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My fashion game has been all downhill since.

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STEALING CHICKENS



David McDannald

1.

Look, my brother is crazy. We've got a lot of crazy people in Israel. And around Israel, sure. But my brother may be the craziest of all of them. Don't tell me about *your* brother. Seriously. He burned the shoes of the bully with Chanukah candles or made out with his girlfriend during Pesach. That's kid stuff. Having Shahar as an older brother was completely useless. He introduced me to exactly zero cute boys. And all the D's he got made teachers suspicious of me. Shahar would appear after spending hours in the bathroom reading about adventurers and who knew what else. We liked to ride skateboards off roofs and lure hawks down from the sky with chickens. This is normal-variety craziness, okay? I was totally unaware my brother had something in him on a different scale. We all were. Like the war with Palestine makes any other war look like a fight over a bowl of tahina. Actually, I don't know what I'm talking about. I can admit that. I know what I'm talking about when it comes to my brother being crazy, but I have no idea what I'm talking about when it comes to war. But, hey, opinions in Israel grow like olives so I need some for myself. If you're Israeli and you don't have an opin-

ion then people will look through you. When you have an opinion they might shout at you but at least they won't look through you. And there's nothing worse than being invisible, unless you're in a war zone. But what do I know? My brother is so crazy our parents can barely get out of bed. They were blindsided. Dad calls in sick, can't teach calculus, keeps going to synagogue to say the HaGomel. Mom walks in circles in the flat looking for strands of my brother's hair. I've counted five knives she's stabbed into her flowerbed. They didn't know what kind of clock was ticking inside their little boy. Or not a clock. He spits on clocks. They didn't know he had his own planet inside his shirt all the time we'd been watching him grow up, and then he took it out and started living on it.

What my brother is crazy about is easy to answer: Africa. Was always that way. When he was twelve he painted a map of the continent across his side of our room and flagged all the rivers he planned to canoe. He was even younger when his African rumba craze hit. "This just isn't normal," our dad said of the music thumping through the bathroom door. It *was* awfully hard to get any idea of what those people were singing about. But here's Shahar, my short, fat, pimply brother singing in Lingala. Just imagine your brother suddenly dressing up like a Mayan priest. And I don't mean for going to clubs in Tel Aviv. He taught himself Lingala in the bathroom. I mean, Theo Blaise Koukou? Have you ever heard of that guy? You should have seen our uncle when Shahar started speaking Lingala at Seder. You're talking about a man who has very strong opinions about the kinds of prayers that should come out of a boy's mouth and what language they should be in. It was like Shahar during all the time he was locked in the bathroom was building the religion for the planet he would move to. I haven't been to Africa—I'm just eighteen, okay?—but it seems like Israelis go there for two reasons: to see giraffes and to do sketchy political things. But what do I know? I've said that. I should admit I'm probably not as modest as I'm trying to sound. It's just that I need strong opinions, like I told you. Anyway, if you're Israeli, don't wander into Palestine. It's just

not going to go well. But if you're a human being, don't wander into DRC. Yep. My brother, Shahar, immigrated to the Congo during a civil war. If that's what you have in mind to do with your life then maybe it is better you teach yourself Lingala in the bathroom and learn how to sing along to Theo Blaise Kounkou. *Hayoum wana galima wana d'jambala*. Or something. "Hayoum, that sounded like Hebrew," our uncle said. "You can be a rabbi in the Congo. There must be five Jews there without a rabbi." My brother hated temple. He didn't spit on temple like he spit on clocks but I'm sure it crossed his mind. The surprise came when it was time for Shahar to leave the army and our uncle bought his ticket to Addis Ababa and gave him five thousand shekels. Shahar was as hardline about Africa as our uncle was about Judaism, so a lot of respect flowed, zealot to zealot. But Shahar wasn't interested in Ethiopia. I mean, he was interested in everything connected to Africa down to fake zebra coasters. But at the heart of his craziness there wasn't room for Ethiopia. He just needed the flight to get south of Khartoum; we're not very popular in the northern half of Sudan, which I'm guessing is partly the fault of people like my uncle. Then Shahar went to the Omo or some river to sleep in villages. Drink cow's blood. See a ceremony where if the boys flinch their families are cursed seven generations forward and back. Again, normal variety craziness (for Shahar, not the initiates). Then he walked off into the bush with a map he'd drawn. He crossed into southern Sudan on foot. And was so shocked by what he saw he started treating people like he was some master physician. My brother can't get rid of the pimples on his face but he started treating the Sudanese for tropical disease. And he wrote in a postcard from Juba that he wished in all the time he'd spent in the bathroom he'd read about how to give someone an appendectomy.

I should rewind. If you're not Israeli it might not be clear that we pride ourselves on teaching kids everything they need to know if the world catches on fire, except of course for caring about other people's opinions. In the army Shahar wanted to become a sharp-

shooter. But he couldn't hit *anything*. Ask that boy to hit the wall in front of him with a rock and he would sooner hit the moon. He'd try to tie his shoelaces and poke himself in the teeth. If you're Israeli you don't want to hear stories about the army because you have too many of your own. And if you're not Israeli you probably only want to hear about assassinations by Mossad. Aside from what you might learn about how to stay alive in Sudan, being in the army is like living in a factory inventing new kinds of craziness. I heard soldiers on the street in Haifa the other day saying what we do to the Palestinians is no different from what the U.S. did to Indians. In the old days maybe a reasonable opinion counted for something, but now it's better to carry a stick and just hit people with it.

Then we got a postcard from Uganda after Shahar stayed with a tribe called the Ik, or what was left of them, and his face was bitten by so many tsetse flies one of his eyes swelled shut. Mom impersonated the Witch of Endor, carving statues out of wood, and Dad went to synagogue to say the HaGomel. I hate to admit it because he's my brother, but when we were younger he was the kind of guy you didn't expect much from. He was awfully fat. He would try to eat his weight in Bamba in a week. "I should have whipped him when he was a boy," Dad mumbled, sipping a Goldstar with his shakshuka. Then another postcard arrived, from Kigali, where Shahar danced to rumba in a nightclub and the local guys told him, "Whatever you do, don't go home with The Terminator." Apparently she had some pretty devastating dance moves. But, trust me, my brother does not.

Then we didn't hear from him for a long time. A postcard came from Ethiopia, delayed, when he was still in his goatherd phase. Finally he called from Kisangani, which of course we'd never heard of. The phone connection sounded like he'd been sucked into the engine of a plane. We were all leaning over the phone, Mom with seven knots tied in a thread and hanging from her hand. Shahar said he would have sent a postcard but you can't really motivate mail-

men to deliver postcards in a war zone. I don't know why he said such things. You have a principle of being honest and then there's the hard reality of your mother having a heart attack. Some booms went off near the phone. "It's not that bad here," Shahar said. "I carry bibles and wear a black robe, and people are too scared to do anything to me now that I've gotten good at conjuring tales of the devil's wrath and stuff." Then he said something about searching for child soldiers that we couldn't understand and probably didn't want to. Mom was plucking out and swallowing her eyebrows. Dad convulsed periodically on the floor where he sat with his head and a bottle of arak between his legs. My brother, Shahar, guerilla preacher, giving sermons about Jesus to stay alive.

I don't know what he believes anymore.

But I wish I could be half as crazy.

2.

All the village dogs knew who the chicken thief was. Rumors were flung around like husks of corn with people saying it had to be Uncle Joseph who didn't know what he was doing for the kerosene he drank and who was just crazy and cold enough to swipe food from folks who bit into one chicken leg a moon. Others doubted Joseph could get his hands on anything but a crippled chicken or maybe one of his nieces. And he didn't have the look of meat on his bones. Then the ruling turned against Cici's boy. My babies came to me, saying, "Granny, do you think it's Cici's boy?" And I said, "His drooping head and half-burned shoes make him look guilty of things that have never happened in the history of the world." And the suspicion against him lasted only as long as a mosquito stays drunk on a drop of blood.

Everyone in Uganda seemed to be losing chickens. Even I was losing chickens. And around the church that had no preacher people said, "Maybe it's a chicken disappearing disease." "You ever seen so many hawks? And cats? And ghouls?" "The ancestors are returning for the hens because the meat's not sweet in heaven." "The good

Lord abandoned our village. Took the rain. Took the men. Took the teacher. Took the preacher. And now he's come for the hens."

I didn't need to consult the spirits to solve the village riddle. The chicken thief slept in my hut with a dozen of my babies whose mamas had flung themselves around like husks of corn. Bosco, my darling boy, brought the first one to me straight, saying, "Granny, caught us up a hen living way off alone all by herself all alone way off in the bush."

Defeathered to hide the victim.

I said, "The devil's gonna take you, boy."

And he said, "If he does, I don't want to be hungry."

The second chicken Bosco deboned and sliced up in a mix with the oily flesh of a forest rat. And he said, "Granny, I went deep into the forest so so so far where the sun doesn't reach and hunted us up a wild fowl. The wildest."

Chicken identifying doesn't require any secondary-school education, and I said, "You hunt bushmeat but not chickens or the devil's gonna take you if I don't take you first."

"But Frederic's mom says getting bushmeat means, it means, Grandma, going halfway to the Congo."

"Then you can live on maize like the rest of your people."

Eleven years old with a mind to trick a woman who's put chicken into fifty children. I whipped a bit of devil-fearing into him, but that just made him dispose of the evidence into his mouth. And I said, "I'm going to look over one morning and see you sprouting feathers."

"The way the preacher said it, and I heard him say it, Granny, is the devil's not that funny."

Now, everyone knows chickens are a not-too-far-from-the-house-wandering type of creature unless you have a proper fence, and then they just lie around like husbands waiting for corn. I snuck out past my sleeping babies, following Bosco under the moon. What I saw was a boy-wizard of the crime scene: felling a hen with one hurled rock, dripping blood in the weeds as though a cat had got-

ten her, leaving chicken down in a puff, a foot shredded, clawed at, one hawk feather resting atop the mud. The village dogs followed Bosco like a police force, taking bribes of bones for not barking. I shadowed him one night to the chicken tree in Cici's yard, a tree empty but for a hen dozing high on a leafless branch, and the boy started dancing in circles like a hyena chasing his tail, turning and turning on one foot in some kind of foolishness I didn't know he was capable of, with that hen staring down at the spinning boy until dizziness came on and she slipped off the branch weakly flapping into his hands.

Bosco started to grow, eating whole chickens like a government minister, growing like in a tale the ancestors told. The boy climbed trees using one arm and jumped over pits using one leg and lifted a billy goat overhead more times than I could make offerings to God, with his veins popping out and that animal screaming like the boy was preparing Satan's shrine right there by my door.

"What in heaven's name are you doing, boy?"

"I've got to be ready."

"Ready?"

"For when the soldiers come."

"Don't you mention that. That's two rivers away. The sin of another gives you no right to your own."

The welts I lent that mama-less boy opened the way to guilt, and, after waking poorer in chickens, our neighbors would stumble out to their fields and find the weeds gone between rows of corn. Bosco learned to weed as fast as he chewed.

Now, I've spent my life walking to market with bananas on my head or charcoal on my head or tomatoes under my arm and a bag of corn on my head, and, in all that work, who knew where the boy's grandfather was. He's slept on more blades of grass than a cricket. The more my husband was gone, the more work I had to do to keep the house running and all my babies running and, the more rundown I looked, the more he looked straight through me and the more he stayed out, preying on women rich enough

they didn't have to work. Meat every other day. Arms as puffy and soft as clouds. Young or old didn't matter, but rich enough not to work. That's how he liked them, a rear end as bent as a riverbed. Earth knows no cure for such a man but his mother. That dead woman had beating-him arms. Arms like ox legs for all the foolishness she tried to whip out of him. Could swing a switch through an oak tree. And then sing those cuts to healing. I used to feel the remnants of the welts putting my arms around his back. The smile Bosco inherited from his grandfather stretched halfway across the sky, and I was thankful he only aimed it at chickens.

So one night another teacher poured her house into a suitcase and dragged it by flashlight all the miles out to Growling Road. Why she left no one had to ask, except Uncle Moto, whose mind ran a fair bit cold, what with word of bloodshed of more than chickens near.

A village had been burned.

The government sent us another teacher when they should have sent a brigade, a teacher as dry and pitiful as droughty corn. In through the broken shutters on her second day of class climbed a rodent half the size of an antelope. "A rat a rat a rat!" the kids said. "The good Lord stole our dinner but brought us a snack." Such a critter is as good as darkness for bringing school to a stop—until it's caught, cooked, and licked from the fingers.

It was while the kids were chasing that rat round and round that Bosco gave himself away.

"Here he is," the kids said. "Not even getting up from his desk because he's fat with our mamas' hens."

Bosco, carrying all that meat in his chest, glared at those spindly boys and blew air loud through his nose.

The elders called a meeting.

While it was going, I said, "I'm going to have to lash you, boy, because you'll get it worse from the rest and it's better you're already bleeding."

"Okay, Grandma. But I did it—I really did it—it's true I ate almost everything but I did it also for them."

3.

Grandma, the hyenas came through the trees. I was at school under the desk. It's Bosco, Grandma. Did you see it all? Under the desk with the boys I can lift over my head, those boys there and all of us with our eyes closed and Frederic, too, Grandma, you were right; a thousand chickens didn't add up to being able to lift an arm to help anyone. The rebel soldiers came like hyenas with their teeth out and there was nothing to do but hide under the desk and then hide inside the hiding. I was building walls inside my brain as fast as you can slap mud on them, building walls to hide behind because that was the only kind of wall that would do any good.

I heard your scream. I know it was yours. I trained my ears for hearing like I trained my legs to run. I saw smoke coughing from the houses. Grandma, I'm taking you with me because having arms as big around as children didn't stop me from being one, and I hid you here behind the wall I built with mud that comes off Drunken Road where all the good clay is. The thick red stuff you like me to bring you. It was the only place left when the hyenas put the village into a cooking fire and I had to let them have my body. But I invisibled myself from my arms and legs like what happens to Uncle Joseph when he drinks kerosene and his body floats through the village hunting for a girl to carry away.

I'm tied up with some of your babies, Grandma, the ones you put your farm into. So many of your babies tied leg to leg like hens. A hyena carried one of your girl babies off into the trees and I was trying to yell but couldn't. I'm sorry all those lashes you gave didn't make me strong. They did a bad thing to Cici's boys for charging after his sister when they dragged her into the trees. That boy with arms as thin as Grandpa's crutch had a lion inside him no one knew about and he roared at that hyena soldier. But they have the biggest guns you've ever seen, not like the one Uncle Moto made with a pipe and a strip of rubber, but guns that can evaporate a hen from her feathers, and three of them aimed their evaporators into Cici's boy who found his lion until they pulled their triggers. All of us

were still tied up together when they cut him free, Grandma, and instead of Cici's lion boy in that rope gang it was his foot without a shoe. What those red-eyed hyenas wanted with girls as thin as fingers I don't want to think about, so I'm going to crawl away from my arms and legs.

Grandma, I'm so hungry. Please tell everyone I'm sorry for eating their chickens. I ate so many chickens. I thought someday I'd stay full. The hyenas are giving us nothing but ears of corn. I opened my eyes long enough to see that the foulest hyenas are the ones getting not-corn. They like my arms and legs, Grandma, so they loaded me down with gear like a donkey coming back from the river. Arms and legs know what to do on their own and the hyenas are letting me hide more corn in my mouth because even they know that if you forget a donkey's stomach you can't expect him to get your water home. Grandma, I don't want to tell you what happened. These soldiers are like roosters who sleep on the top branch of the chicken tree so they can see their flock below. It made them mad I was hiding behind the wall even when I was letting them use my body like a donkey carrying water home. They had an old lady outside her hut, Grandma. You probably know her from market day. I stole one of her chickens maybe. I stole so many chickens. I hope I remembered to weed her field. They put a pistol in my donkey hand and made me aim it at the woman, Grandma, and I was hiding and they knew it and they didn't like that the gun in my donkey hand was as dead as water jugs coming back from the river. But a gun is not something just to be carried and they dragged in one of your babies and the big hyena put his evaporator to her head and told me to come out from behind my wall and open my eyes at the woman standing in front of the pistol in my dead donkey hand or your baby was going to die. The old woman had one good eye and it was aimed at the foulest hyena and she was as quiet as Aunt Gemile when Uncle Joseph drinks himself off into the leaves. The old lady had one dead eye like a ghouel and that was the eye aimed at me and the hyena laughed and said again he would evaporate

your baby if I didn't deal with the milky-eyed woman who I'm sure you know from market day, and I did it, Grandma. I came out and stood beside the hyenas and I shot that old woman straight into her milky eye and I didn't go back to hiding because they told me that if I kept closing my eyes I'd get evaporated. They even gave me a chicken leg from the old woman's pot. These hyenas have guns that can make you break your promises because I promised myself I was never going to come out from behind my wall but these hyenas don't let anyone remain a donkey.

Grandma, I don't know where we are anymore. I'm too dizzy to keep track of your babies. I'll try to get them back to you. The days at your cooking pot feel as far away as Adam and Eve. The soldiers found the wall and I had to come out from inside my head and there's still room for you to hide but I don't know who else and I fired that pistol without closing my eyes and they lashed me for crying but I had a lot of practice with lashes and I'm learning it's smarter to laugh than to cry, so I laugh louder than anyone when we put a village into the cooking fire. They made me open my eyes at that infant boy and I had to throw him so far, Grandma. It was so far. Hands and feet spinning like a star. I have him now with us behind the wall. He doesn't take up so much room and he only snores if blood is leaking from his nose. When I'm laughing my vision is rolled back into my head no matter where my eyes are aimed and I'm sitting there with you and laughing and nothing is really funny, Grandma, and I'm hoping you can sing all these cuts closed. It's not like the preacher said with his devil talk. I'll trade all his devils in a hundred hells for these hyenas. They make the devil of that ran-away preacher look like a chicken you already hid in your mouth.

Oh, Grandma, there are so many things I hope you can't see from behind the wall. Please promise to keep your eyes closed forever. Hell is new every day. I had to make someone's girl cry when we put a village into the cooking fire. They could tell I wasn't looking at her because my boy pistol wasn't aimed. And that got a rifle

pointed at my head. She was standing in front of me with her hands pushed against the wall. I felt so bad because the sweetheart was as thin as a finger and I didn't cry because I learned to make tears flow inside the red mud wall. I didn't laugh either but they don't expect you to laugh when you're with a sweetheart. There was a hyena soldier with one hand on my shoulder making sure like with an old donkey that he got to market, and I wanted to whisper something nice to that sweetheart but this isn't the kind of thing you do in front of hyenas so I kissed the back of her neck and it was so salty and warm, and I can't die, Grandma, because then I won't be able to talk to you. That sweetheart was crying but sweethearts in the world of hyenas are allowed to cry but I can't be one of them.

Grandma, I've been away a long time. So much time. I hope you kept your promise and didn't come out from behind the wall. I was making little wood statues like the ancestors did, the kind the preacher told us to burn. Then hyenas started getting evaporated everywhere and they trust me with one of their big guns that Uncle Moto could never have made, even with a really hot fire, because his mind is a little cool, and I looked at the other hyenas long enough to send bullets into them and the first thing I thought when I saw our own hyenas falling was that I was going to get more chicken legs. Then I ran, Grandma. I dropped my bag and ran into the jungle because everyone was running. This place is so hot and all the trees are wet and we need you here to get the fire going. It all falls to pieces when you take the grandmothers away. The soldiers were scattering like hens when a hawk makes his shadow and I ran and put myself behind a wall in the deep deep deepest part of my head and I ran until everything was silent and I kept running so far I must have run the boots off my feet because they were gone when I finally turned my vision back to the world. I was so hungry I could barely keep my vision from turning to pure black and then it was dark everywhere like inside the uncles' throats when they're drinking kerosene. I heard an infant crying in the brush. There

was a house of banana leaves like Frederic and I used to make and the woman saw me and screamed and started calling me a hyena and I couldn't do anything to make her stop and you can't trust anyone, Grandma, because if there are enough hyenas in the forest then everyone gets a little inside him, even the old ladies, and I came out from behind my wall long enough to eat what was in that woman's pot, but I left her some and I don't think I hurt her child, Grandma; I really don't. And I kept walking walking walking so far into the bush where the sun could barely reach and I didn't hear this strange fat creature with red dots on his face until he got his knife to my neck and started talking about a wall that was bigger than the one I could unbuild.

4.

My people, I am a fool. I give you proof of God's existence, that I am allowed to go on existing. My family loves me, friends, so listen now for the miles I've traveled away from them. They call me Shahar. When I was in Burundi learning half the words I speak to you, I found that devils were also called *gendarmes* and had sold off the medicine from the clinics. So I tried to bring a doctor from the Holy Land loaded down with medicine to help those whom sickness had gotten inside of. But it is difficult to get anyone to leave the Holy Land, because it is holy, and God saw that this was so and he instructed me to bring medicine myself, though I am a doctor of nothing but foolishness. Which my uncle knows. And Africans know best that a fool casts a shadow wider than he can ever outgrow. God forgave me for giving the wrong medicine to an old woman because he saw with many others that the medicine was doing his work in a land of devils in green uniforms and devils in blue uniforms and devils who move in the uniform of darkness, who don't respect the doorways into your bodies, who climb in through windows that were never windows because devils are window-makers and they steal the chicken from your pots and the children from your huts but they can't take the rumba from your hearts.

My people, I beg you to remember what happens to devils when God gets ahold of them. Those of you who have felt the devil lift up the weapons in your hands and lift up the skirts of your sisters that you have taken in your hands, God is tending for your flesh a special flame. Friends, remember that eternity is long. And God's fire doesn't require wood.

Some of you are lost, drunk, bloodlusting. When I walk in the jungle with only the bible raised, friends, I look for dark angels who still have the light of hope within them, sometimes a light as dim as the last minute when dusk is no longer blue. Friends, I look for the youngest devils, knowing this is the reason I've brought foolishness into my life.

Callings, my uncle would agree, can be strange.

I don't have to tell you of the dangers of hiding in the bush, of wet nights and cold lungs, because soldiers of a dozen kinds have come to your fields with famine and to your huts with fire. I don't have to tell you, friends, how nice it is to find a few ears of corn in an abandoned field, a few ears of oblong corn just softer than stone. I don't have to speak to you of the trouble of staying dry in a hut made of banana leaves, when fear keeps the fire unlit, keeps the food cold and the water full of vermin. Friends, we can't bury our babies to save them, nor toss them into the trees to let the monkeys rear them.

My sister told me once that no matter how much I loved rumba it would never teach me to dance. But it's time you helped me learn by singing music back into your legs.

You will not find it surprising that I started climbing trees like chimpanzees to sleep in safety, above the places your people had only modest dreams of repairing the mud walls after the rains and falling in love with the neighbor's niece. Friends, I have a bed in a tree not far from here, in a direction I will not say aloud for fear that devils are listening, because they are always listening, because some of you have had your windows raised. Near this tree, I came upon a young one who sat not far from a trail, a soldier, my friends,

with the body of a god heaped upon a boy no older than twelve. He didn't react as I descended the vines of the tree where I sometimes sleep and sometimes fall, nor as I crept through the leaves of the forest where I sometimes creep and sometimes fall. And I was on him, friends, knife at his neck, he looking up at me as if I were a demon of an altogether different kind.

"I have the power to shine light into your heart" is the gist of what I said to him, though all of you know that those walking in darkness require harsher words.

So numb was this boy to the world that he barely moved when I told him to let go of his rifle, and he did so, friends, this boy who had scars on his face and cuts on his arms and kerosene on his breath, who was marched across the border with the children of his school into the worst corner of hell. I set a bible on his stomach, which he did not look at or move his hands toward, and he watched me as though the better part of him had stopped wanting to see.

Friends, it was hard to know if he heard me tell the story of how I'd reached there, from my time in a stronger army than his to the calling of Africa that more and more came to resemble foolishness as I traveled from Ethiopia to Sudan and eventually into the jungles of war. I told him that my life had led to our meeting beside that trail. Thanks be to God he had no way of knowing how poor I am with a gun, which I tried to keep aimed.

There was enough flesh in the boy's chest to stop a bullet, enough flesh in his arms that had he gotten me in his grips he could have raised me in the air like Lucifer and ripped me in half. I wasn't sure he heard me ask him to rise, so deep into his mind had he fled. But rise he did, friends, and seemed to find his way without his eyes as he walked with me across the forest floor to vines that hang from the high canopy in a way I don't have to describe, and he climbed, friends, climbed those vines as though he were ready to leave the earth. So strong was the boy he could have climbed with a single arm. "On the platform there's smoked meat and water and a bed for you to sleep in," I told him. "No one can see you from below.

Five suns and I'll return. Five suns for the devil to move out from his nest within the chambers of your heart." This is the gist of what I said; all of you know that devils require harsher words.

My friends, the power of a god resides in smoked meat and the power of a god resides in untroubled sleep. Listen now, so my mother can't say I squandered the love she put into me in exchange for a foolishness people refuse even to hear. I returned to the tree, the bed so high in the canopy that from the ground it looked like the nest of a chimp. I returned to that tree, friends, after only three suns because I feared the body of the boy would ask him for more food than I'd been able to stash. The devil's banquet is vast, and we must be ready for the appetites of those who cast aside their plates and run.

Friends, when I returned to the tree after three suns, Bosco, as I would learn he was called, descended the vines, hand under hand, as I don't have to describe to you, this a boy who'd not uttered a single word but whose mouth had opened as though he'd let out a long breath. The hint of his smile was like a view of the sky. Had my sister seen the change in him she might have said I wasn't as crazy as she'd feared.

I held my finger on the trigger as we stood in the leaves.

"I thought my grandmother was dead dead," the boy said.

"I'm sorry."

"But she visited me in the tree wondering what we'd do when you returned."

"We stay alive."

"That's what she thought you'd say." He raised an arm that had the heft of an oak branch. "So what do we do after staying alive?"

"Find another boy for our band."

"Why?"

"Because in hell there's nothing better we can do."

He lifted a leg and set it down. "Where do we find another boy?"

"We walk through the trees looking for the ones who wander away."

"Grandma knew you would say that. What about after?"

“We live together.”

“Grandma wants to know where.”

“In hell as long as we have to. And then somewhere better.”

“Somewhere better where?”

“In a place we can plant corn.”

“Grandma’s asking where.”

“Hopefully not in hell,” I said, the gun still in my hands.

“And after?”

“We harvest corn.”

Bosco laughed a ghoulish laugh. “We’ll get others to handle the corn.”

“No. We’ll be the ones to handle it.”

His eyes opened. “Grandma didn’t like me saying that. Why will we be the ones?”

“Because corn tastes better that way.”

“And after?”

“We find girls.”

“What girls?”

“We’ll find them.”

“And after?”

“Plant more corn.”

“What about after?”

“The girls will tell us.”

“And the chickens? Will there be many chickens?”

“I said the girls will tell us.”

“That’s what Grandma knew.”

