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## The sought-after trigger: Essays from inside the hunt

Jeffrey Kurrus

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THE SOUGHT-AFTER TRIGGER:  
ESSAYS FROM INSIDE THE HUNT

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of English

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

University of Nebraska at Omaha

By

Jeff Kurrus

August 2002

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College,  
University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree Master of Arts,  
University of Nebraska at Omaha

Committee

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Date *6/28/02*

THE SOUGHT-AFTER TRIGGER:  
ESSAYS FROM INSIDE THE HUNT

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University of Nebraska at Omaha, 2002

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While analyzing contemporary hunting and fishing literature, transcendentalism, the adventure narrative, and the familial focus emerge as the most important aspects to continue developing the subject's ongoing discussion. As a writer of this literature, I have been repeatedly drawn back to these key critical issues in my own work and the work of others. However, I feel that more elaboration is needed that discusses the ways narrators and other characters negotiate the often treacherous terrain between the acts of hunting and fishing (their psychological, ethical, and physical dimensions) and the more intimate personal relationships found in their daily lives.

With the following introduction and its corresponding essays, it is seen that the specific reasons for each hunter's desire to enter the field are quite different. However, whether from a transcendental love for nature, or a longing for adventure, or a need to connect with wildness, or, as in my case, a desire to strengthen and enrich personal, human relationships, one experience links every hunter in the following collection. Each one must re-enter civilization and carry their insecurities, their fears, and their loves back

with them. And this re-entrance into the civilized world often contributes to the ongoing complexities between these hunters and those who seek relationships with them.

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## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary American hunting and fishing literature draws upon a tradition which, like the acts of hunting and fishing themselves, is complex and often contradictory. From the transcendentalist approach of Henry Thoreau to the adventure narrative of Dan O'Brien to the familial focus of Norman Maclean, hunting and fishing literature has evolved to encompass a rich diversity of personal, social, and literary concerns. As a writer of this literature myself, however, I have been repeatedly drawn back to several key critical issues in my own work and the work of others. Primary among these are the ways narrators and other characters negotiate the often treacherous terrain between the acts of hunting and fishing (their psychological, ethical, and physical dimensions) and the more intimate personal relationships found in their daily lives.

For me, the American tradition of hunting/fishing literature as relates to these complex relational issues begins with Thoreau's Walden, published in 1854. Although examples of such literature pre-exist Walden, including James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking* tales, Thoreau's transcendentalist approach is one that continues to influence the genre, especially personal nonfiction, my primary field of interest. Thoreau addresses subjects such as man's value to the world, man's exaggerated view concerning the importance of work, and his desire to "live deep and suck out all the marrow of life" (172). He also, however, speaks of hunting. In particular, Thoreau, while focusing on man's relationship to nature in general, also argues that man cannot have a meaningful relationship with nature *without* hunting:



Fishermen, hunters, woodchoppers and others, spending their lives in the fields and woods, in a peculiar sense a part of Nature themselves, are often in a more favorable mood for observing her, in the intervals of their pursuits, than philosophers or poets even, who approach her with expectation (261).

In addition, when one begins to hunt in nature, Thoreau argues, the hunter is tapping into an alternate self, one that balances savage and civilized inclinations. Thoreau states, "I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both" (260).

For me, this analysis of the contradictory self makes Thoreau's work on Walden Pond important to the ongoing discussion of hunting. Gordon Boudreau, in his article "Transcendental Sport: Hunting, Fishing, and Trapping in Walden," states "But for whoever would be a fisher of men, especially of the Self within, these enterprises might prove identical" (80). In other words, when engaged in the rituals of fishing, one may hook not only a new fish, but also a newly discovered self. That self, often to the surprise of the fisherman (woman), is not a unified, transcendental whole, but one that is suspended between savage and civilized impulses. Thoreau gives us an example of that from Walden in his "Higher Laws" chapter. He writes, "As I came home through the woods with my string of fish [...] I caught a glimpse of a woodchuck stealing across my path, and felt a strange thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw..." (260).

Contemporary nature writer and hunter Dan O'Brien seems to pick up Thoreau's moment of internal tension in his autobiographical book, The Rites of Autumn (1987), developing it even further. O'Brien claims that to think like an animal when in nature is a triumphant experience of "wildness" and "unconquerable freedom" (116). To have this other "self" emerge while in nature is what often brings hunters, like myself, back to the woods. To think like a deer would think on a snowy December morning, or to close your eyes and envision your fishing lure swimming through stumps and lily pads, are the types of situations O'Brien is talking about. The sense of amazing freedom that occurs when one discovers that within our human skulls there still remains the inklings of the animal mind. Turhan Tirana, author of Fly-Fishing: A Life in Midstream, also bears witness to this experience, one that I've found to be common among many of the hunters and anglers I have known:

It's as if in capturing the fish, for the few instants that they are in our grasp we can momentarily become one with them, partake of their environment and apparent tranquillity and completeness, and in the process, understand the mystery of their lives and thereby our own (Tirana 9).

However, this emergence of the animal mind can also hold personal complications for the hunter or fisher. What happens to these people, to their wilder selves, when they return to civilization? How does the knowledge that there is another being-- a beast, even- affect the relationship with others? And how does any hunter live with this killing alter ego?

My father-in-law, the 'John' character in "The Sought-After Trigger," is one such person. A Vietnam vet and avid hunter, John seems unable to understand or control his lingering obsession with killing. Furthermore, John's more extreme, decidedly cruel acts of killing (shooting a house cat with a bow and arrow, for instance) seems related to the more subtle, yet equally destructive acts of cruelty he inflicts on his family. Though he does not understand the repercussions of these acts, I am well aware of the personal implications through his daughter Laura, my wife. The relationship that I have with her is one made up of rules which seek to locate hunting as a secondary priority behind our spousal responsibilities. Laura's rules and mannerisms emerge, understandably, from her desire to prevent her relationship to me from mirroring her relationship to her father. However, like her father, I have a passion for hunting and fishing. She has chosen, in many ways, the same man for a husband that she hated as a child. And in many other ways, I have chosen a woman for a wife whose actions too often remind me of her frightening father. The result is a marriage where Laura struggles to ensure that our relationship, unlike her parents', is our first priority; and where I struggle, as part of that priority, to revise the experience of hunting and fishing for both of us. To transform what once was, and still could be, an isolating and destructive impulse, into something that sustains and enriches our love.

In my endeavor to explore and revise the experience of hunting and fishing from within personal, familial relationships, I have found very little guidance from literature. In fact, most of this literature, even when it presumes to make a connection between

hunting and family life, often becomes an inarticulate act of avoidance. This is certainly true for Dan O'Brien. On the surface, O'Brien's work expresses a self-conscious struggle, at the level of identity, between savage and civilized inclinations, between wildness and domesticity. He creates, on one hand, a persona that aggressively seeks to connect itself to nature. For instance, in his book The Rites of Autumn, O'Brien expresses a longing to merge with the perspective of peregrine falcons, birds with which he frequently hunts. To this end, he tries to recreate the stoop of a falcon by making a vertical drop (of several hundred feet) with a small Cessna he is flying. It is only when O'Brien's plane begins shaking so bad he fears it will rip apart that he pulls its nose up to safety.

Furthermore, in The Rites of Autumn, O'Brien steps into the role of surrogate parent to a particular falcon, Dolly, which he hopes to make wild again by hunting her along her migratory route, that runs from his ranch in South Dakota to the Gulf Coast. There, on Padre Island, he plans to re-release her into the current of her natural migration. During this journey, he attempts to teach her the lessons of the wild, refusing, for instance, to let her eat after she had failed to capture any game—while at the same time calling into question his right to do so. "Who am I," he asks after denying her the food, "to enforce a law with such primordial implications?" (75).

While attempting to enforce these laws, O'Brien also expresses the need to connect more fully with the human world, in particular with his girlfriend Kris. In one moment of O'Brien's journey, he meets Kris in her Colorado apartment. O'Brien states, "I had not realized how much I missed the closeness of a woman until Kris buried her head

against my chest and held me tightly" (135). Such moments seems to promise further exploration of how his immersion in the animal world affects his relationship to Kris and perhaps to others. Instead, after Dolly's tragic release on Padre Island, the book ends where, in essence, it began, with Dan suspended between contrary longings: "We will remain lodged between the greens and browns of the earth and the endless blue of the prairie sky" (192).

O'Brien's book Equinox, which was published ten years after The Rites of Autumn, seems to, once again, promise a thorough exploration of the relationship between hunting and personal life. Indeed, the subtitle reads: "Life, Love, and Birds of Prey." In this narrative, which chronicles a season O'Brien spends hacking and hunting falcons in South Dakota, Chris, who is now his wife, asks him to join her in New England where she is attending school. Though he wants to be close to her, he can't pull himself away from falconing. Thus, the only love that O'Brien seems willing to act on is his love for Harley, his newest falcon. O'Brien's desire to hunt consistently overrules his desire to be with his wife, and the type of self-analysis needed for readers to better understand this phenomenon is absent.

In contrast to Dan O'Brien (and Thoreau), these personal, familial dimensions of hunting and fishing take center in 1976. In the book's first line, the narrator states, "In our family there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing." The novella concerns two sons and a father that, no matter where the fish are biting in their own, individual lives, are pulled back to familial water, the Big Blackfoot River, to trout fish. "In a

typical week of our childhood Paul and I probably received as many hours of instruction in fly-fishing as we did in all other spiritual matters (2).

Within Maclean's narrative, the father's preoccupation with fly-fishing, though presumably solidifying the family's bond, may, in fact, contribute to the demise of the narrator's brother, Paul. Paul's drinking and gambling repeatedly surface as topics during the tale, yet the narrator and his father do nothing to stop *his* downward spiral and eventual murder. As if to explain pre-occupation, Maclean's narrator states, "I took my time walking down the trail, trying with each step to leave the world behind. Something within fishermen tries to make fishing into a world perfect and apart" (Maclean 37). As Maclean seems to be saying, a person who fly-fishes desires some form of separation from civilization. The need for this separation is, of course, largely imposed by the act of fly-fishing itself.

Anyone that has fly-fished understands that physical distance from human activity, even from the casting of your fishing companions, is essential to success. Within the context of this story, however, this technical necessity seems to aggravate the psychological and social isolation of Paul, whose skill and detachment from his family lead to his own death. This may be why the narrator claims, at the end, to be "haunted by waters." He is not haunted by waters in general, but by that particular familial water, the Big Blackfoot, where their father bestowed upon them a passion for fishing that kept them at once separated from the human world, and tragically, from each other. Though Maclean's work, unlike O'Brien's, does directly confront the relationship between

fishing and personal/family life, it also seems to shut down the possibility that that relationship could result in anything but loneliness and regret.

In addition, Maclean's work contains surprisingly few detailed scenes involving actual fly-fishing and we rarely find ourselves inside the mind of characters in the act of fly-fishing. The consequences of this, while accentuating the almost disembodied loneliness of some of the characters, is that it extends that isolating experience to the reader. Readers are never allowed any truly intimate contact with the characters and the physical rituals of fishing, which, we are told, are at the center of their lives. And without the details of that physical and emotional passion, there is little chance that readers, especially those who do not hunt or fish, will be able to make any meaningful connection between those details and the passions that inform and complicate daily, human relationships.

Immersing the reader in this connection is one of my central goals in writing these essays. In "The Changing Venery," for instance, I attempt to take the readers into a flooded field before sunlight, where hunters plot decoy schemes in search of ducks. They watch the stars, away from any sign of civilization, hidden beneath cattail reeds with face masks and full camouflage. And when they hear the first whistling of wings, it is my hope that readers will feel part of this wildness, if only for a moment.

For each hunter, the specific reasons for going into the field are quite different. However, whether from a transcendental love for nature, or a longing for adventure, or a need to connect with wildness, or, as in my case, a desire to strengthen and enrich personal, human relationships, one experience links every hunter in the following

collection. Each one must re-enter civilization, carrying their triumphs, their misfortunes, their memories, and their fears back with them. It is indeed treacherous ground these hunters walk on, both in the field and in the home, and as the tradition of hunting/fishing literature illustrates, it resists easy articulation. However, if there is to be any understanding of the mind and actions of the hunter's individual life, the cupping of wings and the hail calls from mallards must accompany these scenes and thoughts. Only then, in the field or on the pond or in the bed, can it be seen how one thought, one impulse can lead to another and another until we end up back home, still searching, among the people we hope to love.



## ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST HUNTING AND FISHING

Have you ever seen Gary Larson's "Far Side" where two angels are standing on a cloud. One of them has just shot a duck that was flying by. The other leans over to him and asks, "You sure you're suppose to be doin' that, Mitch?"

Dad pulled me into the kitchen, propped my leg on the table, and clicked on his desk lamp. "What happened?" he asked, looping the piece of monofilament through the bend in the hook. My face cringed as he did, for he accidentally shook the lure and the hook felt as large as a sword in my leg.

"Had a good fish hit up in the shallows. Set the hook on him but had to duck. It just slammed into my leg. Didn't even hurt. But when I tried to pull it out, I saw that the barb was buried."

"Rob still down there?"

"Yea, he's just waiting on me."

"The key is," he said, "to take the hook out the same way that it went in, pushing down on the shaft while pulling the loop of monofilament extremely hard." And then like a highly qualified fisherman's nurse, he yanked as hard as he could.

"There you go," he said, unwrapping the string from the treble hook. "Works every time."

PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) says that a deer, a cow, and a fish have senses just like our own.

The Up button on my remote control stopped when I saw *Politically Incorrect* and Bill Maher's face the other night. His guests were a couple journalists I didn't know, an actress from LA Law, and Ted Nugent. I had just recently seen a VH1 special on Nugent and held for a moment.

"It teaches kids ethics, friendship, camaraderie, and respect for the outdoors," Nugent said.

"Respect for the outdoors?" Maher shot back. "By putting a bullet into an animal's chest and then hanging its head above the fireplace?"

"You have too many kids," Nugent countered, "that have no sense of identity because of lack of parental support and a flat out disregard for nature."

"And they're going to get this support and regard by shooting at animals that can't shoot back. It seems to me that hunters, in their last vain attempt, are trying to compensate for other smaller things by shooting at things. Due to their own physical shortcomings, hunters must instead compensate by traipsing through the woods in search of something to shoot."

"But..." Ted started.

"I got to go to commercial," Maher said, "and we'll get back to this ridiculous topic when we return."

Have you ever seen Gary Larson's "Far Side" where the two deer are standing around talking? One has a bullseye on his chest. The other deer says to him, "Bummer of a birthmark, Hal."

I understand the arguments against hunting. The entire defenseless animal thing combined with the likelihood that many more animals will die indirectly because of hunting rings true. And the men that were caught on home video trying to run over a mechanical deer with their truck didn't give too much validity to the old fashioned pro-hunting argument that "it's not the kill that we love, it's the sport."

While I agree with the sporting aspect, I can't argue that I haven't been angry when I've missed three of four straight shots out of a duck blind. Or dry-fired on a deer standing broadside, only to have my gun go off a few seconds later while I held it in my lap. I've tried to take a camera into the woods instead, but always find myself strapping it over my shoulder so as to not interfere with my next shot.

When I hear Marty Stouffer's voice in the background as he speaks of the playfulness of month old fawns, I catch myself smiling a bit as if those deer are not the same ones that I'll be shooting at in eight months. When the word "predator" is said by the bearded narrator's Zen-like voice, I put my mental crosshairs on the foxes and coyotes that sneak towards the pack of deer.

But as soon as horns poke through the head of a small buck, my own horns emerge. Eating a deer that just lost its spots compared to eating an aging buck is the equivalent of consuming prime rib instead of a leather shoe. However, when another

hunter shoots that same deer a month earlier than I would have, a deer whose baby spots have not quite faded, hunters scream baby killer. And when a deer lumbers through the woods during the last year or two of his old age, his rack already beginning to fold over and shorten in mad distortions, a shooter will spend three to four hundred dollars to preserve and hang this geriatric's head over the fire place. Will take pictures of it. Call his friends and re-cap the story frame by frame, interjecting long pauses to build suspense.

Molars. Incisors. Canines. I learned these types of teeth in Mrs. Williams's 1st grade class. Molars are for crushing things like nuts, cereal, and chocolate. Incisors are for grabbing things. Canines are for ripping flesh. Many people have their canines filed down. This domestication has been slow over the centuries, our teeth naturally (and sometimes surgically) evolving like the beaks of Darwin's Galapagos finches. However, we still grow these teeth as a baby. Then again as adults. People do file them down to look less Dracula-like, but they are still there in case of a shortage of nuts and berries or for more extreme Donner-like conditions.

I didn't even see the deer when my dad nudged me on my shoulder. His gloved hand pointed to my left as she walked innocently through the woods, her head to the ground. I felt his grip tighten around my waist, for I was eight years old and we were both sitting in his deer stand. I pulled the muzzleloader to my shoulder. She stepped behind an oak tree, nearly hiding all of her body as she did, and I placed the sights on the open area to the right of the tree and cocked the hammer. Her head never came up, and when she

stepped in the open, I pulled the trigger. Smoke clouded my vision as Dad and I ducked to the left and right to see. When the smoke finally cleared, she was lying on the ground where she had stood, baaing like a sheep. Dad hugged me tighter, saying "you got her, you got her," over and over again while he kissed me on my cheek and told me he loved me.

"All right, let's go take care of her, bud," Dad said.

We climbed down from the stand. Ten minutes later, with the doe's chest cavity open from the waist to the neck, blood stained my skin to the elbow while Dad leaned up against the tree, smiling and drinking a cup of celebratory coffee.

A male largemouth bass traditionally grows to a maximum of 5 pounds. The world record largemouth (a female taken in a Georgia farm pond in 1932), however, weighed over 22 pounds. Currently, Lake Fork in Texas boasts female bass over 20 pounds as well. The reason for the obvious size differences between male and female bass? Eggs. Life. A billion tiny fish whose numbers will diminish so rapidly that only an estimated 5 from a particular spawn will make it to adulthood. Only to then be caught and eaten by a teacher from Tennessee whose freezer is full of venison and waterfowl, but feels as though smoked bass would test his new gas grill perfectly.

Have you ever seen Gary Larson's "Far Side" where the hunter is holding up the frog while the frog yells "I got skinny legs, I got skinny legs"?

I can only frog-gig about once a year, maybe even once every two years. It's not sticking the frogs with a giant fork that gets to me; it's the next day when you go out to clean them, and they're still alive. With puncture holes through their bodies, the frogs breathe with bubble gum-like intestines emerging from the forked wounds. And when you pull out your metal scissors, snipping the frog in half for his legs and throwing out the rest of the frog in the side of the yard, the top half continues to breath. Not fast, like a fish taken from water whose air is so limited that the mind is already beginning to asphyxiate, but like an animal who is sitting on the side of a pond awaiting the next cricket or grasshopper to gingerly float by.

John Chapter 21: Verses 5-6: Then he asked them, "Young man, haven't you caught anything?"

"Not a thing," they answered.

Jesus said to them, "Throw your net out on the right side of the boat, and you will catch some." So they threw the net out and could not pull it back in, because they had caught so many fish.

I took my older cousin Jimmy, a novice when it comes to bass, to a lake several years ago. I taught him the importance of lure presentation, the need for matching the hatch, and the subtleties of distance casting. He took to it immediately, fascinated with each catch as if he were a six-year-old. I took to teaching him, showing someone with

little idea of the intricacies of my fishing passion why he should devote at least part of his life to it.

When the trip was over, I still wanted to teach. I took the four bass we caught and put them in the cooler so I could get the electric filet knife and show him how to finish the complete fishing experience. I laid the first fish on top of the cooler while Jimmy stood with his arms crossed. "What you do is go right under this side fin, in until you feel the backbone, and turn the knife and trail right down the backbone."

"Is that going to hurt him?" he asked, the fish's last few breaths emerging from its drying lungs.

"No, he should be fine." I started the knife, its metallic teeth splitting scales as the fish began to shake.

"Why's he shaking so bad?" Jimmy asked.

"It's just shock," I reasoned, turning the knife and cutting along the backbone while the fish's left eye seemed to grow larger by the second.

"Oh God," I thought I heard above me, but I had already flipped the fish over and started on the second filet. I threw the second filet in the pan and held up the remains of the warm fish.

"You can see right through him," I said, discarding the still breathing fish on the grass. I looked up and Jimmy had taken several steps away and was holding his mouth.

"Do they always do that?" he asked.

"No. Only when you clean them while they're still flexible."

"While they're still alive?"

“Yea,” I replied.

I talked to Jimmy that next week and asked him if he wanted to go back fishing sometime. I told him that cleaning fish was usually not like that, that it worked out a lot better when rigor mortis had set in for about a day. He declined my invitation. We have never gone since.

Can you can hear the peaceful, melodic Andy Griffith Show tune in your head? Close your eyes. Can't you see Opie throwing the rock in the pond as Andy carries the fishing poles behind his son?

My father is not much of a storyteller. In fact, he isn't even much of a talker. Which probably explains why his heaven does not include the normal pearly gates and cumulus clouds, but instead a morning lake mist and the sound of wheat fields on a Saturday afternoon. So when I hear him tell his one joke, the same one he has told at least once a year for as long as I have known him, I sit and listen just in case I never hear it again. It's the one time he takes the stage. The one time where he controls the entire room.

“Do you think it's fair to hunt?” someone asks, usually a relative at Easter or someone who just happened to overhear that Dad is a hunter.

“I do,” he responds. Just as the person begins to protest, he says, “You know, I give a deer all the chances in the world when I'm hunting. Just think about it. I only stay in the woods for few hours at a time, on maybe one or two days a week, and can only see



about 75 yards all around me. That animal has all the chances in the world. Then I give it one more chance.” Dad stops and pulls his imaginary gun to his shoulder. He leans forward on the counter, positioning his legs behind him for a brace. He draws in one long breath, then blows out half of it.

“I close one eye,” he says, then everyone starts laughing. Some of those who have heard it before join in, while the person who asks the question usually sits there and stares at him, not really sure if he is serious.

Have you ever seen Gary Larson's "Far Side" where three hunters are holding a deer captive with rope around its shoulders while three deer on the other side of the frame hold a hunter captive with rope around his arms. Then one of the hunters says, "No trade until we check our guy out! Frank, you okay?"

In the Philippines during the holidays, Christians are sometimes nailed to crosses at Eastertide. At my father's church last week, more than one hundred attendants performed acts of symbolic cannibalism. Dad calls it Communion.

Dad went up to our friend Kevin's house a few months ago to deer hunt for a couple of days. Kevin and his wife Paige live on fifty acres of land, with three of those acres being a tree infested farm pond where many a bass angler's dreams can become reality. But this time Dad was deer hunting. The night before he was to go, Kevin approached Dad after Paige had gone to bed.

"Where you hunting in the morning?" Kevin asked.

"Probably on the back side of the property."

"Good," Kevin said. "Paige didn't want to say anything, but she likes when the deer come up to the pond and drink in the morning. She doesn't want anyone to shoot those deer. She doesn't mind if you hunt in the back, though."

Dad respected her wishes, and walked a few extra hundred yards to a spot in the woods.

PETA says that nature is self-regulating. The woolly mammoth has gone extinct and that animals such as the Monarch Butterfly are not far behind. In contrast, PETA also states that white-tailed deer have reached unprecedented numbers in the US, due to a decline in hunting. In urban areas, they eat peoples' gardens, collide with cars, and spread lime disease. Experiments are currently being conducted on using birth control for these animals.

As a child, my dad spent much of his free time chasing mallards, pintails, and woodducks in flooded Mississippi bean fields. I go through countless pictures every summer when I go home to visit, laughing at the picture of me when I was five years old holding a woodduck, or eight years old holding two mallard drakes, or twelve holding my own assortment of ducks.

During these same vacations, we go to my aunt Bootsie's house for homemade ravioli. We swap stories about baseball, jobs, and hunting. At some point I usually get up and go outside to feed the ducks.

"There's not as many this year," Bootsie has often told me.

"Why?"

"Damn drivers speeding through the neighborhood so fast they killed several walking from the lake across the street to the house."

I take my bread out and the mallard drakes come right up to me, eating from my hand. "They're so pretty," I think, and for that split second winter is a million days away.

When I saw Bill Maher on TV the night after Ted Nugent, I thought that he was wearing a pair of nice leather shoes. They looked comfortable.

Rob called me the other day. We talked, as we usually do, about the day we snuck back to the Boy Scout Lake for the last time.

We were 22 and 23 years old that day and I was to be married at the end of the year. The wind was blowing hard, rain was falling harder, and Rob and I couldn't stop catching fish. Bass struck time after time, thrashing our plugs and attacking our deep diving lures. For each fish he caught, I caught one. For each one I landed, he landed one. Very few times do two fishermen go and catch the same amount, fish for fish.

It was the last time we would be the same. The gods of fishing had allowed us one more day in the rain together. While we *were* trespassing, we never got caught, and have

never been back. Over 20 years of deer, ducks, and fish culminating in one October afternoon.

“It seems like every time we talk that day comes up again,” I said on the phone.

“I can’t remember a day I’ve had more fun.”

“Me neither,” I responded, “but I gotta go. Laura’s calling me to clean up something in the house.”

“You tell your lovely wife I said hello and give her a hug for me.”

“I will, bud,” I replied.

“Love ya’ll,” he said.

“Love you too, Rob.”

Genesis Chapter 1: Verse 26: “And now we will make human beings; they will be like us and resemble us. They will have power over the fish, the birds, and all animals, domestic and wild, large and small.”

I'm not quite sure where I'm fishing today. The morning air is still cool, and knowing how cold my ears get, I put on a toboggan as I walk back inside my house. The dogs are outside slapping their paws on the glass door in the living room, but it will be a few months before I need them again on one of these trips. Buddy, the basset hound, might fish with me occasionally, as may Laura if I can get her up, but most of the time I will plan to leave the house the same way I have this morning: alone.

This was Thoreau's favorite part of the day. Since he was the most awake, he claimed, he felt the most alive. I wipe the crust from my eyes, not really sure how awake I actually am, but I still feel what he means. There's something about being the first one up in your own house, in the neighborhood, and in the world. No one else has breathed the outside air that day, and its freshness is yours for the taking.

Walking back inside for the last time this morning, I glance over a pair of gloves that Laura has set out for me on the table. "Just in case your little hands get cold," she told me the night before. I bypass them, thinking there is something else I have forgotten, but it won't come to me. I lock the door, promise the puppies to walk them when I get home, and call Laura's name.

"Hey, I love you," I say.

"I love you too," she groans.

"Be home later."

"Be careful. Did you remember your gloves?" she says.

I eye them one last time. "Yea," I answer, then lock the door behind me without ever picking them up. Three months from now, when snow replaces rain and the Ice Age returns, I might grab them off the table. Then again, I might not.

## THE CHANGING VENERY

Winter 1993: A darkness so black it's blue. Silhouettes of trees blend to the landscape like forgotten lovers, hiding behind their upcoming transformations. Nocturnal warriors ready themselves for hibernation, licking the salt from their red paws. Creatures glide silently across the ice without sound or sight.

Maybe various shades of black do emerge around them. Maybe the smell of coffee and pop-tarts enter their nostrils. Maybe the sounds of rubber boots and laughing warn them of a foreboding danger, of a beast larger than their own lives.

How could I be dangerous? I think. I can barely make my way to the bathroom in the dark, much less this maze of beaver runs and brush thickets. Each step I take forces my last to sink deeper into the mud, where a distance similar to the one between my couch at home and the refrigerator accounts for the sweat dripping from my nose and nearly freezing before it hits the thinning ice.

"One more beaver run," Rob says, his flashlight allowing us to cross that final barrier between insanity and passion. He holds out his arm for support and pulls me over the hole while I reach back and pull my father through the same point. Dad's balance is better than mine, and he merely uses me for touch.

The three of us stand on broken ice, the woods behind us swallowed by the dark. The wind emerges from nowhere, the sweat freezing the pores on my face, then quickly melting as my mind hears the wings of the dabblers and divers from last week's hunt.

"What's the plan?" Rob says, and Dad points to various grays in our vision and plots our strategy. I don't listen. Rob can do that. My eyes are now focused on the white specks above us, and I wonder how long it took the gods to arrange so many stars. I turn back to Dad and Rob. They are silent. The only thing I could hear is the constant ringing from years of gunshots.

Our time is limited. Treading through knee high water, we carefully place decoys in various patterns on the water. Dad surveys the scene, geometrically plotting our plan as Rob and I place the most important ploy, the female decoy, in the middle of the group.

We regroup, positioning our makeshift blind of cattails and broken branches, and quickly load. A #4 shell for my first shot, BBs for my second and third. We all fall silent again. My eyes close, I see Laura, then I hear a group of early risers buzz the decoys. I re-open my eyes and the whistling of wings awakens above me as I see the cupped commitment of a scout. The scout invites others. The grays become clearer. The wings become louder. My heart beats harder. Orange fire welcomes us from the east as our fingers slide down and force a barely audible "click."

"You know that if we date, you'll have to quit all of your hunting and fishing because I'll need a lot of attention and that stuff takes up too much time," Laura said as she stared at me with the same set of brown eyes I had admired, from a distance, for over two years. We were high school sophomores at the time, and I barely even heard what she said. I had wondered during our entire conversation if she was looking at the zit on my forehead.

"Huh?"

"Hunting. Fishing. It's got to stop. I'm not going to spend time away from you."

If she wasn't going to spend time away from me, she must have been thinking of spending time *with* me. That's cool. What would she do if I reached over and touched her leg? Her arm? Would it be like the movies? Would she pull the car to the side of the road and stare into my eyes as if I had been the only boy that she had ever wanted?

"Did you hear me?" she asked.

I had first seen her walking across Aycock Park's baseball field two years prior. Brown, curly hair. Tan. Yellow Polo. Khaki shorts. Gating right to left across the dial. For the next two years of my life, I strategically positioned myself wherever she would be, hoping to catch a smile or laugh without her thinking I was a stalker.

She had just noticed how beautiful she was, once her hair was combed out and Coke bottles had been replaced by contacts. I was the least of her concerns. I was a toy far less mature than her, delving into the world where my voice and its obsessions were constantly changing. When bullshitting with my buddies, I'd go from speaking about Foghorn Leghorn to what it would be like to hold a breast. And after her ultimatum that night I took a teenage glance at her breasts, as if I knew what to even do with them, and told her that she should stop smoking. As for her proposition, I said nothing at first.

"I require a lot of attention. Everyday," she told me, as if I were applying for a job. "Do you think you can handle this?"

"*I'm not sure,*" the logical side of my brain wanted to say, but I dared say nothing.



“Do you hear me?” she said. “Huh?”

I was fifteen, skinny, big-nosed, and couldn't figure out for the life of me how I was even in this conversation. Later that night, I replayed my eventual response after her repeated proposal for me to give up hunting and fishing. The words had come out after she had said "Huh?" at least ten or twelve times. I kept seeing every waking moment spent with her, guessing that she would tell me I was smothering her later in the relationship. I was fifteen, yes, but I had seen enough movies to know how this whole relationship thing worked. But I still thought, later that night, that I messed up by eventually replying “Hell, no” to her proposal. The words had come from my mouth before I even knew I had thought them. And she had merely looked at me as if I were stupid, shaking her head and rolling her eyes as she ceased her conversation and lit a cigarette.

“It won't ever happen,” I told myself over and over again that night in bed. “You missed your chance.” Five hours later, I woke up to the sound of Rob's fist knocking on my door.

Spring 1996: Four years have passed and I still talked about Laura. Rob asked me if I had spoken to her, and I told him no. Then he reminded me of all the time and gas he used driving me to talk to her at Kmart while she was working there, and also while she was still dating another guy. Rob told me that if I didn't eventually call her, I owed him some money. I laughed as we trolled across Spring Lake for our first bass chasing trip of the spring. Rob shook his head. “You need to watch out,” he said. People have been

telling me to watch out for Laura for years, for they knew how much of an invertebrate I became around her.

"For what?" I mused.

"For this shot I gotta make," he said, leaning sideways in order to cast under a weeping willow. It was still cool on this early March day, but a warm spell the week before had brought water temperatures up, ending the winter campaign. Fog drifted from the surface, clouding the swirls and surface strikes of females on their spawning beds.

"Troll slowly towards that stump. It's about two foot of water in that corner and I've seen her run in and out twice."

The blades of the motor slowly drifted us in that direction as my toes began to shake, an anticipatory reflex that had revealed itself years before on a Mississippi farm pond. Yet even though my body knew the task before it, the taming of the female bass on her spawning bed, I could only think of the line from the movie I had seen months before. The title of the movie had left but the line had remained. *"I'll make your toes curl."*

"What did you say?" Rob whispered.

"Nothing. Why?"

"I would have sworn," he began, then shook his head. "Nothing."

"Watch out," I told him. "Troll us really slow. If we get too close, scare her in the least, then we have no chance."

He turned the boat to where it rested parallel from the shallows, thirty feet from the bank, everything aligned exactly how it needed to be.

"You got em'," I said to Rob.

"No. She's yours," he responded, and I wasn't going to ask twice.

I made the cast and the world slowed down for a brief moment, the ripples of the water seeming to shoot towards the lure's destination even before it got there. The plug hit the water, the rings of the lake's stillness not even having a chance to expand before a grenade-like explosion encompassed the lure. The bass had struck without warning, and immediately disappeared beneath the now-rolling water.

I set back instantly, not even knowing that I had done so, the joints in my toes and hands crinkled to white. "Look out!" I yelled.

I closed my eyes and heard the plastic hit my arm. "Damn," I moaned, as the hook of the crankbait nestled comfortably into my leg. We both looked back at the beds.

"She's gone," Rob said. "And you're bleeding."

The hook's barb wasn't buried, so I was good there, but any sort of fish action was obsolete. A cold front had come through, dropped an inch of rain, and disappeared the night before. And now that the fog had lifted, we were left with a sunny, blue-skied day. And my thoughts, as they often did during these times, went back to Laura. Who was she dating now? Was he treating her right? Did she still drive that little green Tercel?

Later that same spring in 1996, as Tim, Brian and I trolled along Glen Springs Lake, I felt confident that we could catch some fish on the westerly point by the rock dam. I had relayed the story of a few small fish Rob and I had caught earlier that morning but had failed to relay what had happened in between that fishing trip and my later afternoon venture with them.

Before that day, I hadn't seen Laura for two years. She had called a couple times, but the only time we spoke is when I had accidentally picked up the phone instead of the answering machine. I couldn't call her. Couldn't go through with it. I was in the middle of a relationship. The last time we had spent significant time together we were lying half-naked in the back of my truck on graduation night, having just dropped off my girlfriend a couple hours earlier.

Before Tim, Brian, and I had gone fishing that day, and after Rob and I had talked about her that morning, she visited me at the fitness center where I worked. The receptionist told me that there was a Laura here to see me. I repeated the name as if I hadn't heard it the first time, and he confirmed it again.

"What does Laura look like?" I asked him.

"Gorgeous," he whispered.

"*Dammit*," I thought.

I went to meet her and, while I had intended on flexing my pecs at the sight of her, I nearly had to place myself in one of the nearby geriatric wheelchairs instead. She was dark, her face tanned nearly black from her daylong sessions of lifeguarding. Her full flowing skirt left everything else to the imagination.

"How are you?" she asked.

"Okay."

"How's life treating you at this place?"

"Okay."

“Is school going well now? Last time we talked you were having a few problems.”

“It’s okay.”

We exchanged a few more pleasantries, while I avoided eye contact and wished that she had never ruined my day by hunting me down.

"Are you still with Shanikaka?" she asked.

"Yes, I am still dating Shauna," I corrected.

“What time do you get off of work?” she asked. My heart shot into each of my appendages, blood running so hot and so fast that I had to put my hands in my pockets.

“W-w-why?”

“Do you want to get dinner?” she asked me matter-of-factly, as if we were two old friends going out for a bite.

But we weren’t. Didn’t she remember who I was? How could she forget February 18, 1993, at 15:37 when we first kissed in front of the Millington Central High School gym after doing student council work with Mrs. Burk for the Winterfest dance? How could she forget my car wreck a week later? How could she forget those long, silent looks she gave me while I lay motionless in the hospital bed, unable to walk and barely able to talk? How could she forget the phone call I made from a hospital bed to her house, the one where her boyfriend answered the phone? How about graduation, when she began to cry in despair as we removed each others’ clothes saying “I don’t want it this way”? How could she come to my place of work and ask me to go to dinner, thinking that I could merely say “bye, see you in a couple years” when it was all over?

“I’m going fishing,” I told her, and she stared at me, perplexed.

"Fishing? Why?"

"I promised some friends."

"You're going fishing instead of going out to dinner with me?"

It was absurd to me as well. "Yes."

"It seems as though we've had this discussion before." She stared at me even harder, as if that might change my mind. I had so much I wanted to say, but Glen Springs Lake sounded so much safer at that point.

"I guess I'll see you later," she said with a roll of her eyes. She stepped forward and I gave her a 45-degree hug, walking away as my paws crawled back into my pockets.

Tim and Brian asked me why I was so quiet on the trip out to Glen Springs Lake, but I didn't have the nerve to tell them. They both would have told me that I was crazy to be fishing with them at the point; I could fish any time.

“Remember how the water gets really shallow immediately following the levee. That's where they're going to be. Just like today. The bass should be running into the shallow water to make their beds. With it being so warm throughout the day, the fish should be moving back into the shallower water to feed. May not catch a lot of good fish, but we'll catch some numbers.”

When the boat's engine and trolley motor finally cut off, I heard Brian's reel backlash beside me. “Dammit,” he said, his thumbs immediately picking and pulling out the tangled line from his reel.

Tim and I both laughed momentarily, yet I was the only one who continued to chuckle as Brian forced Tim to help him with his reel. So as the waning minutes of a summertime afternoon diminished, I was the only one catching fish. Crawfish crankbait was the lure of choice. As natural looking as I could get because the water was so clear. I worked the bank from left to right, twitching the lure on top of the water each time it landed for a crippling effect. I had countless strikes on top as they cussed me from the back of the boat. But the female I dreamed of never came in the shallows. Maybe I had turned her away. She stayed in my mind, but for some reason I never hooked up.

Fall 1997: Dad readied himself for the following morning. He read his list and laid out his gear as though we were planning to chase the Viet-Cong through the bush and wouldn't be back for days. He asked me if I had all of my things ready; I nodded without knowing in the slightest, and finished getting ready for my date that night.

I arrived at Laura's house not quite knowing what to expect. I had seen her a week earlier, the day after breaking up with Shauna, and we had made plans to go out the following Friday.

"When should I call you?" I asked on a Sunday.

"When are we going out?" she said.

"You asked me out," I said, "you tell me."

"I said Friday, didn't I?"

"I think so," I replied.

"Then call me Thursday night. I don't want to talk to you until then."

I obeyed her orders, talked briefly to her Thursday, then sweated throughout the following day before meeting her at her apartment that night. When I arrived, she came up and hugged me, asked how I was doing, and told me that she was ready to go out. We talked for nearly three hours at the restaurant. Books, butterflies, college, dating, sunrises, and families went from her mouth to mine, and from mine back to hers. I learned that her father had spent several years fighting in Vietnam, and how her mother was still searching for a cowboy in her life. I even learned how her brothers remained silent most of the time, very few words passing from their mouths to anyone else in their family. Peg, Laura's mom, had tried to make the family resemble the typical American nuclear family, complete with picket fence and holiday family photos. But, as Laura told me, it's hard to have a picket fence when the young husband who would build it keeps opting for trips to Southeast Asia. And it's even harder to have family pictures years later on Christmas morning when the middle-aged father is 100 miles away on a hunting trip.

Laura told me how she wanted to see the world, join the Peace Corps, and help people that too often couldn't help themselves. I told her I wanted to fish and write professionally. She told me that she had moved out of her house when she was eighteen because her parents were still trying to impart rules upon her. I told her that my mom still made me eggs and biscuits whenever I asked and I had no reason to leave home. She told me she felt rejected two years before when I had turned down her dinner date in order to go fishing. I didn't tell her how I would have traded medication for a taste of her while laying in a hospital bed years earlier.



She paid for dinner and we went back to her apartment. Tracy Chapman's "The Love That You Had" played over and over again on the radio as she pushed me to translate the words. The candles burned slowly, the conversation grew quieter, and the friendship she wanted and the love I desired grew grayer.

*"You're the most beautiful thing I have ever seen, and you have complete and utter control over me,"* I wanted to tell her.

"Thanks for dinner," is what actually came out.

"Anything for a friend."

"Is that what we are?"

"What do you want to be?" she asked, her silken skin finding my hand as our heads angled forward.

Our teeth attacked each other like bitter rivals. Front teeth crashing as if they would never fit right. We tried again, crashed again, then regrouped. Backed up. Moved left. The sound of teeth on teeth again. I opened my eyes. Shit! But Laura would not be held back. She went from my mouth to my neck as I rested my head on the couch's arm. I closed my eyes for several minutes, feeling her mouth upon my skin, then I opened my eyes and looked at the clock.

"I gotta go," I said.

"What?" she questioned.

"I got to go. It's 4:30. I'm suppose to meet dad in an hour to hunt."

"Hunt?" she questioned as I stood up, looking at herself as if to say *"You're leaving me to hunt?"*

“Yea. We’re deer hunting this morning.”

“Why?”

“Cause that’s what we planned to do.”

“Can’t you guys just go in the afternoon or tomorrow?”

“No. I already got it planned. When will I see you again?”

“I don’t know,” she snapped, pulling a Marlboro light from her hard pack.

“Tonight?”

“I got plans,” she said.

“Tomorrow.”

“We’ll see,” she sighed. From what she had told me about her father's excessive hunting priorities, I didn't think it was my best move to leave. I leaned in to kiss her, and while I expected her cheek, I got her mouth instead. “Give me a call and be careful,” she whispered, as if she were telling a secret in a crowded room.

I looked at the phone from the corner of my eye. “*We could always hunt next week,*” I thought, but I couldn’t say it. But God I wanted to stay with her. How could someone leave a person like her to go kill a deer? I imagined her as a little girl, staring at the window as John drove away on Christmas Eve. How could someone *not* be resentful of hunting, of hunters, with a childhood like that? I cranked my truck as she stared at me from the front porch, her arms wrapped around herself as if she needed, had always needed, someone’s arms around her. She smiled, shaking her head as if to say, “I may not be here when you get back.” I put my truck in reverse and drove away.

I dressed on the way to my house and met my dad at 5, replaying our kissing fiasco the entire time. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry because of my embarrassment. But she said I could call her later. Maybe I'd get another chance.

I was sitting against a maple tree by 6 AM while the half-filled moon yawned above me. I put a glove on my left hand, left my trigger finger bare on my right, and scooted out the remaining leaves at my feet so my antlered prey wouldn't hear me when I put my crosshairs on him.

When I woke up two hours later, the woods around me were still. No wind, not too cold. A perfect day to hunt. If only I could keep my eyes awake. I felt my arms pull in closer, hugging my chest the way Laura had as I repositioned myself for the next part of my nap. It was only 8:00 and I wouldn't meet dad for another hour and a half. I had plenty of time to sleep while I hunted. I made one quick glance of the woods around me, saw nothing for the taking, and fell back under.

Dad and I met back up shortly after 9:00 and he asked me if I had seen anything. With sleep still in my eyes, I told him no. "But wasn't it a great morning?" he commented.

"Yep. Sure was."

Mom fixed Dad and me breakfast as we discussed what we were going to do the rest of the day. My sister Gena came in a few minutes later and was the first to notice the mark on my neck. I told the group a lie, and they grew increasingly interested as I moved Gena's hand away from my skin. I told them Laura had pinched me, and they all believed me.

“Putting her mark on you, already,” my sister said.

Fall 1998: I was staring at Laura as she watched Indecent Proposal on television.

“Can you stop that for a minute?” I asked, staring at the engagement ring that Laura had been wearing since the summer.

She obliged, then rolled over. “What?”

“Why are we joining the military again?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. To get out of here.”

“And why the Air Force?”

“Because it’s not the Marines.” Laura smiled as I thought about her father. I’m sure she was thinking about him as well.

“And why are we joining the military again?”

“Because Memphis is a hellhole. You know this. We get to live somewhere else, experience our lives together.”

“But we could just move instead of being forced to go somewhere.”

She laughed. “You’d never do it. The way you’re so indecisive, we’d be here forever, living down the street from our parents.”

“And what’s wrong with that?” I said.

“Because, you know I don’t want to be here. I want to see the world.”

“We could go on vacation.”

“No, stupid. I’m talking about experiencing a different life away from Memphis’s hate. Too many problems. Plus, what do we have to stay here for?”

“Our families,” I replied.

“Your family. My mom would be the only reason I would stay. Dave acts like I’m four and it seems as though Brian has never even talked. Dad,” she started, shaking her head and rolling her eyes, “I don’t even want to talk about him. I’ve resented him for so long. I’m just now getting to where I understand that he’s doing the best he can, but that still isn’t good enough for me.”

I nodded my head, having heard this whole argument before. I looked out the window and saw the reds and yellows of fall. My rods and reels were no longer in my truck. But my shotgun was and a neighborhood squirrel across the street made me think of driving out to my parent’s place and spending the rest of my afternoon in the woods.

“So why are we joining the military again?” I asked.

Laura turned the movie back on and wrapped my arm around her waist. I tried to pull away but her elbow clasped down on my arm. “If you move, I’ll kill you.” I smiled, trying not to laugh, and curled up to watch the rest of the movie with her. When it ended, we were both hungry and opted for Taco Bell. I looked out the window before we left, and it was already dark.

Winter 1999: Deer season rolled through November as Dad and I stared at fishing tackle more than our rifles. Seventy degrees was no time to stay in the woods, regardless of our need to be there. So we traded bullets for crankbaits and fished our way towards the holidays as presents magically collected beneath our family tree. I could also see my tuxedo against my bedroom door as my January 2nd wedding rolled closer.

“We need to carefully plan everything for the surrounding days, so it will all run smooth,” Laura told me.

“What day we getting married again?” I asked.

“Don’t be funny. But for real: are you hunting New Years Day?”

“Probably.”

“What if we got a bunch of stuff to do?”

“Then I’ll do it afterwards,” I said.

She paused. “What if I asked you not to?”

I smiled, as did she, knowing that this wouldn't be the last time we'd have this talk together. “Then I wouldn't.”

She sighed, looking down at the ground then back up at me. “What time you think you’ll be home that morning so we can finish up the rest of our plans?”

“Probably by noon,” I responded, then my mom came over and hugged both of us before she sat down to watch It’s a Wonderful Life.

The weather finally cooled after Christmas and New Year’s Eve, and the Mississippi Flyway opened its flights upon us. Dad, Rob, Tom, and I waded to the mallard hole on New Year’s Day, with Dad feeling well rested while the hung-over young guys took turns carrying each other to their spots. I sucked in each morsel of my dad’s coffee, Rob and Tom’s dip, and my own candy bar as the growing light listened to the loading of guns. And right when the silence again overtook the world, as we whispered prayers for camaraderie and safety, I heard Rob’s cackling voice.

“Somebody’s getting married.”

I had never known life without knowing Rob. He is in my earliest memories of growing up, and we often talked of growing old together on a hunting ranch. He was there for the roost, my first big bass, the 140 bass day in Dyersburg, and had never complained all those times in high school when driving me to Kmart.

“One day til' the big day,” Tom added.

Tom is the Paul Maclean of the group. Good looking, cocky, and a raging alcoholic. He has been a drinker for as long as I have known him. All through high school, we fished what he called "my aunt's place," even though it wasn't his aunt's at all. He also duck hunted with us, spending all night at the bar and, the next morning, was the most excited among us. We frequently considered leaving him in the truck, bound and gagged, because he talked so much, but it still wouldn't have been the same without him.

“Do I get to kiss the bride?” Rob asked.

“Not before I do,” Dad answered.

Dad told me several months earlier that he always thought Laura would hurt me. I told him that I thought that too, but now we both knew things would be different. We used to fish in Senatobia, Mississippi, on Northwest Farms in some of the best farm ponds we'd ever seen. He taught me everything he knew about hunting and fishing, from cleaning game and shooting angles, to crankbait selections and bass tendencies. Later that day, he would be the best man in my wedding. And Tom, Rob, and myself knew that he was already the best among us.

“I got seconds,” Tom jumped in. “I been trying to kiss her for years.”

“Thirds,” Rob finished.

Two hooders buzzed the decoys momentarily but escaped without a shot fired, voices being canceled out by the sounds of their wings. Two woodies attempted the same but failed to emulate their predecessors. I had not taken a shot. Would not take a shot. I only leaned against the tree, watching my friends as their trigger fingers pulled on each duck. Mine wrapped calmly around my ring finger.

Winter 2000: I continued to hold that ring three weeks after our wedding as I watched Laura's plane take off. The plane's tail feathers got smaller and its wing flaps became a blur. I turned around, once the plane was out of sight, and saw that I was alone.

I had found the girl for me nearly eight years before, devised a lengthy and exhausting plan for dating her, dodged her once another girl found me enticing, then eventually asked her to marry me in a coffee shop a few months before. We had only been married for three weeks and now she was off to Basic Training. She wouldn't be back for six weeks. She was gone. How could I have just let her slip out of my hands again? Was I a real man because I allowed my wife to enter the Air Force? I had just promised to spend the rest of my life with her, and now she was going to be further away than she had ever been. I knew it was something she felt she had to do, another example of her ongoing desire to achieve total independence from everyone around her. Yet, somehow, she still wanted me as well. How did I fit into her plans? I wanted to stay near my family, continue our ongoing hunting and fishing adventures, but she wanted her own adventure.



As I stood outside the airport terminal, I wondered if it was the best decision to let her go. Why didn't I just tell her that we could move together right now and forego being separated for this long? She didn't have to join the Air Force for us to move somewhere else. I could have picked up and moved. Really, I could have. I think. And now the Air Force was in control. Once Laura had signed on the dotted line, they could send us anywhere they pleased. She traded, in some strange way, one father for another.

"Hey baby," she said on the phone the next day and I could tell she was crying.

"How are you?" I asked her, and I could hear yelling in the background.

"Not good. I miss you," she cried.

"You miss me? I love you so much," I said.

*"Come home. Please come home," I thought again. I'll take care of you. I'll be here on Christmas morning; I'll sit and watch a movie with you. I'll keep doing all the things you've already seen me do. And I'll leave town with you. I'll go wherever you want to go. Just say the word.*

"I know you do, but I got to go. There's a hundred people behind me waiting to use this phone."

"When will you call again?" I asked.

"I don't know. Don't wait around, though." She was still crying. "Spend time with your Dad. Go and hunt."

The ducks had been landing in the middle of this bean field for several weeks. Periodically, after the wedding, we would ride by and the mallards and gadwalls would always be there. Dad and I would stop the truck on the blacktop, binoculars in hand, and

point and plot our schemes. One morning, we made our way to the field a half hour before shooting time with our guns, boots, and shovels. We had never dug pits before, but figured that we had seen it done enough on TV that we had to give it a shot.

Dad and I buried ourselves in grass, mud, and the beginnings of a morning shower. Our decoys danced on the water, drakes on the outside moving close and away from the hen as though she were a magnet.

Four mallards came in. Wings flailed as the ground emerged and thunderous roars ripped towards their bodies. Two drakes fell instantly. Then the third. The hen turned at the last minute and I drew up. Click. But I had only shot twice. I pulled the trigger again. No sound. I looked down and the gun was covered in mud, and it had only let me take two shots. The female had gotten away. I blinked my eyes. The female had gotten away.

Spring 2000: I saw Laura next in San Angelo, Texas. I had found an apartment and had just finished moving in when she called me to pick her up. It had been six weeks since I had last seen her. When she walked out of her barracks she was wearing camouflage. I smiled. The only other time I had seen her wear camouflage was when I talked her into goose hunting with Tom and I once. "It's cold," she told us that day. "Too damn cold for me." She brought me back to our new home in San Angelo and sat me down on the bed, removing all but my ring. I listened to each word that she said, noticing that the petite, muscleless girl I had left had transformed into something else.

While I had been duck hunting with Dad, she had run through obstacles courses, eaten off the floor, fired an M-16, and endured the spitting instructors that confronted her

every move. She had gone through exactly what her Dad had. The same mental and physical tortures he had endured on Parris Island. But as she sat there smiling, I now thought I knew the real reason she had done this. She wanted to show that a person could live a different life. That she wouldn't mimic her father. She would be the different one in her family, forever trying to walk the fine line in our marriage between provider and best friend. As I stared at her naked body that day, I knew she could kill me with her legs alone. But before I allowed her to do this, she gave me the news.

“We’re being moved to Omaha, Nebraska, when we’re done here.”

“Really,” I responded, thankful our destination wasn't overseas.

“I heard there’s really good hunting and fishing there.”

“So have I,” I responded. I hugged her as tightly as I could, promising myself that I would never again let her out of my crosshairs. Then we kissed. I listened-- no sound of teeth. Afterward, I went outside and watched her smoke. She was down to two or three a day and vowed to finish them completely. I nodded, not really caring one way or another.

Summer 2002: Today Laura will finish her last cigarette as I make my cast into the lake. She will read a suspense novel, perhaps Tom Clancy or Michael Connelly, and I will occasionally interrupt her reading so she can take another picture of a fish. She’ll do so without qualm or question, knowing that this will not be the last day that she will spend out on the lake.

“Two more fish and I’ll be done,” I’ll say, but she is so enthralled with her book that she won't even look up.

“Laura,” I’ll call her. Still no answer. “Laura Hesford.”

Her head will pop up as if it is the first time she has had heard my voice.

“What’s up, baby?” she’ll say.

“I’m about ready to go.”

“Take your time,” she’ll answer with a yawn.

“But I’m kind of hot.”

“I could stay out here all day,” she’ll say.

I’ll make one more cast, knowing that it will be one of my last for the year. The air will grow thicker, the trees will thin, and, inside my heart, the whistling of wings will grow louder.

## THE SOUGHT-AFTER TRIGGER

While I have never heard my father-in-law John speak about Apocalypse Now or Missing In Action, my wife Laura has heard that he despises them. Hates the way that cinematic veterans wake in the morning with trembling sweats and jump at the closings of doors and cabinets through the day and night. All of that is bullshit, down to the medals of honor and the goddamned pictures where the lost soldiers within the Vietnam War Memorial seem to touch the hands of their crying mourners on the other side.

His family, especially his daughter Laura, can't remember John talking about the war. Laura and her three brothers only knew two things about his time spent there, and both of those were told by Laura's whispering mother Peg. One, he was a helicopter gunner. Two, John nearly shot a colleague with his M-60. Luckily, his own gun jammed before another friendly fire casualty was placed on record. Any other military duties were listed under "job" and deemed insignificant by him as subject for the already random dinnertime conversation. Apparently, however, the duties were significant enough for John Hesford to serve not one, but three tours. Something kept pulling him back there.

"He probably won't even talk to you," Laura told me as we rode to her parents' house for the first time while we were dating. I had heard all the stories of how John never talked to anyone. "But he does hunt all the time," Laura reminded me once again, "so you'll have something in common." She had only brought two other guys to the house before, and John never did call them by their right name.

"I'll be fine," I said, not really concerned one way or the other. I had just separated from another girl whose father smoked peyote and beat a tom-tom drum for weekend recreation. We got along just fine without having a damn thing in common.

Laura's mom, Peg, greeted me with the same forced smile that she has to this very day. Not that she is a snob. Quite the opposite. I just think that she has no other way to express herself. When a person is disappointed as much in life as she has been, having her husband all but ignore her for the last thirty years, what other kind of smile is possible? In any case, as long as her daughter loves her, she could at least pretend her life is okay. Laura, similarly, loves Peg more than herself.

"I'm going to take him in here to meet Dad," Laura said.

"Maybe you shouldn't disturb him because he's watching TV," Peg replied. Her perfectly circular face, with cheeks fuller than my childhood hamster Chopper, no longer smiled. In her mind, because of whatever rules her husband had long ago established, bringing a person into the living room to talk to John could be a bad move. Laura, who acted as if she didn't know or care about these rules, walked me in John's direction.

"He'll be fine," Laura replied. "Plus, I have to tell him about my car."

"What's wrong with it?"

"It's overheating," Laura said.

"Don't tell John," Peg said. "I'll give you the money and you can go and get it fixed."

"Whatever," Laura replied, then walked me towards the other room while Peg remained close on our heels. Laura turned and whispered, mocking her mother. "Don't tell John, don't tell John, don't tell John."

I rounded the corner and saw the mythical John for the first time, lying on the couch with a Michael Connelly book in front of his face and the Discovery channel turned low on the television. He failed to move while Laura introduced me.

"Hi, Jeff," John said.

"He's the hunter I told you about," Laura said.

John immediately put his book down and sat up on the couch. "Come on in, have a seat," he said. He was wearing a dark gray sweatshirt, the same one I still see today in the windy tundra of a Memphis January or the siesta heat of a Memphis August. His pants were two or three sizes too long, the cuffs rolled up nearly to his calves. His eyes were puffy, an insomniac's baggage beneath them. The rest of his face was covered with wrinkles as deep as trenches, the same lines that Laura curses in her own face as we grow older.

"How are you doing?" I asked.

"Good. What do you hunt?"

I looked back and Laura stood against the doorframe, watching. John had said more words to me than he had spoken to her in months.

"I love to bird hunt, especially duck, and I've shot a few deer here and there."

“Dad loves to deer hunt,” Laura added from the background, her pinkie fingernail in her mouth. It was one of the few times she has ever given me a reason to believe that she had ever been a little girl.

“You bow hunt?” John asked.

“I have before,” I said.

John left the room without saying a word, giving Laura a complimentary father/daughter tap on the shoulder. She shrugged, as did I, wondering where he was going. We waited for his return while Peg retired to the other room.

“Here,” he said, returning with a compound bow. My heart leapt a bit. “Pull this back.”

Pulling a bow back is like swimming. You use a lot of muscles that normally never move and generally don't feel the pain until the next day. With this in mind, I grabbed the bow from him while he watched. “It's set at 70 pounds,” he said, and I immediately thought that I had never drawn a bow back with that kind of pull.

I grabbed his bow, however, and talked to him while I calmly drew it back. “I had a Bear model myself,” I told him, continuing to breathe easy as I slowly and effortlessly drew the string against my chest. His eyes got big as I gently lowered it back down.

“Nice let off,” I said, handing the bow back to him as if I had merely played with a child's toy. I looked back over my shoulder at Laura, but she had already left. She had seen enough. There was something in this she didn't like, I knew. Something in the man she wanted me to be versus the man her father had become.



Brian, Laura's brother, came in a short time later. Brian is the Jeffrey Dahmer of the family, very rarely speaking and hardly ever allowing his eyes to move above a person's shoulders when talking to them. With his sandy blonde hair and blue eyes, he looks like a young Robert Redford. But, because of his reticent personality, I swore until recently that he had bodies buried in his backyard across town.

"Hey," Brian said to John, acting as if he were speaking to a passer-by on a walking trail instead of his own father.

"Hey Bri," John returned, walking into the kitchen and re-filling his glass of Coke. "How's your fantasy football going?"

"Pretty good," Brian started with a brief shine in his eyes. His lips parted for a follow-up comment, but John immediately interrupted.

"Good," he replied, exiting the room while Brian stood and contemplated his next murder.

John never came back in the room that night and never said goodbye. Neither did Brian when he left. Peg, Laura, and I talked well into the night and we told Peg how we had first met nearly six or seven years earlier. With each comment, Peg's interest increased. With that same forced smile, she told me how sweet I was.

"John's like that," she said after we had finished. "The other day, for Valentine's, we shared a doughnut together before we started our day. It was really sweet. It's just not in his nature to do much more."

"Really," Laura nodded. "That sucks."

We said our good-byes as Laura and Peg gave each other a long hug. Then Peg unfolded her sleeping bag and adjusted her makeshift bed on the living room floor.

"And why does she sleep on the floor?" I asked Laura after we left that night.

"She gets migraines. Any soft bed hurts her head real bad."

"And John always sleeps in the bed?"

"Yea."

"Have you ever caught them having sex?"

"No."

"Are you sure he's your real father."

Laura didn't want to laugh, but she couldn't help it. "Hell, who knows."

Once we got back to Laura's apartment, we talked for a couple more hours while I massaged her back. She repeated that she thought John liked me, and I arrogantly told her that he had no reason not to. "Maybe we can go hunting one day," I told her.

"Yea, sure," she replied quietly. I envisioned her thoughts of John and me staying in the woods for days on end, never making a courtesy phone call to home while Laura waited for her man and Peg tried to talk her into shopping. I should have told her right then that the only way I could stay gone from her that long was if she was with me. And that the only desire I had to be with her father was at her parents' house. But I said nothing. I massaged her back instead, trying to accomplish some act of love her mom had probably never received.

Laura and I saw each other every day for the next few weeks, and spent a couple of those nights visiting my parents. Like former girlfriends, Laura thinks my mom is sweet but highly protective. I agree. Laura also thinks my Dad is the most caring man on earth. I would also have to agree. Yet one night in there, Laura and I made a phone call to Peg and saw that she would be home that night. With John gone so much over the years, she has put a lot on her plate. But she was able to make some time for us so we drove out to their place to keep her company.

“Where’s John?” I asked Peg when I walked in the door.

“He’s still out of town,” she replied, watching an old Clark Gable love story.

“Hunting?”

“Yea,” she answered.

“When’s he coming back?” Laura asked.

“I don’t know. Whenever,” she replied.

“Whenever?” Laura said with a shake of her head.

We saw lights come into the driveway a few minutes later, as if John had been listening to our conversation. The front door opened and John emerged from the darkness. He had been hunting on some private land over ninety miles from his home.

“Hi, babe,” Peg said, nearly running from the living room as flashes of Edith Bunker filled my head.

“Peg, do we have any hamburger meat unfrozen?” he asked, carrying an empty plastic ice cream bucket in his hand.

“Always,” she replied, looking at the bucket. “You got a baby bird?”

“Yea. It's a little mockingbird. It got too cold where I was so I had to come back,” he said, as he walked into the kitchen.

My head darted back and forth from Peg and John during this entire exchange. Things like this never went on in my house. Dad never brought home any kind of creature unless it was already dead.

John opened the package of hamburger and placed a piece of the raw meat in his mouth. Picking up the bird and cradling it in his hands, John chewed the piece in his mouth. Then he brought the bird near his lips as if he were going to kiss it.

I stepped closer at this point, kneeling so far forward that I nearly fell over, and watched the bird's tiny beak open and pull food from John's mouth. I guess John could have simply placed the meat in the ice cream bucket and let it fend for itself, but for some reason John turned into the mother figure. And the bird definitely took to it.

“Did you see that?” I wanted to ask Laura, but she had left the room and was talking on the phone.

When I went to her, she told me to go away. “Yea, yea. I can do that, too.” She went back to her conversation as I watched John place the bird back in its plastic home while Peg continued to stand by his side.

“Be home next week,” he said, then he asked Peg if she could continue to feed the bird while he was away. She agreed immediately, then watched him drive into the night. He had been at the house for less than fifteen minutes.

“How did *you* guys meet?” I asked later in the night while Peg, Laura, and I watched a movie.

Peg's face turned into a sixteen year old's, blushing as she spoke. "John was in the service and I was at a party with some friends of mine. I didn't want to go at first, but my friend made me. I was lucky that I did. John came over and asked me to dance." She stared blankly at the wall. "He used to take me out, driving me around in his car. He got tickets all the time in that old car for driving too fast. He was so good looking, and he still is. And we even used to play canasta all the time," she said.

"What's canasta?" I asked.

"It's a card game. We'd play every night, just me and him." Then she laughed a low belly laugh. At first I thought the laugh, like a hard rainstorm, would be brief. But it kept going, with each extended guffaw Laura and I looked more curiously at each other. "Right after we got married," she finally mumbled between bellows, "I went up to him and asked if he wanted to play canasta. 'I hate that damn game,' John told me, and he continued to watch TV. We never played again and I haven't played since." She continued to laugh as she told this, as if it was the funniest thing she had ever heard.

Peg now began to slap the floor. Laura and I didn't know whether to smile or become concerned. I thought watching her was funny as hell, but I felt it was important, at least this time, to wait for Laura's cue. Finally, Laura started laughing, as did I. "At this point," Peg continued, her face suddenly clearing up as I wiped tears from my own eyes, "I can make it on my own. That would be no problem. Another woman, that's fine too. Divorce, that's okay." Her face got serious. "But if I ever saw him actually take another woman out on a date, I'd kill him."

*"What in the hell am I getting myself into?"* I wondered. Cataloging everything I had heard about John and what I was then seeing from Peg, what person wouldn't question where they fit into this situation? Then, to top it all off, while Peg was in the bathroom, Laura made this comment as we watched CNN footage from the Middle East: "They just need to go in and wipe out every fucking person and start over. Just too much hate over there."

"What about all the innocent people and children?" I asked.

"Casualties of war," Laura said plainly. And while I watched Laura from the corner of my eye, still remembering Peg's earlier bout with hysteria, I wondered about what would become of me. What would become of the way I thought about family and love and life? Would I, like Peg, find myself eventually laughing about the separation of minds in my own marriage in a few years?

Shortly after, Peg began to get a headache, a migraine pattern that her daughter inherited. Laura tried to rub her shoulders to ease the pain, but Peg was too tight and Laura's hands too small.

"Do you have any massage oil I can use to make it easier?" Laura said.

"What's that?" Peg asked.

"What's what?" Laura answered.

"Massage oil."

"You've never had anyone put massage oil on you?"

"No," Peg said.

"That really sucks," Laura said.

A few days later, Laura and I stayed up all night talking. It was our first all-nighter, a crucial accomplishment for two people considering a serious relationship. It began in a Denny's, where we spoke of school, writing, and careers. Later as the conversation occurred in bed, we talked about past loves, the future, and our families.

"I can remember being at Aycock Park a few years ago," she told me, "practicing tennis when I saw my mom's car come up. She'd come up every once in a while and check on me. This day, probably when I was around sixteen, I looked up and saw both Mom and Dad in the car. 'Oh my God,' I remember saying, running across the parking lot. 'What's wrong?' I asked.

"Nothing,' they said.

"Why are you two together?' I asked.

"No reason,' Mom said."

I shook my head. It didn't make sense. "What was the big deal?" I asked, making the mistake of using my own childhood as a point of reference.

"I had never seen them ride in a car together," Laura told me. "Yea. Never seen them together. Never seen them go out on a date, never seen them even kiss." She started to talk louder, the scene obviously becoming clearer in her head. "Yea. He'll change the oil at 3000 miles. That's the one thing he taught me. 'You got to change the oil, Laurie,'" she mocked him. "'Got to take care of your vehicles.'" She laughed. "But he never took care of us." She got silent again as we lay on top of the bed covers. I wanted to tell her that my dad was perfect to me, but many times I still never wanted to fish or hunt with

him. Why didn't I want to go? I really don't know. I found it more rewarding to go with friends and come home and tell him how well we did. It was only recently that I was starting to appreciate my own relationship with my dad, and that she and John still had a lot of years left, just like dad and I, to strengthen their relationship.

But deep down I knew it was bullshit. I couldn't turn this into a sitcom problem, one that ends with a witty line at the end of the story. This problem would go on for as long as I would know Laura. And since this was our first all-niter, I knew that we were both getting in deep. I looked at her face that night, and could already see the baby crow's feet in the corner of her eyes that she had inherited from John. Then I saw the scowl on her face from thinking about him, and I knew that I would always be trying to prove myself to her.

The following night, Laura and I made a double run-- dinner at my parents and a late night talk with Peg at their house.

"He talks to you more than he does to any of us," Laura said in front of Peg that night. I don't even know how the conversation shifted to John, for he was in the other room and had not left his spot on the couch.

"John talks a lot," Peg defended.

"Mom, are you crazy? No he doesn't," Laura said.

"Well. He spent a lot of time in the woods growing up." She waved her hand at us in a shun. "He's always been like that."



I went in the other room where he watched the Outdoor network. “How you doing? Shooting any birds? Killing any deer?” he asked.

“No. Trying to, but no. How about you?”

“We did all right yesterday.” He remained silent for a long time, as if he didn't want to tell me the story. I've never been able to figure that out. Most hunters like to talk out of boastfulness or pride, but you have to press John. Sometimes that doesn't even work. He hunts for himself, sleeping in the back of his truck on cold, winter nights and fighting mosquitoes and chiggers during the early autumn bow season. You just wish you knew what he was thinking on those trips, or when he has to go home to his family. I wonder how big an adjustment that is to come home. I wonder why he comes home at all. He is probably the only hunter I've ever seen that could stay in the wilderness and live. But why he comes back is the kicker, the one thing I can't figure out. It's not as if he smoothly re-acclimates to society and his family, but he comes back for something, doesn't he?

That day, he turned and sat on the edge of the couch and immediately began his story: “The damn buck stood right in the middle of the field and I know he had to smell me, but he never moved an inch.” He kept staring out the window as he told me this, and I guessed he was half-visualizing, half-hoping a deer would magically appear in his backyard. But, as I would find out a few weeks later, I was wrong about what he was looking for in the backyard.

“I put the crosshairs on him,” he said, and my mind immediately jumped back to his story, instead of worrying why he kept staring out the window.

His left eye closed as he braced his invisible gun on his knee, turning away from me as he did. "And pulled the trigger. Whap, he hit the ground. Then out of the corner of my eye I saw a doe shoot out from the woods across the field." Now he was looking at a piano across the room and I saw that he had been hunting, at least that day, with a bolt-action rifle. "Once she stopped, cause you know I can't hit em' anymore when they're moving, I whapped her too."

I laughed and left the room to join Peg and Laura. He also left, walking outside to smoke a cigarette by himself.

"Is the movie over?" Laura asked impatiently when I entered the room. "We want to watch a movie in there."

"I'll just ask him when we can have the TV," I said.

"No," Peg said, "We're fine back here."

I left the room when I heard the front door open again. "John, you care if we watch a movie in here? We got the back TV set up for you if you want," I said.

"No. Not at all. You guys have fun. I've been dozing off for awhile anyway." He left quietly. Peg walked in the room and looked at me as if I had just asked the Messiah to take off His sandals.

A few weeks later, I saw why John repeatedly peered out the window. While watching a deer hunting show with him on TNN one afternoon, John turned his book over and again set it on the coffee table. He made his way to the window overlooking the backyard, and gently lifted the window screen. He picked up the pellet gun from the

corner, loaded a pellet, and brought the gun to his shoulder as he continued to peer out the window. The blackbirds in the yard sifted through the feed he had thrown them until they heard the shot from the pellet gun that normally sat in the corner of the room. I had always thought the gun was for nostalgic purposes, but I should have known better. The small flock of birds flew away, leaving one injured comrade crippling on the ground. The gun went back in the corner, the window silently slid down, and John took one last look at the pigeon cages in the back of his firing range.

Two mesh cages. At least ten pigeons in each, all comparing the number of dead birds in the yard with themselves, having to guess when their time was coming. Pigeon shit everywhere. On the grass, on their feet, on their heads as if the nasty bastards had shit with their asses in the air. He even separated the pigeons. Mean in one cage, nice and retarded in another. "Peepers," he called each of his birds. Laura had even seen him discipline one for picking on a retarded pigeon. He took a Wiffle ball bat to it, feathers exploding off its brown and white body.

"What in the hell does he have those disgusting ass birds in those cages for?"

"He's always had pigeons. He used to fly them around the neighborhood."

"Sure that made the neighbors happy."

"Ecstatic," Laura said. We walked from the backyard, through a slew of dead birds on the ground, into the house. Peg was holding onto the phone and we could see that she was trying not to cry.

"What?" Laura asked.

Peg said goodbye to the person on the line. Then she turned to us. "My friend Barbara died today."

Laura, John, and I went to the funeral home to support Peg. Laura hugged her mom, who was trying not to cry in front of the casket. She still fought to smile. I guess she was just so used to doing so that her face was nearly stuck into the gesture.

"She looks good, doesn't she?" Peg asked me.

I nodded my head and quickly sat back down.

A few moments later, as the priest threw his "Hail Marys" and "Our Fathers" into the air, I leaned over to Laura.

"Where's your dad?"

She turned around and squeezed my hand as she turned back to the front, trying not to laugh. "He's in the back row."

"Oh," I said.

"Look at him," she told me.

I turned around and John was asleep. Again, I didn't know if I should laugh.

A few days later, I strolled into John's house to meet Laura but she hadn't returned from the mall. I went into the living room and found that John wasn't sitting in his same spot, nor was he shooting birds out the back window. I figured he was asleep in his bedroom, and since it was going to be a little while before Laura got to the house, I thought I would go in the backyard and chip a few golf balls.

When I rounded the corner, I saw John pointing his pellet gun into his metal shed. He didn't notice me, only stood stalwart as his body leaned toward the stock of his weapon. I stood for a couple minutes, not wanting to interrupt whatever he was doing, but I finally grew impatient.

"What are you doing, man?"

He didn't say a word; he only raised his finger to his lips and gave a silent "Shhh." I looked around to see if anyone else could see him. What the hell was in the shed? Did he have a cripple that ran in for cover? Had merely killing small birds in the yard lost its fun? Did he now want to conquer one of the more defiant lawn mowers? I walked away silently, finding out later that mouse season had opened on the John Hesford Wildlife Management Area.

"We were on watch one night down at Parris Island," he told us later that night. Peg, Laura, and I stopped when he spoke, listening intently as the three of them smoked on the front porch. "On one of those long twelve hour overnight shifts. We heard a gun go off. Hell, we didn't have anything to do so we walked over to the other watchtower. Damn kid, probably eighteen, had committed suicide. Blown his head clean off." He started laughing as he took a drink of his Coke. "Guess he wasn't happy with the overnight shift."

Laura looked at me as if I would be shocked. But at this point, almost nothing surprised me with him. Thoughts of the suicide and the mouse hunt were the furthest things from my mind. What I was wondering, instead, is how he smokes so much in a day? Also, I knew that smoking at home translated into smoking in the deer stand, where

John has had as much success as any hunter I've ever known. How was that? When I think about breathing in the deer stand with a buck in sight, he spooks and runs away. How could John continually puff away, probably shooting with a cigarette in mouth, and have as much luck as he does?

I asked my dad about this the next time I saw him and he told me that some people were just made to kill. Some people were just live triggers. We had both hunted with such a man, Dennis James, years ago. He'd smoke all day in the woods and wear jeans and cowboy boots up his deer stand ladder. When he had to take a leak, his only worry was not pissing on himself. No worrying about smells or giving away position-- he knew the deer would come seeking him like forgotten family. His gun would raise to his shoulders, the safety would "click," and the thought of missing would be the farthest thing from his mind.

"Live triggers," I repeated to Dad.

"Yep."

"Part animal is what you're saying," I said.

"Yep," he replied. "But John was as hospitable and talkative as he could be when he took me to his hunting land," Dad added. "You know, Jeff, that I'm not much of a talker. And from what you told me about him, I figured we'd spend our time pretty silent going down there. But it wasn't like that. He talked the whole time." And why did I suggest for Dad to go with John? Why would I trust him with my own father? I think back now about the decision and can only shake my head at the absurdly ridiculous answer that forms in my head: John did have a really great place to hunt.

Laura doesn't smoke as much as she used to. She still spends her fair share of time puffing away, but with each passing day she cuts down a bit more. During one of her smoke breaks with her father, I sat in our first apartment four months after our wedding. Laura had recently joined the Air Force and John had just followed me from Memphis, Tennessee, to San Angelo, Texas, a seven hundred mile trip one way. He had driven our car while I drove a Ryder truck. When we got to San Angelo, Laura met us at the apartment. We unloaded the truck and I rested my back while Laura and John went outside to smoke.

"When you guys want me to go," he said, "just drop me off at the bus stop."

"What, Dad?" Laura said. "Take a load off. Go back when you want."

"I'll go back in the morning," he said. "I don't want to be in your hair any. If you want, you can drop me off at a bar in town if you guys want to spend some time together."

"Dad, I'm gonna kill you if you don't be quiet," Laura told him.

The room was silent for a moment. "How was basic training?" he asked her.

"Hard," she said. "It hurt my knees."

John smiled. "Our first day of basic on Parris Island, we were standing on a helicopter pad when a goddamn gunny came and addressed us. I was scared to death. One of the new recruits in line didn't pick up his bags fast enough. That damn gunny walked over to him and hit him so hard in his stomach that the boy fell to his knees. Then the

gunny kicked him in his face, knocking him off the heliport and into the grass. I remember thinking 'oh shit,' to myself." He laughed.

"But things are a bit different now. And that *was* the Marines. I should have known it was coming, though. The day I went to enlist, I went during lunch. The army, air force, and navy were out to lunch. The Marine recruiter was working through lunch. I should have known right then." All the time he continued to laugh. "I should have known right then."

The next day we dropped him off at 8:00 AM at the bus station. "Thank you for bringing me, baby," he told her, kissing Laura on the cheek and giving her a small hug.

We didn't see John and Peg for a few months, and during this time I tried to be the man that Laura had never seen in her own home. I cooked dinner, cleaned, wrote during the mornings, and freed up all my time in the afternoons. She seemed to enjoy my attempts to please her. And each day I was tired, each day I just wanted to lay there and sleep instead of going out of my way, I thought about canasta. Then we decided to go back home for a few days to get the rest of our stuff and see our parents.

When we got to John and Peg's, after swapping pleasantries concerning new jobs and San Angelo, John told me about an animal that had recently reached through one of his mesh cages and killed Peepers. Since they lived in a crowded neighborhood, he figured that it must have been an alley cat. Then he paused. It was a long pause, and I could hear Peg telling Laura in the other room that Putnam was where her money needed to be.

"What happened?" I asked.



He leaned up, placed Tom Clancy's Without Remorse face down, and took a drink. "It was a cat," he said, "just like I thought it was. I looked out there earlier when I had the window raised and heard Peepers acting as if there was some sort of problem. I stepped closer and saw some alley cat reaching up through the wire mesh trying to pull him out.

"So I nocked an arrow, pulled back..." and the whole time he's telling me this he's going through the movements of setting up his body reenacting the moment. His words were sharp, fast, and seemed to pierce the house's noise.

"I pulled back, took aim at the little sucker, careful not to hit Peepers, and released the arrow. Whap! The damn thing took off around the corner toward the front yard with my arrow sticking out its side. I ran through the house." At this point he was smiling, arms falling to his sides in an imaginary sprint. "I looked out the front door, and the damn thing was lying in the middle of the street with an arrow sticking out of it. 'Holy shit,' I said, running out as quickly as I could to scoop the cat into the trash bag." He took a large breath. "It reminded me of that bird I shot that landed on Mrs. Wilson's trampoline." He took a drink of his Coke and re-reclined as if we had just been talking about favorite movies or intriguing books.

In the other room, after Peg finished her Putnam advice, she told Laura that John thinks he's getting old and he wants to own his own land before he dies. I entered the room, saying he seemed young and dangerously vibrant to me, yet neither laughed. When we finally made it back to San Angelo, Laura immediately began researching available

land in newspapers and on-line. I asked her "Why? He's never done anything for you, besides help us move a few months ago."

The computer mouse in her hand stopped moving. She looked up at me and shook her head. "I know Jeff. But, right now, I can't think of one thing that I've ever done for him. I need to return that one favor."

When she finished her first night of research, Laura came to bed. She positioned her body next to mine and kissed me on my cheek. "Talk to me," she said.

"I'm tired," I replied, but turned over and held her. "Why does your dad suddenly want land? They've been talking about moving for years."

"I think with his high blood pressure, he's just feeling old." She grabbed my arm and kissed it softly. "That just sucks," she said.

I wanted to reassure her that there was more time to get closer to him, that the land research was a start. But I said nothing. Instead, I placed my arms around her shoulder and held her. I'm not much of a cuddler-- my own body heat is high enough as it is-- but when we're close like we were that night, Laura asks me to hold her tight. And often, when she has a hard time going to sleep or a headache racks her brain, she asks me to tell her a story. She asks me to kiss her forehead. She asks me to tell her I love her, to say it over and over again until we both fall asleep.

## VICISSITUDE

As soon as I was comfortable in my deer stand that morning, I heard the first screams from the other end of Rob's property. During a hunt, your eyes and ears play with you. At least three times a morning I turn my scope's power as high as it goes, trying to transform the corner of an elm tree and its underbrush into a reasonable facsimile of a buck. So when I heard that first scream belt out while I still awaited sunrise, I did what any other person would. I hesitated, and turned my ear to listen more carefully.

Something screamed again.

The day started well before 3 AM as Rob, his father Donnie, my father Larry, and I drove towards Hardeman County to deer hunt. "When we get down here," Rob said that morning before the hunt, "I have to warn you of one thing. There's this crazy son of a bitch named Bubba. Lives on the land next door and shoots guns and yells at the top of his damn lungs when he knows we're hunting."

"Why?" I asked.

"He's crazy. Plain and simple. The damn fool is probably gonna slash our tires one day. Ain't no telling. If you hear someone yelling, it's him."

Dad and I looked at each other incredulously. I pictured Bubba as a demented Ernest T. Bass from The Andy Griffith Show, skipping around and hooting and hollering

while throwing rocks at car windows. Donnie had already heard about Bubba and chewed on a toothpick in the back seat.

"What's your Bubba doing this weekend?" I asked Donnie. I was referring to his other son, Keith, who, because he was the eldest, was also called Bubba.

"Him, Angi, and the kids are coming down tomorrow. He doesn't get off work until then, but he'll be down for Christmas Eve and Christmas day," Donnie answered.

"He may even be down for the day after, because he said something about coming down here and hunting one day, just us two," Rob added.

"Cool," I said. "I still remember that day he yelled at me through the woods after he had shot that deer." Then I laughed. "I tried to ignore him," I said. "But he wouldn't let me."

"Jeffffff!" Keith yelled shortly after I heard his gun go off that afternoon several years before. There was only one shot, so I knew he had a deer down. But I wasn't going anywhere. I still had an hour left before dark and wanted to keep hunting. Maybe if I didn't say anything, he would shut the hell up.

"Jefffff!" His voice sounded a bit unsure this second time. Maybe he thought I had already walked out.

"Jefffff," he yelled again, and, because every deer within a mile radius had long since left, I finally answered with a whisper.

"Yea."

"Can you come here?" he yelled.

"Yea," I reluctantly answered, climbing from my tree stand and unloading my gun.

When I made it to him, he had a nice buck laying dead on the ground that had a bullet hole in his neck. "Nice shot," I said.

"Thanks."

We stood there above the deer for a moment as I wondered why he had called me out of my hunt.

"I need you to field dress it," he finally said with a squirm of his face. "I'll get sick if I do it."

I let out a low sigh, still wanting to finish my afternoon of hunting. Even though I was only a teenager and Keith was a grown man, I had already been taught by Dad how to field-dress, skin, and prepare any animal I shot. Keith hadn't, and he wouldn't believe me at the time that all you had to do was breathe through your mouth and you couldn't smell. Plus, it was a neck shot. The buck's insides would be as clean as a whistle.

Keith held the buck's legs open as I opened him up, soaking my arms with blood to the elbow as he repeatedly said, "Thanks, Jeff." "Thanks, man." "Thank you so much."

When I finished, it was nearly dark. Keith thanked me again, then we started dragging. Each of us took a leg, occasionally switching hands to avoid tiring ourselves out too soon. All we had to do was make it to the big field, which was about a half mile away, but in the dark we fought through water, mud, and tree saplings in excess of a mile. The third inner layer of clothes, the one closest to my skin, was sopping wet when we finally reached the field.

Looking at me, sweat covering his face in the new moonlight, Keith smiled.

"Thanks, man."

I smiled back, not knowing that it was the last hunting trip I would ever make with Keith. Three years later, Dad would call me sobbing, telling me that thirty-one year old Keith had died of a heart attack. I would hang up and cry in Laura's arms.

I got out the truck the morning Rob told us about Bubba with thoughts of Keith still on my mind. He never hunted with us anymore, choosing the life with his family over any sort of life with the woods.

"Dad," Rob asked Donnie as we stood in the dark, "are you going to be able to handle this climbing stand?" Rob pulled this contraption out of the truck and shined a flashlight down at it. There was an entanglement of camouflaged steel bars and nylon straps. "You know how to do this, right?"

"Yes, son," Donnie said impatiently. "I've done this before."

"Before you climb, make sure these pins are placed good in those holes. Okay?"

"Okay," Donnie replied.

"Are you sure?" Rob asked as if his dad were deaf and dumb.

"Yes, son," Donnie said, irritably shaking his head.

Their conversations had gone like this since Rob was little, sometimes for quite a long time. I can remember sitting in a duck blind with the two of them while Rob argued that our decoy placement was the reason why ducks were flaring every time they got close to our spread. Rob and his dad had nearly started yelling that day, and I can

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remember at least two more groups of mallards that flared because of their voices. I said nothing, waiting for my dad to end their argument the way he would end one if it erupted between my sisters in our home. "Just stop it," he'd say to them, his otherwise calm voice turning instantly boisterous. But with Rob and Donnie, he said nothing. He looked the other way as if he couldn't even hear them.

I looked over at Dad the morning Rob and Donnie were discussing the tree stand. As he did in the duck blind many years ago, he looked at the ground, not saying a word. I knew we would mention it later in passing, discussing our day and how Rob and Donnie can never seem to get along. It was sort of their way of dealing with each other. Our way of dealing with them, in contrast, was to say nothing. Now it seems like both ways, the argumentative and the silent, are a waste of precious time.

"Larry, are you going to be all right in that stand?" Rob asked Dad after Dad had climbed on top of the platform a short time later.

"It's small," he whispered, "but I should be fine for a couple hours."

"If you think it's too small, I can move you somewhere else."

There was silence as Dad's orange vest moved slowly in the dark. "I'll be fine. It's a bit small, but I'm all right." There was uncertainty in his voice.

"Dad. If you don't like it, Rob can move you."

A pause. "No...no, I'll be fine." He moved again, and the creaks and cracks of the wood against the tree turned my stomach slightly. Dad had been old since I was young, and a fall from ten feet could have made him a lot older. We walked back to the 4-



wheeler. Rob drove confidently and I nervously held on to the ATV's steel bars as we motored in the other direction.

Another yell rang through the field that morning. "That's got to be Dad," I thought, climbing down the ladder and standing on the frozen ground. I looked around, a confused wince sculpting my face. I didn't have to pee, wasn't tired, but I was on the ground and the best part of the day hadn't even come yet. "What are you doing, Jeff?" I said to myself, breath misting as it left my lips.

With each step I made, the crunch of my feet on the frosted ground spooked another shot I might have gotten at a deer that morning. But Dad had yelled, right? And why would he yell if something really wrong hadn't occurred? Rob had told us earlier that day that Bubba might be in the woods, but Dad could take care of himself if it was him. Right? Even though he had always been old in my mind, Dad had always been a tough old bastard. In a street brawl, regardless of age, I'd have my money on him any day of the week. So why was I walking across this field?

"Jeff!" I heard again. I ran across the field, rifle in hand. "In the chest, in the chest," I thought, Bubba and the movie Deliverance running through my mind. No. It was the deerstand. He had fallen out. But Dad had yelled. If he was seriously hurt, he couldn't yell. Donnie.

I stopped. "Dad!"

"Jefffff!" his voice echoed back, and I took off toward the sound again, thirty yards from the field's edge. With the gun still in hand, half-expecting something,

someone to step into my path, I felt an invisible barrier grab my legs and ankles, toppling my body head over feet as my loaded gun loosened from my grip.

"What the fuck?" I cried, my brain comprehending that the stabbing in my leg was from a barbed wire fence that I had failed to see. My mouth cringed while my hands searched for ground beneath me.

With the wire still cutting into my leg, I pressed the ground to gain upward momentum. "One, two, three," my mind said, and as I pushed away I pulled my feet down behind me. When I was finally able to maneuver myself away from the ground, I grabbed the top row of the fence that my chest still leaned against and pushed myself back over the barbed wire. For a split second, with more darks than lights filling my vision, I felt my heart leap. I had no gun.

I climbed over the wire as quickly as I could, blood trickling from the shallow puncture wounds in my legs. I picked up the rifle. "Dad!"

"Jeffff!"

I had to be close. I bounded through the grays, my breath again disappearing in a cloud of confusion and fear.

"Dad!"

"Jeffff!"

"Dad!"

"Jeff!"

"Daa" I started again, then looked up. "Oh my God," I said when I saw them, dropping my gun to the ground.

I saw one patch of fluorescent orange, which was a hunting vest, hanging vertically while another patch of fluorescent orange completed the "T" shape. I blinked my eyes and looked again, running forward as my mind already knew what my eyes could not yet tell.

Dad was standing beneath Donnie, on his tiptoes, trying to support the weight from Donnie's body as it hung above him. Donnie's feet were trapped in the climbing stand's bootstraps, but the stand was still attached to the tree and had broken apart when he had climbed it. Donnie's legs tried to support his body as he hung on to a spindly tree next to him. He groaned painfully. Because of the car wreck Rob, I, and another friend had been in several years before, I knew what could happen to a leg when too much weight was placed on it. I knew how loud the 'crack' would sound when his leg broke. I could already- if we didn't get too him before that tree limb he was holding broke- hear him screaming.

"Dad, do you have him?"

"He's just out of my reach. I'm getting just enough pressure on him to keep his legs from breaking." Dad was breathing hard.

"Uhhnnnn," Donnie groaned, his arms shaking from fatigue.

Dad let go of him, dropping to the ground on all fours. "Get on my back. Stand on me and try to free him from the straps."

Mom tells me that, when Dad and she first married, kids in the neighborhood would ask, "Can Larry come out and play?" I never saw this. I was the last kid, the only boy born five years after the last girl. By the time I was old enough to remember anything, Dad had already been laid up a couple times for his back. After dragging a johnboat across a flooded bean field in search of ducks years ago, Dad's back never cooperated again. That weekend he came home went to sleep with a little soreness, and couldn't get up the next morning.

Since that day, his body resisted any amount of physical strain. While he could still outwork the best of us, he always wore a weightlifter's belt, took muscle relaxers, and never ran. Never came outside and played basketball with me. Never showed how fast he used to be when four Division I schools offered him football scholarships out of high school.

"Stand on my back!" he yelled, dropping on all fours. Without thought, I hopped on his back and reached for Donnie's feet, my fingernails bending back from my attempts to free his feet. "Fuck, shit, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck," I yelled, ripping my knife from its sheath as Donnie continued to moan louder.

Two years after Donnie's accident, the infamous "f-word scandal" occurred. Dad had come to Nebraska to pheasant hunt with me a week before he, Laura, and I were to drive home for Christmas break. While there, Laura used her traditional language that often creatively incorporates profanity. Without him saying it, I knew Laura's mouth was

slowly chipping away at his patience. Then, on the day before we left, a friend of ours came over and Laura asked about his military experience.

"It's fucking bullshit," he replied. "This fucking place sucks. Fucking stupid people every fucking day..." His monologue continued for twenty minutes. Dad said nothing. But when we came home the next week, and Mom playfully told him to "put the fucking towel in the hamper," he wrote a message on the refrigerator note pad:

**"Please refrain from using the f word while in this house."**

"That's bullshit," I said when I first saw it, and my older sister Amy looked at me as if I were crazy.

"What's wrong with that?"

"He's discriminating against Laura. That isn't fair."

"He just doesn't want language like that in the house," Amy said. "It's his house and it offends him."

"The word 'nigger' offends my wife. So, when dumbasses around this house stop saying 'nigger,' she'll quit saying 'fuck.'"

When I questioned him about it before our goose hunt on Christmas Eve, he told me he thought that ladies should not use language like that. I told him that 'nigger' was much more offensive than the f- word, and he understood. We called it a truce and agreed to respect each others' wishes. Then we went and shot geese and had the time of our lives.

With my knife in hand, I cut as hard as I could at the strap, not realizing I was cussing so much until I started to actually listen to myself. Donnie's agony still reached out for a savior. "Shit, fuck, shit, shit, fuck," I yelled. One strap cut. Dad was below me. "Shit, shit, come on you bitch!" Dad was silent, unmoving as 200 pounds rested on his aching back. Second strap cut.

I dropped my knife, stepped from Dad's back, and reached up for Donnie's body. "Let go of the sapling," I told him, then pressed his body above my head like a powerlifter, moved him to a cradled position in my arms, and set him down on the ground. I had always heard the stories about people lifting cars off of their dying friends after tragic accidents, or even a deer that runs five hundred yards after their heart has already exploded from a bullet's impact. The word 'adrenaline' usually follows these examples. Donnie was the lightest 200 pounds I have ever felt, a mere child in my arms instead of a fifty year old, overweight, distraught man.

Once I placed him on the ground, he looked up at me and said, "Thank you."

Rob also heard the yells that morning. In a pair of insulated hunting boots, he ran through the woods. At first he thought my dad was hurt. When he couldn't find him, he ran back to the truck, thinking that we may have taken him there. No one was at the truck, so he got the 4-wheeler and rode towards my stand. By the time he got there, morning's light had set in and I had returned and was reading a book. Rob cut the vehicle's engine at the base of my stand.

"What happened?" he said.

"Your dad had a little accident with his stand, but he's okay now."

"What happened?" he repeated.

"A pin didn't go in and the stand collapsed with him halfway up the tree. I had to cut him from the bootstraps."

"He okay?" he asked, closing his eyes and rubbing his forehead just like I had seen Donnie do during his and Rob's countless verbal spats.

"A little shook up, but fine."

Rob cranked the 4-wheeler and was off, speeding across the field in the direction of his father. I imagined that, despite the argument they had had earlier, the thought of his father dangling from the tree was as frightening to Rob as my thought of Dad falling from the tree. I smiled as I watched him speed across the field.

My mom and dad would make great grandparents one day if any of us would have a child. Laura says that my family is the closest to the Cleaver's that she's ever seen. When I was in college, spending very little time at home and most of the time at parties and at school, Mom always found a way to get involved without getting too involved. I'd wake up for school and she'd have breakfast made when I hadn't even asked. She'd show up for all my out of town baseball games, never criticizing when I went 0 for 4, but always cheering when I went 4 for 4. She's there at a moment's notice for my sisters as well, and grows closer to her sisters (who all have grandchildren) by the day. Dad, on the other hand, is an introvert. Rarely talking to people outside of his immediately family, Dad has made a life for himself that encompasses his wife, his kids, his few close friends, and his hunting and fishing. That's about all he needs. But when a little kid is around, it's

like watching a man who is thirty years old again. He's rolling on the ground, reading comic books, and playing board games with the kids. I see my childhood when he's like this, and often wish that I was at a point in my life where Laura and I could give them a grandchild.

In the meantime, Mom and Dad have gotten extremely close to Keith's fatherless children. Especially Mom, who spends many afternoons and nights baby-sitting and pampering the kids as much as possible. She has become the third or fourth Grandma to them, out of her own desire to have a grandchild as well as her simple love for the kids themselves. However, Mom has crossed fence lines that she didn't even know existed.

Since Keith's death, his mom Linda has had a tough time. Due to a fight they had a few days before Keith passed, there is a lot of regret. Linda also confessed that because Keith's children look a lot like him, she too often can't bare to see them. My mom, however, *can* bare to see them, yet not without opposition. She has been accused by Keith's sister of trying to replace Keith and Rob's mom as a grandma, and has seen the lines of communication diminish between herself and their entire family. However, Keith's wife Angi remains close to her and their ties grow stronger. My mom rarely talks to Robbie, his father Donnie, and often has a hard time sleeping at night from the verbal and non-verbal pressure she feels from the opposing family. The last time I was in town with my own family, the communication I had with Rob was limited. The little time I did spend around him and his family seemed, for lack of a better term, strange.

Ironically, five years before we saved Donnie from the tree, Rob hugged me and told me he loved me at the funeral of a mutual friend, Tim, who had been murdered. Tim



had gone on a marijuana run with a friend. Once the pot was exchanged for cash, the third party briefly walked away, turned back around, and aimed a pistol into the car's open window. Tim attempted to turn away, but the barrage of bullets filled the car, piercing the driver and Tim. The killer ran away with the dope and cash as Tim opened the door and staggered from the car for help. He gripped at the hole in his neck. Blood ran between his fingers as he staggered across a McDonald's parking lot, crawled to the drive-thru window, and died. They arrested the murderer later that night. He was at his girlfriend's house watching TV.

While Rob held me in that crowd of people, I saw mentally see Tim crawling across the same McDonald's parking lot that he would eat at after baseball games in that part of town. Rob whispered again that he loved me, then my brain went in a different direction. I felt his arms around me, I felt myself grow smaller in stature and importance, and I reveled in someone comforting me in this way. It wasn't my parents or my girlfriend, who I felt in some inarticulate way were both supposed to hold and comfort me, but it weren't. It was Rob. The same Rob I saw fall out of the boat on our first successful fishing trip together at Lot #3, the same Rob that had shot ducks with me on the roost, the same Rob that had asked me to smell his finger after his drunken make-out session with a girl at a friend's party. The same Rob that, from the earliest moments of my childhood, has been an inseparable part of my life.

After we reluctantly let go of each other that day, I continued my rounds with Tim's family and friends. The next day, after barely sleeping and knowing that I would never see Tim again, I walked into the funeral home and saw the open casket. As I

walked toward it, I wondered how they could cosmetically hid the bullet hole. Even if they successfully did that, I still knew what I would be seeing when I walked to the front of the room. A reasonable facsimile. Like a police drawing of your mother or a wax museum figure, where you can point and say "Martin Luther King," but still know that it's not real. The thing lying in the casket slightly *resembled* Tim. His face was darkly made-up, his hair was combed in a way I had never seen it, he had lipstick on, and he was puffy. Huge, in fact, and his suit was pulled up nearly to his chin to hide the hole in the neck. Years later, for these same reasons, I would avoid Keith's funeral. I knew then that the casket would be open, and I knew that people would say how "good he looks." They never even look okay. They look bloated, monster-like, as if they never were alive.

How could it change so fast? How could things, after Keith's death, become strange? When a close friend dies, I have a friend I can lean on. But when a brother dies, that same friend closes up. The same friend that I rode Big-Wheels with when I was 6 years old and drank Jack Daniels with for the first time when I was 11. No more smiles, no more "God will see this through."

And each day the years we spent together seem to grow more cloudy. Each time I pick up the phone to call him, I want to rely on our hunting and fishing stories to carry us through, but then I find a reason not to call. Those stories occurred before Keith's heart attack, and I'm still not sure whether he's ready to create any new memories yet. He hasn't, up to this point, wanted to visit me in Nebraska because he doesn't want to leave his mother in her regretful state. Keith's death, though instantaneous, seems to be drawing itself, and our friendship, toward and ever-darkening future.

Back with Donnie, who is now resting in the truck, we stood around and told the tale that we assumed would be retold again and again for the rest of our lives. Rob told of running from stand to stand, not able to find anyone and sure that my dad had fallen from his tree. My dad told of hearing Donnie's gasps through the woods, his near crying pleas for help. Donnie told of the pain in his legs, then pulled up his pant legs. His boots had already been taken off, and the baseball welts beneath Donnie's skin pulsated a dark red. We stood around pointing, gasping at the discoloration of his flesh. Donnie wondered if his legs were broke, Rob wondered if his ankles were sprained, and Dad and I wondered what would have happened if we hadn't gotten to him in time.

While we stood there, I told my version of the story. I told of running through the woods towards Dad's voice, bounding across with Bubba and my hunting party on my mind. That wasn't a lie, not totally. Bubba was on my mind, for I was sure he was involved somehow, but Dad was really at the center of my thoughts. He's been the one person that has always done "it" right, regardless of what "it" is. And when a man like me in his twenties and is trying to decide whether or not he will have a family, he wonders if he will be the father that his father has been. For some people, that's scary. I'm one of those people, but for a different reason. I wonder if I can be the father, like my dad, who smiles when his child throws his lure in the top of the tree, or be the father that minds when his boy decides, at the last minute, that he doesn't want to go when you're depending on him to go. I wonder if on all those future fishing trips if I can live up to the

father I can be the one he looks up to when he's older, saying "My dad is the one person that has always done 'it' right."

So when I running across that field, I was wondering why Dad would sit in that tree when he knew it couldn't support his weight. And was the one time that he was a bit unsafe going to cause him more pain? Would I be able to save him? I wanted to tell them these things, but of course I didn't. We were talking about someone else's father, and this was no time to worry about mine, who stood calmly against the tailgate of the truck, probably saying a prayer to himself.

We climbed into Rob's truck and headed back across the field in the direction of home. "Do you guys want to check a field or two on our way out?" he said.

We all agreed that if Donnie could handle it, that would be fine. While still on Rob's land, we checked the first field and Rob told of deer that had been shot there a couple years ago. I saw a patch on the edge of that field that looked hollowed out in the center. "Rob, what's that?"

"Old pond."

"Any fish in it?" I asked.

"Suppose to be, but I've never fished it."

"There he is," Dad pointed from the back, and we all turned and saw the spike buck lying down in the field at the edge of the trees surrounding the pond.

"Shit," Rob said, "What do I do?"

"Keep driving," Dad commanded, "We can get a shot from the truck." I did not hesitate, did not even consider that the man who outlawed the word "fuck" in the house

would be the same one suggesting we break the law by taking a shot from a moving vehicle.

Rob gingerly crept around the last corner of trees. I heard the teeth of a guncase zipper flying open. "Jeff."

"Yea."

"You going to be able to take a shot?" Dad asked.

"Yea, I'll shoot."

Dad put one shell in the chamber and maneuvered the gun to the front seat with me. "Rob," Dad said, "drive back slowly, like you were, through the field. Jeff, as soon as he stops, you gotta shoot. The deer will be gone as soon as Rob stops, so you got to hurry."

"All right," I said, as Donnie sat silent in the back seat.

Rob pulled through the field and the deer was still relaxing on the ground, and thoughts of a game warden's mechanical deer went through my mind. But this one's head turned slightly.

"You ready, Jeff?" Rob asked. I had already rolled down the window as the gun rested on the edge of the door.

"I'm fixin' to stop."

"Make a good shot," Dad said.

"Up in the chest area," Donnie breathed.

"All right," Rob said.

"All right," I repeated.

"I'm stopping now."

"Okay."

"Make a good shot," Dad repeated.

"Now," Rob finished.

As soon as the truck stopped, one of my eyes closed as I peered through the gun's scope. Crosshairs on deer. Not even really sure where. Brown and gray filled the scope. I fired.

The deer rolled over as if pushed by the wind. Pats on the shoulder erupted through the truck as everyone high-fived and congratulated my shot. But as Rob pushed the gas again in the direction of the deer, the young buck tried to stand back up.

"Get him," dad yelled, and Rob stopped the truck and three of us emerged.

Donnie sat where he was.

The deer's backbone was broken near its shoulder, and it attempted to crawl away using its front legs. From my peripheral, I saw two more deer running to my left and I ran on foot with the rifle still in my hand, trying to load another shell as I did. Behind me I began to hear shots.

Dad aimed at the crippled deer point blank with the high-powered rifle he had been hunting with. Rob had his pistol turned sideways and rattled off shot after shot into the animal. Dad fired one final shot and there was silence.

As much as carrying a gun in the woods is tradition, watching Dad run from the programmed camera back to the group of us posing at the edge of the field was also tradition. It always made us laugh, especially watching Donnie limp over to the group as

well. Then Rob took one last picture as he always did, with him and I shaking hands in front of the dead buck. While they walked away, I looked at the deer. Its eyes were wide open, and I leaned down and patted its chest. I shed a tear for it, as I do every deer I shoot, and wiped it clean before anyone else could notice.

A week before Keith died, a couple years before Mom began stealing the grandma role, we drove closer to Rob's land and all laughed.

"Dad, you going to be able to stay up in the tree this year?" Rob asked Donnie.

"I'll try," he said.

"How's Bubba?" Dad asked Rob, and for a moment I thought he was talking about Keith. I figured that Keith just sat this one out, like he did all the others.

"Bubba's dead," Rob said between bites of his sausage and biscuit. "Committed suicide. He won't be shooting his guns off on my land anymore."

"Really," I said, relieved somehow that Rob was referring to the other Bubba, the one for whom I had no memories.

"Yea," Donnie said, "That crazy son of a bitch." Then he took another bite of his hashbrowns.

We changed the topic back to Donnie's leg and to the deer helplessly toppling over, discovering that the story's comedic value was naturally growing by the day. We continued to laugh in the waning night, and all knew that good times like these would never change.

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