

Photographing the Boys

I've been supporting myself on odd portrait jobs this winter. It's easy enough work, but it gets on my nerves the way the subjects want so badly to be breathtaking, unusual, gorgeous.

It's all I have, though, so when Dane calls one day and says, I've got one for you, I tell him, Okay, and I write down the place and time as he reads them to me. When I arrive, they're already there, wearing old-fashioned clothes and clowning around.

They have names. They've told them to me; there's a Sam and a Lewis, there's an Alan and maybe a Lee, but they're jostling each other and telling jokes, clamoring for my attention and smiling, so that I can't keep them straight.

They're noisy in the winter woods, their voices hard against the trickling of the snowbound stream behind us.

After a while I say, "All right, guys. Line up how you want."

They fix their caps or hike their pants up higher and some of them lean and wrap an arm around another and I look through the lens as they fall still, waiting for me to photograph them, and that's when my hands start shaking so hard their faces blur.

Because on the right side stands Death in a buttoned coat and a perfectly fitted hat and beside him, arms clasped round him, is Charm in a black stocking cap. Embracing Charm on the other side is Youth, slender and long-limbed. They both lean heavily on Death, and I can see the connection between all of them.

Want is in the middle, alone and hatless.

There is a space between Want and Pride, a snow-white space

leading to the forest beyond, and in this tree-trunked wasteland stands Sorrow, half smiling, an arm uncertainly raised to touch Pride's shoulder. Charm belches. Youth thumps him on the head, and smiles break across the line like ice cracking a river. I feel each grin splitting me open and they're waiting for me, holding themselves more stiffly, trying not to laugh, but I can't trust my voice so I turn the camera, snapping the shutter, and finally I swallow and say, "Okay, whatever's next."

They don't consult one another. They had this planned. Want, Charm, and Youth fall to their knees and brace themselves while Death and Pride carefully kneel astride their flat backs. Tall, skinny Sorrow, an odd size for the job, climbs to the top of them all. Without shifting my eye from the viewfinder for even a moment, not wanting to break the spell, I watch them raise their heads from their necks to look at me, awkward turtles lined up for the sun, faces bright and sweet in the snow light.

They seem so simple, but I know whose neatly buttoned jacket holds the heart of them, whose strong back will carry them away. I zoom in on Death and he is not smiling, not grim, not threatening; he is only balancing his load, his hair combed and neat, waiting to be photographed. I shoot his lips. I shoot Want's hands in the snow. I shoot Youth's red cheek.

Sorrow begins to move. Slowly, carefully, he turns so that he is kneeling sideways across the backs of Death and Pride. They wince under his shifting weight. While I watch, snapping the shutter, Sorrow raises a leg into the air behind him, an awkward, girly pose. Pride lets out a grunt of pain and crumples, taking all of them with him. Sorrow falls, laughing, into the jumble of arms and legs beneath him and I shoot the rest of the roll, knowing these will be the ones they desire the most. I hold on for a moment after the film is shot, watching them through the lens. Pride is mad, complaining that his back is hurt. Without taking his eyes off me, Want lifts a handful of

snow to his mouth and tastes.