

The Bowhunter

Michael Fillerup

JACK SLOWED DOWN, LOOKING FOR A SIGN. Seeing none, he sped on down the highway, grumbling to himself. Dean could have given more specific directions — or better, first-hand instructions, not this friend-of-a-friend nonsense. It was prime hunting time, and he was going to miss it.

He drove another mile before turning around and heading back. Dean had insisted there was a sign: “Don Haines says Dave Alderman says . . .” Jeez! Jack still couldn’t believe it — no, he couldn’t *understand* it: five years in Flagstaff and his brother had never been on the peaks.

“Too busy,” he had shrugged. “Too many irons in the fire, I guess.”

No. Too stuck-in-the-muck. Too damn housebound. Too Di-a-na.

Jack looked at the fast fading darkness and wondered if he hadn’t made a mistake. The massive zigzag of the San Francisco peaks was emerging like a row of pyramids, eclipsing half the sky.

He turned onto an unmarked dirt road, his Chevy LUV struggling for traction, slipping and sliding along the muddy ruts, compliments of last night’s thunderstorm. Several pickup trucks were parked along the shoulder where clusters of camo-coated hunters huddled around campfires, laughing, chatting, sipping from their mugs. He rolled down the window. The smells of fresh coffee and woodsmoke in the chilled September air filled his nostrils like sweetened snuff. He should have camped out too — to really do it right. But Carmen was already put out enough. Every excursion was like World War III now. The Great Compromise. A little tit for a helluva lot of tat. For two days of hunting in northern Arizona he had agreed to tack on to their vacation a week at Carmen’s mother’s in Provo.

The truck rattled across a cattleguard. A half mile up ahead a grove of aspens waited like an army in crazy green headdress. Tight ranks. Like an ambush, Jack thought.

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He pulled over onto a level, grassy area and unloaded his gear: a small day pack, a recurve bow with a seventy-pound draw, and a mounted quiver containing six aluminum arrows tipped with broadheads, razor-sharp. He liked to hunt light.

Fishing two tubes of camo paint from his pack, he squeezed some green goop onto his fingertips and smeared it over his face, throat, and hands. Checking his face in the side mirror, he broke up the ghoulish green with quick, short strokes of black. He had never been much to look at — porcine nose, swollen cheeks, a ponderous brow protruding above bleached blue eyes, the left one frozen in a permanent squint, like a boxer's swollen shut. Not like his younger brother, whose dimpled, baby-bottom cheeks and high-flown hair used to break all the girls' hearts. Tall, blond, slender. Classic California. Jack was six inches shorter and thirty pounds heavier, every ounce rock solid. "Orangutan," they used to call him in high school, as much for the ungainly length of his arms as the red fur carpeting them — and everything else: chest, legs, back, behind. (They had paid for it, though, on the football field with cracked heads and bloody noses.)

Jack looked at his painted hands and wondered what his old classmates would call him now. Camouflaged from head-to-toe, he looked more like a human salad than a would-be Nimrod.

A muddy trail snaked through a meadow of knee-high grass, rising gradually to where white aspens merged with dark, rain-stained pines. Beyond this, the mountains bulged like giant monuments, their silver peaks rising to sharp pinnacles that scraped the gray underbellies of the clouds. Back in Texas he would have scouted out the territory weeks in advance until he had found a frequented trail or bedding site and then set up his blinds. But this was mule deer country. Muleys were vagabonds, wanderers — nothing like the predictable, habit-maniac whitetails back home. You couldn't scout a muley in July and expect to find him in the same spot in September.

Jack started up the trail briskly, with quick, military strides, his legs swishing through the damp grass. Soon his sneakers were soaked and his pants damp to the knees. He really hadn't come prepared for wet weather, but since it was only a day hunt he could manage all right.

He climbed over a barbed wire fence and soon found himself weaving through a dense mingling of aspens and evergreens. He moved quickly but quietly, trying to blend with the sounds and rhythms of the forest. Since taking up bowhunting five years ago, he was always amused by poetic descriptions of the "deep silence" of the woods. There was plenty of racket: squirrels chattering like gossipy old shrews, birds cutting in with machine-gun chitter, and from some invisible center, an inexorable buzzing — bees? yellowjackets? — a sound without a source, growing neither louder nor softer but pervading the entire forest. This was acceptable. This was music. It was human noise that stood out. A snapped twig was like clashing cymbals to a buck.

Jack gazed up at the intersecting branches raftering the slug-gray sky. The clouds were big, sodden sponges waiting to be squeezed. The weatherman's promise for clear skies was not to be. It was going to be another wet,

dripping day after all. An ambivalent blessing: although the moisture helped cushion his footsteps, preventing that brittle cornflake crackle that gave away September hunters, it could also make the stalking miserable, especially if he went a long time without seeing any signs of game. So far he hadn't — no tracks, no droppings, no scraped saplings or snagged bits of fur. Normally the sun was a nuisance — casting shadows, flashing warning signals off of rings and belt buckles — but today Jack would have welcomed a little color. Red and gold flowers were scattered about, but there was something moribund about them. Sapped of their brightness, they looked like popped balloons or scraps of crepe paper, a post-party depression.

He hiked on, carefully straddling fallen timber and easing around boulders barnacled with lichen. As he started up a steep embankment and the muscles began gripping in his thighs, he smiled. He loved a swift, tough climb. Soon sweat was oiling his back and shoulders. The faint spray of moisture on his face as he brushed past giant ferns piqued him like after-shave. But by the time he reached the top of the hill, he was feeling down again, and a little queasy.

Damn virus, he thought, lumbering along. All summer he'd been pestered by it. Since Christmas, really. It was either one long, lingering strain or a series of smaller ones. Either way, it irked him. He never used to get sick. Not even colds. But ever since Anna started kindergarten — "the germ factory," Carmen called it. "She brings home every virus in the book." This last was a bugger Jack couldn't seem to shake. He really should have stayed home and rested, to get over it once and for all. That was Carmen's advice, and Dean's. Fat chance! No way was he going to miss out on his hunt.

He stopped a moment to catch his breath. Skipping breakfast didn't help. He was nothing when his blood sugar dropped. Plus he was a little out of shape. Thank long hours with the Bureau for that. The paperwork! Much more than he'd anticipated. Well, that would change too.

He checked the piece of thread tied to his bow. He was downwind, so he began still-hunting — moving in super slow motion, like a statue trying to sneak from one end of the forest to the other without anyone noticing. Although his body was advancing at a snail's pace, his heart was thumping like an engine at rush hour. Yes. This was what he loved; this was what he had come for: the forest like a maze of surprises and possibilities. He was a time traveler stepping into the past, leaving behind cars, contraptions, videos, taxes, shopping lists, agent I.D. cards and putting himself on simple terms with the animals — primitive terms. *Their* terms. He shunned the devices of contemporary hunters — compound bows with their array of pulleys and cables; artificial scents, lures, rangefinders, and other gadgets to guarantee a kill. He hunted with a simple recurve bow he had fashioned himself — no sight, no finger release. Why, he didn't even carry a watch or compass anymore. Sensing his way through the woods by instinct, shooting by instinct. Bare bow and bare soul. He had once read that many Indian tribes used to undergo a pre hunting ritual in which the hunters would literally transform into the animal they were to stalk, a prehuman flux. Likewise, he tried to feel himself into the animal.

And he was proud of his prowess in the wilds. Not bad for a kid from the

L.A. suburbs, raised on skateboards and street football. His old classmates were doctors, lawyers, and professors who drove El Dorados and BMW's. While they were working weekends to make even bigger bucks to buy even bigger cars, he was sneaking around the woods looking for spoors. Three, even two years ago Jack would have smiled at the thought, but lately he was beginning to wonder. Carmen, his job, the kids, life in general. He used to be so confident about what he had done, where he was going, how he was going to get there . . .

A soft crackle broke his train of thought. He froze, searching the woods carefully for an ear twitch, a gray hump hiding within the mottled green and brown. He had let his mind wander, suicide for a bowhunter. For every deer you actually saw, four or five had probably slipped by. He reminded himself to focus, concentrate.

He spotted a narrow opening between two pines where the grass was trampled flat. A game trail. As he picked it up, he was surprised — happily — when several shafts of sunlight seeped through the overgrowth, dropping little gold pieces on the forest floor. The damp pine needles sparkled like sunken treasure, an underwater mirage. He felt a surge of anticipation. There were deer out there, somewhere. He could sense it.

Soon he found evidence: a pile of droppings beside a lightning-charred stump. They were dark brown, the size of unshelled peanuts. Elk. He mashed them lightly with his sneaker; the insides were moist. Fresh.

He ducked low and turned sideways to slip between two pines leaning against each other like doomed lovers. He had always wondered how elk, with their high, thick chests and branching antlers, could move so adroitly through such an evergreen obstacle course. Magicians, he had mused. Or spirits drifting right through the trees. Then, three seasons ago he had watched one in action. Picking his way through the timbered congestion, the bull seemed to know exactly the width and height of his rack and had dipped and twisted it accordingly, squeezing through impossibly narrow openings. A magnificent sixth sense.

As Jack followed the game trail, the forest sounds grew more pronounced, more lively and animated, as if the maestro sun had finally raised his authoritative wand signaling the wilderness symphony to commence. All prior noise had been an ear-grating exercise in finding the right notes. But the hole in the sky soon clamped shut, and the sketchy sunlight bowed to wintry gloom. He was climbing uphill again; he could feel it in his legs and lungs. The peaks were long gone, lost behind the wall of evergreens.

He hiked another mile before stumbling upon a flow of volcanic rock. It curved through a grove of aspens, dividing it in two, then soared quickly up the mountain to become its silver peak. In actuality it had taken a destructive downward course, burying anything in its path. Jack wondered how many millions of years ago the mountain had blown its top and sent its broken pieces tumbling down the hill. Was it capable of a repeat performance? Staring at the huge, lichen-covered blocks, he thought of Pompeii and those jungle-strangled cities of the ancient Mayans. The longer he looked, the more it

appeared as though some of the rocks were moving — subtly, stealthily. Like hunters, he thought. Sneaky bastards.

Still feeling queasy, he stopped for a short rest and a little food. He leaned his bow against a rock, removed his pack, and spread a plastic garbage bag on the damp grass. He sat down and began bolting down trail snack. Much better. He'd underestimated his hunger. No wonder he'd been feeling so down and out.

The surrounding branch and bristle reminded him of those line-drawing puzzles he used to do as a kid, where you try to find the little pictures hiding within the big. He noticed two squirrels chasing each other from branch to branch, like fuzzy-tailed trapeze artists. They reminded him of an amorous married couple, playful but forthright, the female intermittently stopping the chase to scold her suitor with jittery head and hand gestures that made Jack think of silent films. He chuckled softly.

From the muddy access road the forest had appeared as a thick buffalo pelt, triple-textured, shrouding all but the very tips of the peaks. Close up, though, it became a wonderland of subtle happenings and soap opera scenarios, a microcosm behind every tree — if you looked for it. On every excursion he made a point of noticing something different, something new. If he didn't, it was his own fault. He was out of touch, too bogged down with peripherals — the daily diaper duty of life. Funny, Carmen felt that way about church. "If you're not spiritually fed, you've only got yourself to blame. . . ." Jack disagreed. Sundays were sheer automata. Business as usual. The repetition tortured him.

He had joined half-heartedly — not exactly as a condition of marriage (she hadn't given him an *ultimatum*), but close enough. Although he had been attending regularly since then, he had never had what he considered a deeply religious experience. Oh, he'd had occasional inklings, Sabbath flutters, but nothing that took him by the shoulders and shook fire and thunder through him. The closest he had ever come was his baptism and confirmation. When Carmen's father had placed his gentle hands on Jack's rusty-haired head, confirming him an official Church member, hot and cold tremors had scurried madly through his body, like a cat-and-mouse chase. It was a weirdly fluish feeling, wonderfully strange inside and out, as if he had been stuck in the icebox and then tossed into the fire.

But the intensity of that moment — like love? passion? Carmen? — had gradually dissipated until now it seemed as if it had never happened, or at best had happened to someone else and he was simply reiterating the story. Now he was a Sunday Mormon. He prayed, fasted once a month, paid his ten percent, attended all (most?) of his meetings. Generally kept his nose clean. But it was ersatz. Letter-of-the-law nonsense. He was enduring to the end, kowtowing to some stubborn sense of principle and duty.

He took a swig from his canteen and ran a sleeve across his mouth. Cool and spikey going down, the water settled in his stomach with a satisfying, split-second spasm. Well water. Dean had that over him too.

He had wanted Dean to come along. Why else would he have come all the

way to Arizona to hunt? Colorado had twice the game and was half the travel time, if a deer was all he wanted. But Dean had hemmed and hawed and hadn't gotten a tag and license. Also, he was taking the kids to the county fair today, his three and Jack's two. That was his excuse anyway. Jack had sent him a bow for Christmas, a nice PSE compound, with instructions and a note: "Read! Buy a bale of hay! Practice! Practice! Practice!" Had he? Probably not. Diapers to change, dishes to wash, laundry to fold. Helping Diana with the household chores was one thing; doing half of them, when he was working full-time at the shop and Diana was home all day . . . it wasn't right.

But that was Dean. The stay-at-home. Momma's boy. While Jack and their father had traipsed off to the tennis courts, Dean was in the kitchen making Rice Krispy cookies with Mom. Still, as brothers they had enjoyed some good times together — ditching school and driving down to Ensenada for a day of deep-sea fishing, hot-wiring Mr. Levy's Cadillac and leaving it up for grabs on Mulholland Drive. . . . A shiver scurried across Jack's massive shoulders. What had once stirred fond memories now left him feeling mildly depressed, though he wasn't sure if it was because he had changed or his brother had. Or the world. Life had changed.

No, it was Dean. He could thank Diane — Di-a-na — for that. He was too nosey now. The little brother playing big. Everybody's keeper. Last night on his redwood deck, a black-light glow above the peaks, purple-on-purple:

"So how are things with you and Carmen?"

"Fine. Great. Like you say, it gets better and better. . . ."

This was a lie. Things had never been worse. Lately she had been acting more and more like Diana. The same banal arguments: she couldn't just take off and leave the kids, so why should he?

"It's not the same," he said.

"Double standard."

He refused to argue the point. She didn't understand. Besides, she didn't like the wilds. A two-hour picnic was her limit with Mother Nature. The ants, the dust, the mosquitos, the campfire smell. Leaves, twigs in the punch. Kids. Laundry. Pack and unpack. Every outing was cleaning the Augean stables.

She didn't used to be like that. He had married an outdoor girl — a hiker, a skier, a swimmer. What had happened? Kids. Kids had happened. Motherhood had sucked the life and vitality out of her. So because she couldn't — or thought she couldn't — he shouldn't? Was that her game? Misery loves company? No. She wasn't miserable, just hampered. And in many ways, self-hampered. *Everything* was a hassle. Going to the store, a movie, church. She rolled her eyes wearily: dress the kids, pack the diaper bag, get munchies, bottles; strap the kids in the car seat, stop, unstrap, put them in the stroller. Stop-unstrap-strap-go. It wasn't worth it.

But other women managed — Margie Johnson had seven kids and still got around town like a taxi driver. Deformed foot and all. (Jack never mentioned this when they argued; he was hard but not stupid.) Besides, he had encouraged Carmen to go out, make friends, take a college night course. Get out of the damn house for a while. He'd watch the kids. Do *something* to even the score.

"I don't have friends here," she had said, dripping with self-pity.

"Whose fault is that?"

"I had friends in Oregon."

Of course. She had loved Klamath Falls, and so had he. The town. But his job as assistant city manager . . . he was a rubber stamp, a paper shuffler. He had stuck it out two years before quitting to join the FBI. His military experience had given him an in. Immediately he was transferred from Klamath Falls. Sorry, the Bureau doesn't stake out utopias.

"We live in Houston now."

"I know. And whose fault is *that*?"

"Listen, I'm going hunting. I'll be back tonight — *sometime* tonight."

He didn't like being so gruff, but it was the only way. Every time he had given her an approximate hour, he'd been held up — a late hit, a late stalk. You can't leave the animal out there bleeding to death just to get home in time for dinner. Still, she'd held him to the deadline. Arms folded, tapping her foot, nodding: "Mmm hmm . . . mmm hmmm." The kids screaming like the end of the world when he trudged inside, dinner dished out on their plates, growing cold. Making the scene as godawful as possible.

"Dammit, you can't hunt on a time clock. It just doesn't work that way. You don't under —" He wisely checked himself. Accusations of not understanding were the very worst insult to an outdoor girl — formerly outdoor — a magna cum laude graduate who spoke three languages and had been published in the *Modern Language Journal*. She was no dumb blonde. But she didn't — she couldn't. . . . Not this.

"It doesn't work that way," he had said.

This time he wasn't lying. In fact, every trip now he drove further and further from home and hiked deeper and deeper into unfamiliar territory, as if intentionally trying to lose himself inside the forest labyrinth. At nightfall, when he should have been heading home, he would continue his aimless wandering as the full moon stalked him from tree to tree. He would hike until ten, eleven, midnight. Sometimes he would lie down on a bed of soft grass and close his eyes to the bubbling of a brook and the chanting of crickets and imagine himself falling asleep and waking up like Rip Van Winkle, with a beard to his knees. The thought always enticed him, but, ultimately, he would hike back to his car by moonlight and drive on home, stumbling into bed at three or four A.M. Carmen? She was out. Zonked. Slipping in beside her, he always wondered if he hadn't made a mistake.

But that was typical now. More and more he shunned company. He wanted to hunt alone, to be alone. And not just in the woods. At work he volunteered for solo assignments. At church he herded his little family into the chapel at nine sharp and beelined to the car right after the last amen. He took the rear exit, avoiding the hand-shaking mob. He boycotted church socials, dinner invites, any gathering of two or more. He was turning into a hermit minus the beard.

"Tonight," he had said. "Sometime."

No, he didn't like that tone. But if he was soft, accommodating, sensitive — like Dean? And where was Dean? Hemmed in, penned in. He had to get a passport and visa to go around the block. It was no way to live.

"I can't make friends *for* you."

"*You're* my friend — my best friend."

When she said that, he felt sorry for her.

"*You are*," she said.

Someday she was going to use the past tense.

Jack took a final swig and screwed the cap back on the canteen. His eyes quickly scaled the pines. The clouds had darkened in spots and grown threadbare in others, like faded blue jeans. The sun was a fuzzy blotch, a mole stubbornly trying to burrow its way through. Judging by its position, Jack figured it must be two or three o'clock. If he retraced his steps he would make it back to the access road by dark — no late stalks tonight: Dean would hit the panic button and send out the National Guard. Stuffing the canteen and trail snack into his pack, Jack surveyed the surrounding aspens as if snipers might be lurking within. A light breeze blew, shaking the lime-green leaves like sequins.

He had felt good heading out, but the queasiness soon returned to his midsection and quickly spread throughout his body. Nothing serious — feverish tremors, more irritating than distressing, but they were impeding his usually keen judgment. Weaving between the pines, he came on a fallen oak tree. It was rotten timber; he could see and smell the bat dung caulking the hollow center. Still, instead of going around — a minor inconvenience — he clutched a branch for support and slung his leg up over the side. The branch snapped and sent him reeling to the ground. A stupid, novice mistake. He popped up and brushed the wet pine needles off his backside. His shirt and pants were damp on the elbows and rear. He took his arrows from their bow-quiver and eyed each for damage. All okay. He hiked on, muttering self-reprimands.

The humming noise seemed to be growing louder. Was he nearing its source? Or had it centralized in his brain? Suddenly his head was buzzing fiercely. The whole damn hive must have been unleashed inside. He should have brought along a couple of aspirin, just in case. But he was too damn stubborn, self-willed. Had to do it *his* way. Because he was Jack W. Robinson, and he could outrun outhunt outhike outbike outlove. . . . He didn't need anyone or anything. Just like his old man. A carbon copy. That's what Dean had meant to say last night on the redwood deck. Why else had he ushered him outside so quickly after dinner? To show off Robinson Acres? All that he, Jack, could have had? Floodlights illuminated a lawn as big as a football field; the plastic dome over the swimming pool bulged like a giant blister. Every house in the neighborhood soared into the night sky like a churchhouse. Cathedral row. Was Dean rubbing his nose in it? No. That wasn't like Dean. He'd just wanted to clear the air.

"So how do you like your job?"

"I like it — I do." He nodded vigorously.

Dean got right to the point, more or less. "I could really use some help right now. I'm swamped."

Who was convincing whom?

"No thanks," Jack said.

"You're sure? This is no B.S., Jack. I really could use the help."

Did he think Uncle Sam was starving him?

"Thanks. We're fine. I like what I'm doing."

"You're sure?"

"Thanks."

Carmen would be mad — furious. She still made occasional digs about "the refusal." Semi-jokingly. But Jack had been a swinging single then. . . .

A small tear appeared in the clouds. Sunlight leaked through, tossing quick-glitter on the pines. Jack struggled along. He felt so listless, waterlogged. What was wrong? Every step another layer of mud stuck to his shoes. He was walking on twelve-inch heels, teeter-tottering on orthopedic feet.

He stopped to rest again. As he set down his bow and day pack, he saw a white flicker, a quick fuse, in the collage of green. A gray hump emerged from the shadows like a tiny island in the fog. Another hump, smaller and snow-spotted, followed behind. They were in no danger: it was buck season. Antlered deer only. Besides, he would never have shot a doe with a fawn.

The mother lowered her head and began nibbling the grass, but the little guy had noticed him. He was approaching on skinny, nimble legs, herky-jerky, like an old movie clip. Ten yards shy he stopped. Staring directly at the hunter, a camo-Picasso, he tilted his head this way and that, trying to make sense of the mottled configurations of greens, browns, and blacks, this human plant. He edged closer, five feet. Jack could have reached out and touched him. He was tempted — counting coup, like the Indians. The little fellow stamped his forehoof, jerking and twisting and ducking his angular head like a shadow boxer. Curious. Just full of it. Like Dean's kids.

Jack was thoroughly enjoying the spectacle, but the mother was not. Something was fishy, but she wasn't sure what. Intermittently she raised her nose, sniffing suspiciously. Seeing, smelling nothing, she resumed her cautious nibbling. Ultimately her sixth sense got the best of her. She stamped a hoof and motioned to junior with her head. Reluctantly the little guy obeyed but kept glancing back until they had disappeared into the shadows.

Jack clapped his hands triumphantly, violating the silence and sending a clattering of hooves through the woods. "Dean!" he gasped, looking around, almost expecting to find his brother there. "Dammit, Dean. . . ." This was it. To bag a buck was nice, but this was the real trophy. The journey truly was the destination.

Riding a momentary high, he spread the plastic garbage bag and sat down, recalling other deer he had taken. Two years ago, for the first time, he had almost been shut out. He had missed most of the season with special training for the Bureau. It was closing day, four A.M. Carmen didn't like it. "Sunday now? What do I tell the kids?"

"The ox is in the mire."

"Whose ox? Whose mire?"

"Yours. Mine. J. Edgar's."

"What next, Jack?"

"I'll be back . . . later."

He had driven to a wooded area an hour away and set up a tree stand. It was just after daylight when an eight-pointer began picking his way through the snow. It was a long shot, fifty-five, sixty yards, but he decided to chance it. He nocked an arrow, drew, anchored, released. The arrow hissed through the frigid air: one, two, three — counting to himself — forever it seemed. Then a quick double-rip, like fabric tearing, and the arrow bounced off an icy crust on the other side and scooted off across the snow. The buck looked around as if he had been struck by a pebble, lowered his antlered head, and continued nosing for grass. Then he folded up his spindly legs, lay down on his side, and calmly closed his eyes.

The rule was to always — *always* — wait a half hour minimum before retrieving your deer, no matter how sure the shot, because even a mortally wounded buck could spring to his feet and put a mile or two between himself and the hunter before dropping for good. But this time Jack had violated the rule, monkeying down the tree and sprinting to the animal. His instincts were correct. The arrow had nicked the heart and pierced cleanly through both lungs. A perfect shot, an instant kill. He skinned and gutted the animal in time to make it home for church at noon.

Another shot, two years earlier, had not been so perfect. Again he had shot from a tree stand, but this time it was autumn and the distance only thirty-five yards. But the broadhead had stuck in the buck's spine. He recalled the nightmare in painful detail: the animal lunging forward, his forehooves desperately pawing the ground as his hind legs collapsed; the grunting and snorting and awful head-heaving as he dragged himself miserably through the mud. Then Jack, sliding down the tree like a fireman, leaving half his palms on the bark, racing over and putting another arrow in the contorting animal, in the chest this time, the vitals; the buck's head rearing back, his anguished eyes glaring at his torturer — a split-second still-shot — then lunging again, twisting his antlered head as if trying to unscrew it, and the sounds — the awful snorting, choking sounds — the crippled leaps, blood dripping from both nostrils. Another arrow, another lunge. More flailing, grunting, snorting. "My God! Oh, my God!" He was turning him into a pin cushion.

Then the buck knife. Grabbing him by the antlers, sawing across his furry throat — a sloppy job; short, jagged cuts, the skin resistant, rubberized. Finally it gave, but a ghastly cry, blood-choke. "Dammit! Shit!" The vein! Get the vein! Not the damn vocal cords! He tried again, carving a fraction higher. The skin broke and blood gushed out like water from a faucet, smothering his trembling hands, splattering on the brown-and-gold earth.

Jack closed his eyes, bracing his forehead against his fists. That experience had almost made him give up bowhunting. He had sat out one season, a depressing winter. Housebound. Pacing the living room like a caged animal, staring out the perspiring windows at the gloomy Oregon sky, the eternal drizzle. No wonder the women went bonkers.

Three years later he had shot and killed a man. It was self-defense, in the

line of duty. What had bothered him far more than taking a man's life — this man's in particular: he was drug scum, a low-life who dealt cheap stuff to grade school kids, a playground parasite — was how easy it had been. He drew his pistol, he pulled the trigger, a man was dead. That simple. He remembered little about the man except that he wore a mustache. Brown. Wispy. Was he white? Hispanic? Married? Kids? Did he like baseball? Who cared? Who the hell cared?

Jack let his mind go blank. He listened to the squirrels shrieking back and forth and the never-ending buzz and the wind like an invisible presence, a cool hand stroking the back of his neck. He felt his strength dissipating again, a soft fever in his arms and shoulders.

He was on his feet. Grabbing his bow, shouldering his pack, heading out again. He didn't go far before entering an area that looked hauntingly familiar. The pines were sparse, arthritic, their crippled limbs cobwebbed with moss. Fallen trees were gutted, sawdust spilling out their jagged ends. The woods here seemed in a state of transient decay. Jack looked around, trying to get his bearings. No, he had not passed this way before. He decided to follow the downward slope, assuming that would eventually lead him back to the access road.

The woods thickened. Soon the pines were packed so tightly he had to turn sideways to squeeze through. Leaning and fallen trees barricaded every opening and thoroughfare. He crawled under some, over others, sneaking through gaps like a rat in a three-dimensional maze. An hour later, knees and elbows raw and bleeding, forehead lacquered with sweat, he stumbled onto another clearing: no. It was the river of volcanic rock. He was walking in circles.

His eyes followed the igneous flow up the mountain. A white mist spilled over the top, billowing downward like an avalanche in slow motion. Somehow he had gotten turned around. His built-in homing device had gone haywire.

Then he heard a sound like a rope being swung around and around — a huge rope, huge circles. He looked up and saw an enormous bird — eagle? condor? — beating its enormous wings. It was skirting the tops of the pines like a B-52 bomber. The bird traversed the gap in the sky and plunged down into the descending mist. Jack listened until he could no longer hear the haunting whoosh whoosh whooshing of its wings.

Gripping his bow, he started back down the mountain — or at least in the direction he thought was down. The woods looked dull and dark now, varnished without the shine. The aspens shook their leaves like a half-hearted cheering section. He told himself to relax, keep cool — follow the fundamental procedures. The Marines and the FBI had taught him that. But suddenly the forest had become his enemy. The pine trees glared at him like totem poles, every knothole a nefarious eye. He hastened his step to a trot. Soon he was sprinting recklessly through the woods, lowering his shoulder fullback-style and crashing through the branchwork. Limbs reached out like withered arms and clawed his camo clothing, scratched his cheeks, went for his eyes. He couldn't account for his panic; this had never happened to him before. Stumbling, he

took a shot on the hip that stung like a bullet. He scrambled to his feet and ran on, busting branches, trampling ferns and flowers, a human tornado.

He covered two congested miles in minutes. Sweat poured down his face and stung his eyes. He licked his salty lips. The sky had turned to soot. The mountain grumbled like a cantankerous old man. He was running out of gas. The nausea hit again, hot and cold tremors. He looked around, blinking, trying to clear his eyes. The trees were swaying like dancers on a crowded floor.

Again he ordered himself to slow down. His legs finally obeyed, but his heart raced on. His free hand was a machete hacking at branches. He began talking aloud — praying. Sort of. Except his voice, his words, seemed foreign to him. It was someone else speaking, uncertain quite what to say. Simple words, naive — like Anna and Jack, Jr.'s bedtime prayers: please bless Blankey and Pooh Bear and. . . His words were repetitious but for once they were not mechanical. They were real. Please, God, please.

The mountain grumbled again, a cynical reply. His ankles and knees were growing stiff. Rusty hinges. Hot and cold tremors chased up and down his spine, and a sweat and mucus mix formed in his mouth; he swallowed some, spit out the rest.

He saw a dead oak tree up ahead, its thick, gnarled trunk caught in a tortured pose, as if it had been electrocuted. It reminded him of a painting: Gethsemane.

Then he noticed the buzzing had stopped. Everything had. The forest was utterly still. He recognized that silence. He had heard it two days ago when they had stopped at the Grand Canyon en route to Flagstaff. It was just after sundown. The Japanese tourists had capped their cameras and filed back into the tour bus like an army of black and white Munchkins. Carmen and the kids had also gone back to the car. Standing alone on the overlook, Jack had gazed down into the vast, multi-tiered cavity that looked like a stairwell to the center of the earth. It had appeared fake, painted on. Overhead, a crow was circling the empty expanse, pinching something white in its beak — bread for some homeless Elijah? As night filled the void like black water, Jack had listened to the bottomless silence. It was the sound of peace and death and what comes after. It was the earth sighing.

Listening now, he heard voices within the silence, whispers flowing secretly from tree to tree. Children's voices. They grew louder, rising to a glass-breaking pitch. He had heard that sound before also, walking down the corridor at church:

Whenever I hear the song of a bird
Or look at the blue, blue sky . . .

Then he had peeked through the little window on the door at the rows of young children, Anna and Jack, Jr., among them, singing obediently along. But his kids had looked so stiff compared to the others, like they had guns pointed at their backs. Especially Anna with her perpetual side-glancing eyes — big, brown, half-spooked. Checking the corners — for what? The boogeyman? Child molesters? Kidnappers in Santa Claus clothing? Had he and Carmen laid it

on too thick about not talking to strangers and staying close to Mom and Dad? No. They had been frank but tactful. Carmen was good at that. But little Anna sensed some inherent danger — congenital paranoia? — *out there!* At school, at the store, at the park. Walking on eggshells, like a doe in season. Flinching at everything.

Jack, Jr., was worse. It had been near impossible getting him to stay in the nursery. That worried forehead. His mother's high cowlick. Doomed to early baldness. But why was he so afraid to play beartrap with his cousins? When Dad and Uncle Dean had lain out on the floor reaching for daring victims, his cousins had charged right in, laughing when they were caught and trapped in a scissors hold. Jack, Jr., had played the wallflower, fingers in his mouth, blue eyes bulging. Caution was one thing, but intense paranoia? It was no way for a kid to act. Yet the vibes were there.

Whenever I feel the rain on my face
Or the wind as it rushes by
Whenever I touch a velvet rose
Or walk by a lilac tree
I'm glad that I live in this beautiful world
Heavenly Father created for me.

Beautiful, yes. The mountains were beautiful, the forests, the oceans and deserts. The animals, they were beautiful. People? The double-breasted executive, Mr. Yuppie, who lived in a castle on Houston's west side with his beautiful blonde wife and one-year-old daughter. A letter to his "business" partner: "I've been putting semen in her bottle at night to acclimate her to the taste. . . ." My God. Sicko-weirdo. The world was full of them. The kid didn't have a chance.

Kids. If the perverts didn't get them . . . The Houston man who blistered the buttocks of a two-year-old — Jack, Jr.'s look-alike, that same mournful look of imminent disaster. A fly forever on the verge of being swatted. He'd had an accident, a little dribble down the leg. So what? Hadn't Mr. Macho ever wet his pants? Whack! Whack! Whack! with a hairbrush. "Don't you never do that again!" Later, sniffing, rubbing his fist back and forth under his runny nose, the boy had crept back into the living room where Mom and Mr. Macho were watching TV. She was trailer trash. Swollen arms, swollen face. Levis that could barely contain her thighs. Hillbilly hair. Her boyfriend was spread out on the sofa, cracked vinyl with the foam rubber stuffing leaking out. Shirt open, beer dribbling down his chest, a tattoo on his upper arm: LIVE TO RIDE, RIDE TO LIVE.

"What did you learn, boy?"

"Ass hurt," the boy said, pointing to it. Miming Mom's vocabulary.

The man lunged and grabbed the boy by the arm, shaking him till his eyeballs did somersaults. "What? What the fuck did you say? I'll teach you to talk like that!"

He snatched the nearest thing — a pepper shaker — pried the boy's mouth open, and emptied it. The kid gagged, flailing his spider arms, then went limp.

The mother screamed — token protests, but they got her probation. The judge tried to strike a deal to have her ovaries removed, but bleeding hearts had rushed in screaming human rights. Human? Mr. Macho got ten. He'd be on the streets in two.

That was the beautiful world his kids sang about in Sunday School. The real world. Jack's world. This wasn't the *Cosby Show*. In the world he worked in, love was never spoken. Satan picked your nose and made you eat it. Shat and fed it to you on a cowpie platter. Carmen, Diane — what did they know about it? Dean, he knew something, but what he knew he was trying to forget. And Jack? He wanted, however blindly, to believe again.

He continued on, walking now, picking his way through the pines. An hour later when he once again found himself standing at the bottom of the volcanic river, he finally admitted to himself he was lost.

He closed his eyes, half-hoping that when he opened them he would be somewhere else. When he did, everything looked out of focus. Fog coming? Or was he going blind? Scales frosting up his eyes? No. Just the damn virus playing havoc with him. He removed his pack and began stuffing his mouth with trail snack. The raisin-nut-oatmeal mix had a fecal taste. He spit it out and rinsed his mouth with canteen water.

He hiked on, his queasiness giving way to despair. The buzzing started up again, from nowhere, and the taunting chatter of squirrels. His arms and legs were growing numb. He tried to wriggle his toes, but they had turned to stone. His strength was draining fast. He dropped his bow and fell to his knees, then onto his side. He rolled over onto his back and could feel the pine needles piercing him. I'm a pin cushion, he thought. It comes full circle.

He tried to move, but his body refused. He was staked to the ground. Gazing up at the branch-fractured sky, he admitted something else: he was afraid.

The clouds clamped shut. The thunderheads billowed like smoke from a devastating fire, and he heard the first faint plinks of rain.

It began as a soft, easy drizzle but quickly thickened until fat beads were splattering all over him. He mustered up enough strength to roll onto his belly and then, with nauseating effort, as if he were carrying the planet Atlas-style on his shoulders, he rose up on his hands and knees and squirmed the shoulder straps free. The pack slid down his back and hit the ground. He tried to unzip it, but his fingers were prosthetics. He finally managed, using his teeth, and removed his plastic poncho. But he couldn't get it on. His hands weren't cooperating.

Clawing the soggy soil, he dragged himself towards a fir tree and huddled underneath, head tucked like a skid row drunk, as the rain hurtled ruthlessly down. He looked up. Though it showed no burns or black scars, the tree looked lightning-struck. Skeletal. This whole part of the forest appeared to be cursed, scourged. The rain roared down, thoroughly drenching him. His camo clothing clung to him like an amphibious second skin. His teeth chattered. He hugged himself to stay warm. He was standing under a roof with no shingles.

My God, what had he done? What had he ever done? The day of his

graduation, his father shoveling down the rest of his Taco Loco, too hyped up to truly taste the Mexican chef's handiwork:

"We'll go fifty-fifty to start, and when I retire, I'll give you the whole damn thing! That won't be long — two, maybe three years is all."

Jack had forked a gob of cheese off his enchilada and studied it for the longest time as his father's cavernous smile gradually closed. No. Sorry. He couldn't see himself pushing pencils for the next forty years.

His father smiled, nodding. I'm a Vet, I understand, his pale blue eyes had said, dirgeful. He opened his billfold and dropped a fifty-dollar bill on the table — triple the tab. His paying hand patted Jack on the shoulder, then suddenly gripped it like a talon. His eyes were filled with tiny pink fractures. Jack was seeing him, for the first time, totally exposed. His bald head — the one that used to flash like a warrior's helmet whenever he charged the net with his Jack Kramer Special and slammed home the foolhardy lob of his foolhardy opponent — was wrinkled now, a turnip texture.

"Jeezos peezos, Jack, take the damn thing, will you?"

Jack looked down; he couldn't bear to see his father like that: pleading. "I can't, Pop."

"Who then? Who? You tell me!"

Dean? The Momma's Boy? Take over the dry-cleaning empire he'd built from scratch? It would fold in a week. Dean didn't have the temperament, the gumption, the balls for crissake.

"Sleep on it. Will you do that? Think it over?" He was begging. It was pathetic. He was.

"I have, Pop. I'm sorry."

"Goddammit all! You know what you're throwing away? To go play army?"

Jack stared at his napkin, spotted with enchilada sauce, like blood. Then he felt a thunk, his father's knuckles on the side of his head. Like old times. Except this time he did not call him knot-head or asshole. He didn't need to.

Two days later Jack boarded the plane for Officers Candidate School in Quantico. Did he regret it now? Standing on Dean's redwood deck at twilight, gazing across the fleet of multi-storied rooftops and the golf course receding into the pines like a rolling green ocean. . . . Dammit all, Dean! Dammit! Don't look at me like that — that mokey-dopey-eyed pitying look. I don't care. I honest to God don't care about your swimming pool and Cadillac and your clear-as-crystal well-water. Just please don't look at me like that. Don't think what you're thinking.

No. He was doing what he wanted. Maybe not what Carmen wanted or what Dean and Diane wanted. But you have to trade a lot to live like the lords and ladies of the mountain. White collar bark and beg. Here, boy! Fetch, boy! Roll over, boy! They needed so damn much — or thought they did — to be happy in the great American way. Hell, all he needed was a bow and a sleeping bag.

And an umbrella, he thought as the rain splattered down, varnishing fallen logs and lichen-covered rocks. He was lost in a rain forest. He fumbled with his poncho, but his fingers were rubber hooks. Fat and worthless.

Gradually the rain thinned. He stood up, but his legs were sand bags. He stumbled towards a huge log and sat down. It crumbled on contact. He was sitting in it, like a porta-john. The Great White Hunter, stuck! If Dean could see him now! If Carmen. . . !

Pressing down with his palms, he tried to lift himself out, but his arms were empty sleeves. He felt like a total ass. Where was his dunce cap? Dean could do no worse than this.

Thunder cracked the sky. The B-52 dropping its leftovers. The sky was black and boiling. Lightning slashed across it. The devil's pitchfork. Or God's crooked cimiter? The mountain exploded again, and the ground beneath him trembled.

Then a pellet struck him in the head. Another. Handfuls. Hard white bullets were striking the earth and hopping around like Mexican jumping beans, millions of them. Thickening like snow. Christmas in September. What next?

Jack covered his head with his hands and waited it out. Carmen would laugh if she found out — and it would not be a fun laugh. It would be sinister. Just desserts. Quiet, think-no-evil Carmen had summoned the gods on her behalf.

What had happened to Carmen? To him — *them*? Had they become dumb statistics, victims of the life cycle: boy meets girl, they fall in love, get married, have children; they grow old, they die. . . . When he tried, he could still see and smell those premarital summer evenings in the hammock on the porch of the old stone house overlooking the Provo Valley. Crickets, the muddy canal, the tantalizing redolence of fresh-cut grass. Warm nights, clear skies, the electromagnetic manta ray outline of the Wasatch. The cool aphrodisia of apple blossoms, Utah Lake paved with midnight, the furnaces of Geneva Steel lighting up the sky like Moses' fire by night. Her supple body in cut-offs that rode her thighs like a teddy, frayed hems on golden flesh, back when they were both virgins and permanently in heat, drunk with the mystery of flesh and summer and innuendo. Dangling the carrot. Playing her trump card so expertly. How they suck you in, those Mormon girls: a little hot necking, purring in your ear: "After you're married in the temple, do you have to wear your garments *all* the time?" Running a finger down his chest, his belly, to his belt. Always stopping there. The prenuptial tease.

Typical, that once the ring was on the finger . . . No. She hadn't planned it that way. Who could have foreseen? A universal lament among men. Maybe the Italians had the right idea — a wife for formal home life, domestic cares, public entourage, and a mistress for skin thrills. Sexfeste. To purge the male animal.

Or polygamy. Another erased option. Then again . . . one wife was plenty. More than plenty? If they only realized their holding power, what just an occasional surprise, to wake up in the middle of the night to her hand stroking your crotch — lips even. Yes. No. Go. It wasn't just the raw meat thrill of it either, but her, your wife, doing it to you and no one else. A stroke of righteous wickedness once in a while. If they only realized But maybe it was better they remained stale. On ice. Easier to get out the door.

Jack listened to the last hard pellets rebound off the pines. The clouds had shredded slightly. Jack sucked in the wintry fragrance — like Thor, tightening his magic belt to double his strength — and brought his fist down on the log: it gave way like balsa wood. Again. Again. Again. Smashing a gap around his entrapped buttocks, pressing down with both fists, he managed to lift himself out, but the effort sapped his little remaining energy. Three steps and he was on his knees. Dear God, Father . . . He knew what he wanted, needed, to say, but the words — he couldn't articulate.

He closed his eyes, thinking, saying nothing. When he opened them, sunlight spotted the ground, a leopard look. The wet pine needles glistened brilliantly, yet little drops continued striking his camo hat. He looked up and saw a blue wedge splitting the grim clouds. Sunshine rain. The devil's beating his wife, he thought. Then he realized the drops were falling from the bearded branches overhead. He laughed, his voice booming through the woods. He felt his strength returning, a helium sensation. But when he tried to stand, his body crumbled. He lay twisted on his side, gunned down. Alone — so totally alone. As the sun spots dimmed, his spirit seemed to depart with them, leaving his wrecked body behind. Something grabbed him by the throat, his peppered throat, and reached down until he gagged. He was choking. Thrashing on the wet ground, clawing at his collar, he cried out. It let go. But the voice was not his but his son's. Whiney Jack, Jr., spindly, fidgety, nervous-in-the-service. And so damn tense. When he ate, his bowels knotted up and he would be constipated for days. Screaming on the toilet as he tried to push out baseballs. *Always* yelling — he had no other volume. Loud and louder. So intractable, demanding. Just like . . . Dad?

Jack had finally plugged his ears — his heart, too? Had he and Carmen grown accustomed to his constant racket, like the yellow jackets buzzing in the netherwoods? No wonder she looked dragged through ten knotholes at the end of the day. Zombie eyes. He ought to tell her, express at least this much. It was so damn hard. Hey, but that's life. He couldn't help — yes. Some things. His gruff homecomings. Eight, nine, ten o'clock sometimes. New job, long hours, commuting an hour to and from. Sure he was tired, too pooped to pop. But if there were dirty dishes in the sink, he'd look, grunt, mumble something — kids asleep? Grab his dinner from the oven, wrapped in tin foil. Wolf it down. Caliban. While Carmen quickly cleared the table and slipped off to bed to play possum.

The woods grew darker. His eyes climbed the pines. The sky was smothered again. An old woman's wind-ravaged hair. Witch whorls. Lying on his side, he curled up like an embryo and closed his eyes. Dear God, Father. . . .

When he looked again, little geysers were steaming up the forest, as if a great fire had been quenched. He rose to his feet and slowly, comically, like a drunk on a tightrope, began picking his way through the webwork. Eventually he stumbled across a game trail and followed it through a chain of small meadows, encouragingly familiar, that ended in a thick grove of aspens whose sour apple scent was weirdly inebriating. Where was he now? The white-trunked trees formed a protective wall around a garden of hanging vines and

flowers. Blossoms of all colors spotted the scene like bright wallpaper. Sunlight leaked through the branched rafters. Looking up, he saw deep cuts and slices of blue. Tiny prisms and mini-rainbows sparkled on the grass. Waist-deep in ferns, inhaling the green delirium, he began shivering again, but not from the wetness or the cold. He felt warm and weak but wonderfully so. Light as air. His spirit departing again but this time his body was coming along for the ride.

Then he saw it — them. There were two.

They were standing side by side, identical except one was slightly larger than the other, like a mature father and son. Big and beautifully black, a small tree branching from each head, they stood perfectly still, like statues chiseled from obsidian, staring at him as if they had been expecting him and were maybe a little peeved because he had kept them waiting.

Even if he had had an elk tag, even if he had been within range — fifty yards, fifty feet, ten inches . . . No. It would have been the height of petty human arrogance, like shooting an arrow at the sun or trying to build a tower to heaven.

Jack returned their stare, waiting, but for what he wasn't sure. He wanted them to stay, linger, approach even.

The exchange was brief. The bigger one, the poppa, lifted his head slightly — a dare? a challenge? an invitation? — waited a moment or two, then turned and strutted off, his miniature following like a shadow. The aspens seemed to momentarily part for them, an Arabian Nights phenomenon.

Then they were gone.

The barbed wire was a giveaway. He followed it up a small rise and down a mile or so to where the forest ended abruptly, a few feet shy of another fence-line. By the time he reached the trail, the sky had cleared except for a few clouds bunched up above the peaks. Birds twittered, and the aspens blazed flesh-white as the sun made a soft landing on the hilly horizon. It flared briefly, a phoenix-finale, then dropped out of sight, leaving only a gassy pink residue behind. The blue sky darkened. Calm waters. A coyote howled. Then silence. Jack paused to listen. It was the sound of twilight, of the wind. It was the sound of the rock he had tossed over the great canyon's rim whistling all the way down to the bowels of the earth. A bird, a falcon falling.