

"This is a wonderful novel. Original, suspenseful, funny, and profoundly moving. It's about family, community, the human bond with animals, and—oh yeah—spaceships. I am in awe of Yannick Murphy's achievement and I plan to recommend it to everyone I know." —Geraldine Brooks, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Caleb's Crossing*

A NOVEL

The  
Call



YANNICK MURPHY

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*The*  
**Call**



A Novel

YANNICK MURPHY

HARPER  PERENNIAL

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## Dedication

FOR JEFF, THE BEST MAN, FATHER, AND VETERINARIAN I KNOW, AND FOR OUR CHILDREN, WHO TAKE AFTER HIM IN SO MANY GOOD WAYS.

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# Fall

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**CALL:** A cow with her dead calf half-born.

**ACTION:** Put on boots and pulled dead calf out while standing in a field full of mud.

**RESULT:** Hind legs tore off from dead calf while I pulled. Head, forelegs, and torso are still inside the mother.

**THOUGHTS ON DRIVE HOME WHILE PASSING RED AND GOLD LEAVES ON MAPLE TREES:** Is there a nicer place to live?

**WHAT CHILDREN SAID TO ME WHEN I GOT HOME:** Hi, Pop.

**WHAT THE WIFE COOKED FOR DINNER:** Something mixed-up.

**CALL:** Old woman with minis needs bute paste.

**ACTION:** Drove to old woman's house, delivered bute paste. Pet minis. Learned their names—Molly, Netty, Sunny, and Storm.

**RESULT:** Minis are really cute.

**THOUGHTS ON DRIVE HOME:** Must bring children back here sometime to see the cute minis.

**WHAT CHILDREN SAID TO ME WHEN I GOT HOME:** Hi, Pop.

**WHAT THE WIFE COOKED FOR DINNER:** Steak and potatoes, no salad. She said, David, our salad days are over, it now being autumn and the garden bare except for wind-tossed fallen leaves.

**CALL:** Sick sheep.

**ACTION:** Visited sheep. Noticed they'd eaten all the thistle.

**RESULT:** Talked to owner, who is a composer, about classical music. Admired his tall barn beams. Advised owner to fence off thistle so sheep couldn't eat it. Sheep become sick from thistle.

**THOUGHTS ON DRIVE HOME:** Is time travel possible? Maybe time is not a thing. Because light takes a while to travel, what we're seeing is always in the past.

**WHAT THE WIFE COOKED FOR DINNER:** Breakfast.

**CALL:** Castrate draft horse.

**ACTION:** Pulled out emasculators, castrated draft horse.

**RESULT:** Draft horse bled buckets. Pooled around his hooves. Owner said she had never seen so much blood. It's okay, he's got a lot of blood, I said. She nodded. She braided the fringe on her poncho, watching the blood.

**THOUGHTS ON DRIVE HOME:** What's the point of a poncho if it doesn't cover your arms?

**WHAT THE WIFE COOKED FOR DINNER:** Nut loaf.

**WHAT I ATE FOR DINNER:** Not nut loaf.

**CALL:** Horse is colicking.

**ACTION:** Drove to farm dodging dry, brown leaves skating across the road because at first I thought they were mice or voles running to the safety of the other side. Gave horse Banamine. Watched him sweating. Watched him rolling on his stall floor. Watched owner cry. Just a few tears down a freckle cheek. Listened to horses in other stalls whinny, worried for the colicky horse.

**RESULT:** Stayed for hours, until night. Moon was full. Walked horse out to field by the apple tree. Gave him a shot to put him to sleep. Patted his neck. Left owner with her head by his head, not saying anything. Maybe just breathing in his last exhaled breath.

**THOUGHTS ON DRIVE HOME:** When I go I want to go in a field by an apple tree on a full-moon night.

**WHAT I SAW WHEN I PULLED UP TO THE HOUSE:** Bright lights in the sky, an object moving quickly back and forth. Not a plane.

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**WHAT I HEARD FROM CHILDREN WHEN I GOT HOME:** Gentle snoring.

**WHAT I HEARD FROM MY WIFE WHEN I GOT HOME:** Loud snoring.

**CALL:** Sheep with a cut from a fence.

**ACTION:** Drove to farm. Inspected sheep. Cut was old. Small white worms were crawling on it. Gave owner some antibiotic.

**RESULT:** Asked owner if he had seen the bright lights in the sky the night before. Owner shrugged. I got to bed, the owner said.

**THOUGHTS ON DRIVE HOME:** Since people have become used to seeing telephone wires and telephone poles everywhere, they can get used to seeing wind turbines everywhere. It's just a matter of getting used to something.

**CALL:** Alpaca down.

**ACTION:** Drove to farm. Remembered not to look alpaca in the eye.

**RESULT:** Looked alpaca in the eye by mistake. Got spit in the eye. Alpaca nice and angry now. Alpaca got up. Owner thankful. Handed me a rag that smelled like gasoline. I wiped my eye. Asked owner if he had seen the bright lights, the object moving back and forth in the sky the night before. The owner shook his head, he hadn't seen anything. The alpaca came to me and put his face in my face. I thought he was going to spit in my eye again, but he didn't. The owner laughed, looks like he's trying to tell you something, the owner said. Did the alpaca want to tell me he had seen the object in the sky?

**THOUGHTS ON DRIVE HOME:** I could have been an engineer or a fighter pilot.

**CALL:** A prepurchase examination on a Thoroughbred.

**ACTION:** Brought digital X-ray machine and performed a complete set of X-rays on horse in a barn with ducks, spaniels, and kittens walking about.

**RESULT:** Owner tried to give me a kitten to take home to the children. No, no, I said. We have two dogs. The dogs will love the cat, the owner said. How about a duck? the owner said. No, they shit liquid, I said. Yes, that's true, she said, but the eggs are golden.

**THOUGHTS ON RIDE HOME:** Chickens might be nice to have. The children could check for eggs every day. We could eat the eggs. Chickens don't shit liquid. This is the problem today, people don't know where their food comes from. My children will know where their food comes from.

**CALL:** A sheep needs its shots.

**ACTION:** Took bottles of vaccines and drew up shots.

**RESULT:** Old woman named Dorothy called the sheep to her. The sheep's name was Alice. Alice lived in the house with Dorothy. I'd let her live outside, but she's no bother inside, Dorothy said. Alice lay her head in Dorothy's lap. Go on, give the shot, Dorothy said. The sheep was very still while I gave the shot. She is like a dog, Dorothy said. I take her everywhere in my pickup. She waits for me until I get back from my errands. I took her into church one day. I showed the pastor. He made a remark about sheep. He said they were dumb. Go get Alice from the back of your pickup, my friend said, nudging me. I went to the parking lot and got Alice. I held the church doors open for her. She followed me down the aisle. She looked into people's faces as she walked. I'd like you to meet Alice, I said to the pastor. She looked him in the eyes. Now go on, I said. Read the part again in your sermon about how sheep are dumb, I said.

**THOUGHTS ON DRIVE HOME:** I know some people who will not look me in the eye.

**WHAT I SAW WHEN I PULLED UP TO THE HOUSE:** The object flying in the sky again. It seemed to circle

the house. More likely it was a drone the military used and remotely practiced with in our secluded woods, but still I could not help but think it was other-worldly, the way its lights flashed on and off, the way it flew so low, as if it wanted to see in our windows and check on what my family was doing felt that it knew me somehow.

**WHAT I FELT EVEN BEFORE I WALKED IN THE DOOR:** Warm. Even though it was cold outside, I already began to feel warm as I stepped onto the porch where the glass front door always seemed to be constantly steamed over from the exhaled breaths of my wife, my children, the dogs, and all the other creatures inside.

**WHAT CHILDREN SAID TO ME WHEN I GOT HOME:** Doesn't Alice pee and poop on the floor in the house?

**WHAT I SAID:** I suppose she does.

**WHAT THE WIFE COOKED FOR DINNER:** Omelets with green olives.

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID:** David, I don't want a sheep.

**CALL:** A cat.

**ACTION:** I told owner I don't do cats. The owner asked if I could do this one. The owner had shot the fisher-cats in his barn that had eaten half his chickens. Shoot the cat, I said, you have shot fisher-cats. You have done huge horses, why can't you just do a little house cat whose time has come? the owner said.

**RESULT:** I did the cat in the belly. I did not need to find a vein. I was paid in sausage and bacon.

**THOUGHTS ON DRIVE HOME:** This war we are in is a war we started to see how much we can take from another country. It was once not so easy for me to see it this way.

**WHAT THE CHILDREN SAID TO ME WHEN I GOT HOME:** Mom is not making dinner. Mom is sick on the couch.

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID TO ME WHEN I GOT HOME:** David, where's the gun? If you just shoot this side of my head, I'm sure it will get rid of my headache. Then Jen laid her head back on the easy chair where the sun was streaming in and the bright light on her face made her look porcelain-white.

**WHAT I COOKED FOR DINNER:** Bacon. Glorious fresh bacon given to me by the man who shot fisher-cats, not house cats. I showed my children how the bacon did not release injected water into the pan while it cooked because it was fresh bacon, good bacon. Bacon the way bacon should be.

**THOUGHTS WHILE TURNING BACON:** Why is it legal to inject meats with water? Why is it fair that the consumer has to pay extra money, per pound, for injected water?

**WHAT THE CHILDREN SAID:** Pop, don't burn the bacon.

**WHAT THE WIND SAID AT NIGHT:** I can blow down all your trees. I can make the walls of your house fall in.

**WHAT THE MORNING SAID:** I kept the wind at bay.

**THOUGHTS WHILE SHOWERING:** Deer season will be here soon. Already it is bear. We have heard the hunters and their bear dogs early on the weekend mornings barking, treeing bears. I will hunt first with a bow for deer this fall season. I will sit high up in a tree in a purchased stand that came with big labels telling me never to use it without wearing a safety harness. I will wear the safety harness. I will check it before I put it on. Are the straps worn? Is the buckle fastened securely? Are the deer gods on my side?

**WHAT MY SON SAID AT DINNER:** Aren't I hunting with you this fall? He had not hunted with me before, this would be his first time. He was twelve years old now and old enough to carry a gun. He knew the rules well. He had aced his hunter's exam. Gun tip pointed up or down when walking through the woods, never shoot at an animal on a hill, because you never know who might be on the other side of



the hill, open your chamber when passing your gun to someone and say, “action open, safety on” when you’re passing it.

**WHAT I SAID:** Yes, I suppose you’re ready to hunt with me now.

**WHAT MY SON SAID:** Yes! I can’t wait! and then he chanted, Kill the deer. Eat the meat! Kill the deer. Eat the meat! in time with holding his fork in his fist and banging his fist on the table, making me think maybe we should wait. Maybe he wasn’t ready to take a gun into the woods.

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID TO ME:** Be careful hunting, David. I don’t like it. He’s still so young. You only have one son, you know.

**WHAT I THOUGHT:** Maybe Jen is wrong, maybe there are other sons I have. Who knows if the sperm I once donated in college was ever used or simply thrown away after time? The money I received was spent on taking dates to restaurants I wouldn’t otherwise have been able to afford.

**WHAT I WOULD NEVER TELL THE WIFE:** That maybe she was wrong about me not having other sons, because if I told her then I would have to explain why I wanted the money. I would have to explain the other girls, and no matter that I didn’t know Jen then, she might become jealous.

**WHAT I SAID TO THE WIFE INSTEAD TO CHANGE THE SUBJECT:** Did you know that because light takes time to travel, what you’re seeing is always in the past?

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID:** I like that, it’s the world’s best excuse. The adage “Don’t cry over spilt milk” applies to everything then. It’s all in the past, there’s nothing we can change.

**WHAT I THOUGHT:** That I could tell Jen not to cry over spilt milk if ever she learned of how I had earned extra money in college and that somewhere in there was a pun she’d pick up on, the spilt milk of me somehow worked in.

**CALL:** No call. The phone rang and when I answered, whoever it was hung up. Hello, hello, I said and kept saying hello even after I knew they were gone.

**WHAT WE DID AFTER DINNER:** Put on sweaters to keep off the chill and went outside and called to the owls.

**WHAT THE OWLS DID:** Called back and then the spacecraft showed up again, its lights blinking faster than the last time, as if it were trying to sing out its own kind of call.

**CALL:** A choke.

**ACTION:** Touched the horse’s neck. I could feel the ball of food caught in his throat. This could be a tough one, I told Arthur, the hired hand. I gave the horse drugs to relax his throat muscles. I went to fill up buckets. I would need the water to pump through his stomach. I would need to clear the choke, put the tube through the horse’s nose. I asked Arthur, while I was working on the horse, if he had seen the object in the sky, if he had seen the bright lights a few nights before. Arthur, with one hand resting on the horse’s neck, looked up at the sky, as if the object I had been talking about could still be seen in all the blue. Arthur shook his head. No, didn’t see it, he said. I wasn’t out here. Only thing out here were the horses, Arthur said. You see it, Boss? he said into the ear of the horse I was working on, and while he said it he had the flat of his palm on the neck of the horse and I thought how maybe Arthur wasn’t doing the talking, that maybe it was the horse doing the talking for him.

A flock of geese came flying down to the pond. Arthur and I watched the geese, their feet out in a pose to brake, their wings not beating, coming down on water flat as glass on a windless day. Who knew geese could walk on water? Arthur said, his hand still on the horse.

**RESULT:** The drug worked quickly. The water went straight down. The choke had passed. I told Arthur that was good, otherwise we could have been there a long time and he would have heard my whole life story and I his.

**THOUGHTS ON DRIVE HOME:** What was Arthur’s life story? Did he ever have a wife? Kids? What was

my life story?

~~THIS IS WHAT I WANT ON MY TOMBSTONE: He loved his children.~~

**WHAT THE CHILDREN SAID WHEN I GOT HOME:** Pop, Mom's in one of her moods.

**WHAT THE WIFE WAS DOING:** Unloading the dishwasher, but doing it by slamming the pots onto their shelves.

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID:** Can't anyone else help to do this? Jen motioned with her arm, taking in the kitchen, the messy countertops, the food bits on the floor, pieces of carrots dried and turned white kicked up under the shelves. The books and papers on the table, the loud toy guns, the fishing reels needing line.

**WHAT THE CHILDREN DID:** Ran outside.

**WHAT I DID:** Ran outside.

**WHAT THE CHILDREN DID:** Climbed me.

**WHAT I SMELLED:** Their hair, a sweet smell and also an outdoors smell, the smell of fall's fallen leaves kicked up.

**CALL:** No call.

**ACTION:** Stayed at home.

**RESULT:** Wished the children were home with me, resented school for taking them away and teaching them nothing. They would learn more at home with me. I would teach them things I want to learn. Violin, German, the possibility of time travel.

**THOUGHTS WHILE WALKING THROUGH THE WOODS LOOKING FOR SPOTS TO RAISE DEER STAND:** When shooting the rifle, make sure the deer is moving, otherwise he will notice the safety releasing, he will bolt before you squeeze off the shot. Will I even see a buck this year?

**WHAT THE CHILDREN SAID TO ME WHEN I GOT HOME:** Pop, there was a moose in the back of the house!

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID:** A cow, not a bull.

**WHAT I SAID:** Everybody, let's go for a walk and see if we can see her again.

**WHAT WE CAME ACROSS:** Moose poop. Bear poop. Deer poop. Coyote poop. Fallen over rotting mushrooms that looked like loose poop.

**WHAT I POINTED OUT TO MY SON:** The barks of trees rubbed off by the antlers of deer. Flattened ferns where deer had lain.

**WHAT SAM SAID:** I cannot wait to hunt, the deer are all around us!

**WHAT WE DID:** Put our hands down on the flattened ferns to see if they were still warm and then we walked back home, avoiding breaking spanning cobwebs in our way.

**WHAT THE WIFE COOKED FOR DINNER:** Spaghetti with meat sauce, black olives, and mushrooms.

**WHAT MIA, MY YOUNGEST, MY SIX-YEAR-OLD, SAID TO ME BEFORE BEDTIME:** Poppy, I'm going to cold you up. Then she reached her cold hands up under my shirt and touched my back.

**WHAT SAM, MY OLDEST, MY TWELVE-YEAR-OLD, SHOWED ME BEFORE BEDTIME:** How to exhale when squeezing off a shot to avoid excessive movement and achieve the truest aim.

**WHAT SARAH, THE MIDDLE CHILD, MY TEN-YEAR-OLD, SAID TO ME:** Lyle got detention for throwing a pencil at Miss Ackerman when she turned her back.

**WHAT THE OWLS SAID AT NIGHT:** We are in every tree in a five-mile radius.

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID IN BED WHILE THE LIGHT OF THE FULL MOON CAME IN THROUGH THE WINDOW:** Somebody turn off that light.

**CALL:** A Dutch Warmblood needs teeth floated.

**ACTION:** Went to farm where horse is stabled. Brought out floats. Tried floating teeth without giving drug to the horse. Horse clearly needed drug. Drew up shot, injected horse.

**RESULT:** Was able to float horse's teeth, but the woman who owned the horse could talk a dog off a meat wagon, and I had to listen to her. ~~Funny how the horses like their teeth floated. Grinding down the back hooks, this horse closed his eyes; if he could purr he would. My arm was sore afterward, was the woman's mouth tired?~~ She talked of gardens and nematodes and the forecasts of the *Farmer's Almanac*.

**THOUGHTS ON DRIVE HOME:** This is where the horses live, in cozy barns, the pastures here still green, heron flies across, the cows all standing north to south, the attraction of the poles said to be the reason for their alignment.

**WHAT THE CHILDREN SAID TO ME WHEN I GOT HOME:** Pop, you smell like horse manure, and what's that on your upper arm?

**WHAT I SAID:** Why, that's horse saliva.

**WHAT THE WIFE COOKED FOR DINNER:** Pizza.

**WHAT KEPT ME AWAKE AT NIGHT:** Pizza.

**WHAT I LOOKED FOR OUT THE WINDOW WHILE I WAS AWAKE:** The bright lights, the object moving back and forth in the sky, but I didn't see it. I just saw the horizon and what looked to be the sun still setting, only it was the middle of the night and the sun was long gone. I wondered if what I was looking at was just the glow from the moon shining over our back field.

**CALL:** A one-inch-long curved laceration above the eyebrow on Sarah.

**ACTION:** Laid out a blanket and a pillow on kitchen table. Told her to lie down on them under the bright light. Blocked her, then began to suture.

**RESULT:** Sam took pictures with the camera, so close to her face I had to tell him to step back.

**WHAT MY WIFE SAID:** Maybe we should take her to a real doctor.

**WHAT I SAID:** I am a real doctor.

**WHAT MY WIFE SAID:** They have staples, they have glue these days at the emergency rooms. Maybe she won't scar as much with staples or glue, she said.

**WHAT I SAID:** A scar gives you character.

**WHAT SARAH SAID:** I want to go to the emergency room!

**WHAT SAM SAID:** I took eighty-six pictures; want to see?

**THOUGHTS WHILE WIFE COOKED DINNER:** We must buy a cow. The depression will be upon us soon. No one will be able to afford milk when it happens. Milk will be a thing of the past. And cheese, think of the cheese. We will make our own ice cream, we will no longer have to buy cartons of it from the supermarket, the ice cream whipped with air. Why are we paying for air? When the depression comes we will no longer be able to afford our property taxes. We must sell now, go live in a small house in the woods. We won't have a view. We won't be taxed for our view if we don't have one. We will not have a pond or a stream. We will not be taxed for them if we don't have them. We will continue to heat with wood. We will live off the grid. Our light will come from solar panels. Our woodstove will be our kitchen stove. We will never turn a knob to turn it on. There will always be heat on the range.

**WHAT I TOLD MY WIFE BEFORE BED:** Let's move to the woods.

**WHAT MY WIFE SAID:** We already live in the woods.

**WHAT I SAID:** No, the real woods, way back on the roads where the poles for electricity end.

**WHAT MY WIFE SAID:** I am not moving from here. I like our house. I like our pond. I like our fields.

**WHAT I SAID:** You will not have a choice. The calls will stop. People will stop treating their horses, and cows, and sheep. It will cost too much money to treat them. Even if the calls do not stop and I still get called to treat the horse or the cow or the sheep, the bill will not be paid. The people will not pay. Our taxes will continue to rise.

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID:** How did a bat get in here? Who left the front door open?

**WHAT THE BAT DID:** Flew low, over Jen's head in bed so that she had to bring the covers up over her head. It reminded me of the spacecraft. Why was everything flying so low? Why did everything want to be so close to us?

**WHAT I DID:** Opened up the window and let the bat out into the full-moon night. I could see the moon on the grass that was frosting. It reminded me of a Christmas bulb my mother used to put on the tree when I was a child. The bulb was frosted, sprayed on with something white and granular, something like snow.

**WHAT I THOUGHT:** Something is wrong when something in nature reminds you of something man-made. It should be the other way around. Is this the result of the human race having been around too long?

**THOUGHTS WHILE SHOWERING:** Maybe we don't need a milk cow, maybe we need cattle raised for beef. A milk cow you have to be at home twice a day to milk. Ah, but the good taste of fresh milk. Maybe we need both dairy and beef.

**WHAT THE CHILDREN SAID:** Pop, we don't have a barn.

**WHAT I DID:** I looked around for a place to put a barn. Too close to the house, you would be sorry in the summer for the flies. Too far you would be sorry in the winter, walking all the way across the snow and ice. Besides, put up a barn and they will tax you. They will count the added square footage. They will consider the property improvement. The cost of raising a barn and the added taxes and feeding the cattle the hay that is now so expensive will undermine the profit.

**WHAT THE WIFE COOKED FOR DINNER:** Steamed squash and rice.

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID:** I really could be a vegetarian. We would all be better off if we were. Who needs meat?

**WHAT I SAID:** All those dogs on the meat wagons.

**WHAT I THOUGHT:** I am one of those dogs.

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID AFTER DINNER:** Whose sneakers are these on the floor? Who left the butter out? Whose books are these? Whose sweater? Whose crumbs? Can't you clean up after yourselves? Don't leave a wet towel on your bed. Flush the toilet. Can't anyone flush the toilet? These papers will get ruined on the table in the kitchen. Do you want your papers ruined?

**WHAT THE CHILDREN DID:** Ran outside.

**WHAT I DID:** Ran outside. We went and looked for trees that would be good for raising my deer stand. There's a hill and ridge below where a stream runs through. There are game trails going down the ridge. There is already a wooden deer stand there someone put up long ago where Sam could hunt from while I hunted from my tree stand at the same time. This would be a good place for my stand. I thought I could use my stand for other things than hunting, too. I could stand in my stand at night and call to the owls. I could stand in my stand at night and look for the bright lights in the sky, the object moving quickly back and forth, but then I remembered there was a warning that came with my stand. The warning said never to strap yourself into the harness in darkness because you may make a mistake, you may not be able to see where your leg should be going through a loop. You could be strapped into nothing. Also, you may not see a rung as you're climbing up to the stand. Your footing will have no purchase. You will fall like a shot bird from a branch, head over heels to the forest floor heavily strewn with needles of pine.

**WHAT SAM DID:** Imitated me standing in the stand and falling out and landing with my head on a rock.

**WHAT MY DAUGHTERS DID:** Jumped on top of him as he lay with his head on the rock being me.

**WHAT I SAID:** Shhh, if you want to see something in the woods you have to be quiet.

**WHAT THE KIDS SAID ON THE WALK HOME:** Tell us about when you were young. Tell us about the time you hit that kid with a pipe by accident and he had to get five stitches. Tell us about the boy who died

after a hard rain in the culvert. Tell it to us again, they said, how he drowned, how the mother stood on the grass, holding her hand to her mouth, her legs giving way, her skirt darkening as she fell to the wet grass, as if she had peed herself, after hearing the news.

**WHAT I SAID:** Tell me instead what you did in school today.

**WHAT THE CHILDREN SAID:** Oh, today, some bad kids. Some older kids, they changed the words on the sign outside the school last night. You know the sign that says COME TO THE FALL BREAKFAST, that sign well they changed the letters and they made the school sign say COME TO THE FALL BOOB FEST.

**WHAT I SAID:** I would like to go to that Fest.

**WHAT THE CHILDREN SAID:** Oh, Poppy.

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID THE NEXT MORNING WHEN THE KIDS WERE AT SCHOOL:** David, have you scheduled your next exam?

**WHAT I SAID:** Not yet, Jen.

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID:** You should schedule it soon. What if your levels are high again? Then what will you do?

**WHAT I SAID:** Cut it out.

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID:** Cut it out.

**WHAT I SAID:** I like living. I'll cut it out to get rid of it all.

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID:** I knew we should have had more sex.

**WHAT I SAID:** Want to have sex?

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID:** Now?

**WHAT I SAID:** It could cure me. It can't hurt.

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID:** Pleased to oblige.

**WHAT THE KITCHEN ISLAND SAID:** This is not the usual pounding of dough being kneaded.

**WHAT FELT GOOD:** Her breasts. The sex.

**WHAT HURT AFTERWARD:** My dick.

**WHAT I SAID TO MY WIFE:** That was a bad angle.

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID:** I should have worn heels.

**WHAT I SAID:** I made it to the boob fest after all.

**WHAT THE WIFE DID:** Laughed, hit my shoulder.

**WHAT THE HOUSE SMELLED LIKE:** Anadama bread the wife was baking.

**WHAT WE ATE FOR LUNCH:** Anadama bread, butter, and jelly.

**WHAT WE ALL SAW FROM THE KITCHEN WINDOW WHEN THE CHILDREN CAME HOME:** A spikehorn, too young a buck for me to shoot, behind the house, eating apples fallen to the ground beneath the apple tree. The children were noisy, too noisy, fighting over binoculars. They almost scared the buck away. Sam pretended he was holding his rifle. Bam-bam, he said excitedly, shooting multiple times. I hit him in the chest hard with the back of my hand. Be quiet, I said. I didn't want him to act this way when we would really go out to hunt. It wasn't safe. He ran upstairs, starting to cry, and the moment he ran up, I was sorry, and I wished he'd come back down. I almost ran up after him, but just then the buck scraped the dirt on the hillside with his front hoof, then he turned and stood over where he had scraped and shook his tail, releasing secretions from his glands. He hardly chewed the apples. He mostly swallowed them whole. I could hear Sam upstairs. He was watching the buck from the bathroom window. He had stopped crying now, and I could see the buck lifting his head, listening to sounds coming from our house, from my son above me who shifted his weight on the slate tiled floor of the bathroom, who rested an arm on the top of the clothes washer, who wiped his nose, runny from crying, on his shirtsleeve. Tell no one at school that we have a buck on our land, I told the children.

Other hunters will want our buck if they hear, I said. The children nodded their heads.

~~WHAT THE CHILDREN DON'T KNOW: That their father may or may not need surgery.~~

**WHAT I DID INSTEAD OF MAKING A DOCTOR'S APPOINTMENT:** Cleared land by the stream. If the banks of the stream are cleared, the children can run to the stream, they can lay their bodies down beside it, watching the small trout as small as their hands swimming.

**CALL:** A colicking horse.

**ACTION:** Drove to farm during snow flurries. Directions from owner were to keep driving down a dirt road, and when you feel as if you've missed it and that you're in the middle of nowhere, then keep driving. Finally found the farm. Gave horse Buscopan, a new tranquilizer I had just ordered, to ease his pain. Decided to oil horse to relieve colic. Inserted tube inside his nostril and pumped the oil in. Stood talking to owner. She told me to guess what she had seen on her front lawn. I thought she would say the flying object with the bright lights. I thought I had found someone else who had seen what I had seen. Instead she said that one day her husband and her sons took their rifles and went hunting up on the hill behind the house. She could see them hiking up the hill through the window. But in the front yard, through the picture window, she noticed a huge twelve-point buck just standing and nibbling grass in the yard. She knew that if she opened a window to yell at her husband and her two sons to come back down the hill and shoot the buck, then the buck would take off and bound through the woods. She just sat in her chair in the living room and watched him through the picture window. He had a broad chest and a handsome head and when he lifted it every once in a while it seemed to her as if he could see her watching him from her easy chair.

It was then that the owner stopped talking and pointed to the floor of the barn by the horse's feet and said, Look at all that oil on the floor.

**RESULT:** A cold shiver ran up my spine. This is a horse doctor's worst nightmare, that you have inserted the stomach tube through his nose but you put it into his lungs instead of his stomach and now it's coming back out and you have just drowned the horse. You have just bought the horse. I was content listening to the owner talk about the big handsome buck in her front yard. I wanted to keep listening to her telling the story. For a moment, I was her in the nice easy chair positioned in front of the window with a view of the beautiful twelve-pointer lifting his head and looking me in the eyes and her husband and sons far away by now, up over the back of the hill and into the woods. But no, there was now this oil pooled at our feet and the horse with his head down so low it looked as if he would drink up the oil beneath him.

I checked the tube. I blew into it. There was no buildup of pressure. I was able to blow air through it. This was a relief. I knew then that I had not put the tube down the lungs instead of the stomach. It was the new tranquilizer, the Buscopan, that had relaxed the smooth muscles of the esophagus so much that when the horse lowered its head, the oil came out its nose. After a while, the horse seemed better. The symptoms of his colic subsided. I put my stethoscope to him and I could hear the sloshing sounds of his moving gut. He was breathing easier now. The owner wiped up the oil with a towel, and the place on the floor where the oil had been was now clean.

**THOUGHTS ON DRIVE HOME:** That was scary. That was not good for my levels. Calm your levels, I said to myself. Look how the sun is over the fading green lawns now, raked clean of October's falling leaves, and the sky is blue with passing clouds. The snow flurries are over.

**WHAT SAM SAID TO ME WHEN I GOT HOME:** Pop, they have given deer eye tests and they have found out what deer can and cannot see. They can see the camo that hunters wear. They roll their eyes at camo. They've invented a new kind of camo, it's not shaped like leaves or branches, it's like computer dots. The tiny pattern matches the colors of the woods, it looks the way the woods would feel to a deer. They learned how to do it from leopards and tigers. Leopards and tigers don't look like leaves or trees.

they have spots and stripes, but when the leopard runs or the tiger runs, their spots and stripes blend into the background.

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**WHAT I SAID:** Deer have entered the computer age? I myself have not mastered email.

**WHAT THE WIFE COOKED FOR DINNER:** Falafel.

**WHAT THE CHILDREN SAID:** Fal-awful.

**WHAT THE MORNING SAID:** The deer have already walked through here and you have missed them and next time you should wake up earlier. You should be out here before morning, before my fog has lifted, before the birds have sung.

**NUMBER OF DEER I SAW WHILE DEER HUNTING:** 0.

**NUMBER OF SQUIRRELS I SAW WHILE DEER HUNTING:** 6.

**NUMBER OF TIMES I WIPED MY HAND ON MY SLEEVE BECAUSE I WAS COLD AND MY NOSE WAS RUNNING:** 10.

**NUMBER OF THINGS I CAN TAKE TO HELP MY LEVELS GO DOWN:** 0. No vitamin A, B, C, D, or E can bring them back down.

**WHAT THE CHILDREN SAID TO ME WHEN I GOT HOME:** Hi, in German.

**WHAT I SAID:** Oh, my *lieblings*, you have been paying attention to your Poppy! German is a great language.

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID:** They should speak Spanish instead. So much of the world does.

**WHAT I SAID:** Do you really want to know what the Mexicans are saying? I'd rather know what the Germans are saying.

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID:** To the showers, *mach schnell*. That's what they said.

**WHAT I SAID:** No, no, they said that only during a fascist regime, but they also strived to do the best. Do the very best, they said. Make the very best, they said. That's what I want my children to learn, I said.

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID:** Maybe they should learn a little Buddhism. A little maybe it doesn't matter to be the best.

**WHAT I SAID:** Listen to the children. Hear them say let's race to the car. Let's race up the stairs. Let's race to the end of the field. Who can be the first to finish this book, that meal, brushing their teeth. This is what the children want, I said to my wife. They want to be the best.

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID:** Dinner? You and the children make your own. I'm sure it'll be the best.

**WHAT I COOKED:** Tomato soup and grilled cheese.

**CALL:** No call again, just the caller who hangs up. *Bist du krank?* I said to the caller, practicing my German. "Der Ozean ist blau. Die Maus ist grau." Who are you talking to? the wife and children said I put my hand on the mouthpiece, shhh, it is Merkel, she wants to know how I feel about health care. Then I took my hand off the mouthpiece and continued talking into the phone. "Ja, die Banane ist gelb."

**WHAT THE HOUSE SAID:** The house creaks and groans. The house of hemlock, pegged together, framed like a barn so our children can say they grew up in a barn. So they can say they grew up in a house that always sounded like it was coming apart.

**WHAT WE HEARD AT NIGHT:** Rifle shots.

**WHAT SAM DID:** He ran into our room and turned our light on. Pop, he said, I can see from my window they are jacking deer up the road. They are turning their cars into the field and catching deer in the headlights. They should be stopped, Sam said. It's unethical, he said.

**WHAT I SAID:** When did you learn that word? sitting up on my elbows and rubbing my eyes, "unethical"?

**WHAT SAM SAID WHILE STANDING IN THE DOORWAY IN HIS PLAID BOXERS:** Pop, I didn't take hours of hunter safety not to know what *unethical* means.

**WHAT I SAID:** Yes, I forgot. I am living with a walking talking hunter safety manual.

**WHAT I FELT:** ~~Sad for the deer. They had no chance frozen in the headlights.~~ All right to kill them by day, I mused. But it wasn't yet rifle season. Just coming on bow. What right have they got? I ranted. I shook my wife's shoulder.

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID:** Call the police.

**WHAT I DID:** I called the police. Not an emergency, I said right away. The warden came. He went on his hunt for the men who were probably crouching by their dead deer in the woods, slitting it open. The warden would find them. He would arrest them. Go back to bed, I told Sam. I hope they didn't shoot the buck I am going to shoot when it's rifle season, that wouldn't be fair, he said, and then he stomped back to his room and slammed the door shut, only because every door he shut was slammed and every floor he walked across was stomped across because he did not know the meaning of quiet and I wondered if he would really be able to be quiet enough this year in the woods to shoot a deer or if I should wait to take him out next year when maybe he would be more Indian, more light of foot and aware of how to stop his body from crashing against boughs of pine and treading noisily over fallen leaves.

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID:** Can we go to sleep now? Close the window. It's cold.

**WHAT I SAID:** Leave the window, Jen. I want to hear for their cars. I want to hear if there are more rifle shots and tires rolling on the dirt road and car engines. I am attuned to those sounds now. They make the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

**WHAT I HEARD WITH THE WINDOW OPEN:** A whir. Could it be the spacecraft? I opened up the screen and craned my neck to look out the window. It was the spacecraft. It wasn't circling the house this time. Instead it was hovering above it. It stayed that way for a while, and then it quickly sailed away, as if answering to the call of someone else far out in the universe.

**WHAT THE WIFE COOKED FOR DINNER:** She didn't. We went out. Her idea, not mine. Chinese in what used to be a train car. Sam ordered underwater conference. He picked up a shrimp and a scallop off the platter. How do you do? he said, holding the shrimp so it faced the scallop and moving the shrimp up and down, as if it were talking. Sarah, my Sarah, fell in love with crab Rangoon. Mia learned from her place setting that she was a horse.

**CALL:** A Belgian cannot breathe.

**ACTION:** Incised the horse's trachea, looked around for a tube of some sort to put into the trachea to maintain an airway. Asked owner if she had a plastic gallon milk container. Cut off handle of milk container, inserted it into horse's incision.

**RESULT:** Belgian started to breathe.

**WHAT THE OWNER ASKED:** How long do I keep the handle in the horse?

**WHAT I SAID:** Forever.

**WHAT THE OWNER DID:** She was short. She was probably eye level with the incision and the handle of the milk container sticking out. She could see the wet skin around the horse's neck where I had dunked a towel in water and wiped the blood away. She could see how even though we had rinsed out the milk jug, we did not have time to wash it, and there was still a bit of white watery fluid inside the handle. She nodded. The horse lowered his head toward her and then she put her forehead right against the white star he had there.

**THOUGHTS ON DRIVE HOME:** Leaves are just mini solar panels. The leaves positioned all around the tree's trunk catching optimum rays all throughout the day. Photosynthesizing all day long. What if you designed a solar panel that looked like a tree? Why can't you plug in a tree? Don't they sell science kits to kids where you can plug wires into a potato and run a watch? Why not plug into a tree?

**WHAT THE KIDS SAID TO ME WHEN I GOT HOME:** And oranges, you can plug in an orange and run a



watch, too.

**WHAT THE WIFE COOKED:** Carrot soup.

**WHAT WE SAID:** What else is there to eat?

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID:** What do you mean what else? She shook her head and looked at us trying to understand.

**WHAT I COOKED:** Fried eggs and bacon and peanut butter and mayonnaise and lettuce and tomato sandwiches made with toasted bread.

**WHAT I SAID TO SAM WHILE I COOKED:** Sam, are you ready for youth deer weekend tomorrow?

**WHAT SAM SAID:** My Mauser and I are ready.

**WHAT I THOUGHT:** What a lucky boy to already have an attachment to his hunting rifle, as well he should, it being a German Mauser that belonged to his grandfather.

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID:** Don't wake me up in the morning.

**WHAT SARAH AND MIA DID:** Ran outside.

**WHAT SARAH SAID:** I'm going to barf.

**WHAT MIA SAID:** I'm going to barf.

**WHAT THEY DID:** Barfed. One in the driveway, one in the flower bed.

**WHAT I DID IN THE MORNING:** Woke the wife up, looking for pants that would keep out the rain while I hunted with Sam.

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID:** Fuck, do you have to fucking wake me up in the morning? Can't you find your own fucking pants? How old are you, anyway?

**CALL:** My son. I can't get to him fast enough. He has fallen from the wooden tree stand on our property. The stand is an old stand whose supports are wooden boards nailed into branches of maples growing close together. This is not the stand I have purchased with the warning labels all over it. This is a stand that has been on our property for years. This is a stand that you climb up to by stepping on slats of gray worn wood nailed with nails now rusty, into the tree. This is a stand where there's a milk crate sitting on its rotting platform, and you sit on the milk crate and you wait for your buck to come out and show his face while you notice how sore you are from sitting on hard plastic for so long.

**ACTION:** From my store-bought tree stand set up fifty yards away, I see him fall. I see him and I do what every hunter safety manual would tell me not to do—I throw my rifle to the ground beneath me so that I can go down the footholds more easily and quickly, but nothing is quick with all the gear on me. I am a tangle of canvas straps and plastic buckles that are fastened around my legs and by my crotch. My son is on the leaves, the rain has stopped but now there is a brisk wind, the leaves have already blown over him and there is a bright yellow one on his cheek, as he lies still, his eyes closed. Oh, Christ. There is no bute or Banamine or injection I can give him. There is nothing I can do. There was another hunter in the woods. He was not out for deer. He hunted with a shotgun, firing off into the sky at the grouse he had flushed while walking through our woods. These two seasons overlap, grouse and deer. My son fell twelve feet, on his head. He fell from the force of the shot hitting his shoulder. I did not see the hunter. The hunter is gone now, the grouse in more northern woods where I have seen some cedar waxwings also head, and my son is unconscious with gunshot peppering the flesh of his shoulder. I can see the holes in the cloth of his coat, and the goose feathers sticking out from them, wavering in the wind.

I look around. Where is the hunter? Where the hell is he? But I do not hear anyone coming toward me through the fallen leaves. It's quiet now, except for the sound of a squirrel chattering at me from a few trees away. I put my son over my shoulders in a fireman's carry. I am surprised how fast I can run down the hillside and back to our house. I am surprised the door is already open to our house. Did the house know what happened and was it ready and waiting for me? There is no one else home.

put Sam on the kitchen table. He is breathing, but he is not awake. I take off his coat and wrap towels around his wound. There is blood, but not a lot of it. There are leaves on the table, too, from when I scooped him up to carry him home and the leaves are mixed with the mail, the bill from the gas company and the catalog from a store that sells seeds and tulip bulbs for spring.

An ambulance isn't smart, not where we live anyway. What is smart is if I put him in the backseat of the truck and drive him to the hospital myself. I will get there that much faster.

On the windy back roads, I reach out behind me, only one hand on the wheel. I make sure he's not going to slide off the seat and onto the floor, I am driving so fast. I drive fast past the Bunny Hutch preschool, even though there are signs everywhere telling me to slow down, telling me there are children at play.

**RESULT:** My son is being cut out of his camouflage clothes by nurses and I'm standing beside him, my canvas straps from my tree stand safety harness dangling on the hospital floor. I have not had time to take it off, and if I did, I do not know where I would put it. There are no hooks on the wall for coats, nor for the safety harness of a deer-hunting tree stand. He is scanned and there is no sign of brain damage. And a coma, the doctor says, can be, and he knew it sounded strange, not such a serious thing. The body has the opportunity to rest, the doctor says, and on the Glasgow scale, he's scoring high, the doctor says. His chances are good. Ah, the Glasgow scale, I say and look at my son. His face appears pale and yellow, and I wonder if the yellow fallen leaf that had lain on his cheek had somehow left some of its yellow color on his skin, and what comes to mind is the way my girls have played with dandelion flowers, rubbing them on their cheeks because they said the yellow dust was like their mother's blush.

The gunshot is taken out while I sit in the waiting room, head in my hands, thinking of calling my Jen, then thinking to wait until I know more, until maybe he wakes up from his coma and I can tell how he's better now, how he was unconscious, but that's over. I look up. People walk by, a few men in camo. Is one of them the hunter? I think. I feel the blood rush to my face. Is one of them the one who mistook my son for a bird? Has he come to inquire about my son? Has he come to tell me he's sorry? But these men have not just come from hunting. They are only wearing fashionable camo-patterned pants that are more the weight of jeans than the heavy cloth of real hunting pants that are double-lined and meant to walk through sharp briar and meddlesome branches of pine. The men are wearing sneakers and short sleeves and in the brief moment they walk by me I can smell cigarette smoke on them. They have come from someplace inside and not from the woods. The man who shot my son is not here. The man who shot my son is probably home by now, removing his boots, the dirt from my land falling from the soles to his mudroom floor, his wife inquiring about his luck with game bird. The man who shot my son probably just up the road from where I live and too afraid to come to my door and tell me what he's done.

**CALL:** An owner needs a health certificate for his horse to travel to North Carolina. I do not respond to the call.

**CALL:** An owner's horse has a spot of fungus on the pastern. I do not respond to the call.

**CALL:** An owner's horse has a navicular cyst. I do not respond to the call.

**CALL:** Jen wants to know where we are. Why is there blood on the table? she says in the same breath and in the background I can hear her pacing in our kitchen, walking across the loose floorboard that squeaks by the kitchen sink. It is a floorboard that is turning black from water sliding off the counter when dishes are washed, and pooling on the floor.

**ACTION:** There wasn't much blood, I tell her. The hunter was a bad shot, he only hit Sam's shoulder. Thank God, Jen says. I can hear her sigh over the phone and I almost feel the warm breath of it coming through, or is that just my own breath coming back to me that I breathed into the phone? She is on her way, of course, even after I have told her I would stay with him. Even after I told her he would be fine.

I go down to the lower level. It is more like a mall. There are shops where I can hear the coffee machines at work, spraying lattes into cups. There are shops that sell baby clothes and there are shop sporting holiday decorations early, white ceramic polar bears hanging by ribbons on the branches of fake trees. The polar bears look smooth and polished, as if they had been tumbled by waves for years at an ocean's pebbly shore. I have an urge to buy something for Sam. I could buy him a Rapidograph. There is one in a stationery store's window. I'd like to see the fine lines he could draw with it. I can see him drawing a submarine, the periscope bending like a goose's neck, observing all there is to see across the sketchbook page.

**WHO I SEE IN THE LOWER LEVEL:** My own doctor wearing a breast cancer pin buying a Jamba Juice.

**WHO DOESN'T SEE ME:** My own doctor buying a Jamba Juice.

**RESULT:** Jen has come and she is with me by his bed now and she is yelling at me. She is telling me she will never forgive me for having done this to our son, our only son. How could you? She's holding my son's hand while she is yelling and I think maybe she is like Arthur the farmhand and all she has to do is put her hand on my son and he will talk through her and my son is yelling at me now. How could you? she yells. I am sorry I said that, she then says and she goes to me so that I can hold her. I am so sorry, I say. I can smell the scent of our Newfoundlands in her hair, and I think how before she saw the blood on the table she must have greeted the dogs and bent down low and hugged Bruce or Nelly, and her hair must have fallen across the dogs' fur. I tell her what the doctor said, that sometimes, not always, the coma can be not such a bad thing. I tell her about the Glasgow scale, how high he's scoring on it and how good that is. Oh, really? she says. She shakes her head. She looks down at our son. She puts her hand on his forehead, as if he were sick with the flu and she was feeling for a fever. She bends closer to him, breathing in different places on his face. It wasn't enough to get shot? she says, and it's to our son she is talking.

**WHAT I DON'T TELL HER:** That I will find a way to get the hunter who shot our son.

**WHAT THE DOCTOR SAYS AFTER WE HAVE STAYED THERE TWO NIGHTS:** Go home and sleep. Think of your son as sleeping, too. Go home to your other children. Explain to them what has happened. It's the best you can do.

**WHAT SARAH SAYS:** Sam likes to sleep. I bet he's happy.

**WHAT THE SHERIFF WHO IS ON THE CASE SAYS AFTER HE HAS COME BACK FROM SEARCHING OUR WOODS:** Traces of the man are not to be found.

**WHAT MY WIFE DOES:** Sits up in bed all night with the light on, not even reading.

**WHAT I DO:** Read the paper.

**WHAT THE WIFE ASKS:** How can you read the paper?

**WHAT I SAY:** I can't do anything else. You could so, she says. You're right, I could go out, I say. I get my clothes on and grab a flashlight. I tell her I want to find my rifle that I dropped beneath my store-bought tree stand. What I really want to do is find traces of the man who shot my son that the sheriff, when he came back from his investigation in our woods, said were not to be found. I want to run through the night hitting every branch as I go, kicking up every leaf, punching my fist into the stone-hard bark of all the fifty-foot pines that bore witness, that all saw the man who shot my son, but that cannot speak to tell me his name.

**WHAT THE NIGHT SAYS:** Go home. There are no clues here, no flattened leaves holding the shape of a boot of a hunter. No evidence, even, of the plate-sized footprints of the half-ton moose that has traveled here before. Your rifle will still be on the ground in the morning.

**WHAT THE COYOTES SAY:** You have crossed over to where we live and now our howls could be the howls of your own heart you are hearing, or just us, our coats slightly ruffed from the November chill.

**WHAT I DO WITH THE FLASHLIGHT:** Point it on my son's tree stand, point it on the plastic milk crate,

point it at the ground where I found him, point it on the ground where the hunter probably stood who shot him but there is nothing to see, no telltale impression of a hunter's boot in the fallen leaves. I turn and walk to my own tree stand and find my rifle that I only notice because the tip of the barrel is not completely covered in leaves, and it is as if in the time since my son had been shot the leaves were trying to cover up some kind of disgrace, as if it were my rifle that was responsible for the harm done to my son, and the leaves like so many hands of creatures or fairies that live on our land would make the earth swallow it down. I pick up my rifle and head home, the howls of the coyotes flanking either side of me as if they were providing some kind of corridor leading me straight to my home and back to my bed.

**CALL:** In the morning, a bread machine that needs the belt reattached.

**ACTION:** Told the wife I could do it. Set bread machine on kitchen table. Unscrewed all the screws in the bread machine. (Number of screws: 62.)

**RESULT:** Reattached the belt. Screwed back in 60 screws. Two disappeared.

**THOUGHTS WHILE WALKING WITH BREAD MACHINE FROM TABLE TO COUNTER TO PLUG IN BREAD MACHINE:** It's winter. Snow is falling outside the window. We are living in a snow globe. If there had been snow on the ground at the time my son was shot, the footprints of the hunter who shot him would still be in the snow, but there was no snow and the ground did not hold a man's boot print.

**WHAT THE GIRLS SAID WHEN THEY CAME HOME:** What's that burning smell?

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID:** Look at the floor! Take off your boots!

**WHAT SMELLED LIKE SOMETHING BURNING WHEN IT SHOULD HAVE SMELLED LIKE BREAD BAKING:** The bread machine, whose paddles were not turning because the rubber belt had once again slipped.

**WHAT THE RADIO SAID:** Beep-de-dah-beep-de-dah-beep-beep-beep.

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID TO THE GIRLS:** I am getting a transmission.

**WHAT I THOUGHT:** My wife can save us all. She can save me. She can save our son. She can take us up in her spacecraft. Our son will awaken in the spacecraft and my wife will rub a window clear for him to see down below to our fields covered in frost. She will point out how places in the field hit with morning sun have already melted, and the dead grass showing through is as tawny as the hides of lions on African land.



## Winter

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**WHAT WE DO:** Visit Sam whenever we can. I sit beside his bed. I bring magazines and newspapers as if I were going on a trip and knew I would need something to read. When I'm done reading them I leave them on the bed and when Jen sits down next to him she becomes angry, pulling out the newspapers and magazines from underneath her and around her, throwing them onto the floor, their pages spreading, catching air, coming down for a slow landing like the geese on Arthur's pond. Can't you put them away? she says. I gather them up and keep them in a stack beside his bed and tell the day nurse not to throw them away. Who knows, I say, if there is an article in one of them I missed. Sam is pale and Jen puts her hand on his cheek and rubs it and I wonder if she's trying to give his face some color. When Sarah and Mia come they play beneath his bed, creating a fort with his blanket and his sheet, exposing him where he lies dressed in a hospital gown. Don't, he'll get cold, Jen says and tries dismantling the walls of their fort, but they protest. "It's hot in here! I'm burning up!" they cry, and it's true, the hospital is overheated. "Let them, it's okay," I say to Jen and she nods her head, letting Sarah and Mia play beneath his bed, every once in a while hitting a hanging blanket, making the blanket move, making it look like just maybe it's Sam doing the moving himself.

**THOUGHTS ON DRIVE HOME:** My hands are cracking again in this dry weather and I must rub them with Silvadene tonight and wear some gloves to keep them from cracking and bleeding further. I must order more vaccine because I am running low on vaccine. I must teach the children some German. We have not picked up our books in days. I must turn on the German language CD to listen to while driving in my car. The woman on the CD is named Gisela. I have listened to Gisela for months now in her dialogues. Gisela is my good *Freundin*. I wonder if I would be able to understand another woman so well as Gisela. Gisela, on the CD, has let Jürgen know her telephone number. I now know Gisela's phone number, too.

**WHAT GISELA SAYS WHILE I AM DRIVING HOME FROM A CALL:** Where is an apothecary? I'd like to purchase some aspirin.

**WHAT I PASS ON THE ROAD:** A diner, a bowling alley, a car dealer, a tax-preparation office. Gisela doesn't need these things. What Gisela needs is an apothecary. I must find one for Gisela. Gisela feels *krank*. Gisela would like to remove her *Kopf* from her shoulders and take a break from it. It is causing her so much pain.

**WHAT I NEED TO DO:** Order more vaccine. You would think West Nile virus runs rampant through these parts the way I need to vaccinate for it, and maybe it does. Little Egypt, the town, is only a few hours south of here.

**WHAT GISELA SAYS:** I also need to find the butcher's. Do you know where one is?

**CALL:** An old horse that needs to be put down.

**ACTION:** Had owner walk horse over alongside the wide deep grave dug with a tractor. While the horse walked alongside his grave, one of his feet slipped. He almost fell in. I gave the shot. He did not go down. I had to give more. Finally he went down. He fell on his knees, his head in between them. His eyes not so glassy, his eyes looking like he still could see.

**WHAT THE OWNER SAID:** How do you get him in the hole?

**RESULT:** Watch, I told the owner. I tipped the horse. He flipped. He fell into the hole sitting up. His head facing forward, his head propped up by the wall of dirt.

**WHAT THE OWNER SAID:** Is it all right to bury him that way? Shouldn't he be down flat? Isn't his head even after it's covered with dirt, too close to the surface?

**WHAT I DID:** I shook my head. There was nothing going to dig up that horse's grave. That horse, with his wise look, would frighten any other animal away.

**THOUGHTS ON RIDE HOME:** It might happen again. A fascist leader might rise to power here. It might even be a woman. How ironic. Everyone happy to see a woman finally in power, only it comes at a time when the country is broke and the woman is a fascist, her ideals appealing to an economically battered public. Who can say it won't happen? Who will save our country? Who will fight for the good? Who will fight Hitlerina?

**WHAT THE WIFE COOKED FOR DINNER:** Pulled pork on a bun.

**WHAT I HEARD IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT:** A whinny. A horse lost down our road. At first it sounded like an owl or a coyote, or even, Jen said, the sound of Sam crying.

**WHAT I TOLD HER:** All the way from the hospital we would not be able to hear our son cry.

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID:** Maybe the horse is injured. Maybe it's his levels. At least he knows when to see the doctor. Have you made your appointment yet?

**WHAT I SAID:** That's not the whinny of an injured horse. He's just calling to see if anyone's around. He will find his way home at daybreak. A smart horse doesn't travel at night when he might trip and break his leg when he can't see.

**WHAT I DID:** I turned on the light in our bedroom for the horse.

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID:** You're leaving a light on for a horse?

**WHAT I SAID:** He's just like us. He gets scared in the dark.

**WHAT THE WIFE DID:** She nodded. All right, leave the light on for him, she said. I hope they leave a light on for Sam in the middle of the night. I don't want him waking up in the dark, she said.

**WHAT I SAID:** Don't worry about the light in the hospital. That place is lit up like an airport. The lights stay on all night.

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID:** Yes, only too bad he's not going anywhere, too bad he's not getting on a plane. Too bad we are not going to some faraway place with a beach and a bar.

**WHAT THE WIFE DID:** Fell back to sleep. The flies buzzed. We have flies that winter over in our house. They swarm into the corners of the windows. They fly around the bulb in the lamp that is on. They are noisy. Some die every day, falling from the corners of the rafters and the windows and onto our bed. We shake out the top cover at night before we go to sleep so that they land on the floor instead. Sometimes, while we are sleeping, we are awakened by a dead one falling on our face. I fell back to sleep, too, by the sound, the buzzing lullaby.

**HOW SAM WAS LYING DOWN:** On his side. The day nurse moved him.

**WHAT THE WIFE WANTED TO KNOW:** Why she turned him so that he faced the door, and why didn't she turn him so that he faced the window. "At least the trees beyond the parking lot are something to look at," she said.

**WHAT THE STATE TROOPER SAID:** We've asked around, but if you didn't see the man who shot your son then we have no lead. Unless your son had enemies, it was obviously an accident. He's okay, isn't he? The gunshot was just to the shoulder, right?

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID:** In a coma is not okay.

**CALL:** Another horse to put down.

**ACTION:** Put the horse down. The owner could talk German. The owner listened to me say a few German words. The owner corrected my accent while the horse fell to his knees.

**RESULT:** I worked on pronouncing *Strasse*, *fleissig*, and *Goebbels*. *Goebbels* is really difficult to say. We easily tipped the horse into the hole. He went in facedown, his knees bent as if he were in the middle of trying to dig with his hooves an even deeper hole in the ground.

**THOUGHTS ON DRIVE HOME:** How do you say "Fuck the fucker who shot my son" in German? The only curse word I know in German is *Scheisse*. I need to learn more German curse words. I need to learn "fuck." Then I can say "Fuck the fucker," instead of just knowing how to say *Scheisse*.

**WHAT I DID WHEN I GOT HOME:** Went to my tree stand. I checked the straps to make sure they were

secure. I attached my bow to a long string and I set the bow on the ground and then I climbed up the deer stand with the end of the rope attached to my harness. When I was in my stand I pulled up my bow. I loaded my arrow. Then I stood. My ears turned on. The first thing I heard was my stomach gurgling. The second thing I heard was the wind blowing through what few leaves were left in the top of the trees. I heard small birds, nuthatches, flitting under the fallen leaves, covered in light snow. I heard cars, far off, driving on the road. But I couldn't tell if they were coming or going. I heard a dog barking that did not sound like any dog I knew. Then it was quiet. Now was the time for a deer to walk past me. No deer did.

**THOUGHTS WHILE DEER HUNTING:** You may have to be really smart to kill a deer. Where are my antlers to clatter and call the deer in? Where is my doe urine? My grunt call made of plastic in the shape of a tube? My scent-lock coat? My milk jug to piss in so my own urine smell won't be carried in the wind? My camo made of millions of tiny computer dots?

**WHAT SARAH AND MIA SAID WHEN I GOT HOME:** Did you shoot any deer?

**WHAT I SAID:** Deer is not for dinner.

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID:** Good, I could really go for some stir-fry anyway.

**WHAT I TOLD THE WIFE THAT NIGHT IN BED BECAUSE SHE WAS CRYING:** I love you.

**WHAT THE WIFE SAID, STOPPING HER CRYING:** What's the matter? What hurts? We laughed. Hers is not a tinkly one, nor is it heavy or gravelly or deep. It is more like a grunt, first an inhalation, then an exhalation along with the sound of her voice, not high or low. What would the deer think of it? Could her laugh call them in? Could we both fit standing on the tree stand? Maybe if we were entwined. Her laugh my call that bags a prize buck?

**WHAT THE WIFE DOES:** Moves Sam herself so that he is facing the window, but she needs help. It is not easy. There are tubes to contend with. There is the slit in the back of his hospital gown now open, now exposing him to whoever walks in the door. We do it together, moving him, and he feels so much lighter than the last time I carried him, which was after he was shot and I held him in a fireman's carry down the hill. Sarah and Mia, seeing him exposed, dismantle their fort themselves and give back his blankets. Sarah tucks the blanket around his feet and underneath his body so that now he looks like a pale blue cocoon.

**CALL:** A horse with a lameness.

**ACTION:** Drove to farm. The poorest farm I have seen so far. Looked at horse. Spoke to owner. There was nowhere to sit outside. There were no lawn chairs, no typical rock walls. The owner's boy sat on the rusted seat of a tractor that did not look like it could move but grew up from the ground where it was, pushing itself through the dirt, and had come to rest. Tall grass grew up high alongside its tires, past the height of the wheel wells. The woman owner sat, too, she sat in the driver's seat of a compact car. She sat sideways in the seat with her legs and knees facing me and the door open. One of the tires of the car was a spare, not meant to be driven on for long, but of course it had been, and it looked bald. These were the only places to sit. Maybe there were places to sit inside the house, but I could not see through the windows. The panes of the windows were missing and in their places were sheets of milk-colored plastic stapled to the frames.

**RESULT:** After I felt the horse's leg, I told the owner about the heat. I told her she would do well to stand the horse's leg in a bucket of ice water. The woman shook her head. "No ice," she said. "Isn't that right?" she said to her son. Her son shook his head, one hand on the steering wheel of the tractor, his sweater sleeves pulled up to his elbows, his arms streaked with dirt, as if he were the one who had driven the tractor up from the center of the earth, as if he did it every day and in a minute he would tunnel back down in his tractor and he would come back holding up a bag of ice, the outside of the bag covered in dirt, but nonetheless ice, because he seemed like the Artful Dodger out of *Oliver Twist*. He could obtain anything his heart desired, and it didn't matter what methods he used to get it. He was



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