

Look and Listen

By Melissa Simon

i.

Gunshots hollered over the kittens' mews, leaving a ringing in my ears even through the earmuffs Daddy gave me. The kittens, oblivious to the target practice nestled on the other end of the porch, searched for a mama who had been run over that morning. Daddy never missed his target.

ii.

Remington shells plunked onto the wooden planks. I stood from my crouch beside the crying tub where the kittens scrambled over one another, and I looked over the porch's edge where Daddy rested the barrel of his rifle. The peppered silhouette quivered from a hundred feet away with each shot.

iii.

"You want to try?"

"Mama says I need to watch the babies."

"They'd be alright for a minute."

"Mama says I'm too little."

"Then you're too little to be a mama for those kittens."

"Mama says I'm doing the right thing."

"Mama sure says a lot of things, doesn't she?"

iv.

Peeking over the plywood railing, I saw Daddy – fresh target in hand – cross the green-brown yard, growing in tufts of churned dirt. Half-way across the yard, one of Daddy’s feet twisted in a fresh mound, and he fell onto his stomach. He shouted: “Damn them shittin’ rabbits! I’ll kill ‘em!”

v.

He clipped a gun sling to the butt and forearm of his rifle and limped along the property, poking his barrel into dirt mounds, briars, fern patches, and fallen branches. Daddy grunted as he searched – until he got on all fours and climbed under the porch. Then he started hollering.

vi.

A rabbit squeezed through a gap in the cement block steps and darted across the property toward the cover of trees. Daddy pulled himself free, cradled his rifle against his face, and followed the rabbit through the scope. The brown body leapt, all four feet in midair, then I screamed.

vii.

“DADDY, NO!”

Daddy’s shoulders tensed as the body across the yard fell limp.

“What are you yelling about?”

I was off the porch and running toward the trees.

“YOU CAN’T KILL BABIES!”

Daddy came running after me.

“Leave that thing alone. Do you know where it’s been?”

I started crying.

viii.

The rabbit's chest heaved, its nose twitched, and its eyes darted around until settling on Daddy as stopped behind us. Dark blood oozed from its hindquarters, trickling in the dirt beneath it. It shuddered. Daddy took my hand, pulling me behind him. "Cover your ears. Can't let him suffer."

ix.

"Babies aren't supposed to die!"

"That's not a baby."

"Yes, it is!"

"Can't have them digging holes in the yard. What if *you* twisted your ankle – or Mama? You want her to fall and break her neck because a rabbit wanted to destroy the yard?"

"No – I want Mama safe."

x.

The kittens started mewling when they heard me come up the porch steps. I put on my earmuffs like Daddy said, but they couldn't block everything. The kittens cried for food and warmth, while my hands pressed against the earmuffs, waiting for Daddy to make Mama safe. The gun hollered.