

The Hunt

I remember the cold wind blowing over our heads, the gray taste of winter air, the waning sun and its bleak yellow shade. Marching across dead grass and dandelion, our dirty sneakers crunching frost underfoot and the sky darkening with our advance. I held a rifle, a brand new pellet gun my parents gave me for Christmas, and my younger brother stood unarmed and vigilant at my side, too young to have his own. We were just outside the bowed backyard fence peering into the tree line beyond our neighbors' tomato garden, watching for movement. Any sign of life. We wanted to get closer to the trees so we crossed the imaginary boundary between the neighbor's yard and ours, two kids in snow jackets and caps stalking through the low grass.

I was so proud of that pellet gun. Slid my hand across the soft metal barrel, toyed with the plastic trigger that clicked when it was pulled. The stock was polished in some cheap auburn glaze and the sight was a little left of center, but to me the flimsy replica of the heavier rifles my father had in a cabinet in his bedroom was real enough. I strutted out the door into the backyard early that morning, careful not to let the dogs follow me. I set up a few paper bullseyes, held the gun up to the crook of my arm like I'd seen my father do and bent my eyes to the sights. I spent a half hour loading pellets and shooting to no real excitement. So finally I loaded and cocked and looked down the barrel again but this time swung the gun around, searching for a better target.

I saw the wooden cardinal my father had carved for my mother years ago, sitting tall on top of the fence. I hated the thing, its dead eyes too large and its beak incongruent. I might have at least appreciated the sweetness of his gesture if I'd ever seen that side of my father, the side that spent days in the garage carefully sanding the curves of a gift for his wife. Some combination of the drinking and the factory work made him mean, constantly braced against his life, and this was the only man I knew for a father. I don't think that my mother much cared for

the wooden cardinal either anymore, its only positive attribute being its misshapen, homemade “charm.” She was quick to mention this charm with a smile and a hint of embarrassment whenever somebody asked her about it.

I aimed the gun at the cardinal, imagining the stiff, lifeless bird instead squirming, preparing its wings for flight. I primed the gun ten times too many, steadied the stock, and blew it into splinters.

Feeling at once slightly regretful and riotously alive, I rushed in to the house to find my younger brother Chris. Though Chris and I ended up living in that house until we were grown, in my mind my childhood home always looks as it did back then: scores of odd little knick-knacks displayed proudly on the wall shelf, the good dishes in their glass cabinet, everything polished, shining. Even with the illness my mother wouldn’t live in a dirty house, and when it became too difficult for her to clean it herself she’d put Chris and I to work, feather dusters in hand.

I tiptoed through the living room to try and not wake my mother, dozing in her usual position on the couch while talk shows played on the TV, and stealth-sprinted back to my brother’s room and jammed open the door. He was still sleeping when I bounded in and shook him out of his bed. After some initial dispute about the surprise awakening he agreed that blowing up the cardinal had indeed been fantastic and was excited at the idea of hunting with me. We rushed back through the hall, visions of exploding targets and wooden birds in our heads, but we were too loud, my mother stirring as we tried to get by.

She sat up on the edge of the couch in her yellow nightgown, hands planted weakly at her sides. Her life had been receptions and departures from hospitals, chemotherapy, hard-worn smiles for her sons. It’s been fifteen years since I’ve seen her face, and because I have no pictures it remains a blur to me, the constant shifting of rose-flush and jutting cheekbones,

depending on her state of remission. This particular memory takes place towards the end, the doctors having little else to say to her but that she should find a comfortable place to rest.

Her voice dredged up from the bottom of a well, my mother croaked, “What are you boys up to?”

I was the designated speaker for my brother and me, the representative. Chris didn’t say much to anyone other than me until he was in his teens, always shy and mindful of the embarrassment kids bring on themselves when they try to speak. “Nothing,” I told her.

“Nick...”

That’s all she ever needed to say, just my name, and I would spill. “Shooting targets with the pellet gun.”

“Nick, you better be damned careful with that. And Chris isn’t allowed to shoot it. Got it?”

She hated the gun, hated that my father thought it was the right gift for me. One of their many lingering tensions, arguments that had existed before she’d gotten sick, before I was even born. She’d been no stranger to bruises even before the chemo made her skin frail. My father taught Chris and me about confrontation and conflict and my mother tried to turn us away from a belief in them until she no longer had the energy.

“Alright, Mom, I won’t let Chris mess with it.”

“Now Nick, goddamnit, I’m serious.”

“I know. So am I.”

We rushed back outside and set up some new targets for Chris to practice with. Looking back now, the scene was dangerous as all hell: Chris, only six years old at the time, barely able to support the gun in his arm, the barrel wavering too much with his slightness, pellets flying and

landing everywhere except for the target. I guess that even in my youth I realized the impending destruction of something or someone important because I only let him go on for a few shots before retaking the gun.

“What else can we shoot at?” Chris piped up, wide-eyed.

“I don’t know.”

“Are there any more birds around?”

“Not wooden ones.”

Which got us thinking about real birds. We quietly, carefully unlatched the back gate and walked through it. Off we went, trudging through the stale leaves and ground, on the first legitimate hunt of our lives.

It took some time for us to find any approachable game. Sure, there were plenty of robins and sparrows settling on power lines and soaring through the air overhead, but my untrained aim could do little to impede the creatures at such a distance. I fired a few rounds in frustration at them, none of the pellets reaching their targets. Eventually my brother, acting as scout, spotted a small, black bird perched on a low tree limb some thirty yards away. I don’t know birds, to this day I don’t know what sort of bird it was exactly, just that its feathers were especially dark against the pale maize light of dusk. It stayed there almost unmoving for a few seconds, still and confident. I raised a finger to my lips, gesturing silence, and used my index and middle fingers to point at nearby cover. In a spasmed sweeping motion I waved my hand at another likely spot. None of these signals meant anything to us before, but Chris knew exactly what to do. We awkwardly barrel-rolled once or twice on the hard ground, winter jackets absorbing the blows, and crouched over to our designated bushes for cover.

I looked over at Chris and nodded, asking my scout for the time to shoot. He peered over the bush at the black bird, squinted his eyes as if judging the distance or calculating wind speed, and trained his eyes back on me, nodding with resolution.

I hesitated no further; I pumped the rifle at least twenty times and threw it up to the bend in my arm and stared unflinchingly down the barrel. We held our breaths as I focused my aim. We reached a threshold, blood pulsing, hands tight, guts clenched in anticipation. I pulled back on the trigger and had the overwhelming feeling that this was something I had done before, in a past life or in a past world, not as myself, not as a ten-year-old child, but as a man, and my movements seemed right, they felt as natural as breathing or feeling for the warmth of a fire. I watched the bird keel to the side, its wings outstretched, and I followed its short descent to the earth.

We walked the thirty yards between us and the bird, a once-green yard where my brother and I mimicked ninja television shows and climbed on swing sets to avoid imaginary lava. This yard where we threw baseballs and footballs and ran howling from bee stings and chased the dogs around. That day the yard was all dirty snow, mud, shuffled footprints. The bird's body lay disheveled in the flurry when we got to it, twisted uncharacteristically, blood splashed on its breast.

We watched the bird for a long time, watched the way it didn't move and the way its beak hung limp. I could think of nothing to say as I stood there in the increasing dark. I thought it might make sense to slap my brother on the back and yell "Nice!" or "We did it!" but I wasn't entirely sure what it was that we did. Whatever expectations we might have had about our victory were dashed as soon as we were confronted by the stillness of the wings, the false twitch of the body in its dying. The open eyes glazed and wooden, the blood hyper-red.

I looked over at my brother and watched his wide eyes. He bent down to the ground and reached for the bird but pulled back before touching it, wanting a little distance. I let him sit that way for a few seconds before touching his shoulder and telling him to follow me back to the house. As we walked I could tell that he wanted to look back over his shoulder at the bird, the impulse burning and demanding him to look back, but something in him told him that it would be easier not to and so he never did.

We entered the garage and I sat the pellet gun gingerly back on the shelf. I wanted badly to cry, to rush in and grab my mother around her shrinking waist and hug her, with hospice waiting quietly in the near future, and then her passing, and then the blur of her face and my memories of her with it, but then I thought of my father, how he would react to my tears with laughter and a slug on the arm, how he would tell me that the world was for the strong and that I needed to get used to the pain of it, the way that felt, and I would cower in fear under his glare, so I stifled the tears. I pushed the button to take the garage door down and I watched the sun hang motionless behind it for a few seconds before it finally disappeared from my vision.

Chris went inside immediately for warmth, still so young then. I wondered how long he would remember what it was like standing over that cold dark thing. A week? A year? I collected myself and joined him and in silence we tiptoed together past the living room, past my mother coughing in her sleep. Wanting a little distance. We made it through the hall and sat down on our beds and started the process of trying to forget.

Factory

New bosses, maybe, and new systems, but old work, each day another notch in my skull. Under a film of soot and a gray turret sky, I walked steel toe to pavement through the lot and into the mouth of the building. I passed through the turnstile and shined a badge to put a name to my face, crossed into the plant proper and immediately a flood of sick-smelling heat, a whirl of machinery, metal terrorizing metal, sweaty bodies stationed among the clashing parts. I snaked through to the back of the plant, dodging forklifts as they whizzed by, supervisor carts trailing behind, the recognition of the same 12-hour-shift look on everyone's face, on my face.

Here they made tires. People standing in place applying strips of cured rubber to revolving spools to the molders and shapers of product to the treaders and finishers and finally to the warehouse, where I put in my time, driving the forklift, blurring through the hulking stacks, rowed to oblivion, chasing down competitor's tires locked away upstairs to take over to testing. The competitive edge, I knew it, I dangled precariously right along it. Each day I drove up the beaten ramp and entered Warehouse 3. A profound silence would greet me, emanating out of musty rubber air and near dark created by dim overheads that hadn't been re-bulbed in twenty years. My head buzzing with the constant worry that the tall, winding stacks of skids would come crashing down on me, shuddering my forklift's cage, collapsing my frame inside it forever. I drove around Warehouse 3 to avoid work, dodging supervisors and the more dedicated warehouseers, creeping among the tire rows like shades. If I needed a darker hiding place, I might drive all the way up to Warehouse 4, with its loose tires spilled across the floor, empty and forgotten skids bent all

ways, whole cities of cobwebs on the ceiling. That was where all the failed tires went before their rubber was repurposed, the unsalable tires that'd gotten lost somewhere in the production process, the tires unfixable. Up in 4 I could be completely by myself, some days for hours at a time before someone would come looking for me. Most people hated being up there, alone and sightless, because there were dozens of ghost stories going around about Warehouse 4, of flashlights gone missing, flickers of unexplainable movement, cold breezes in the middle of summer.

My interest was piqued. One day, at the beginning of my shift, I drove through to the deepest part of 4, where it's pitch black at six thirty in the morning and nearly impossible to navigate without light. I parked my forklift and turned off the engine and waited quietly for the rotten smell of exhaust to die. I settled into my seat and closed my eyes for a few moments, to clear my mind, to unclutter its shelves, and when I felt like I could finally think with some lucidity I got up and walked around the tall dark columns, keeping my eyes closed, feeling the tires for a path around them. I thought of my father as I crept without vision around the tires, as I often did in Warehouse 4, because the older warehousemen'd told me of my father's shared predilection for 4. Like father like son, of course, of course they'd say. I had few memories of him, he'd left when I was twelve and never contacted me after, and the memories that remained for me were the sort I'd be better off without. Whiskey whispered in the ear. Arms bulging red from the strain put on them. My eyes pulsed in thought that morning in Warehouse 4, remembering him, and unexpectedly I felt a rush of cold from somewhere deeper in the stacks. My gut tensed, I took out my flashlight, but I couldn't get it to turn on. The batteries were dead. I peered into the dark, waiting for my eyes to adjust, but there was no purchase. I drove back down to the shipping warehouse and back to the work set out for me that day.

All through the shift I wondered about the cold wind, and elaborated my suspicions of its ghostly origin. It was June in Ohio that morning, and no stale draft shut up in a warehouse corner could ever be that cold in June. My assumptions grew fantastical, rampant. I planned to return to Warehouse 4 as soon as I could, but the supervisor was particularly tough that day, and there were simply too many special orders going out to all ends of the country. Instead it was an especially long twelve hours in and out of an airless

truck trailer tossing twenty pound tires, fresh, steaming rubber knotted and piled and stuffed inside until the doors barely closed. All the while a tinny radio bleating grunge, the lightheaded smell of manufacturing in the summer months, the curses and jokes of the other tire throwers. The slow, impossible crawl of a workday.

But my mind was with the ghost all day long, and even as I walked back through the turnstile out to the thick air of the factory town when the shift was over, escaping that place like a loose captive. That night when I fell asleep, I saw him in my sad, woozy dreams, my father, his throat dry and roughed from yelling, a bottle in his hand, as usual. It was the clearest picture I ever had of him, that sleeping vision, having otherwise no photographs or intelligible memories. He was a whirl of machinery, metal terrorizing metal. Sweat-soaked and screaming through the doorways of my childhood home. My mother and I curling up in our familiar positions against him. Holding a blanket over our heads like a storm shelter, hissing illiterate, childish prayers. The dream goes on for an eternity, it seems, before I wake up sweating myself, my own bottle clasped in my sleep-stuck claw. The irony is not lost. I finished what was left of the whiskey in my hand and collapsed back into bed for a few moments of sleep before the alarm rang me back awake, for another inscrutable day.

I took the bus to the factory in the still-dark. It breached the usual hill and I saw the building's façade, violently chugging smoke, even in those short morning hours. The factory had no need for sleep, I knew. Into the doors I went, back through the turnstile, and back to the warehouse. The shift started busy, I remember, so for a few hours I tossed tires, moved some skids around. After the supervisor made his first round about the place I snuck myself up to Warehouse 4. I'd changed the batteries in my flashlight and swung it across the tall colonnades, the light jutting in and out of the spaces between tires but finding nothing of note. I scoured the warehouse, searching everywhere for the cold air I'd felt the day before, obsessed with finding it. I wondered if I might have to catch it in the act, if the ghost was playing with me, so I intermittently jogged and slinked up and down the rows, shot around corners, first with some patience but eventually in an unbearable haste, impetuous, consumed by the day-old breeze. That day I was more

determined, I wouldn't be thwarted, so I hid quietly among the stacks when other workers or the supervisor came whizzing by, careful not to give myself away. I decided, two hours into my search, that no matter how long it took I would find my ghost, would know what there was to know about the phantom I'd encountered there.

Many hours passed, as they so easily do when working twelve-hour shifts, and still there was no sense of the coldness. I started to shake, in spite of it. I could taste metal along the edges of my gums and inside my cheeks and I realized that I'd been chewing them, voraciously, and they were bleeding. I spit some out onto an old stack of tires in frustration. And at this the lights went all the way out, the dying bulbs in the ceiling finally dead. I started to wander around in the total dark. Without any sense of where I was in the warehouse, and my flashlight forgotten on my forklift, which I'd left hundreds of yards away, I groped senselessly at the air in front of me, feeling for the walls of tires. The only sound I heard was my heartbeat, deafening on my chattering eardrums. I tried to make my way back to the forklift but I had no idea which way to go, or which way coincided with which cardinal direction. It was simply too dark to gain any bearing. I began creeping slowly by the tires, brushing them with my fingers as I went by, not sure what exactly I was going to do. And then I heard the whisper, soft as a voice in a closed bottle.

I moved in the direction of the voice, for longer than seemed possible, I just kept walking the same course towards the sound and kept feeling the tires as I passed them. I thought that I should have hit the warehouse wall at some point, but I simply didn't, I walked for hours and hours in that single direction, whichever direction it was, and the voice grew slightly louder all the time, with each hesitant step. Eventually I noticed how cold the air was becoming, colder the further I went towards the voice. My lips quivering, my fingers aching and numb, I got close enough that I thought I could almost make out what the voice was saying. I reached my hands out in front of me and hoped they might find the speaker, with some kind of luck.

And, soon, a touch.

Contact.

The atmosphere in that beyond place, past the warehouse wall, past the vestiges of space and time, was so unbelievably cold that I could barely feel it, this object my fingers found, and upon this tender collision I struggled to will my hands to move at all, but after some force I managed to graze them across the surface of the thing and I realized quickly that it was a body, a person, dressed in what must have been a cloth workshirt. I clutched the folds of the shirt, in terror, in the absolute dark, and pleaded for the body to speak again, to identify itself, reassure me in some way, or, at the very least, to repeat what it'd been whispering all that time.

But it said nothing at all, in refusal or inability, and soon a heady silence filled the space around us. In that silence, charged with things that weren't being spoken, like dogs lunging at the doors to their cages, I knew it was my father. My dead father. He smelled just as he had in my dream, of department store musk, plastic-bottle whiskey. Of desperation and fear. His presence terrified me then as it had the night before, in the midst of the dream. I worked my eyes open and shut, feverishly, trying to adjust them to the darkness so that I could finally see him, but he was gone before I could manage, back to ash and dirt. The freezing air billowing all around, icicles particling off of my skin, I was so cold that I didn't notice, for a very long time, that I was sobbing, grasping at the thin dark shadows before me