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Skinned

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**content warning for graphic violence*

Mist hung heavy in the air, a blanket of dew spread upon the grass as the sun struggled to peer out from beneath the clouds. Sleep tugged at his eyelids, but the boy had no time to close his eyes as he struggled to keep up with his grandfather who cheerily shambled ahead of him. One foot went precariously in front of the other as his old body struggled to maintain balance on the uneven terrain of the forest. Their destination: the rabbit traps set up by the old man, a source of not only their next meal but an apparent cure for the boy's "weak spirit." He shuddered as he thought of the rabbit's fate, slinking behind his grandpa as prey would move in fear of being eaten.

"Ah-ha!" his grandpa chortled. He spun around with a rabbit helplessly wriggling in his grasp. Gasping at the sight, the boy felt his insides churn in tune with each desperate shake and twist of the rabbit. "Ah, come on now, just a bunny rabbit," and with that, his grandpa dragged his catch back to the camp. "You bring the other one. Ya gonna learn how to skin a rabbit tonight!" he chuckled as he swung the rabbit merrily. The boy turned his eyes back towards the trap, seeing another rabbit within. Bright white with red eyes, the rabbit huffed anxiously, its body puffing up and down rapidly as the boy approached it and picked up the cage. He felt his stomach drop.

A swift crack in the neck and the rabbit was dead. As the boy's grandpa hummed a merry tune to himself, he placed the rabbit's body on a cutting board and pinched above its back, promptly cutting a line at the end of its neck. He then flipped the rabbit over and cut on its stomach, the knife effortlessly slicing through the rabbit's skin, as the boy watched in terror and clutched the cage with his still-huffing rabbit. Unable to tear his eyes away, he held his breath as he watched his grandpa grab the rabbit's skin and peel it back, exposing a network of stringy muscles underneath, wet with blood and glistening in the setting sun. The rabbit's dead, glossed over eyes observed the boy carefully as his grandpa chopped off its head, still watching him as it rolled off the cutting board. Its body twisting unnaturally, it squirmed as it was cut open, shivered as its organs were scooped out in one smooth

motion; ropes of intestines slung out, reaching towards the end of the cutting board as if to escape. Chilly air crept into his lungs, the world a whirl of colors and shapes, before the boy passed out.

Only the fire illuminated their surroundings, dancing off every surface and eagerly pawing at the rabbit corpse roasting above it. He tried not to watch as the rabbit's body slowly spun over the fire, dancing along with the light. He thought of his rabbit sitting in the freezer, completely skinned and gutted by his grandfather, waiting for its time over the fire. A clink of silverware alerted him that the rabbit was nearly ready, and he swallowed the growing lump of fear in his throat in preparation for dinner.

He felt each chunk of meat glide past his tongue as he threw up in the privacy of the forest, hoping the sound didn't wake up his grandpa. The bile mixed in with the meat burned, and he felt the aftertaste rabbit on his tongue. As much as he had tried to sleep, he just couldn't rest with the knowledge that his rabbit was lying dead in a cooler. He had to at least give it a proper burial, and he'd turn over the cooler and spread some dirt around, so if his grandpa asked, he'd say that a wolf must have broken in. So with renewed resolve, he took a spare shirt, opened the cooler, and wrapped up his rabbit.

Treading carefully through the forest, avoiding every stick and leaf so as not to alert his presence to anything nearby, the boy continued on enveloped by the night. He wasn't sure what he was looking for exactly, other than somewhere far enough that his grandpa would never notice, and somewhere important-looking enough to constitute as a grave.

At last, he came upon a scarred and burnt tree, its branches twisted and bare of life, its roots scratching and gripping the ground as if it were hanging off of the edge of a cliff. A large hole decorated the front of the tree, wind howling through the opening as if it were screaming in intense pain. A shiver racked his body as he stood in the tree's presence, and glancing down at the crumpled lump of a t-shirt he held in his hands, the boy figured this was as good of a place as any to bury a body. It then suddenly dawned on him that he had neglected to bring a shovel, yet having no other options and desperately wanting to get the job over with, he chucked the rabbit into the hole of the tree.

All at once, a blanket of chilling sweat covered his neck, the hole in the tree howled like a wounded animal, and he felt a primal urge inside the pit of his stomach to run. It seemed like his body twisted around on its own, and before he knew it, he was sprinting back to the campsite, the forest around him an amalgamation of sounds. Skittering, clawing, howling, and the chattering of teeth, all of them desperately chasing him, at times getting close enough to graze his back or breathe on his neck.

He stole a look behind him, to give shape to the figure chasing him before he reached the safety of the campsite. He could only make out a mass of teeth chattering indistinctly and a pair of dead, glazed over eyes. Each tooth seemingly had a mind of its own, as they twisted and wriggled in a mouth indistinguishable from the darkness of the forest around it. Bulging eyes sized up the boy, as a predator does prey, with unnatural shuddering movements, twitching occasionally as if determining the right time to strike. The rest of the creature shifted unnaturally, barely illuminated by the moon as to where the boy couldn't tell where the creature ended or began. It seemed to collapse and twist within itself, spreading and contracting all at once.

The shock gripped his throat, and as he desperately tried to call out to his grandpa, a small squeal choked out of him instead. A dull thud rang through his ears as he realized his body had crumpled to the ground, completely paralyzed with fear. Chest heaving up and down, eyes wide and fearful, he laid helplessly watching as the indistinct figure shambled up to him.

A pinch at the back, a cut at the base of his neck, and the feeling of skin peeling from his body, blood sloshing onto the ground- he tried to scream. But no sound came out. Flipped onto his back, all he could hear was the slashing of his stomach and the chattering of teeth.