Bang! You're Dead

The son sits in the cab of the blue pickup truck trying not to listen to the father's incessant talking: last week's hunting party, the migration of elk up Diamond Creek, the health of his various horses. The asphalt lies out in front of them in a straight line 40 miles long. The Madison Range, its peaks capped in snow, looms high to the east; the humble Gravelly Range, dusted with its own layer of snow, frames the valley to the west. The Madison river cuts down the middle of the valley floor—a tear in the carpet of winter's dead-grass yellow.

The son picks at his sandwich.

What's he even talking about? Is this a pickle? I hate pickles. Thank God It's so beautiful here, otherwise I'd open the door and drop my head under the tire… still might.

The flatbed Ford swerves off the road, dragging the rattling horse trailer to a stop in a wide area next to the fence. The barbed wire fence runs along the dirt road, up to a green, metal ranch gate in the wide area. The fence continues across the grass range on the other side of the gate, disappearing over the yellow horizon. Bits of snow cower on the lee of scattered sage brush. A brown United States Forest Service sign instructs the use of bear-safe camping techniques and displays a map of the Diamond Creek drainage.

The son checks his watch.

Noon? Seriously? Nothing changes with this guy. I was up at freakin' day break. Dressed, fed and coffee poured. 'We'll hunt our way in, and hunt our way out,' he said. A night in

hunting camp, hunting the whole time, except when we're breaking camp. 'Not much to pull out. Just the tents and stoves.' He better be right. Everything takes so long with him. Now half the day is gone. Still… riding horses in the winter. That's dope. I hope I'm not cold sitting in the saddle for an hour. I wonder how many elk we'll see. Can I shoot from the horse?

"Sorry we're so late, Son. I meant to fill up the truck yesterday." The father looks out the windshield at the sky. "A perfect day for a ride." The father backs the horses out of the trailer, their hooves banging and echoing on the metal. He ties their lead ropes to the trailer's side and unloads the saddles and rifles next to each horse. The the son stands and watches.

I can help, Old Man. He knows I'm here. If he would've set the tack out on the ground by the shed this morning I could've loaded it. Save time. But no, he had to pick and choose each saddle and bridle and blanket and load it one at a time, just so, in the bed of the truck. Why wasn't that done before I arrived? I could've been feeding the horses, or loading them, in the time it took this man to get his head screwed on straight.

The father saddles the four animals, and attaches the rifle scabbards to the two saddle horses. He loads the empty panniers on the pack saddles.

I'm half way through high school and I'm still standing around waiting. Why did I think anything would be different? 'Sure, come hunting with me son, I've got a camp to pull the last week of the season. I can finally take you hunting and we can do Thanksgiving together.' Great Dad. See you then. Thanks for squeezing me in. Come to Chicago sometime and we'll go to a concert, to a ball game. My ball game.

The father drops two ropes in the empty canvas panniers. He tests, then tightens, the cinch on the son's saddle.

"I think the stirrups will be long enough. The hunter who used it last week was about your height." He pats the son on the shoulder. "This is great. Thanks for coming out."

The son smiles. Nods. "Yeah. No Problem."

Wow. That leather's cold in the winter. Smell that crisp air. Love this horse. That's my boy. You like a scratch between the ears? OK, fine. I won't. Just a pat on the neck. Look at that dust. OK, boy, let's go. The old man's waiting. How does he do that? Riding, holding lead ropes, opening gates. Like it's a dance.

The father leads the pack train along a weak trail through the sagebrush and dead grass. They drop down a short bank and land on a little used logging road. It was graded once, a generation ago, but the grasses have grown in along the shoulders and down the middle, leaving the tire tracks as parallel trails. The road is completely exposed and the snow has been fully blown away. They round a hill and march down into a forested valley. The son shifts his weight frequently, searching for a comfortable seat.

This is why I hate riding. Maybe if I did it more. Look at him. It's as easy as sitting on a couch. God, I wish I was back at home on the couch. I wonder what John's Ultimate War score is today. I'll have some catching up to do. Unless I kill something today. Then John will be the one catching up. Which will never happen. He's never even left the state of Illinois.

The road leads the party over a barren ridge to the edge of the forested Diamond Creek drainage. At the edge of the trees, a brown sign on a brown post points with yellow letters to a trail leading off the road, "Diamond Creek - TR234." The son straightens up.

Finally. A real trail. Real riding. This is funny. Usually he's talking the whole time. Now I can just be. Look at that sky. So blue. Chicago's more of a powder blue. Dusty. Hazy. When it's not gray. Ow! What the fuck? Branch! Damn horse!

"Watch where you're going you fucker!" The son slaps the horse on the neck—the same spot he patted the animal earlier. The horse jolts in surprise, bolts sideways off the trail into another branch of another tree. The son curses again. He pulls the reins up to his chin, forcing the horse to stagger backward. He scolds the animal through the grimace of clenched teeth. The father stops and turns in his saddle. His horse and pack string stand in line, their ears flicking sideways and backwards, monitoring the ruckus behind them. A pack horse reaches for a tuft of yellow grass.

"Gently. Calm down. What happened?"

"He ran me into a tree branch. Scratched my eye." He holds his hand to his eye.

" Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." The son checks his hand for blood. "Not really my eye. Next to it. Just a scratch. Could've poked it out, though."

"Alright. Keep it down. We don't want to scare off the game." The father turns forward, and without any visible sign, his horses continue down the trail.

Fucking asshole. Of course we don't want to scare off the game. That's why we're here. To shoot them. Can't shoot them if they've run off. Duh! Stupid horse. Bang! Bang! Bang! That's what I'd do if you were in Ultimate War. I'd cap your ass!

The pack string walks into the Diamond Creek hunting camp two hours before sundown. The camp site is placed on a level patch of ground 50 yards up an unnamed

spring creek tributary to Diamond Creek. Two wall tents, one larger than the other, made of heavy white canvas and shaped like a child's drawing of a house, stand among the tall evergreen trees. The roofs, covered by blue plastic flies—the only spots of color in the scene—are layered with patches of sloughed snow. A black stove pipe protrudes from each. Bits of snow cling to the branches overhead. The sky peeks through the canopy as a scattering of blue shards. A thin layer of old snow blankets the ground. The horses' breath lingers in the air.

The father likes this spot for its level ground and ready supply of water. He explains to the son, as they unsaddle the horses, how he guides his hunters to hike a quarter mile to the end of the draw behind them, then cross over the ridge into the larger Diamond Creek drainage to hunt the elk from above.

"Elevation is a tactical advantage," he grunts as he hauls the panniers and pack saddle onto a felled Douglas fir. He slings all the tack over the trunk and covers it with a large blue tarp, which he wraps with one of the 50 foot manila lash ropes he stowed in the panniers.

The son listens to the explanation as he works to tie the lead rope of his horse to a skinny tree.

Tactical advantage. Got it. Hunt from above. Be quiet. Tip toe through the forest. What's up with the snow? No tracks. What the hell? Do I twist the rope this way… or that way? How do I get it to be a slip knot? God it's cold. Stand still, you dumb horse. My nose is frozen. Fingers numb. No! Don't come over. I've got it. No. No.

"Here," says the father as he takes off his gloves and reaches in between the son's arms. " You twist the loop toward you. Then stuff this part through. See?"

"Got it. Thanks"

The father pulls firewood from a tidy stack next to the large tent and starts a fire in the stove. This is the cook tent. At 10 feet by 12 feet it acts as the main lodge during hunting season. In the middle stands a collapsible table with aluminum legs. A collection of aluminum legged stools surround it. Wooden panniers line the wall next to the stove; part cabinets, part counter. A cot runs along the back wall.

The son sits at the table. The father brings in a cot from the other tent and sets it up. He rolls out his air mattress and fluffs his sleeping bag.

"Now that's cozy!"

"Yeah," says the son.

"Let's break down the other tent while this one heats up. It gets chilly as the sun gets lower, doesn't it?"

"Yeah."

Oh God. Are we ever going to hunt? The elk must've heard us by now. We can't afford the time to take down this tent. We've got to go.

The father and the son dismantle the sleeping tent. They fold the canvas and blue tarp and tie them in a bundle with rope. They collapse the stove, the remaining cots, and a stool. They stack it all next to the saddles ready for loading on the horses the next day.

Smoke wafts out of the cook tent's stovepipe. The father stokes the fire with fresh wood.

"Alright, grab your rifle. Let's hit the trail."

Yes! Finally. Wow. This gun is cold. And heavy. Let's see, bullets: check. Safety: on. I've got

my gloves, my hat, my knife, a candy bar, small bottle of water, orange vest. Ready!

"I'm ready."

"Do you have your hunting license?"

The son pats his chest and pants pockets. His eyes widen with panic. Patting his pockets repeatedly, he heads toward the saddles to check his saddle bags. The father pulls a plastic envelope with the license from his jacket pocket. He holds it, pinched, dangling like a dead mouse.

"You left it on the kitchen counter," the father whispers.

You did that on purpose. Why didn't you tell me sooner? No wonder Mom left you.

The two men hike up the draw, away from Diamond Creek. They follow the spring creek until it disappears into an ice patch on the rocky ground. Their breath hangs in the air, hardly dissipating. They step carefully around the crusty patches of snow.

The father stops. He holds his hand out to stop the son behind him. He points at tiny black droppings on top of the snow. Little tracks lead up to, and away from the scat.

"Rabbit," the father whispers.

Wow. Neato. I didn't skip a week of school and travel all this way to look at rabbit poop. Where are the elk? Are they on vacation? I wonder if we'll get back to the ranch in time to see the Bears tomorrow night. Their record sucks, but at least I'd be warm. Better yet, Bang! Bang! Bang! I'm taking you down when I get home, John.

A knocking sound pops through the trees. The father stops. Holds his hand out again.

Ratatatat!

"There," whispers the father. He points at a bird perched on the trunk of a Douglas fir.

It's red head twitches, picks at the bark, then: Ratatatat!

The father raises his rifle at the bird and watches it through the scope. The son does the same.

Look at that. Better than binoculars. It's so clear. Real cross-hairs. Line them up. Bang! You're dead, Bird.

The father leans over to the son's ear, "Let's go back. There's nothing here right now. We'll try again in the morning."

The son sits on the edge of his cot watching the father prepare dinner. Water boils for the mac and cheese and the hot chocolate. The father pours off water for the hot chocolate, then dumps in the boxed macaroni and sliced kielbasa. Before pouring off the hot water outside the tent he adds a bag of frozen peas to the mix.

"Do you remember your mother and me taking you camping in the Jeep? It was the summer you turned four. It rained so hard we had to camp next to the Jeep, next to the puddle where we got stuck? I think that was the first time you ate Glop. You were the one who named it Glop. We were laughing about the sound it made when you dropped some in the mud. Glop! You laughed and laughed. She and I always got a kick out of that story." The father laughs and shakes his head.

What I remember is you telling that story a thousand times. It's cute, but what about something new? This'll be a long night if I don't redirect.

"Where'd you learn to hunt? I mean, you grew up in Albany."

"Ontario." says the father. His eyes light up. He spends the next hour talking about traveling to Canada with his best friend's family to camp and hunt in the Canadian wilderness. Every summer the father was mentored by old trappers turned guides. Men with names like Jacques and Pierre. They were the kind of men who stopped in the middle of the day—when the deer were harder to find—to build a tiny fire on a rock and boil water for tea. They peeled strips of bark off birch trees to make their cups. They dipped their tea bags in the cups and whispered stories of the old days, when they hunted and trapped with the Indians.

The glop pot is empty, the fire has died down, the son yawns. The father gathers the dirty dishes and steps outside to wash them. When he returns the son has fallen asleep on top of his sleeping bag.

He smiles.

The noise of the father stuffing wood into the sheet metal stove wakes the son from a shallow sleep. He wears a head lamp for his task, which the son can see through his squinting, blurry eyes.

The father rubs the sons shoulder, "Hey. It's time to get up. The elk won't wait."

He speaks in a whisper as he works. He lights a gas lantern. He talks about the movement of the elk before daybreak. How they migrate through the Diamond Creek drainage downstream to the ranch land bellow. Unless there's too much hunting pressure, in which case they travel upstream and pass over the ridge to the high elevation meadows

of the Gravelly Range. He never pauses for the son to interject, or respond.

The tent warms up enough and the son concedes it's time to get going. After an oatmeal breakfast, and the making of sandwiches for lunch, they step out of the tent. The son looks up and sees the faint light of early morning in the sky.

They turn on their head lamps, shoulder their rifles, and head up the draw.

They follow the same path as the previous night, a light game trail emerging from the thin snow cover. The father stops and whispers to the son, "Remember, if you get lost stay still. I'll find you."

I'm not a kid anymore! Wait, you also said once, to get out of the woods head downhill and follow the water—you'll cross a road eventually. What if we get separated? What if I end up at the highway and you don't know where to look? I bet there's no cell reception out here. God, who gets up at this hour? Shit, this is cold. Hurry up, sun.

They pass the head of the spring creek, and hike until the ground steepens and the son's breathing is too loud. They stop to rest, but do not speak, then continue. A half hour later the ground rounds off to a resemblance of level, and the sky can be seen through the trees ahead, not just above. They turn off their head lamps.

Still in a whisper, the father leans close to the son's ear, "We're on the ridge behind camp. Down to our left is Diamond Creek. Let's drop down toward the creek. Keep an eye out for tracks, fresh poop. Anything that moves."

This is it. I can do this. We're going to see something. I'm going to shoot something. Bang!Bang!Bang! Come here, elk.

The hunters descend into the thick forest slope, step by step, avoiding crunchy snow

and dry twigs. The sun hasn't reached the depth of the valley and the air is dark and frigid. Higher up, on the mountains and the ridges, the morning glow warms the air and initiates the morning wind. The trees hiss as it passes.

A woodpecker knocks a distant tree.

They bushwhack their way toward the sound of water. Diamond Creek gurgles out of the snow, beginning it's trek to the river miles away. The father pulls out a water bottle and they rest against a fallen log.

"Did you see any sign?" asks the father.

"Nothing," says the son.

I bet they're not even here, old man. They haven't been here in days. How'd your hunters do? My legs hurt. How long do we have to do this?

As they stand and snack out of a bag of nuts and drink water from the stream, a woodpecker, complete with gray stripes and a red head, lands on the trunk of a dead spruce tree nearby.

Ratatatat!

It pecks in bursts. Twitches its head around. Pecks again.

The father raises his rifle, aims it at the bird and watches it through the scope.

The son does the same.

That's so cool. Better than binoculars. So clear. All I have to do is line up the cross-hairs... and, Bang! You're dead, Woodpecker.

"Did I ever tell you about the best shot I ever made? Don't tell any one, but I shot two woodpeckers on one tree. This was years ago, before I got my outfitting license. I used this

rifle to shoot two birds. Now, I'm not proud of killing woodpeckers. Don't you ever do it."

"I won't."

I'm not an asshole, Old Man. Duh.

"Hundred yards. Bang! I shot the bottom one first so it wouldn't scare off the top one as it fell. The top one never flinched. Bang! Got them both. It's a pretty big caliber, but I found both of them. I still have a couple of their feathers on my work bench."

He looked through the rifle's scope again.

"Nope. Too beautiful. Never again."

"You never got caught?" asked the son. "Aren't they endangered?"

"I was alone in the middle of the woods. Out here is the ultimate freedom—no one can hear you if you don't want to be heard." He pops a handful of nuts into his mouth. "I don't know if they're endangered. I do know I'll never do it again."

"Yeah. Of course not."

Nice shot. I bet I could do it.

The father packs up his water bottle and bag of nuts. "Let's do this differently. I'll climb up this slope and you follow the creek. It'll get bigger as you go, so stay on this side of it. We'll meet up at the trail crossing."

"How far is that?"

"Maybe a mile. Mile and half. Should take about an hour to get down there."

I bet I get there before you. I bet I sit around for hours waiting. Wait! What if you don't show? How do I get back to camp? Do I shoot if I see an elk? There better be an elk out there.

"Sound good?"

"Sure."

"Remember, keep the safety on and point the barrel at the sky or the ground."

"I know, I know."

"Don't put a bullet in the chamber unless you see an elk."

"I know!"

The father pats the son on the shoulder, starts uphill and disappears into the trees. The son watches him go. He listens to the fading sound of the father's footsteps. He pulls the bolt back on the rifle and slides a cartridge in the chamber. He sets the safety and chuckles.

What you don't know can't hurt you, old man.

Diamond starts as a trickle, growing from spring to stream to creek. The water bounces over and between rocks, unable to stop itself, not seeming to care. The son, tired and breathing heavily from picking his way over the forest's detritus, stops to rest on a log. He listens to the profound silence.

Ratatatat!

Startled, the son jumps. He raises his gun to his shoulder and scopes the forest. The ratatatat comes closer. He aims in its direction.

Aha! I see you. Bang! You twitchy little bitch. Old Man did it. Why can't I?

Orange flashes behind the bird.

What's that? Woah… Old man. Look at you, tip-toeing through the forest. Big hunter. Ha! Now I've got you.

He scopes the father walking through the trees, the cross-hairs on the old man's

temple.

Ratatatat! Back to the woodpecker. Back to the old man. Cross-hairs.

No one's around, Old Man. No people. Not Mom! God, she hated this life. Too cold. Too risky. Not even elk. No siblings. Whatever. Your guides, your hunters: gone 'till next year. Just you and me. Just a squeeze of this trigger. Feels good. Grooves so my finger doesn't slip. Way better than the button on my controller. Flick the safety. Whoa! That's loud. Hey… we're live, baby. Shall I squeeze?

The father stops to listen. He looks around. Switches the gun to the other shoulder. Continues.

I'm gonna follow you. Haha! Now I have something to hunt.

The son follows the father at a distance. He dodges from tree to tree, stopping occasionally to scope the father, rubbing the trigger with his index finger, measuring his breath.

When the father reaches the main trail he refills his bottle at the creek and sits on a log to wait. The son takes off his orange hunting vest and kneels 50 yards away. Leaning against a tree he scopes the father, centering the crosshairs on the old man's face.

There you are, alone. What are you thinking about? Your horses? All the elk your hunters shot last week? What about your ex-wife? If you hadn't driven her off I could be living this life. Chicago sucks. Why did you leave me there? Look at you. You think you have no cares in the world. But you do. Me! All I have to do is squeeze.

The son strokes the trigger.

The father stands up. He looks both ways, up and down the trail. He checks his watch.

"Son!" He shouts.

He whistles. He paces and hollers.

The son follows the father with the crosshairs. He steadies his breath. Inhales. Exhales, slowly. Applies pressure on the trigger.

Bang! You're dead, Old Man.

The father cries out his son's name, his tears visible through the scope.

Ratatatat! The woodpecker fires off his machine gun rattle in the tree overhead.

The son flinches. His heart skips. The scope jerks about. He loses sight of the father. He lowers the rifle, resets the safety. Closes his eyes.

The father checks his watch. He looks at the sky, checking the daylight. He takes his orange knit hat off and hangs it on a broken branch over the trail—a beacon. One last holler. He listens. He can't hear the son's racing heart, or his panting breath. He can't see his son's tears, or his shaking hands.

The father steps off the trail to follow Diamond Creek upstream—to look for his lost son.