

Deerslayer

I

Prep for gutting.

Position the deer, if possible, so the belly is up and the hind-end is pointed downhill at an angle. Let gravity work for you.

The first time I entered her home, I was told to take my shoes off. Her shoes lay right behind her apartment door, but not so close to be in the way. The toes of her shoes pointed toward the threshold, not toward the living room couch or the kitchen, but directly at the door. Sitting beside them, a pair of slippers pointed in the same direction. The slippers were practically new, the fuzz on the strap still fluffy and bright green. On her typical days, she wore dress shoes, preferably reasonably-priced black flats. Her eye movement directed me to place my shoes near hers. I pulled off the heel of my sneakers, no need to untie, and placed them in the same direction, toes pointed toward the door adjacent to the slippers. The direction was not explicitly mentioned, but I felt it necessary to follow her lead.

Today, and every day, I wore the same shoes, white Reeboks with a blue stripe lining the side. I noticed the laces of my shoes were much whiter than the shoe itself, despite never washing the laces. I chuckled at the observation, no one would notice but me. These were the same shoes I had worn since junior year. They smelled of turf grass and smoke, yet they never left my feet. I wished I could get rid of them; I couldn't get rid of them.

A Bordeaux-tinted stain resided on the midsole and toe box of my sneakers that contrasted the green of her slippers. Our shoes sat like soldiers, waiting at the door for the next move, but for now, stagnant in place. Silent. I assumed the shoes were placed in that manner for organizational purposes; I presumed her tidy disposition. And, in the next months, as I began to notice the hand-washing and compulsive pillow-straightening, my conclusion proved correct. Our shoes did not move for the rest of the night.

The remainder of the night was unremarkable. A typical rom-com, wine, intimacy. The movie was boring. The wine was dry. The sex was mediocre. Maybe my expectations were too high. Sheet-gripping, messy romps were too much for me anyway. But, her Venus De Milo curves and marble skin, entranced me. Still, our intercourse was quick and methodical. Her hand touched mine and I followed suit like a surgeon requesting a scalpel. It was enjoyable, for me at least, but it was premeditated. Every leg movement, every moan, all planned ahead of time. By the end, we laid together, silent and uneasy. And, as I began retying my shoes, she giggled and remarked that my laces were "uncomfortably white." I left her apartment blushing like a newborn baby.

II

Carefully work your way to the sternum.

Create an incision just below the genitalia and run a straight cut clear up to the neck.

There were two lines in the middle of my palms and there were two lines in hers. Both our lines were deep but hers were deeper. Sometimes, she cradled my hand and examined my lines. Her fingertips caressed the deep crevasses and followed the length of the line to the end of my palm, just before my wrist. At times I flinched, other times I marvelled. She pointed out the lower line, the “life line.”

“What are you, in first grade?” I teased.

“No,” her response was shy and awkward. She remarked that my life line was too short. I did not question her, nor did I take her gypsy-reasoning seriously. However, when I examined her lines, following the same path she did, I was pleased to discover that her life line was long.

Her hands were sweaty, just like mine. She hated that her hands would sweat, but she said it would be worse if they shook. “They shake when I’m nervous,” she clarified. The tip of her middle finger twitched when her hand relaxed. It jerked, defining the creases between knuckle and knuckle, and then settled. Her fingers were almost as long as mine.

She had little moons on her fingernails, right above the cuticle. I did not have the moons, but delighted in hers. I loved the moon. One day after a long exam I came home, exhausted. Checking my phone, I smiled enraptured by the multiple moon images she left me in our text chat. There was no caption, no explanation, just the pictures.

She had a scar on her pinky that she said she got in the woods with her father when she was young. I had a similar scar on my thumb from when I carelessly sliced my finger while cutting grapes, a story I told her two weeks in. I didn’t usually tell stories. She laughed, her smile wide and her teeth pearly. Her hand shoved my shoulder, proving that she found it as funny as she made it seem. She loved grapes.

We were approaching three months. We stayed at her house, but we watched the same movie over and over until we knew the script from beginning to end. She quoted one character, and I quoted the other. Sometimes, we even quoted the same line.

Three months in and we slept in the same bed. We already had our routines. She brushed her teeth but not before checking the locks on every door, the clasps on the windows, the oven. It drove me crazy. Three months in and we rustled over door locking. I believed it to be obsessive; she insisted it was safe. When she was angry, she was nervous. When she was nervous, her hands shook.

III

Release the diaphragm.

Cut the diaphragm, the thin sheet of muscle between ribcage and stomach. Run your hand up the neck and cut the throat at the base, slicing through windpipe and blood vessels.

There was always something pleasurable about the way her hair draped over her back. When she sat, posed like a delicate muse, her hair practically hovered over her bare skin. Even when wearing my shirts, her hair, drooping over the surplus of fabric, was intoxicating, almost unworldly. She sat at the edge of the bed, upright donning perfect posture. With the exception of a few times when she was overcome with sleep, she rose and tiptoed to the bathroom after intimacy. Her feet had perfect arches that grazed the ground silently, despite the aging hardwood floors.

She turned the sink handle to the right, cold. The water ran and ran through the pipes until her hand slipped under the drip, cold. Maybe it was the temperature that changed her aura from delicacy to urgency. Once her palms interrupted the faucet's stream, she became efficient. Exact. Two pumps of soap, never three, cupping with nails pointing up so that the soap was placed directly in the center of the palm. The back, side, wrist all accounted for, never missing a spot and surely, never washing with warm water, a practice reminiscent of my childhood pediatrician.

And when she was done, she rewashed. Why she rewashed I never knew and never bothered to ask. I assumed it went hand in hand with her door locking; it was not in my best interest to unveil her idiosyncrasies. But still, I wondered.

The soap jar that sat adjacent to the sink was always full. When departing from the bathroom, a familiar smell of lavender and honey confirmed she had thoroughly scoured her hands. She always did. After months of meticulous washing, I noticed the soap jar was never empty. Only once did I notice the need to refill.

"You're running out of soap." I said.

"I know." Her eyes met mine, almost filled with tears. She stared back at me as if I were Judas. Nothing but betrayal. It was only soap- I repeated to distract myself from the eyes of Messi. But, nothing could divert her ghostly stare. Like her compulsive door locking, I could not explain her retort. I stroked her back and kissed her shoulders to ease her. She flinched.

"Do you want me to refill it for you?"

"No," she said abruptly. "Sorry."

Sorry? Another reaction for which I could not have prepared. She was not sorry, she was annoyed. Her hands were shaking. My soap-filling gesture did not amuse her, nor fill her with romantic appreciation. In retrospect, romantic appreciation would have been uncharacteristic of her, yet, a reaction of annoyance, intense exasperation, was unexpected. My observations offended her. Deeply. Her reaction concerned me. Deeply.

IV

Get the guts out.

Pull the innards out and lay them on the ground. You will likely have a few strands of tissue that want to hold things in; simply cut them away as you go. At this point, you should have a big pile of guts outside the deer, barely attached near the anus.

Her sighs signaled to me that it was Friday. She typically would come home at six-thirty, on occasion seven. She let the door close behind her and exhaled before it was completely shut, never forgetting to lock the door.

She did not sit, however, until her shoes came off. In the middle of the week, she switched her flats to slippers. But on Fridays, her feet were bare. She walked to the sofa, feet scuffing beneath her as if she had run a mile, then crumbled into the couch with a sigh. Friday. She motioned with her long pointer finger, in an almost “come here” gesture. I rose and placed the remote on her lap before heading to the kitchen. No conversation would ensue until she ate. I didn’t find it necessary to make small talk with her, only if probed. Her absence in conversation made it virtually impossible in the first place, so I refrained, willingly.

It was Friday and I had already eaten. It was already quarter past eight and my food was getting cold. So, I ate. She sat, assuming her food would find its place in front of her, and so it did. Today, I even added a small bowl of grapes.

“I talked to my dad today,” she stated, popping a grape into her mouth like a southern man’s sunflower seeds. “Says the weather is perfect.”

Her parents lived about an hour and a half away, 85 miles north. Her breath hitched sharply and she sighed again. I stared at her slightly opened lips; a small piece of grape wedged in between her two central incisors.

“He wants us to visit,” she stared straight. Her mouth was downturned. She stood from the couch, plate in hand and slowly walked to the kitchen. She cleaned her plate but not before throwing away the extra grapes she did not eat. Once she finished cleaning, she removed the full trash bag from the bin, pulled the two red strings hanging from the bag, and knotted it closed. The flapping sound of the new replacement bag signaled that it was Friday- trash day. She cleared her throat, another sign that I was to do something. She hated when the trash sat out of the can. I rose from my seat, picked up the bag and walked barefoot to the curb. She hated that I went barefoot.

It had not been this chilly in a long time. For the last few weeks, I complained about the relentless summer. It was early Autumn, and the heat was still interrupting my sleep. But, as I brought the trash to the curb, the cold concrete stung my feet. Cold.

The waxing moon lit my path. From my peripheral, I noticed a slight movement. A deer stood on my lawn just a few yards from me. It stared at me. One front leg was

bent, the other extended, as if she could charge me at any moment. She could; I thought she would. But, as I stared back, her eyes gazed at me with grace. I stood silent, unresponsive just like the deer standing before me, just like the deer I had once smothered under my cupped palm.

My hazards blinked the same two notes, tormenting my eardrums like a gnat. Even when the driver's side door opened, the two notes persisted. That night, I had been distracted. Maybe, if I had taken a deep breath, in and out slowly; maybe, had the moon been present to reflect in the wood's red eyes, it would have been different. But now, the large mass lay limp in front of me, slightly cloaked by the white snow and agitated gravel. The leather of my steering wheel, my sweatshirt, both drenched in tears and sweat that suffocated my skin and pruned my life line. I had to step out of my car, yet I sat still, frozen.

A crunch of fresh ice echoed through the trees. Haunting. And, as I slowly walked toward the animal, my fingers tensed with frostbitten fear. My headlights forced my eyes on the deer as she lay nearly unconscious, her stillness interrupted by only a slight occasional twitch. As I approached, I could hear her hitched, labored breaths. I could not leave her like that, suffering, immobile. So, I began.

My widened eyes drooped; the weight of my awkward frame pressed down heavily. Her snout, cupped and encaged, gasped for air. Her rib cage, collapsed and gutted, convulsed. A drop of blood hit my shoes staining the white canvas. And, as I began to feel numb and the twitch in the deer's concave chest ceased, my hands released the muzzle. I sank, my shoes stained and my hands trembling; my eyes met the deer's. Her eyes were open, frozen.

It had been six years since I had lost my first car. Six years. My snowcovered blue hoodie, my Reeboks all kept, but everything else was gone. But now, a deer sat in my yard, staring with the same eyes I had seen before. Looking straight at me, stunned and huge, still but not frozen. This time, however, these eyes did not glare in fear only to cloud in slaughter. They were soft and teary, as if to say "Let go."

V

Drain the blood.

Grab the deer by its front legs and lift. This drains the blood from the body.

We arrived at her parents before the sun rose. The driveway was long, almost a quarter of a mile. After each one hundred feet passed, my stomach sank deeper.

We began. My white, stained sneakers looked odd against my camo pants. Out of place. She complained that the white of my shoes reflected the moon too much, a possible alarm to the game we hunted. I scoffed. The moon sat in the middle of the sky, brightening the dewy grass beneath me, yet too dark to define the blades. In each droplet's eye, the moon peered, always there, always guarding me.

It's hard to recall the events that transpired over the next few hours. Still, the sun sat below the horizon. Squinting over her cracked wrist watch confirmed that it was a few minutes past four. My hands resembled the ground, perspiring and cold. Yet, when I held hers, they were dry. Warm.

At some point before dawn, it was done. A shot fired; a body collapsed. So, we stepped forward, through the wet grass and towards the figure. The infrared goggles sat crooked on my face, a not so perfect fit. She had confidently written my name on the inner band in blue marker. But, when I put them on, shame's ghostly stare was revealed beyond the lens' lime green tint.

We approached the figure as it lay twitching and limp. A mortal exhale escaped from its snout, forming a white cloud in the air. I glanced at her and a small smile curved her lips upward. She placed her hand in the right pocket of her pants to extricate a knife which she held firmly in the center of her palm. Engraved words lined the handle, writing I could not discern with the exception of a single clearly carved word: Hunt. Then, she began.

She tapped the blade and ran her finger down the side to test its sharpness. Her smile widened. Gripping the knife firmly, she made the first incision. Her long life line deepened as she methodically pulled the knife up through the breastbone. The line was straight, accurate. Her hands were still. And, while the white air disappeared, the deer's eyes remained fixed, open.

It smelled of rust, reminding me of the split lip I earned from a second grade playground fight, reminding me of the limp body I grieved that night in the beam of my headlight, a smell I knew once and wished I could forget. She lifted its haunches, angling blood's flow toward the forest floor. Again, a single drop of blood found its way toward me, this time staining my right shoe in matching Bordeaux.

"What are you afraid of?" she spit. It was the same blank tone she used to ask if the milk had expired or if my socks were dirty. That same tone was as disturbingly familiar as the smell. She looked at me staring straight through my labeled goggles.

Marina Puno

Despite her own goggles' dark tint masking her face, I could see her crow-footed eyes glistening. She glared without remorse, but with mechanical, dead eyes, eyes that looked identical to those of the dead animal before her. She was proud.

At that moment I knew. I knew the way a chef knows when to take a steak off the flame. And, as the sun began to rise, she placed each dismembered limb into a bag and dragged it through the grass. The moon was no longer visible. She wiped her hands with a rag and placed the bags in the back of the truck. I stood, silent. And, as we drove home, I sat, silent. She didn't wash her hands until two hours later, this time, without soap, relishing in control's rusty stench.

Tomorrow, I would buy new shoes.