
Dear, deer

By Scott Weeks

My feet felt like blocks of wood, and my hands were starting to get those nasty, driving pains that precede proper medical frostbite. Jim and Dan were down in the valley trying to scare some deer out into the meadow, while I was slowly succumbing to hypothermia up on the ridge.

Dan was kind enough to leave a Space Blanket™ behind—I had it wrapped around and underneath my body, keeping most of the wind out. The steel on the trigger guard of the gun was cold enough to burn my fingers so I kept them stuffed into my armpits. Each time I moved them it felt like I was putting an ice pack under my arms.

Over at the edge of the bowl the trees broke a shape, as it skirted along the outside of the clearing I maneuvered my .270 so that I could see clearly through the scope. I'm no hunter, in fact to these guys I'm just that city boy nephew, that's why they put me up on this ridge, out of the way of the real men—it was the right decision. If I was down there with them, traipsing through the snow, I'd just slow them down. Two packs of smokes a day will do that.

So here I am on the ridge waiting for them to flush out a deer so that I can get an easy shot and feel good about my trip to the sticks. And here was the deer.

It didn't run right out into the field, but stayed against the tree line, maybe it didn't want to expose itself; or maybe I was reading too much into it. I removed my hands from my armpits and held the gun properly, just like I had been taught by my uncle. The gun hurt, the metal stuck to my skin, and the whole thing felt too heavy, too alien. I was shivering—not shivering like I was waiting for the bus in the rain—I was convulsing like an epileptic. Somehow the gun stayed steady. Everything was frozen, the deer was all I could see. I moved the crosshairs up to its neck, leading by a couple of feet, just as I had been taught. I squeezed the trigger automatically.

Guns are so loud. They have a loudness that you can feel, that strikes real terror into you. The bowl filled up with the sound of the Winchester. A second later the deer collapsed, it was a perfect shot. What now? Do I wait? No; if I sit here and expect Jim and Dan to clean the deer I'll be the worst kind of pest. I'll be that kid that treats their bumpkin relatives like tour guides.

So I got up on my block-feet and lurched down the hill to the bowl. I followed the tree line around the meadow, not because I needed cover, but because I didn't know how deep the snow was in the middle. The last thing I needed was to sink into a bunch of slush.

There was steam coming from the hole in the deer's neck. I grabbed my knife and opened up the belly of the animal, letting its guts spill out onto the snow. I was careful not to pop the intestines, I'd done that once before and the smell made me vomit—an incident that I am reminded of at family dinners and on most holidays. The deer was warm; the only warm thing for miles around. I stuck my hands inside, deep inside, and felt them thaw a bit. It hurt at first, when you're this cold it's the warming that can be the most miserable.

I wanted to be warmer. I didn't care how many meals I would have to sit through being mocked for this, I was going in. I climbed inside the deer, and it was like going home. I could feel it breathing, the water vapor was pouring out and rising, and I was happy. I was warm again. So tired, and so warm, and so comfortable. It was time to sleep, just to close my eyes for a bit before they found me.

I woke up on the kitchen table. I had been parceled out into mince, steaks, and neck meat for stews. I stayed with Jim and Dan's families through most of the winter, they finally ate the last of me in March, just in time for the salmon to run. I have no complaints, in the end I got what I wanted—to be part of the family.