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THÉODORA
ARMSTRONG



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and for J, with love.

C O N T E N T S

Rabbit 1

Fishtail 20

Whale Stories 48

The Art of Eating 65

Thanks to Carin 121

The Spider in the Jar 152

Clear Skies, No Wind, 100% Visibility 168

Mosquito Creek 206

R A B B I T

I WRAP MYSELF IN our scratchy curtains and watch Mom from our front window. The glass is freezing. I can feel the cold without touching anything. My brother, Matt, is sleeping on the couch behind me. He's snoring and his shoes are still on. His jacket is on the floor beside him. He looks ready for a quick escape, but he's been here for a while now, almost a year. He has a toothbrush Mom bought for him. He's hung a movie poster in his bedroom, *Scarface*. I guess that's a good sign.

It's too early for visitors, but Mom is in her fuzzy blue robe and thick woolen socks, talking to our neighbour on the porch. I don't know his name, but sometimes I see him early in the morning walking to his car in a suit and tie.

It snowed last night—the first snow—enough to get to my ankles. Mom's breath is thin like a beautiful bubblegum balloon, reaching out and almost touching the neighbour before vanishing.

Mom comes back into the house, all the cold running in with her. She can't see me behind the curtains. She stands

watching Matt for a while. I wish I could snore like him, like a bear asleep in a cave. I poke my head around the curtains, moving them carefully so I don't wake up Matt. "Get a move on," Mom whispers. "I'm giving you a ride to school this morning."

I SIT IN THE car while Mom warms it up. I'm in a white envelope being mailed to China or Peru. She knocks ice and snow off the windshield with her mitts. Usually I walk to school—it's not far, four blocks on the other side of the mall, but the mall is a long block and counts for at least two. I want to ask why I'm being driven to school, but weird things early in the morning always mean bad news. Mom keeps forgetting things, running back and forth from the car to the house. She spills her coffee getting into the front seat and swears. For a minute I think she's forgotten I'm here.

There are a lot of people on our street this morning. Most of the time our streets are empty. In the morning or at dinnertime cars are in and out of driveways, but there are never people on the sidewalks. Sometimes I feel I'm the only one who walks on our street. But this morning people are out, walking in groups of four or five, holding steaming cups of coffee, calling greetings to each other. They look like carollers, but I've only seen carollers in my Christmas books. At the end of the road, police cars are parked around the brown house with the windmill on top. Mom slows down as we drive by, and for a second I think we might stop to join everyone, but instead we turn the corner and head toward the school. "There was a girl that went missing last night," Mom

says. “She never came home from the mall. Did you hear anything?” I shake my head no.

Along the river, the tree branches are heavy with snow. There are police cars here too. I turn up the heat, hot air blowing in my face. Mom turns the dial back down.

NOT MANY KIDS AT school know about the girl, so at recess I tell everyone. I say what she looks like even though I’ve never seen her. She has long blond hair in braids. Her eyes are green. She was wearing a jean skirt and winter boots. Everyone crowds around me in a tight circle. They go off to make other circles. Soon everyone is in circles.

After recess, Ms. Peterson makes a special announcement to the class. She uses the word *abduction*. She tells us what to do if we meet a stranger. We don’t take candy. We don’t tell anyone our names. We scream. People turn to stare at me, their eyes huge like moons, and it’s official now: I told everyone first.

SAM’S MOM IS GOING to take me home before she takes Sam to his swim lesson. Sam’s in my class, but we never play together because he plays kickball every day, even in the snow.

When they drop me off they walk me right to my front door. Matt cleaned off the stairs this morning and all my footprints are gone. I feel grown-up taking out my key chain with the blue dolphin and unlocking the door. Sam doesn’t have a key chain or a key, and he was looking at mine while we waited in the schoolyard. He was pretending to make the

dolphin dive in the snow, but I was afraid he'd lose my keys and I wouldn't be able to go home, so I took them back.

We talked about the girl. She's not really a girl. I'm a girl; she's a teenager. But everyone calls her a girl—that poor girl, that innocent girl. Mom told me a bit and Sam told me the rest, but no one really knows anything about her. Someone took her while she waited for the bus in front of the mall. She went to Ferndale High. I don't think I knew her, but one day I might have walked beside her without realizing. She screamed a lot. Lots of people heard her, but everyone kept drinking their tea and watching their television shows. Sam says he heard her, but I think he's lying. Mom says she thought it was teens down by the river goofing off.

Sam and I stand by the front door staring at each other while Sam's mom looks around my house. She wants to know where my brother is and I tell her he gets home from the glass factory at four. When I picture the glass factory I see nothing but stacks of window panes. Once Matt picked up a sheet of glass with unfinished edges and slit his palms open. Mom says he's lucky to have his fingers. You're supposed to wear heavy gloves at all times. He was at home for a month with fat white bandages around his hands. He liked to pretend they were boxing gloves. He still has the scars.

When Sam's mom leaves she tells me—same as Mom did—not to open the door for anyone. I hear them wait until I turn the lock before they make their way down the steps. I run to the front window to watch their car pull away from the curb. Sam watches me from his window. I make the blue dolphin bob up and down as if the windowsill is an ocean.

I TURN THE HEAT up as high as the dial will go. There's a heat vent beside the sliding doors in the kitchen that look out on our backyard. I sit there with a box of Froot Loops and let the hot air puff out my T-shirt. The house is quiet like a forest. I feel like animals are hiding everywhere, under the sofa, in the cupboards, behind the doors. Matt isn't home yet and because of the snow it'll take him longer than normal.

If Matt gets home before me, he's usually on the deck with his .22 rifle. I like to sit on the vent and watch him. Matt just turned twenty. We had meatloaf on his birthday and Matt ate seconds. Last year, we didn't get to celebrate his birthday because he was living in Port Alberni with Uncle Pat and working at the lumber mill. Before that he was with Grandma Alice in Vancouver and before that I can't remember. The last time he left, he didn't say goodbye. Mom forgot to tell me he was gone because he comes and goes as often as cats want out. One day I asked her where he was and she looked dazed. She said: *Oh, honey*. She said people need space to breathe and I thought that was pretty obvious. Everyone needs space to breathe or else they'd be dead.

But Matt always comes back—one day he opens the front door and he's here. There are twelve years between us. Mom says that makes him responsible for me.

Matt likes to shoot soup cans from the deck. He stacks the empty cans on tree stumps at the back of the yard. They're old and rusted together, the labels peeled and curled—beef barley, cream of mushroom, chicken noodle. I make the soup when Mom's late from work. Behind the stumps are trees and behind the trees is the river. After you cross the river you get to the mall.

It takes Matt a long time to shoot. He aims carefully, adjusting his arm a lot. The bullet flies when I least expect it, but it never makes me jump or even blink. He almost never hits a can.

Sometimes while I watch Matt, I blow my breath against the glass of the sliding door. I blow a lot at once, covering a large area, then I draw quickly before the glass clears again. Sometimes I plot out maps, how far Matt has to shoot to hit the cans. Or I'll draw the face of someone I hate at school, then I don't mind when the glass clears. Sometimes I draw Matt's girlfriends with big breasts and knock on the window to get his attention, but he never turns around.

Everyone has walked into these sliding doors. Mom likes them really clean. Once I got knocked out. I was running and looking at something on the TV. We are as dumb as birds, I guess, but our necks are too thick to snap.

The front door opens and I hear girl laughter and Matt stamping the snow off his boots. I peek around the edge of the island between the kitchen and the living room. Matt's standing beside a girl who's unlacing her boots. When she bends down he sticks his gloved hands under her skirt and she swats them away while she loosens her laces. "Quit it," she says, but she's laughing. The girl graduated from my elementary school last year. She used to have no boobs. She was bad at sports. Once her class was playing baseball outside and the ball hit her in the nose. She had blood down the front of her shirt and a black eye for over a week. I was going to the washroom and saw her walking quickly down the hall with Mr. O'Brian holding a hanky to her nose. She was crying and I thought that was stupid.

She looks the same now, but with breasts. Not bloody or crying or anything, I just mean the same face and the same haircut. She's wearing a puffy jacket and under her skirt her legs are bare and red with goose bumps all over — chicken legs.

She and Matt don't see me sitting on the kitchen floor as they go into his room. The girl is giggling like something's funny, but I can't hear them talking. I crawl to where I can see past the door, lying down on my stomach. I'm wearing a white shirt and the kitchen is all white just like hunting in the snow. Matt's sitting on his bed with his head tilted to one side, watching the girl. She's between his legs with his hands in her hair. He starts grunting, moving his hips and pushing down on her head. She makes a choking noise and then climbs up on the bed beside him. He sits there, his penis straight up and shiny. I slide back behind the counter, my breath stuck in my throat and my palms sweaty along the linoleum, but then I look again. The girl lights a cigarette, drops it and laughs before picking it up. She rubs a spot on the comforter. Matt stands and zips up his pants as he leaves the bedroom, and I leap back to my spot on the heater, my heart thumping the way it does when I run around the yard three times.

He plops down on the couch and turns on the TV. I crunch my Froot Loops a little louder. Matt turns to look at me, "How long have you been sitting there?" I shrug. "I've got a girl here. Hang out in your room." I shrug again.

The girl comes out of his bedroom and smiles at me in a practised, older-person way, "This your sis?" She doesn't recognize me, but I didn't think she would. Matt flips the channel to hockey without saying anything. The girl snuggles into

him, but Matt likes a big space between him and whoever else is sitting on the couch, so he moves over and she stays put. She watches him more than the TV. You could drop something on Matt's toe and he wouldn't notice. The girl leans over the back of the couch, looking at me with owl eyes. "Police think it's someone in town took that girl," she says. Her cigarette is still dangling between her fingers, the smoke reaching way up, touching our ceiling. "Someone who was following her to and from school."

I shrug and look out the window. In the yard snow falls off the trees.

"They won't find her," Matt says, flipping channels.

"She's dead, for sure," the girl says.

I want to stick my tongue out at her, but I'm too old for that now.

Heavy feet come up our front steps and someone bangs on the door. The girl shrieks and then laughs again, grabbing onto Matt's arm. "That was freaky," she says. "Who is that?" The banging gets louder and she turns to look in the direction of the door, her face suddenly going white. "It's my dad." I wonder if she has X-ray vision.

"Dawn, go to your room," Matt says, taking the girl's hand and leading her to his bedroom.

The house is quiet again. Now there are people hiding. I eat my Froot Loops and wonder if the Dad has a gun. If he does, will he shoot Matt or will Matt get his gun and challenge him to a duel?

A man walks up the back porch steps. He doesn't have a gun. He's mostly bald and has delicate glasses. The steps are slippery and he walks slowly, holding the railing. Instead of

winter boots he's wearing brown loafers that are very wet. They look like the soft nose of a dog. He peers through the sliding doors, a white blotch from his breath growing and shrinking on the glass. He knocks loudly before noticing me sitting on the vent and squats down so we can look at each other face to face. His eyes are dark as rain puddles and there are deep wrinkles criss-crossing his forehead.

I leave my box of cereal and run to my bedroom, slamming the door. The only sound is my breath whistling through my nose. I reach down inside my pants and tuck my hands between my legs. I fall asleep on top of the covers.

WHEN I WAKE UP the sky's dark and Mom's back from her shift at the hospital. I walk into her room and she's sitting on the edge of her bed, pulling off her pantyhose. She wears the same kind every day: bare nude control top, the Leggs brand. In the morning, when she has on a new pair, I like to rub against her. I can tell how her day went by her pantyhose. In the summer, clouds of dust puff up as she pulls them off. Once there were flecks of blood down the backs and she wouldn't tell me what happened at the hospital. Today the snow is melting in Kelowna, car tires turning everything into wet mush along the sides of the road. I watch as she slides the thick elastic top down her hips and grabs at the stained toes, pulling inch by inch. Muddy water marks dot the nylon, but no runs. They can be saved, thrown in the sink to soak and hung on the shower rod. I hope I never have to wear pantyhose and go into town.

"What did you have for dinner?" Mom asks.

“I fell asleep.”

“You feeling okay, hon?” She puts a warm hand on my forehead. Her skin is dry and scratchy. I shrug my shoulders and back flop onto the bed. She likes to pull out a thermometer for the show of it, giving it a shake and popping it in my mouth. I stretch out and work the glass tip around with my tongue.

“Don’t fool with it. Keep it in one place.”

She pulls off all her jewelry — one ring, pearl earrings and a gold chain with a thin cross. I used to think a man had given them to her as presents, but when I asked one day she said it was Grandma’s old jewelry and when I was old enough I could have it. She stretches out beside me on the bed and pulls the thermometer out of my mouth, holding it up to take a look. “Normal,” she says.

“I knew you’d say that.”

“The thermometer doesn’t lie. You’re a normal kid. What kind of soup do you want?”

“Tomato,” I say, following her into the kitchen. She pulls out a pot and a can opener from one of the drawers. “I got a big heating bill today,” she says, punching the opener into the top of the can. “Know anything about that?”

“No.”

“You haven’t been touching the thermostat?” She cranks the opener and loses the lid in the liquid. There’s a knock at the front door and Mom goes to answer it. I hop up on the counter to fish the lid out with a fork, but it keeps slipping back in. When I look down the hall Mom’s talking to a man in a dark coat. He says they found the girl down by the river, close to the dam. Mom says *God, God* and then her voice

floats away. “I keep thinking, if I’d gone out to see—” Mom says after a pause and the man clears his throat. He asks her questions about the members in our family and takes notes in a book. Mom twists her hair and answers yes or no. She tries to close the door gently, but the man keeps his boot in the doorframe. “Just a minute,” he says and he smiles. I slide quietly along the wall toward them. He asks Mom if any of our family members spend time in the area around the river. “No, we don’t,” she says. I stand beside her and they stop talking and smile at me. The man takes his foot out of the frame and Mom closes the door carefully. “Who was that?” I say, following her back to the kitchen.

“A police officer,” Mom says, pulling the lid out of the can.

“About the girl?”

“About the girl.”

We stand in the kitchen listening to the clock while Mom stirs soup, swaying from side to side like she’s listening to the radio. “Matt had a friend over today,” I say.

“Did he?” She stops swaying and looks up at the ceiling.

“And the girl’s dad came here.”

“Really?” She turns to give me a look that says, *I know there’s more to this story*. A crinkle, like a little worm, forms in the middle of her forehead.

“But I didn’t let him in.”

“Why not?” she says. She’s not looking at me, but I can tell she’s listening carefully because she tilts her head in my direction.

“You told me not to.”

“I said strangers.”

“He’s a stranger.”

“Well.” She scrapes the inside of the empty can. “Well, well.” It’s something she says when she runs out of words. She twists her hair again, this time in a knot on top of her head. “Have people been saying anything to you?”

“Who?”

She looks at me and shrugs. The hair unravels and falls around her shoulders. “Kids at school.”

“About what?”

She turns back to the stovetop and talks to the pot. “Sometimes your brother makes the wrong choices, but he’s a good person.”

“I know.”

“Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.” She stirs the soup. Her hips move from side to side. Bubbles pop and send splatters over the stovetop.

“Can I sleep in your room tonight?” I say.

“If you have a bath.”

I LOCK THE BATHROOM door behind me, checking it twice before turning on the tap and letting the tub fill. I dip my toes in first then stand ankle-deep while my feet adjust to the heat. Slowly I lower myself into the water. When I was younger Mom wouldn’t let me lock the door, in case I slipped or drowned. She promised not to come in, but she always did, saying, *I’m covering my eyes, I’m covering my eyes*, searching like a blind lady for whatever she wanted.

When I turn off the tap I hear sports on TV. Channels switch, flicker, flip. “People talk,” Mom says, over the noise of the announcer. “People make assumptions.”

“You’re paranoid,” Matt says, laughing the way he does when he thinks someone’s stupid. Scores ring out on the TV. The tips of my fingers are white. They’re wrinkled like they could be picked apart.

“Pay attention to me,” Mom says. The TV noise goes dead.

“Give me the fucking remote.”

“Be quiet.”

“F-off.”

“Dawn will hear you.”

“Fuck Dawn.”

I disappear under the water. There could be more bubbles in here, but it’s too late once you’ve poured the bath. The dead girl floats into my head, her skin white and picked apart like the tips of my fingers. I wonder: if the girl was in the river, why didn’t it carry her away? The river never freezes. When I come back up from the water Mom is knocking lightly on the door. “You okay in there?” I keep myself as quiet as possible. I keep the water quiet around me. I hold my breath and watch the door. “Dawn?” The doorknob jiggles and Mom shouts. “Dawn, answer me!” Her body thuds against the door, trying to force it open. “What?” I call, splashing in the water.

“Why didn’t you answer me?”

“My head was underwater.”

“Don’t do that again.” Mom is so close I hear her lips brush the door, her body against the wood. Her breathing makes me feel lonely. I blow bubbles in the water until she goes back to the kitchen. My hands glide over the skin on my stomach. I don’t like that part of my body because there are no bones to protect it. The skin is pink from the heat, and soft—rabbit skin. Rabbits are too squishy and terrified. They’re always

running. My nails dig into my tummy, leaving rows of white moons.

WE LEAVE EARLY AGAIN this morning. Overnight everything has turned to ice. Mom and I hold hands down the sidewalk and I take long, skating steps, but Mom squeezes my hand and tells me to stop. She's wearing nice clothing and dressy shoes that are too slippery for snow. She says she wants to give the lady in the brown house our condolences. "They found that poor girl dead" —that's what Mom said this morning. When I asked where, she thought for a second then said, "Down by the river." She wanted Matt to come with us, but he didn't come home last night.

We used to go for walks along the river before Mom got her job in Kelowna. Once we saw a dead bird. It was black like it had been stuck in the oven for too long, but I can't imagine a dead girl. There are always teenagers down there, wild like packs of wolves. They always seem hungry, but all they do is smoke. I never look at them when we walk by. When we had our dog, Tucker, we would take him for walks along the river, where he'd sniff out beer bottles and sometimes find clothes or a shoe. Matt would come with us, taking the leash and walking ahead. Tucker would look back to make sure Mom and I were still there, but that was a long time ago. Matt watched the groups of teenagers like he was hungry, too. One day he knew some of them and stayed down there while Mom and I took Tucker back home. That night Mom waited for him, pulling back the curtains, but she got used to it. After that we didn't walk down there much.

I don't tell Mom about the dream I had last night about the poor dead girl. She was running and I was chasing her. I was angry, but I kept forgetting I wasn't supposed to be. I was trying to tell her something, throwing my arms up and yelling. She kept running and falling. She had rows of bloody moons down her stomach. She didn't have blond hair like I thought.

We get to the brown house and there are colourful cards and flowers all over the front steps. It's like a candy machine exploded. We have to step carefully around them. Some of them are buried in the snow, wet and soggy, the ink running so you can't read people's words. Mom finds a spot for our flowers in a dry corner near the door. She puts them down gently and we start back down the stairs without ringing the bell or saying hello. It seems too quiet to make any noise at all and I don't even like the sound of my own steps crunching down the walk. When we get to the street I hear a window opening above us. A woman sticks her head out, pushing the window with her flat hand. "What are you doing?" I stare up at her, my mouth open to the sky. "What are you doing here? Where were you when she was screaming?" the woman yells at us. "Get out of here."

Mom stiffens and takes my hand. I can't look at her. We turn around and walk away.

IT SNOWS AGAIN. SAM stays after school so I walk home by myself. It keeps snowing again and again, like the town is trying to be new every day. Or maybe it's trying to be the same. I can't imagine anything quieter than snow falling off trees, and white piled on white makes no difference.

I take the shortcut through the mall parking lot even though Mom doesn't want me going that way. There are too many cars, too many doors that could open with people waiting to snatch me away, but it's cold and I want to get home quickly. When I get to the mall only a few cars are parked near the doors and a snowplow clears spaces, piling white hills around the lot. The automatic doors swish, opening and closing as people hurry around inside. Matt's car is in the lot parked sideways, but it doesn't matter because there are no lines for the spaces. I brush the snow off his bumper and sit down, waiting for a ride. Once he picked me up from school and we went to A&W. We didn't go through the drive-thru, we sat inside to eat our burgers. When our fries were done he bought us more to share so we could stay longer.

Matt comes out of the mall with the same girl, the girl from the house, and they walk along the covered sidewalk. I can only see them from the chest up because of the snow piles. Matt climbs the bank and holds out his hand to the girl. She's wearing the same short skirt. A car door opens near them and the girl's father gets out. They all stand staring at each other without saying anything. I have one of those bad feelings you can't ignore, so I start walking toward them, calling Matt's name. The dad holds out his hand to the girl, but she jumps away and slips on the ice. Her skirt lifts up and I can see her purple underwear. Matt tries to help her, but she pushes him away and hops off the snowbank. She doesn't cry or look back at him, but walks to the mall entrance, disappearing into the warm, colourful air. The dad is shouting, pointing his finger at Matt, and I start to run.

"Go home," Matt says as I stop in front of him, before I

even have a chance to speak. He doesn't look at me. The mall parking lot suddenly feels bigger, like it's spreading.

"I want you to stay away from her," the dad is saying. His voice is so shaky I think he might give up. Matt looks away from the father with a smirk on his face. He smirks at the snow, he smirks at the mall entrance, he smirks at the snowplow circling. I step closer to Matt, standing between him and the father. "I don't need this," Matt says, smiling at the snow on the ground. His warm breath floats down on top of my head. When he turns to walk away the dad reaches out and puts his hand on Matt's shoulder. "She's my daughter." The words are gentle, but Matt turns and shoves the dad. "Worthless punk," the dad growls, slipping on the snow. "You're nothing. You're a loser." The words fly out of his mouth. Matt looks down at me, and for a moment, I think he's going to pick me up and carry me to the car, but instead he punches the dad in the face. It's not something I expect. One second Matt is standing, arms loose at his sides, the next he is throwing the punch right over my head. The father falls against one of the snowbanks and everything freezes. Matt is breathing hard, his shoulders rising and falling. He looks right through me and then walks quickly to his car, shaking out his hand. The engine revs and his car slides from side to side on the ice, skidding out onto the road, but there's nothing for Matt to hit even if he wanted to.

The father takes a handful of snow and holds it up to his nose. His glasses fog and there are drops of blood at his feet. "Your brother is a pervert," the dad says, through the snow. He looks right at me when he says the words, but I don't blink. I spit on the ground, aiming the glob near the dad's shoes. I

was saving the saliva in my mouth without thinking, swishing it around with my tongue. A shock cuts through my body, breaks me in half, leaving me standing off to the side, watching. I can feel the curl in my lips, hot words in my mouth, ugly and new. “You fuck off.”

“You’re not so different from him, are you?” the father says, shaking his head like I’m a shame. He looks at the bloody clump of snow in his hand and I squint at the parking lot. The man in the snowplow waves at me and I wave back. The dad doesn’t say anything else. He puts new snow on his face and gets into his car. “Go home,” he says, before he drives away.

I stand in the parking lot by myself. The plow is on the other side of the mall. I don’t want to go home, but there is nowhere else to go. I take off running because it’s cold. There’s nothing in the air but the sound of my breathing and the word *pervert*, *pervert*, *pervert*. No one is at the bus stop. The neighborhood houses look abandoned. The curtains are pulled shut like eyes sleeping tight. When I get home my lungs are burning and snot runs out my nose. I can taste it on my upper lip. Matt’s car isn’t in the driveway. There are muddy tracks from the tires, tracks from Matt’s boots in and out of the house. His room is messy, clothes everywhere. In the bathroom, his toothbrush is gone. His gun is gone. His *Scarface* poster is still there.

I get my box of cereal and turn up the heat.

ONCE, MAYBE LAST WINTER, I watched Matt from the trees and he never found out. He had only been back a while. I came home from school early to see him, the thighs of my

snowsuit rubbing. The noise was annoying. I lay down in the snow behind our house, in the middle of all the tall pine trees, waiting for him to come home. There was no snow falling that day. Everything seemed frozen together. I even felt frozen together. Like if I went inside and sat on the heat vent, I might fall apart. I fell back, lying there for a while, trying to see if I could melt snow off the trees by staring at it long enough. It didn't work. I lay there until Matt came out. The sliding door swished open and closed. He shot three times and hit nothing. I could hear the bullets zip through the trees above me and get lost.

I go lie in the backyard like I did that day. I pretend I'm hunting rabbits. It's harder than you think. Rabbits turn white in the winter and everything else is white. The sun shines white rays and if you look hard at anything you go blind.

Matt's been gone a week. Mom called around, but no one's heard from him. When he comes back I might ask him to take me rabbit hunting. Then we could have rabbit stew for dinner instead of canned soup. I would stand over the stove stirring for hours, and by the time Mom got home from work the house would be full of the smell of meat. We'd all be at the table. The smell would be so good, Matt would have to sit down. We'd be so busy chewing, no one would talk.

I imagine Matt and me crouched down in the snow, our elbows propped up, our guns ready. I'd see it even though everything would be white on white. I would squint my eyes and shoot. Matt would laugh in a good way like he couldn't believe it was me. I would pick the rabbit up by the ears. The ears would be the softest things. The rabbit would be heavy. I would have to hang on tight.