

## WAR GAMES

When I was 15, I killed a couple cows belonging to a neighbor. It was fall. I was a sophomore. I was coasting through school. I hardly even noticed it. Autumn was all pheromones. Bright orange leaves, woodsmoke, boners. I felt like I had a few too many gallons of blood in my veins.

No one knew I had the crossbow. Dad knew I had a rifle, he gave me it, but not the bow. It was a hunting bow with a nice polished wood stock and a 4x20 scope. Found it on craigslist for \$60 and met a freckled guy in the Walmart parking lot. Came with six aluminum arrows and a sling. He didn't look me in the eye once, looking down at his phone the whole time.

I kept it in the closet. Target practice on a straw bale out in the back of the backyard, in the shadow at the edge of the woods in the late afternoon, before dad got home from work.

Sometimes I'd be back there shooting and a deer would poke her head out from the edge of the woods and walk out, freeze, and side-eye me for a while. It'd take her a moment she'd determine I was all right — just another splotchy human kid standing in some weeds with bulgy jeans and a tool in his hand — and she'd wander out and nose her way into some wild mustard.

She'd be standing there, broadside, head down in her greens. Sort of a dream shot, but I didn't want to kill a deer at home. Not superstitious, I just liked them coming around. I could see them from my bedroom window.

I always overheated in my bedroom. Dad liked to keep the house hot. But there was too much blood in me. I'd open the window and lean half my body out. It felt like I was dunking into an ice bath. Sometimes it felt so good I'd crawl the rest of the way out and go for a wander. Midnight, 3am, didn't matter.

One night I went wandering out my window with my crossbow slung over my shoulder. The asphalt was slick, frozen dew. In the breeze, you could hear the frozen branches clicking against each other. My senses were turned all the way up like a cougar's. I thought I'd hunt something down in the dark.

Long story short, I ended up killing two of the Grondowskis' cows. It wasn't long after I'd left home. The Grondowskis were our neighbors up the road. I won't bore you with the details, but I got one in the vitals and one just below the anus, what they call the taint, while it ran away. That one ran a few more yards after it was shot, looked over its shoulder at me, rocked back and forth a bit, and then stumbled and rolled down the steep hill into the creek. It bled out down there. Not an honorable kill.

I pulled the arrow out of the first cow, then climbed down the hill after the other one. I hiked out along the creek instead of taking the road. I cut north into the woods that divided our properties. I had my hut back there.

I went there, jerked off, cleaned the arrows, zoned out, then went home.

My dad didn't give a shit about me. I mean, he liked me, I guess, but he didn't worry about me at all. I only ever saw him when I was scarfing cereal or whatever.

One morning I was at the counter eating a bowl of Cinnamon Toast Crunch, watching Dad assemble a drone on the coffee table. I'd been wanting a drone. Last year, Billy Desmond brought a combat drone to the talent show. It had a blowtorch on it. Billy was a chubby Native American kid who I'd never really paid attention to until then. Turned out he was talented. His talent was he stood to the side of the stage and flew the drone over a cake he'd placed on a table there and lit the candles with a blowtorch blast. It was awesome.

We lined up and ate the cake afterwards. My piece was a little waxy. I went up to Billy and asked if I could fly it. He said hell no. I respected that.

"Can I fly that thing when you get it built?" I asked Dad.

"Hell no you can't," he said. "This is so we can keep an eye on those protesters." He did air-quotes. The word "protesters" was pretty much interchangeable with "Indians" those days.

Dad was Sheriff and he had his hands full with the Indians all summer. They were protesting because fish were dying and they were saying it was because of the fracking.

They had the road blockaded for weeks. After weather and milk prices, small talk around town always turned to the protesters and their fuss.

This of course was well before the aquifer collapsed.

Distrust of the protesters grew all summer. The blockade on the highway passing the reservation meant a long detour for people driving that way. Resentment compounded distrust. Newscasters wouldn't shut up about the protest. Everyone on social media was bouncing links into the echo chamber and fighting in the comments. Fatigue compounded resentment.

When Jim Grondowski found the cows, he figured it was Indians that did it, clued not only by the arrow wounds but also because he'd just recently found himself at odds with the tribe.

What'd happened was a guy in a truck swerved toward an elder woman who was standing on the shoulder holding up a feather toward him. She had to dive into a ditch to avoid him. There was a video. It was sort of funny to watch, in an unfortunate blooper kinda way.

Turned out the driver, the swerver, was Mr Grondowski. So that's how he got himself on the Indians' most wanted list, along with the governor, the CEO of the fracking outfit, and my dad. They were all getting called out by strangers on Twitter. Mr Grondowski came over to tell my dad about the cows. My dad was heading to work. They stood there talking, both looking down at the driveway, shaking their heads.

Mr G figured some protesters had killed his cows to get even for the driving mishap. He muttered, "It's damn terrifying."

My dad said, “They’re basically like terrorists.”

Word went around about the cows, and floating along behind it was that word: *terrorist*.

It got some news coverage. “Cows discovered dead early Wednesday on a local farmer’s property were shot with arrows. The property is less than a mile from the Native American protest camp, where tensions with officials are ongoing.”

Everyone was dead sure it was some Indians who did it.

“Save the money on the judge, you know as well as I know who killed those cows.”

There was a sense of excitement about it. Deep down, everyone loves a game of Cowboys-and-Indians. I’d say even Indians do, deep down. It’s primal. We’re all of us weaned on those same frontier stories. My class read the same US History textbook as my dad’s did. We all know how it goes. The Indians play victim, us White guys play dumb. And now here an Indian destroyed a White guy’s property. It triggered something deep. People were seething.

I wasn’t worried about a thing, personally. I felt untraceable, with my craigslist crossbow. So I could just hang back and watch everything, like I had nothing to do with it at all, even though I was complicit to some degree, and now tensions were really starting to flare up.

Some churchy volunteers crowdsourced the price of replacement livestock for the Grondowskis. The cover photo on their facebook was a wonky painting of Jesus holding a glowing hand up to bless a calf. They raised the money in less than 48 hours.

The Grondowskis made a public statement thanking the community for the substitute cows. Mrs Grondowski did the talking, breathy and teary. Said the cows were more like family than livestock, said they felt blessed and humbled by the kindness, and said she sure hoped law enforcement to put an end to the recklessness and violence that was plaguing the community.

The town ate it up.

A few days later an old Indian fellow got run over in the Walmart parking lot. A security guard backed into him with his F-150. Old man ended up under the bumper with a broken rib, water bottles spilled out his toppled cart, rolling all over the parking lot. The driver said he'd accidentally bumped the gearshift when he dropped his burger. Showed his unfinished burger as if that was evidence. No charges against him, he didn't apologize.

My dad was cranky busy. He was always getting phone calls from numbers that would make him stare hard and sigh heavily before answering.

He was on the news a lot. It was national news by that point.

One day I saw Natalie Portman outside Subway, where I was a quote unquote Sandwich Artist. I watched her from inside the store. She was letting someone take a selfie with her. I recognized him from school. Declan was his name. He was guffawing. He was wearing his Roosevelt Warriors hoodie, that's the high school team. The mascot is a hook-nosed Indian riding a cartoon horse. The town was big into their Warriors. War cries at the basketball games. Everyone had their Warriors gear. Their fitted caps, their beer cozies, their keychains. At least a dreamcatcher hanging from the rearview. Indians

were a big part of the town's identity. I mean the old kind of Indians. Warriors.

When Grondowski came by that time to tell dad about the cows and chat about terrorism and such, I was lingering inside, watching them through the screen door. They shuffled around with their hands in their pockets, each nodding and frowning, muttering, "Yup," to everything the other said.

I heard Mr G mumble something about arrows and make a gesture, which I interpreted as representing a cow being shot in the taint. I blurted, "Billy Desmond has a crossbow!" They both looked at me.

I don't know why I said Billy Desmond's name. It just came to mind.

But, in terms of keeping the suspicion totally off of me, it turned out it was exactly the right thing to say. Billy Desmond. Geeky, pudgy Billy, with his killer robots. He slotted right into some notion everyone already had, a notion formed long ago, of the particular kind of person who might have killed those cows.

"Something off about that kid."

But they didn't press charges. Nothing to go on but a notion, I guess.

It was cold. Crunchy ground. I was spending a lot of time out at my shed. It was on BLM land. I was thinking of growing weed when the weather got better. Let freedom ring. I was feeling good. I was renovating the shed. Insulating it. I even found some scraps of carpet on someone's curb and put that in. I was gonna build a stove. I sat around in there a lot. Did my thinking. Whatever.

One night I went out to the shed and the door was open. When I walked in, I inadvertently cornered a fox that had found its way inside. It freaked, I freaked, it sprang past me. The shed was frosty and the frost was stamped with hundreds of dancing fox prints.

Taco Bell was open until midnight and had those Doritos tacos, which I was a fiend for those days. It was like a mile from the shed to Taco Bell. I cut out the woods to the street and took the shortcut to the back of the strip mall. I heard commotion as I came around to the front of the building.

Declan was there with some buddies and girlfriends. The girls were wearing Pocahontas costumes. I forgot it was Halloween. Declan had on a feathered headdress and some war paint. There was a Water is Life picket sign leaning against his knees. I'm pretty sure the Jack Daniels bottle he was swigging was part of his get-up too.

His buddies were chasing each other around the icy parking lot, giggling like 10 year olds, dousing each other with Super Soakers. They had the big strapped cannon ones that cost like \$80. The girls were taking turns rolling their eyes and screeching.

The front door of Taco Bell swung open and Billy Desmond came walking out, bag in hand.

Declan grabbed a Super Soaker from his buddy.

"Hey Billy," he said. "You thirsty, bro?"

He drenched him. Totally ruined his burritos. Declan and his friends were cracking up. Billy looked at them, looked at me, and got on his bike and rode off. It was real cold. I ate about six of those Doritos tacos, then went home.



Heard the next morning about that protester who lost her leg. She said she got shot with a flash grenade.

Dad was on a press conference, denying the department even used that particular kind of grenade. Said it must have been one of their own.

Law enforcement treaded lightly for a while after that, with folks online hollering brutality. But they stayed out there all winter, in their riot gear, looking through their plexiglass shields at the Indians praying in snow.