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Note:

The author composed this story in response to a prompt that constitutes the opening sentences. "Cousins" is, if you will, a proof of concept.

Cousins

Harmony Neal

Barney rolled out of bed later than usual. Looking down at the dead deer carcass he had taken as his lover, he realized that somehow and in some way he wasn't happy with his life. Perhaps it was time to finally move away from Wisconsin. Maybe go someplace where twenty beers a night was unheard of, somewhere without hunting and his cousins egging him on.

How had it started? With Bobby-John and Buck convincing him to put his finger in a chicken's butt. They said it felt just like a woman. That was fifth grade. Their barnyard degradations had multiplied in scale and scope over time. He did not want to remember what happened with those shaved sows or how they'd explained it to Pa and Uncle Pooter.

Barney could hardly think of himself as a virgin, though he'd never touched a woman's breast. What was it Buck had said last night? *A live deer's too dangerous, a dead one too stiff, if you want to get a real feel for a woman, break its legs.* Barney grabbed each hoof and pulled. It seemed he hadn't taken Buck's advice 100%, but the deer carcass itself was a sign he'd had a few too many. He'd thought he was beyond the barnyard days, beyond letting Buck and Bobby-John convince him to do immoral deeds.

He hoisted the doe over his shoulders and took her out to the meat shed, crunching through a foot of snow. Skinning and gutting, he worked himself into clarity. As he prepared to carve up deer steaks, he heard a low whistle behind him. "Wooo-wee! Looks like Barney's got himself a real pretty lady there." He ignored Buck's taunt and sliced the flank. "I do say, I hope you aren't going to try to feed any of the family that there tainted meat. Oh unholiest of unholies! Bobby-John, can you imagine sweet old Grandma biting into some deer jerky flavored with Barney's special sauce?" They snickered and hooted. Barney turned in time to drop his blade and catch a flying can of Budweiser.

Without thinking, he chucked the can at Buck's head. As the aluminum arched through the air, Barney recalled that chicken, and how he'd felt repulsed and attracted to the warmth of its insides, the way it twisted and flapped in Buck's hands, how after he'd pulled his finger out and saw how normal it looked, except for a faint oily sheen, he'd flailed into Buck, who dropped the chicken, and with one short-arm clothesline, had him on the ground, gasping for air as Buck and Bobby-John kicked the living shit out

Harmony Neal

of him.

The can made contact and shot out a stream of froth like fresh piss on the crunched up snow.

Barney ran.