

My Father, the Deer Hunter

There will be dead deer hanging in the garage when I get to my dad's house. Their spines will be fractured from holding the weight of their bodies to the pipes in the ceiling. There will be blood on the garage floor, thick and syrupy. It will run down their foreheads, through the muscular grooves of their necks, and over the white fur of their bellies until it puddles on top of the brown stains left over from last year's hunt. There will be two of them, two does; my father hunts does now. His gun will be leaned up against the wall, still hot from the hunt. Above it nailed to the wall will be his mirage of prizes: feathers and bones, cleaned and mounted. This collection of death somehow a collection of his life. A timeline made out of the feathers of pheasants he shot as a kid, spanning across decades, and landing on these two mothers, or sisters, tied to the ceiling of his garage.

My father is a hunter. Hunts pheasants and deer mostly. He took a short break from killing in the 90s to make my sister and me. He grew us and nurtured us with bowls of dry generic brand cereal and spaghetti from a box, until we were older and more abandonable. Now he lives quaintly in a house five hours from the one my sister and I grew up in with our mother. He spends his mornings in an orange jumpsuit crouching in the thicket of trees behind his house with a gun in his hand. He takes a break to come home and read the paper, and drink a cup of weak coffee. In the afternoons he is wrist deep in something's guts, peeling it for sausages or filets. He is hard to have a conversation with. He makes little noise.

Every November, I make the drive out to the western part of North Dakota where he lives. The drive goes by in excruciatingly long, movie-like pans. It is quiet and monotonous. The wheat fields go by like long water colored streaks between the sky and road. My father and I catch up for a day or two, and once we've run out of insignificant small talk, I throw my bag back into my car and finish the holidays with the rest of the family.



The bones of this house are cold. The knob on the front door is frosted from the first snowfall of the year. I enter and my bag drops to the carpet with a thud. I go to switch on the light and I can feel the chill outside soaking the

walls. When the sun goes down here there is nothing you can do to keep warm. Even the paint is cold; it goes all the way through.

“Dad? I’m here,” I call out into the house and flick on the light.

“Out back,” he calls back. He’s in the garage with a heart in his hands, no doubt.

The front hallway is full of photographs, hung like a gallery. There is one of me from a ski trip he took me on in middle school. My goggles are pulled sideways on my face and I’m tugging on one of my long braided pigtails. Next to that is one of him holding onto the antlers of a large buck. His face is stoic and cold, though he must have been proud. We have the same long nose. He has a whole long face, but I was lucky enough to get my mother’s stubby jaw. There are graduation photos, school plays, our cousin’s baby shower announcement where they painted her baby bump with a deer’s face and her husband stood beside her holding a shotgun.

An entire hallway’s worth of proof that we are family, and that we have done and been invited to family things. I wonder if anyone has ever even seen this gallery besides us.

The back door swings shut and the yard is as cold as the house. The grass is brown and flat, and the porch—which has been halfway finished for the last ten years—is dusted with a hard layer of frost. I cross my arms to try and build warmth in my chest; a trick I learned in a yoga class for people with anxiety. Or was it depression? I went because a scorned ex-boyfriend had broken into our dorm room my sophomore year of college and taken a baseball bat to all of the door handles all the while screaming my roommate’s name and reciting a Frank O’Hara poem. It took almost an hour before Campus Safety could safely enter the building and get him out. The relaxation techniques did not stop the sound of a bat against my door every time I shut my eyes. Plus, it ruined Frank O’Hara for me. I uncross my arms.

“Hey kid,” my father says, getting to his feet and wringing his hands in a white towel. The doe’s mouth is open just enough that I can see her teeth. The bullet hole is in her rib cage.

“Hi, Dad,” I say pulling my sleeves over my hands.

“Pretty, isn’t she?” he asks. He’s right. There is something exceptional about the perfectly circular hole between her ribs, and the way the blood is dripping perfectly from the side of her mouth down the white streak under her chin. Her eyes are open. I wonder if she has children. I wonder if they have seen my father.

“How was the drive?” He asks, “Roads treated you alright?”

“Fine, hardly any snow.”

“Buck got hit up the road.”

“Must’ve missed it.”

“Radio said it was pretty bad. Car drug the intestines a whole mile down the road with it.”

“I doubt that’s possible, Dad.”

“You ain’t ever had your hands in the belly of one. Those things seem to go on forever.”

I think of my dad pulling the intestines out of a deer like a magician pulling scarves out of a hat.



The sun goes down and outside my window is pure black. The trees behind the house are indistinguishable from the sky. I can’t tell where anything begins or ends. In the kitchen my father makes spaghetti; it’s so quiet I hear the water go from warm to boiling. I sit at the edge of the bed and wait for it to be done. My phone gets hardly any service out here. In moments when it catches a strong signal I think I’ll be flooded with emails and texts, but I just get one from my sister wishing me sanity and warmth. I pull an old sweater out of the closet and put it over my shirt. Everything in the closet is a collection of old Christmases, when my sister and I used to come here together. Our dad would pack the house with pristinely wrapped, ill-fitting sweaters, always in the wrong color. He made a game out of staying warm in the house as if we wouldn’t figure out he couldn’t keep the heat on.

I make it to the kitchen just as my dad pours an entire jar of red sauce onto the noodles in the pot. He takes a fork and stirs it together, noodles and sauce going around and around and around. I sit at the table. The only sound in the house is sauce squishing between noodles, weaving a pattern in the pot. Squish, squish, squish. With a fork and his thumb my father dishes a helping onto the plate in front of me. He takes out two glasses and a gallon of whole milk. He pours one full glass and begins on the second.

“I don’t drink milk,” I say.

“No daughter of mine is going to have weak bones,” he says, but pours the milk back into the jug anyway. “Still liking city living?”

“Yes”

“I hear it’s getting pretty dangerous.”

“I suppose.”

“Lotta news stories about pretty girls getting shot.”

“It’s fine, Dad.”

“I see them on the news. Always pretty, always young. All those poor dads.”

“All those poor women.”

“Don’t make me one of them dads.”



I turn off the light in my bedroom. At first it’s so dark I can’t tell when my eyes are open or closed. I wonder what the deer in my father’s garage was most afraid of.



I wake up in the middle of the night from the cold. My room is dark and it takes me a couple of seconds to realize where I am. I pull my knees into my chest and tuck the quilt under my feet. I lie like that for a few minutes before I decide it isn’t going to work. My dad must have moved all of the extra blankets out of the closet, since they aren’t in there anymore. The bedroom door creaks when I open it. My breath escapes in thin, puffy clouds down the hallway, and seems to reach all the way to the door. The door that leads from the hallway to the backyard is glowing orange. There is a light on outside. The line between the trees and the sky breaks apart in translucent orange, outlining the trees and the garage in amber and leaving the rest still black. I cross my arms and envision my heart, which is beating hard now, as a glowing lamp. Another stupid yoga trick.

“Dad?” I whisper down the hallway toward his bedroom. I wait for an answer. In the hallway between his bedroom and mine I am frozen. I don’t dare even move my eyes. I hold my breath.

“Dad?” I muster the courage to say it louder. I make my way down the hall. His door is slightly open. Nothing.



Growing up, my sister and I both had night terrors. I would wake up in the middle of the night screaming from the same dream. I dreamed that the house was on fire and I could feel it through the walls of my bedroom. I would pace the room trying to decide whether to open the door to the hallway or jump out my second story window, all while the walls were getting hotter. Sometimes, if it took me a while to make a decision, the walls would turn black and orange like embers. I could hear my sister calling for my help; I am the older one. Sometimes I would yell through the walls for my mother,

who, of course, never came. I would open the door to the room and my sister would be standing there with all of her skin black and hardened, everything but the blue of her eyes.



I pull a coat down from the hooks next to the back door and slip on my boots. Outside is somehow even quieter than the house. The light seems to be coming from somewhere just behind the garage. I hit the garage door opener. It makes a whirring sound. I hope the sound scares off whatever is around, but I suppose too it might just give my place away. That was a half baked plan.

“Dad?” I call into the garage. He isn’t there. I go inside and hit the door shut. The whirring sound seems to go on forever as the door juts outward at a diagonal and then slowly lowers to the ground. Finally, it is flush with the opening, closing out the white from the little snow outside and the faint orange light with it. I stand for a moment in total stillness, waiting for something to move. Nothing does. I run my hand against the wall and try to find a shelf. The walls feel warm; it might be my imagination. No, the walls feel warm. What was that orange light, anyway? A fire? An old fashioned lantern? Where could it have been coming from? I close my eyes and rely on my hands. I put just my fingers against the wood. I slide my foot forward. I try and picture what is on the floor so I won’t run into it. I try and picture which corner the doe is hanging from. My fingers hit plastic. I run my palm along the shelf and grope indistinguishable objects, until I find the flashlight I have been looking for. I should have brought my phone. I flick the plastic button on the side. The batteries are dead. I hit the bottom against my palm. Nothing. I try again. Nothing. I throw it and as it hits the wall across from me it springs to life, lighting the garage in a dusty yellow.

The doe’s eyes are like black marbles. She looks right at me. I wonder what it felt like, if she saw my father and knew she was going to die, or if that bullet in her ribs was sudden and unexpected. The garage smells astringent and tinny. Living in this forest meant her days were numbered from the start. There are hunters everywhere. Danger lives in the wooden houses surrounding every edge of her home. I hope she didn’t feel the heat of their guns moving in on her. She would have lived paralyzed in fear, not just in brief moments, but all of the time. I know what fire lives in the barrel of a gun. I know the news stories, and I know those poor, pretty, young girls. My eyes are glass marbles.

The whirring of the garage door starts. It lifts off of the ground as my

dad bends underneath it. He hits the light switch. He picks up the flashlight and turns it off.

“What are you doing out here?” He asks.

“You didn’t come when I called for you,” I say.

“What?”

“Back at the house.” I tell him. “I was scared and you didn’t come.”

My father walks over to the shelf. He returns the flashlight to its home. He turns out the light and ducks under the garage door. He waits for me to follow. From the porch I see the trees lined in amber. I cross my arms. The orange light is coming from a house somewhere deeper in the trees. It is the color of warmth, but it is not warm. My father shuts the garage door with his hands, and there is no whirring. He is good at making little noise.

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