

When I learned we could go hunting, I imagined Dad and me huddled over the hiss of fire, warming water in tin cups for bitter cowboy coffees, trudging mountain paths with sacks of elk meat and a prodigious rack of antlers slung over our shoulders triumphantly, and the look on Mom's face when we return home with the grit of the hunt unwashed from our smiling countenances.

We left early enough in the morning that icy stars hung in the wintry sky, still stained with the inky black of night. The cold wouldn't surrender much to the coy November sun as night gave way to day. I envisioned the relief I would feel at once from sticking nearly frostbitten fingers into the steaming chest cavity of a dead elk still warm with life. Then I flinched at such a disturbing thought. *That is some badass hunter shit.* Mom requested that we bring home the liver to be fried with onions. It was her favorite growing up.

We drove out of the city limits and into the belly of the desert, and had arrived at Dave and Daniel's dusty little hunting cabin by sunset. Dave was a bald and unctuous New Mexican standing a dinky five feet in height. He had large, flat teeth with a wide gap in between. When he laughed, his long tongue slithered out of its toothy cage, yellowed with dip stains and whiskey, like a weary snake. He grabbed his pot belly, which shuddered as he heaved his smoky cackles. I heard an ocean of phlegm in his lungs that he couldn't entirely cough out, despite habitually hocking loogies at his feet with each hearty laugh, which was often.

His father Daniel oscillated rhythmically in his rocking chair wearing worn overalls and a grey straw mustache. His face bore the stillness of a man who'd spent much of his life sitting in blinds and tree stands. The two went hunting every year since Dave could hold a gun. *It's a sacred bonding experience to hunt as father and son,* he had told my dad over the phone.

The next morning, we started hiking. Following Dave's hunting expertise, we traced tracks caked in mud, spotted antler scratches in the bark of bleeding spruce trees, and pursued echoes of the creature's incessant ethereal yapping, to no avail. The beast was perpetually just beyond the hill, just beyond sight. By dusk, it was obvious the elk had outsmarted us, and won its life. Dispirited, we trudged home via mountain paths blanketed with fallen pine needles.

Dad voiced his disappointment. From the passenger's seat, I nodded my head. We had spent time together, and in that respect, the hunt was a success. In silence, we identified this as the trip's true objective. But it was also to kill. Dave and Daniel had promised us a kill. There was no meat to bring home to Mom and no trophy rack to mount, triumphantly, upon the mantle.

In the summer, the phone rang. Dave would get us a kill. Elk season was over, but he would make it up to us. *Prairie dogs are nongame. You can do whatever you want to 'em*, he said, *Bring the AR-15.*

Dave picked us up in his truck. He had grown a wily mustache, like an unkempt version of his father's, since I'd seen him last. He reminded me of the Lorax. Daniel appeared to be wearing the same overalls as last time.

Dave's mud-caked F-150 clambered through oppressive woods and up jagged mountain roads. At the peak, we met suddenly with a visage of the sun glittering at its zenith through diaphanous clouds, which cast their dainty shadows upon the face of a tremendous caldera. We had arrived at the tip of a tooth in the earth's gaping mouth and drove inside.

There were thousands of holes the size of baseballs on the crater's surface. It was a prairie dog metropolis and a tryphobic's fever dream.

“Ready to fuck up some prairie dogs?” Dave gave me a firm pat on the back and his laughter sounded like the sawing of wood. He handed me the AR-15, and I crouched. I looked through the scope, and saw the sparkling black eye of a prairie dog poking its head out of a hole. I could see its nostrils flaring, and the fluttering of its delicate, translucent whiskers. I flinched. It jerked its head, and sprinted from the trench. I tracked it in my crosshairs.

“Shoot it! Shoot it! Fuck it up!” Dave was howling in my ear like a hyena. I squeezed the trigger. Particles of burnt gunpowder dashed my cheek, stinging lightly.

I didn't flinch. I merely watched. Dave was yipping and hollering. His eyes were sparkling like those of a child at the zoo. My nose was assailed by the stench of death. Shit and something else. The sun-baked desert flowerettes, which groped the sky with withered arms, were bathed in liquified viscera. I had gotten a kill. Dave hocked some dip-spit into the puddle at his feet, and said:

“Nice shot! More!” I heard a distant crackle. Dad got one with the .22.

“Okay.”

“Hurry and shoot, before they spook.”

We brought no meat cooler or knives for dressing. The box of ammunition, full at first, was emptied. The brown dirt was stained crimson. The prairie dogs did not spook so quickly.

The sounds of our return home were the muffled pangs of dip landing in an empty soda can and the crepitation of rocks tumbling under truck wheels as we scaled back up and down the black mountains, which had staged our little play. Silence lingered in the car, too. Dave asked me if I had a good time.

“It was fun,” I said, which wasn't a lie. But I felt a little nauseous.

“Yeah, those little fuckers sure do like to run,” said Dave laughingly, “good bonding experience, huh?”

I thought of a story Mom had told me. Her uncle had to drown puppies in a bucket when their farm dog got pregnant. They didn't have the resources to care for a litter. *Did he wince when he heard the burbling? Probably the first few times*, I thought. I was like my great uncle, now; a real man. *Have you lost some delicate part of yourself when you stop wincing, or have you just become a real hunter? Calluses around the heart, or they're just prairie dogs. A selective deafness for the cries of a pup, an unhesitant willingness to rip the guts out of a deer; manhood. These things sound terrible, and perhaps they are, but isn't it the right thing to do for the universe? And what of the prairie dogs? Is it really so bad in the big scheme of things? Isn't it fun? You aim for the heart, and if you hit the belly, so be it. In life, you get the job done. Mom wanted to fry the liver with onions. Get the job done. The puppies will die slowly and painfully otherwise. Drown them now, and remember this lesson next time you see the neighbors' mutt sniffing around the property. Use the BB gun to scare him off next time.*