

# The Boneyard

Jua Kim

The doe's carcass lay before us in the tall grass. Its limbs were splayed at awkward angles and its head was shot clean through with my bullet. The ground had soaked up the blood by the time we had run across the field to look at the body, but its hide was still warm when I touched it. Its heartbeat had ceased just moments ago. The thought of it frightened me: alive one second, dead the next.

"Not bad, kid," remarked my older brother John from behind me. He had Dad's rifle—a slender, mahogany-colored thing—slung over his shoulder on a leather strap. "You killed it on your first shot."

"Her, not it," I told him. He looked at me funny. I explained, "She's a girl deer. A doe. Has no antlers."

"It's an *it* now," he said, nudging the body with the toe of his boot. "Just a dead body."

"Okay. So what are we gonna do with...it?"

"It's our dinner." He laughed scornfully at the look of horror on my face. "Kidding, it's just for fun. But if you want, we can skin it."

John was the one who had fired first. I recalled him grinning sharply as his finger tightened around the trigger. The shot had only hit the deer's hind leg, making it buck in fear. It had started limping, then pathetically dragging itself, towards the woods. Then John thrust the rifle into my hands. "Now! Shoot it, quick!"

Feeling sick, I leveled it at the deer, following its path as it hobbled for its life, and fired. The sonic boom was deafening. When the bullet hit, the deer had jerked its head violently like a man cracking his neck, and then had slowly toppled to the ground.

I crouched unsteadily next to the carcass and lifted its head a little. When I looked into those glazed pebble eyes, it was as if I had been roused from a lucid dream. That second shot meant that we weren't just kids messing around with a gun anymore. It felt like murder.

"You good?"

I looked at him. "That was a living, breathing thing. We—I mean, *I* killed it."

"Yeah, well, so what." He shrugged and inspected the rifle in his hands. "Now help me carry this thing so we can wash it off at the river."

#

The river was a long walk from the meadow. It was a hot day, too; the sky was intensely blue and a dry wind wove through the yellow mustard plants. As we trudged along, the deer's distended torso kept swinging back and forth and thumping against my thigh. The body stunk like a zoo in midsummer, and I kept having to readjust my slippery grip on its knees.

I hadn't been to the river since I was little, but John had recently been spending a lot of his time there by himself. He said he needed to

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clear his mind, and always brought along Dad's hunting rifle and a case of copper-colored bullets.

We threw the deer onto the rocky riverbank once we were there. The green water lapped at its grimy hooves. From his belt, John pulled out a wickedly curved knife that also belonged to Dad. Kneeling on a boulder, he peeled off his shirt and then started sawing away at the deer's hind leg. Rivulets of dark blood ran down his forearms and blotted his camo shorts.

Dad used to take great care of his hunting equipment. The rifle in particular had been his prized possession. It was an antique Remington Model 94 that had been passed down from Grandpa. He hung it proudly over our fireplace and rarely let us touch it. Dad was a very protective man; whenever John and I went hiking, he insisted on coming to supervise. But after our mother got sick, he didn't seem to mind where his equipment or his kids went.

The afternoon air was tranquil, and the rushing of the river's current somewhat cooled the breeze. Several bleached sticks were littered on the riverbank, which was strange because the forest only began near the meadow.

I picked up one of the pieces of wood. It was heavy and smooth with porous knobs at both ends. I looked around and saw that all of the sticks were of a similar shape.

"John," I began, nausea roiling in my stomach. "These are all—"

"Bones? Yeah," he replied without looking up. He'd ripped off a sizable flap of hide off the tough flesh. The underside of the deer's skin was grey and bloodless, like a membrane.

"You killed all of these?"

"Sure I did. I bring them here and skin them. The coyotes eat the leftover meat."

There were so many bones here, all lodged in firmly between granite stones. I wondered vaguely about just how many animals my brother had killed with that rifle.

"Mom would hate this. She always got mad when Dad would go hunting with his friends." I felt stupid in the heat, and my voice sounded whiny, even to my own ears. "If she was here, she'd say—"

John glared at me. "Say what?"

The kids in my town had always held my brother in a kind of fearful reverence; he was tall for his age and wore shirts with the sleeves torn off to show his growing biceps. Right now, there was deer blood crusted all over his bare chest and arms, and his pissed-off glower made him look almost feral.

"Nothing."

#

Our family used to go to the Abundant Life Pentecostal Church every Sunday. It was where John and I had been baptized. I never paid attention to the pastor's rambling strings of words, but I liked the way we got ready in the mornings. Mom would put on lily-scented perfume and her one good dress with the polka-dot pattern. She would button up my shirt and help John with his tie, and then we would all walk hand-in-hand down the tree-lined road.

It had been just my brother and I the last time we went, because Dad had to drive Mom to the hospital. Back then we didn't understand how serious it would be. The morning had been the same as all the other Sunday mornings: warm and dappled with pale sunlight.

There we were in the airless chapel, sweating through our shirts in the back pew. John hadn't figured out how to tie a tie by himself, so he had

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his shirt collar wide open. The pastor had been speaking for hours and showed no signs of concluding the sermon.

"God is the one who decides on when we will pass. Our bodies will return to the ashes and dust from which we were created," he said. "But our spirit will move on to Heaven to be with the Lord, if only you give your heart to Jesus."

"What a load of bull," John muttered next to me. "When something dies it doesn't go anywhere. It just ends."

#

The deer looked half-naked now. The hide on its hind legs and flank had been flayed off neatly like a pair of jeans. Its fluids leaked downstream and were lost in the frothing current. I wondered if it felt any shame, with its naked rear glistening wetly under the orange sun.

"We should have a funeral for it," I said, stroking its limp neck. "The deer, I mean. So it can go back into the soil."

"There's no point. The coyotes will dig it up."

"But Mom would want—"

John stopped cutting. He carefully picked up the rifle and pulled back the bolt handle in one smooth motion—click.

"Do I look like I give a damn about what she wants?" he hissed. "Stop talking about her."

"But she's dying," I said. "She's stuck in a hospital room by herself. And you're out here killing animals—"

There was a sudden, earsplitting pop. A flower of blood burst and splattered, warm and sticky, on my cheek. Somewhere not far off, birds spiraled off, squawking into the sky.

The second bullet had penetrated the deer's skull and split it down the middle; the soft purple

stuff inside its head was now fully exposed. Bile burned my throat. In the corner of my vision there was the gun's long barrel, smoking gently.

"Fuck you," my brother said flatly. "It wasn't me who killed it, anyway. You shot the gun, so why do you care?"

"Don't," I whispered. I couldn't look away from the mutilated deer. There was a hot pressure behind my eyes, and I fought to keep the tremor out of my voice. "Let's just go home."

He ignored me and shot at the deer again. The butt of the rifle jolted against his shoulder. There was even more blood now, staining the edge of the river like an oil spill.

"Stop it." My voice was an ineffectual whisper. I watched John reload, aim, and fire, as if he were an automation. Geysers of blood kept exploding out of the carcass, loud and mesmerizing like fireworks.

I squeezed my eyes shut to block out the sight, but I could still hear the awful cracks from the rifle. I wanted to be lost in the black void behind my eyelids forever.

#

Mom didn't live at our house anymore; she'd gotten too sick to be in bed alone. In July, Dad had taken us to the hospital in the town where she was being treated. The whole drive there, John silently held a rag in his bruised mouth. He'd been in a fistfight earlier and one tooth had been bashed out. "Imagine what your mother would think," Dad sighed, and then nobody said anything.

When we got there, the doctor talked about how the cancer was spreading throughout her liver and even her bones. Then, quietly, he said that nobody could be certain whether she would survive until the end of her treatments. "Stay with

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her during that precious time,” the doctor told me and John.

Mom was so doped up that she didn’t even notice us walking into the room. She was watching the town firework show from the hospital bed, reaching out as if trying to touch them through the glass window. She looked very pale and tired, and a lot of her hair was missing. She was also hooked up to some kind of beeping machine. Its clear tubes tangled around her arm and weighed it down.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my brother’s fist clench, knuckles blanching. I turned to him to say something, but he avoided my look and stormed out of the room.

Mom watched him go. She blinked a few times, confused. “John,” she whispered, struggling to open her mouth, but he didn’t come back.

For a long time, I stood in that room alone until the lights in the sky dwindled out.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The pastor had said. It didn’t make sense because we were anything but dust. We were all nerves, muscles, pulsing heart. Hot blood in gallons. It was cruel of God to snatch it away from us.

#

The deer’s head was reduced to a pulp at this point, and its skull was fractured into a million tiny chips. But John didn’t stop. I was afraid to look directly at his face. He was grimacing in a way where his pink gums were exposed at the root of his canines. For what seemed like the hundredth time, he reloaded with the bolt once more and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened.

He pulled it again. It gave a hollow click. The bullets had run out.

A sound wrenched free from his throat, and he threw down the rifle. There were flecks of greyish brains all over the front of his clothes.

“Look what you made me do,” he breathed. “Now the hide’s ruined.”

He twisted his face in disgust and waded into the river until the water was licking gently against his knees. But instead of washing himself off, he stood there and watched the sinuous river flow over the boulders. From this distance he seemed almost younger and smaller than I was.

“Hey,” I said.

He looked back, and I realized that my older brother was crying. His face was strangely devoid of anger. He wasn’t making any noise, either. Like his tears were just raindrops sliding down a cliffside.

“We should go back to the hospital,” I said. “Mom is still there, you know. We don’t have to kill like God does.”