The Rifle

It is the same routine as always. We spend the ride back to the homestead in silence. Rug drives with the lights low, parks near the back, accidentally nudges the fence. Under the cover of night, I lug the rabbits from the back. I don't look at the eyes. They feel heavy. I feel old. Rug takes them; skins them with a deft hand. He throws one to the dog. The others are gutted. I empty my rifle, set it against a tyre, cradle the unused bullets in a closed hand, crouch besides a tree. I listen as the bush hums its night-song. Leaves rustle with a soft crackling noise. Summer has dried them on their branches. A bird hoots; its mate, perhaps, returns the call. Rug murmurs something I don't catch. I don't ask him to repeat it. It is still light enough to hunt, but he is too tired. I am too tired. In the distance, something moves. The bullets tremble in my hand, as though they are eager. I hesitate. It is a rabbit. It is always a rabbit. It twitches once, twice. Iridescent glints from its eyes. I reach for the rifle – but the rabbit is gone. I sit and listen to the sound of its escape. It reverberates, the echoes deafening in the quiet, worse than any gun shot. I wrap my hand around the rifle, breathe, and preserve the sounds of life for later, for when I know I will need it.

-

The first time was magical. How was I to know? I was eleven. My uncle Rug held the rifle and I pulled the trigger. I called him Rug for his hair – his shaggy, almost sheep's wool mop reminded me of our living room carpet, and if the nickname bothered him he never made any big deal of it. I only ever saw Rug in the summer. It was supposed to be an experience, according to my father. I remember at first I hated the smell of the place. The stink of dust and sweat and manure lingered in my hair and clothes no matter how much soap I lathered myself with. Rug's attempts at entertaining me didn't help either – he would have me milk cows, then brush the horses, then feed the chickens, then help him with the fences. Menial tasks. I wilted like the flowers on his front window in the afternoon sun every time he handed me a bucket or a paddle brush or a pair of scissors. And every day, while I tugged and scrubbed and scattered, I would think of Rug, disappearing into his ute down at the bottom of the property and imagine what he was doing while I lived in repetition. I began to shirk my chores and hide in the trailer, gripping the sides as the bulky car rocked and bucked its way down to the bushlands. Then I would watch in awe as Rug drew the rifle from his back and aim.

I had never seen a gun before then, let alone a rifle. There was something elegant in its metal body, the smooth, oiled wooden stock. I knew, inherently, or maybe from school or parental warnings, that it was dangerous. Yet I watched entranced as Rug picked off tin cans with enviable ease.

I managed to sneak down to Rug's practice sessions for almost a week before he found out. I still remember his face as he lifted the tarp, expecting a crate, only to find me. His wide eyes were almost comical. But beyond his shock there was no reprimand, not even a disapproving glare. That evening I watched from what he deemed a safe distance instead of from over the top of a trailer side, deep breaths in time to the 'plink, plink, plink' of Rug's bullets toppling each can.

I begged to try after that. I doubled my workload, hastened my pace, making a show of reliability every time I passed by Rug. He refused every time, but with each whining session he became more and more weary. When I finally broke out with forced tears on my final day he gave in. We piled in the ute; he drove to the far end of the property, and I held my breath when he held the rifle before me. He showed me the proper way to hold it, the names of the parts, the boring things, the things I didn't want to know about. Then he handed it to me. I raised it to my shoulder, struggling all the way, the weight of it almost unbearable and yet somehow enticing. My breaths came raggedly. I shook the entire time – Rug had to support me when I tried to squeeze the trigger. Of course, my first shot, clumsy and desperate, didn't come an inch near Rug's sloppily drawn target. At the time I didn't care. The rifle was a magical thing and I was able to hold it. I forgot about the cows and the chickens and the stink and stood in the searing heat of that last summer day, repeating the echo of my first gunshot over and over in my head.

I spent the next few summers of my life with Rug. He taught; I listened. He told me his stories of rabbit chasing, then other anecdotes of his hunting group. Summers spent blistering while padding across sandy paddocks, a rifle and a gruff mate for company. Twilight sessions that passed with bated breath, waiting for a tell-tale twitch to tempt the trigger-hand. And all those stories, the objects of my dreams, were of rabbits. Always rabbits. Rug didn't care for the bigger catches, and I didn't know any better. I lived for those stories during the days I spent with Rug. I would repeat them in my head while I bumbled around the homestead, and they would circulate even when I was fast asleep. Rabbits would clamber and twitch in dreams, amalgamating into a mass of rippling fur. They would advance and I would stand my

ground, hands firm and steady as I set up the rifle. In the world of my dreams I was as accurate a shooter as Rug, perhaps even better, and each bullet would find its target without me even having to think. Each would fall, bloodless and painless, and collapse into a heap like ragdolls. And I would emerge victorious, a gold-medal hunter, and a sea of dead rabbits would stare back, offering my impassive reflection in their glittering eyes. Yet every morning I would wake and recognise the fruitlessness of my dream, my heart crushed by reality. I was a lousy shot, even with Rug's guiding hand. It would take years before I could shoot my first rabbit, and by then I was no longer dreaming of soft, sleeping fur.

But before then were the rules. Don't waste bullets. Don't rush. Pay attention. I rolled my eyes and grumbled affirmatives, thinking it all so obvious.

"This is the most dangerous thing you can give a person." He had said one night.

I was frustrated, and anxious to start, and Rug's warm face made seriousness hard to fathom.

"But it's not dangerous," I protested. "*I'm* not going to shoot you or anything. As if I could." I had twirled the rifle between my hands then, the memory of missing a rabbit by a mile still hovering over me.

"Doesn't matter. Any gun is dangerous," he replied. "Any gun. A gun is not a tamed creature. Not even the person holding it can say confidently that they have control of it. And it doesn't matter what you're shooting. Rabbit or person."

He lifted the rifle then, methodically, slowly. The barrel swung, inches from my face. The gunshot I heard then was unlike any other I had heard before, and still unlike any other I hear now. It exploded by my ear, violent and ugly. I forgot to breathe. I could taste gunshot residue on my tongue.

"I could have killed you."

Rug said this nonchalantly, in the same tone he had always used when he told me to close the door, or when he told me to have a good sleep. He kept the rifle at his shoulder, and stared at me. His eyes were dark, focussed. I felt small. A rabbit in the night. I remember thinking it was a blank. A risky plot to teach me a lesson. I remember stumbling over my apology, and spending the short ride back in silence.

It wasn't until much, much later, when I finally returned to that spot that I found the bullet hole. I stood before the tree for several moments, not breathing. The bullet had remained,

untouched, still whole. I dug it out with a pen knife. The wound left in the trunk was ugly, distorted, big. Dried sap dribbled a red path to the ground.

I still have that bullet, inside my desk drawer, behind the penknife. It rattles sometimes, like the padding of tiny rabbit feet, when I knock the desk. I try not to think about it.