

## Christmas Eve

The last night I saw my little sister Sharla, we sat close together on the couch, our arms pressed against one another, sharing a blanket, watching *A Christmas Story* with the volume down low. In the corner was the little pine tree we'd cut and decorated with paper stars and a few boxes beneath it, small cheap things from us to our mother and our mother to us. Outside was cold and quiet; the rain had stopped. I was too hot, the soles of my feet scorching as they rested on top of the gas heater in the center of the living room. I watched the blue flames flicker but didn't move my feet.

From his chair, Darryl talked over the movie, laughing, and that night even Sharla knew to play along, smiling at the right times, getting up from the couch to grab a beer for him from the fridge. Our mother, in the other armchair, smiled too, and for a moment it felt like we were a family.

When the movie ended, we sat there through the credits, feigning interest in the names of producers and camera operators. Darryl stood up and stretched, draining the can.

“Let’s go, then,” he said to Sharla and me.

Our mother didn’t protest, so neither did we.

“We gotta hurry,” he said, “to get back before Santa comes.”

The Walmart was thirty miles away, and layaway, where Darryl said our mother’s gift was waiting for us to pick up and load into the back of the truck, would close at nine. Darryl turned up the radio loud. There was no middle seatbelt, so I gripped the edge of the bench seat and leaned against Sharla, who faced out the window into the dark. The guns rattled on the racks behind our heads.

No other cars were on the road so Darryl drove with the brights on into town. He pulled into the gas station, took the keys from the ignition, and walked inside. Leaning with his elbows on the counter, he looked like a little boy with thick, hairy arms as he laughed and joked with the clerk. It was cold in the truck with the engine off.

He came back out and put in five dollars of gas. But then he turned the truck back in the direction we'd come from.

"Where are we going?" asked Sharla.

"I told you," he said, not taking his eyes from the road. "We're getting your momma her present."

Darryl passed the turnoff to our house and continued to drive for a long while before turning down a logging road. The road was lined with towering pines, tall and straight, spaced evenly in rows. The headlights reflected off the trees, which seemed to flicker and flash. Ruts and rocks in the dirt road jostled the truck back and forth. I knocked into Sharla as Darryl shifted into four-wheel drive. The radio turned to static and he flicked it off.

He slowed and rolled down all the windows. The air stung my face. He reached behind the steering wheel to switch on the spotlight, then out the window to adjust it. It illuminated the thin line of ragged trees along the road, and behind them I knew would be a clearing where the timber had been recently cut, all stumps and tall grass. Darryl pointed the spotlight into the trees and behind them we saw dozens of golden orbs, glistening green pearls, moving in the night.

Darryl slid back into the cab and grinned at us.

"Your momma'd like a little doe," he said, putting the truck in park. He reached for the rifle behind my head and spoke softly as he loaded it. "They make nice little steaks."

He steadied the rifle across the windowpane. I pressed my hands tightly over my ears and Sharla pulled up her knees and buried her head between her legs to wait. Finally he took the shot, and I felt the reverb through my core. Sharla and I both jerked. The golden orbs flicked and scattered across the clearing. A deer close to us ran a few paces before it stumbled and fell. Darryl set down the gun and hopped out of the truck.

"A good clean shot," Darryl called from the field, but I knew that a clean shot meant that an animal doesn't run once you shoot it.

We crossed the ditch and crawled under the barbed wire after him. It was a young doe, and it was dead. I grabbed the front legs and Darryl took the back. Sharla pushed down on the top of the wire fence as we heaved the body over it. She held the doe's head as we lifted it into the truck bed, then helped to cover it with a tarp and surround it with junk and tools, so that someone who wasn't really looking wouldn't have a reason to see. Darryl started to whistle. He drove too fast down the road toward the highway, and around a sharp curve the back of the truck fishtailed briefly before he regained control. He glanced over at us. If we showed too much fear, he'd keep doing it because he thought it was funny, but if we didn't look scared enough, he'd drive worse until we did. He slammed on the brakes to make us gasp, laughing like a child. He slammed them again. The truck skidded toward the ditch before coming to a stop.

A massive buck was in the road in front of us, the spotlight blinding him, the shadows from the points of his antlers stretching high along the trees behind him. He began to lope away from us, a few graceful strides along the ditch.

Darryl fumbled with the gun over our heads. He grabbed at the shifter and the truck jerked Sharla and me toward the dashboard. Darryl threw his weight against the door and, with his feet on the driver's seat, balanced the gun across the roof of the truck. He fired, and the noise was so loud and close to our ears that it shook the truck. For a moment I wondered if the shot had killed us and we were floating in our last moments, if I'd ever hear anything again. The deer stumbled in the ditch but stayed on its feet, then hopped the fence and disappeared into the night.

"Fuck," Darryl said. He jumped out of the truck, leaving his door open wide. He stood on the edge of the ditch, looking at the fence where the deer went over, then climbed across and disappeared into the woods.

I pulled the door shut. Sharla reached across me to turn off the radio. We watched the clock. Twenty minutes, thirty, forty-five.

"We should definitely leave now," said Sharla.

"Maybe he got lost," I said after a while.

"Good," said Sharla. "Then let's go."

I didn't answer. She reached across me again to point the heater vent toward her.

"He's such a fucking idiot," Sharla said. "There's plenty of people that live out here."

"Nobody's coming out here to check on Christmas," I said. I looked around then for signs of anyone coming to look for the source of the shots, but we were alone.

"Let's just go, Dani," Sharla said. "Just move over and drive." I ignored her. She always acted like she wasn't scared and pushed me when she could tell that I was, or even if I wasn't. She was only fourteen. I was two years older, and I knew so much more than she could. There were things that she didn't understand, things she didn't think through. I was always thinking things through.

"This is fucking stupid," she said, and she started to climb over me. I made no effort to move for her, and she kicked me in the stomach. She righted herself in the driver's seat. "We're fucking leaving."

"You can't even drive yet," I said, trying to laugh at her, but I was angry then. I could leave in two years, as soon as I turned eighteen. But I already knew I wouldn't. My mother needed me. They both needed me to be there. For the past year, as soon as things would calm down or start to feel OK, it was always Sharla who went and did something stupid to make it all terrible again. And even when it was her fault I still had to pay, because I was older and should've made it stop.

"You don't know what I can do," she said. She sounded so much like a child.

Just then we saw the flashlight. Darryl was coming back, not from where he'd disappeared under the fence, but walking up the road.

"Move," Sharla said. I slid against the passenger door and she pushed into the middle seat. Darryl opened the door, breathing hard.

"I tracked it," he said, leaning in. He got kicked out of the Army but he told people he went to Iraq. "Down to a creek there, just down the hill. He's good and dead. He's not getting up. I got a good shot in him."

He went around to the truck bed and started rearranging all the junk. He pushed the little doe over to the side, then all the way to the top against the back window, but there wasn't enough space. He stood there, thinking, then came back to the door.

"I'm gonna drop this one off at the house," he said, pointing at the truck bed. "And y'all are gonna wait out there with that one." He pointed down the road, back toward where he'd come from. "When you see me coming back, when you see my lights up on the road, you drag him over to the fence there at the bottom of the hill."

We didn't move from the cab of the truck.

"Come on," he said. "Out."

"Why?" Sharla asked. "Just put it on top in the back."

Darryl's voice was steady. "Because," he said slowly, "I need my knife. And a big tarp to cover it up with. And I'm not driving around with both of them back there."

"How about we drive back?" said Sharla. "Me and Dani. And you go wait with the deer." I hit her in the leg and she slapped back at me. "Dani can drive," she said. "Dani and me will go back, and you can stay out here." I shook my head at him; this was not my idea, please don't blame me. I held my breath.

"Get the fuck out of my truck," he said to us. I opened the passenger door and climbed out but Sharla didn't move.

"I don't have a coat," she said.

"He's heavy," said Darryl. "You'll warm up." He dug under the seat and threw a flashlight into the ditch. He grabbed a T-shirt from the floor of the cabin and tossed it at her. "Use that."

"Why didn't you get it?" she said. "Why didn't you bring it up here?"

I called to her but I knew she wasn't going to stop.

"You can't even move it," she said. "You're too fucking weak to even move the thing. You have to get two girls to do your work for you."

He hit her hard across her face and her head slammed into the dashboard. It was too quiet afterward, like another shot went off and deadened my ears.

She sat there for a minute under the cabin light. He yelled at her again to get out, and she climbed out the passenger side and squatted down in the ditch next to me.

Darryl wouldn't look at me or Sharla or say anything. He was upset. He hadn't meant to lose his temper, knew he shouldn't have done that. I felt I almost understood why he'd done it, that she needed to learn to shut her mouth. Years would pass before I'd feel shame for ever thinking this way. Darryl climbed into the truck and drove away, and my sister and I were alone together on the road at night.

Sharla stood up. She kept her head turned away from me and started to walk down the hill. I followed with the flashlight but it was cheap and only illuminated a few feet in front of us. There was no moon but the stars were bright. At the bottom of the hill we left the road and crossed the ditch, where icy water seeped through my shoes. At the fence, Sharla held up the top layer of barbed wire and I slid under. We moved slowly along the creek, picking our way through the undergrowth until we saw the outline of a large animal on the forest floor.

The buck was lying still, but it jerked as we approached, attempting to push itself up for a moment before collapsing again, kicking, antlers digging into the ground. A line of thick dark blood covered the pine needles.

Sharla moved toward the deer and it thrashed again.

"That's really dumb, Sharla," I said. She ignored me and inched closer. "He's going to stab you," I said. Sharla squatted down behind the body. The deer was still again. She reached out and put her hand on his side. The deer breathed in and out. Sharla looked around, as if searching for something, then stood up quickly. The deer jerked again and she stumbled back.

"See?" I said. I was shaking, from fear or from the cold. "I told you."

She squatted down beside the creek bed, cupped her hands, and splashed the cold water onto her face. She cupped water into her mouth then spit it out again. Then she started to pick up rocks from the creek bed. She picked them up and dropped them down. She still hadn't said a word to me and I was getting angry again, her throwing one of her little silent fits out here. She dropped a heavy rock back into the water and the cold water splashed me.

"Will you stop doing that?" I asked.

She squatted again and worked her fingers around the muddy edges of a large rock buried in the creek bed.

"I'm going to kill it," she said.

"No, you're not," I said, but the more you'd tell her not to, the more she'd do. "You can't kill it. You can't do that." She lifted a corner of the rock but it was too heavy and tumbled back into the water.

"He's suffering," she said. "It could take hours." She was acting differently than I'd ever seen her. I was afraid that if I touched her I might break her, snap her in two.

“That’s not going to kill it,” I said. “Just wait. It’s almost done.” We both looked at the deer breathing softly. “Look. He’s calm. It’s OK. Just leave him alone.”

Sharla looked down at her feet, balanced on dry rocks in the creek bed, then climbed out and moved back toward the deer. She knelt next to it again. She stroked the animal’s neck. I stuffed my hands under my sweater and rubbed my knuckles against the skin of my stomach, flexed my toes inside my wet shoes. Sharla’s teeth began to chatter, and I squatted down next to her. We pressed into each other’s sides. I reached out to touch the deer. It was warm and soft. Its neck was thick and muscled. We stroked the deer’s neck and talked to it softly. Then Sharla lay down and put her head in my lap. I ran my fingers through her hair. We sat in silence for a long time and I watched the stars move between the branches of the trees. The wind was still and there were no sounds. The moon rose up over the horizon and I watched as the pale light streamed through the treetops, reflecting off the deer’s thick coat and my sister’s hair. She closed her eyes. I watched my sister breathe and I tried to keep myself awake. I counted backwards from ten and sang children’s songs in my head.

The deer died and my sister breathed soft and shallow. I shook her gently at first, then harder until her eyes opened and she pushed herself up off my lap.

We each took hold of the deer’s legs and pulled. He was too heavy. His neck twisted as his antlers dragged along the ground and caught on the forest floor. We heaved but could only move him a few feet at a time. My fingers were numb then, and my neck and my ankles and my throat were stinging. We gave up and sat down again. I knew I needed to stay awake but could only think of how sleep would make the cold go away.

The lights seemed oddly bright, moving slowly along the road, the spotlight sweeping back and forth. Didn’t he remember where we were, the bottom of the hill by the creek crossing? I nudged Sharla, and it took a lot more shaking before she woke up this time, and longer before she understood that it was time to go. We walked out toward the road, and just when we got to the fence, I realized why the light seemed so strange. I pulled Sharla back roughly by her arm.

They did hear the shots. They were searching for the poachers, and we were there with the evidence. I ducked and told Sharla to get down, and for once she did what I said. I whispered to her and explained the danger. It wasn’t Darryl who was coming. Someone did hear, and we had to hide. The truck moved past us and a state seal on the door caught the light.

But then Sharla was up and running away from me, across the ditch, chasing after the truck, yelling after the lights.

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The warden picked us up, bewildered, responding to the call for gunshots and instead finding two young girls, lost and freezing and one bleeding from the mouth. We went to the station and they wanted us to talk to people, but those people didn't want to talk to us on Christmas Eve, so finally they brought us to Nana's house. She sighed as she opened the door to an officer's knock at three o'clock on Christmas morning, and again as she pulled out the couch bed. I collapsed into the bed and fell immediately to sleep, before I could say thank you to Nana or goodnight to Sharla. And in the morning when I woke, our mother was in the kitchen talking with Nana in low tones, and Darryl was waiting for our mother to show up with bail, and Sharla, along with sixty-five dollars from Nana's purse and a goose down coat from the hallway closet, was gone.

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