



Fiction

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Deer Camp

My dad didn't talk about deer camp. Even at barbecues with other cul-de-sac dads, he yammered about weather and the tyranny of local taxes. I absolutely hated it. Why withhold the coolest thing about yourself? It was what made him different. It was what made him my dad. Each fall, a rifle would emerge from the locked cabinet in my parents' bedroom. A real live gun as heavy as a pug. Then from the garage came a tote of blaze orange gear that my mother washed in special dirt-scented soap. He'd drive east to Pennsylvania to meet his hunting buddies, and a few days later he'd come home grimy, parading around the house with hunks of meat so lean and purple he'd have to grind it up with beef to get my mother and me to eat it. I'd tell the elementary school girls about it to make them cry.



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"How're your boys?" Mom would ask him sometimes while she was cutting carrots or scrubbing the fridge. She never wanted an answer, though, and he never wanted to give her one. But occasionally while drinking he'd let things slip. Things so small and cryptic they felt cruel. He'd say Marty said this, Terry did that. The time Dan stepped in a fox trap and broke three toes. How Phil had a son who got killed when an icicle fell from the roof. That was the only time Dad went to see them outside of hunting season. He was gone three days, and when he came home he didn't say a word about it.

I liked to imagine his hunting friends as fun uncles I'd never met. And would they look like him? With his wavy brown hair and a chicken nugget tan. He used to work shirtless in the yard, a tattoo of an eagle on his bicep. When he flexed, the eagle flew.

When I was nine Dad fell out of a tree stand at deer camp. He broke his back and shot a bullet through the meat of his thigh. We drove three hours and when we got to the rural hospital his buddies stood around him with their hands in their pockets. In the white room they looked dirty, like homeless people in the library. It





was the season after Phil's son, and I think they'd all been drunk. I remember Phil bending low to meet me, his squint-wrinkles, and mom yanking me from him to speak with the doctor. Later she and Phil argued in the fluorescent hallway. I could tell by the tone of it, the hissing. I didn't think it was strange because I was still of the age to think that all adults were part of the same conspiracy.

It took Dad a month to wipe his own butt and four months to walk. We made a banner for him and hung it above the door when he returned from the hospital. It was weird to watch him shuffle over the threshold with his walker. I was barely old enough for shame or pride. I was not old enough for both at once.

At school, he became the dad who learned to walk again. I told everyone how he should have been dead or crippled, saying that he'd had a two-percent chance of survival. What I didn't mention was that he was half an inch shorter and wore patches for the pain. And he didn't go to camp anymore. He sulked around the house like something essential had been taken from him. Sometimes I'd find him in his man cave in the garage, drunk and loopy from his patches. He'd plop there in front of the space heater and stare.

Because it hurt him to throw a ball, my mom bought me an expensive plug-in football launcher. Dad threw a screaming fit—the cost, the cost—and swore off ever touching it. So I used it myself, running under the arching footballs in the soft flat lawn.

“Did you see that catch?” I'd say to him, half-watching from the porch.

“Extend your arms and you wouldn't have to dive,” he'd say.

Eventually I left it in the rain too much and it died.

Five years and two surgeries later Dad decided to go back to camp. I couldn't believe he let me come.



When I was little, I imagined deer camp would be made from big logs like a state park lodge. But it looked like a garden shed. The place was Phil's, who lived a few towns away, but it was obvious they all took some pride in it. There was no electricity and no running water and no stone fireplace with guns crossed above it. Everybody slept on cots they unfolded at night and I was given the loft, not much bigger than a coffin. When we arrived the men said hello and questioned me about girlfriends and guns, smiling through





their big beards. Then we worked until dark, unloading gear and clearing the mouse nests from the camp's corners. My dad insisted on handling the firewood, grunting as he wrestled wheelbarrows from the woodshed to the porch.

Inside, the walls were mostly bare. One had an old board impaled with barn spikes to hang gear, and on another hung a nude calendar I tried to look at and not look at it. Near the woodstove hung a rack of antlers, the only one in the camp. It was a huge, knuckled, mutant mess with tines that forked off in every different direction, like roots. It had ten points on one and eleven on the other. I wanted antlers like that. I wanted to kill a huge buck and have Dad thumb its blood onto my forehead. Years before my friends and I had found a baby rabbit and crushed it with a cinder block so I figured I was at least half ready.

"You lookin to hunt tomorrow?" Phil asked me while we ate thick burgers and chips.

"It's his year to learn," Dad answered. "And anything we got will put him on his ass."

"I just bought a .243 special for this," Phil said. "He could shoot it."

"He could," dad said, his voice ticking up.

"He's got his mother's frame," Terry said from the window, where he was pissing out into the night.

"Shut it," Phil said. "And put that thing away."

"We'll see how it goes," Dad said. "I ain't making any promises."

After a while they began to ignore me, drinking beer and swapping stories. "I've got one for you," Phil said. "One day Marie came from the garden all in a tizzy because she found a snake skin. And I went out there and sure enough a snake had shed right by the peppers. Looked like a rattlesnake."

The cigar he'd been chewing for hours had turned his mustache brown. He relit it, a big balloon of smoke expanding from his mouth. I leaned hard against the card table. These were the stories I'd wanted.

"And so I kept a good lookout and Marie let the garden go to shit. But I didn't see anything and summer went into fall."

"Like summers are bound to do," my dad said, deep in his folding camp chair.

"And one morning I'm out in the mulch pile getting mulch for



Marie's beds and I notice another snake skin and my ass puckers up."

The men nodded, so I nodded.

"And I heave that pitchfork into the mulch and heft it out and right there, impaled on the tines, is a whole nest of little rattlesnakes, all tangled together. It sounded like a fucking morocco with all those rattles whizzing."

"A maraca, you mean," dad said. "Morocco's a country."

"A maraca, then. All of those little bastards rattling, their guts popping out, writhing all over the place." Phil went swig, puff, swig.

"So what'd the old lady say about it?" Dan asked. Dan was the huge clumsy one with a caterpillar unibrow.

"Nothing," Phil said. "I burnt the whole mulch pile and told her a hot ash from the burning can touched it off."

Everybody chuckled and so I laughed the hardest. Phil looked at me, his tobacco-stache underlit by the lamp on the plywood floor. "You think I'm pulling your leg?"

I shrugged.

"Looks like he could use some social lubrication," Terry said.

"That won't go over well," Dad said.

"It'll go over as well as he lets it," Phil said.

Dad shook his head and Phil shook his head. Again. All the eyes in the room latched onto him until Dad limped to the green Coleman cooler by the door, and grabbed two beers. He cracked one for himself and set the other in front of me.

He said, "Sip."



A few hours later I woke on the hot loft floor with my contacts burning into my eyes. My mouth tasted like wet bread and I didn't remember getting there. The air was thick and quiet except for the heavy snoring from below. I sat up and hit my head on the cross board. Outside it was snowing. A paper sheet of it on the dead leaves and the moon on that, Crayola blue. Out by the woodpile something moved. I thought: Yeti. Bigfoot. An ax-wielding psycho in a bloody wedding dress. I wiped frost from the glass and touched it to my stinging forehead. It was Phil, and Dad. They pulled apart from each other and came back together, hugging tight in their big Carhart jackets. They slapped each other's backs but stayed close,





swaying like my mother's wind chimes.

At breakfast they ribbed me for puking and fed me eggs and greasy bacon. I even drank a little coffee and choked down the bitter grit at the end.

"I like coffee," I said. "The blacker the better."

Phil boxed my ears and told me that camp coffee would put hair on my chest.

The sun was poking over the hillside, melting the snow where it hit. It was the week after Thanksgiving and the woods looked empty. Wasted, brown. The men complained they'd overslept, promising to get an earlier start tomorrow. Phil and I were supposed to hike up the creek that ran through the property to the top of the hill. Then we'd spread out and walk straight down, slow as sloths, and clap to move the deer from their beds. This used to be my dad's job back when he could walk right. The rest of the guys would wait for the deer in the valley. They called it a deer drive and bemoaned the fact that the state higher-ups were probably going to make the practice illegal.



We hiked. At the top of the ridge Phil and I stopped at a big rock and looked out over the valley, all gold and brown. The sun was out and the snow'd rotted away. I could see a big ocean of hills that led back home, to my laptop and my mom.

"What's next," I asked.

Phil took off his orange cap and slapped it on his knee. "Listen up, you little shit."

All the flaps in my stomach closed shut.

"When I was a kid I had these two hunting dogs," he said. "And, one day, one of them stepped in a hole and hurt its leg. And after a couple of days of limping, the other dog started doing the same. Just limping, you know. And we all thought it was pretty funny until the hurt dog started to get better. Little by little it just healed up. But that second dog limped like that the rest of its life."

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"I'm talking about your father." He lifted the rifle from the rock where it leaned and I thought for a second he was planning to shoot





me.

“He hasn’t even taken you to the gun range yet?”

“No.”

“Then he sure as hell isn’t going to let you hunt. I love the man but he’s full of lies. Been pitying himself since college.”

He handed me the gun and told me not touch a goddamn thing. He took off his jacket and folded it perfectly, like a mom might, and laid it on top of the rock. “You do have your mother’s figure. You need something to lean on.”

He took the magazine from his pocket and put it in the gun and inspected it.

“You keep the fucking safety on.”

I nodded.

“And you slide the bolt forward.” He demonstrated. “And jiggle it if it sticks.”

“And you keep the son of a bitch pulled firm into your shoulder. And I mean firm.”

He set me up and explained the scope. I sighted at a tree and watched it wobble in-and-out of the crosshairs as I shook. Eventually I pulled and the recoil rippled the whole way through me. The noise and force of it were like one big thing, attached to each other, a rubber band of shock down to my cold toes. It took the air from inside of me.

“Jesus Christ was that bad,” he said laughing. “Again.”

This time my hands shook even worse. I didn’t want to shoot, didn’t want the shock of it again. My shoulder hurt.

“Do it.”

And that was the time I scrunched up. That’s what Phil called it. Apparently I lowered the gun butt before I pulled the trigger, slipping it under my armpit, and I didn’t hear him when he said DON’T. When I pulled the trigger the gun recoiled, sending the scope back into my face. It burned and stung and rattled my thoughts. I dropped the gun and it slid off the rock, scraping the stock the whole way down.

“Oh motherfucker,” Phil said. “You went and got yourself scoped.” He put his hand on my chin and jerked my head to the side to look at my wound. “You’re gonna have a scope ring around your eye. And you’re cut a little on your nose there. Just keep your hat down low when you get back to camp. Wipe the blood with a





fern or some shit and if your old man asks, you tell him you fell. Seems like something you'd do."

Then he told me how to get down the hill and he left me there alone holding a cold flat stone against my eye to help the swelling. He said to wait fifteen minutes before I headed down.

I started walking the way he'd had explained to me—across the ridge until I saw three dead stumps, then straight down. But of course I was from the suburbs, a place with all the edges rounded, so it didn't surprise me at all when I couldn't find the stumps. Back and forth across the ridge, the light shifting, no luck. I couldn't even find the place where I'd scoped myself. Eventually I picked a spot at random and descended into the gray woods.

I thought about the limping dog. The icicle in Phil's kid's brain. My mom cussing him out, and the hug. The Hug. Was my dad queer? I'd seen him feeling up my mom once, standing behind her with his hand up her shirt while she stirred pasta sauce. It made sense to me now that he didn't explain deer camp to the neighbors. Even being here, it was impossible to understand.

Earlier in the morning, after we'd went over the plan, I'd followed Dad to the outhouse and asked him if I could stay with him instead of hiking with Phil. In truth it wasn't because I wanted to be with my father, but because Phil'd scared me with his snake story and the way he'd squeezed my father in the night. And now? Now I was less afraid of him but I understood him even less. It struck me that I knew Phil about as well as I knew Dad, and that Dad could be depressed or gay or both and I had no way to figure it out.

When I asked Dad if I could stay with him instead of going with Phil, he'd said. "Cal, we need you up there. Man up and play by the rules."

I told him my ACL was hurting, which was the only lie I could think of, and when he ignored me I began to follow him with a slight limp, hoping he'd notice. He didn't.

"Dad," I said. "Please."

"Listen," he said, his voice sharp. He leaned close until I could see his nose pores. "You'll be fine. But please stop being such a fucking pussy about this."



Now a flush of shame rose up in me. Lost in the woods. Scoped in the eye. Couldn't even kill a tree. Even my gay depressed dad calling me a pussy. I wished I was either older or younger. Either one would do.

They said I was lost for two hours and had been back at the camp drinking beet for almost as long. When I returned, my father and Phil were standing at the door, zipping their coats to come and find me. Terry and Dan were in the camp behind them, hovering over some steaks on the stove. The whole place reeked like meat and sweat. I was shivering cold, cold right down to my insides.

"Jesus Christ," dad said. "What took you so long?"

"I couldn't find my way down," I said, passing him to stand by the woodstove.

Terry handed me a knife with a piece of pink meat on the end. I didn't like pink meat but I ate it anyway, the best pink meat of my life.

"What happened to your face?" Terry asked.

I said nothing.

"Get the hell over here." I walked to my father, looking stuck in his camp chair with his legs propped up on a milk crate. He knocked off my hat by the brim and looked hard at me.

"I fell."

He stood, quicker than usual, and turned to Phil. "He comes back half-froze with a scope ring around his eye. What in the hell am I supposed to tell Maggie about this?"

"Tell her you took him out hunting. Tell her accidents happen."

Dad grabbed a beer from the cooler and flicked the water from his hands onto my face. "I didn't say you could shoot." I apologized and found a seat near the stove. It was quiet for a minute, the air thick with wood smoke and dad's rage. His ears were turning red and I knew he wasn't going to let it go. And after a few minutes, he proved me right.

"You know, Phil?" he said, slow. "I didn't tell you to take my kid shooting. I didn't tell you to get him lost in the fucking woods."

"It's not his fault," I said. "I looked for the three stumps. I just couldn't find them."

My dad said, "Three stumps."





"You walk across the ridge until you find the three stumps." I looked at everyone, one big collective shrug. Phil was smiling now, yellow teeth under his stache.

"I didn't think he'd get so lost," Phil said.

"You played the stump trick on my fucking kid?"

"It's good for him."

"Who the fuck are you to say? I didn't take him up there!"

"Goddam right you didn't," Phil said. "Goddam right you didn't."

Terry kept saying easy now, but nobody listened.

"All you do is take," Phil said, a finger in my dad's face. "All you do is take from people." I thought of my mom bathing him after his fall. The way she brought him beers in the garage.

When Dad ignored him, Phil said, "You didn't even want to bring your own kid hunting."

My father rushed him, pushed him back into the wall. The cooler tipped over and water and ice and beer all rolled onto the floor. They wrestled and tugged each other's shirts, awkward like neither one could be the first one to hit the other. But in the end Phil didn't have to hit him. He just spun Dad around and pinned him chest-first to the wall, his body pressed against Dad, hands on his wrists, chest to his back, asking Dad if he really wanted this in front of his boy.

I just watched it happen, wanting both of them to end up hurt.

We packed up and left that evening. On the drive I asked my father if he'd really wanted to leave me at home and he said, "Yes. And I don't owe anyone a fucking explanation."

That was it. I didn't ask any more.

That winter dad's drinking got worse and by summer my mom had thrown him out. He kept boxes in the garage, though, and some of his extra clothes hanging in their bedroom closet. It was part of a larger strategy to keep himself in mind. When he'd come by for this-and-that he'd leave a flannel on a chair or a self-help book splayed open over the remote.

She ignored him for a while but over the next year he came by more often each month, sometimes staying for dinner. He told me one evening that he'd been through pain management classes and he was getting better. Getting well. The young part of me believed him. It'd been a bad accident, bad enough to change him. And I



wanted to believe him, if not for me then for my mother. I'd heard her sobbing, found the broken dishes in the trashcan.

A month after our conversation I came home from basketball practice early and caught him walking from the bathroom to my mom's bedroom, naked and fat, his dick still half-hard. He had a look on his face that said, I'm Home. And he was.

That winter I really did hurt my ACL, two minutes into our last game of the season. I thought this might bring us closer somehow, being that tissue was most of what we had in common. And for a while things were better. We went to the beach, the movies. He drove me to my doctor's appointments and offered me little pep talks. "One of the things I learned in pain management," he told me over and over, "was to sit with your pain sometimes. Give it space to tell you what it wants to tell you, you know?"

My father sat with his pain all right, and with his patches and his beers. Every night he sat with them. He sat with them until he lost his job and took to the garage again. He'd sleep in there sometimes on an old cot, his own little deer camp. Once I came home from my part-time job and found him there, fuming because of a speeding ticket I'd gotten the day before.

"We have no money," he said. "And then you act like this."

"Your poor mother," he said. "And me out of work." He turned away from me, looking at his tote boxes full of shit. "Things aren't great, I'll give you that. But at least I'm trying here. At least I'm trying."

It was the repetition that got me, something about the same lie told twice. "I'm not sure if you hate yourself because you're a cripple," I said, "or if you hate yourself because you're queer." It was the only real way to hurt him. And it did.

He turned and hit me harder than I thought possible. I stepped backward, things were shifting, unstable, and then I was lying on the cold dusty concrete. My ears buzzed, my teeth felt loose in my mouth. Blood, and the sound and the force of everything coming together like the gun in the woods, roaring.

He was standing over me, high above. From the floor, I saw him like I had as a kid—big, strong, the hunter—but as my head cleared, I realized that what I'd taken for awe was always distance.