been lunch, the sun shone down, but all that did was make their dry spot under the tree wet. Then the wind started again.

“Where’s that stick?” the boy asked.

The father narrowed his eyes as if he hadn’t thought of that. “Your rabbit,” he said after a few minutes.

The boy nodded, said, almost to himself, “It’ll come back.”

When he looked around to his father, his father was already looking at him. Studying him.

The rabbit’s skin was out in the snow, just past the tree. Buried hours ago.

The father nodded like this could maybe be true. That the rabbit would come back. Because they needed it to.

The next day he went out again, with a new stick, and came back with his lips blue, one of his legs frozen wet from stepping through some ice into a creek. No rabbit. What he said about the creek was that it was a good sign. You could usually follow water one way or another, to people.

The boy didn't ask which way.

"His name is Slaney," he said.

"The rabbit?"

The boy nodded. Slaney. Things that had names were real.

That night they slept, then woke somehow at the same time, the boy under his father's heavy, jacketed arm. They were both looking the same direction, their faces even with the crust of snow past their tree. Twenty feet out, its nose tasting the air, was Slaney.

The boy felt his father's breath deepen.

"Don't . . . don't . . ." his father said, low, then exploded over the boy, crashed off into the day without his stick.

He came back an hour later with nothing slung over his shoulder, nothing balled against his stomach. No blood on his hands.

This time the son prayed, inside. He promised not to throw any of the meat up again. With the tip of his knife, his father carved a cartoon rabbit into the trunk of their tree. It looked like a frog with horse ears.

"Slaney," the boy said.

The father carved that in a line under the rabbit's feet, then circled the boy's mother's name over and over, until the boy thought that piece of the bark was going to come off like a plaque.

The next time the boy woke, he was already sitting up.

"What?" the father said.

The boy nodded the direction he was facing.

The father watched the boy's eyes, then nodded, got his stick.

This time he didn't come back for nearly a day. The boy, afraid, climbed up into the tree, then higher, as high as he could, until the wind could reach him.

His father reached up with his stick, tapped him awake.

Like a football in the crook of his arm was the rabbit. It was bloody and wonderful, already cut open.

“You ate the guts,” the boy said, his mouth full.

His father reached into the rabbit, came out with a long sliver of meat. The muscle that runs along the spine, maybe.

The boy ate and ate and when he was done, he placed the rabbit skin in the same spot he’d placed the last one. The coat was just the same—white underneath, brown at the tips.

“It’ll come back,” he told his father.

His father rubbed the side of his face. His hand was crusted with blood.

The next day there were no walkie-talkies crackling through the woods, no four-wheelers or snowmobiles churning through the snow. And the rabbit skin was gone.

“Hungry?” the boy’s father said, smiling, leaning on his stick just to stand, and the boy smiled with him.

Four hours later, his father came back with the rabbit again. He was wet to the hips this time.

“The creek?” the boy said.

“It’s a good sign,” the father said back.

Again, the father had fingered the guts into his mouth on the way back, left most of the stringy meat for the boy.

“Slaney,” the father said, watching the boy eat.

The boy closed his eyes to swallow.

Because of his frozen pants—the creek—the father had to sit with his legs straight out. “A good sign,” the boy said after the father was asleep.

The next morning his father pulled another dead branch down, so he had two poles now, like a skier.

The boy watched him walk off into the bright snow, feeling

ahead of himself with the poles. It made him look like a ragged, four-legged animal, one made more of legend than of skin and bone. The boy palmed some snow into his mouth and held it there until it melted.

This time his father was only gone thirty minutes. He'd had to cross the creek again. Slaney was cradled against his body.

"He was just standing there," the father said, pouring the meat out for the boy. "Like he was waiting for me."

"He knows we need him," the boy said.

One thing he no longer had to do was dab the blood off the meat before eating it. Another was swallow before chewing.

That night his father staggered out into the snow and threw up, then fell down into it. The boy pretended not to see, held his eyes closed when his father came back.

The following morning he told his father not to go out again, not today.

"But Slaney," his father said.

"I'm not hungry," the boy lied.

The day after that he was, though. It was the day the storm broke. The woods were perfectly still. Birds were even moving from tree to tree again, talking to each other.

In his head, the boy told Slaney to be closer, to not keep being on the other side of the creek, but the boy's father came back wet to the hip again. His whole frontside was bloodstained now, from hunting, and eating.

The boy scooped the meat into his mouth, watched his father try to sit in one place. Finally he couldn't, fell over on his side. The boy finished eating and curled up against him, only woke when he heard voices, scratchy like on a radio.

He sat up and the voices went away.

On the crust of snow, now, since no more had fallen, was

Slaney's skin. The boy crawled out to it, studied it, wasn't sure how Slaney could be out there already, reforming, all its muscle growing back, and be here too. But maybe it only worked if you didn't watch.

The boy scooped snow onto the blood-matted coat, curled up by his father again. All that day, his father didn't wake, but he wasn't really sleeping either.

That night, when the snow was melting more, running into their dry spot under the tree, the boy saw little pads of ice out past Slaney. They were footprints, places where the snow had packed down under a boot, into a column. Now that column wasn't melting as fast as the rest.

Instead of going in a line to the creek, these tracks cut straight across.

The boy squatted over them, looked the direction they were maybe going.

When he stood, there was a tearing sound. The seat of his pants had stuck to his calf while he'd been squatting. It was blood. The boy fell back, pulled his pants down to see if it had come from him.

When it hadn't, he looked back to his father, then just sat in the snow again, his arms around his knees, rocking back and forth.

"Slaney, Slaney," he chanted. Not to eat him again, but just to hold him.

Sometime that night—it was clear, soundless—a flashlight found him, pinned him to the ground.

"Slaney?" he said, looking up into the yellow beam.

The man in the flannel was breathing too hard to talk into his radio the right way. He lifted the boy up, and the boy said it again: "Slaney."

“What?” the man asked.

The boy didn’t say anything then.

The other men found the boy’s father curled under the tree. When they cut his pants away to understand where the blood was coming from, the boy looked away, the lower lids of his eyes pushing up into his field of vision. Over the years it would come to be one of his mannerisms, a stare that might suggest thoughtfulness to a potential employer, but right then, sitting with a blanket and his first cup of coffee, waiting for a helicopter, it had just been a way of blurring the tree his father was still sleeping under.

Watching like that—both holding his breath and trying not to focus—when the boy’s father finally stood, he was an unsteady smear against the evergreen. And then the boy had to look.

Somehow, using his poles as crutches, the boy’s father was walking, his head slung low between his shoulders, his poles reaching out before him like feelers.

When he lurched out from the under the tree, the boy drew his breath in.

The father’s pants were tatters now, and his legs too, where he’d been carving off the rabbit meat, stuffing it into the same skin again and again. The father pulled his lower lip into his mouth, nodded once to the boy, then stuck one of his poles into the ground before him, pulled himself towards it, then repeated the complicated process, pulling himself deeper into the woods.

“Where’s he going?” one of the men asked.

The boy nodded, understood, his father retreating into the trees for the last time, having to move his legs from the hip now, like things, and the boy answered—Hunting—then ran back from the helicopter they were dragging him into, to dig in

the snow just past their tree, but there was nothing there. Just coldness. His own numb fingers.

“What’s he saying?” one of the men asked.

The boy stopped, closed his eyes, tried to hear it too, his own voice, then let the men pull him out of the snow, into the world of houses and bank loans and, finally, job interviews. Because they were wearing gloves, though, or because it was cold and their fingers were numb too, they weren’t able to pull all of him from the woods that day. They couldn’t tell that an important part of him was still there, sitting under a blanket, watching his father move across the snow, the poles just extensions of his arms, the boy holding his lips tight against each other. Because it would have been a betrayal, he hadn’t let himself throw up what his father had given him, not then, and not years later, when the man across the desk palms a handful of sunflower seeds into his mouth all at once, then holds his hand there to make sure none get away, leans forward a bit for the boy to explain what he’s written for a name here on this application.

Slade?

Slake?

Slather, slavery?

What the boy does here, what he’s just now realizing he should have been doing all along, is reach across, delicately thump the man’s cheek, and then pretend not to see past the office, out the window, to the small brown rabbit in the flowers, watching.

Soon enough it’ll be white.

The boy smiles.

Some woods, they’re big enough you never find your way out.

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