

2,500 words

LUCKY

By Berlin Mair

Gavin has never killed anything as big as a rabbit. Mostly he shoots at birds.

Sometimes lizards, though he never gets them. He's gotten squirrels, but the rabbits are faster, and much quieter. The squirrels make a lot of noise on the ground, rustling around in the underbrush. The rabbits always take him by surprise; one moment the wash is empty, and the next a pair of wide, black eyes are staring back at him from under a shrub. Another moment and they're gone.

It was Chris' idea. He's the one who saw it crouched in the sagebrush, and put out a hand out in front of Gavin's chest to stop him.

They froze, and the rabbit watched them out of one eye. Then it turned its head, and they both dropped low to the ground, holding their breath to see if it would notice and run.

But the rabbit didn't run. Its head swiveled back towards them, and it didn't seem to particularly notice their disappearance. They sat for a while watching it as it got comfortable, swiping a paw over its ears.

Gavin's got a better shot at it--there's a tree branch keeping Chris from being able to lay flat on his stomach, and he can't move it without making noise.

Chris spotted the rabbit, but Gavin's the one who kills it.

Chris has never killed anything this big before either, Gavin's pretty sure. A year ago he said he killed a fox out on a camping trip with his dad, but Gavin is pretty sure he's lying because the last time it came up, Chris got red in the face and changed the subject.

The rabbit's legs give a few final twitches as they approach. This, Gavin is used to. Nothing ever dies instantly, except for maybe hummingbirds.

The rabbit's head is tilted back in the dirt, mouth frozen open, and Gavin can see its tiny front teeth. Maybe it's the teeth, or the big, round eyes, that bring a strange feeling to his stomach. But why should killing a rabbit be any different than a squirrel? They're basically the same thing.

"What should we do with it?" Gavin hears himself saying. It's a dumb question--they never do anything with the animals they hit. The point is to do it, to see if they can. It's not like they can bring them home--Gavin's parents know he takes out his BB gun to "target practice," but he's never told them he uses living targets, and his mom would freak out if she knew. And besides, what would they do with them at home? The stuff they shoot is too small and too weird

for anyone at Gavin's house to eat.

He thinks maybe Chris will laugh at him for asking, but when he turns, Chris is just looking down at the body, face blank.

"You ever had a lucky rabbit's foot?" he says.

"No." Gavin's never had one, but he's seen them in gift shops on vacation before. He doesn't know if those ones were real. Hanging off their little gold keychains, each perfectly the same size, it was hard to picture them ever being part of a whole animal.

For Chris' last birthday, his Dad gave him a Swiss Army knife. "My mom didn't want him to give it to me," Chris said, "but my dad told her it would be alright as long as he taught me how to be smart with it."

Chris lets his BB gun clatter to the ground and pulls the knife out of his pocket, and opens the blade.

They both crouch down over the rabbit.

"You think it's safe to touch it?" Gavin says, almost in a whisper.

Chris shrugs. "Didn't look sick or anything."

They each gingerly grab a foot.

"That thing's not going to be able to cut through the bone," Gavin says, glancing at Chris' knife. "We're going to have to break the legs."

Gavin doesn't really know how he knows that. A couple years ago Uncle Aaron had promised to take Gavin hunting with him when he turned eleven, but then Uncle Aaron moved to California with his new girlfriend, and didn't visit for Gavin's eleventh birthday, or twelfth, or thirteenth. Dad's never really been the hunting type.

"How do we do that?" Chris asks, and Gavin shrugs.

"Maybe with a rock?" he suggests.

"I don't know, seems messy. How hard do you think they are to snap?"

Gavin shrugs again, and pinches the rabbit's ankle with two fingers. The fur is soft, but feels thin over the bone. No extra fat or anything.

"Probably not too hard," he says, "they feel pretty thin."

"Maybe we could do it like a stick," Chris says, "Like brace your foot on it, and pull."

Gavin nods, and they both shuffle around, still squatting on the ground, to each brace a foot, lightly, against the rabbit's haunches, right where the legs begin.

"Ready?" Chris says, and Gavin nods.

One.

Two.

Three.

Gavin feels the sound of the snap all the way down his spine, but he doesn't let his face show it. Chris feels along the leg he's holding for the break, and once he finds it, starts sawing with his knife.

There's less blood than Gavin might've thought. It doesn't come spilling out, just soaks into fur around the edges of the cut. It only takes a few seconds, and then Chris hands the knife to Gavin. Gavin braces his finger on the back of the blade.

It's easy. The knife cuts through the skin like the soft, slippery sautéed onions his mom serves with steak. Snapping some of the tendons is a little harder, but no worse than cutting off the tag on a new t-shirt.

They leave the body of the rabbit where it is. Something will eat it, probably.

The feet sit limp in their open palms. Gavin's is a little longer; his break was a little further up the ankle.

"What do we do with them?" he says, and Chris says, "What do you mean?"

There are little claws on the bottom of the foot. They scratch at Gavin's skin as he rolls the foot in his palm.

"Don't we have to do something, to stop them from rotting?"

Chris shrugs.

"I don't think so. Guess we'll know if they start to smell."

Chris tucks the foot into his pants pocket. After a moment, Gavin does the same.

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The house is in the middle of the street between two other houses, the Mendozas on one side, and a new family he doesn't know on the other. Their house and the Mendoza's house are almost identical, sort of sideways houses with the garage in the front. For a while after they first moved in, Gavin kept turning too soon, and walking up the wrong driveway to the wrong door. It should have been easy to tell the difference, even if they were the same shape--the fake stucco on the outside of their house was beige, and on the Mendoza's house it was a dark brown, but he made that same mistake for weeks in a row.

It's his grandma's house, actually, and smaller than the one they used to live in a few neighborhoods over. Their old house had a pool in the backyard, and was closer to the rec center.

His mom told him what she told everyone else, which is that they were moving in with Grandma because she was getting dementia. If that were true, they would've just moved

Grandma into their old house, which had an extra bedroom on the ground floor anyway. Gavin's pretty sure the move had more to do with his dad getting laid off.

The blast of the air conditioning cools the sweat on his forehead when he walks in, makes him feel clammy. The living room is quiet. Mom and Dad at work, and Grandma is probably in her bedroom watching John Wayne movies on cable.

He climbs up the stairs to his room, and closes the door quietly behind him, even though Grandma's so hard of hearing he could probably slam it and she wouldn't know.

He sets the rabbit foot on his dresser, next to his sixth grade flag football trophy and his alarm clock. It looks strange sitting there, a little piece of the outside world come into the air conditioning. If his mom saw it, she'd make a face and pick it up with her hand inside a garbage bag, the way she did that time they found a dead mouse in the toilet. Then she'd demand to know where it came from, why he had brought it into the house, who he'd been hanging out with when he'd gotten it, and how, and where.

He tucks his BB gun under his bed, and looks at the foot for a few moments before opening the top drawer of the dresser, and sweeping it inside, on top of his socks.

Rabbit's feet are supposed to be good luck. Suddenly, Gavin can't think of anything he needs good luck for, besides making sure his mom doesn't find it.

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Lying in bed watching TV that night, Gavin remembers how he knew to break the rabbit's legs before they tried to cut through it. Over the summer he saw some Dateline special about a guy who got his arm trapped under a boulder, and had to cut it off so he wouldn't starve to death. It had taken days for him to get the guts to do it, he'd had to drink his own pee to keep from

dehydrating. When he finally decided to cut off the arm, he only had a pocketknife, so he used the leverage of the rock holding the arm in place to snap it first. It took him five hours to saw through the muscle and skin. Five hours. Cutting through the rabbit's leg had taken less than a minute.

For days after he'd seen the special, Gavin couldn't stop thinking about cutting off his own arm. If he could do it, if he had to.

He feels it out again now, squeezes his forearm in his other hand, tests the thickness of the bone, the way it feels to put pressure on it. When he broke his wrist last spring it hurt, but it wasn't unbearable. He even made it home before he cried. He could break the bone on purpose if he had to, he thinks, in order to survive.

It's the tendons that would be the real problem. The bundle of nerves and muscle running from his wrist to his elbow, the one that got sore when they went to the rec center once a year with his gym class to do rock climbing.

He lays back in bed and closes his eyes, presses that bundle of nerves and tries to decide how long it would take him to sever them all.

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He's out in the wash again that night. He hunkers down between white pools of moonlight, in the spidery shadows of low, scrubby trees and bushes. The dark sky glows streetlight orange in the distance. Rooftops of the houses in his neighborhood lurk just over the wall.

His hands are wet. His hands are moving, tearing something soft and squishy. He snaps and wrenches with quick pulls of his fingers, and lifts something to his mouth. It slides oily

against his lips as he stuffs it inside. He chews, and tiny pieces of fat and gristle pop under his teeth. He swallows, a long greasy slide down the back of his throat.

I should be using a fork, he thinks. Mom's going to get mad.

But he can't stop, tearing off bite sized pieces and popping them in his mouth before he's even finished chewing the last one.

His hands itch. He looks down at them, and they're covered in a soft tawny fur, soaked with dark black blood at the fingertips. Something white glimmers off the end. His fingers are too short by at least a knuckle, and he isn't holding anything. He's been tearing open and eating his own hands. Shit, he'll never be able to hide this from Mom and Dad.

He wakes up choking.

Something soft fills his throat, expanding to take up all the empty space. He reaches in and frantically pulls a long tuft of something out of his mouth.

He fell asleep with the TV on, and he holds up the clump to examine it in the harsh blue-white light from the screen. It's stuffing. Soft, white stuffing, scratchy now that it's wet.

He's kneeling on the bed, over his pillow, torn open at the corner leaking poly-fil. He throws the pillow away from him and spits and spits, scrubs his tongue with the back of his hand, scratches with his fingernails, but he can't get rid of the tiny fibers clinging to his tastebuds.

He squints at the screen, picking bits of white fuzz out of his mouth. The TV is playing an episode of Off the Air, which means it has to be almost morning.

An eagle soars over a barren mountain top. Shaggy white goats pick their way along the steep ridge. The eagle swoops down, and lifts one of the goats in its talon. A full grown goat, thrashing its horns but unable to reach the eagle's body. Gavin didn't know a bird could be strong

enough to lift a whole goat like that. It must be struggling though, because it drops the goat for a second, and it tumbles through the air, down into the canyon. The eagle dives back down and catches it again by a single leg. Flaps its wings and Gavin can almost feel the strain in his own back. The goat writhes. There's no hope for it--either it's going to fall, or it's going to get ripped open in the eagle's nest.

The eagle can't keep its grip on the goat, and it falls again. Gavin's stomach jumps. The eagle dives, but misses. Cuts its loss, and flies away. The video feed fades out before the goat hits the ground, melting into an animated sunrise. Gavin shuts off the TV.

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He leaves the house early, and wades back out through sagebrush, into the wash, before school. He doesn't know exactly where they killed the rabbit--the body seems to have disappeared.

In his pocket, folded up in a tissue from the bathroom, is the foot. He pulls it out, and tests the weight of it in his hand. It's light, lighter than when he took it home, he thinks. He pulls his arm back. Does a couple of shadow pitches.

But he doesn't throw it. Instead he rolls it over in his palm, and thumbs at the shredded edge of skin around the exposed bone. It peels back a little at his touch. He pinches at the dense fur and pulls, revealing the meat inside, sandwiched between the skin and bones. Gavin tastes stew, and gags.

He slides a fingers under the skin, and pries out a piece of the flesh inside. He holds it up to the light, between his fingers. And touches it to his mouth.

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