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The Camp

BY SARAH WEAVER

My cousins and I ran through the tall grass, weaving through trees, pigtails flying. We'd played Red Rover and hide-and-go-seek all morning. Hunger whined but noon would bring hot dogs. We reached our aunt's camp and slowed down. We were looking for our cousin Jonathan.

I leaned down to scratch a mosquito bite. I was freckled with them, and scabs from scratching. The more fun we had at our family's campground, the more trophies we won.

"Maybe he's in here." Gabby said, dumping dirt from her sandal. We climbed the front steps and opened the door. The Camp's rules were more about snakes and cow pies than knocking.

We heard voices.
It was dim, after the sunshine.
We huddled near the door, blind.
We didn't mean to eavesdrop. We 'd been taught not to interrupt.
I heard snuffling. One of us whispered, "Should we look?"

No time to answer.
Someone yelled, "But it's not fair! They were only babies!"

Aunt Loena was trying to be patient.
"Derrick, stop crying and listen to me," she said.
Her breathing was loud.

"Babies grow up and cause damage. We had to kill them now before they could grow up. We couldn't just let them go. I'm sorry, you hear me?"

Our eyes rounded and mouths opened.
I looked around the room for dead babies.
My eyes were adjusted now, but no babies or blood.
We silently stared at each other.

Edging to a different angle, I saw half of Derrick, lying facedown on the sofa.

"They were so cute!" Derrick howled, his almost-manly voice cracking. "They didn't do anything wrong!"

"But they would have, you have to believe me. I can't do this all day."
We hadn't noticed her voice getting closer until she appeared in the doorway.
She looked stressed.
We looked guilty.
"Girls, y'all should go play," she said.

I was the oldest. I cleared my throat. "What's wrong?"

She sighed. "Your uncle found a nest of armadillos under his camp. He had to kill them all. They burrow and mess the foundation up."

The sunshine wasn't as glorious.
The hunger wasn't as strong.
We sat on tree roots, lost in thought.

Babies could be killed if they were the wrong species. Teenage boys could weep if their hard exterior couldn't hold.