

TONI JENSEN

## Rabids

THE CRAZY LADY WITH THE YELLOWING hair stood between me and the raccoon. I was holding my twenty-gauge and the crazy lady was holding her garden hoe. The West Texas sun stared down at us, scorching the pear trees, and sweat dripped off my temples. The raccoon had spit dripping from the left side of its mouth and bright yellow goo holding on under its mask. I sighted in, cocked the trigger, and the crazy lady shuffled to the left so she was in front of the raccoon, her thick legs spread, her orthopaedic shoes digging into the dry soil, planted.

Before the raccoon wobbled out of the tree line, the orphans were picking pears. It was my father's idea to have them out. It'll give them hope, he said. He and the bus driver were over at the neighbour's place thinking beer. I had said I wasn't sure picking fruit in one-hundred-degree weather could inspire anything except heat exhaustion. Dad had said, It's so good to have you and your smart mouth back home. Still, I liked the way it sounded—hope. I liked that Dad had dared to say it out loud. Besides, there was all that fruit, giant from too much spring rain, and it was getting so I couldn't look at it. The pears were the size of softballs—freak-show, unnatural. They made the hairs on the back of my neck rise.

I had been looking over the orphans' bus. Its cheerful yellow had been painted over, was now robin's egg blue, with children's signatures and dates scrawled in looping red letters on its sides. Birthdays? Dates of commitment? Of adoption or escape? In some places, the bus looked lassoed; in others, like it had been shot.

The orphans were deep into the pears when the raccoon toddled out from under a fat, low-lying branch, and the smallest orphan, a towheaded, round-faced thing, ran toward it calling, Kitty, kitty. Right away, I saw the danger hope brings. A handful of other orphans ran toward the towhead, the raccoon, and I tried to yell, No, but it stuck in my throat, planted.

It was then I heard the familiar tires, the gravel spitting under them. I grabbed the towhead's soft hand, and the pickup spun to a stop next to the bus. The raccoon hissed and lunged, and the other orphans ran as one, their legs tangling, some falling and crying out—a virtual orphan stampede. The pickup door swung open, and I pulled the towhead toward the bus. His round face was dirty and streaked, his mouth opened in an O of surprise that would soon start making god-awful wails. I pulled on his hands, turning their softness over and over, and then I checked his ankles, the backs of his knees, but there was no mark, no swelling of blood about to gush over.

I handed him to the tallest orphan, said, Get back, and they did. But they weren't looking at me or the raccoon, who now snuffled a fallen pear. The orphans watched the crazy lady, who looked from the raccoon to the orphans to me, her eyes sinking into me, her hands tightening around the hoe.

We keep the gun on a rack over the front door, and I was back with it loaded before I had decided to retrieve it. The crazy lady said, What's going on here? and she said it in an even, calm way, and for a moment, I allowed hope to creep out like warmth from the cold place in my chest. The raccoon's sick, I said, rabid, and she turned to look at it. It had abandoned the pear and stood underneath that low branch, listing from side to side like a watermelon before the knife goes in. I thought about water, about rain—how it could start right now and we could all flee to the house or bus. I could make cookies, we could sing songs. The sun could quit staring, and the raccoon could lie down and drown.

The crazy lady turned, said, I don't believe in rabids. She tightened her grip on the hoe, so tight that the wrinkles around her knuckles pulled smooth. At first, I didn't understand. I wondered what rabbits had to do with anything. And then it hit me—what she'd said—and the place in my chest pulled cold and tight like it had done so many times, and the warmth faded though I was still sweating. Please, I said, listen—but I knew she couldn't. She stared me down. That look I'd seen before. Her eyes as blank as the raccoon's. Who are you? she said, and what are you doing on my land?

I was crying now, and behind me, the orphans tumbled up the bus stairs, the tallest one climbing into the driver's seat, touching wires together until the engine rumbled to life. Overhead, the sun moved into the only cloud. In front of me, the raccoon had fallen over, next to the pear. The crazy lady stepped toward me, brandishing the hoe. I brought the gun up to my shoulder with hands that shook. I brought it down, back up. I sighted in. Mother, I said, I won't shoot.