

Hunting Bambi's mom

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Bambi - The relationship I have with hunting is, “it’s complicated,” as they say in the social media. I have Bambi issues.

Best shot in the family with iron sights, was Mom. She stilled her breathing and heartbeat to mimic a cave dweller frozen in a glacier.

When we were younger our whole family went out shooting. We set cans against a hill and truded down the hill and up another hill to peer seventy-five yards across a small valley at what were now microscopic Campbell’s Pork & Beans cans and Tide detergent boxes (“Dirt can’t hide from intensified Tide.”)

Mom squeezed the trigger and nailed Campbell right through the weenies.

I grew up in a family of hunters in the American west. Wyoming, Oklahoma, West Texas. I don’t have blood in my veins. I have red dirt. We always had rifles and shotguns leaning in the corner of my dad’s closet.

We learned how to clean the guns and how to safely cross a fence with an unloaded shotgun or rifle, passing it from one to the other. We learned when to shoot and when not to shoot, being mindful of what lay directly beyond the target.

We went hunting in the fall and winter for doves, pheasants and deer. With deer it was almost always a buck, but sometimes not. Seeing a doe stretched out across the hood of the Jeep unsettled me. It’s perfectly legal to shoot a female, but still, I could not help thinking of Bambi’s mom, who was taken by hunters. I never asked my dad about it; I didn’t have the articulation to formulate my question at age nine. But why a doe? The unquiet image has remained to this day, thank you, Mr. Disney.

Dad never needed to explain that you hunt for food, not to kill something. We didn’t do “trophies.”

We just knew it. Never shoot an animal you don’t intend to eat unless you’re protecting your chickens from possums and rats, and the sheep from coyotes. I do recall shooting a crow or two in the garden. Somehow, crows just piss you off.

Then one day when I was in high school, without becoming “anti-hunting,” I simply stepped away from it. The hunting urge, and me, went separate ways. Culling the deer herd eases overpopulation and their impact on the surrounding habitat, and I’m okay with that. Why hunting’s thrill dissipated from me is probably one for the shrink. Maybe it’s a Bambi’s mom thing, but whatever, I went with my gut.

In my 40s, I was invited to go deer hunting in West Virginia. Partly, I think I wanted to see if I still felt the same way. I do enjoy walking around outdoors with a bigass gun, blasting the hell out of things. That, and blowing stuff up, are primal urges. So I accepted. I ended up on a wooden platform in a tree fifteen feet up, holding a deer rifle. It was a frigid late-November morning. I had been in the tree since before dawn, but I had a jug of hot coffee, and the rising sun that came through the branches made it worth the price of admission.

Numbing cold gave way to a world rimmed in gold and an austere beautiful fog that lasted only long enough to make me see the ghosts of Civil War soldiers tramping through the cane and milk thistle.

The sun warmed only the places it reached. Moving my hand in and out of the shade, I could feel twenty degrees of difference. My rifle rested in the crook of the tree. Deer passed by now and then, only one or two hundred yards away. I glassed them through the scope and could see the muscles of their shoulders and haunches rippling beneath the fur. They were lean, healthy. Close enough to reach out and touch. God, this was beautiful.

Then I heard a rustling close by. A magnificent buck and three females came strolling and grazing into my field of view. They stood directly in front of me, twenty feet away. His females, stood next to him inside his sphere of protection, and I thought, Well, you're a lucky man.

He reminded me of a 19th century mega-stud power broker, an invincible decision-maker, a railroad baron with a cigar and snifter of brandy. Only this was the younger, muscled Yale wrestling team version of that. And then I realized...

Omigod, it's freakin' William Howard Taft.

William Howard Taft, the last U.S. president to have sported facial hair while in office, had come back as a white-tailed deer in West Virginia, and was calmly munching winter wheat not two dozen feet away. I'd know that face anywhere. Surrounded by his entourage, he was at his winter estate with Bambi's mom and his secretaries.

I stayed quiet, motionless, stilling my soul, like Mom would have, giving off no signs of life, devoid even of self-awareness. I was dressed in brown camouflage, tree-brown scarf and wool hat. Peering through the crotch of the tree, I "became" the tree. The kind of tree that wears glasses and holds a rifle.

The rifle spoke to me, as they sometimes do when they feel free to speak their mind. In a prehistoric voice I heard through my hands, it said, "Hunt, survive, feed your family, live. Other deer will grow strong where this one once stood."

The rifle reminded, "This too is love."

There is no way to fathom this if you don't hunt, but I know the truth of it to the last corpuscle of my body.

I comforted the rifle, saying, "I have learned much from you. You have given more than you have taken. But I don't need this buck to feed my family. I have other ways." Mine was a view one acquires after having lived a certain number of years. The young archer, his blood hot, cannot think this way.

The buck, an ever watchful sentinel, looked up from chewing the grass. His gaze wandered farther up the tree. He saw me and stared, thought, This is a tree... and yet... something is off here... what? A tuft of grass hung comically from his gaping mouth. Then it registered on him. Holy crap! Where did you come from?! The look on his face was priceless. I'm sure his gentleman friends at the club still razz him about it over brandy and cigars in the off-season.

I grinned at him, waved, and in my friendliest voice ever, said quietly, "Mr. President."

All four of them must have jumped ten feet in the air. Without ceremony they simply vanished. Their hooves made almost no noise, and even then, only for a second. They were gone. I poured myself another cup of coffee.

Hunting is a partnership, a relationship between human beings and the creation.

What was essential to do at one time, is somewhat less so now, and is therefore a topic of heated debate. Through greedy excess, through wanton slaughter, through killing game from the back of a goddamn pickup truck driving down the road, through hiring someone to shoot your animal and bring it back to the lodge so you can have something to mount on the wall of your man cave – through all these things we disgrace ourselves and the gifts given to us.

To hunters who honor the process as sacred, and yes, sometimes necessary, who feel this covenant for which the creation holds us responsible, I salute you. There aren't that many of you still out there, but to those who show reverence for the eternal nature of this love, I will carry your gun.