

SILENCE spread across the forest as William slowly stalked forward. Before him, a great beast grazed in a meadow, antlers rattling against the branches ten feet above its head. Blood dripped from the creature's fangs. Instead of letting fear rush through his veins, the prospect delighted William, and he grinned in anticipation. He sprung forward, getting the drop on the creature that was twice as tall as him. The beast, one of the dozens of imaginary monsters that William protected the village from on a daily basis, fell and evaporated into the ground. William let loose a barbaric yawp that echoed around the trees.

As his echoes died down, the exhilaration faded away to unease. William turned circles in the meadow, studying the forest around him. Heat spread across the back of his neck, something bore into him. Something was watching William. Raising his weapon, a large, knotted stick, above his head, William approached the edge of the clearing. Hunched over, he leaned around the trunk of an oak tree and came face to face with a deer. Small, forked antlers sat on top of its head, a pitiful show compared to the beastie that William had just slain. Nonetheless, the animal's presence frightened him. A shriek tore through the woods and the deer bounded away, heading north through the trees.

When William had a chance to settle his nerves, he knew he had to follow the deer. It posed a threat to his village, to his sister, and it was his duty to hunt it down.

Armed with his stick, William followed the path away from the village, slicing at invisible foes along the way. The trees, shedding their leaves for the season, encroached and the early-morning light bled through the patchy canopy above. The road had narrowed as soon as he left the last building behind and became little more than a game trail. A run-down, mossy cabin belonging to an old trapper lay out here somewhere. William knew not to play there; last time he

had ventured too close, the mountain man had run out of the shack half-naked and chased him off with a stick of cordwood. Other than that, there was nothing but wilderness north of the town.

William swung his stick and an imaginary beast fell to his wayside. He broke into a run, feet pounding against the dirt, weapon high above his head. He jumped and brought the stick down with a crash against a downed log, sending bark and moss flying. A smile stretched across his face. Thanks to him, the village was now safe from whatever evil stalked the woods.

But there was still that deer that needed to be taken care of. Satisfied with his monster slaying abilities, William assumed the role of a master hunter. Word had spread around town that the festival might be smaller than in the past. Less crops were harvested. Fewer deer were killed. The town would be relying on Merkel's shipment.

William didn't understand all that was said, but he picked up the idea of killing deer and ran with it. He lifted the stick and pulled it snug against his shoulder, staring down the barrel, ready to throw potshots at whatever animal stepped out in front of his peep sights. A few squirrels and rabbits were gunned down by imaginary bullets.

A branch broke to his right and William spun, ready to face the deer and make it submit to him. Instead of some beastie, Martin and a few other younger boys stepped out from behind the trees. William let his stick fall to the ground beside him, where it joined dozens of other fallen branches.

"What's the baby doing out here?" Martin called. He took a step towards William and his friends followed. "Playing baby games? Hunting with sticks?"

Without a word, William turned and ran. The crashing behind him told him that the bullies were pursuing him, as they always did. He ducked under branches and sidestepped around saplings, but the cacophony of shouts and jeers behind him grew ever closer.

He remembered the last time Martin and his friends had caught him. It was a little over a week ago, when William was playing with some discarded fishing line, trying to catch his own fish with a hook-shaped twig and a worm. That chase had only lasted a few minutes before Martin caught him, pulled his pants down, and started smacking his butt with a switch one of the other boys broke off a tree. He still had splinters stuck in his ass.

A hand closed around his shoulder. It pulled back hard and William felt his feet leave the ground. The air was forced out of his lungs as his back hit the dirt beneath him and Martin climbed on top of him, pinning his arms down. His head exploded with pain as Martin's fist collided with it, and the cheering of the other boys grew distant. Martin punched again and again. Blood started to flow from a gash on William's brow and ran a hot trail down his cheek, pooling in his ear.

"Check his pockets!" One of the other boys cried.

Someone ruffled through his trousers while Martin still held weight on him.

"There's nothing there," Martin said. "His dad drinks it all away. You think he'd leave any money to little Willy here?" Another punch to the face.

William tried to raise his hands, to fight back or push Martin off of him, but the aggressor outweighed him by nearly fifty pounds.

"I heard your sister is gonna be our new teacher. You better not tell her anything. If we get in trouble for this, we'll burn your house down. I know where my daddy keeps his matches."

"Clean him up, Martin!" came a voice somewhere to William's right. Or was it left? His head hurt and it was hard to tell.

The cuts on William's face started to sting as Martin grabbed handfuls of dirt and pine needles and rubbed them into the wounds. William screamed as fresh pain assaulted his face and tried bucking his hips to dislodge Martin, but he weighed too much.

Laughing, Martin jumped up and left William writhing with pain on the forest floor. The other boys soon joined in, and the chorus of insults and taunts returned.

"We better not see you at the festival tomorrow night," Martin called. Footsteps carried the sound away as Martin and his gang retreated.

William lay on the ground crying, clutching his hands to his face. He tried scraping some of the gunk off his face, but only succeeded in rubbing more pine needles into the cuts. He'd need to find someplace to wash his face, but he couldn't even open his eyes without them stinging and burning. Besides, he didn't want his sister, Elizabeth, to see him like this, to know that the bullying was still ongoing.

A hand on his arm startled William, forcing him to cry out. "Please, don't hurt me again!"

"Shh," came a gentle voice. "Martin and them're gone."

It sounded like Thomas Hill, but William couldn't be sure.

The voice helped William to his feet. "There's a creek nearby. I can't take you all the way, but I'll get you pointed in the right direction. If I take too long... If they knew I was helping you..."

It was Thomas Hill, William was confident now. Thomas was part of Martin's gang, but always seemed to hang back whenever things got physical. The term "gang" was being generous. Martin's group of bullies was nothing compared to the real gangs in the city back east. They could pretend all they wanted, and they were tough, William knew, but they were nothing more

than boys. It would be a few years before they grew into men, and then they *would* be dangerous. Maybe Thomas Hill was scared of Martin, too.

Thomas guided him through the forest, over downed logs and around sticker bushes. The pounding in William's head started to dissipate and he thought he heard the sound of running water. The crisp smell of the creekbed confirmed it. He didn't know exactly where he was in the forest anymore, after trying to flee from Martin, but this creek had to be the one that snaked through the trees, feeding into Deer Lake. The trail he had stomped down from running should be easy enough to follow, but he could always navigate home from the lake.

"They only pick on you because you're the youngest," Thomas said. "You just turned ten, right? They targeted me before you moved here. Once one of the other littluns grows up, or some other kid moves to the village, Martin will leave you alone. Probably even invite you into the gang. How it happened to me."

The hand left his shoulder. William cracked his eyes, crusted with mud and blood, and got a glimpse of Thomas. A frown stretched across the boy's face.

"Please don't tell them I helped you. The creek's about a dozen yards in front of you. Follow the sound."

Thomas took a step backwards and disappeared in the foliage.

William wanted to call out "thanks," but didn't have the energy. Instead, he stumbled forward, towards the trickling sound of the creek. He didn't know he came upon it until his boots sunk into the muck, filling to the brim with water.

Fresh tears flowed down his face.

The mud released his boot with a squelching sound as William sat on the creek bank. He leaned down and cupped his hands in the water. A shiver ran through him as he let the icy water

run from his crown to his chin. He splashed again and again, trying to get as much gunk off his face as he could.

Finally, he removed enough to be able to open his eyes.

The boy staring back at him from the surface of the creek looked broken, both in body and in spirit. William's left eyebrow had a cut above it, running half the length of his forehead. Pine needles decorated the wound and fresh tendrils of blood still trickled out and matted his eyebrows. It took him nearly ten minutes to get all of the needles and dirt out of the brow, icy water stinging his face the whole time.

When the work was done, his hands had turned white and shivered uncontrollably. He rubbed them together, breathing on them, trying to get some sensation back in his fingers.

"I hate them," William whispered to his reflection. A shadow hung over his face, obscuring his eyes. "I want them all to leave the village. I want them to leave me alone forever."

In the water, faces gathered around William's reflection.

Martin. Jack. Countless other boys and girls who picked on William time and time again.

"I just want them all to die."

The wind whipped up and the reflections in the water disappeared as ripples spread out.

William stood up and started walking back to town, sticks snapping under his soles and shattering the silence.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood up and he froze, one foot still suspended in the air. The feeling was back again.

Something was watching him.

Without waiting for the beastie to spring out of the woods and devour him, he broke into a run.