

## LAST SHOT

My Uncle Jack lives by two rules: If it's no longer of use to you – shoot it. If it *can* be of use to you – shoot it.

That's how I came to be strangled by my ancestral roots and on my way to the town of Sommers End: I was no longer any use to my mother who walked out leaving me with my dad two years ago. And it became patently obvious that I was of no use to my father and he was ready to shoot me.

At seventeen, thanks or no thanks to summer school, I still wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed – as my father would often remind me. I really had no idea how the length of a hypotenuse or knowing the internal anatomy of a frog was going to allow me to make a dent in the universe. Add to this my shortcomings of taking after my mother with her slight build and, in my opinion, witty sarcasm, as well her aversion to anything more aggressive than swatting a fly, left my father wanting – wanting a different son. I am my father's son in name only – Daniel James Sommers Jr.

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School had broken up for the Christmas holidays and Daniel James Sommers Sr. had better things to do than spend time with his genetically screwed up son. Hence, an all expenses paid vacation to the ass-end of the world hosted by my Uncle Jack.

During my three hour layover in New York City there is a temptation to abandon my Lewis and Clark expedition to Minnesota and remain in the Big Apple. I touch the wallet in my back pocket and I'm assured that my ATM card is at the ready. I could escape and take in a rock concert and use my fake ID to hit a bar. Then I could find a studio apartment and

jam with Sonic Youth. I turned up my iPod *I ripped your heart out from your chest. Replaced it with a grenade blast...*

My fantasy is soon blown to smithereens by a fat dick-wit, his Mets' cap sitting backward on what looks like a shaved head. His skin is dark, not Negro dark, more Hispanic. His pants hang low on his hips with his boxer shorts riding high and the crotch of his jeans wavering near his knees. He asks me for a cigarette. When I tell him I don't smoke, he laughs. Then he asks for some money so he can buy some. I can see from the corner of my eye three of his goons, dressed in similar "keep-out-of-my-face" gear standing sentry at the exit.

My motto: "escape is safer than valor". The screeching sound of my Vans on the tiles signals my intention to get the fuck out of there. My iPod and Sonic Youth crash to the ground and slide out of reach. I don't look back. I head toward the terminal gate and on to the next leg of my odyssey to Cleveland, then to my Uncle Jack's in the "Land of 10,000 Lakes".

When the Greyhound rolls to a stop at the station in Sommers End it has taken one day, fourteen hours and thirty-five minutes, seven states and twenty-five cities. Compare that with a flight that would have taken me less than six hours – my dad's way of teaching me the "back to basics" lesson: *Goddamn it, when I was a kid we had to walk ten miles in the snow – with no shoes... sort of shit.*

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An old black woolen beanie sits on the shock of graying red hair, his weatherworn face fringed with the surplus. A matching beard makes Uncle Jack look as though he is peering out of a lion's mane. His skin is tan, wrinkled, and he smells of pipe tobacco and bourbon.

He has the same scalding blue-eyed gaze and tight fixed smile of his brother and walks with a limp he claims came with the war. But from what my mother had said about him, he got it tripping over his own ego. He never married.

His hand shoots out as if in unfamiliar territory and grasps mine. 'Welcome to Sommers End, boy.'

It becomes clear the greeting is a cover for my Uncle Jack's true feelings. Except for the occasional grunt from him and the scratch of the windscreen wipers, silence rides along with us like a third party.

The ancient red pick-up crunches over the cindered road then, after about forty-five minutes, swerves left down a muddy track.

A far cry from the apartment I live in overlooking Boston's Charles River, the ass-end of the world comes in the form of a cabin at the end of a road in a town called Sommers End. "End" – real *Nightmare on Elm Street* stuff.

Gray smoke pours out of the stone chimney. The wide snow covered patch of ground sweeps away from either side of the narrow path that leads to the bare door. No Christmas wreath, no welcoming holly decorating the windows, no holiday cheer. The only thing remotely Christmassy on the naked white canvas are two racks of deer antlers, broad in span as a man's outstretched arms, locked in a death embrace.

'Found them,' Jack says, his voice tinged with malicious pride. 'Had a hell of a time getting them back here in one piece.'

I picture the two great beasts, their tines breaking as they wrench and strain against one another's mountainous strength in their fruitless struggle to pull apart as death comes closer and they die from hunger or exhaustion or both.

Jack kills the engine, takes a pouch of tobacco from his pocket and rolls a cigarette. 'But we're goin' after something even bigger. We're goin' after Big Ben.'

I roll down my window to let some of the smoke escape. 'So we're killin' time?' This is met with a blank look. 'Big Ben? London? Or how about Ben, the telepathic rat from the Michael Jackson song before he was into chimpanzees and little boys? Never mind.'

'Your dad told me you were a smart ass.'

'Wit, Uncle Jack. Wit.'

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Inside the cabin is sparse with the feeling of just someplace to get away to for a weekend or at most a couple of weeks, though Jack lives here year round. It lacks the soft edges of a woman's touch, something I had watched diminish in my own home and perish when my dad and I moved to the apartment after the split.

On a threadbare mat, stretched out in front of a dying fire is a black dog. A breed of unknown origins, his graying muzzle twitches as though bothered by a fly. His ribs rise and fall as he lets out soft puffs of wheezy tones, blind to the intrusion.

'That's Scratch. Deaf as a doorknob,' Uncle Jack says as he crosses the small room and nudges the dog.

Scratch rises stiffly and limps to the far corner where he circles and curls himself into a tight ball.

‘Must do something about him soon. Not much of a hunting dog anymore. Just eats and shits and smells. Farts worse than I do now. Ain’t that right, Scratch?’ The old dog lets out a long, low snuff. ‘Yep, must do something about him. In the spring, when the ground thaws.’

Jack moves across the mat that Scratch has been shifted from and grabs a rifle leaning in the corner next to the fireplace. ‘Well, smart ass, let’s see what you can do *wit* this.’

The gun stings as it hits my hands. ‘You’re joking, right?’ I say.

‘Killin’ ain’t no joke, son. Big Ben is a buck. Biggest damn buck in these woods, probably in the state,’ Jack grizzles. ‘The folks around these parts call him Ben after Ben Labarde. The bastard gored him two winters ago. Was frozen solid by the time we found him. By then we could only recognize him from his boots. His lucky boots he called them. Worn almost clean through. I guess his luck finally went the way of the soles. Wolves had claimed most of the rest of him.’

‘Sounds to me like a fair fight,’ I offer. ‘Labarde had a gun. Self-defense.’

Jack gives me that pissed-off look. ‘That’s not how it works out here, boy. Only thing they’re good for is eating. But you can bet Ben will be one tough son of a bitch. You know, the thing you outsiders don’t realize is that deer are pests, not your cute little Bambi fairytale shit. And the herds are growing out of all proportion. Soon there will be more of the bastards than people.’

Finally a comforting thought.

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Unless he’s talking deer, Jack surrounds himself with a withdrawn sullenness as though he has too many ghosts rattling around in his head.

I can't understand why my father would stick him with me. Dad, more than likely, is paying him to do it. It sure looks like he could do with the dollars.

After a feast of dry, charred venison and mushy vegetables I leave Uncle Jack dozing at the kitchen table, red-faced with drink, snoring through his potato-shaped nose thick with veins of intolerance.

Lying on the hard bed I can hear the night wind howling and feel the cold seeping through the cracks and sitting heavy on the blankets. I'm still in the clothes I've worn for nearly two days but to remove them, well I just can't.

The dirty glass of the window dilutes the glow of the moon giving it a weak greasy look. I try to read but my fingers stiffen and can't turn the pages. Even thoughts of undressing the larger-than-life Coca-Cola bikini-clad girl I had watched hurl by on the billboards along the interstate, slowly untying the thin straps of her bikini, can't mount a stir in my graying jocks and cause enough friction to heat the cold bed. 'Welcome to my nightmare,' I mutter as I slide further under the covers.

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I wake to the strong smell of coffee and the crackling noise of burning logs. Wrapping a blanket around me, the worn boards groaning under my feet, I head for the warmth of the fire. I feel myself slowly thawing as I watch sparks of radiant heat take leave and escape up the blackened void.

'Here get this into you.'

Uncle Jack thrusts a bowl into my hand. I lift the spoon and half the contents stick to it. It's the closest thing to glue I have ever come across.

'It'll stick to your bones,' he says.

I don't doubt him.

Jack shrugs into his red and black checkered coat and dons the worn beanie. 'When you're finished get dressed and meet me behind the shed.'

As Jack closes the door, Scratch moves in beside me to share the heat. Above the mantelpiece three deer heads, mounted on shiny wooden plaques, watch as I gulp down the last of the glug.

The weathered shed sits about fifty yards from the cabin. Logs are stacked along the far end of the building. A block and tackle sways above a concrete slab. Close by are large butchers' knives protruding from a timber tabletop. Obsolete car bodies lie scattered, blanketed in dirty snow where they may have stalled then collapsed, their remaining beating parts salvaged to resurrect the next old heap. Rusted traps hang from rusted nails, their sharp teeth gnashing in the icy wind, a reminder of the area's fur trading history.

Rifle practice brings with it even more groans from my uncle. I sight the target, pull the trigger. The rifle jumps, I lose my glasses and land flat on my ass. I hear a muffled 'dumber than dog shit' from Uncle Jack.

After a bruising thirty or so goes, my hands blistered and chafed from the cold, I wing the enemy – a newspaper with a photo of Ex-President George W. Bush. He is now not only missing his brain but also his left hand. I'm not sure whether Jack had been referring earlier to the ex-president or me – probably both.

For three days I practice until old George W. is just confetti.

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It's raining at dawn, a chilling drizzle just this side of snow, when we pull on bright orange plastic rain suits over our clothes (I can only assume deer are color-blind) and slog off into the woods.

We hear a few rifle shots as we move through the mountain laurel and we see scratches in the dirt where a buck has marked his territory.

Uncle Jack's raspy day-after voice is low, 'It's not Ben. Too close to the park boundary. He can smell a man's yesterday thoughts. He'll be a lot further in.'

'I thought that's why we had to wash in that stupid deer soap; so he couldn't smell us.'

The furrows in Jack's brow deepen as his lips form a thin angry line. 'Ben's smarter than that, he doesn't just smell danger, he senses it. We've got to be smarter than him.'

The only smart thing I can think of is sitting back in the cabin with a warm blanket and a hot drink.

The early drizzle turns to snow. High on the ridge the trees lean at odd angles, shaped by the wind. From far down in the valley comes a hollow scrape of antlers. We trudge toward the sound. We find where some deer have lain in the snow and some fresh-nipped branches. Shallow bowls, made by their hooves, run ahead and disappear into the paper birch and white spruce dominated forest. Intersecting them is a patter of wolf tracks.

Jack points to the left where three wolves sit watching from their knoll, silhouetted like round rocks with pointed ears. 'They want their steak. Out here it's living or dying, boy, and there's nothin' in-between.'

We plunge on cross-country our boots sinking into the two feet of crusted snow.

The strap of the .308 is digging into my shoulder through the heavy layers of clothing. Again, a cold wind is howling. Maybe this is the sound of Uncle Jack's ghosts.



I put my hands up to my face and touch my nose – it's numb. I can't think of anything that could make this easier, except not being here.

Even with Jack's limp, I'm struggling to keep up the pace. My short legs anchor in the deep drifts. Uncle Jack turns his head and spits on the ground in disgust. He goes ahead, leaving me to follow him as best I can.

There is a rustling noise behind me. I take in a deep breath and hold it. It stays in my lungs for a long time as I wait for the growls from the pack of wolves to begin. Jack's words loop relentlessly through my head, *Out here it's living or dying and there's nothin' in-between.*

The noise is getting nearer, coming slow and steady. I can feel the drumming of my pulse beating at my temples. My breath escapes in soft shudders of mist that fog up my patched glasses. I wipe them quickly with my gloves. Streaks of moisture turn the forest into waves of white, green and brown. I dig deep into my coat pulling at the tail of my flannel shirt and dry them. My feet are numb, rooted to the one spot. A sudden loud crack and I twist my body to uselessly ready myself for the attack. I want to close my eyes, a senseless way of hiding from what is coming. But fear has locked them open. In a clearing I see a large mass of brown – Ben. Raising his head with its massive crown of horns, he looks at me with a majestic gaze. He snorts softly in agitation, his ears tense, listening. He doesn't flee but continues chewing.

He begins moving toward an eastern facing slope then angles downhill along a spur covered with sphagnum moss and rhododendron. I start to move after him. He stops on a knoll next to a solitary fir.

I take the gun from its case and fumble with the safety. There is a soft click as it releases. The only other sound is the muted stillness of our breathing. I raise the .308 to my

shoulder and put the sight to my right eye scrunching the other one shut. Just one shot, I think, and all this will be over.

I take in Ben's stance. He is the master of his domain. His broad chest takes in the cold air and releases it in great puffs. His large brown eyes, lashes tipped with snow, scan the valley keeping a constant vigil, snatching at the slightest noise or shift of smell.

I find it hard to steady the gun. My arm is aching. I adjust my aim. Ben looks at me, studies me. He blinks. He doesn't run. I want him to run. I want him to run at me. Self-defense. I can accept self-defense. I take a long breath. There are three rounds in the Winchester. I can feel the cold steel of the trigger. I pull it slowly. The kick of the rifle hurls me back against a tree. The shot echoes through the forest. Birds scatter as the bullet rises to the clouds. I smile. 'Well Ben, from one pest to another, have a good life.'

The great beast leaps over a snow-covered ravine. I shoulder the rifle. I hear the rustling of branches and snapping of twigs. Up ahead, in the distance is Uncle Jack. A steely glare is frozen on his face as he raises his rifle. A shot rings out. There is an unearthly bellow as the buck collapses onto the ground, his front legs folding, the rest of his body being whipped against a stand of birch, thrashing as his last puff of air is exhaled.

I stand motionless. Hot tears sting my frozen cheeks. My gun falls, silent in the soft snow. My scream hits the air like a steel cable. My body begins to shake: first my shoulders then down to my knees. They can no longer hold me. I sink to the ground. A coil is wrapped tight around my chest and vomit mixes with the snow as I watch as the last pulse of life leaves the animal. His eyes stare at me, brilliant though lifeless. We both have had our last shot.