

Any time Dad showed me the photos, the ones with the polka-dotted fawn nestled in her mother's soft neck, or the ones with the bobcat licking her fleecy kitten clean, or the ones with the throng of ducklings trailing after their mother, I ached. Dad was obsessive with his trail cameras, crafting a robust system of surveillance that collapsed our entire 10 acres of forest into one massive eye of Dad sight.

When Dad was home, I lingered in the back room of our cabin so he wouldn't remember I was there, and couldn't sit me in front of the computer and click through pictures of the doe and the bobcat and the mother duck, laughing and sighing with awe in my ear. When he was gone, then I'd flip through the photos, making my own conclusions about Dad's creatures.

Still, I could tell he ached too. He appeared in the trail photos often, when he was out tweaking and shifting the cameras. At dusk, I would see him lying on his back on the forest floor, tears running from the sides of his eyes into the earth. It was only when he dusted his corduroy jacket off and headed back to the cabin that the deer would come out and the owls would fly low again. Humans were the loneliest beings, he'd said to me once.

And then there was one day, when the light had slipped beneath the trees and the crickets had begun to hum the rhythm of the night, and Dad was still not home. In the green, wobbly nightvision of the trail cams I could see him wandering. He probably hoped the dark would obscure his form to the animals. Maybe a blind doe would let him curl up against her neck.

In the morning, the cameras snapped him sleeping. His body was sprawled across the thick branch of an oak, limbs dangling over the sides. The light danced across his face as the trees swayed overhead. When he woke, he fell to the ground on all fours and scuttled off into the brush like an oversized crab. I shook my head and scoffed.

He stayed out there for the rest of the week, scrounging in the dirt for roots and fallen nuts and drinking the dirty, stagnant water of the duck pond. He looked unwell. I watched his skin gray and fall off in long sheaths as if he were a snake. Each morning when I turned on the computer, photos of his night activities were uploaded in great clusters. He slept in the trees, a mass of wrinkled gray flesh and bone. His clothes had been abandoned long ago and I could see the deep ridges of his spine undulating in his back as he moved.

What could be done about this? I wasn't exactly sure. Should I have corralled this pale beast back into the cabin? Hoped he would grow a warm, red layer of skin and fatten back into the man who once promised an 11-year-old me that he would try to notice when I spoke?

Maybe it was purposeful. He'd made himself very lonely in this world. If a gleaming angel floated down from above and offered to turn him into a wild creature for the rest of his days, he would have shaken the golden man's hand without a second thought.

Night and day, I laid in front of the computer, watching the photos from the trail cams sync up and chart Dad's path through the woods. I saw that the deer scattered in his presence, that the bobcats cowered in their dens as he passed. No one else would have him, but neither would I. The cabin's front door was double-bolted, the back door locked and blocked off with my dresser. But the pantry was becoming hollow; I would need food in a few days.

And then just like that, Dad was gone. I watched him run like a leopard through the woods on that last day, leaping over saplings and rocks until he reached the border of our 10 acres and disappeared completely.

I waited a day just in case, and then I went down the path to the neighbor's, printed photos of Dad in hand. Mr. and Mrs. Michaels nodded along as I spoke, agreeing it was best to

shoot the creature on site. They were scared for their chickens, they said. I told them they should be more scared for their daughters.