The Coyote Hunter

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ALL THE TIME I WAS GROWING UP, my father would go out coyote hunting. His was the typical beat-up pickup with the full gun rack in the back window. He had a gun cabinet in the house and a pistol in the seat pocket in his car. He prominently displayed his NRA membership sticker on all his outfits.

This doesn't accurately describe him, however. It's all true, but it sounds like he was a gun-toting fanatic or a flagrant gun-slinger. He wasn't. In his hands, a gun was a tool, not a weapon.

I am uncomfortable now with the fire-power in and around my father's house. But it is a recently acquired discomfort. I grew up with his guns and was a pretty good shot myself. I took and passed Hunter's Safety. I only went hunting once, however, with my uncle and cousin and got a rabbit right in the eye or wherever you are supposed to get a rabbit. It's a distasteful memory to me as I think of my cousin showing me how to step on the rabbit's head and pull on the body to tear the head off. As disgusting as the thought is to me now, I was proud then.

Other more pleasant memories are of target shooting with friends and surprising the guys by beating them. One of my fondest Christmas memories is going trap shooting on Christmas day to try out my brother's new skeet shoot. I was not uncomfortable with firearms until I lived in a few big cities and began to understand the myriad uses for guns other than hunting.

Dad grew up in a western wilderness. He talked about being lucky to have grown up when "we had the outdoors to ourselves." I grew up in the same hometown he did—the same one his mother did. It's small now, maybe 500 people. Then, the town consisted of about 100. And my father and his younger brother spent a lot of time with their father on the mountain. Grandpaps was a sheepherder and a trapper for the government. Dad trapped and hunted all of his life. It was what he had learned when he was a boy.

Dad's favorite pastime was coyote hunting. "I'm goin' out after coyotes," he'd say and be gone for several hours. Though I grew up there, I

never became as familiar as he was with the geography of the area. There was South Valley, Sheep Creek, Dowd Mountain. He would drive around in his pickup looking for coyotes. His eyes were always keen. He only started needing glasses for reading his last couple of years.

Once when we were visiting home and my first daughter was old enough to enjoy it, we went for a ride all together on an unpaved backroad to Henry's Fork. After a ways, we pulled off the road on a hill overlooking a valley. It was almost dusk. When the engine stopped, a stillness settled in. An autumn chill was in the air, the valley in blue shadow, the field full of deer. From across the valley, a coyote howled. The deer started and ran. Dad returned the coyote call. We listened and an answering call came. Dad was too out of breath from emphysema to continue, but his great pleasure in the surroundings was obvious. This was what he was about.

The Dad I knew was a quiet, solitary person although later I came to realize he was social in his own way. Though there is no bank, movie theater, library, or doctor, there have always been two or three cafes open in town. And Dad would visit at least one every day for coffee. I think then he could be quite talkative. And first thing in the morning and last thing at night, he would visit his folks up the hill for a cup.

To explain Dad, I probably should explain about his family some. Paps and Gramma lived up the hill from us near the school. They also had a ranch about ten miles out of town. Gramma would go "out to the ranch" at least once a day, usually driven by one of her kids or grandkids.

Dad's family was unpretentious. Much of what Dad was came from the way his parents were, I think. They always had company. Family and friends could drop by anytime. Gramma would say, "Set ya down." And when you had to go, she'd say, "Don't need to rush off," even if you'd been there for hours. And then as you'd go out the door, she'd say, "Slip back." It wasn't effusive hospitality you felt there. Sometimes it seemed like indifference. But maybe it was acceptance for what you were; acceptance of what they were. Had the Queen of England or the President of the United States come to visit, they would not have been treated any differently than any other visitor. They would have been offered a seat and a cup of coffee and asked to join in the pinochle game that was invariably going on.

And that was how Dad was. He didn't expect people to be different than what they were. I always tried to make him proud of me. I think he was, but I don't remember him ever saying it. Maybe it was because he would have felt the same about me whatever I had done. He would have loved me. He would have tried to help me if he could. Whatever accomplishments I had were nice, but they weren't necessary. Maybe that's how he felt.

Dad's variety of fatherhood consisted mainly of keeping the family fed and warm which he did well. He was a hard worker. He was not a

demonstrative person for whatever reason, and he didn't believe in the need to teach people (i.e., his kids) things. "Nobody taught me," he'd respond to my mother's injunctive to teach us something.

Perhaps one reason he hadn't needed to be taught was because he was very observant. One of his baffling abilities was to guess what he was getting for Christmas. No matter how carefully wrapped, how cleverly concealed, how painstakingly disguised his presents were, he could stroll over to the Christmas tree, sit back on one heel, shake his present a little, and then guess what it was. Every time. His quiet observations served him well at Christmas present guessing. And at other things, too, I imagine.

Much of what Dad learned came from growing up in the country, hours away from shops and stores. He had to learn to fix things himself, and he could fix anything. He used to work on the t.v. That was back in the days of those damn horizontal and vertical knobs. Lines on the t.v. would go up and down, back and forth. Our t.v. would get to where we couldn't watch it without getting sick or having to sit with one hand on the knob turning whenever the mechanical vertigo would start.

Dad would move the t.v. away from the wall—no easy task in an age of console t.v.'s. My job was to hold a mirror in front so Dad could see the picture as he worked on the back. He would bark orders at me to hold the mirror still. He'd work on whatever it was that was back there until the quality of the picture satisfied him or he had to admit it was unfixable.

Once after I was married, Dad was visiting our home and helping put something together. I found the instructions and gave them to him. "I don't use the instructions," he said, half apologetically. I was surprised and impressed. I have had to become the handy-person in my family. I grew up watching Dad fix things, so I know it can be done. But I need instructions—careful step-by-step instructions with big pictures. Then I can eventually put it together—usually.

When I was six months pregnant, I naively bought a lawn mower still in the box. I asked the salesman if it was difficult to put together, and he said no. He was obviously a man who had put a lot of lawnmowers together. When I opened the box, a myriad of parts and wires spilled out. But there were instructions. So with three-year-old in tow, I put the thing together. Not without calling Dad several times, however, to find out for sure which was the cotterpin or which the hex nut.

Once in college the fuel pump went out on my car. It was one of those rare occasions when I had a boyfriend. And he offered to fix the car. We bought the part and proceeded to get to know one another better than was good for our relationship. We got the fuel pump on, but the car still didn't work. Half-way around the block on the test drive, it quit again. Had there been a cliff handy, this story would have a different ending. Instead, I called Dad. School was a 160 miles and three hours from home, and in about three

hours, Dad was there to fix the car. We had gotten the wrong part. Dad got the right one and fixed the car.

Usually he didn't have to come, but could diagnose the problem over the phone. One of my cars was a hands-on lesson in mechanics. I am quite confident around cars when it comes to batteries, fuel lines, and tires, but especially carburetors. My car kept dying, and Dad thought that my carburetor probably had some dirt in it, and if I would just get a rock and tap on the top, it would loosen the dirt and the car would start. I eventually bought a big wrench which worked nicely whenever the carburetor needed a good tap.

The first time I couldn't get the car started, however, was when I was in a mall parking lot. While there was an abundance of cars, there were no rocks to be had. Dad's advice to get a rock showed what a country father I had. His world view included rocks wherever you needed them.

Dad didn't live by a schedule. Most of his life he worked for himself and kept his own hours. He drove the school bus for close to thirty years, but that was mostly for the insurance and left him free during the day for his other jobs. City people think driving school bus is an easy job and entails going up and down blocks. For us, it was a job for the best and strongest drivers. One run brought kids from Dutch John over the mountain—close to an hour one way. And in the winter, the roads could be and often were treacherous, the pavement icy, the switchbacks steep. And one year Dad drove that bus there was a flood in Sheep Creek Canyon wiping out the paved road. The only way over the mountain for a good year after that was on the old dirt switchbacks which were only wide enough for one vehicle. If two cars met, one would have to back up to a wide space in the road and let the other pass.

I remember going on the school bus with him one time. It was such a long way that he would stay overnight in a little trailer and get up early and bring the bus back over the mountain in the morning. I stayed with him that night. It was a little blue trailer. I remember there wasn't much to it, just a place for Dad to sleep, a stove, a small bathroom, a cupboard with a few cans of soup.

The other bus route he drove until he retired was a rough one, too. He would drive up to Birch Creek in the very early hours. In winter, he would have to go extra early to give the bus time to warm up. He rigged up a heater for his truck that he could plug in at night so the truck would start in the mornings.

Dad was so quiet and unassuming, he was like a part of the bus, seemingly oblivious to the squawking and mayhem going on behind him. But he was alert and aware. The kids never got too carried away because he'd stopped the bus by the side of the road a time or two.

Once on a hot day the kids got him to stop at a cafe on the edge of town

so they could get ice cream cones. When they came back, a couple of the little ones who had no money and no older sibling or friend to fend for them came back empty handed. Dad was pretty irritated at the other kids for not getting the little ones some ice cream and went and bought them some himself.

One of Dad's jobs was a sheep shearer. He had his own equipment. It's still up in the old house somewhere. He told about the summer before he got married, he got a job shearing sheep and was paid $1 a head. That day he sheared one hundred sheep earning himself $100. That was the most he ever sheared in one day, he told me proudly.

For those who don't know, sheep shearing is back-breaking work. Only a canvas bag serves as a gate to the sheep pens. The animals could bolt and run, but they're too dumb to know they can get by the canvas.

First, you reach past the canvas and grab a sheep by the leg, usually a hind leg. Sheep kick like the devil. You pull the sheep out and flip it onto its back and set it up holding its head between your knees. Then you shear down the neck, over the belly and inside the legs. You turn the sheep over and catch its head between your legs again and finish shearing the wool, over the back, down the legs. A good shearer like Dad never nicked the skin or drew blood and could shear the wool off in one piece.

Shearing for Paps and Gramma was a family project. Dad was their oldest son. When I was little, I helped out, too. The little kids were responsible for catching the lambs. We'd chase them down and bring them in to be docked and castrated. I never did try the after-shearing delicacy of Rocky Mountain oysters.

The men sheared sheep and the women fixed lunch. The bigger kids stuffed the wool into burlap bags that must have been ten feet long. The bags were put onto a big wooden tower with a platform at the top that had a round hole in the middle. The opening of the sack was attached to the hole by a big metal ring. Then the wool was passed up to someone on top who would put the wool into the bag. One of us would be inside the bag and tromp down the wool as it was put in. When it was full and packed down tight, we'd sew it shut with a big needle and twine and replace it with an empty sack.

We always had to check carefully for ticks after we'd been shearing. We especially had to check in our hair. We'd pick one another over monkey fashion to make sure we were tick-free. When we weren't, we'd have to go through the de-ticking process. If you put salad oil on the tick to smother it, it will back out of your skin. Then you burn it because you can't kill it any other way. At least that's what we believed. I guess we could have flushed it down the toilet, but burning it was so much more satisfying.

Mom always told Dad how soft his hands were after he'd been shear-

ing. The lanolin in the wool made his rough, calloused hands soft and smooth.

Dad had a funny way with money. He always paid his bills, and he was never broke. He always had at least two jobs and usually more. Money came in from here and there. None of us children learned how to hold on to money—but Dad knew how.

Once when I was pretty little, I went down to the basement to get something and there was Dad counting a wad of money. When he saw me, he put the money back into a coffee can and then inside a cinder brick block in the wall. He didn't say anything about it. I sneaked down later and counted it a couple of times. I don't remember how much was there, but it was a lot. One time when I went to see it, it was gone—off to some other hiding place.

When I was a teenager, my mom hollered at me to come here. She was cleaning out a closet. She handed me some cash—over $8,000. She'd found it hidden away in an envelope underneath the filing cabinet. All his life, he kept some money hidden. It wasn't all he had, but enough to make himself feel safe, not having to trust completely in financial institutions.

My father was a good man. He did not live within the graces of the church though he came from a long line of Mormons and had been baptized as an adult. He and his brother and a couple of buddies were all baptized the same day. I found this out when I was working on his personal history. What made them decide to get baptized, I asked him. He couldn't remember just why they'd all decided to take the plunge that day.

Dad smoked from the time he was a teenager, and that's what killed him. He was sick with emphysema for a long time. He'd had trouble breathing for years. Ever since I could remember, the first sound in the morning would be Dad coughing after he got up. He'd been to several doctors, had been down to Mexico to get medication banned in the U.S.

He could have lived to be an old, old man because longevity ran in his family. And his heart was strong until the end. It kept him going long after he wanted to. His biggest lesson in life, he told me, was not to smoke cigarettes.

Toward the end he got so sick he had to go to the hospital. We all thought he was going to die then, but he pulled through enough to come home, to wait there to die.

My husband and kids and I were able to stay with my parents for a couple of weeks after he got home from the hospital, and I knew it was probably the last time I would see him. I kept feeling like I wanted to make sure nothing was left unsaid. Several times I went into his room to tie up all loose ends. But it was never right, and I finally realized it would never be right because it wasn't him to say everything—it wasn't us. So I just sat

in his room with him. Sometimes we talked. Mostly we didn't. Nothing was left unsaid that shouldn't have been.

In his last months of life, his biggest concern was not to put anyone out. He was an invalid, bedridden, yet he didn't expect, let alone demand anything from anyone except maybe Mom. While I was with them, I took care of him while Mom went back to work. I would fix his meals and take them in to him. I was touched by my mother's meticulous care of him. She carried his food in on a cookie sheet covered with a place mat and set carefully with silverware so that it would be nice. I tried to do the same.

I found some instant breakfast in the cupboard and made him a fancy shake trying to get as many calories in as possible. He drank it every morning and thanked me. After a few days when I went to make it, Mom was there and told me that Dad didn't like the chocolate instant breakfast. But he had never said anything. He didn't want to put me out or act unappreciative.

There was so much more to my father than I knew. I began to understand this a little when I saw the outpouring of support and care from the community. Those small town people are always available when someone needs help. Still, the sustained support and kindness were unbelievable. While I was there, visitors would come daily and would sit with Dad and chat. I heard a lot of stories from the past and came to know my father a little better. He was much more talkative with his old friends than I had ever known him to be.

He is gone now. Even though his death was expected and even prayed for, I wince with the memory of his passing. And though I believe in and am grateful for the plan of salvation, it's sometimes not enough. I don't doubt that he is somewhere. But he is not here. And I miss him.

My father was a simple man, lacking in ways. Yet there was more good in him than his quiet demeanor and solitary style would suggest. A few months before he died, I finished his personal history. I'm grateful I persisted in getting it done. I was able to learn a lot about him from that. When I asked him how he wanted to be remembered, he said, "I want people to remember that I was honest and a hard worker." I do, Dad. I remember.