

from THE NOVITIATE

This story takes place in a small Canadian prairie community in the 1940s. From time to time, the government would offer a small amount of money to people who helped control pests such as gophers. At that time, this practice was not only common but generally accepted. Some people today feel strongly that such practices are wrong because animals are being killed needlessly; however, others feel that such controls are necessary.

He took her with him, grudgingly, because his mother had said sharply, "Well, what if Stewie Grant can't go! Take your sister. I won't have you complaining under my feet all Saturday."

5 She trotted at his heels, back a pace, as was respectful. The paper bag was in his knapsack, but he let her carry the ball of string.

She dawdled deliberately in order to fill her heart with his fury if she could not fill it with his favor.

He said politely, as though he were speaking to somebody else's sister, "We ought to get lots of gophers today. It's a good day for gophers." And then the 10 topic enthralled him, and he went on with eagerness, forgetting. "Stewie Grant made \$3.48 with his gopher tails last month. You get three cents bounty for every tail. They eat the wheat. I figure if I make twelve dollars, I'll buy Bob Phillip's bike. His brother's getting him a new one."

15 "Judy Craig has a pet gopher," she said. "It lives under their front steps. It sits up and begs for nuts."

"Sure." He dismissed the subject. "The way I figure, a guy needs a bike. Bob Phillip gets to deliver handbills all the time on account of he's got a bike."

A gopher stood on tiptoe and watched them. "Stewie Grant got wenty-one gophers last Saturday. He uses twine. But I think twine slips. All right if you 20 grab him hard the first time, but they're tricky. They fight."

The gopher slid down the hill. He whistled.

"Judy Craig's gopher whistles like that," she told him. "He lets her scratch his head. He's exactly like a little dog."

25 "I figure we ought to get thirty gophers today anyways," he said. "It's early yet."

"You'd better stay with me the first time and see how it's done," he told her.

"This one will do," he said.

He made a sliding loop in the string and set it close around the hole. "Not 30 too close, though," he warned, "or he'll see it and dodge back." He led her back from the hole and they lay flat on the grass. "Away from him, the way the wind is moving," he explained, "so he won't smell you."

"Judy Craig's gopher has little hands just like a monkey," she said. "He sits on her shoe and holds nuts in his hands and eats them."

35 "Don't talk," he said. "You'll scare him."

Her leg was cramped and she wanted to move it, but she didn't. She looked at him and his eyes were steady on the gopher hole and she belonged beside him on the grass and was very happy.

40 "Got him!" He was shouting. She saw it then, and it was tiny, like Judy Craig's gopher, and rearing back with its tiny paws at the loop on its neck.

He screamed, "Stay back!" And she stood like a rock while he played the string into his hand and the little animal recoiled from him in terror, but fury, too, with its tiny teeth snarling in the sun.

45 And then he had swung it in a wide arc and it thudded on the ground, and struggled, and thudded again.

She did not move, but her stomach turned, and she thought she must lie on the grass and be sick.

"Why did you kill it?" she whispered, after a long minute. "Stewie Grant doesn't kill his, he just takes their tails and lets them go."

50 "That's cheating." He knelt on the grass and removed the tail. It came off easily, just a twitch. He was full of success. "I told you it would be a good day. Three cents already." He spoke briskly. "Now I'm going to set you up with a snare of your own." She went behind him, stumbling. She did not look at the dead gopher, but her body felt it through the ground.

55 He was expert now, talking in whispers. He found a new gopher hole, set the noose about it, drew her down-wind.

"Just sit tight. Let him get well out of the hole before you pull, but not too far or he'll get away. And bring him over to me when you get him. Just lead him on the string. I'll take the tails." He was excited, his eyes were pinpointed

60 with pleasure, sheer intoxication.

She was all by herself then, with the string in her hand. She could still feel the dead gopher in her body, and her throat was so tight that it seemed to stop her breath. She did not want to cry, but her eyes were dull. They could hardly see her brother, where he walked gaily on the grass.

65 She lay without moving for a long time. Her chest hurt, and her mind went running, for an instant, to Judy Craig's gopher, and she could see Judy scratching it behind the ear, and the way it leaned on Judy's hand. Then she did not think of that any more.

She felt a stir on her string, and her eyes saw the gopher nosing out of his
70 hole, and her hand yanked. But he was gone, dodging back to safety. She had pulled too soon.

She got up and draped the noose carefully once more about the hole. She went down-wind and lay still.

75 He came up slowly the next time, very slowly and suspiciously, turning his head around, but not seeing her, and coming up higher, a little higher, till his tiny face was clear of the ground and his paws were tiny hands on the grass. She yanked then, and she had him, high and hard; and he was a wild thing, darting and fighting on the end of her line.

She stood shaking on her feet and looked down at him. He was at bay,
80 turned to face her, a little gray animal with big teeth like Thumper the Rabbit, but snarling. Not as long as her foot, and in terror and hating her, with his little brown hands fighting the noose at his neck.

She was alone and crying and hated; but far down the grass she saw her brother, and he lifted his arm to her and waved, in the urgent friendship of this

85 one afternoon.

He was her dear companion, and she was running toward him in wild, sad ecstasy, dragging her sacrifice behind her.

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