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The Eyes

Glenn Miscikowski

Accepting the invitation to go deer hunting in northern Wisconsin with Mr. B and his sons on their farm was a no brainer; the first deer hunt after leaving Nam six months earlier.

Arriving at 3:00 PM, Mr. B opened the car door and hugged me, “Glad you made it.”

The trips became an annual ritual. Each one renewed friendships as we talked about past experiences and new challenges, sitting by the fireplace with a Budweiser. The bellowing laughs commenced after anecdotes of the latest blunders, old girl friends or a new car. Everyone shared one crazy event with the group, no exceptions.

The talks left me disconnected because an essential element was missing. Nothing changed between us, but everything had changed around me. Did they feel the void as well?

The fourteen-point buck roaming the woods became the topic of conversation at breakfast. Deer stands were selected based on buck sightings over the last week. Mr. B placed salt blocks and bushels of apples at several sites. I located a comfortable deer stand for the first day of the hunt as the deer follow their normal patterns, not spooked. My deer stand provides stealth, visibility, and comfort. With a bit of luck, a buck may cross my path. Mr. B walked, pushing the deer through the area; arthritis affected him while sitting.

The temperature on opening day dipped below freezing coupled with a mesmeric gentle falling snow. The large snowflakes blocked visibility to a degree. I cuddled up to a couple of large toppled maple tree stumps. My back and head rested comfortably on them. The comfortable surroundings and previous lack of sleep produced the sedative. I was out like a light.

I sprang up hearing my name. Mr. B stood not ten yards from me, “Glenn, Glenn.”

“I’m here.”

“Did you see him?”

“See who?”

“I’ve been trailing the big buck for the last three hours. The swamp swallowed his tracks. I got a glimpse of him; he’s magnificent.” He knew I’d dozed off. I looked like a snowman. He looked at me then proceeded to backtrack, trying to pick up the tracks.

I brushed the snow off my jacket and pants, becoming vigilant of my surroundings. The snow dropped a beautiful white carpet quieting the woods. A couple of grey squirrels chased each other through the trees. They showed off their agility. Slivers of sun flashed through the woods, ricocheting off the snow, causing momentary blindness.

The squirrels stopped chasing. I heard the audible muffled clump, clump. An animal moved stealthily through the woods towards me. My body became rigid. Breathing became difficult to control. The ambushes in Nam triggered an identical response. My hands squeezed hard on the stock. The inside of the gloves felt damp. Come-on, clear your head and get back to the world. What the hell is wrong with you?

God almighty, the buck walked right out in the open not twenty yards from me. This magnificent creature sported an enormous rack. He stood broadside, daring me to pull the trigger. The black eyes remained fixed on me. I raised my weapon and depressed the safety. My finger applied pressure to the trigger with the scope cross hairs on the beast. This buck was mine. The trigger wouldn’t depress. There must be something wrong with the gun. What the hell is wrong with me? Shoot him. Shoot him. I took two deep breaths and tried to relax as I looked through the scope.

The buck remained motionless for ten seconds. Then it snorted at me, dipped its head, and returned in the direction of the swamp. Two minutes passed.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

I heard Mr. B yelling. The magnificent creature never had a chance.

The black eyes stared at me from the white carpet. I wanted to look away but wouldn't. The innocence in those eyes haunted me. One of God's creatures deserved a better fate. My eyes watered looking at the beast. Mr. B cocked his head, giving me an odd stare. I shouldn't care what others think. I earned the right to express my feelings. In Nam emotion demonstrated a sign of weakness, even when one of my men went down. For me to show emotion outwardly had become rare, but for this creature.

This buck earned my respect; he deserved to roam the woods managing a harem of does. The local bar celebration became loud and joyous continuing into the wee hours of the morning. Mr. B gave willing hunters detailed explanations of how he bagged the beast. The stories changed as the bottles stacked up. He became the county hero for a season.

Mr. B looked disappointed after telling him my decision to head home a day early. My child being sick had become the excuse. I knew after today's hunt something was wrong with me.

Mr. B hugged me, "Take care of yourself."

The drive home became a personal reflection. Two friends part knowing one will not return. Mr. B witnessed my change in demeanor. I wished we talked about what happened. No one, not even my wife, initiated a conversation about the past.

The creature's eyes staring at me transported me back to another time, another world. Sgt. N smiled at me as he crossed the stream climbing up the hill onto a wide trail. He was the third soldier in his column. I heard the haunting blast. The chilling reminder that shit happens. Sgt. N stepped on a 155 or an anti-tank mine.

I still remember screaming, running to the disaster, “Why Lord, Why?”

Descending the conical hole, Sgt. N’s eyes were vacant, staring out into the nothingness. I closed the eyelids of my fallen comrade. The medic and I put half a soldier in a poncho. After carrying and gently setting him in the chopper I never cried. Concentrating on Sgt. N’s eyes and not the mutilation of his body had kept my sanity in check. If I’d let my emotions surface there was no telling the outcome.

My reoccurring dreams continued to haunt me; seeing Sgt. N’s eyes staring at me. The hollow stare rivets my psyche. Why him and not me on the chopper? Strange, I would die for my men but never cried for a fallen soldier. My eyes watered for the beast. The enemy never received my dignity. Seeing bodies after a firefight or baking in the sun on a trail, they became an inanimate doll. A doll never possesses a soul. I didn’t hate the enemy. Survival became the only objective for my men and myself; bring my men home. If the Vietnamese invaded our space with weapons, we retaliated.

Not pulling the trigger on the beast went against all of my past experiences. The beast lived for another two minutes. In the scheme of life, my action made no difference. Somehow, those two minutes meant a world of satisfaction to me.

I’m trying to understand the mask I wear. If I pull the mask off my face, will I still be who I think I am? I feel a numbness and coolness to life. Deep emotion eludes me. I couldn’t cry holding my son for the first time returning from Nam, but for the beast I cried.

The suffering and death are in the past. I’m trying to get to a better place. I hope this is the first step in feeling life.