

Snaring Rabbits

She sets two snares at the edge of the warren, where it slopes down into the dense birch. He sets two snares as well, but further out, where the birch gives way to the field. Two snares each, no more. They had agreed. The freezer at home is nearly full of deer and elk but she knows he'd set six or seven snares just for the pelts if she weren't here. She fusses with her wires, adjusting them so that the opening is no wider than the span of her hand, straightening the necks so that the loop is precisely at a right angle to the sapling it is anchored to.

"Are you done yet?" He comes tromping through the trees toward her, obscuring the small tracks in the snow that lead every which way.

"Almost. I don't want a fox or anything to get caught by accident."

He snorts and turns away, starts trudging back toward the field. "You worry too much. Shoulda been a mother."

This is a well-worn phrase of his that she hates. He knows she's sensitive about not having children. He knows she loves him a little less each time he twists the knife. And he does it anyway. At least once a week. For years.

The loop on her snare keeps slipping on the horizontal wire, widening. Maybe he's right, maybe she does worry too much. But there

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are a lot of fresh tracks in these woods. Coyotes, rabbits, deer, elk, fox, something with a swishing tail: badger? porcupine? She unwinds the anchor, straightens the wire, tries again.

A few minutes later, as she is leaving the birch stand, she passes his snares and notices that both loops are larger than the regulation five inches. He has also propped up the anchor wire with a stick and fixed a secondary, break-away anchor on the other side so that the noose is suspended perfectly between two saplings. She looks around to see if he has secretly set more than the two he agreed to; she doesn't see any but suspects they are there, camouflaged in the bush. He's never satisfied with only taking what they need.

Back at the cabin, she stokes the little wood heater and fills the kettle. He is out at the fire pit, piling the wood up to get the coals nice and hot for supper. She looks in the cooler; a small chunk of cheese, two cans of beans, some condiments, a pack of wieners, and the heel from a loaf of bread. After three days, supplies are getting low.

He shot five grouse that morning, showed her how to get the meat by stepping on the wings and yanking up on the legs. The sound of skin and feathers tearing, bones popping, the suck of the bird's innards, made her want to throw up. He tried to get her to do one of them herself, but she wouldn't. Couldn't.

"If you want to learn, you have to practice—c'mon this is a good survival skill." He held out the last grouse by its feet, shaking it gently at her.

"No, I'll puke."

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“C’mon honey. You said you wanted to do this so just do it. It gets easier over time. Besides, you enjoy eating them, right?”

She shook her head, stared at the grouse, its sleek coat of patterned feathers marred by a thin smattering of blood. “Sorry, I can’t.”

He tossed the grouse down at his feet, stepped on the wings. “You’re so fucking non-committal.” He pulled the legs up in one sharp jerk, the guts, spine and head slipping away smoothly from the breasts and wings in a slimy clot. He threw the legs and their dangling viscera aside.

“It’s fine if you don’t have the stomach for this, but I just wish you’d make up your damn mind one way or another. God made predators and God made prey. Figure it out.”

She had no response to that. He was right, she needed to figure it out. Silently, she helped him clean off the small, pink muscles in the snow and put them in a plastic bag.

The grouse breasts are frozen solid now. Beans and wieners tonight. Tomorrow they’ll load the truck up and head home to the city. At home, he’ll take his time with the grouse, cook them in butter and cream. “The way God likes ’em,” he’ll say. “Why else put them in the sight of my gun?”

She looks out the cabin window to make sure he’s still at the fire before digging around in her overnight bag for the smooth, cold

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surface of the micky. She slips it out and pours a generous portion into an enamel cup, returns the bottle to its hiding place amongst her long underwear and extra sweaters. She adds a tablespoon of instant coffee and a bit of the warming water from the kettle. She drinks the tepid, boozy coffee while opening the can of beans and cutting up the wieners into a soot-bottomed pot. She will slip back to make another drink while the beans are cooking, and then there will be their evening tea, which they drink at the fire before turning in for the night. His with powdered milk and sugar, hers mostly brandy. He would probably smell it on her breath when they crawled into bed, but so what? She is an adult. She isn't hurting anyone.

Sure enough, after dinner she wobbles while stoking the stove for the night and he picks a fight.

“Get away from there, you're going to burn yourself.”

“Piss off, I'm fine.”

“You think I can't tell when you're drunk?”

“Leeme alone, I'm not a child”

“Well then stop behaving like one.”

If they weren't confined to the twelve-by-twelve cabin, if it weren't February in the boreal forest, she would sleep elsewhere. But her options are none: sleep with him in their small, sagging bed or freeze.

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He strips down to his long underwear and kneels by the bed. She has already crawled under the covers. He looks at her, eyebrows raised. She shakes her head. He prays. Lately, she has given up on it. Secretly, she hasn't been a true believer for a long time; her faith started waning nearly a decade ago and last year, a few weeks before turning forty, she finally got up the courage to admit to herself that it was gone. For a while, she continued pretending for his sake. His faith grounds him, makes him a little softer when it really matters. It's what brought them together in the first place, was the glue that bonded them, got him sober, healed them again and again. She wanted to be part of the thing that helped him, but it never helped her. She was surprised at his indifference when she stopped praying and going to church. Maybe he's given up on her like she's given up on his god.

His eyes are closed now, his forehead resting lightly on his clasped hands. She can see his lips moving but doesn't try to make out what he's saying. When he's done, she scoots over to the edge of the bed so he can crawl over her and wriggle down into the blankets next to the draughty wall. Even when he's angry with her, he takes the cold side of the bed. It's the Christian thing to do.

The problem with drinking, she remembers as she stares into the darkness, is that it almost always makes sleep impossible. Her hangovers are as much a result of sleep deprivation as her liver in overdrive. She is too hot. The room, if she could see it through the darkness, is spinning. Maybe she should give up booze for a while. Just a couple of weeks, a month, tops. See how it goes. If she likes it, she could keep going, but no pressure, no expectation to be a teetotaler. It's not like she gets drunk every night. Just weekends and special

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occasions. During the week, she drinks in a way that is considered civilized in most European countries: a glass of wine or two with dinner, once in a while a nightcap while watching TV. Nothing excessive.

Her train of thought is interrupted by an unfamiliar sound. A high-pitched screeching, no, a squealing. A rubbery sound that winds around itself. She stops breathing for a moment to listen better, all her senses piqued. There it is again. She slips out of the bed without interrupting his snores. She feels around clumsily in the dark for her boots, her fleece pants, her coat. She hears the sound again, just as she is opening the door, which creaks on its hinges. She pauses, grips the doorjamb to steady herself. His snoring stops.

“Where you going?”

“Just out to pee.”

“I left the toilet paper on the chopping block.”

“Ok, thanks.”

He knows she hates going to the outhouse at night, especially in winter. It's too far and the plastic toilet seat too cold. She does, in fact, have a full bladder. She grabs the toilet paper, walks twenty paces from the cabin and squats in the field, looking out over the expanse of snow between the cabin and the forest. He bought this quarter section two years ago, in a middle-aged fever to get closer to god by getting back to the land. He built the cabin in the middle of what was once a grain

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field because he likes to be able to see what's around him in all directions. She doesn't mind being out in the open, especially on nights like this when the stars are so bright and close.

The heat from her urine steams up around her, smelling of coffee, or the residue of coffee after her liver is done with it. She sways a little, braces herself by putting a hand in the sharp, crusted snow. There's the sound again, shriller, clearer, coming from the dark line of trees on the other side of the field. She stands, inelegantly pulling her pants and underwear up at the same time. She feels in her pocket for the small flashlight that she keeps there for these late-night bathroom breaks, clicks it on. It's surprisingly bright for such a small thing, casts a strong beam far into the field. A pair of eyes reflect back at her. A fox? A coyote? Too far away to tell and they disappear as she adjusts the beam to get a better look. She wonders if the strange sound is a rabbit in one of the snares. She read somewhere that it can take minutes for a rabbit to die, unless they snap their neck in the struggle. The idea makes her queasy. She had been hesitant to set the snares in the first place, but he convinced her he could make mittens from the pelts, stew and pie with the meat, and besides, this was what it was all about: becoming self-sufficient, getting out of the rat race, connecting to the food on the table... So she agreed to try it, telling herself that letting an animal die on its own, without a human standing over it, was better, cleaner somehow. More private. Now she's not so sure.

The brandy makes her brave. She walks toward the tree line. If there is a rabbit struggling in the snare, she'll have put it out of its misery, snap its neck or something. She has no idea how to do that and hopes it isn't a rabbit, that the snares are empty. She decides to pull

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them or at least bend the loops so that no little heads can pass through. She'll make it look like some other animal stepped on them or that a rabbit snagged but got away. If he finds out, he'll be mad. They'll fight all the way home. But he doesn't need to know anything. She'll be careful.

The beam from her flashlight bounces and shimmies over the field stubble. She swings it around to the left and then the right every few steps, but the eyes she saw before must have retreated to the trees. The screeching, squealing noise seems to have stopped. She hopes that if it was a rabbit, the rabbit is now dead.

She arrives at the wall of trees. Her flashlight bounces off the silver birch, creating shadows that move beyond. His snares are just a couple meters in, hers a bit further. She finds their footprints from the afternoon, but they are obscured by myriad other prints—elk, deer, and yes, rabbit. She follows the boot prints into the forest and finds his snares easily enough. They are empty but the break-away anchor wires are dangling, the supporting sticks knocked over. Good, she thinks, and places the flashlight between her teeth. She kneels down to the noose, pulling it small and bending it so that no head or foot can enter. She stands and moves to the second snare, does the same. She swings the flashlight around to see if maybe she can spot any additional snares he set without her knowing. A reflection flashes in the underbrush a few feet away, but by the time she adjusts the beam, it's gone. She moves toward where she thinks it was, eyes wide for any sign of movement. She squats in front of a tangle of willow and directs the flashlight into the bramble. Nothing. Also, no boot prints here. She retraces her steps to his snares, scans the snow for his prints but they only go toward the

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warren, where she set her own snares, and then back on themselves. She walks in his tracks, stopping with each step to scan the snow around them but there's no sign of him stopping, kneeling to set more snares. Maybe she's being too hard on him, too judgemental. Why does she always assume he's lying?

She reaches the warren. Here there are more fresh tracks but only rabbit. Rabbits everywhere. Rabbits crisscrossing over his and her boot prints. Why have they been so busy, especially with the freshness of human scent contaminating the area? She finds her first snare empty and, surprisingly, there are no fresh tracks anywhere near it. She kneels and clumsily unwinds the anchor from the sapling, pulls the noose through and crumples the wire deep into her pocket. As she moves toward her second snare she catches something in the beam of her flashlight again, only this time it isn't eyes but fur. There is fur up ahead, in the snow. Unmoving. A foot. A small, elongated, white-furred foot. She freezes, her stomach a tight knot. Her breathing is shallow, her heartbeat rapid. *Get it together. You are responsible for this, now go deal with it.*

The rabbit is dead, its head at a strange angle. Maybe it broke its own neck. She hopes so, but the imprints in the snow around it suggest not. It struggled. She reaches down and touches its side with her cold hand. Still warm. Still very warm. A small movement under her fingers.

“Shit!” she jerks her hand back.

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The rabbit moves again, this time twitching its hind legs. She sees, then, that one of its front feet is caught in the noose which has cinched foot and neck together, tightly but not tight enough to kill. Worse than dead. Almost dead.

“Oh fuck fuck fuck!”

Quickly, she jams the flashlight between her teeth, kneels and begins unwinding the anchor wire. *I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry* ... she tries to keep the tears now welling up from obscuring her vision. Her fingers are numb, and she fumbles with the wire. She lets out a groan, a whine, blinks to clear her eyes. The rabbit twitches again, stronger this time. Just as she manages to free the anchor wire the rabbit lets out a scream. The flashlight falls from her teeth into the snow and goes out. There is sound all around her now, movement. She reaches for the flashlight, gropes in the snow but can't find it. She touches soft fur, something sharp, falls backward onto her elbows. Movement, the sound of many small feet on snow, branches being quickly pushed aside. Then blackness. Silence. Stillness.

Her eyes adjust surprisingly quickly to the night. So much so that she wonders why she thought she needed the flashlight at all. She crouches in the snow, taking in the forest with her eyes, her ears, smelling it. The effects of the brandy seem to have vanished, leaving her more alert than she can ever remember being. She can smell the rabbits, but they have moved away, their scent already cooling. Even the rabbit from the snare is gone. The only sounds she hears are the trees, quietly creaking, brushing up against each other in a faint wind. She sees her own tracks and begins slowly, carefully retracing her steps

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in short, halting strides, jumping from one boot-print to the next. The forest feels menacing and she thinks she's being watched; by the trees, by numerous hidden pairs of eyes keeping their distance. She tries to control her breath so she can hear better, but her heartbeat is so loud. She stays crouched low to the ground as she moves, close enough to the snow to make out each individual footprint. So many rabbits! A swarm of rabbits.

The density of tracks lessens as she gets closer to his snares. The moon is up and its light is stronger here. She sees something she didn't notice earlier—wide marks in the snow, like it has been swept with something. She looks closer. Under the sweeping marks, deeper indentations, boot prints. *I knew it. I fucking knew it.*

He must have used a spruce bough. Once she is familiar enough with its marks, the track is easy to follow. She finds the place where he knelt in the snow, deep enough into the trees that she wouldn't have seen him while she was busy with her own wires. When he finished he must have walked backwards in his own steps, sweeping in front of him until he came to his original snares. So deceitful. Devious even. How many had he set? She realizes she will be out here for a long time, tracking his movements, rooting around for his snares, dismantling them. It's the price she has to pay for the rabbit she almost killed. Maybe did kill; for all she knows it could have run off and hid and died or is dying of its wounds. The warm flutter of its ribcage under her palm returns to her. She shudders. Yes, this is the price of that.

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She crouches where he knelt but can't see the snare. There is a tunnel of sorts between two birch trees where saplings and dead sticks line either side of an older rabbit trail. This is where he would set it but why can't she see it? She sees where rabbits have chewed the bark of a young sapling. She leans closer, thinks she can smell him on the snow, on the saplings. Faint, faint, but yes, it's there—his rough hands smelling of metal and wood-smoke. She sniffs one sapling, then another, trying to determine where the scent is stronger. Leans in further, closer.

It isn't until she pulls her head back, tries to sit up on her haunches, that she feels the wire on her neck. She instinctively reaches up to pull it away, but it has already cinched and she can't get her hands to work, they are too blunt, the fur preventing her from getting a grip. She begins to choke, adjusts her position to take the pressure off but doesn't know where the anchor wire is coming from and as she leans forward, the cinch tightens. She scrabbles at her neck, scratching but gaining no purchase. She cannot get the right angle, cannot reach the wire. She can feel her eyes bulge with a ferocious pressure. Blackness seeping into her peripheral vision. She doesn't know which way to move, tries one direction, then another but still the noose won't let up. Finally, she lays still, her head and body swelling hot. She thinks of him coming in the morning, looking for her, his horror at finding her, here. Maybe she can last until then if she stays perfectly still, if she can get the tiniest amount of air into her lungs. Maybe she can last.