

The Sledge.

Go and get me the hand-sledge, said my father, pulling the hind legs of a deer carcass off the end of the trailer. A pool of dark blood trailed behind the body.

The fur along its neck looked red and stiff. It wasn't the first time I'd seen my father skin a deer.

I skipped over the loose step on the side-door of the garage and bolted up towards the brick shed where my father kept most of his tools.

I slipped underneath the front wheel of the John Deere, bending over to keep my back straight underneath the drive shaft. Maneuvering through the mess of old tractor parts and discarded shop equipment was like wading through the jungles of Rio de Janeiro. I knew about Rio de Janeiro from Little Frank, the white-haired man who lived next door.

It was where he lost his temperament, he said, and got the tattoo of a dancing woman on his arm. I thought he might be a criminal, so sometimes I stole tools out of his garage to practice my detective skills.

I found the hand-sledge lying flat underneath the rusted casing of a bench-top grinder. Upright the handle stood as tall as my shoulders and the hammer weighed more than my head. It took most of my strength to work the sledge around the tool bench and out past the tractor. Instead of carrying it through the hot gravel of the driveway, I went around back through the grass. The enormity of the sledge, its weight alone, offset my balance, and I imagined I was dragging a stiff body down the slope of our backyard.

Curty helped my father hoist a chain around the rafter in the back garage and pulled the deer to a standing position. Its chest cavity hung wide open with a single cut running the length of its abdomen. Its eyes were glossy and the tongue slid out beyond a snarled lip, exposing a set of the whitest teeth I'd ever seen.

The deer had been dead for most of the day and I wondered what it felt like to be swinging on that chain.

My father looked at me and then the sledge I was leaning on.

God-dammit. I wanted a god-damn mallet. I don't need the full sledge. Take it back and bring the hand sledge, he said. He turned, picked up a flat-butted knife, and walked over to the deer carcass. Jesus Christ, boy's seven years old and doesn't know the difference between a mallet and a sledge.

Curty stood at the garage entrance. They both wore long white coats to cover their clothes. My father wore a pair of green latex dish cleaning gloves that were almost brown from the blood.

I stopped listening and began playing a game where I stand on the hammer end of the sledge and try to maintain my balance while shaking the handle. My father went straight to work on the buck, cutting its tendons away from the skin.

If you want these antlers, Curty, he said, you best get the hack saw.