

Responsibility

by Rachael Needham

“There ya go, Biddy.” Luke said as he stepped back to admire his work.

“Can I go look?” I asked, my legs dangling from the countertop.

“Sure, go ‘head. I’m gonna go get ready.” He wiped the green and black paste off each finger with a wet rag. My bare feet smacked against the cold, white tiles, and I scurried down the narrow hall to the bathroom. I didn’t bother with the light switch; the bulbs above the mirror had died weeks ago. During the day we relied on the natural light that flowed through the window above the toilet. At night, we used our hands and memories to see.

Familiar brown eyes stared back at me from inside the mirror, a tan ring of naked skin framed them. The rest of my sun-stained skin was covered in thick, finger shaped, green and black streaks. The light from the window created shadows that made the smudges more ominous. I smiled at how much I resembled Luke like this.

My usual halo of brown frizz clung to the sticky paint. My face scrunched up from how much it itched. I took one last look at my new camouflage, then ran out to find my Grammy. Grammy sat in her usual spot on the porch, creaking back and forth in her rocking chair. Her cloudy eyes watched something in the distance, though I never could see what.

“Grammy,” I called, “Will you braid my hair?” She turned her gaze to me and gasped.

“Abigail Biddy Mathis!” Her hand pressed against her heart. “Good Lord, child. Go wash your face! You nearly scared the soul right outta me!”

“Sorry, sorry,” I giggled. “Me and Luke are goin’ deer huntin’. I can’t wash this off just yet.” I sat down in between her slippers and hugged my knees. “Please do my hair? It keeps

stickin' to my face." She sighed and ran her spotted, thin fingers through my tangles as she mumbled.

"Good Lord."

"Thank you, Grammy." She raked my hair into three bundles and began weaving them.

"I wish he wouldn't encourage these kinds of activities," she grumbled.

"Whadya mean?"

"I mean you're just barely a young lady. At thirteen you should be learnin' how to cook deer, not kill it. That's man's work." She twisted the braid around itself at the top of my neck. I felt her shove a bobby pin into my scalp. I assumed she took the pin out of her own white bun.

"You can show me how to cook it after I bring a big one home," I said.

"That ain't my point, Biddy. Lord, what would your daddy say if he knew how much of a tomboy his li'l girl is." Her points always had something to do with at least one of my parents, but it had no effect on me. In my dreams and memories, they were faceless.

"Well," I stood up and spun on my heel to face her. "If he ever comes back, I guess we'll find out." Her thin lips curved downward and I regretted my retort. "I love you very much, Grammy. Thank you for always doin' my hair." I blew her a kiss. She smiled and blew a kiss back.

"I love you, too, child."

The front, screen door squealed in protest as Luke swung it open. It slammed behind him. He was clad in heavy brown and green camouflage. In his left hand, he held a jacket identical to the one he wore. In his right were a pair of combat boots I knew would be too big for my feet.

“Put these on.” He tossed the boots in front of me. I leaned against the chipped, white porch railing and began unlacing them. They smelled pungent, like sour fruit and milk.

“Why do they smell so bad?” I gagged.

“That’s doe urine yer smellin’.”

“Oh good Lord,” Grammy grumbled behind me. Luke ignored her.

“Put it on yer boots and it covers yer scent,” he said. I didn’t question him and slipped on the oversized boots. After lacing them back up, Luke nodded and handed me the jacket. I held my breath.

“Does this have doe urine on it, too?”

“No,” his huge body shook as he chortled, “I put enough on the boots.” Grammy made a disgusted sound. Again, Luke ignored her. I slipped on the jacket, the fleece interior shielding me from the November chill. Luke looked me over and nodded in approval.

“Ya ready? I already put the guns in the Dodge.”

“Hell yeah! Let’s go!”

Grammy gasped, but I ran and climbed into the passenger seat before she could scold me. Instead, she turned on Luke.

“You bes’ take care of her,” her long finger wagged at him. “Brothers should protect their sisters ‘stead of corruptin’ them.”

“She’ll be safe, Grammy. She’s gotta learn sometime.” With one large step, he heaved himself into the truck and turned the key. Luke’s eyes focused on the road ahead. I waited for him to speak.

“Do I need to show ya how to use that gun, again?”

“Nope, I remember.” A week before, he had shown me how to aim, shoot, reload, and even clean the rifle he dubbed mine. I absorbed his lessons like a dry sponge. There was no way I could forget.

“Good.” He turned the steering wheel right. “I’m puttin’ ya in a tree stand on the edge of a clearing. It’s one of my favorite spots.”

“Where will you be?” My stomach churned at the thought of being alone.

“I won’t be far. Ya got yer cell on ya?” He glanced at me, then back at the road.

“Yeah I brought it.” I took the old flip phone out of my pocket.

“If anythin’ happens, ’specially if you get a deer, text me and I’ll come runnin’.” My nerves settled a bit. We fell silent again until we pulled onto a dirt road. Luke slowed to a stop on the edge of the path and parked. He reached into the back seat and grabbed our guns. He handed me my rifle, then pulled something out of his pocket. “Take this.” It was a jagged hunting knife with a beautiful, swirling design carved into the wooden handle. I took it, admiring how comfortable the handle fit in my small hand, and shoved it in between my undershirt and waistband. “Alright, let’s go. Quiet now. We gotta walk a ways, but deer got good ears.”

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