

## Just Like You Told Us To

Deer hunting I tried but just the once and it was a long time ago. I went with a little buddy of mine named Brett Peacegrove and his old man Pat. It was a Saturday morning in the fall. I remember we left very early in the morning and all day long it was cold, gray, and foggy.

Pat picked me up outside my house in his old yellow pickup truck. Like me, both Brett and Pat were already dressed head to toe in green camouflage fatigues bought secondhand at an army-navy store. We all wore brimmed camouflage hats with a string on it and little nylon hoops so you could stash shotgun shells inside.

Rumbling along we didn't talk much. I felt nervous, my mind groping through visions of blood-dappled leaves and the black marble eyes of a dead deer lying on its side, a tongue drooping pink out the side of its mouth. I didn't like it. But I was already along for the trip and couldn't back out. Silence seemed my best option.

Pat turned on the truck radio. Scratchy stations flipped in and out and settled finally on the drone of the local weather report. I had no idea where we were by this point, though it seemed like we had been in the truck for hours. I also had no idea where we were going.

Eventually we wound slowly down dust and gravel roads to settle in an unpaved lot overlooking dense forests.

Through the driver side window I saw a row of unfinished houses and sleeping atop hills of upturned dirt some dusty Bobcats. Scraps of cloudy plastic fluttered in the open windows of the soon-to-be mansions.

Pat killed the engine, undid his seatbelt, and then leaned over the wheel to look at us both:

All right now listen up, he said. We run into anyone or anyone asks us what we're doing out here, just act normal, and tell em we're out paintballing, okay? You got it?

We both nodded, muttered something or another.

Good. Now open up that glove box. It's time to camo up.

Brett popped the glove box and the door fell open to reveal lighted stacks of papers, some junk and wrappers, and a rounded can. Inside the tin canister was an oily camouflage face paint, the circle divided into three different colors of paint: green, brown, and black.

I'll show you boys how it's done, Pat said, running two fingers through the paint and smearing it slowly across the bridge of his nose and down his cheek, leaving behind a shiny trail of dark green where he'd rubbed. Then he dipped his fingers back in the tin for more. When we were all finished painting our faces Pat opened the door, its rusty hinges squeaking:

Well boys, he said. Time to drop your cocks and pick up your socks. It's open season...

Looking ghastly, green, and demonic we rose out from the truck like weird ghosts born of the forest undergrowth, made humanoid only by the whites of our eyes. Pat in particular held a nightmarish aspect now that he was painted up with camouflage.

While Brett helped his old man get things out of the bed of the truck and ready for the trip I walked to the edge of the lot and looked out on the woods. Stretching first low and then rising up a far hillside the tall dark pines were snaked through by a river of white mist, the mist gliding and weaving its way then through the steel legs of grim latticed towers in the distance, from which sagged giant metal cables, their deadly currents buzzing soft and dull in the stillness of the gray morning air. Here and there a bird cried out.

When I turned back to the truck Pat marched past me towards the forest, Brett following at his old man's heels with a shotgun resting over his shoulder and jumping as he hiked down the slippery hillside in front of me. The whole way down I watched the fat black barrel of the shotgun bob side to side on Brett's shoulder. I wasn't exactly sure that Brett should be in charge of such a thing as a loaded gun. No, to be clear I was damn sure that he shouldn't be.

At the bottom of the hill we paused, huddling a moment at the edge of the forest so that Pat could say a few things about safety and how to go about it quietly if we

happened to sight a deer. It was during this time that I first laid eyes on Pat's compound bow, painted a black camouflage with all these different cables and eccentric pulleys, and the quiver of fiberglass arrows slung over his back.

The talking out of the way, we moved single file into the trees.

It was going on about noon. We'd traversed the forest this way and that covering several miles. By that time in the day I had already touched my fair share of deer crap, all of it disappointingly cold. Also I was beginning to feel hungry from all of the ground we'd covered, weaving through trees, only to double back and be completely turned around.

I wondered where and how it was a deer slept. Where could they hide that predators wouldn't find them? And did they sleep standing up like cows and horses? Or did they drop down onto their legs, like how dogs sleep? I never asked.

One nice thing was that every so often Brett and I traded jobs. Then it would be my turn to carry the shotgun and Brett would be the one stooping down to feel at the deer pellets for a temperature. I'm not sure why but for some reason Pat and I seemed to notice more piles in the dirt than usual whenever it was Brett's turn at the feeling duty. Nor did we have any problem directing Brett towards these droppings. Aside from being funny I felt that – heck, maybe we both felt that – it was safer for me to hold onto the gun instead of Brett. Not because I knew guns any better. In fact, that was the first gun I ever held in my life. But it seemed safer because, well: I wasn't the sort of kid who called all of his buddies on a school night and threatened to kill himself with what – according to his sister, Meadow – turned out to be an air-powered BB pistol. In other words I was if not smarter then at least a bit slower to take desperate action.

You guys hungry yet? Pat asked, sleeveing some sweat from his brow and smudging the paint so it exposed a red patch of flesh.

Starving.

Yeah, I could eat, I admitted, curious as to what there was for food.

That is, Pat didn't seem to have brought anything. I guess I'd just assumed we would eat at some point. But now I realized there was no obvious hint as to how or, more importantly, what.

Come on. I think that little fort we made last time is up near here. I want to see if anyone tore it down yet or if it's still there.

Following after Pat we trekked up a brown slope dusted with pine needles.

Seated around a bowl of charred black earth where once a small fire had warmed them during an unexpected hale storm, Pat, Brett, and I rested our elbows on our knees and chewed at the tiny candy bars that Pat had brought with him in the pocket of his army jacket.

Left over from last Halloween, he said, biting into a Three Musketeers bar.

My lunch was small but it helped to have something in my guts. A half-frozen Baby Ruth, a Butterfinger and a Milky Way, and all of it tasted like last Halloween, too. But I was happy all the same. I did however begin to wonder if we would ever see a deer. The way things were then, cold and mellow, the prospect of killing something, cutting it open to pull out of the hot bloody innards and things and then having to lug it back to the truck...it just didn't sound like it would be much fun. Truth was, it sounded like hell.

In a patch of gloom, the shotgun and compound bow leaned up against a tree.

Overhead a camouflage tarp billowed now and then, stirred by a draft, its four corners strung up to tree limbs and the base of trunks. The wind smelled of sap and moisture from some far off showering of rain.

Every few minutes a pack of birds would squawk in warning over our presence.

A gray light pervaded the forest and all around the gentle swaying of branches.

Pat sat holding the tin canister over his knees, his fingers reapplying gobs of oily green paint to the place on his forehead where he'd smudged it earlier:

Man, I thought for sure someone would've come around and tore everything apart. Or rip the goddamn tarp down, at least. His face paint restored, Pat sighed, glancing up and shaking his head. Looking back: You guys about ready to move out?

Yeah.

Okay.

Stuffing the empty candy wrappers into our pants pockets, we all got up to our feet again. I let Brett take the shotgun this time and the two of us started down out of the camp. Meanwhile Pat lingered a moment stuffing the paint tin away and looking around, proud that his impromptu hideaway had remained a secret so long. A second later with the bow in his hand Pat rejoined us down below. Then we struck out in search of game.

With only two hours of daylight left, we kept on searching. I began to accept the possibility that we would never see a deer that day. Even if we didn't I was beginning to think it would be fine. Maybe it would be for the best. I found the experience worthwhile. Gearing up in soldier fatigues and stalking through the woods as if some dwindled, misbegotten platoon in search of the enemy? That alone was fun. And then it happened.

Pat's arm slid out to the side like the gate of a railroad crossing.

We all stopped. He craned his neck back at us, pointed two fingers to his bulging eyeballs then turned and pointed to his left toward somewhere deep in the brambles off of the path. We both stared off to where he had pointed, looking for it. I realized I'd stopped breathing for a minute. My eyes scanned to make out the vague distinction of a deer in the wild backdrop of the forest.

Then I saw it.

Clear as day. A crown of white antlers on its head, black eyes darting left and right as he tore leaves off of a low hanging branch and chewed them in his cheek. As far as that big horned buck was concerned the three of us did not even exist. In its ruminant eyes we were the forest, no more and no less.

Gathering us near, Pat spoke in a tense whisper:

Do you see him?

We nodded.

Good. I'll stay here and sight him. You two head down thataway. Get on his right flankside, okay? Then make some noise. Not too much, but just enough so that he'll come on out of that thick bramble he's in and give me a clean shot... You got it? You understand what you're doing?

Again we nodded. Then we started quietly away.

Further down the path Brett stopped and gestured toward the bushes:

Here. Let's go in here, he said, the shotgun resting in the crook of his arm.

You sure? I asked. I mean, I think he wanted us to get on the other side of the deer. Don't you think we need to go a little farther maybe?

No, this is the place, said Brett, beginning to sound stubborn.

I don't know...

What? Do you think I don't know what I'm doing? I've done this before. I've done this lots of times. Have you?

I didn't say that. It's just that, I don't think we've gone far enough yet to –

This is the place, Brett said, and by his tone I knew there was no use in arguing my point. He was going in there and nowhere else.

I shrugged:

Okay, sure. Let's go.

Treading our way in through the sticker bushes and swiping away the low branches, Brett turned back to look at me, a furtive grin on his face like he was holding a lit M80 over a toilet bowl:

Time to make some noise, he said, and stomped down on a dry stick to break and snap in the silence.

He kicked at ferns and violently shook treelimbs, jumping around on twigs and making as much ruckus as he could.

Taking my cue from Brett I began to rustle the branches around me.

This dance of noise lasted maybe only five minutes. And yet to me it felt five minutes too long. To me it felt like a dumb thing to have done. And I was embarrassed about it. But then, as Brett had pointed out, what did I know? In the aftermath of destruction, Brett signaled me and we turned around and started back for the path, neither one of us speaking as we both were too busy kindling the private flame of dead deer visions...

Not finding Pat in the spot where he'd dispatched us, Brett and I doubled back the way we had gone to spook the buck and then kept right on along the path, hoping to meet up with his old man somewhere ahead.

As we walked it was starting to get dark. And although beginning to feel tired and hungry for real food, the question kept flickering in my brain, gnawing at me: Had he got it? Had Pat downed the grazing buck with an arrow? Then I began to go through the post-kill stages of gutting and draining and transporting the remains, the steaming entrails and damp fur so vivid in my mind's eye that I could even smell it, the salt-briny taste of warm blood on my tongue, rushing down my throat to the point I felt disgusted.

All of a sudden my eyes shot upwards, alarmed by a wild presence storming towards us like a dark green piece of the trees cut loose and embodied, the whites of the eyes burning with fury as they rose over our heads to loom down in threat. Then we shook under a roar of flying spit:

Brett, you fucking idiot! What the hell were you doing back there?

In a second, the shotgun was ripped from Brett's hand and his hat was slapped to the ground, leaving him to look frail and displaced in the darkening woods, hot tears and stifled sobs already beginning to choke him up.

Seriously, what in the fuck were you thinking?

Stuttering in fear, Brett gave the only answer he knew how:

We were only trying to scare the deer, Dad, just like you told us to...

Pat scoffed and lowered his face:

And where did I say to come out at, huh?

And although the last thing Pat wanted now was an answer, he allowed a moment for reply:

I said the right flankside. The. *Right*. Flankside! And you think to come stepping out on the left? I saw you both and I almost put an arrow in your asses on sight, I swear to God! Kicking and breaking shit left and right, what the fuck was that all about? No use in tracking the deer now. Right when you stepped out, that thing took off like screaming Jesus the whole other way... And I don't blame it none either. The way I saw you idiots

dancing around like that I almost took off and left you my own damn self. Hell, I still might. I don't know yet.

Shaking his head in the outrage and disbelief that his son inspired, Pat finally stepped back and sighed at Brett's weeping:

Ah shit, don't start that. Get your hat up off the ground and let's get out of here before it gets too dark to see our way back to the truck.

Once Brett had pulled the dusty hat down on his head Pat apologized by way of handing him back the shotgun, a white glimpse of teeth shone from the painted face as he chuckled:

Come on, he said. It was only a two-pointer anyways. There'll be plenty better...

Sniffing, Brett cheered some at this prospect and then sleeved the tears out of his eyes until he resembled a sad, smudged clown with the shotgun cradled in his arms.

Pat spat in the dust by his feet and then pointed:

I think the truck is back this way somewhere, he said, and then set off with his arrows clinking and the two of us following behind him at a short distance, watching the shape of things blur as the trees grew darker and darker all around us.

At the edge of the woods we came to a sudden stop. My heart jumped when Pat spun around and ushered us quickly off the path:

Stay down and don't move till I tell you, he hissed, squatting down beside us under the sweep of a fir tree. Between his tone and the way his eyes bulged from his mask of paint both Brett and I knew whatever thing scared him was a thing we too should fear. We sat down in the dead leaves under the fir tree. Pat meanwhile unslung his quiver of arrows and foisted them over to me along with the bow. The new responsibility given me was staggering and only served to bring home the weight of whatever threat lurked beyond the trees where we took cover. Stay put till I come back for you, Pat repeated. Then he lifted up and walked away towards the hillside at our backs. Brett clutched the shotgun tightly, his eyes moving about shifty with fright. In a fading bellow we heard Pat call out to someone, Hellooo there...



Who was he talking to? I wondered, and craned my neck to see. But I couldn't see through the skirts of pine needles anything but cracks of dirt and gray sky.

By this point Brett's fear was escalating beyond reason:

Shit, shit, we're fucked, he muttered, shaking his head with apocalyptic-type conviction.

I wasn't sure that things, whatever they were, had gotten that far just yet. Still the mystery of all this mousing around under trees and the way the Peacegroves were speaking with such paranoia, it got me so that I had to know:

Here, I said. Hold this. I'm going to steal a peek. And I laid Pat's bow and the quiver of arrows down on Brett's legs. Then I lowered myself onto my chest and carefully snaked my way through the wet leaves in order to stare up the side of the hill towards the truck. All the while I did this poor Brett was suffering spasms of truefelt panic in his spot below the tree, the whole arsenal heaped upon his lap.

In the very last light of day in the unpaved lot above, I saw Pat speaking with a man whom I could barely make out in the failing light. Pat was nodding his head and gesturing broadly toward the forest then crossing his arms and nodding some more as the other man explained something or another. The two of them stood for nearly ten minutes together, rapt in some secret exchange by the truck. After two minutes of watching though I wound my way backwards and knelt again with Brett under the fir tree, waiting for Pat to come fetch us and explaining what I'd seen to Brett.

Was it a cop? Brett asked.

I don't know. No, I don't think he was a cop. He didn't have a cop uniform on, anyway.

That don't matter, Brett said. Maybe he's undercover or something.

Yeah, I said. May be...

Just then Pat shuffled down into the leaves and knelt, chuckling with a big prankster's grin on his face:

Come on boys. Time to book it on out of here. Hurry up. Get the stuff and let's go. Just in case that yuppie dickhead comes snooping back around for some reason.

Getting up, Brett hurried with the shotgun for the truck, Pat running alongside him. I slung the arrows over my shoulder, took up the bow, and jogged up the hill behind

them to the truck. We threw the weapons into the bed of the truck and Pat rolled them up in a wool blanket and rolled the blanket and weapons up then inside of a tarp and stashed the whole bundle down into the metal lockbox behind the cab and locked it up. Brett and I climbed up into the truck and took our hats off, bouncing a second in the seat to get comfortable and blowing hot breath onto our hands to warm them, after having sat still so long in the damp leaves beneath the tree.

Pat jumped in and started the engine. Then we peeled out of the lot and sputtered around all the turns in the windy gravel-dirt roads. By the time we reached the main road night had fallen complete in the windows of the truck. All black and cold with stars...

As we drove home we ate more of the stale candy bars Pat kept stored in the truck. I asked Pat who the man was he'd talked with back there. Staring ahead at the road he shook his head and scoffed as if remembering something so pathetic it begged a decision whether to laugh or to cry:

Just some yuppie asshole who's building all those big old houses we seen back there so that he can sell em to other yuppie assholes for millions of bucks. Told him I was out paintballing with my kids. He said that sometimes he's seen hunters out there and that he's called the cops before. I told him I didn't know nothing about any hunting, but that we were just coming back from some paintballing and that's all. Then he took off, the skinny mutant chickenfucker...

Brett and I laughed at this. We didn't like the mutant chickenfucker any better than Pat did. Nor did we like that he was going to make millions of bucks from selling those big houses.

Pat grew somewhat serious then:

Yeah, it's not looking too good, boys, I tell you what. Pretty soon they'll build up all those houses and then when those are built they'll have to build some more and pretty soon there'll be no wild nature left, just a bunch of mansions that all look the same and have big metal gates around them so that all the yuppies can sit inside and count their money in peace.

It sounded bleak, all right. Real bleak. And the rest of the ride home no one said much about anything. Probably we were all haunted thinking about big mansions with tall iron gates around them. Then again, maybe we were also thinking about that two-point

buck that got away and about the way that he chewed those green leaves off of the trees like we weren't even there.