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The Hunt

Elise Riffle

Grand Valley State University

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The Hunt

The wind whistles across the field. Stalks of brown alfalfa, stiff from the cold, reach towards the gray November sky as they collect powdered snow from the frigid air. Tucked against the woods, miles from any road or house or person, my blind groans in the unrelenting wind. My cheeks are raw and red from the wintry gusts. There is no greater silence than this day, the first day of the hunt. I have sat here since dawn, when the world faded from deep black to deep gray and then to white. I am bundled in layers of clothing, camouflage, blending into the dark stretch of woods behind me. There is only the whisper of the wind and the creaking of the woods, the maples and birches bare and leafless. Every so often, in the distance, I hear the piercing crack of a gun. It echoes, stretching and long, until it eases into silence. It marks a death, blood spattered across the snow, dead eyes. My rifle, long and black and gleaming, rests in the corner. Waiting. Looming. I know the motion; cheek to stock, finger to trigger, and the terrible ringing in the ears that comes after. Sparks at the end of the barrel. Death, blood spattered across the snow, the dead eyes. The empty eyes.

I have seen that emptiness many times, great orbs snuffed of life, liquid black and glistening, staring out in shock and in pain. There was that time in

this same field, this same blind, this same grayness when I bumped the stock. The bullet grazed her lungs. I pulled the bolt back on the rifle, sending a steaming case flying. I took the second shot while she ran; blood sprayed across the snow as the bullet tore through the right side of her nose. And then she stopped and watched me as I climbed from the blind. I sat in the snow, tears stinging my eyes. *I'm sorry.* I whispered to her as I cycled the chamber, my numb fingers fumbling with the bullets. And then, as she stood shivering and in pain, I delivered her a swift death through the spine. It was where I always hit them; painless and quick, those eyes always calm and surprised when I approached the body. My father would clasp my shoulder when I dropped them like that, resting in the same spot they stood, *The spine is the best place. They go down quick and it saves the heart and the good meat. You've got talent.*

This is where I drift during every hunt. The long hours are passed in thought; I understand why my father loves it so much. Beyond the death and the delight, the frenzy of tracking and stalking prey, the stillness is like a blanket. For a man who has worked every day of his life, shoveling shit, bending in the dirt, struggling to farm a land that no longer has a place for the small and the idyllic, the silence is his

escape. The hours slip past in thought and reflection. *It's like going to church*, he would say with a half grin, his weathered and tanned face crinkling.

The snow has grown worse as the day has progressed. Drifts appear across the field. A lone bird circles in the blank sky above. I rub my hands together, trying to warm my stiff fingers. I grab my binoculars, scanning across the fields for any sign of movement. A question remains in my mind, tugging at me, nagging at me over and over again through the flashes of my thoughts. But I ignore it and there is only the snow, the cold, the waiting, and the gun in the corner, gleaming in the half-light.

And then, in the distance, a figure emerges. A doe. I grab my gun, pull it close to my arm, my cheek resting against the cold stock. My breath is shaky. I watch the doe as she gingerly steps into the field, her ears twitching as she looks around. Her tail shakes, a flash of white. She smells me. I could let her go. I could put the gun down, put it into its case and never do this again. The question echoes again as my finger brushes the trigger. The question I have always asked. *Why do I do this?*

Since I was small, my father took me hunting with him. As the years passed, it became clear my

mother wouldn't have any more children. And so I was brought into a world that had once been only reserved for the men in my family. On the days we hunted, I carried a pack and trudged in the snow behind him. My legs were short as I scrambled over drifts and through wet snow, my coveralls stained and soaked with frigid water. My father would not wait. He walked away from me in the distance, disappearing into the dark. He would look back for a moment, his gaze long. When I scraped my knees and arms he wouldn't hold me or kiss my wounds or wipe away my tears. *You have to be tough in this world*, he said to me once, *you have to stand on your own*.

He taught me many things. *Look for blood*. We walked along the edge of the woods, man and small child. I scanned the ground. There was the brown of dead grass, the intricate patterns of the decaying leaves, and the broken twigs and branches blending together. And then there, the flash of red, small pools and flecks of blood leading into the woods, the brilliant crimson smeared on the dull bark of pine trees and ragged thickets.

We stalked the red, walking slowly into the dim and the damp of the forest. Birds cried overhead, their forlorn calls echoing through the trees. We paused after several steps, peering through the dusk,

listening for sounds. There was a snap. Dad waved me back. I could see, in the half-dark, the crouched shape of the doe. She watched my father as he drew closer. She did not run. The bullet had grazed the edge of her stomach and her lungs. It would be a slow death, and so she waited, watching calmly, sides heaving, legs trembling, and blood dripping from her side as my father lifted his rifle, a soft, triumphant smile on his face, the wooden stock gleaming eerily in the grey light. I remember, so clearly, in the mists of that November, it began to rain. The drops of rain gathered on the steel of the barrel of the gun, collecting, and then dripping to the forest floor.

Blood, so much blood, spattered on the snow. I held the legs of the doe as we turned her, her round, white belly warm and soft. My father crouched nearby. *You got her legs?* She was heavy, I grunted as I adjusted my grip on her.

We had dragged the doe to the edge of the woods, laying her in the snow. The rain had started to wash away the snow, melting it, making the field a pool of mud. Around us, mist and fog rolled across hills blanketed in snow. The white disappeared as the hours passed, replaced by patches of brown and green. Blackbirds circled above, their dry cries

breaking the silence, waiting for us to finish gutting the doe. My father unsheathed his knife and ran it across his belt, quickly sharpening it. He plunged it into the perfect white of the doe's belly. I closed my eyes as he began, trying to ignore the sound of tearing flesh, the crunch and crack as he forced the knife through her rib cage. I clutched onto her legs as she was jostled, wrinkling my nose as the heavy smell of blood filled the air.

My father's voice was stern *Watch. You need to learn how to do this.* I opened my eyes. Blood spattered across the snow. Steam rose from the rib cage. Dad stared at me. His face was unlined then, his brown eyes, almost amber, were serious. He gestured with the knife, pointing out each of the organs. *This is the heart. The lungs—see where the bullet went?* I only nodded, trying to not look at the deer. The wind picked up. I shivered. I told my father I was cold. He pulled out rubber gloves from his pack. *Put these on.* The gloves were too big for my small hands. He pointed to the stomach, which bulged from the carcass, white and pink, the purple veins stretching across it. *Put your hands in.* I shook my head. *Come on,* he urged. He caught me by the wrists as I began to back away. He pushed me towards the deer. He stuck his own bare hand along the side of

the stomach. *Like this.* I stuck my hands into the deer slowly, cringing as warmth spread across my fingers and as it eased into my skin. The stomach was smooth and soft through the rubber gloves and surprisingly firm. My father stood and smiled at me as he grabbed snow from the ground, rubbing his hands together as he washed the blood away. *That's my good girl.* I sat, my hands being warmed by the guts of the doe, as I saw her eyes. The black and brown more blue as her body cooled, frozen, staring ever outward. My father's hand on my shoulder.

My mother and father argued. I could hear them through my bedroom wall. *She doesn't want to do hunter's safety, Bruce! She doesn't like it!*

Dad's voice was deep, *She's doing it.*

Bruce...

Unless you give me a son, she's doing it.

I lay in bed, staring up at the ceiling, pulling a pillow over my ears. I whispered to the dark, *If only there had been a boy, if only there had a boy, if only there had been a boy...*

We sat in a room filled with boys. I was twelve, the youngest child in the room and the only girl. Faced

with this prospect, I had begged my father to come with me earlier in the day. He shrugged as I asked him, *Fine.*

The wood-paneled room was small and dingy. The two leaders of the Fin and Feather Club wore greasy baseball caps and camouflage button down shirts. One of the men wore suspenders. I was given curious looks as I wove through the boys. I kept my eyes down, staring at my shoes.

We need some more goddamn chairs! One of the men yelled as more boys and men came into the room. My chair was rickety on the uneven cement floor. My father sat next to me, smiling and shaking hands with some of the men as they walked past. I ignored them as my face grew red.

Their voices were all the same, laughing, indulgent, *Your girl is gonna get her license?* They gave me a long look as they laughed, *Miss deer-slayer!* My dad laughed with them and then paused, looking at me. He said what he did so often, *She does well enough.*

The man with the suspenders stood up. He leaned heavily on his cane. He called off the names, a long list of boys, pausing over mine. His eyes flickered towards me, disapproval stamped across his face. I

turned to my father, hoping he had witnessed the exchange. He was engaged in whispering to one of the men from earlier. The man in the suspenders pushed a TV and a VCR to the front of the room. He pushed a movie in with little explanation.

The picture was static, lines running across the screen as a cheap video, demonstrating the need for gun safety played across the screen. The story of the video followed two boys as they laughed, accompanying their fathers on a hunting trip. One of the boys, who had dark hair and dark eyes, went into his father's gun cabinet the next day, stealing a rifle. He invited his friend, meeting up with him in the woods. They wandered through the bright forest, kicking rocks and taking turns shooting at small animals. The music was light and happy; I found dread filling my stomach as the sun faded from the video. The dark-haired boy carried his gun haphazardly as he stumbled down the side of a hill. His friend walked in front of him. The boy lost his footing and tripped, landing hard on his back. His rifle, the wooden stock gleaming in the light, landed beside him, firing. His friend clutched his chest, the fake blood spreading, blossoming across his white-button down shirt. The dark-haired boy scrambled across the ground to his friend.

Many of the boys in the room snickered as the dark-haired boy wailed as he clutched his friend on the television. Blood spattered across the ground. My father continued whispering to the other men, ignoring the video. Tears welled in my eyes as I watched the display. The boy clutching his friend, the gun that had fired of its own will, that bright day made dark. I thought of the countless does we slaughtered. The blood. The eyes. The man in the suspenders paused the video and shuffled over to the light switch. My hands were balled into tight fists. I would not cry in front of all these men. I glanced at my father. My throat was tight. I bit my lip. As the lights illuminated the room, tears ran down my face. I wiped them away quickly, not before the man in the suspenders saw them and gave me a satisfied smile.

As I looked down, I saw that my shorts were stained with blood. I stiffened in horror. I shifted in my chair, hiding the evidence. As the first class ended, I remained seated, waiting for the men and boys to shuffle out of the room. My father was still speaking with another man. After sitting for a long time, my father came over to me. He smiled and asked if I was ready to go. I stood, walking stiff as we exited the room. He gave me a long look, noticing the blood,

frowning, but he said nothing. He ushered me from the room, opened the truck door for me, and helped me up, his great and calloused hand gentle on my back. A light touch pushing me forward. He muttered something like, *There you go* in a soft voice.

What gauge is the yellow shell? I stood at a table in front of the man in suspenders. He adjusted his glasses, the whites of his eyes yellowed with age. I could see veins running across his cheeks; some were broken, tendrils of red and purple blooming against his sallow face. We were asked before the final hunter's safety test whether we used a shotgun or a rifle. I chose the rifle. I knew rifles.

I stared at the shell for a moment, until I snatched it from the table; I rolled it between my fingers. I examined the shell, trying to figure out the gauge, searching for small numbers, anything to indicate the size. The man watched me, a smile on his face.

I looked at him and told him that I would be using a rifle, not a shotgun.

He smiled, resting his chin on his folded hands, *Well, I happen to think it's good to know both. Do you know it?*

I looked at the shell a bit longer and then said, *No.*

He gave me a patronizing smile. He wrote on a slip of paper. *You passed everything else though. Congratulations.*

As I fled from the table, happy to escape the man's wide smile and yellow teeth, I looked down at the slip of paper he gave me. The paper was pink, a large COMPLETED emblazoned across the top. At the bottom, in black sharpie, the man in suspenders had written NEEDS HELP. I glanced back at him. He watched me as I walked away, shaking his head as he spoke to the man next to him. My father waited outside, sitting in his truck.

How did it go?

I shrugged and handed him the paper.

He looked at it for a moment and then looked at me. *What did you do wrong?* I tried to explain. My father gave me his long look, tilting his chin down, raising his fine brows, *Well, maybe you should know.*

I stared forward, folding my arms as I watched fields and trees flash past, a blur of green. As we came to stop sign, my father glanced at me. His voice was sharp, *Oh, don't you start doing that.* I glared at him, tightening my arms. *That's what women do.*

I relaxed my arms, defeated.

The question constantly circles in my mind, chasing my dreams, my thoughts, my wants. *Why do I do this?* Why do we crave what is most painful to get? Why do we want what we cannot have? I can see the doe in my sights, the crosshair shaking as I flirt with the trigger. I almost put the gun down. I almost cry out, try to scare her away; but I know the motions too well. Cheek to stock, finger to trigger, and the gripping relief that slides through the body after, like a release of pain, the adrenaline carrying me to such great heights.

She begins to turn, ready to bound towards the tree line. Sparks fly from the barrel of the rifle and all I

can hear is a single tone, high and piercing, ringing. The doe drops, blood sprays across the snow. I feel heavy as I lean back, setting my gun beside me. I cycle the chamber, the hot casing of the bullet steaming in the cold. I leave the blind, making my way towards the doe. She lays, her eyes empty. The blue staring out into space, empty, devoid of life. Blood pools beneath her body. Her tongue hangs from her mouth. I sit on the ground beside her. I pull out my phone. I am breathless, searching, and wanting as I say in a hoarse voice, my mouth dry, "Dad I got a doe." On the other end, a warm voice, approval. *Good girl. Deer-slayer.* The words always the same. The only approval from these men, the men who cherish sons, the men who revel in the hunt, I have ever known.