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Sagebrush Hill

Erik Nielsen

I shot the bear in the early hours of a rainy morning in June. It had snowed the night before. Sagebrush and pines were covered in frost and snow, and the snow melted and dripped off the branches into the mud with the rain. Inside the sheep wagon, the windows steamed from the heat of the wood stove, the rain pattered on the tin roof and hissed on the stovepipe outside. I sat on the cot with the rifle on my lap and waited for the sun to rise. The sky was gray and clouds hung low in the trees; mist and rain all rolling down the hillsides slowly.

The sheep left camp reluctantly, the last old ewes laying in the mud, chewing mindlessly in the cold. As the band made their way around the north side of the forested hillside, I left them to graze. I chained my dogs up at camp and walked through the forest along the south side of the hill. The rain tapped on my hood, my shoulders, and the barrel of the rifle, and soon the sounds of the sheep disappeared into the dark distance of the trees and rolling hillside.

I walked slowly and carefully through the brush, making my footsteps quiet as I crouched and held the rifle ready. I had never killed a bear, and I was nervous. He had left his mark all week, though—dead sheep and lambs found gutted carelessly in the grass—and it was time. The rifle was heavy and comfortable in my arms. The stock was worn and smooth to the touch. It almost felt warm under my fingers. When I slid a cartridge into place, it clicked easily and effortlessly, and the rain rung on the barrel.

When I shot him the first time he ran, the black mass darting through trees faster than I expected. Thirty miles an hour uphill, and he was out of sight. I wheezed up after him and could hear my dogs barking back at camp. I found him fifteen feet up in a tree when I got to the top of the hill. He looked down quietly at me, and I up at him. We sat like this for a few minutes, and I pretended that I wasn't trembling. It took five more shots before he fell out of the tree, his body limp and heavy as he teeter-tottered

on branches and collapsed on the ground, awkward and lifeless.

He was so beautiful and peaceful there. His black fur was streaked with rain, and it repelled the moisture off in beads and little braids down into the dirt. There was blood in the dirt. His stench was heavy in the air, and I cried for him in the rain. Somewhere through the sage, the ponderosa, the prickly pear and the last bits of last night's snow, the sheep spread out and grazed, comfortable and calling to each other in the cold moments of an early morning in the low, stretching Big Belt Mountains.

