

ERICH MULHALL

BETWEEN BROTHERS

THE TWO MEN ARRIVE at the cottage after dark. They pull the truck up the gravel driveway and park it under the kitchen window. They carry their bags on their backs and use a wind-up flashlight, the whirl of the crank like a swarm of angry bees. When they open the door, the musty smell of the carpets and the old wood paneling brings smiles to their faces. It reminds them of their childhood and of the restful nights that come with being young.

They clean the ash out of the woodstove and replace it with blocks of store-bought pine. It takes the chimney a moment to draw properly, so they open the windows and listen to the water slapping calmly against the rocks. The cold air spilling in through the openings.

A light sheet of snow begins to fall.

Peter, the older of the two, claims the room that faces the road. Michael takes the one beside the kitchen. They each set their bags on their bed and then meet back at the table. The first whispers of heat moving through the building.

“Are you hungry?” Peter says.

Michael checks the fridge and finds it empty. He rummages through the cupboards and emerges with a large cast-iron pot in one hand, a frying pan in the other. He fills the pot with water and sets it on the burner. There are dishes piled up on either side of the sink.

“That wife of his isn’t much for housekeeping,” he says.

They open the bag of potatoes they’ve brought and drop them into the water. They arrange strips of bacon on the frying pan and the fat begins to crackle. As the food cooks, Michael lets the dishes soak in the sink. He makes it so that the water is almost overflowing, and the bubbles rise up like an effervescent mountain range. Peter plugs in an electric kettle and brews a pot of tea. He places it, along with two cups that he wipes with his shirt sleeve, in the middle of the table.

Against the far wall there is an oak cabinet filled with expensive dishes. It has plastic plants on top and a handful of family portraits taken

over the past thirty years. Peter touches one of the frames, his fingerprint smudging the polished metal. The photo is of Raymond, their oldest brother, and Margaret, Raymond's wife. They are in a tent, drinking beer, cards spread out on the sleeping bag between them. He studies the portrait as Michael brings the food to the table, the air sweet with the smell of boiled potatoes.

"You think he knows about her?" Michael asks.

"What do you mean?"

"About the way she is with other men."

They sit down and begin to eat.

"I saw her with a boy at The Paramount," Michael continues, his mouth full. "Must have been about half her age. They were just sitting in a booth and sharing a bottle of wine. I never saw them touch each other or anything, but there was a feeling. Like something wasn't right." He takes a long sip of tea and then smacks his lips, satisfied. With the back of his hand he wipes the plastic tablecloth. "Was she ever that way with you?"

They fall silent at the sound of tires crunching on the driveway. They notice the glow of headlights through the window, the shadows of the trees tattooed against the wall.

Each one waits for the other to speak.

They hunted the land behind Brubacher's farm, and in the late afternoon, when the sun was still visible over the tops of the trees, they got in their truck and drove through the field towards the highway. The crops had been cleared and the earth was freshly tilled. The mud was wet and loose, and it splashed over the sides of the vehicle, coating the windows in thick brown pellets. They'd taken only the one deer. A doe. It was done quietly, without a tag, so they wrapped it in plastic, tossed it in the truck bed, and covered it with blankets.

The wind from the north blew in over the hills and rocked the truck as it rolled onto the road. The windows fogged and Raymond used his sleeve to wipe a tiny porthole over the steering wheel. He leaned forward, struggling to see. Peter was in the passenger seat, an old issue of *Popular Mechanics* lying face down in his lap. Michael was wedged between them, his eyes glassy and his skin ashen. He'd never seen anything killed before and he was handling it worse than expected.

"We'll wait until it's dark," Raymond said. "Maybe stop somewhere to eat before that."

“You really want this thing in a crowded parking lot?” Peter asked.

“I don’t feel much like sneaking around. Do you?”

Michael picked nervously at the seam of his pants. “What do we do if someone asks us what we’re hauling?”

“Tell them we’ve got garbage in the back. That we’re on our way to the dump.”

“You want me to lie?”

The truck slowed as they rounded the corner. Raymond took his hand from the wheel and waved a crooked finger in his brother’s face. “You be careful what you say up there,” he said. “These are suspicious people.”

They crested the hill and rolled quickly down the other side. Raymond rode the brake the entire way, and Peter dug around in the glove box for something to eat. He found half a ham sandwich wrapped in wax paper. Using a pocket knife, he cut the sandwich into three sections and then stabbed one of them and held it up for Michael to take. Michael frowned so deeply that his bottom teeth were showing. He held the fraction of sandwich between his fingers the way tweezers might grip an eyelash. Then, after a long pause, he popped it into his mouth and chewed.

“It’s awful,” he said.

“I wish you wouldn’t make that face,” Peter told him.

A car door slams. Boots slap against the concrete walkway. The screen door swings open and a man stands there with a bag under each arm. His hair is pulled roughly to one side and his face is red from the cold.

“You’re late,” Peter says.

“There was traffic,” Raymond says. He drops the bags onto the floor and kicks his boots aside. The snow in the treads starts to melt, soaking into the carpet.

Michael points at the door. “Where’s Margaret?”

“What?”

“Margaret.”

Raymond bends over and unzips one of the bags. He digs through the layers of folded shirts and pants, and pulls out a bottle of scotch. He holds it up proudly. “Twenty-five years old,” he says. A cork in the spout and a faded label. “I’ve been saving this.” He walks over to the shelf where the expensive dishes are kept and grabs three crystal tumblers. While he stands there, he notices the photograph of himself and his wife. He pauses.

“You remember when that was?” Peter asks.

“It was a long time ago,” Raymond says. He sets everything on the table and turns away from the photograph. Before sitting down, he takes a plate from the cupboard and fills it with the food that his brothers have made. With the precision of a surgeon, he uses his knife to divide the potatoes into perfect quarters. Then he wraps each quarter in a strip of bacon and jams one into his mouth. Between bites he coughs, his mouth pressed into the crook of his elbow. The grease building up like phlegm in his throat.

Michael puts his feet on the empty chair. “Where’s Margaret?” he asks again.

Raymond takes the photo from the cabinet. He tilts it forward and holds it so that he can make out the figures. “She’s in the truck,” he says.

Peter picks up the bottle and pulls the cork. A muted pop echoes down the neck. He gathers the glasses together with his left hand, one finger in each and the thumb like a rudder. He pours the scotch and then he touches his lip to the rim without drinking. “And you’re just going to let her wait out there?”

“Who?”

“Margaret.”

“Oh. She’s not coming in.”

The brothers turn their heads and stare out the kitchen window. They see Raymond’s truck parked behind their own. The cab is dark and there’s no sign of movement.

“I think she might have left,” Peter says.

Raymond laughs and takes a gulp of the scotch. “I doubt it,” he says. He leans back in his chair and looks up at the hanging lamp. The shade is made of painted glass and the whole room is tinted green because of it. He locks his fingers together behind his head. His shoulders slump as if freed from some enormous weight. “I’ve been waiting a long time to drink this,” he says.

Michael sets down his glass to keep it from spilling. His whole body is trembling and the colour has drained from his face. “Has something happened?” he asks. “Is she alright?”

“Who?”

“Stop asking who.”

“Don’t get excited.”

Peter is more direct. “Did you do something to her?”

“Me?” Raymond says, his voice dripping with mock sincerity. “What do you think I did?”

“Is she hurt?” Michael says.

A silence settles over the kitchen. To their surprise Raymond doesn't startle at the accusation. He takes a few more bites of potato, a careful sip of scotch. “Would it be so terrible?” he asks, finally. “Would it be so unforgivable?”

Neither of them knows how to answer. Or if to answer. They watch his hands moving across the tablecloth. A knife in one and a fork in the other. The knuckles encrusted with recently opened scabs.

“Should we phone the police?” Michael asks.

Raymond's expression turns sober. “For shit's sake, settle down,” he says. “I don't know where she is. I haven't seen her in days.” His eyes scan the dimly lit driveway. “You two will believe anything,” he says. He watches the faces of his brothers, waiting for them to understand. When neither of them cracks a smile, he starts to laugh. Softly, at first, and then with more enthusiasm. He slaps his palm hard on the table. The dishes rattle against each other. Michael and Peter hold their breath to keep their anxiety from escaping. Their hearts feel as thick and heavy as cannon balls. They are dizzy with anger.

Outside the snow falls quietly.

Raymond waited until after midnight to pull the truck in behind the motel room, over the concrete barrier and right up beside the dumpster. They turned the headlights off and used the flickering neon sign to guide them. *Days Inn Dorset* written backwards in the auburn glow. They parked the truck and shut the doors. Raymond put on a pair of plastic gloves. Peter glanced over his shoulder to be sure that they were alone, and then he threw open the tail gate and helped his brother drag the deer, which made a heavy thump as it dropped.

“Keep an eye out,” he said.

A car and a trailer sputtered past.

He rocked his knife in under the skin of the stomach and slid it up to the breastbone. The muscle underneath showed through and he hacked furiously at the connective tissue. Michael was leaning against the truck and Peter could see his breath, but not his features. He said, “You're not doing us any good over there,” and he motioned for him to sit down.

Michael walked over to the wall and laid his forehead against the brick. “I can't watch this,” he said.

A light rain was coming down sideways in the wind. Peter squinted to keep his eyes from stinging and used his collar to shield his face. When he looked up he noticed that Michael was watching the lighted rooms, the flickering televisions and the landscape paintings. He tried to remember how long it had been since they'd last stayed in a motel.

"Do you hear that?" Michael said, spinning sharply to face the road.

"Maybe you should wait in the truck," Peter said.

He shook his head and curled up against the dumpster.

Peter turned to look at Raymond. His fingers were shaking and white from the cold. He zipped up his jacket and wiped his nose on his sleeve. He could tell from the sour smell of the air that Raymond had cut into the bowel. He said, "Leave it here and let's go home."

Raymond looked into the cavity as if he hadn't heard his brother. He flipped the carcass onto its side and a splash of hot guts spilled out across the pavement, the steam rising up around his arms.

They pass the rest of the night saying almost nothing. The potatoes grow cold and the grease from the bacon hardens along the edges of their plates. Michael picks at it, forms it into balls and arranges it like a shimmering caterpillar. A row of segments. He is afraid that if he says something now the pretence that they've built up will unravel. That his brothers will turn against him. He tips the bottle of scotch on its edge, the neck resting in his palm. Peter smells the cork. "It's yours to finish off," he says to Raymond.

Raymond shakes his head and suppresses a burp. "It was a long drive up," he says. "I could use some sleep."

"There's sheets in the hallway closet," Peter says.

Raymond grabs his bags and makes his way upstairs. They can hear the floorboards creaking under his weight as he moves from one room to the next. They hear the faucet running and the toilet flushing and the latch of the door popping shut. They are the sounds of routine, and in a way they are comforting. Peter lets out a long breath and smiles. He looks at his brother, his eyes red with emotion. "He sure got us good that time," he says.

"Real good," Michael says.

They clear the table and take their drinks and sit down in the living room. They feel the heat from the fire and watch the snow landing gently on the water. Michael puts his feet on the ottoman and imagines what it must be like to die. Peter stares at the bottom of his glass, the light catching and

rippling in the amber liquid. He turns and looks across the kitchen. He sees Raymond's truck parked sideways in the driveway—the frost building up on the windows—and wonders what might be inside.

“Maybe I'll do some of those dishes,” he says. “I don't feel like sleeping just yet.”