

Them Trophies

The Jeff City county fairground is a holding pen for teens filling that emptiness with Bud Light and pictures of each other, but it's really a vacuum of worship. And what they need is in those woods out by Apache Flatts; they just have to come and see.

Margie is slurping it all in behind a Canon XL2 Camcorder on an aluminum tripod that takes her four minutes to set up because three boys are watching from the Junior class, and she is still wearing her school uniform pants from Friday. Their eyes might see through her to the chafing holes rubbed out in-between her khaki thighs as she bends over the equilibrium bubble of the tripod and straightens that sucker out, one leg at a time, letting her press badge dangle. Margie is bigger than all three of them boys. Their stares are bored gawks, not sinful ogles, but she's red all the same. Sometimes she fantasizes that the boys from school—any of them, with their sweet elbows and truck window tans and Grecian curls around their ears—had a camera they could look into and see her at any given moment; sitting on the sink shaving her ankles, eating a granola bar after school, hunched over a blue-lit keyboard. She feels chubby now, too heavy for her bones. She nuzzles into the viewfinder.

There, on the cake-walk stage bleachers, Jordania Stuckenschneider and Jezebelle Bernskoetter perch together while Jenny Schumacher snaps a picture of them on her pink flip-phone. Margie takes in the scene as b-roll for the documentary the city commissioned Jaegers to do. She shoots their volleyball bodies flush with the red borderlines of her camera display and then focuses centrally. She unscrews the quick release plate, sets the camera in the grey sponge interior of its handled shell-case, and approaches them. She slings the tripod over her shoulder after their initial glances. She slips her intern badge into her pocket.

“Howdy, ladies.”

She shows them her press badge, and says she'd love to put them on screen. They get real flattered real fast.

“Shame they got you workin' today—there's lots goin on 'round town.” Jordania's voice is a sing-song and Margie gets comfortable. “Hey, you still goin' to film school next year?”

“Sure as shit.”

Jordania smiles, twirls some hair. Jenny's carting a stuffed rabbit propped against the skin of her hip, stiff and dirt-brindle. Their lack of cover-up makes Margie feel hot in her long sleeve denim shirt with "JC Productions Inc." on the breastpocket.

"Whatcha exactly been conductin' interviews about anyhow?"

"The deer statues being stolen from everyone's lawns and dropped off on South Country Club. It blocked the road to the rifle range—did you hear?"

They smile. "Yeah, we heard."

"And a lot of taxidermy has gone missin', so. They think there's some connection to that woman who took to livin' in the Apache Flatts woods."

"We heard that too." The rabbit in Jenny's hand looks hot, its eyes look sweaty.

"And I just wanted to get, uh, any more information about it for a little project we're doin' for the city. Thought maybe you all would know something about it, I mean, 'cause the stunt y'all pulled in Coach's class last Thursday, and 'cause of that rabbit."

Jordania's bottom row braces fall out her grin. "You came to the right ladies." And she lets Margie clip the mic to her spaghetti strap.

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The commission is complicated, so Jaegers hasn't 'splained the minutia to her, just the deadline. But she's worked it out herself: the city council wanted some sort of consensus on if what this out-a-town squatter is doing to the property of the local men who make some type of living off fuana might just be illegal, and to a lesser degree, what kinda Rip Van Winkle this woman is to the impressionable girls in town. But truly, they want something for the city archives. Jeff City has become something of a commercial ghost town with a couple high profile murders, the old State Pen getting a spot on the travel channel, and its retired capital punishment gas chambers with all the victim's pictures in the hall outside now open, and you can take pictures in the chair. In the past three years, that field where that girl from the public high school buried all those cats and that kid had become a bit of a photoshoot destination. The city didn't sanction this, but sure didn't discourage it. If they're lucky, Margie thinks, this might end up a mass murder of teenage girls.

Jaegers' house is brick and mostly garage, which is where their operation is set up. Four Macs, a green screen, and lights: Jaegers jokes so often about them shooting pornos that Margie's

polite-harlequin laughter is a real chore. Sometimes folks come in for interviews; mostly Margie goes out. She's a deft grip and can carry most anything on her handlebars. Once, the year before, she met Jaegers on-site to shoot a promo for the local off-season firework sales. That shoot was the furthest she had carried a jib rig on a bike. They both arrived earlier than Bill of Bill's KaBooms, and Jaegers took the opportunity to give her what he declared "a lesson every woman in the business needs to learn," and he just stared at her school-crested polo shirt bosom for a few slow minutes. Margie could feel her each breast burning hot red like the end of a cattle prod then. She pivoted away once or twice, but he stuck with her and his chuckle made it a game. Margie tried to become the gravel. After, she only ever wears a baggy sports bra to work, one that lets gravity work, and she imagines her breast milk might come out curdled one day, if it comes out at all.

They are both gazing at the screen. Jaegers chews. She wipes pieces of wet Swisher Sweet off her shoulder. "That's a good shot." He leans further over her to point to the ferris-wheel sunset on the screen and she holds her breath. The wolf head trophy stares down on her with menace.

Jaegers used to drive semi-trucks but now he's a small-time producer. His one-man production company model requires interns. After a year, the apprenticeship she wants has slipped into some sort of partnership. Every once in a while, Margie's aunt passes a comment about all the time she spends alone with an unmarried adult man and Margie's daddy yells her silent about how Margie needs the money and Jaegers has better fish to fry anyway and then he goes back to Cardinals baseball.

Jaegers sits on his porch and drinks sweet tea while she edits in the garage, a screen door between them.

Margie has collected fourteen interviews in the last week. She sets the pocket tapes into the digital converter and listens to them unwind as the images move backwards across her Final Cut screen. In the playback of their interview, the girls' backwards expressions are uncanny; Margie lets her eyes rest on Jaegers' yappy Bichon Frise. She's a little piqued tonight, jittery. They cock their heads at each other.

The tape stops, the voices start. She taps spacebar pause. She plays her previous string of interviews first, ones she mostly got from classmates at Jacey Luetkemeyer's party. The montage of beautiful, braced faces of boys and girls begins.

"Some kinda medicine woman. Fixin' animals in the woods," the first head says.

Then the second head: "She's a survivalist—been livin' off

the land. She's got a *way*."

Another: "She has deer hooves for hands."

"I was driving down Old Highway 50. I stopped when I saw her. And she just called to me. Said my name. Knew me." The interviewee's mascaraed eyes brimmed with tears here and Margie cut this because it felt like peeking from a closet.

"I know yer makin' this documentary or some shit to get her run outta town." Margie's voice from off camera, muffled, something about, "No, it's a commission—doin' my job's all."

"Well, when Charla finds out about all this, I wouldn't wanna be on the wrong side of the camera."

Margie cuts this last part, too, and then the vague tapping in her mind: why is she trying to sanitize this story?

The Bichon Frise shakes and slides along the floor leaving a thin ribbon of wet scarlet. Margie gags, nudges the dog with her sneaker, and that's when Jaegers walks in, and he picks the Bichon Frise up and carries her deep into his house where Margie doesn't go. He comes back with a little coin of blood on his white undershirt and picks tobacco-pulp paper out of his teeth. "Women," he tells her.

Margie goes back to the tapes, now digitally converted. She intersperses the interviews of hearsay from boys, firsthand accounts from girls, and victim stories from old men. She plays back the county fair interviews; she likes these ones better because they've got Jordania and they're more true.

"We usually meet Charla in, well, we meet her at the beginning of the week and she, uh, gives us our next conservation project."

"Is she involved with the Missouri Department of Conservation?" Margie says offscreen.

"You could say that."

"Yeah, and then we meet back with her at the end of the week for a little recap of our work and some fellowship."

"It's a bit of a bible study."

Offscreen, Margie: "Does she actually have deer hooves for hands? Folks been sayin'."

"Naw, not anymore 'least. She's missin' a hand though—has a stub."

"She used to be a trucker."

Margie re-ran the last piece of information like her tongue on her teething wisdoms. Everyone living along the river, along Highway 70—the Boone County stretch enroute from Kansas City to St. Louis—is wary of a certain kind of truck driver. The kind that'll tip you right off the shoulder trying to signal you to flash them your tits. They might pick you up, tie you up, take you

across state lines. Margie knows this, but she's never sure what to make of lady truckers.

"That that Stuckenschneider girl?" Jaegers' finger jab into the screen startles Margie and her teeth scrape together. "God damn, she's growin' up fine. Jesus Christ."

Margie grinds her molars again to undo the tingles. "You saved or somethin'?"

"God and I have an understanding." Jaegers winks, and Margie imagines going home right then. But instead, she watches her most recent cut of the documentary in full.

The shots start at St. Charles High School in the Home Ec. course, which, under the tutelage of Coach Pip Schulte, took three semesters to morph into an Outdoor Education P.E. credit and then into Animal Cleaning 101. Margie is in the course, and she's earned a keen eye for subtext in her interviews by working for old men. The tape roles of Coach answering her questions, and Margie can see a flush of subtext when she replays the interview in half speed. It's too uncanny. She doubles the speed, listens close. She can still read him.

Coach really likes watching tall blondes cut into necks of animals. So, the first day of class, he brought in two injured rabbits and held their mounded bodies in his hands for his students to see, quivering and warm. They killed and dressed them, necks snapped easy as thumb-flicking a coin. Then a goose: Coach made sure the girls were watching real close as he slid a slit with the field knife into the exposed meat, peeling back the down, skin, fat, exposing the purplish muscles of the goose breast, cutting along the breastbone, flush against the y-bone, letting the breast meat curl into his hand like expectation. The Stuckenschneider girl gave Coach a look like she might field dress him, and he thought about this look and smiled all day and night. The next week, to Coach's delight, he only had to swerve a bit to clip a deer, a small doe, but she'd do. He strapped her to his truck, drove her to school, and hung her in the boys' old locker room, hocks spread, front legs tied together in dead supplication. The bed-sheet-white fur belly was too much for him not to touch. As they came, he told the students he was finding her ribcage, and even made the first incision himself. Then something happened. The Stuckenschneider girl and some of her friends—Bernskoetter, Luetkemeyer—cut the chords from the ceiling tying the doe's legs and Jordania took her up bridal-style, and like blonde-wigged automatons, they plaid-skirt marched through Coach and the football boys' gropings against their escape. Coach failed them, and the principal fined them for destroying school property, and

they never gave back the deer.

With a couple more interviews, Margie gets the information she needs to fuse together a climactic buildup. So far, lots of folks have lost their hunting trophies; the taxidermy shop has been clear cleaned out. She went there first, then to Arthur's Bait and Tackle shop bared of all in-season guppies, crawdads, tads, even earthworms. The Altenhofens' archery shop has no more bows, and Dudenhafer's shooting range has no more ammo. Then she went to find out more about something that happened on the Bruhners' land that folks were sure connected to Charla.

She bikes over and takes the ditch down into the Bruhners' and lurches back up onto the gravel road. The dead dogs are splayed in the front yard; projected slideshows from Coach's *America in WWII* class develop in her dark wet mind, piles of bodies and such. Both dogs' black-roan necks ripped thin red—the girls did a clean job. Margie can't feel too sorry.

It took Bruhner five red-faced takes, but she got his story. Initially, the rottweilers harassed the Schusters' goats, killed and ate one, so word got out about the Bruhners' dogs bein' bloodthirsty, and then the strangest thing: as if they conspired, the goats all disappeared. Some folks've been makin' the connection now: nomad woman in the woods, local girls actin' all types of ways, animals and property disrupted. People are confused, maybe hysterical, but Margie sees the *mise-en-scène* of it all now, some kind of biblical Noah for the deceased or soon-to-be-so creatures of Jeff City. She needs to get one last shot.

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Apache Flatts is deep down Old Highway 50. She bike-glides down a curve hill to the straight road through cow fields with watering holes and one Eden tree far off and a cool, smells-like-money manure scent just chemical enough to put her somewhere else: the city, the safari. Orange sky from the two suns, the greater in the sky and the less touching under it on the surface of the Mueller's cow pond. She passes the barn and the brick sarcophagus house where that daddy shot his one girl and maimed the other; she crosses herself here and imagines a Blue Virgin like she's been told. She remembers that braid-tail girl in the class under her at St. Alph's; her dad told her it weren't none of her business like he did when he adjusted his legs in his wheelchair and her eyes lingered. The priest shot a blessing from the pulpit to the girl's soul in purgatory and went on with the Mass. Margie's grandad used to have her parrot that they had pure *West*

German blood; she has not seen old men take responsibility for holocausts much.

It's dark by the time she passes the neon-lit gentlemen's club, a semi-truck parked out front. She wonders how them girls get into that anyhow. A haggard green sign announces "Apache Flatts, Unincorporated Township." Margie lets adrenaline carry her down the hill into the woods.

There is a doe—perhaps taxidermied—leaning against a tree with its arms crossed, John Deere cap pulled low.

She hauls her equipment quietly into the man-made clearing. The girls are lined up facing toward a fire, bare shoulder to bare shoulder, and Margie holds her inhale and softly releases her viewfinder. They are black silhouettes against the glowing orange; the screen jolts and juts looking for a focus, until Margie makes out what the girls are holding. A goat on a rope with a rasping bleat, a gnarly bobcat that used to be mounted at the entrance of the archery range, some kind of skunk, opossum, some other smallish mammals—dead or alive, she can't tell—and between the two girls on the end, about twelve or so rifles, balanced languid in their stringy arms.

She decides she's got to get closer for a better focus. She snaps her ankle in a hard mud tire track and jerks the camera's LED attachment on. "Shit." Five blonde heads swivel around at her, fronts follow. They have shorts on. Jordania is in the center. Margie flips off the light and in its absence the firelight flackers brutal against their bodies and their trophies.

Jordania's voice is a pressure keg release: "Hey, Margie!" She's actually pleased to see her and Margie cracks all ten fingers. "We're about to take a night-dip over in Murphy's Ford. Wanna join?"

Margie swallows phantom spit and chokes. Jezebel Bernskoetter tells her they got beer and pork rinds and the normalness of the invitation keeps Margie's bile from rising any higher.

"If you'll just wait a bit till we finished our meetin'," she adds.

"And turn off that camera—we're shy," one of the girls chimes in, and they all share a private giggle that finds its way through Margie's throat too.

"Let her film first—that's what she does."

That voice resounds, fried and full, off the woods and through the fire, collecting oakiness as it goes, and it vibrates Margie to her core.

"Go ahead," it continues.

Margie flips on the LED. A ghost semi-truck reflects it from deeper in the woods. She clips the Canon into the tripod mount and sticks the three legs together in the wet ground so she can

swivel a slow panorama of the trees, the fire, the repossessed hunting trophies planted in the ground, buck heads, doe bodies, a cougar, coyote pelts laid across the branches above the woman like a ritual wedding canopy. RAC focus in, she is sunsoaked and taut, white windbreaker sleeves pushed up and long pepper braid, stub-arm. Margie's camera unfocuses.

Then the choreography begins. Margie feels hot and sick at her own intrusion—like whenever she gets noticed in the girls' locker room—as she watches the girls split and circle the bonfire, arms extended in conscious ostentation of their trophies. One by one, the animals are laid at the shiny steel toe boots of this woman. Margie watches the line-up: fish frozen in time, woodchucks and skunks and such with dark matter for eyes, and a Frankenstein mix of a couple things with a mallard head. “We got a lone predator, huh.” The woman crouches to pet the bobcat, and Margie half expects it to arch into life.

“I know there's a Timber Wolf somewhere in this town. Got market intel tells me so.” Her voice is steady; even with Margie's years of listening to interview voices, she's having trouble explaining this one to herself. The woman grins and a false tooth catches the firelight and shines. “Which one y'all gonna git it for me tomorra?”

The girls whoop and holler.

Charla says, “Fine work this week.” Her grin gets coy. “Why y'all still waitin' around?”

The girls are a monolith of giggles.

Charla says, “Well, what is it?”

Jordania says, “It's prayer time, Miss Charla.”

Charla steps close to Jordania. “So it is.” And then she presses a flat white tab onto Jordania's pink tongue, then Jezebel's, then the rest of them. “Y'all know the rules, now. Git you some water from the cooler.” Charla looks at Margie, who's fingering her camera. “Heya, hun.” She steps toward her with whatever she's got still cupped in her palm. She can read Margie's lip quiver and whispers, “You ain't gotta do anything you don't wanna do tonight.”

The girls are gathering blankets and coolers and dancing down to the water. “C'mon, Margie!”

“But you better do what you wanna do tonight,” Charla says. Then she calls after them all, “Don't forget to catch some of them bullfrogs for me!”

Jordania smiles and beckons. Margie deposits the hankie-wrapped tape into her camera bag before she heads down to Murphy's Ford with the girls, imagining this is gonna win some

awards in a St. Louis indie film festival. And that night, she sees that their no-eat bodies aren't much different than those boys with their farmer tans, and she leaves her camera on the bank and sinks into or out of a fugue and wades through pond scum and catches some frogs.

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She's back at dawn for one last shot in the daylight. She made it to Jaeger's studio before she realized her tape wasn't in her bag. She'll have to edit the new footage today before noon and burn the whole thing on a DVD to deliver to Jaeger to deliver to city hall this afternoon. But she's got to get at least one shot of Charla and the semi. And maybe of her voice.

Charla doesn't look up. "Thought you might be back, miss Margie." She's kicked back in a lawn chair with a straw hat pulled low, frog leg bones on a paper plate in her lap, smoking. She lifts the brim of her hat to give Margie a wink.

Margie gives Charla the gray wolf head she took from Jaegers' wall before coming this morning; strapped it to her handlebars. Charla says she could just kiss her.

"So you're a taxidermy collector?"

Charla is nose-to-nose with the wolf head. "More of a trader."

"Of live animals too?"

"Some, sure. People'll pay a pretty penny for a bitin' cobra."

Charla grins at her. "But between you and me, hun, I'll trade jist 'bout anything." The wind stops blowing and the birds stop chirping while Charla grins and licks her gold tooth. Margie can feel her cheeks get hot, her thighs still hot and shaky from her fast pedaling. Then Charla's focused on the wolf again. "But only thing worth anything folks 'round here got came from the woods."

"I thought, well, some people thought you were some kind of animal rights type?"

"Animals got the right to be buyed and sold to the highest bidder, I do reckon."

"Oh."

"Course I ain't a believer in senseless killin'. That's why I'm more in the business of recyclin', see." Charla starts toward her truck with the wolf cradled in both arms. Margie follows her with her camera recording.

The semi-trailer and purple tractor unit with a bull of a wind deflector is a metal beast among the flora. Saplings are bent under the deep-tread willpower of all eighteen tires. The spiked hubs look like teeth. Multiple trees have come down for the clearing.

Charla opens the back and the door slides with a metallic clang that shatters the morning sounds. And a Bengal tiger pounces—Margie starts!—frozen mid-pounce, its muscles straining to extend claws that aren't there anymore, teeth gone too. The trailer is crowded with animals, Missouri woodland types and otherwise. Margie zooms in on a bundle of twenty elephant tusks. A Peregrine falcon flaps from its hanging cage, confused and longing in the sudden sunlight.

Charla throws her most recent acquisition into the open trailer, bodies and heads strewn and piled. The wolf's mean bead eyes disappear into the sea of it.

"So you aren't trying to save nature?"

"No ma'am, jist human beins." Charla turns and sees Margie and her camera, then she smiles. She belt-loops her one thumb and pushes her stub deep into her pocket and sways while she spits, a bobo doll that ain't never gonna fall. They cock their heads at each other. She smiles a wide flat smile that unzips in Margie a certain apathy about cameras and stories. She drops her camera.

Margie never knows what to make of a lady trucker, and Charla is no exception. Charla, however, makes a good guess about Margie.

"Well ain't you jist hustlin' for yer right to breathe." She spits tobacco real close to Margie's feet, poking that boundary. "Don't be so 'shamed you exist, honey bun." Margie stands real still. "Marge, do you make yourself exist?"

"No."

Charla's windbreaker catches the breeze; she is a dove. "I do."

Margie won't finish the documentary. She'll ride along to St. Louis in a semi-truck and film sun-prism shots of Jordania's hair in the wind, but she'll get real lost along the way, somewhere on Highway 70.

Margie won't end up going to film school after all of it.

She won't end up going nowhere she ain't taken.

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