

# Opossum

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It was unfortunate, but there it was, an opossum slinking across the field.

“Don’t let it get away,” Henry, Joe’s oldest brother said, pushing Joe’s shoulders.

Joe took a step backward. The tall, untended olive grass stuck to his bare shins like ribbons of a wet sheet until Matt, the middle brother, jammed a knuckle into the back of his ribcage and shoved him forward.

Matt had described in detail what he was supposed to do. Moving towards it, not running, but not walking either, Joe saw the ugly wedge-head, the gray-black lump of its body and that huge pink rat tail. Twenty feet away when Joe actually decided to go through with it—that he had to go through with it—that this was some rite of passage necessary to spend time in the woods with his brothers.

He angled himself to come up from behind the animal, and five feet away he leaned his shoulders parallel to the ground, sighted the top of its head and swung his fist. He was expecting the creature to take a finger but he felt his knuckles knock against something hard before blindly running over it. Then he heard his brothers’ voices coming closer.

“You did it,” Henry yelled.

“I can’t believe it,” Matt said.

When Joe opened his eyes and looked back the opossum was on its side with its legs straight out to the side like a sun bloated carcass. Both his brothers, blond boys themselves, were shuffling in a circle over it.

“Pick it up,” Matt said.

Joe, still feeling a surge of adrenaline, kept his legs bent and ready to spring to the side as he walked to where his brothers were standing. He leaned over and wrapped his fist around the opossum’s tail. It was thick, warm, and covered in soft downy hairs. A musk smell wafted up to his nose as the animal hung limp in front of him like a flag.

“Good Job,” Henry said, and that was like a gift to Joe. Henry was fourteen. He was the leader of the hierarchy. Joe was the bottom. Praise rarely came his way. It felt good. Satisfying. Then Matt kicked the toe of his shoe against the back of Joe’s locked knee and Joe almost buckled over with the opossum in his arms.

“Put it in here,” Matt said, dragging over a rusty old rabbit cage long abandoned in the field. When Joe lowered the opossum into the cage it rolled over and hissed when it touched the bottom. Henry latched the cage door and both brothers picked up the cage and carried it by the handles between them. When the opossum’s canine teeth jutted out Joe felt like they’d captured something giant and terrible. Then his brothers walked to the pond.

Their father had driven around town with a flatbed truck after the holiday several years before and gathered up all the old Christmas trees by the curb and had the boys throw them in the pond to create artificial hiding spots for the fish that he’d stocked each year. Joe couldn’t look at the pond without imagining the needleless trees at the bottom, how the bare branches reach up like arthritic fingers.

At the edge of the small wooden pier Henry tied a long length of rope to the cage so the extra line coiled under his right foot.

“Wait, let’s let it go,” Joe said, but as usual, his brothers didn’t listen to him.

They rocked the cage back and forth between them. The opossum hunkered to the bottom of the cage and hissed as it swayed between Matt and Henry who tossed the cage through the air. The hissing stopped when the cage hit the water, like the quick fizzle of a match being snubbed out between spit-dabbed fingers.

Henry picked up the rope and let it slide through his hands until the cage had found the Christmas trees and the line went slack.

There were birds in the trees at the far end of the pond chirping to each other. Big white clouds drifted across the sky. Joe's brothers were intent on watching for air bubbles rising to the surface. The three of them were quiet on the dock for a long time.

"How long's it been?" Matt finally asked.

Henry looked down at his Velcro watch. "Seven and a half minutes."

"Pull it up," Matt said.

Joe inched closer as his brothers hauled in the rope. The wet twine left a puddle on the wooden dock. When the cage was pulled out of the water the opossum was twirling in manic circles and rattling the cage door with each swipe of its tail.

"How's it still alive?" Matt asked.

Henry checked his watch again and pushed the cage off the dock with his foot. "We'll wait ten minutes this time."

The three of them stood peering into the pond. Joe waited for air bubbles with them, like this were what would pay for his brothers' acceptance of him. Part of him felt sick. Another part of him curious if the animal was still circling the cage, still fighting to get out. It was imagining the senseless struggle that shifted something in him.

"Look there," Joe said and he pointed to the water right off the dock. When both his brothers bent down for a better look Joe stepped back, placed a hand on each of their butts and pushed.

As his brothers crashed into the water Joe grabbed the rope and started pulling it in. It was heavier than he thought but it was lifting. It might not be too late. He pulled until he felt it get impossibly heavy. Matt grabbed hold of the line in the water. Then Henry did as well and they both began pulling, dragging Joe towards the water and everything it held on and under the surface.