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Traps

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The traps had been good to her that day. Five muskrat, three a good size, and the two smaller ones would still get a decent price. The pelts were thick and full because the winter had been cold. Joey was proud that she could judge a good pelt and she usually came. pretty close on guessing the price the dealers would settle for."

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Traps

by Helen Borriello

The traps had been good to her that day. Five muskrat, three a good size, and the two smaller ones would still get a decent price. The pelts were thick and full because the winter had been cold. Joey was proud that she could judge a good pelt and she usually came pretty close on guessing the price the dealers would settle for.

It had been a good day, except for that last trap. She had placed it too far from the water and when she got to it the 'rat was still alive, trying to chew its paw free. She had had to kill it with the heavy pole her father had taught her to carry. She struck at the 'rat again and again, and each time she lifted the pole a sickening, dizziness came over her so that the blow only wounded the animal. The pleading look in the 'rat's eyes as she pounded at its head made her sick. Finally, with one last grotesque spasm, the 'rat lay rigid at her feet, and she threw up on the fresh snow. She hated herself for being sick. Carefully, she covered the mess with the clean snow as if the snow could hide her shame.

Night had begun to descend over the whole valley and everything was shaded grey. Even the old house with its beaten siding was a grey hulk. There was never time or money to paint it — at least not both at the same time. If Pa had

the time, he was out fishing or hunting; and if there was extra money, he needed a new gun or his reel was on its last spin.

Joey knew what was really important and the old grey house didn't bother her as it did her sister and her mother. The house was at the far end of the hollow up against the steep mountainside. It had been built there near the rock wall more than seventy years before to offer protection from the wind that swept up the valley in the winter.

The light grey smoke circling its way into the darker sky meant a good hot fire in the cook stove. She moved along faster, eager for its warmth. As she came close to the house, the only signs of life were the square patches of yellow from the windows on the grey snow. Darkness had sealed off the entrance to the valley.

She went around to the back shed just off the kitchen. There, she put her catch on the old saw table and sat on the wooden bench to take off her boots. The kitchen door was ajar: her mother was frying meat at the stove, Pa at the kitchen sink washing up, the soapy water running off his elbows as he scrubbed his face. He was in his undershirt, his red, gold hair wet to his face.

Joey could hardly wait to show him her catch, tell him about the new tracks she had seen over by the old mill. She hoped he would help her set some more traps there.

Then they could walk along the creek and talk, and not be interrupted by Mamma and Mary Ellen.

Joey was aware of their voices, but not until she heard her name did she begin to listen. Her mother said, "You know, Charles, it's time Jo-Ann started wearing a brassière."

"Now what would she be wantin' that for? Joey's just a baby."

"Because the boys in town are starting to pay attention. Jo Ann's not a child, she's becoming a young lady."

"What boy'd be paying 'tention to Joey? She's more a boy'n a girl, stronger'n most o'them town boys too. You'll be makin' a sissy out of her like you did Mary-Allen. All them flouncy clothes...."

Mary Ellen came to help set supper on, complaining as usual, "Where's Joey? She never does anything in the house. She's always out with those stupid traps."

"What Joey's doin's important," Pa defended Joey. "She carts all the firewood, don't she? You just be glad you're in here where it's warm, helpin' your Mamma."

"Mary Ellen's right, Charles," her mother said. "Jo Ann should share some of the housekeeping chores. No man's going to want a wife who can't cook or keep a decent house." The clatter Mary Ellen made setting the table kept Joey from hearing any more. She didn't want to anyway. Her mother was right. She had felt the swelling

Helen Borriello, a junior and an English major, is going to teach and write.

of her breasts under the covers at night.

She searched through the rag bag her mother kept in the back shed and found a torn sheet, then walked through the kitchen and up to her room, hiding the sheet under her shirt. She didn't speak to any of them.

In her room Joey hung her heavy wool jacket on the peg by the door, then took off the flannel shirt she wore even to school. Finally, she stripped away the boy's undershirt to expose her bare body. Then she tore the sheet into long strips, wrapped them tightly around her chest and caught the end with a large safety pin. When she was satisfied that she was again flat, she put the undershirt and flannel shirt back on and went down to the kitchen where the others had already started to eat.

"Pa," she said, "I got five 'rats today. Three are real nice."

Pa was pleased. "That's fine, Joey."

"Had to kill one. Boy, was I glad I took the pole with me, like you said!"

"You hit him a good one, like I told you?" Pa would have been disappointed if he thought she'd made the animal suffer.

"I sure did, Pa. He was out like a light."

Mary Ellen made a gagging sound. "How can you talk about such things at the table, Joey?"

Her mother was upset. "That's no way to raise a girl, Charles. Teaching her to kill things."

"It's all right, Mamma. Let's just eat now." Pa always let her think she was right.

The winter stayed cold and the trapping was good. One day Pa brought home a bushel of oranges from the railroad produce yard. Each orange was wrapped in soft, purple paper that looked like the iris that grew down by the creek in the spring. In the hollows around the oranges were dozens of fresh pecans. In the long evenings, they sat in front of the fire in the living room while the winter wind beat against the house. Pa tore rags into strips and forced them into the cracks with a butter knife, but the wind only found another place to chill the warm room. Pa would score an orange with his pocket knife; starting at the top, pull the

skin away to bare the white membrane that covered the fruit. Then he broke the orange into sections and gave half to Joey and as they bit into their orange, Pa told stories about ghosts, or train wrecks, or Joey's favorite, about the man Pa had found dead in the dark pine grove behind the hunter's cabin. Sometimes the stories scared her, then Pa would put his arm around her, and tell a funny story to make her laugh; then laughing, they threw the quartered orange peels onto the hot coals and the heat sent the smell of orange peel all over the room. The taste of oranges in their mouths and the smell of orange peel made the wind outside less scary.

Joey wore the bands around her chest, even at night, sure they would prevent her body from changing, but, each time she peeled them off to take her bath, she knew they weren't enough.

When the first signs of spring showed, it was time to take up the traps. Once the 'rats lost their thick undercoat, the skins were worthless.

The first day Joey was home from school, she packed a picnic and a thermos of hot coffee. Pa brought the burlap bags from the barn, tied them on the sleds, and each pulling a sled, they started down the valley. They spent the morning taking in Pa's traps. Pa pulled them up and Joey put them into the bag along with the stakes. When they were finished, they tied the lumpy bags on one of the sleds, and headed downstream to the old mill.

"This is where I had my first trap line," Pa said. "I sure didn't do as good as you done this year. 'Course, I didn't have no expert to help me." He grinned so Joey knew he was just teasing.

"See here, Joey, been a rabbit by here. You can tell spring's on the way. Look at how the snow's melted down, just since we started out." He touched the ground where there was a bare spot. "Feel how the ground's gittin' warm? The earth always knows what's coming, Joey. Begins to get ready long 'fore people notice."

Joey put her hand beside Pa's on the earth. "The ground gits ready for spring same as the mare gits ready for birthin' a foal," Pa added.

"Come on, Pa, let's eat lunch

at the old mill before we start pullin' my traps."

At the mill they climbed to the second story of the millhouse, above the grindstone, where they looked out across the fields and could just barely see the mouth of the valley, but not the house up at the far end.

While they were eating, they threw bread crumbs to the sparrows who were making bright little noises below. Juncos and a nut-hatch flew down from the pines until, suddenly, one squawking blue jay scattered the smaller birds in all directions.

"It's all right, Joey," Pa said, "Nature makes a balance, sometimes it just don't appear kind to us humans."

When they climbed down from the mill, Joey caught her snowpants on the branches of the thorn apple trees. Pa was already across the creek. "I'm caught, Pa. Wait for me!" Joey yelled.

"Just turn around and pull your pants off the thorns. You aren't going to start acting silly, are you?" Pa called from across the creek and he started away. Finally, Joey yanked her pants free and ran to catch up with him, then they started to pull up her traps.

The season was over and the next day the trader was coming to buy the last of the furs. That evening Pa took Joey to the hotel barroom with him. The local men were there, poultrymen, farmers, and railroadmen like Pa. Some had brought their older sons along. "Hey Charlie," called Jock van Den Haag as they came up to the bar, "remember my oldest boy Clarence? He's logging up on the ridge now. Foreman tells me he's gonna be one of the best loggers this county's ever saw."

"What good's loggin'?" Sam Howell interrupted. "Ted here's goin' up to the Ag college. Won a scholarship. You ain't got no boys, have you, Charlie? Too bad."

"My Joey's the best son a man ever had. Caught near fifty rats in her own traps this winter. Why, only a couple weeks ago she clubbed a rat an' never even flinched. Ain't that right, Joey?"

"Sure did, Pa," Joey said, pleased.

But now the other boys didn't treat her the same way. She knew

they were telling jokes and kept looking over to make sure she didn't hear. They'd look her way, then turn back, nudge each other and laugh. She walked over to them when Teddy Howell was telling about the interview he'd had up at the college. "You shoulda seen them wimmen up there. Got tits big as muskmelons." Then he saw Joey and snickered, "Beat it, Joey, this here's man's talk."

Spring was in the valley when Joey began to dream of fishing. Matt Wells and Henry Baker from down the road dropped in when Joey and Pa were looking over sportsmen's magazines and cata-

logues. They'd been going fishing with her and Pa as long as she could remember. Matt turned a page in the catalogue with new metal poles and all kinds of fancy flies. "Look here, Joey," Matt said, "here's some stuff you'd like."

"That fancy stuff's only for women and city slickers," Pa said, "not for good fishermen like Joey."

Next day was the first of the season. Joey and Pa stayed up late putting everything in order so they could get an early start. They put rubber patches on their hip boots, and Pa helped Joey make trout flies with red feathers and tiny silvery flashers. The nets they'd put away in the fall in good shape had holes in them so they worked

the shuttle and silk to repair them. Joey went to bed excited and it was a long time before she could fall asleep.

She woke up early with a pain that was different from anything she had known before, sharp and drawing at the base of her belly. She sat up in bed, feeling dizzy, then saw the blood spots on the sheet. She stood up and walked across the cold floor to the mirror. Slowly, she undid her pajama top and let it drop. Then very carefully she wound the bindings from around her chest and dropped them too. When she had pulled the last strip away she looked down at her small breasts and saw the tears fall on them.

