



JAMIE GREIFE

Headcheese

GREFE

I'm stale medicine when the crust splits, crumbles down my cheeks in sharp titters.

Too late. The fire turned Pat and Paul to sludge.

And I'm outside, popping reds, watching the house tumble and drip. Plumes of skin-smoke like sea waves. I palm more reds and freeze. Metal shines from the rubble.

He rises. The axeman.

I should have seen this all coming.

He's in there huffing embers, swinging at rafters, mowing towards me. I see that mask, how it's peeled off, seared, sticking to some kind of mangled mess of a face. I hightail it.

Sirens barrel up the drive, blues too bright, but those shots, the bullet-cracks, hit the house and pop-thud around me. I turn back. He's stomping now, long strides, holding up a wad of goopy hair: Pat and Paul's should-still-be-alive headcheese.

I'm shaking in a good way. Shots hit the tree, the barn, the shed, porch-wood, and sprinkle the field. I slap, snuff out flecks of fire on my shoulder and know, just know it's all going to end and this is it, but just not yet. I'm waiting for the music, see. Saves me a lot of explaining, really: the torch, the cash, the drugs I ate. I mash those reds and crunch, sizzle, let them melt my tongue before running through the red wooden doors of the barn.

The barn is shadows jiggling, just light enough to make out a path to the coop, the second, more secret coop where I get away, the one with the push-spot where Pat said leads a tunnel out to the woods, to the well in the woods. I'm blurry, though, a flesh-hole of light drinking red air. I scurry: hay, feed, wire, shit. So many dead chickens. I duck in, try to avoid the rainbows. Before I can slide in though, there's a vice grip on my ankle, a jerky tightness hauling me out and I'm flung, rabbit tossed across the barn by the axeman. I hit the floor in a slide, sink in a hay-pond, hear him rasp closer through the plummeting straw.

I'm up. A pitchfork is lobbed right at my head. Scramble to my feet, to a corner. And fists are stars, too, edgy rocks or bolts, but I'm faster: red, lit up. I dodge and flail, roll under his legs and can't stop laughing. That

voice of mine has changed pitch and I'm too much Paul, too much pick-up truck, cracked windshield and Pellet Gun Paul to be me. But Paul's dead and this new other corner is too soft and feathery like fireworks or popcorn or bullet holes.

Shots hit everywhere. The barn is swiss with stars at night peeking through. Too much smoke. The axeman is frozen, body fluttering and holier than a roast duck. Those bullets he's feeling are strings of blood. He roars smoke, goes down, topples, stumbles, topples, falls and shot upon shot pour into the barn: polka dots. Light it up in holes and through blasted wood I can see it, taste the old man's house. It burns brighter now, orange popping, but the sheriff, when he comes in, is redder than a B-flick devil. He's cracking off rounds into the axeman, fuming and cussin, until he sees me.

I know this by the right hook he lands, the gut kick and the "not you again" Skoal-laden spit I swallow. I see him pull back. I'm outside of myself weeping tobacco juice. He steps slow, pumps his shotgun, but before he can drill me one, the axeman jolts up, is reanimated with a sickle in hand arcing in to catch the sheriff and a slice, a rip so quick, I swear his head looks around soliloquizing, flying through the air for me to catch and dribble. And I do. I catch it. It knocks me back across the barn and into

the coop. I bawk and crawl in, find that magic spot right where Pat or Paul said it would be and I go, baby, dig deep in mad strokes. I'm tunneling through dirt in waves to the well.

I'm not five feet down and I can smell him, can smell headcheese trying to jam his body in deeper, but he can't fit. I bawk, float past dirt for what feels years. But it's when I hit that wall of night-dirt, a solid wall of thick soil, that I know, I know this is it and I know it even harder when I feel the first blast of the dead sheriff's shotgun level me right where I lay, right into my chest. The second shot hits me in the back of the thigh, but I don't know that yet. And the third shot: eyes pulled so far into my body I can taste toes. That third shot, the one that just misses me, it explodes a gust of eggy air in the dirt, dirt that is wood, dirt that saves my hide.

I throw my fist into it to override the clicking sound of reloading, a clicking far, far away, and then the bullet storm from what I am guessing are the other officers who have probably entered the barn in a fury of hell-shit and are shredding axeman to twigs, timber, carving novels in his body, worlds of word holes etched in blood. And I punch and punch, don't even know if I'm made of steel, until that wood breaks and I topple, roll into a shaft, sharper, sliding snake-dance past the filth, bawking

all the way to the well.

The well, though, it's dark down here and I don't know how long I'll lay, just want to look up at those stars, like some dream that won't end, not just yet. This doesn't end here.

I'm yet to crawl.

I heave myself over the edge and there it is, a patch of grass so green, I tear it out in clumps, shove it into my chest. He's there, too, but not the axeman, no, just one cop face down like he's passed out drunk. Creep past him and make my way to where the smoke is breathable. I go back to the house like any homesick boy would.

I'm not sure why, maybe Pat and Paul, maybe the sheriff, or maybe I'm just too lit up to give a damn, but I go back and find the biggest oak from where I can peek and hide. I just want to look and make sure all this is real: the fire, the axe, Pat, Paul, the police. When I hug the tree, put my face up to it and drip into it, skin on bark, coated and hot, I reach down: blood from the hole in the back of my yellowing leg and light streaming from my chest.

Woozy. Red.

Hungry. I want to rip off a chunk and I pull a piece of me right off and rub fingers to chalk before tasting. I limp to the heap, to the house on slow fire and the smol-

dering hump of that house is churning or my eyes are churning, narrowing, streaking.

And there he is, sleeping sound in a river of his own red: the axeman. He's got that sludge pile of Pat and Paul next to him like just can't let go.

Night, stranger.

I'm too much of a rotten sleeper now. So I lie down in the middle of the pile near where I hear Pat and Paul crooning "Goodnight, Sweetheart" and find a plank to rest my head on. I snap a chunk of my yellowing skin off and suck on myself for a little while, swallow.

I could be here for awhile.

I'm too ready to stand up and step inside my own mouth. Isn't a morning like this enough? Isn't a morning so fine enough, just to look down at that expanding chest-hole and see how that axeman is slowly, ever so slowly moving rising like a slug.

I leave this mouth wide open.