

Victim's Eyes

Though I have the deepest love for life now, by the time I was 12, I was an accomplished killer. When I was in third grade we moved to a small town in Wyoming which was little more than a speck of dust on some maps. Back then, we spent most weekends camping in the rugged, prairie terrain that proved to be unforgiving to a body riding in the back of an ancient Ford pickup flying down a twisty, hilly, washboard road at top speed. I was protected from the iron bed by only a mattress and wholly unprotected from the ceiling of the camper shell and flying debris from the camping gear tossed in haphazardly in a rush to, “get the hell out of dodge.”

When I was old enough – perhaps around ten – I lugged a .22 caliber lever action rifle through rocky foothills that were coated with sagebrush and little mounds of dug-up dirt that were homes to ground squirrels we called *picket pens*; I called them fodder. Like the great ten-year-old hunter that I was, I crept through the foothills, taking cover behind large sagebrush, stalking with a secret agent's stealth and waiting for my prey to make a mistake – and they always made a mistake. When a picket pen chanced poking its head out of its dirt mound hole, I was ready. I would calmly aim, as I was taught, and without hesitation or remorse (it's not like these were someone's pets; they were just animals) I'd squeeze off a clean shot. I enjoyed the way their little bodies would sometimes fly through the air in lifeless somersaults, validating the love I had for my self-exaggerated skill. No picket pen was safe from me.

I eventually graduated to rabbits. Those you could eat. And we did eat a lot of them. That was typically how we survived the winter – we ate what we killed and what we grew. Wyoming, at the time, did not have a bag limit or require a license for rabbits. *Our* bag limit was the capacity of the bag; usually a large black garbage sack that would normally be used to stuff

leaves and twigs into in the autumn. Killing bunnies offered new and different thrills that made the kill more gruesome, more personal, more deliberate. I had to step on the head with my waffle-making clod hoppers and grab the legs with both hands and jerk the body away from the head. The head of the rabbit was tainted with nasty ear mites and, if an exceptional shot was made, a bullet hole.

I was taught that when you go rabbit hunting, you *have* to go for the head shot. There is so little meat that a bullet hole anywhere else – even from a little .22 – means there will be inconsumable parts of the body (bruises and blood clots surrounding a bullet wound ruin too much of the meat). If you leave the head on the body, the ear mites will escape the ears and spoil the meat as well.

By adding rabbits to my list of prey, I was now contributing to dinner and nothing tastes better than food you put on the plate yourself. It means more. It has more value and is more difficult to take for granted.

Needless to say, I was ecstatic when I got my very first license for my very first deer. I was finally going to enter into the world of the *real* hunter. No more practicing exclusively on rabbits and picket pens for me.

I contemplated my upcoming kill all the way down some bumpy dirt road, but this time I was not isolated in the back of a pickup, *apart from* the adults. I was now a part of the action: *I belonged*. And this time, we were in Montana and after passing Hunter's Safety, I was licensed to kill. Hunter's Safety was where I learned in a classroom to put small balloons over the barrel of my gun to protect it from rain and snow as I trek through my chosen hunting grounds, which seemed weird to me when I could just carry my gun with the barrel pointing at the ground. That is the only thing I remember learning from that class. I already knew everything else, and much

of what Hunter's Safety taught me contradicted what my step dad taught me in the field. So, of course, I didn't bother remembering any of it.

I contemplated my upcoming kill as I envisioned the beast standing broadside. I foresaw the bullet entering just behind the front shoulder, piercing the heart. I had seen it done over and over by both of my mom and my step dad. *KAPOW!!* The gun would blast and then the beast would drop. If the bullet didn't destroy the heart – if we were *really* lucky and it hit the upper part of the heart, severing the veins and arteries while preserving the organ itself – we ate it for dinner that night. Pan-fried heart is surprisingly tender, and almost sweet.

I contemplated my upcoming kill with focused determination and excited energy on the day we found a small outcrop of trees standing alone in some obscure field marked off by some average fence on some rancher's land who granted us permission to hunt on his land. Those trees must have offered some sense of security for a small herd of deer that grazed there as if under some misguided assumption that they were completely safe on private property. Little did those ignorantly inapprehensive deer know, one of *them* would soon become *my* next victim.

My step dad picked out a beautiful dry doe for my first big-time victim. The creature stood broadside. I could have gone for a head shot. It would have been easier. It was not like I wanted to keep her head to hang on my bedroom wall. Aiming for the heart was what I was taught good hunters did. So that's what I would do. I calmed myself, marking in my mind's eye that sweet spot right behind the creature's shoulder blade. My eyes traced the lines of the doe's muscular structure, marking roughly halfway up the arch of the front leg. *Breath.*

I became one with my rifle – this time, a Jesse James style Bicentennial 30-30 Winchester... it was mine, all mine a gift from my step dad. *Breath... slow... steady.* I lowered the barrel of my gun calmly as I took aim – though this was no picket pen or rabbit, and my 30-

30 was a little heavier than the old .22, I was comfortable and ready, as I had been a thousand times – no, a million times before. I gently caressed the trigger – gently, carefully, I had to be ready to pull that trigger: pulling the trigger is a deliberate act; it must be made to be intentional; there can be no accidents. I squeezed the trigger - but the beautiful dry doe *did not fall*.

In fact the doe stood still, looking at me as if to mock me: “You missed, and I’m not concerned!” it seemed to say, but I did *not* miss. Of that I was sure! I was bewildered. This was no two-inch head of a picket pen, which I had little difficulty targeting in the past.

I looked at my step dad who, with tight lips and furled brow, nodded for me to try again. So I did. Just like before. But again, the beast did not fall.

Confusion and anger fought for domination in my psyche. I squinted my eyes to investigate the situation. I discovered, to my horror, that both of my bullets *had*, in fact, done their job. But instead of piercing the heart I twice grazed the gut. The damage done was not enough to kill – or to even move this animal for that matter – but it did open the gut enough so some of the innards began to spill out.

My frustration transmuted into horror as I began to take aim one more time when my eyes met hers. This was the exact moment that I truly came to understand what it meant *to be alive*. I saw in her eyes all the fear of a thousand picket pens and rabbits. I saw ants burned under magnifying glasses, legless grasshoppers, wingless houseflies, all fighting for their lives – trying to escape from me. There before me stood a creature of beauty that had most likely been mother to some innocent fawn. I saw fear of death and pleading for life. I saw myself through her eyes: a fearsome thing that maims, tortures and keeps alive to inflict more pain.

My heart pounded fiercely full of guilt and shame I’d never felt before, pounding in my chest, aching in my own innards. This creature was standing somewhere in between being alive

and not being alive. Her eyes screamed for mercy, but my most carefully aimed third shot grazed her stomach yet again, *and she still did not fall.*

It was clear, now, that I was *not* going to kill this poor Doe. My step dad finally delivered her the mercy she desperately needed with a pistol from near point blank range in the back of the head.

She fell. And with her, a part of me I no longer wanted.

We later discovered that by leaving the guns laying out in the back and driving down the bumpy road caused the front sight on my cherished 30-30 Winchester to become bent (slightly), making it fire low and to the right. It wasn't *really* my fault after all. In fact, if we would have transported the guns correctly (probably something they taught in Hunter's safety) and had the sights been spot on, the deed would have likely been done on the first shot. Perhaps I would have gone for a trophy next year and lived a long, happy hunter's life, never truly knowing the value of life outside of my little microcosm of understanding.

It's been a long time since that fateful day, but that doe looks back at me every time I think about her. I don't look at animals the same way anymore. I can't. I no longer see a clean shot when I see a broadside doe. I see their eyes. I see their will to live, love, survive. I see the stories of their lives. Mama doe, and her two spotted fawns hopping along happily behind her (too small to be aware of the dangers they face in life) visit me from time to time when I sit in my backyard. With a smile on my face and affection warming my chest (the area right behind my shoulder when I stand broadside), I enjoy watching them frolic. I appreciate their presence in my day. What a gift.

I don't want to discourage others from hunting. I am not here to judge or make accusations. I still love wild meat and eat it whenever I get the chance. I'm only saying that I will

not join you on the trail. The ghost of my last victim still haunts me; she reminds me of the sort of heartless creature I once was. I no longer try to run from her, but I embrace her, her memory is welcome to me. She taught me how to view Life and I will always love her for that.