

LAURA BEST

Windows

THE LAST DAY OF JANUARY and my father and brother are going to check their rabbit snares. Outside I can hear their footsteps crunch in the snow. My father calls out for Mannie to slow down. Mannie says something to my father that I can't make out. I move close to my window and look out to see their blurred images moving across the snow. The plastic on my window makes it nearly impossible to see anything. I sit on my bed, press my face into the plastic and brood over the unfairness of it all.

There is a steady stream of cold air coming through a hole in the plastic. I poked the hole in with a pencil one day when my mother sent me to my room. I can't tell anyone what I've done so I must put up with it. Plastic is expensive, the heavy kind, that is. Not to mention how Dad struggled to hold it in place while he stuck it fast with masking tape to the windowsill. Winter is out there. I can see the white snow behind this semi-transparent wall. And then of course the cold that is coming in through the hole. The cold makes it believable.

White frost has formed on the wall beneath the window. I scrape it off with my fingernail and ping the ice particles in my face. It dissolves into cool wet little droplets and makes me smile. I'm willing the outside to come join me, to sink between the walls and surround me with snow. A winter wonderland right in my own bedroom. The first thing I would is to make a snow fort with a sign on top of the doorway that says, *"Boys Are Not Allowed."*

Twice a month Mr. Pulley comes to the house for the rabbits Mannie snares. Early on a Saturday morning he comes to our house in his rusty green truck. You can hear him blowing on his horn as he enters the driveway. Mannie is always waiting for him, sitting beside the door, with his rubber boots and jacket. As soon as he hears Mr. Pulley's horn he races out the door. The back of Mr. Pulley's truck is piled high with junk: old batteries,

angle iron, copper wire, aluminium and cases of empty beer bottles. My mother calls him the junk man.

In November Mr. Pulley bought the empty beer bottles Mannie had collected from the ditches during the summer months. Mannie helped him load them on the truck. Mr. Pulley is short and fat and can't crawl up on the back of his truck so he sent Mannie up instead.

"Up you go like a good lad," he said. "I'll hand them on up." Seconds later Mannie was up on the back of the truck. Moving around some of the junk, he was able to find a spot for the beer bottles. Mr. Pulley handed the boxes of bottles up to Mannie, grunting each time, as if they weighed a hundred pounds. When the last of the beer bottles were loaded on the back of the truck Mannie jumped off and landed on the ground between Dad and Mr. Pulley.

"I'm looking to buy snared rabbits," said Mr. Pulley giving Mannie the money he owed him for the bottles. "I'll pay a good price."

"Depends on what you call a good price," said Dad, spitting tobacco juice on the ground.

"Dollar and a half a pair. That's big money for rabbits." Dad nodded in agreement. "They got to have them hind feet on, though. They won't buy them in the city less they do. Scared of buying cats. That's what they say, anyway. Folks are dirty enough for anything these days. It ruins it for the honest man," he said, rubbing the grey stubble on his chin.

"We'll have to see what we can do," said Dad. "I won't make any promises, though. Mighten be a good year for rabbits."

Yesterday when Mr. Pulley was here Mannie had nine rabbits for him so I guess it's a good enough year for rabbits. Mannie keeps them hanging out in the woodshed by the hind feet; their small stiff bodies dangle in the cold. I have not looked but I can imagine.

"Naked bat bunnies," Mannie said laughing with his face stuck in front of mine. "Not a stitch of fur."

I wonder, can rabbits be ghosts just like people? Will the woodshed become overrun with ghost bunnies, hopping all over the place? I look straight ahead whenever I walk past.

"Four and a half pair," Mr. Pulley laughed, looking into the woodshed that day. "How about we call it five? But just for this time." Mannie grinned up at him like a monkey.

"That's seven fifty," Mr. Pulley said. "Why, you're going to be rich, if you keep this up." Mr. Pulley hauled a handful of bills from his pocket. Folded neatly in two, it was much too big to fit into a man's wallet. Peeling a five and a two dollar bill off the bundle, he shoved the remainder back in

his pocket and jingling the change in his other pocket finally producing a handful of coins.

"You pick out two quarters," he said to Mannie. Mannie plucked the fifty cents from out of the mass of coins. Mr. Pulley looked down at me and grinned.

"And what about you little miss? Did you catch any rabbits?" I shook my head. "Well, then," he said, "here's a quarter just for being quiet." He plopped a quarter in my hand and rubbed the top of my head. I knew I was supposed to be grateful for the quarter but instead I stood there enviously eyeing the bills Mannie was clutching in his finger. I shoved the quarter in my pocket and ran for the house.

"Mr. Pulley gave Pearl a quarter and she didn't even thank him," Mannie conveyed to Mom as soon as he walked in the door.

"Thoughtless girl," Mom scolded. "People will think I never taught you a thing. Now give me that quarter." Reluctantly I handed it to her. She placed it up on the windowsill. "Now, that will sit there until you thank him for it," she said.

"But that's two weeks away," I cried.

"Maybe then you'll think twice before you forget to thank someone when they give you something," she said unmoved by my pleas.

Mannie stood in front of me waving his money under my nose. "Now, put that money away before you lose it," said Dad. Mannie ran off to his bedroom. His money he saved in a jar, always with big plans on what he was going to buy for himself, plans that sooner or later fell to the wayside. The last time I looked there were a few pennies and two dimes in the bottom of the jar.

"I'm going to save up for a bike next summer," he said when he came back down.

"No fair," I complained.

"Do you want to go traipsing around the woods?" Mom asked me. I looked over at Mannie. He was smiling. I wanted to pull the smile off his face and throw it at my feet, jump on it and twist it into the floor with my heel. "Now help me set the table," Mom added without waiting for me to say how much I longed to go into the woods with Dad and Mannie.

"Will I get paid for setting it?" I asked as Mannie raced back up the stairs to his bedroom. I thought about going into his room when he was gone and taking his money, hiding it on him at least, under his mattress, just enough to get him going.

"Of course you won't get paid. What a totally useless question," said Mom. "Girls are supposed to know how to set a table. Knives on the right. Forks on the left. Spoon on the knife side. Now hurry up."

I had to push myself to set the table for my legs felt as though they were heavy enough to pull me down through the kitchen floor.

"Don't worry, he'll have it spent long before summer," Mom said quietly. "It'll be gone in a flash as soon as that grocery truck rolls up on Thursday afternoon."

But what about all the bars and chips Mannie will buy? I silently cried. What about watching him climb up on that step at the back of the truck, his knees resting on the shelf where the box of candy bars and potato chips are, picking out Kit Kats and Smarties and Tom Thumb potato chips, finally stooping down to pick out a 7 Up from the case that sits on the floor, while I stand there with a dime in my hand that Dad has given me, waiting for him pay for his things and leave? And what about later when he takes a hammer and crunches the chips up into a zillion pieces and then eats them slowly bit by bit by bit placing a Smartie on his tongue and letting it melt, sticking his tongue out every so often for me to see? And worst of all knowing there's more where that came from and mine is all gone.



I wait until I hear the front door open and then run down the stairs. Mannie stands in the kitchen, his cheeks a bright crimson colour. A thin streak of mucus runs out his nose. He sticks his tongue up to meet it. The moment he sees me looking he wipes his nose with his coat sleeve. Mom cuffs him on back of the head as she walks past telling him at the same time to mind his manners.

"How many did you get?" I ask.

"They didn't even run last night. It wasn't cold enough," says Mannie taking his mittens off and putting them in the warming oven. There are many things to know when it comes to catching rabbits. Mannie thinks he's the only one who knows.

"Can I go next time?" I ask looking up at Dad who is hanging his coat up on one of the nails above the cot.

"You can't walk that far," says Dad pulling up his socks.

"Yes I can." I crawl up on the cot beside him. He smells like chewing tobacco and I can see a small speck of brown tobacco juice on his bottom lip. I'd like to spit on my finger and wipe it away.

"For pity's sake let her get it out of her system," says Mom waving a potholder in the air. "Once she sees it's not all glory she'll change her mind."

Dad pats me on the head. "You'll have to bundle up," he says. A groan comes from Mannie who is stomping his way up the stairs.



"Stop being so slow," complains Mannie. He's in the lead as we head back the road to where the rabbit snares are. It is an old tractor road, one Dad used many years ago to haul out firewood. Bushes are growing along the road. Sometimes they swish in my face and across my jacket. Mannie walks fast with his chest stuck out and his arms swinging madly.

It is a cold day and the wind sends a chill through my knitted mittens. The cold against my cheeks makes them feel taut. I'm reminded of the clothes Mom has hanging on the clothesline out back swinging back and forth in the breeze, rigid as pine boards. She brings them inside and drapes them over the backs of chairs until they thaw.

I catch my foot on something and fall down. Dad picks me up. I wipe the snow from my face with my equally snowy mittens. Some flutters down my collar but I don't cry out.

"You'll have to slow down, Mannie," says Dad removing his mittens. "Are you alright?" I shake my head yes, not wanting him to turn around and take me home. Snow sticks to my eyelashes and bangs. Dad brushes it away. Cold water wets my cheeks and runs down my neck. It'll warm up fast enough. It'll be like that small hole in the plastic that covers my window. Soon I won't even care.

There is nothing in the first snare. I stand behind Dad while he adjusts the wire, moving it so that it is just the right height. He breaks off little twigs and places them in front of the snare.

"That's so they don't see the snare," says Mannie.

"I know that," I say, "I'm not stupid."

"Could have fooled me," he says.

Dad looks up at us. "Do you two want to go home?"

"Nooo" we both say in unison.

Mannie gives me a look. The look says, "*Keep your trap shut or else.*" We walk a little further. This time we must leave the tractor road and walk into the woods, up over rocks and around bushes. Ahead of us is a felled log. Mannie runs on ahead. "I got one. I got one," he calls out, falling to his knees.

"Now don't go disturbing the trail," Dad warns.

I want to see the rabbit too. It's not fair that Mannie gets there first and I must follow behind Dad.

"I can't get the snare off," says Mannie. His mittens are flung off and he's pulling at the wire with his bare fingers.

"Hold your horses," says Dad. Mannie pulls the stick out of the snow and holds it up, dangling the dead rabbit in my face. I knock it out of my way. Dad loosens the wire and removes the rabbit. He forms the wire back into a perfectly round circle again just big enough for a rabbit's head.

"Hey Pearl, want to carry it?" Mannie asks.

"Sure," I say seizing the dead rabbit around the middle.

"By the feet," says Mannie, "You got to hold it the right way."

There is always a right way and a wrong way to do everything even when it doesn't seem to make a difference one way or the other. I hold the rabbit *the right way*. Mannie looks down at it. "Look you're holding its pissy feet," he laughs.

"I don't care," I say glancing down at the yellow fur on its feet. I can be tough, just as tough as Mannie. Something like pissy feet won't bother me. Mom can wash my mittens. They'll be as good as new.

"Mannie!" Dad says sternly. Mannie quiets down quickly, still with a stupid grin on his face. The grin is still saying, "*Pissy feet ... pissy feet*. I ignore him; hurry instead to keep up with Dad.

"Do you think you can manage it?" Dad asks me. Mannie is watching, waiting for me to say that it is too heavy. But I won't. I shake my head. "Good," says Dad smiling. "Move along, now," he says to Mannie.

Mannie weaves in and out among the trees. Dad and I follow his crooked path.

Go in and out the windows.

Go in and out the windows.

Go in and out the windows.

As you have done before.

The rabbit's ears drag in the snow. Its head bobs up and down. It's dead and can't feel anything but I still feel sorry for it. Poor, poor bunny soon you'll be a bat bunny too, hanging in Mannie's cave.

There are no more rabbits in any of the snares and for that I'm glad. We reach the last snare and turn to head on back. My toes are tingling inside my boots. Tough, I think. I can make myself be so tough. No whining, no matter how easy it would be to do.

When we get in sight of the house Mannie turns to me and grabs the rabbit from my hands. "I'll carry him now," he says.

My arms feel like rubber, I don't mind relinquishing the rabbit. Besides, its body is stiff, frozen from being out in the cold last night and I wonder suddenly just how it died. Was it strangled by the wire or did it

freeze to death in the cold? And as suddenly as the idea pops into my head I realize then that I couldn't bear to ask, to know one way or the other.

Dad and Mannie take the rabbit out to the woodshed to skin. "Are you going to watch?" Mannie asks.

"I've seen skun rabbits before," I tell him.

"You're not much of a trapper," he calls out to me.

I run into the house and take my coat and boots off. I don't tell Mom that my feet are cold. She would only tell me that I should have stayed at home. Through the window in the kitchen I can see that the door to the woodshed is open. Mannie is carrying the dead rabbit.

Bye, bye, bat bunny.

In my bedroom I place my hand on the wall where the frost has penetrated. The frost melts leaving behind the imprint of my hand, my fingers stretched wide. I can hear Mannie outside talking to Dad. He wants to skin the rabbit all by himself, he says. Through the plastic on my window I can see Mannie's red doeskin.

Hang the rabbit up by both feet. Cut the fur all the way around the hind feet. Pull the fur back. Down ... down across its back and stomach until you get to the head. Pull the front legs through. Like taking your coat off inside out. Cut off the front feet, the head.

I know what they are doing. I don't need a clear picture. I lay my cheek against the plastic and feel the small steady stream of cold coming through the hole. A strange noise rises from my aching chest. I'm not sure why I'm crying. All I know is that I will not thank Mr. Pulley for the quarter when he comes back the next time. I will tell Mom she can keep the quarter or better yet she can give it to Mannie. Strangely, it seems like the right thing to do.