

The Hunt

A Short Story by Patrick Rule

Roll out was at five o'clock, and five o'clock was just too early to do anything. Dad came in, pulled the covers off me, and said, "You'll never kill a deer with the covers over your head!" I never figured out why the deer couldn't wait until the afternoon to wake up, like I did. On most Saturday's, I'd be spending time out in clubs or on dates, and just getting home at 5 am. But it was November 9, the opening day of deer season. I had to get up to go hunting with my Dad, and his best friend, Chuck. I had been deer hunting with my dad since I was 12 years old. In sixteen years, I'd killed only one deer, and that was one too many.

Although I saw deer every time I went into the woods, I never had a good shot at one until five years ago, when I was 23. That year, a young buck came walking out from under a bluff that I was hunting on. It was only thirty yards away. I raised my rifle. Lined the cross hairs up on his chest. Took a deep breath. I released the safety. Then, I squeezed the trigger. BLAAAAM! The bullet went through his lungs, and pierced his spine. But, the shot didn't kill him cleanly, instantly. He lay on the ground, his hooves kicking in a wasted effort to get up and run away. I ran down the hill to where he fell, and he was snorting and baying. He looked up to me -- as if to ask me why I did this to him, I thought -- and he grunted. I put my gun to his head, pulled the trigger, and put it out of my misery.

Since then, I was into the companionship of the hunt, rather than the hunt itself. I didn't think I could kill another deer, but I didn't want to let my dad down, either. So, I got out of bed, jumped in the shower and washed up with Big Jim Hunter's Unscented Soap. The label read, "You can smell the deer before they can smell you, guaranteed!" The shower felt good, and the warm water helped to wake me up.

When I got out of the shower, I lit a cigarette, walked into the mud room and dressed in my hunting clothes. Dad's best friend, Chuck, walked in with coffee, handed me a cup, then sat down in a chair across from me. Chuck and my dad could be bookends -- both of them wore beards, and they were both losing their hair. Chuck was shorter than my dad, but they had a lot in common, namely hunting, guns and scotch. Dad and I were the perfect straight men for Chuck's unusual wit.

"Cigarettes and coffee, the health food of morons," he said. "That's like waking up in Chernobyl with the wind blowing in."

"Good morning, Chuck." I said.

"Are you ready to bag the big one this year?" he said.

"I've only killed one deer in sixteen years," I told him, "I don't think the species is endangered."

"All the time you spend sleeping in the woods hasn't exactly paid off for you, has it?"

"Sure it has, I make up for all the sleep I miss getting up at five in the morning," I said.

Dad walked into the room with maps of the farm. It was time for that final, pre-hunt briefing. My dad's passion was hunting, and he planned every opening day like Eisenhower before Normandy. He handed Chuck and me maps, laid his out on the table, and began the briefing.

"Where are you going to hunt?" he asked me.

"The twenty-seven acres," I said.

"Ok, but start out in the stand by the clearing," he told me. "I saw a buck and a little doe up there last week, so you might get a shot."

"Aye-aye," I said.

"Chuck, you should go to the Watergate stand," he said.

"You bet. That's where I shot my deer last year." Chuck said.

"That's where you get your deer every year," I said. "You'd think they'd know you by now."

"It could be my smiling disposition," Chuck said, "or just the doe piss I spray on my boots."

"It's either that, or all the suicidal deer know your the man to get the job done. Chuck, the Doctor Kevorkian to the antler set," I said as the two of us laughed.

My Dad smiled, but had a serious look on his face and took the tone of a general about to reprimand insubordinate officers. "There's a big buck in these woods, least 16 points or better," he said, pointing at his map, "I'm going up to the bluff. At nine, I want you to walk down this hill to Chuck's stand, then Chuck, you walk up this hill and drive the deer up to my stand."

"You should just wait here, and we'll bring one up to the door on a leash for you," Chuck said.

Though I had only killed one deer in my life, I always dressed well for the part. I was wearing my Treebark camo coat with an orange Eddie Bauer vest over top. I wore a camo belt around my waist that held my flashlight, my knife, and in a leather holster, my mom's Smith and Wesson .357 magnum. Dad bought Mom a handgun for their 27th anniversary. Although its main purpose was for protection, Mom let me use it for deer hunting. I wouldn't shoot at a deer with the damned thing, I just wore it to look cool. I grabbed my Remington 30-06 rifle, and walked out into the cold dawn air.

My parent's farm sat on 360 acres of woods and crop land. A stream forked its way through the property, and Dad maintained an excellent habitat for deer. The twenty-seven acres was so named because it was a separate plot connected to the rest of the property at the northwest corner. I always hunted there because no one else ever wanted to.

It was a five minute ride to the twenty-seven acres, and I took the Honda 4-wheeler. In the summer, I would tear through the woods as fast as the bike would go, but now, I drove very slowly so I wouldn't disturb the deer. I drove across the river, around the wheat field, and up the hill to the back fence. I followed the fence until I got to the blue gate, where I parked the bike and walked the rest of the way to the tree stand.

The tree was a pin oak, located in the center of a clearing. It had 6, 2 x 4 steps, leading up to a plywood platform supported by 2 x 4's and tree limbs. There was a wooden seat, and the floor of the stand was covered with a patch of green carpet. I sat down and loaded my gun. I checked the safety, shoved the clip into the receiver, pulled the bolt back and let it close with a clunk. I checked the safety again, then pulled a thermos from a pouch in my vest, and poured myself a cup of coffee.

The wind picked up, and was blowing in my face as the sun started rising. I checked my watch -- it was six o'clock, legal shooting time. I waited. I heard three shots echoing in the distance, bang, bang. Bang. I stood up, scanned the clearing in front of me, turned around and looked into the woods behind me. I waited. I thought about the warm bed waiting for me back at the house. I yawned. There was nothing to see so I sat down.

Thoughts of sleep were heavy in my mind. I should have stayed in bed. The cold wind started blowing harder, as the sun rose. My cheeks were starting to get numb, so I put my blaze orange ski mask on. I waited. I checked my watch again -- it was six fifteen. I looked all around me again, saw nothing, then leaned my

head back against the tree. My coat was warm, my eyes were heavy, and I could feel the energy drain from my body as I fell asleep.

I woke up because the sun had risen above the tree line and was shining in my eyes. I pulled out my sunglasses, put them on, looked around, then closed my eyes again. I heard a twig snap to the right of me, and I sat up, alert. I looked down and saw a red squirrel carrying an acorn in its mouth. He stopped and looked up at me. The sun was well above the trees, and I checked my watch. Seven-twenty. I waited. The sun felt warm to me, though I could still feel cold air on the skin around my eyes.

I pulled a Snicker's bar from my vest and ate it. I wondered what Dad and Chuck were doing, and if they had seen any deer. I studied the life that was flowing around me in the woods. To the left of me, a woodpecker knocked on the side of an old elm tree -- it was digging for larva in its bark. The squirrel was eating its acorn by a maple tree to my right. Across the clearing, I could see birds playing in the weeds, though I couldn't tell what species they were. The woods were alive, I thought, and I felt happy. The last thing I wanted to do was kill anything.

I pulled the clip out of my rifle, and pulled the bolt open. The shell hopped out of the chamber and landed on the floor with a thud. I closed the bolt with the chamber empty, put the shell back in the clip, the clip back in the gun. I double checked the safety. "I probably won't see anything anyway," I said to myself.

I thought about my dad, and how much he loved hunting. He started bowhunting when he was 50, and he killed his first deer, with a bow, earlier in the season. He hunted nearly every day. On weekends, Dad would stay in the woods all day, rain or shine. Dad worked very hard at his sport, and I felt guilty because I did not share his passion.

The hourly chime on my watch beeped, and I looked at it. It was eight o'clock. I waited. I noticed the birds that were playing by the edge of the clearing had flown away. I looked around and I spotted movement over my left shoulder. I turned and saw a brown ball of fuzz moving between the trees. I felt a surge of adrenaline as I watched. I could hear the sound of steps coming towards me, and I could see legs underneath the fuzz ball. I could make out the shoulder, then the back, then a rump. I couldn't see its head. I grabbed my gun and started to get ready. I remembered all the coffee I drank, and felt an urge to pee.

A head poked through the trees about fifty yards away. I could see branches around the eyes and ears. It looked odd, then I noticed that the deer was in the clearing, not in the woods anymore. It was a buck, a big one. It had at least 16 points, going on 20, and I knew this was the monster Dad was talking about. It was in a perfect position, about 40 yards away now, broadside to me, and his head was down, eating acorns. I could have pissed on it from here, I thought, and the urge came back to my consciousness. Excitedly, I raised my rifle. My

heart pounded. I lined the cross hairs of my scope on his chest. I Took a deep breath. I released the safety. Then I squeezed the trigger.

Click!

The buck looked right at me. He definitely freaked out - - seeing a camouflage and orange creature standing in a tree, wearing sunglasses -- shooting at him with an empty gun. He put his flag in the air and in two bounds was lost in the woods forever. I stood there for a while. I would never have a chance to shoot a big buck like that again, yet I was proud of myself for my decision. At the same time, I thought of how much my pride Dad would feel if I had been the one to "bag the big one", and started feeling guilty, again.

I climbed down from my tree and walked over to where the deer had stood. "Fresh droppings", I said to myself, "at least I scarred the shit out of him". I remembered the urge to pee, and did so, marking my territory for no particular purpose except to relieve myself.

I was tired, and didn't feel like hunting anymore. I walked back to the Honda and checked my watch -- it was eight thirty-two. I rode back to the house and waited for Dad and Chuck. I decided not to tell them about my deer. I didn't want to hurt Dad's feelings, and had I told Chuck, I'd be the fodder of his jokes for years. I knew they couldn't understand my feelings, and I didn't want to try to explain. I didn't really want to kill anything. I just wanted to go back to sleep.