

JUDD HAMPTON

BABY TEETH

HIS FATHER'S OLD PICKUP churns the dust like a twister, the back end fishtailing, wheels flinging gravel and battering the fenders. Ten-year-old Dorsey rides shotgun, sitting on his hands so not to claw at the dashboard, or throw open the door and just dive out. Billy is in the back. He's too young to understand the juxtaposition of things: infidelity and separation, wives and lovers, fathers and sons. He's nothing but giggles and baby teeth back there, thrown around the seat at every turn like as many spare parts back there.

"I have to tell you—" And his father pounds the wheel, just slams a meaty fist against the fake leather. They're calloused and gnarled, his hands. As spent as his workman's wage. He affords no luxuries, save the odd trip to the lake and birthday gifts. He never forgets their birthdays, his break in the clouds, occasion to buy his sons another firearm.

"You should be damn proud, boy, to have your own thirty-ought-six at your age."

Dorsey loathes guns as much as fishtailing and rocks battering the fenders, as much as Billy back there, all giggles and baby teeth. But what he loathes more is his father's sense of duty: turn Dorsey into a man, not the child he caught playing with dolls. Peter, Dorsey's stepdad, is different. Peter accepts things the way they are.

"You like the lake," his father says. "Not the old man, but you like the lake."

Billy is the favorite. His father should just leave Dorsey out of this.

Scenery flashes by the window, spindly unclaimed trees, a rusty polluted creek. Someone has dumped a load of garbage down the bank. The creek, all polluted and garbaged-up like his father's apartment, like no one knows anymore how to keep things right. The spindly unclaimed trees feed into open clearcut. Bald hills, a mess of stumps and cut-off limbs, logs stacked and piled on rutted earth.

"That's not right," Dorsey says.

"What do you know about *right*, boy? *Right* never put food on the table. And *right* sure as hell never stopped your mother from taking my house and letting that sonofabitch move in and raise you. Hell, what's *right* got to do with anything?"

His father noses the old truck down an abandoned road, wheels chattering against potholes and bouncing over fallen trees. Billy in the back ricochets off the roof, all laughing and giggling and goddamn baby teeth. "I want to live with you, Daddy," Billy says.

They find the old cabin in a clearing by the lake. The lake: mud and cattails and only two feet of water, all leaches and mosquitoes and frothy pond scum, just squirming, wriggling bugs in there. Why's it even called a lake?

"Not the old man or the guns, no, but you like the lake."

The boys unload the truck: sleeping bags, kerosene stove, the frying pan they'll use, knives, a cooler with provisions and half a bottle of scotch, an axe. And the guns, of course. Three trips for the guns. Stacked in Dorsey's arms like firewood. And now it's raining.

"I have to tell you—" And his father pounds the half-bottle against the table. And they're dressing in fatigues, their camouflaged slickers and kill-boots, all plastic and Neoprene so the blood washes off, so the blood just rolls off their backs. "It's not right what your mother's doing," he says.

And they're down at the swamp, steel barrels jutting like prosthetics from the crooks of their arms, pockets filled with red shells. Billy is running into the reeds, head just disappearing among the cattails down there, all laughing and giggles and goddamn baby teeth down there.

"That's my boy, Billy. Flush them out. Flush those geese, Billy."

And the geese are beating their wings, rustling out of the reeds and hitting the sky by the hundreds. The juxtaposition: buckshot and down, blood and rain, father and son.

“Blast one, damn you.”

But Dorsey can't. Doesn't even try because he can't. “They're not mine. I wanted you to know the dolls aren't mine. A girl brought them over. A girl from school. We were studying. I wanted you to know they're not mine.”

“Shoot, goddamn it.” His father's eyes seep rage. He hoists his barrel and fires one off. Dorsey flinches. And a bird drops out of the sky. A goose, a Canada goose.

And his father just stands there: breathless, barrel smoking, chest heaving up and down. He looks the same as he did that day, that day with the dolls. He was all: *You play with Barbie dolls? That's what Peter's teaching you to do? I have to tell you. It's not right.* And then he squeezed one of those dolls so hard his whole face turned red, and then he popped Barbie's head off just like a bottle cap and stuffed it into Dorsey's mouth. And Dorsey was all choking and gagging, but his father held him down until Dorsey swallowed that head. *You want to be a little faggot that plays with dolls, boy? Well, I'm going to teach you all about it. Just wait until that head comes out, boy. Then you'll know what it feels like to be a faggot.*

The goose lies dead in the marsh, wings tattered, back broken. And Billy is dancing down there, nothing but giggles and fucking baby teeth down there. “Please, daddy, can I live with you?” Billy says.

A second Canada goose swoops down and crouches over its mate, all hissing and honking and spitting at Billy.

“You see that, boy? Geese are faithful. They mate for life. That one there would rather die than lose its mate. It'd rather die!” He snatches Dorsey's shotgun, pumps one into the chamber and shoves it back into Dorsey's hands.

“Your turn, boy. Be a man, damn you. Kill that sonofabitch. Put him out of his goddamn misery.”

“I have to tell you—” Dorsey says, and he's lifting his gun.