

Cry of the Canopies

Every year, around the late summertime, my dad and I would trek up to his cabin in the boreal forest of northern Minnesota. This was some sort of family tradition for him, but I never understood the meaning of it. One evening during one of these trips, Dad caught me by the old broken tree with a matchbox I'd stolen from the kitchen, trying to start a fire. I wasn't the stealthiest kid on account of my bright ginger hair, so it was only a matter of time before he caught me.

"Morgan, how many times do I have to catch you out here?" he beckoned angrily. He smacked me square on the head and snatched the matchbox out of my tiny hands. "You oughta know why you can't be doing this!"

Whenever I misbehaved, he would tell me this story about his brother Bucky. I wasn't sure Bucky even existed, and I always figured this yarn he'd spin was some sort of campfire story he made up to scare me. But he always told it the same.

Roughly twenty years ago, he says Bucky came to these same woods to visit him at the cabin. At the time, my dad lived with his doting mother, who's since passed on. The Hitchcocks were a peaceful bunch and enjoyed taking in the scenic beauty of the northern country. That is, except for Uncle Bucky, who wasn't quite a sentimental type.

Every time Bucky came to visit from down south, he insisted that he couldn't leave without a proper hunt. He had a lame arm, but he was a rough-and-tumble type and liked to boast

his gun skills despite his handicap. My dad says he was just a big showoff, and deeply irritating to boot. Since his last visit, Dad hadn't seen a single sign of deer for at least fifty acres around. He told Bucky to let it go that year. But it was a vain effort.

“You just gone soft, Ray. Pop knew better than to sit ‘round and let fresh game be. He weren't about the ‘love of nature’ or some such crap, you just watch your big brother work.”

It was a week or two after Bucky came to stay that Dad heard the pop of a rifle go off in the distance. A few hours later, Bucky came hauling his trophy out from the thicket.

An infant fawn, hardly a month old. He'd shot it where it stood the minute he laid eyes on it and brought it back. Couldn't resist the thrill of it. Dad disapproved, but Bucky simply said, “Don't you mind, Ray, I'll fix him up and make him real nice. Just for you.”

The stuffed fawn's head was placed above the cabin mantelpiece, a grim reminder of Bucky's bloody appetites. You'd think this was the whole story, but something strange happened after he hung up the fawn.

Dad and Bucky took a stroll in the woods and they found a peculiar object hanging from the limb of a tree. It was some sort of talisman fashioned out of small bones and twigs dangling there, and the weirdest detail was what got strung up inside it.

Human hair. Specifically, thick, golden-brown locks of hair. Unmistakably from Bucky's head.

He shrugged it off and said it was the work of some "stupid no-gooders" and left it at that. They walked back to the cabin in silence, trying not to think about it. But Bucky, Dad said, wasn't the same after that.

Dad found him two nights later sitting in front of the mantel. He was pale and sweating, and his eyes were darting around the walls restlessly. "Bucky, the hell's the matter with you?"

He scarcely talked back. Something was clearly troubling him, and he was obsessively scratching his temples until they were raw. "Something's in me. Something's in my damn head. I feel them poking out. I think it's that bastard's fault." He pointed at the fawn on the wall.

Dad didn't know what to make of this, so he left him alone until supper that night. Dad, Grandma, and Bucky sat around the dining table and dug into the venison from the hunt. He always told me something about that meal just made him feel so wrong.

After a few minutes of quiet eating, Bucky dropped his fork and stood up abruptly. He screamed and pointed straight at Grandma's head.

"You ain't real! I know you ain't! Ain't nothing got horns that size that walks this earth!"

Dad and Grandma looked at each other with uncertainty, and without another word Bucky ran out of the cabin hollering like a lunatic. And he didn't come back.

Supposedly, that was the end of Bucky's story. Dad took down the fawn, and Bucky never came to visit again. But Dad says it didn't stop there. He told me he looked out his bedroom window one night, and saw Bucky standing there. A silhouette shifted in the dark just next to him. It looked like a tree coming down, but Dad swears he saw massive pearly white eyes beneath branch-like antlers, and a giant toothy maw. He says the antlers lifted Bucky up, up above the canopy, never to be seen again.

And he tells me that's why the tree is broken. Because the tree is Bucky and his lame arm is the broken branch. He says that the thing they found on the tree was "otherworldly," some kind of punishment for disrespecting the woods by killing that fawn. After he finished his usual spiel, I rolled my eyes and he dragged me back to the cabin.

The morning after, I saw a somewhat unsettling sight. Turns out Dad didn't stomp out the fire quite enough, and a few trees got burned up in the aftermath. The broken tree, now charred and blackened, held something new on display.

A talisman fashioned from bone and twigs, with bright ginger hair in the center.