

# The Jackalope

By Marianne Cassidy

Blood seeps into the soil. One of the hare's eyes dangles by a glistening, viscous thread, ripped from its socket by the impact. The other eye lies open, staring at nothing. Its fur is a mottling of summer and winter coats, aged brown flecked with pristine white, now stained crimson, darkening to maroon in the crisp air. Torso curled over itself, limbs twisting inward, concealing the hole the girl's dad had created between its ribs. Sour tang of iron and flesh, decaying leaves and Adirondack pine.

The girl stands over the broken animal. She has seen more violent deaths. The mutilation is as natural as the frost coating the surrounding earth, as normal as the wind licking her hair.

The antlers are not normal.

Twisting from between limp ears, they span the length of its body. Each branching section of bone ends on a menacing point.

Her dad squats beside his prey, shotgun slung over one shoulder.

— Bullseye,

he says. Puffing a final cloud from his cigarette, he extinguishes the tip on the corpse, spits, and stands. He rolls the body over with the side of his boot, admiring the entry

wound. Then he brings his heel down on the hare's head. She doesn't blink as he crushes the skull, doesn't flinch as flesh clings and sticks and splits. The antlers snap away, nothing left to connect them. A hunger satiated, her dad gives the animal one last kick before drawing back.

— Come on.

He says it at her, not looking her way. Pine picks away at mucus and bone on the leather of his boots as he begins to leave.

She opens her mouth, closes it, breathes, blurts:

— what is it?

Her dad stops and gives her a look, confusion combined with derision. Shame gnaws in her belly.

— I don't know what the fuck you're asking.

Can't he see the antlers? Is it her imagination? Maybe this is her inheritance. Her dad always says: *your mother was a crazy bitch*.

— Come on,

he repeats. He turns to walk away once more, fishing a fresh cigarette from his pocket.

Her body splinters; a need to obey clawing against an instinct, a whisper beneath her skin. Remain with the dead. Still staring at the hare, the soles of her shoes feel melded to the soil, as if at any moment the ground would part and swallow her home. Her dad's voice scrapes from behind her, timbre of pepper through a rusty grinder.

— You going deaf?

She manages to tear herself away, looks up at him, meets his catlike gaze. He takes a drag from his cigarette. The smoke hits her eyes, stinging.

— If you don't keep up, I'll leave you behind,

he says.

— Don't think I won't.

She doesn't doubt it. But she responds with silence. If she opens her mouth at all, she'll scream. Her dad flicks the cigarette at her face, a smudge of ash painting her cheek.

This time, she follows when he leaves. A heaviness tugs at her as she forces herself through each unwilling step.

Stay in the woods.

Remain with the dead.