

The Hunt

A Short Story

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I'd get my rifle down days beforehand and start cleaning it. Dad used to kid me. It doesn't take that long to clean a rifle, he'd say. But I always got so excited. Sometimes I think it's the preparation, the anticipation that's the most exciting part. But I couldn't wait for opening day. I'd set up a practice range behind the house and tack up an old camouflage jacket on the barn. I'd aim right for the top button. I wanted to be at my optimum for when the real hunt began.

It was the best time of year. The turning leaves cast a golden-orange glow, the atmosphere was crisp, there was a smoky smell in the air as folks were starting up their wood stoves. That's when "buck fever" sets in. The old adrenalin gets pumping and you feel super alive. It's my favorite season.

No one who hasn't done it can understand the thrill of the hunt. I believe it has to do with our early hominid origins. In those days they had to hunt in order to live. Of course, there were berries and nuts and grasses which the women gathered. But the real food came from the hunters, who were men. They had to be out there every single day. No time restrictions, no hunting "seasons." Hunting was 24-7. What a life! Sometimes I wish I'd lived then.

It makes you feel like you're getting back to your primitive origins when you're hunting, back to your natural self, away from all the artificial restraints of modern life. You feel like your uncivilized, untamed self is coming out. It's a kind of exhilarating liberation.

It makes you feel proud to be a man, too. Not that I object to women hunting, if they want. But to me it feels like it's a man's tradition, going back to ancient times when they hunted with bows and arrows and knives. It was my Dad who taught me to hunt and

that's the way it's been for centuries—father to son. That's why I prefer to hunt with just guys, my buddies. We understand one another. We know the tricks of the trade.

For example, you have to watch the sounds you make. With all the leaves down on the trail it makes a rattling, swishing noise when you tramp through the woods. So you have to learn to slide your boots under in a way to minimize the noise. And no talking. And smell. You'd be surprised how distinctive humans smell in the woods when there aren't so many around. You can smell them. Animals can smell them. So I mix up a perfume, I call it, a mixture of crushed mosses and leaves and cow dung for me and my buddies. We dab it over our clothes before we head out. That blunts the human smell and makes it harder to know we're coming.

The first day of the hunt is always the most exciting. I never sleep the night before, thinking about the trophies I'm going to bring back. Of course, I always imagine bagging the biggest buck in the forest and hanging the head in the den, with everyone cheering and clapping and thinking I'm the greatest hunter ever. Not that it happens that way. You take your prize to the weighing station, there's nobody there to cheer, but you can tell by the way the wardens look at you that they're impressed, if you bring in a big one.

You have to get up before dawn, get your clothes on, grab a bite and some coffee, get your gear and head out. We wear camouflage fatigues now, not orange vests like in the old days. The idea now is to blend in with the woods, not stand out and make yourself a target. It's a different ballgame.

I met my buddies at a corner of the cornfield behind our house. That's where the woodlands area begins. It stretches several miles to the west over a series of hills called Humpbacks after the whales. To the east, not too far away, here in southern New Hampshire, is the ocean. So that's why they named the hills after the whales. They've marked out a fifty-square-mile area for the hunt, which takes place the first two weeks in November. It used to be the whole month but

the slaughter got so great they had to cut it down to just two weeks. The last week in October is for bows and arrows but that leaves so many wounded in the fields, crying in pain, that people are starting to complain, and hospitals are finding their emergency rooms can't handle the load, so there's talk of ending that tradition. A ballot initiative is planned next fall to end it once and for all.

But the regular hunt with semi-automatics goes on and is very popular. The National Rifle Association is happy because the New Rules have made it even more popular than the old-fashioned deer hunt, bringing more hunters to the field and more members to the NRA. Ecologists like the New Rules too because the harvest cuts down the population. You cull the excess. Kill one here, it saves someone from starving somewhere else, like in Africa. I figure we hunters are really doing mankind a favor.

On the occasion I'm writing about me and my buddies saluted one another in the early morning light and lit into the territory of the hunt, stalking our quarry. Jed, my best buddy, said he'd found there was a herd gathering by Stanton's Stream, a little rivulet that ran down the slopes of the first Humpback about a mile from where we were. (We still used some of the old terms, like "herd," "buck," and "doe." I guess old ways die hard.) Jed had been out in the middle of the night and said he could smell them. He had a keen sense of smell. He said he got up close enough to see them and there were a couple of bucks in the group, just what we wanted.

The most prestigious trophy to hang on your wall was a young buck. If he had a little beard, all the better. Older guys were OK. I knew of one fellow, a neighbor of ours, who had a line-up of old beards on his wall, some with drooping mustaches. But most people preferred the younger ones. They preserved better, their skins looked healthier, almost lifelike, not deathly green-yellow like a corpse, though that in fact is what they were. No one wanted females, though I fancied one with long blond hair. That would be something on the den wall, but Dad wouldn't have it. He thought we should stick with

at least some of the old traditions, and that meant only male trophy heads.

Jed led us toward the stream where he'd seen our quarry. The stalk manoeuver is one of the most important parts of the hunt. One slip-up and you've had it, you've lost your chance. The trick was to keep them from seeing you first. If they did, and they started shooting, it could be a blood bath, unless you hid yourself in the shadows and stood stock still, the way deer used to do in the old days to avoid hunters. Nowadays, the deer run free. Sometimes you see them watching you curiously from the sidelines as they unconcernedly munch their breakfast acorns.

Quiet, Jed whispered, pointing ahead. I could smell them now too. It was that distinctive human smell, especially pungent because of adrenaline rush from stress and anxiety.

Nothing is more exciting than when you see your prey. There they were sitting around a campfire. I focused my cross-hairs on one of them. Perfect. Right on the heart. A young male, too, right about my age.

Nobody who hasn't hunted can understand the spiritual feeling you get. As I looked at my target through the rifle sight, I felt a communion with him. Here we were together, bound as one in this wonderful moment of life and death. In a second he would be dead, life just blasted out of him. What a dizzying sense of power that gave me. My heart started racing. I thanked my prey with a little prayer. I thanked him for giving himself to me, for surrendering to me, for sharing with me this ecstatic, orgasmic moment.

As my finger tightened around the trigger I remembered my first hunt. Dad was with me. It was not long after they changed the rules. I was about twelve. We stalked our prey in our customary way and came upon a solitary male in a clearing. It wasn't clear if he was a hunter, but Dad said it didn't matter. Nobody was supposed to be in the hunt zone who wasn't an authorized hunter. He clamped his arm

on mine and gestured what I should do. I held the gun up, sighted the man, who I could see was not much older than myself. My stomach clutched. My hands trembled. I couldn't do it. Fire, Dad ordered. Be a man.

I closed my eyes and pulled the trigger. The blast blew his head apart. It was all blood and bones and teeth and eyes rolling about. I wanted to throw up. It takes some getting used to. But you do, in time. Dad put his hand on my shoulder. You should aim for the heart, he said, not the head. You'll never get a trophy that way.

One thing I'll say about the changed rules. It's fairer this way. Before it was us humans with our weapons versus the deer, who had only their speed and their wits to defend themselves. Now that it's hunters versus hunters you have both sides with the same kind of weapons, so it's a more equal fight. It also makes for a more exciting contest. You know they can get you, too, whereas before it was a rare deer that killed a man. This way, it's more like war.

They instigated the New Rules several years ago. Public opinion was turning against hunting. All those Bambi-lovers had got to the politicians and it was feared that they would ban hunting altogether. Then someone came up with this good compromise. Hunting could continue, but in a different form. You could still have the thrill of the hunt. Men could still experience their real manhood. The only difference was hunters would hunt each other instead of deer and other animals.

So it's a different ballgame now, with different rules, but the experience has turned out to be much the same, with the added excitement of having to be on the alert to make sure the other guy doesn't bag you first. It's more of a sport now. You don't kill to eat (we generally give the headless bodies over for scientific research); you hunt for the thrill of the chase and the ecstasy of survival.

As my finger tightened on the trigger and just as I was about to blow, our prey suddenly sensed our presence and grabbed their guns.

I fired but missed. We quickly hunkered down behind some trees and they did likewise on the other side of the clearing. There were three of them. One made the mistake of lifting his head up to see where we were and I begged him flat. I hit his head, though, so any hopes of a trophy were lost. That left two. Jed hit another one, an older guy, we could see when he tumbled out of the brush. One left.

He's running, Jed shouted. We jumped up to follow. I caught sight of a figure running up the trail and aimed at his back. Bam. I hit. The head should be OK, I thought with glee, so I'd have my trophy. We ran up.

It was a girl, with the long hair I'd pictured on my den wall.

Too bad, Jed said. He knew it wasn't worth much.

We went back for the others, I dragging the long-haired female. The old man was still alive, crawling along the path, leaving a trail of blood, moaning softly. Jed put him out of his misery. The other one whose head I'd hit was so blown apart we left him there for the buzzards. I pulled his ID from his pocket, so the authorities could notify next of kin. It was one of the New Rules that you had to carry an ID and whoever killed you was honor-bound to collect the ID and turn it in to the Game Warden at the weighing station.

We hauled our harvest back to the road. Jed tied the old buck to the right fender of his car and I tied the doe to the left. Some people, I know, object to the custom of tying human bodies to cars that way, but how else could you get your trophies home?

After the weigh-in we headed for a taxidermist we'd used in the past. He did a good professional job—the eyes set right so they don't stare at you accusatorially, as some I've seen did, and he charged a fair rate.

I hoped Dad wouldn't object to the female, but it was better than coming home empty-handed.