

D. M. Armstrong

New Year

The ground has turned to infinitesimal spikes of glass, the frozen dandelion blades hard and artificial-looking in the cold morning air. I haven't moved since the last shot. The one that whistled off the steel rim of that junked car, buzzed back, across the open yard and plugged itself, dead—ended in a muted pillow-strike sound that I've heard before.

I haven't moved. My finger is still on the trigger, and I'm dimly aware of that arthritic ache in the joints of my forefinger. Of my thumb looped flatly behind the rear sight, fingers braced behind the guard. My left bloodless hand under the forestock has gone to sleep or frozen. For the first time since it happened I'm aware of my breathing, the dense mist of my breath rising in a vapor before my nose.

My mind is a blank. I've been staring into those weeds for hours. I walked out at nine last night and tried out the new sight line. Andy had helped me clear a few saplings blocking the view of the muddy trailer park at the bottom of the hill. Jerry, the guy who runs the place, told me he'd pay me fifty for slugging rats, said my trailer, uphill about fifty yards, was a good spot for shooting vermin—rats, coons, squirrels, maybe coyote—digging through the trash at the back of the lot. About a dozen trailers squatted there in the mud, and after Christmas the dumpster got full with wrappings and boxes, turkey leftovers and casserole carcasses, and Jerry told me to wait till Sunday night when everyone went up to First Baptist for the evening service and a potluck. Take care of some rodents, any wild dogs, feral cats. That sort of thing. He said he didn't want sued for some kid getting bit just 'cause the fucking tenants were too lazy to hoist their trash bags into the god damn container.

So I waited there and waited to see anybody moving, and I took off my gloves and I set down a styrofoam cup of coffee I got at Speedway, and grabbed half a sack of dog food by the door and set it up on the stump like a sandbag, rested the gun across it, got comfortable. Watched the shadows brewing up out of the soft darkness, the angle of the dumpster cut by a pasty orange streetlamp that coated those black plastic bags in a wet-like sheen. I drummed my fingers to keep them warm till the first raccoon came up and started tearing at the edge of a trash bag. The way their hands move is almost human. I shot him through the skull. His furry body rolled over in the dead brown leaves and didn't fuss. After that I put two rats down. A mangy dog. A smaller raccoon, more delicate than the first, maybe a female, sniffed along the outside edges, maybe at the dog, and I put her down too. Each time, the rifle cracked like a stroke of lightning, bowled the life out of each animal till it was around ten-thirty and I thought I best pack up, as the church van would be back any time.

If it weren't for that god damn cat.

A cat.

Stringy as spaghetti, spindly legs like a spider's, hunching, clawing, probably pawing for mice that had gotten at the garbage. It was a pitiful thing. Rangy, sooty gray with a tail kinked left and down, crooking like a rusty drill, left-up-left, jerky. Pitable.

If only I hadn't waited. Thought about it too long before putting a bullet into it. I watched the cat doing its own cockeyed version of a pounce, a halt, then a spastic rush forward. Could hear the leaves crunching, crinkling up like old paper, underfoot. Bag of bones on a paper bag. Better off dead.

The cat suddenly slipped backward in one of those herky-jerky tailspins, rolled to its side, into the shadow, just as I pulled the trigger. I adjusted instinctively. The pop of my twenty-two, the bullet searing a line down through the patch of scraggly woods.

Struck the rim of a blocked car, sailed wide.

Then the sound.

A short—very short; too short—figure at the edge of the trailer near the dumpster. That sound like a rock thrown into a sheet on the line. Stopped mid-air and lodged into something soft. The same way a bullet goes into a dog.

That little figure fell forward into the leaves, and I heard the crunch of them louder, world-jarring loud. The cat scurrying away, making a wooden racket through the invisible trees.

God.

My finger is still on the trigger, my eyes still trained on that spot, where whatever it is fell. Maybe a Christmas box, a doll's box. One of those big ones the size of a child. Maybe a thrown-out wad of insulation. A soiled cot mattress rolled and bound. Infinite.

The Baptists drove in about ten forty-five I think, but by then the night had stopped. Chatters and muffled goodbyes as passengers dove out into the cold, called over their shoulders, slammed the sliding door. The motor made a hurting sound as it trolled up the road and away down the bend.

In this morning-white haze I'm looking for the signs of artificial colors. The sunshine yellows bright as Big Bird, or candy reds of fire engines—the kind of things children wear. Get suited up in by parents. Not a peep from the park since someone started a car, turned it off, closed their door, sometime after the van came by. Very late.

There's a rigid silence to dawn. The fluid winding of a noiseless clock. Somewhere across Jisco Road a tractor starts up like a man clearing his throat.

I wait until a woman, eyes broken U's, tumbles out drunk-sick, hungover with a flimsy nightgown loose and wagging across her breasts, swaying as she retches in the weeds before dropping to one knee and wiping away the strung spittle from her lips. I take her for mid-twenties. A mother, maybe.

I wait for her to look beyond her feet at whatever it is. I wait for the way her face will distort as she discovers some horrible secret in the silver grass. But her marred, bleary expression holds steady as she hitches herself up against the backside of her trailer, tugs up at the neck of her gown while mincing—she's barefoot—to keep her toes from freezing to the ground.

She turns and highsteps back around to the front, out of sight, and doesn't appear again.

The cold sun draws up on its hind legs until I'm staring down on a gray miniature of the trailer park in full detail. I don't move. Not for anything. This is the way stone feels.

Late morning, a tall man with black wisps of fine hair fluttering across his scalp crosses the central space that serves as a sort of courtyard. He carries a white trash bag and wears a pointed party hat in metallic purple with white, loopy letters on it that say *Happy New Year!!* And for the first time I realize last night was new year's eve, and midnight came and went without any ball or resolutions, without the hollow cheers of confetti-blanketed millions calling out to me from my television. I can't remember the last time, if ever, I didn't watch that ball, the one with all the lights, touch down like a goodcheer bomb at the center of Times Square, the ripples of laughter and singing spreading out till it seemed like they'd reach all the way out here, in the icy moon-dim silence of my little place on the hill.

And for the first time, I feel the quiet—as I watch that man crossing the yard in silence like a movie with the sound turned down. As he removes the hat, jams it in with the trash, tosses that bag and twirls on his heel. As he stops and circles that indentation in the grass. As that grown man tries to catch his breath, and bows down in haste, in absolute panic, to the tiny body at his feet, I feel the quiet.

And realize those cheers never ever reached this far.