Winnie’s Tale

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by Adrienne Lyles

The kitchen's always been my favorite place. Small an dark an warm from all them bodies inside an the stove burnin. We always in there, me an Daddy an Georgie an Michael, all talkin an eatin, cozy-like. Georgie jus noddin his head an giggin, he too little to understand much. Kitchen always smellin so nice, sweet an greasy, like Mama's fried onions an pies, but kinda with the sharp smell of the stuff she cleans up with. Mama's summer smell, too, kinda clean an sweaty. Mama's cookin's the best, all the people in town always sayin so. Mmm, good cookin, Thelma, gimme jus a little bit more. An mama always so nice, always givin, an sometimes ain't much left over for me. I always like it so much too, you know.

Jimmy an I sat at the kitchen table eatin seconds of Mama’s rhubarb pie, still so hot it burned that little flap of skin just behind my front teeth. Georgie was still workin on his mashed potatoes, laughin an smearable em all over his chubby little face. Daddy usually cleans him up, but he an Michael was workin late at the garage.

"From the way you two been eatin up that pie, no one’d believe you just finished a plate of ribs," Mama says laughin, busy washin dishes. "Lookin at your little body, Jimmy, I can't imagine where you'd hold so much food." Mama was wearin the apron Daddy got her for her birthday. It was white an spotless, just like her best tablecloth only with little blue flowers all round the edges. But it was so hot in the kitchen, she kept pullin up its bottom an wipin her forehead with it. “You been quiet tonight, Jimmy. Somethin the matter?”

“No. Just too hot, I guess,” Jimmy says, pushin a little piece of crust round his plate with the fork. Jimmy been eatin over most of the summer, since his ma died and his dad don't really cook no more.

“Boy, you got that right. Weatherman say it's supposed to be the hottest week ever.” Mama starts shakin her head as she dries her thick hands in a ragged old towel. I get up an put our dishes in the empty sink, tellin Mama I'll be in before dark.

We went out to shoot cans back in them woods behind his dad’s shed. Them cans so banged up already, but Jimmy just keeps usin em over an over. Daddy gave me my own gun, Christmastime. Mama said, but that's a boy's toy there now, give her dolls or somethin. Not for me, though. Daddy got himself a rifle, too. Shoots birds an things an Mama cooks em up.

“Damn, it's hot out here,” Jimmy says. It was spooky-like, the sky all cloudy an the air so thick you could feel it. All them ugly crows goin crazy, flappin round the trees. Usually hard to hear anything, them squawkin an all. But they was kinda muffled now, an soundin far away.
“Wouldn’t be so bad if there was a breeze,” I said, sittin down in the steamin grass to clean out my shoes. Little rocks from the road over to Jimmy’s got in the holes an started burnin my feet. Mama always sayin girls shouldn’t be wearin such tattered shoes, but Daddy lets me. They usually keep my feet cool, water from the grass ticklin my toes an all.

“Least you don’t got long hair.” Jimmy brought his gun up with those skinny little arms an aimed at a Pepsi can, them shoulder blades stickin out of his t-shirt like a bird’s wings. “I don’t know how girls can stand havin long hair. It’d make the back of your neck sweat.” He missed and waited for me to take my turn. “My mama, she had long hair. She even used to let me braid it. It would all end up in knots, but she always let me do it anyway.”

I stood up. It was hard to get a good grip, my hands stickin to my gun funny. “That Susie Ray, she got the longest yellow braids I ever did see. Sometimes I just wanna get Mama’s sewin scissors an cut em right off when she answers Miss Little’s questions just right.” I shot down the Pepsi can from the old tree stump an aimed at the one next to it.

“You know, Winnie,” Jimmy says, “I thought long hair looked pretty on you.” He bent his head an shuffled his foot in the grass.

“Aw, come on, Jimmy.” I remember Daddy pullin my ponytails, sayin they made me look silly. Once when I was real little, I heard Daddy tell Mama he never wanted a baby girl. Mama told him to take it back. But Daddy ain’t so bad, always takin me hunting an stuff. “I wouldn’t want to be like all them white girls, anyway.”

I let Jimmy take my next turn. Then I hear Rudy an them big boys hootin an swearin, comin close from down the road.

Rudy always pickin on Jimmy. He more Michael’s age, but Rudy picks on him too cause Michael kinda slow sometimes. Rudy ain’t got but one eye workin. Other one faded, lookin off funny. All them boys at school afraid of him. Say he messed up that eye fightin with his crazy pa that used to beat dogs an stuff, sayin they was evil spirits. But no one ever talks bad about his pa when Rudy’s around cause Rudy’ll give em a serious whuppin. I guess his pa got real wild a couple days ago an a white van had to take him away to some kind of institution. We ain’t seen Rudy since, until now.

“Well, lookey here,” says Rudy, near outa breath from runnin. He a mighty big boy, though not much fat on him. “Jimmy an his girly-friend shootin cans!”

“Shut up, Rudy,” I say, turnin to shoot again. “You’re just jealous cause Jimmy an I both shoot better than you.”

“Oooh, Jimmy needs a girl to stick up for him,” says the skinny one now caught up. His voice just too low for that little body. Sounds like he’s got a burp caught in that throat, gonna come out all stinky any minute now. So I start laughin.

Rudy crosses them thick arms above his belly. “Just like my pa
always sayin, things never change much round here.” Rudy got scars on
them arms like a map. They all glistenin now like orange puddles an
streams flowin down his dirty skin.

The fat boy finally gets caught up an starts laughin at Jimmy an
callin him a sissy.

I go over and shove him. He gets this funny look on his face as he
trips and falls over an old root stickin up out of the grass. His body jiggles
when it hits the ground and I point the gun at his head. “Why don’t you
just get off Jimmy’s property and leave us alone?” He looks up at Rudy, not
smilin no more.

“He,” Jimmy says, his eyebrows bent and all. He always tellin me
not to do his fighting for him. It ain’t that Jimmy can’t fight. He just don’t
want to. So I don’t shoot. Just scare him a little.

The short one stays laughin at the fat one as he tries to get up, but
Rudy’s all serious. “Boy, Jimmy,” he says all squinty-eyed, “your girly-
friend sure thinks she’s tough.”

“She ain’t my girlfriend. How many times I gotta tell you?”

Rudy smiles and pulls a gun out from under his shirt, the armpits
stained yellow. Rudy always flashin his BB gun around, but he don’t never
shoot. I bet he couldn’t hit a horse if it was two feet away from him. But
this ain’t his BB gun. It’s a different one, all crusty an lookin like it’s about
ready to fall apart. Rudy starts touchin it like it’s some kinda prize or
somethin. Them other two lookin at the gun, all surprised.

“You know what this is?” Rudy says.

“Yeah,” I say, “it’s some old rusty thing that don’t got no chance of
hittin nothing.” It was kinda funny-lookin like the one Grampa got from
the war.

“My pa gave it to me,” Rudy says, all dreamy-like.

I wanna ask him if his pa gave it to him before or after he was
shipped to the funny farm, but I look over at Jimmy and know to hold my
tongue. “Why don’t ya try shootin it?” I say. I can feel sweat runnin all
down my back now. Like usual, Rudy don’t do nothing.

Then we all hear Daddy’s car pullin up the road. Not many cars
come through at dinertime, everybody home already.

Rudy puts the gun in a back pocket of them baggy jeans, all brown
an full of holes. “Hey,” he says, scootin over and nudgin me. “Better get
home to your daddy an your loser brother.” He twits his face all funny an
sticks out his tongue. This close his breath smells like that slaughterhouse
down by the school.

“Don’t you be talkin bout my brother!” Rudy got on a tank top an
when I pull away I think his skin’s gonna come right along with me. I aim
at him now an imagine shootin his other eye out so he’d just have that
funny one lookin off into nowhere. “Michael can beat you stupids up. He’s
older than any of you.”

Michael really is smart inside. It’s just hard for him to show it, so
he gets into trouble a lot. Mama says he was born with a sickness that makes him slower than a lot of other boys. One night he snuck Daddy's car out with Susan, that girl with all them tight t-shirts. Michael always lookin those nipples. All sophisticated like, she shavin now, legs smooth an glistenin. Couldn't walk them shorts much tighter. Drove that car straight into a ditch. Another time got in a fight with Old Red Perkins. Michael told Daddy that Old Red ain't paid him for detasselin. He been helpin out Daddy at the garage ever since.

"You just all talk, Winnie," Rudy says, his eyes gettin red now. Sweat's drippin into them, but he pays it no mind. "All talk an no balls, just like your stupid brother." He puts his sticky arm round Jimmy now. "You don't got no balls either, Jimmy, do ya? Big baby shootin with girls." Jimmy pulls away. He's sweatin like crazy, lookin like he's about ready to pass out.

"Come on, Jimmy," I say, "let's go home. We can make lemonade or somethin." It's gettin real cloudy now, an the air's even thicker. Usually you can smell them pigs from that farm behind Jimmy's house, but there wasn't no smell in the air at all.

"Go on ahead," Jimmy says. "I ain't done shootin yet." So I start walkin, leavin them stupid boys bickerin behind me.

"Hey Winnie," Rudy says. I keep movin, hearin Jimmy shoot down more cans.

"Winnie, I'm talkin to you." Then Rudy comes up behind an spins me round. "I got somethin to show ya." He starts grinnin, them teeth stained from all his smokin. But them ones next to his front two, they sharp like I ain't noticed before.

"I am not interested in anything you got to show me," I say in my best Susie Ray voice, nice an calm so maybe he'll leave me alone, an I keep lookin straight down that gravel road. I swear you could see the heat wavin over it like a flag.

Now them cows in the field next to my house was just layin down near the fence by the road, not doin nothin. Weren't even swattin their tails to keep all them flies away. All of a sudden Rudy goes up by that fence an pulls his pants down. I mean, he ain't got no underwear on or nothin.

"Hey!" he yells out, gettin the other boys' attention. "Look here!" Now he holdin on to his thing an aimin it at the cows. I ain't got nothin to say, I ain't never seen one of them before. Them other boys come runnin up, but they stop laughin when they see what Rudy's doin. I'm thinkin Rudy's gonna pee on them cows, so I'm tellin him to quit and all. But instead he pees on that fence like there's no tomorrow, just a neverendin stream.

I was waitin for the fence to sizzle or smoke or somethin, but nothin happened. Instead, Rudy starts movin his body a little an smiles real big. I swear, that electricity was goin through his thing into his body, and he was
lovin it.

I couldn't stop starin. It looked just like them sausages Daddy burned on the grill last fourth of July. Next thing I know Jimmy got my arm and is heading me home.

“Rudy,” Jimmy says as we walkin away, “you crazy. Just like your pa.”

I hear Rudy stop peein an I turn around. “What was that you said?” Rudy says. He got one hand round his thing, all dark an limp, massagin it. I'm thinkin it must feel like rubber.

“I said you're as crazy as that pa of yours. Maybe even more.” Rudy got a look on his face I ain't gonna soon forget, like someone came out of nowhere and punched him real hard in the stomach. But he don't say nothin.

Now that heat was goin to Jimmy's head so I grab him and we start runnin back home. Rudy don't even come after us, just watches us with them other two.

Me an Jimmy go round back an come in through the kitchen just as the thunder's startin up. Daddy just finished paintin the house white, everything but the door. Still peelin and yellow, dirty from when we come in from playin, before Mama makes us wash our hands to eat.

It's even hotter inside, the room still burnin from the oven. Daddy sittin at the head of the table, big like a king, eatin the dinner Mama saved.

“Where’s Michael?” I say, my t-shirt stickin to my body. I settle in the chair next to Daddy, the crooked one by the window, got that way from Michael always leanin back. My Mama, she got eyes like a hawk, lookin at my BB gun. She don't like that stuff at the table, so I put it underneath and try to catch my breath.

“He's still at the garage. I'm gonna pick him up later.” Daddy wipes barbeque sauce from round his mouth. “What's the matter, Winnie?”

I can hear Rudy and those boys closer now, shoutin. “Nothin, Daddy.” Daddy don't like it when people run away from a fight. I close my eyes and see Daddy puttin those big faded hands round Rudy's neck. They so big his fingers overlap, them dirtied nails closin round each other again and again. I picture Rudy's face all green and bloated, like them dead frogs laid up by the creek last spring.

“Are you sure, darlin,” Mama says, sittin down. She puts her thick arm round me, the skin kinda slippery, pullin me to her so-wide breasts. I hear thunder clappin outside. “Come on, Jimmy, sit down.”

But Jimmy stays standin in front of the window, his skin kinda gray. He got his right hand up by his mouth, chewin on them ragged nails again.

Everybody's all quiet for a while as the kitchen keeps gettin darker, the air charged from the storm. Those three boys are arguin just outside the window now. Rudy gotta have the filthiest mouth I ever heard.

“You know, Thelma,” Daddy says, takin a drink, “someone oughta
shut that Rudy up once and for all.” He laughs a little into his water glass.

“Well, these children ain’t going nowhere til that storm passes through,” Mama says.

Jimmy drops his arm from his mouth and without sayin nothin turns round an walks outside. He just ignores me when I tell him he don’t know what Rudy’s up to, so I grab my gun and follow him out.

Rudy got his back toward us. He swingin his gun, liftin it away from his body, then bangin it at his side. When them other two boys see Jimmy come out, they go runnin back down the gravel road. Rudy yells a bunch of nonsense after them, wavin his gun around. He never bothered bucklin that old leather belt of his and it sticks out from his body, floppin around as he moves.

I touch Jimmy’s arm. “Jimmy, come on back inside.” I wanna get in before Rudy notices us.

Then Rudy turns around. When he sees Jimmy he smiles real big and aims the gun at him. “Hey, Jimmy, wanna go shootin cans?” Rudy sweatin like a dog, his one eye goin wild, lookin everywhere while that other one just stays still.

Rudy and Jimmy stare at each other. I’m thinkin to myself that there ain’t no way Rudy’s old gun can fire. It’s just too old.

But then Rudy moves the gun real quick and shoots the kitchen window. There’s a huge crash as the glass shatters, pieces flying everywhere. Mama screams from inside. “Fooled ya, sissy!” Rudy’s laughin like crazy, his other arm holdin his stomach. “Hey Michael, why don’t ya come on out here with your sister an Jimmy-boy! I got somethin to show ya!” Rudy points the gun at Jimmy again. The thunder’s loud now, real close.

It finally starts to pour with Jimmy just standin there, not a look on his face. I put up my BB gun an aim at Rudy. I ain’t never shot a person before, but I’m ready to. Jimmy still don’t move. I yell at Rudy one more time.

Rudy shoots again. This time, he hits Jimmy. At first I can’t tell, Jimmy just stands there with his hands over his middle like he got a stomach ache. He moves his lips a little but before he can say anything he falls down. Water splashes up from the ground when he lands, but it ain’t a hard fall like I always imagined happens when people get shot. It was more like Jimmy just was very, very tired and laid himself on the ground to go to sleep. But I knew when his arms fell to his sides and his thin white t-shirt was stained red. Jimmy didn’t move. I don’t know if I started cryin then. It coulda just been the rain.

I was screaming for someone to come help Jimmy as I aimed my gun at Rudy. When he started laughin an aimed right back, I didn’t care any that it was my BBs against his bullets. Jimmy was my best friend.

But before I can do anything, Daddy comes round the side of the house and grabs Rudy, holdin him in a great big bear hug. He grabs real tight that wrist holdin the gun. “Drop the gun now, Rudy,” Daddy says.
“Ain’t gonna do you no good to shoot her. You’re already in a world of trouble.”

Rudy squirms all over but Daddy holds on. “My wife’s gone and called the police,” Daddy says. Rudy keeps fightin. “They’re already comin, Rudy. Now just drop the gun.”

Rudy stops movin around now but that eye still goin crazy. Daddy holdin him so tight, just towerin over him like he was a little child. “Go on, now,” Daddy says. Rudy smiles an lets the gun fall.

Daddy keeps holdin on to him. “Now you can put the gun down, Winnie.”

“But...” I’m still aimin. Daddy gotta know I’m strong, not like a little girl. “I just...”

“Winnie, come on now,” Daddy says, not mad at all. “You need to take care of Jimmy.” Mama’s out of the house now, holdin on to his limp body.

I move my gun down by my side. When Mama sees me coming, she stands up and moves away. I kneel down beside Jimmy and lift him a little so he can lay on my lap. I ain’t never held a boy before and Jimmy is so heavy in my arms. I put his arms back on his stomach and wipe that water that’s pooling by his eyes. I give him a little kiss on the forehead and hold him while we wait for the police to come.