

Hunting the Last Season

Jeffry and Sarah left for school, and Ellen went to work. I loaded papers into my briefcase, downed the last of my coffee, and the phone rang. I picked it up and said hello, and Mom said, "Dad says he's going elk hunting this year. What the doctors say or I say doesn't make any difference. He's going."

I said, "When?"

"He says he's going the last season, November 29th."

I said, "That gives me some time. I'll come up this weekend and talk to him." I said, "If I don't get out of here, I'm going to be late for work. I'll see you Friday."

Tuesday morning at breakfast, I said, "Let's go up and see Mom and Dad this weekend."

Ellen said, "I have to work Saturday morning. We're having choir practice after church, Sunday."

Jeffry said, "Dad, I have a game Saturday."

Sarah said, "Melissa and I are going to the game. I promised Melissa I'd go to the dance with her after the game."

So I drove up to see Mom and Dad by myself. I took off from work at noon Friday, ate downtown, and drove up the mountain. The mountains are beautiful that time of year, once you get clear of the city.

The highway narrows into the mountains. Traffic thins out. Leaves have turned a dozen shades of red, yellow, and brown in the valleys. Up the mountain, in east slope, western larch turns yellow and sheds needles. Aspen trees along the high meadows are nearly bare; a few yellow leaves hang on against the wind.

I turned onto the road that winds up past houses spaced among pine forest, firs, and spruce, punctuated in places by small groves of aspen. When I pulled into the driveway and shut off the motor, Mom and Dad came out of the house to meet me.

I got out of the car, and Mom hugged me. Dad shook my hand. Then he pulled me close and hugged me. I was a little stiff. That's the first time we've hugged since I was ten years old.

Dad said, "Hello, stranger. You'd never know you only live about two hundred miles from us."

I said, "People get too busy. Anyway, I'm here now."

We walked into the house. Mom fixed tea, and we sat down at the kitchen table and drank tea and ate cookies.

"Come on," Dad said, "We'll show you what's new."

We walked out into the yard behind the house. Dad said, "Frost finished off a lot of the garden last week. We still have kale and cabbages and Brussels sprouts." A few pumpkins and squash still lay on the ground, with the vines withered away. About a third of the ground was tilled.

Mom said, "Dad always says he's going to work the ground in the fall to have it ready for spring, but this is the first time he's actually had time to get started on it."

"Well, I do a little at a time. Maybe I'll get it all worked up this fall, and maybe some of it will have to wait for spring. We got the raspberries trimmed and fertilized, and the strawberries weeded and ready to cover. We had good berries this year."

Mom put the harvest on the table for dinner. Fresh greens, broccoli, cabbage, jams, jellies, and frozen berries. After dinner, I said, "No television?"

"We have one. We don't watch much, anymore. The news sometimes. It's in the back room. You can watch it if you want." But I didn't. We sat and talked.

Late in the evening, Dad asked me, "Want to go fishing in the morning?"

"Sure. What time do you want to go?"

"You say."

"Let's get there at daylight."

I woke before the alarm went off, reached over and pushed the button, sat on the edge of the bed in the room I'd had from when I was twelve years old, when we moved to this house, until I left home. I dreamed many dreams here, sleeping dreams, waking dreams.

I dreamed about what I would be when I grew up. Forest ranger. Logger. Miner in the mountains. Geologist, like Dad. Biologist, studying nature.

When I went to college, I decided to pursue a good, reliable income, and I went into business. And I do make good money. The rest of the

dreams, did any of them come true? I tried to remember what they were. Some of them came back, but I drew a lot of blanks. Adolescent dreams of fame, fortune, and romance, washed away by maturity and the world.

I heard Dad walking in the hallway, and I flipped on the light by the bed. He tapped on the door. I said, "I'm up. Come in."

He opened the door and looked in. "Pancakes and eggs in five minutes."

Dad's old beater of a pickup sat in the driveway before daylight, with frost settled thick and white. Dad scraped the windshield while the engine warmed. Headlights reflected from frost on the brush by the road as we drove toward the river.

We rigged tackle at dawn. My fingers got so cold, they almost wouldn't work. Rising sun shone through frost and refracted stars of rainbow colors from leaves of grass. I stood in frosted grass and cast into cold, active water.

The day warmed. I caught one rainbow trout, about fourteen inches long. It came in too easy, as if it was resigned to its fate as soon as I set the hook. A tame fish, recently planted in the river. Rainbow trout have replaced the wild fish that were native to this stream. I put the fish down in the cold grass and shed my jacket and scarf. I gutted the trout and lay it into dampened grass in my creel. I sat down, then lay back in sunshine above the running water and dozed.

Dad walked down the creek bank. He said, "Did you quit fishing?"

"Fishing's resting. Resting's fishing. How'd you do so far?"

"Three worth keeping. Maybe two pounds each." He sat down beside me. We soaked up sunshine a while before he said, "You came up to try to talk me out of going elk hunting."

I pushed my hat up from my face so I could see him. "I don't know if that's right or not. What if I did?"

He said, "I'm going. Hunting doesn't have to be strenuous. I know that country. I can cover a lot of territory without climbing five miles of bluffs and steep hills. You know I hunt slow and easy. Is anything strenuous about quarter-mile-an-hour soft-footing it across the mountain?"

"If you kill an elk, it starts getting strenuous."

"I have a packjack and a chain-saw winch. It'll be cold enough, I won't have to rush getting the meat out. I'm not in any hurry about any of it. Your mother reads too many magazine articles. I think she's afraid I'm

trying to kill myself living the life that's already gone, up on the mountain on a last hunt.

"But that isn't what I'm doing. I love living. I'm not despondent over my health. I never have been. I'm too busy being glad I'm alive. I still enjoy this world a bunch. I haven't had time to get depressed about pain or limited abilities. I'm not crippled. I walk a brisk half-mile and a more leisurely mile, five days a week."

I said, "Sounds good. Mom's worried about you going by yourself more than anything."

"Most of the guys I used to hunt with are gone. Nobody who's left is in shape to hunt anymore. I don't want to find a new hunting partner this late in life. It could be dangerous to go hunting with someone if you don't know how they handle a rifle."

We thought it over there in morning sunshine until thinking gave way to drifting into sleep. When Dad sat up, I woke and sat up. I said, "I was starting to get too warm. I dreamed I woke up and moved into the shade and went back to sleep. Then I dreamed something hit my hook, and I was trying to drag a six-point elk up out of the stream."

We waded shallows and fished opposite sides of the stream to the pickup. We headed home halfway through the afternoon, with seven fish, plenty for dinner and some to freeze.

After dinner, Dad said he was going for a walk. I asked, "Mind if I go with you?"

"If you think you can keep up."

Dusk slid down off the mountaintops toward us while we walked. I said, "What if I went hunting with you?"

"How long since you've hunted?"

"Almost twenty years. But you know, I never said I wouldn't hunt again. I just haven't. I haven't fished in fifteen years, but I caught fish this afternoon. You don't forget that stuff. It's like riding a bicycle or swimming."

"If you're thinking of going because you think I need to be taken care of, stay home."

"I'm thinking of going for the same reason I'm here now. The years go by. We haven't done much together. But if you do kill a bull, you're going to need help, even if you do have a packjack and a winch. I'll go to hunt,

but if we kill an elk, I'll do most of the heavy work getting it out."

Back in the city again, I settled into the usual routines, but I started planning for the end of November, I asked Jeffrey if he was interested in going hunting with Dad and me. Jeffrey said, "I have practice and a game. This could be the last year I get to play, unless I make a team in college. Coach says the competition to get on the team in college is fierce."

The competition is fierce. My son, growing into a young man, used to say he was going to be a pro. Maybe he's started giving up dreams. He isn't sure he'll play football in college, let alone make a pro team. I want to talk to him about dreams, but neither of us has time right now.

On the mountain, the end of November, I could have shot a spike the first morning early, but I let him go over the ridge. Something started before daylight that morning that might never end. Being in the mountains again stirred restlessness, discontentment with living in the city. Maybe that was part of the reason I hadn't gone to the mountains much to visit Mom and Dad, though consciousness of that possibility usually stayed beneath the surface.

That night after we ate dinner, we sat by the fire. Dad said, "I could have shot a spike, but I didn't even try to put my scope on him." He dropped another chunk of split pine onto the fire. Sparks scattered up the rising smoke and climbed toward the dark sky. He said, "I've killed my share of spikes. I'm looking for a bigger bull."

"What would you shoot?"

"I don't know. Size of the bull, size of the rack counts as much as the points. I'd take a four-point if he had a good spread and he was a healthy bull. I don't think I'd shoot a three-point, but I'd have to decide after I saw him."

We left camp at daylight the next morning. We walked up the ridge to its confluence with the next ridge north, and we split up and walked up opposite sides of the ridge.

We met on the saddle and sat on that dark, jagged rock bluff for a couple of hours.

We looked down on two trails through timber and open meadow. I killed my first bull from there, twenty-two years ago, a three-point, and I helped Dad pack out a four-point he shot from there two years later.

Late morning, three hunters walked up the trail below us. They didn't

look up and see us above them.

Dad walked over from his high point and sat down beside me. He said, "Too damned many hunters. It puts the elk out of any pattern. Used to be, skill would get you your elk. Now, it's just luck. Hunters keep the elk moving all over the country. If you happen to be where they go by, maybe you get one. Pretty much a game of chance now."

"There's a lot of changes in the world."

"Yeah. I'm going down this draw and then above the edge of the meadow, back to camp. You see a lot of meadow if you walk the edge of the timber."

The third day, it got a lot colder mid-afternoon, while the sun was still two hours above the horizon. Clouds spilled off the mountain peaks toward us. Cold wind whipped across the mountain slopes. I walked back to camp. I checked tent stakes and tightened the ropes.

Dad came in, unloaded his rifle, put it in the tent, and built a fire. I walked over and sat down on a log across the fire from him. I said, "We might get a snowstorm."

He sat down, leaned forward, took his gloves off, and held his hands out to the growing fire. "If it gets any colder, it'll be too cold to snow."

It was an argument we'd had every year, years ago, when I still hunted with him. I said, "It doesn't get too cold to snow."

I think he was glad I picked it up and didn't just let it fade away. He said, "If it drops below twenty degrees, it won't snow. It never snows below twenty degrees."

"Dad, it snows in the arctic at fifty below zero."

"That's the arctic. I'm talking about this country right here. If it drops below twenty degrees, it won't snow in this country."

"I brought a thermometer. I hung it on that pine tree right there, around the other side. We'll see if it tells us anything."

"I hope it does snow. It's easier to track elk in the snow. I usually get an elk if there's snow, and I usually don't get one if it doesn't snow." He walked around the tree until he found the thermometer. "No wonder it feels cold. Five degrees." He came back and sat down again.

I said, "So I guess we don't get any snow."

"Oh, we could. Those clouds hanging on the peak could move in, and it could warm up to twenty degrees and start snowing."

Dark settled on the mountain while we ate. I said, "Next time, we should get a cabin someplace close to where we want to hunt. The trouble with doing it this way is I'm always too warm on one side and too cold on the other."

Dad said, "Indians thought white men were stupid. Build a big fire, have to back so far away from it, they freeze to death. Better to build a small fire and huddle in close."

"A cabin with electric lights, maybe even a television set. Without light, there isn't much to do. It gets dark pretty early now."

"All the hunters from the cities get cabins with electric lights. They stay up late and get drunk, play cards, and tell dirty jokes."

"I'm up here hunting, and I'm from the city."

"Do you know any dirty jokes?"

"Probably only ones you've already heard, traveling salesmen, circuit-riding preachers."

We cleaned up after dinner and sat by the fire. We didn't say much. Eventually, I said, "If I soak up anymore coffee, I'll be up every hour all night. I'm going to bed."

I heard snow blowing against the tent when I woke up about midnight. Out of the bag and into my boots and jacket. Mighty cold, but that could be the wind and the snow in the wind. Snow creaked under my feet, already three or four inches deep. I yellowed the clean white snow the other side of the pine tree. Falling snow covered the yellow hole in the snow rapidly. I shone the light on the thermometer. Zero.

If I wanted my old man to believe me, I'd have to wake him up and get him out to look at the thermometer. But when I crawled back into the tent, he was snoring. I shucked my jacket and boots and crawled back into my bag.

I woke at five and jumped out of the sack before I could think about how cold it was. Dad was already up and had the fire roaring. Clouds cleared off. Stars shone bright in the high mountain sky. Six inches of new snow squeaked under my boots as I walked. I took my flashlight over to the tree. Ten below zero.

Dad poured me a cup of coffee and poured pancake batter onto the griddle. He said, "Let's go up to the point and split the ridge again. Maybe there won't be a lot of hunters in there."

We left the pickup on the point and walked down two sides of the ridge. Snow quieted the world. Snowshoe hares and coyotes had tracked down across new snow. I thought I saw grouse in a tree, but I wasn't sure, just grouse-like motion in the edge of my vision and then gone from my vision.

Long ago, two different seasons, I shot grouse, built a fire and cooked and ate the grouse and then resumed my hunt for elk. That was a different time, a different way of doing things. The past keeps tugging at me, trying to tell me something. I think about Jeffrey who has never been hunting, who might never go hunting.

Dad and I met at the aspen grove for lunch. I said, "See anything?"

"Nothing."

"How are you doing?"

"I feel better than I've felt in a couple of years. Kick their butts outdoors, they'd lose fewer heart patients."

We put down a ground cloth, leaned against a big tree, ate lunch, rested and dozed for an hour. Then Dad said, "Time to go kill a six-point bull. I'll see you at the pickup about dark."

Near the top of the ridge, I saw three cows, two with the year's young. They went over the ridge without seeing me. Then I saw the bull. He walked slowly across the east face of the ridge. He used all the cover there was and checked everything around him, but he didn't know I stood across the meadow from him, watching. Five points. A nice rack, with a wide, almost flat spread. His breath steamed in cold air in front of him. He walked into thicker timber, out of sight.

Half an hour, I heard a shot boom down the long canyon and echo across the valley. I waited to see if there would be another shot, and then I headed down the canyon.

I cut the elk's trail first. Lots of blood. Then Dad's trail joined it. I covered ground. When I caught up with Dad, he was sitting on a big rock he'd brushed clear of snow. He was breathing pretty hard. I said, "You okay?"

"Yeah. I'm okay. I hit him. He's bleeding a lot, but he's still going."

"Where'd you hit him?"

"In the head. He went down hard, but he was up and running in two seconds. I couldn't get the scope on him again before he ran into the timber. I should have stuck with open sights."

I said, "He's losing a lot of blood. He can't go far. I'd better go get the pickup and get you back to camp."

"I'm all right. We'd better track down this wounded elk. I just got going too fast too soon. Damn. I don't know why I let go of what I know. When an animal bleeds that bad, give it time to lie down and die. I wanted to finish the job, and I got him on the run. I'm about out of energy to track him down."

I brushed more snow from the rock and sat down by him. His breathing steadied. Color on his face smoothed toward normal. I said, "I'm going to see if I can track him down. I think you'd better take an easy walk back to the pickup."

Dad sat there for a minute, with his rifle across his knees. He said, "I'm going to do it the way you say. I don't like it, but if I head out there to track him down, he might not be the only one who has to be carried out. Maybe that'd be a romantic way to bid this life farewell, but it'd make problems for the people around me. I'll take a slow walk back to the pickup and wait for you there."

The elk had put distance between him and where he'd been hit, bleeding all the way. He ran up through timber and jumped wind-thrown trees. I panted and puffed. I thought about the old man trying to do this, and even me at forty-one, I'm moving slower than I want to, because I know I might have a long way to go. I can't burn all my energy the first mile.

When I cleared the timber, I took a break and just breathed. I couldn't outrun him. All I could do was get there as fast as I could.

I trotted a mile and a half of open ground, six inches of powdery snow adding to the hard work, and then another half-mile of wind-blown lodgepole. I couldn't detour, because I didn't know where he might turn or stop. I tried to put it in past tense. He turned. He's down and dead by now. But somehow, I'm sure he's still alive. I keep moving at the edge of my endurance.

He fell here. Loss of blood slowed him down and made it harder to keep his balance, dizzy, confused about what he's going to do. I hit open ground again and settled into a steady trot. I ran up the valley, along the edge of the meadow.

He fell twice more and then headed into the timber. I found him two-hundred yards into the timber, in a small open area, big stumps from

fifty-years-ago logging on both sides of him.

He reared up onto his front quarters and tried to get up, but he fell back into bloody snow. Blood covered his neck, chest, and front legs, matted into his rich brown, buff, and black fur, grown thick for a winter he would never see. He hooked his antlers toward me as if he hoped to reach me from that far away.

I was cool and quick because I wanted it over with, this animal's agony done with. His lower jaw hung by a piece of hide. Most of his tongue was shot away. He'd already lost more blood than I had in me, and he was still bleeding.

I slipped the safety off, sighted through the scope, and fired a bullet through the top of his head. I knew I'd ruin the rack, but I didn't slow down. I blew his brain cage open and empty.

He dropped flat, dead in the snow. I put the rifle down, dropped to my knees in the cold snow, and shook. I thought a prayer for this huge, beautiful, dead animal, inanimate in bloody snow, not a prayer of words, but of feelings, of thoughts beyond words.

I stopped shaking. I slowed my mind down and thought about what I needed to do.

I opened the bull and pulled his intestines out onto the snow. I tugged at him top and bottom and skidded him inches at a time away from the steaming intestines onto clean, white snow. I skinned his neck and shoulders, broke a dead branch from a pine tree, and wedged the carcass open to cold air. My thoughts still ran wild, but I got everything done that had to be done. Then I headed for the pickup.

Dad sat on a log near the pickup. He looked good. He had all his color back, and he breathed well. I said, "I think we can get close with the pickup, if the ground still lays the way it did when I was twenty years old. I have to take the time to eat a little bit, even if it means coyotes stop by and take tribute."

"No predator will mess with the carcass the first day. I'd worry more about some hunter picking up the rifle. I wouldn't have left it."

"Come on now. Things haven't changed that much, have they? What I'd worry about more is coyotes stealing the rifle. When wild animals start shooting back at us, we're in trouble."

We ate. I sat on the log and rested. Then we got in the pickup and

started down the meadow.

I said, "We'll have to see if the old road up from the bridge is still open." Down lodgepole blocked the road at the top of the ridge. I drove around the down lodgepole and cut across, got onto the meadow, changed course and hunted around several times because of a washed out drainage I couldn't drive across, but we found a way and drove right to the dead bull.

I said, "What do you think? Skin it and quarter it?"

"Dark's pushing us. It's cold enough, it'll cool out like this. Let's use the winch to get it onto that high spot and load it like it is."

I said, "You tag it. You brought it down."

"It doesn't matter to me, either way. We share the meat the same, however we tag it."

"I ruined the rack."

"Not really. Just if you wanted the rack with the top of the skull. The antlers are still solid in what's left of the lower skull, so I'll just skin and clean the whole skull."

"And mount it over the fireplace?"

"No. I'll probably put it out in the garage. Unless you want it."

"I'll take it. I don't want it to gather dust in the garage."

We skinned and quartered the carcass. We packed up camp early in the morning. Snow drifted down heavily while we took the tent down and rolled it and stuffed it into its sack. Dad said, "Next year, I'm going to hunt with a camera in the spring and summer. I'll take your mother along."

"We had a good hunt. We got a good bull."

"I know. We're pulling out about the right time, too. Might get snowed in up here. An inch higher or an inch farther back, either one, he never would have got up after he hit the ground the first time."

"An inch off. A hundred and fifty yards. That was a good shot."

"I've always shot for the head. Most people say, shoot for the heart. I guess there's more chance of putting the animal down."

"You made a good shot. Nobody can fault you for that shot."

"No, I guess not. Just for the follow-up."

"Dad, it came out all right, didn't it?"

He thought about it for a minute before he said, "Yes. It came out all right. Maybe the best way it could have come out. We were both in on it, the way it went."

Twenty miles down the road, I thought about the thermometer still hanging in the tree. I wasn't going to drive twenty miles back in a snowstorm for a five dollar thermometer. I didn't say anything about it. My leg muscles ached from covering several miles in a hurry.

Five miles farther down the road, Dad said, "I got that thermometer off the tree. I put it in the glove box. When I took it down, it said five below zero, and it was snowing hard."

It snowed so hard, the falling snow might hypnotize a driver, but I kept driving. I put miles behind us, trying to get down into lower country, where plows clear the road every time it storms. I thought about Jeffry. I wondered who won the game.