

REPEATER  
(Second Place, 2002, The Hook)

“Of course he could be shot. He could drown in a duck blind too, but he won’t.”

“He’s only six,” Susan says to Charles, wishing her brain would clear, sludge in a timeless fog from not enough sleep. Since New Year’s it seems like, she’s only slept standing up, what with the baby’s croup and the early morning tightness in her belly that can only mean one thing. For a second she wishes Chuckie was the one with croup so he wouldn’t have to go on this first hunting trip, an initiation she’s delayed for the last two years with tricks and pleas and tears. This year nothing works.

“He’s seven,” Charles mumbles.

She watches her husband, sitting legs astride the table he let her paint white in this house that feels like his first wife’s house no matter what she does. Seven years Isabella’s been gone and Susan feels her eyes on her back when she’s serving Charles his scrambled eggs and hash browns, feels Isabella’s breath on her neck as she combs Chuckie’s hair with the same part as his daddy, just off the middle, razor sharp with the scalp showing pink, the black hair so fine that Susan sometimes wonders if the Italian woman left her mark on Chuckie somehow, like the initials in the walnut tree out front. ‘Isabella and Charles forever.’

“I hope it’s the first day of dove season,” Isabella said when she saw Susan months later in the market, fat and smiling with Charles’s son straining against her uterine wall. The boy, impatient even then to be free of her.

Oh, no, Chuckie’s definitely her baby. She remembers the frantic lovemaking in the Dodge and the little gifts—gloves, perfume—slipped into her hand when no one was looking because he was married and she was underage. And she remembers the long labor alone in the hospital.

Because of the baby, Charles brought her here before he’d filed for divorce. The same night Isabella left, the scorch marks still visible in the yard where he’d thrown her suitcases when he found her in bed with his best friend. Charles drove to the flower store and, with the tinny Elvis instrumental serenading them from the shopkeeper’s portable radio, he peeled off forty one-dollar bills for a dozen blood red roses.

While she wrapped them in tissue, he paced without speaking. After she handed them to him, he thrust them back at her.

“Marry me,” was all he said.

It was a command, but she didn’t realize it then. Then, they couldn’t stand to be away from each other for the ten hours he worked on the road crew. He would sneak back at lunch and drag her giggling and chilled from the flower freezer into the break room and warm her up. She never considered saying no. They married because of the baby. Without Chuckie, they might have lived together for years, making love in the living room, on the porch, under the stars.

She tells herself that now, when she knows better. Charles works away during the week, building bridges in unknown cities instead of roads that lead to places she knows. On Fridays he plays poker. On Saturdays he hunts. Or cleans the guns or buys the guns or trades the guns. He’s off at endless gun shows or home with garlicked friends who stroke

long-necks like hookers and eat her dinners and try to thank her with their hands when Charles isn't looking.

She twists her loose hair into a knot and fixes it with the silver clasp he gave her for their first anniversary. Have there been other anniversaries? She forgets.

He is almost finished cleaning the rifles. One for each of the Morgan' men. Charles and his father, C.T., and Chuckie. Piece by piece, he fits them together snugly, sharply snapping them into position in the overly warm kitchen while she stares hypnotized by the glisten and the gleam, hating them, hating him.

"When did you start?" she asks, hoping for a lucky break, knowing from the rise in his shoulders that it's a foolish question.

His hands slow. "When I went to kindergarten." His gaze tracks her as she wields the serrated knife and slices bread for their lunch. He continues, "That winter I missed ten days of school and the teacher nearly drove my daddy crazy with phone calls. C.T. was polite, he was rude, finally he went and had a heart-to-heart with her." Charles raises and lowers his eyebrows as lewdly as he can without his hands to elaborate. "She quit."

"Quit calling?"

"No, left town. When she took the job, she knew damn well how guys are 'round here. She oughtta have left it alone." He smiles his winningest smile and slides the third gun into the third rifle case. "Buck up, Suse," he grins at the pun, "Any son just wants to do like his daddy. It's natural. He'll be fine."

They hear boots clump on the stairs, and Chuckie stands at the doorway, his shirt buttons mismatched, toothpaste on his chin.

"Morning, sweetie," Susan says.

He steps forward, catches the loose shoe lace with the other boot, and topples head over heels, landing at her feet. Before she can reach him, Charles slides his hands under Chuckie's arms and hauls him upright. After setting him on his feet, he slaps his arm and guffaws.

"You got a little of your mama in you, son. We'll work on that too. After the hunting lessons."

Chuckie's lip juts out, but he doesn't cry. She draws him close and wipes his chin with the corner of the dishtowel.

"I made oatmeal. That'll keep you warm in the woods." Under the red flannel, she can feel the toothpick bones, so fragile, hanging together with cartilage not fully formed, growing even as she holds him still. She redoes the buttons, but watches the gold flecks in his eyes dart about trying to connect with his father. Charles gathers supplies and straps them about his shoulders and neck.

"Hurry up, Suse, C.T.'ll be here any minute."

At her signal Chuckie sits and guzzles juice. After Charles goes out to load the truck, she moves the newspaper and the oily rag onto the porch.

"I tole you it wouldn't rain, Mom," the boy says.

She hears his father, 'I tole you he won't get hurt.' Who would have predicted that she would love the son more? She strokes his head as he eats.

"You don't have to comb it for hunting," Chuckie says.

"No, I know."

"Anyway, I can do it myself."

"I know."

“In the mirror.”

In the bathroom there is a wooden stool with painted words, and she realizes, as he speaks, that it’s no longer there.

“Where did you put the stool I painted for you?”

“In Connor’s room. I don’t need it anymore.”

The image of baby Connor wavering on his tiptoes on the painted roly-poly pigs with his pudgy fingers grasping at the cold porcelain makes her stomach roll. In response, he wails from upstairs.

“Did you go in his room?” The anger in her words surprises them both. She likes that the boys are friends, that Chuckie walks behind Connor when he crawls up the stairs and that he carts his brother’s toys to the crib at bedtime so he won’t be lonely.

“He was already awake. The curtains were open.”

She remembers. Unable to sleep, she went in to watch the sunrise from there. With no success, she willed the clouds to deliver a rainstorm that would overflow the gutters and flood the dirt road from the house to the highway.

Chuckie hops off the stool.

“Wait one minute,” she says, “Today those laces have to be tied right. You don’t want to trip at the wrong minute and scare away the deer.”

When he nods so seriously back at her, his dark eyes clear and sunny, her hands tremble. The laces are thick and stiff. New boots for his first hunt, his Paw-Paw’s gift to him at Christmas. And then they had snow, and Chuckie had the flu. A month those boots sat in his closet, baring their evil teeth at her every time she opened the closet door. ‘Soon, soon, he’ll leave you and follow his father.’ What is it that the Bible says about a rib and a man? Ah, but the Bible is wrong, it isn’t a wife who is so much a part of him that they are one.

“Chuckie,” Charles yells from the driveway.

“See ya,” he says and is gone. Winter shoves itself into the kitchen through the open door, scrabbling fingers of relentless icy wind. She slams the door, but stays by it, her hand on the knob as if she hasn’t made up her mind after all to let him go. She shivers.

Upstairs Connor rocks the crib rails to make them squeak. He sings his nonsense baby songs. In spite of herself she smiles. The wide repetitive syllables remind her of the bedtime lullabies she sings to the boys. She stirs the milk pot on the stove. When she clears the table, Chuckie’s spoon holds the slightest memory of his body heat. She holds it tightly in her fist and lets her own heat flow into the metal, willing it to burn a brand as witness to her love.

Through the gauzy curtains she sees the old man’s faded blue truck gain speed and skid to a halt, kicking up the loose stones and stirring the dust into a haze that hides them completely. When the smoke clears, Charles is loading equipment into the back. Chuckie tries to lift the cooler, but ends up dragging it. The two men laugh and point. After ruffling his grandson’s hair, C.T.—to prove he is still strong—lifts Chuckie off the ground and throws him into the air. He catches him on the way down and plunks him into the truck cab. In the early morning dimness Chuckie’s white teeth glisten. Despite the distance she thinks she hears him laugh.

The old man with his back turned could be Charles. They hold their heads the same way, slightly to the right, skeptical and ready to argue. C.T. has always come and

gone without warning, a whirlwind of energy belying his almost eighty years. She wonders if that's how Charles will be in fifty years. What is it in their genes, which makes it fascinating to hike into the dark woods for the thousandth time and kneel on hard, frozen ground for an animal that runs at the slightest cough? Crazy men.

And who keeps a six year old out all day in twenty-degree weather? How will they keep him warm? What will he eat from the cold lunch she's packed? Salami and thick slices of cheddar and the honey bread she made at midnight while she thought the mere doing of the extra work might yield the usual futility of her days, and the hunt might be abandoned. More likely delayed, but . . . each day, each hour Chuckie grows up a little more, becomes a little stronger, better able to defend himself, to protect himself from the evil that infiltrates the adult world into which his father insists on thrusting him.

Connor calls to her, "Ma, Ma, Ma, Ma." He makes the sounds on purpose to hear how they bounce about the empty rooms. He knows his brother is gone. He knows his mother is somewhere in the house. Right where he should be, he is satisfied. When she picks him up, she notices the solid flesh of his limbs and chest that weight her down, stoop her shoulders. He must weigh thirty-five or forty pounds, chunky for not quite two. In her mind he is still the seven pounds that she held in her two hands at the hospital. Kissing his neck and face and the top of his head, she hums lightly, an echo of his song.

Outside a rifle shot cracks in the distance.

"Oh," she says, and grips him tighter.

He repeats it, "O."

She trips on the rag rug and has to put her hand on the wall to save herself from falling. Thinking it's a game, Connor laughs. Up and down.

The shot repeats, slightly louder. Deadbeat poachers, Charles says, without land of their own. They don't know any landowners well enough to gain permission so they spy from the woods to see when the truck leaves. All clear, the owner's gone, the woods are unprotected. Entwined with Connor in a perpetual hug, she locks the kitchen door and returns to the living room.

"We have to fold laundry, baby. Saturday's laundry day."

He tries the words, "Bon dee day, bon dee day." She sets him on the floor, inside the diamond she forms with her legs. Picking out the big items first from the basket, she stacks them on the sofa where he can't knock them accidentally. Once she finishes the first basket, she swings one leg over his head and stands, careful not to disturb him. He's found Chuckie's sneakers under the sofa and he beats one against the floor. She has half a minute, maybe, before he realizes she's gone and starts to fuss. Quickly she dumps the warm clothes from the dryer into the basket, fitting it between her hip and ribs.

When she returns, Connor is still banging, this time on the sofa. He makes the banging noise himself though because the shoe is silent against the upholstered cushion.

"Good boy," she says, relieved that he did not attempt the stairs while she was gone. Shots ring out from the woods, closer. "Damn poachers," she says.

"Dam, dam, dam," the baby offers, the shoe forgotten while he watches his mother sweep the fabric over his head as she folds.

"One more load, sweet thing, and we'll make you a snack."

Unless C.T. had engine trouble, they should be at the ridge by now. Parking and dividing the stuff between them. After school the day before Chuckie emptied his backpack so he'd have room to help carry supplies. From the bedroom she overheard

father and son discussing his duties as an apprentice; when the bag could be put down, when silence was required, when they would eat. If it were cub scouts, she wouldn't have minded. Indian skills and star watches and signals made of rocks and sticks, a boy should learn those things. But a gun destroys things. A gun has no redeeming value.

They don't eat what Charles shoots, at least not more than the little bit he likes to brag about to his poker friends. Marinated venison steaks or his mother's stew recipe. Because the smell of the deer carcass makes her nauseous, he has to do the butchering and the cooking. It is the only time he cooks. Once it spoils—and it always does—he buries it in the gully. If it stays dry, the scars remain for days where the tractor pulls the carcass.

She folds quickly, coming to the loose socks and miniature underwear. Chuckie's big boy pants they called them for a while until Charles said, enough, he's not a baby anymore. She switched to plain white, putting the ones with trains and footballs in the attic for Connor.

“Is Mama's baby ready for some crackers and peanut butter? Bananas?”

Connor grins his toothy smile and puts his arms up in the air. As chunky as he is, she should let him walk.

“Up you go,” she sings, drawing him up to her face for a kiss and settling him back on her hip.

A sharp crack startles her. The shot is so close she snaps her head around to the window, but there is no one there. Silent, Connor listens too. The voices are close enough for her to distinguish the words.

“Why'd you shoot so close to the f-in house? Thas' a house.” An unseen man hisses.

“Jesus H. Christ, something moved. Sure looked like a deer,” a second man moves into view. He is so close she can see the peach fuzz on his cheeks. His camouflage suit bunches around his boots as if he borrowed them from someone much taller. His gun hangs from his arm like an extra appendage. She's never seen him before. Or is it that they all look alike in the dusk when they call out their good-byes to Charles? Their headlights race ahead of them to escape into the night.

“D'you hit anything?”

“I'm scared to look.” But the young one laughs, black gaps in his mouth where teeth should be.

She stands perfectly still, praying for Connor to do likewise. She doesn't want them to know she's here by herself, doesn't want them to ask to use the phone or the bathroom, or to apologize for shooting in the yard. She doesn't want them to tell her what they've shot.

“Charles's truck is here, mebbe he's good for a Bud.”

“We passed him and his ole' man on the ridge, 'member? He's got his boy with him.”

“Couldn't of hit a kid then.”

The low chuckle and the high one blend and filter into the house as cutting as the cold air that hangs about their unshaven faces. She gags, wills them to move away from the window, and they do. They lurch across the yard in the direction of the lean-to where Charles stores the tractor.

She sinks onto the sofa, releasing Connor who swings his legs down, wiggling until his feet touch the floor. The piles of laundry crash soundlessly around him, but he moves with purpose.

“Pa, pa,” he yells as he waddles across the bare floor to the window and the male voices.

Pressing her hand to her chest, she pushes the bone and skin against her heart to get it to stop racing. As the men walk to the scrub pine that grows by the shed, they pass a bottle between them. One of them spits and a brown stream of tobacco juice or whiskey arcs and falls to the earth. In slow motion the other man bends and leans his gun against the single walnut tree that grows there by the rope swing, Chuckie’s favorite toy. And beneath it is the tick hound that Charles won in last week’s poker game. Pasted on the black and white tapestry of sunless woods, the red wound on the animal’s chest draws her eye. It gushes in a stream down his leg as he tries to stand, but can’t.

“You’ve gone and shot Charles’s new dog.”

“You shot too.”

“Looked like a buck to me.”

“See. That brown coulda’ been horns.”

“Can we make it look like he run away?”

“Charles won him offa Hook Peterson. He’ll go looking to Hook if the dog’s gone.”

“But if Hook hasn’t seen him, how kin he prove it?”

“No one’ll believe Hook.”

“Let’s do it.”

“Do what?”

“Bury him and make it look like the dog run off.”

“You’re crazy.”

“I don’t want Morgan mad at me.”

Susan watches the scene outside. When her view is obstructed by Connor’s head framed in the pane, she leaps up and pulls him away from the window. He begins to cry. She covers his mouth with her hand.

C.T. put up the tire swing for Chuckie’s fifth birthday. “Your pappy had a swing like this from the time he could walk. He could make it do circles and backwards circles. He could hang upside down in it. He was like a monkey, he could shimmy up the rope. All the way up, and slide down like a fireman,” CT explained.

“Shhh,” she whispers in the baby’s ear. “Connor want juice?”

Carrying him close to her chest to keep his crying muffled, she follows the wall to the kitchen. One-handed she scrabbles in the cupboard for the crackers and sits on the floor with Connor on her lap and the opened box. Once he’s quiet, she crawls to the refrigerator for the juice box. She punches the straw into the metallic circle and holds it in front of his face. He sucks it in, dribbling red on his chin, happy.

She will call the doctor. No more babies. No more sons.