



The Liver Skillet

Chapter 1

A marine layer moved into the coast in the early morning and held the energy on the land. We got out of the Subaru after a trip to the Circle K for doughnuts and hot chocolate. I burned my tongue on the sweet liquid because I didn't have patience. The energy deadened my tongue. When I opened and closed my mouth, it felt like a sock on the top instead of wet skin. I got a taste of the dew in the air. "We have to get to the other side of the lake so Pop can scare the ducks over us." My father explained to me. The moisture tickled the little boy round nose on the walk to the other side. Father held his Browning Auto 5 in his right hand and me, his little 5 year old son in the left. We started walking slow, but my father reminded me. "I told Pop we'd be at the other side of the water in fifteen minutes we need to move faster." Then it became a ride to get there. My small stride couldn't match that of an adult, so father took a step with his right foot then pulled up my hand to make me go airborne for the left stride. "Joey. Is your shoulder ok when I pull you over the weeds?" Father clarified. I nodded my head.

We moved like that across a field of huge plantains and green alfalfa. The dew on leaves soaked through the my blue jeans and left me wet from the knees down. My big fluffy camouflage parka kept my core warm, so I didn't mind the moisture on my ankles. Father and I moved in the early morning darkness to a patch of weeds that sheltered our forms from the excellent vision of the waterfowl floating in the lake. It seemed like a carnival ride that I just took over the summer going up and down next to my father's left stride. The intensity to get to the location and get shots of at the ducks had me suppressing a giggle. At the patch of weeds we waited for a couple of minutes before Pop scared the green wing teal and spoonies. I sat on a gopher's old pile of dirt next to my father. The shotgun beaded up water on its barrel as it waited to swing on the wings. The mixture of the wet jeans, dry mouth, and left over taste of chocolate that coated my throat made me anticipate the shot.

Pow. A shotgun bellowed into the slightly blue light of the new day's black. I silently hoped Pop, my grandfather, knocked down a duck on his first shot. A splash directly in front of us indicated we snuck close enough to the water. The splash turned to quick whispers of feather like the sound of air going in and out of a musician's lips. The whistles flew directly over my father and he raised up to his knees and

brought the shotgun to his shoulder in one fluid motion. Red and orange fire belched out from the end of the barrel and a silhouette of one of the ducks folded up from his flight and dropped to the ground. Inertia from the 35 mile per hour flight carried the teal well beyond my father's position. Since the bird took a direct hit and folded his wings up immediately, the energy carried the waterfowl into a thick light brown mustard patch. I stood up in the interim and turned to go get the duck.

"No, not yet." Father patted the ground where I sat. "Sit tight and mark the spot. These birds will mill around for a bit and other teal and spoonies will want back into the pond. We can get a few more opportunities before we start looking for the downed ducks. Mark the spot." I sat down next to Father again and scanned the sky for more teal. In the minutes that passed, I saw color on the hills that surrounded the pond. A gentle green moved from the bottom of the cattle pastures to the tops with rocks and grey brush. The sprinkles fell down in late September and sprouted color to adorn the hills in mid-October. Another flock of ducks flew over the hidden humans. Again Father rose to his knees and the browning boomed three times to no avail. The mottled brown on the birds and light orange spoonbills brightly made an escape in the early morning glow. Joseph felt a tightness in his stomach a marble sized irritation. Why didn't Father make that shot? The colors on the ducks clearly showed they zipped by in range. Some would not end up in the fryer browned up with a savory hard butter coat ready for the oven. Joseph loved the smell of onions and clean snap of celery on the ducks before the oven door closed.

When my Father missed a duck, I felt like I missed too. Still perturbed by the miss, I waited excitedly for the next group to make way into the wind.

Now that all the ducks escaped, mudhens took possession of the entire pond. They splashed with oversized green and yellow webbed feet. Once in awhile, one flew low to another position on the water and pond scum clung to the nails in the webs like a fish trawling net. Mudhens stayed on the water when all the other ducks flew away from danger. At the first few echoes of powder sometimes they hid in the tules. Other times they proudly displayed their yellow beaks and black feathers for all the scared birds flying above. Did spoonies find contentment in floating on the water safely? Coal colored and splashing like a kid in the bathtub covered with filth, mudhens sounded out a cross between a frog croak and a soft goat bleat. The sound indicated that the action of flying teal ended for awhile.

Father and son nestled in the brush looked and listened for the return of the teal. Big luck consisted of a lonely pair of greenhead mallards that searched for a place to spend morning. The sun in the east played hide and seek with scattered clouds and shone red and orange like a kindergarten's skilled watercolor with only two choices. In the mist above the barbed wire fence a few scattered black Angus cows chewed the alfalfa over and over again. Calm descended on the pond side, and even the calves moved slowly through the dew. A big bull with a droopy organ let out a long stream of water. It splashed down into the dirt like a garden bucket dumped out water for newly planted seeds. No vegetation stood in the way to mute the sound. I laughed out all the excitement of the morning.

I held in my nervous energy the entire morning to remain quiet during the stalk up to the brush line. I remained quiet during all the important times. During the miss when I felt a tear tingle in my eye, I remained mute. Now, I ejected a big belly laugh. "That bull is taking a piss." I laughed again loudly and the mudhens cackled with me.

My father grinned. "That big guy had to go bad."

I looked across the pond a good 200 yards and saw Pop mill around. The older Crowheart man moved into the open field above the tules and held something up in both hands. The shotgun must have slept at his feet, so he could show them his birds from so far away.

"Did you see the position where the duck fell?" My father asked me gently.

"Yeah, it's right over there. I bet it's a big old mallard." My father smiled.

"No. That one was not a big duck. Where do you mean by over there?" He clarified.

I pointed with my numb fingers to a patch about twenty feet into the dead brown mustard.

"When you mark a dead bird, keep your eye on it all the way until it hits the ground. You need to estimate a bit farther from where it disappears out of your field of vision because it will travel with the left over speed from falling out of the air even farther. With your eyes fixed on that location find the most conspicuous plant or mound of dirt next to that spot. That location is your mark."

"I don't think I marked the spot." I smiled sheepishly.

"That's okay. We had to wait until the ducks stopped flying. Without a dog's nose to help you, the best way to recover the bird is to walk directly over to that spot without removing your eyes from that

exact location. I've done it sometimes on a big duck like a greenhead and not even looked down to reload."

"Let's go find that mallard." I replied.

"Go get him." Father commanded. I looked like a young lab pup the way I crashed through the brush to get over to the duck. Just like a retriever, I kept my head down and enthusiastically bolted to the location of the duck. Then, like a young puppy, I spun around and around looking for the duck.

"I thought it was right here," I called. He joined in the search and together we knocked down with snapping and cracking about a ten yard circle looking for the spot. We searched for half an hour. Not even a feather, we came up with nothing. Father continued to look, and I got discouraged and walked back to the hiding location. I hopefully awaited the next flight of ducks.

Father gave up the search and walked back to me. We sat together. The man saw his son's chin tremble. In silence, we waited for a flock that never came. After about forty-five minutes with the sun fully shining over the pond's bank, father said, "Looks like it's time to go to Pappy's Diner"

"Pappy's?" My face lit up immediately. We trudged back through the pasture that looked like normal green grass in the sunlight. Some of the intensity faded now that the flocks departed for other waters and the murky mist disappeared into the day.

In the blue Subaru, the elder Crowhearts told stories of past hunts. My favorite was about my father at fourteen. Grandma Alice drove Father to the same gully they hunted today twenty-five years ago in her night gown. He snuck down to the water's edge and fired off several shots. Grandma dismissed the noise as missed shots and continued reading her romance novel. About an hour, later father returned with two spoonies. He didn't miss the ducks after all.

At the diner while we all inhaled linguisa and eggs I asked Pop a question. "When you held up the mallard and teal for us to see, which is your favorite? You got a

drake teal which is more colorful than the mallard. I like to see Dad knock down big ducks from the sky."

I expected that grandpa liked the mallards best, too, even if they were less colorful.

"Joey, you sure ask a lot of questions, but if you force me to answer." He paused for effect. "I like this," Pop replied and waved his fork back and forth a couple times at his son and grandson with half a

breakfast meat still attached. He chewed contentedly and grinned back at his little inquisitive grandson.

Chapter 2

The duck hunt at five years old remained both my earliest memory and my first hunting experience. Time moved out to the ocean like an undammed river. I didn't stay five years old. After my twelfth green corn moon, I waited for my A zone deer tag to arrive in the mail. I day dreamed about it often.

The mirror stared back at me. My boy face with round curves and not a trace of stubble reminded me just how weak my body functioned under stress. Even if I made a good shot on a buck with my twelve-year old muscles, I could not lift the carcass to carry it back to the truck and get it home to get skinned. My weakness whispered doubts into my ears while hazel eyes stared back into me with determination. My eyes didn't give me the same message my face delivered. I could hardly wait for my buck tag to arrive in the mail. My father helped me fill out all my demographic information, and we both sent in the applications yesterday. A surprise met met on the form with the box for hazel eyes. I didn't know what that word meant.

"What does hazel mean? I asked my father.

"Hazel is a mix of brown and green eyes," My father replied.

I went into the bathroom last night to check on my eye color, and sure enough my eyes were hazel. Was that a good sign for killing a buck in the upcoming season? I didn't know, but learned a new word. Last night, my eyes drummed back a different sound. The strong sound resonated from deep inside the iris, the black abyss. Chin and no hair showed immaturity and weakness. A black hole that bored into my brain made me think of infinity pounded back a message of tenacity from a location beyond time and space. Courage came from a place I couldn't find on a map.

With my tag information filled out, I needed to run. I liked running anyway because the best sport ever, soccer, required lots of it. Up before anyone else in my family I slid out the door to the darkness. Adidas gear with long lines on the lateral sides of my legs and chest show brand name cost. The workout clothes my father bought me at the beginning of the travel season.

My feet hit the pavement with muffled thuds in the misty morning fog. I breathed in through my nose and out through my mouth. The hunt was only a few weeks away, and I needed strong lungs to stay

focused. The run helped perfect my position as a midfielder.

The mist hit my glasses and fogged them up. Fields opened up on the left and right with lines upon lines of strawberries. The buried morning smell paled in comparison to the strawberry explosion of the afternoon. I used a black Adidas T-shirt to wipe the moisture from my glasses. After three rounds of wipes to get the moisture off, I let the water bead up and drip off the lens. I viewed the wet world around me better with big droplets than the mist from the constant wipe.

“Buenos Dias.” An early riser called out. On the dirt side of the road next to the asphalt, field workers gathered around a small cardboard and stick fire. Waxy smoke rose up from the center of the yellow flame. A couple of the men in the group waved back an early morning chilled greeting. Primal elements of fire and water bounced off the asphalt.

Did the field workers light the fire to warm up more than just the physical body? These thoughts confused me. I should just be on a run to increase strength and lung capacity. Yet, once I got into a rhythm, many thoughts came into my brain that didn't come in often. Big thoughts like the fire and water stuff were beyond. I kept these ideas to myself, but every once in awhile I'd throw a question out to Pop to see what came back.

When these ideas came to me at school, they made me nervous. I focused on long division instead, and the thoughts distracted me.

I figured that the good feeling from a run just took the same thoughts and made them good. The same way everything during Christmas made me smile: the sage smudge, venison wrapped in bacon, and presents wrapped by my brother from Field and Stream outdoor shop.

Feet pounded the dirt shoulder within soft soled rubber. My soccer coach held conditioning at Oso Flaco beach every other week. Coach boasted that barefoot runs built muscle in a player's feet. These extra muscles prevented injury and contributed to stamina during the last twenty minutes of a game. Adults came up with many explanations that left questions. The athletic type of information probably came through Major League Soccer coaches, and the AYSO coaches just borrowed the information.

At first I didn't like the adidas. No cushion on the heel felt exposed. Over time I practiced toe striking even on a jog, and I felt confident to run on the uneven surface of the road side. I definitely

needed my ankles healthy for all the activities I planned in the next couple of weeks. The sunrise just blasted out enough light to redden the horizon over Coche Peak.

Steady sweat moved along my spine, and now I had to keep up an eight minute mile to keep out the chill. I knew all my friends in sixth grade slept in warm beds right now. This exercise bestowed an advantage on me when the quarter minutes ticked away with my team behind by one point. Since I accustomed myself to cold, strong lungs worked with my legs to keep me going.

Cars on the way to Santa Ynez buzzed by me. I liked running on the shoulder better than the actual pavement. I ran against traffic to see the cars coming toward me. On the dirt, I owned time to get out of the way in case a distracted driver didn't notice the white lines. I thought about an orange reflective vest to put on for the dark time training, but I never got around to it. My parents didn't say anything about the extra precaution, and I strode out with invincible legs.

The cold air bit into a moist nostril cavity because I increased my pace. On the last half mile, I sped up to a seven minute mile to get my fast twitch muscles some exertion. With the increased breaths, a plume of mist escaped my mouth directly from my lungs. I imagined myself a dragon on a sprint to find a buck or a soccer goal whichever came first. The polyester built up a silky electric charge against my skin. I imagined in the place of fabric, scales for fire protection.

I hoped deer season came faster than goals. With this extra effort I could find the deer that hid well in the chaparral.

Chapter 3

Dressed in black pajamas, I silently climbed up the brick wall with a grappling hook. I used ninja skills to gain entry into the lord's bedchamber without making a sound. My pockets thick with yen from a neighboring lord, I swelled with confidence to make the assignment successful. The moon shone my shadow only to those that looked directly at me. I made myself part of the rough hewn bricks that made up the castle. The grapple set into the stone like roots of an old gnarled oak into the sediment. Before I climbed up I tugged on it three times to be sure it would not spill me at the most inopportune time.

Once I reached the grapple, I jumped up onto the catwalk and coiled up the rope. In this manner I left smaller traces of my presence as I continued my duty into the night. Cloth ninja slippers crept forward. I

made my way to the open air window of the lord's bedchamber. Bamboo curtains slid aside easily as I hopped into the room in one fluid motion to land on the balls of my toes like an ebony panther. On my bottom I removed two silver objects long like chopsticks. Ninja lore required that the ends hooked toward each other to make grappling easier. I silently began my work, and removed a grid and yarn.

"Who's there?" the lord whispered out from his satin enveloped bed. I chose this night for the mission because the lord's wife traveled to her mother's house. The decoy letter luring the wife away worked brilliantly. A silence fell on the room when I suspended the glinting metal objects in midair.

"I can pay you double whatever Inue offered you. All I have to do is ring this bell and my samurai will track you down and hang you from the moat wall by your own grappling hook."

"Empty threats my lord." I displayed the latch hook art I just completed in the bedroom of the ruler. It portrayed yin and yang together with red and black yarn forever locked in a cosmic dance of balance. "This is the first tapestry your sister commissioned for you to display in the dining hall. She commissioned me with utmost secrecy because of the importance of dining hall decoration."

I lit a match to make eye contact with my prey, only to find not a human looking at me, but an enormous buck with wide antlers well beyond the large brown pointed ears. I shook my head in amazement while the mix of human and buck answered me back and rang the bell at the same time.

The deer's mouth moved as he spoke. "Guards capture the ninja. We have no use for his tapestries."

With that darkness fell and I sat up in my bed. The head of the deer made perfect sense to me, but why would I try and assassinate the deer with the tapestry of a latch hook art project? The entire dream left me feeling disoriented as I turned off my alarm. It might wake up my brother in the other room. The dream woke me up five minutes before I needed to get out of bed for the boat work.

Someday my father wanted to try his luck at Lopez Lake with an old Sears Game Fisher boat he found at the edge of town with a sign on it that said "free". The only imperfections he noticed in the boat were old fiberglass repairs that let in water through hairline cracks in the dried epoxy. Father knew it would be an easy fix. The boat owned oars, oar locks, and a welded wheel set up all laid neatly in the bottom of the hull of the overturned boat. The back of the boat fit perfectly into the wheel device flipped upside down. The bow of the vessel had a hand hold about three inches from the bar that reinforced the

entire circumference.

The oars and other equipment father quickly threw into the truck bed. He drove back home quickly and got Joseph out of his bedroom to come help him load the boat into the back of his truck bed. “Joey, I need your help to load a boat into my truck,” father said as soon as he walked in the room.

“Where did you buy a boat?”

“I didn’t buy it. I found it on the side of the road, while I drove out to the trap range this morning,” Dad explained.

“Okay, let’s go.” I agreed. On the way my father filled me in on the details. He figured someone got tired of making all the repairs after every fishing season. He knew the boat was used for fishing because tiny fish scales clung to the bottom of the green polyester carpet despite frequent washings. The previous owner rushed all the patch jobs with several layers of fiberglass of different shades of age. Father planned to buy all the correct size of fiberglass cloth and resin and finish a thorough job of one coat of fiberglass. To get the best seal he would use his electric hand sander and a number two grit paper to get a smooth finish on the old patches and lay down a new layer of fiberglass. Once the sealed boat received the new coat it would be as good as new. The only downside required two days of working on the boat with a helper, instead of two days of immediate fishing.

“Father, I’ll help with the sanding,” Joseph offered.

“I was hoping you’d say that. If I had a hard time convincing you to help me out then I figured I could throw an extra hundred dollars into your allowance.”

“I’ll take the hundred dollars. Now that you mention it,” I clarified with father.

“No, too late you already offered to do the job for free,” My father corrected. I mentally slapped myself in the face for offering his help so easily.

The ever present lawyer in my father taught me another lesson in negotiations. I knew I should not have shown enthusiasm to my father until he figured out how much the effort required. I enjoyed the work with my hands, so the mistake didn’t sting much.

We parked next to the coyote brush and the boat crouched in the shadow unmolested in the interim twenty minutes.

Father grabbed one side of the upside down hull, and I got the other. We pointed the stern out the back of the truck bed and centered it on top some old beach towels. The material on the bottom cushioned the sides with the bar from impact on the road. On the way back home several dips in the road shoved too much kinetic energy into fiberglass. More hairline cracks showed in the boat, even the reinforced places. With two people to balance the weight the craft settled like a landing mallard. Joseph looped a bright orange ratchet through the nose hold and clicked it down on the truck eye loops.

They drove it back home and used the free sign to dust off the dirt once inside the garage. “There is no time like the present,” father said. “Let’s go down to Home Depot and buy some fiberglass cloth and resin.”

Once we had all the necessary materials, I took the hand sander and smashed it onto the holder. Father came out into the garage and watch me fiddle with the sandpaper. “I’m going to go finish trap shooting. You stay here and start sanding the bottom of the boat. Make it real smooth.” He sauntered out the garage door with the brown carry case for the broken down BT-99 trap shotgun. In his other hand he held a three pack of face masks. He threw them to his young son. “Here use these. Be careful you don’t breath in too much of the fiberglass dust. It is not like asbestos, but it will irritate the inside of your nostrils.” He held up his hand in goodbye. Once inside his green Tundra he fired up the ignition and steered the car east.

Asbestos. The word rang in my ears. What does that mean? *That was the first time I’ve ever heard of the word. It must be something that was irritating to soft tissues.* The boat stared back at him. It represented a lot of work and time. Then he thought of lowering it on the boat sling into Avila Bay. Within the bay were at least twenty kelp forests held into the surrounding sand by holdfasts on top submerged rocks. Kelp held all kinds of fascinating sea creatures: crab, smelt, johnny bass. Halibut also cruised the soft bottoms of the sea looking for all those morsels especially during the spawning season. It started when the water increased its temperature a few degrees. The females laid eggs in dug out shallows of sand. Fish also timed the release of progeny at the same time the grunion ran into the surf’s shore with full moons. All this happened at the end of August or beginning of September and was dictated by the cycles of the ocean.

I needed to get this boat in ship shape to capitalize on all those opportunities. My bass pole was rigged with two split shots about a foot and a half from a live anchovy on a number one hook. The cross eyed giant camouflaged beneath the sand with just his vision looking above the grains. My arms twitched under the imaginary pull from a nice eight pounder. The sander became a reel and I set the invisible hook lightly in the halibut's mouth and started to reel the fish into the net of my newly fiberglassed boat.

I flipped the on switch. Vibrations of a heavy motor rotated on the inside instead of the reassuring tug of a sea fish. First, the boat needed to be sanded, then came the fun. With elbow grease, I lowered my weight onto the machine and watched dusty yellow and white tinged particles sputter out from the sides of the sander. This wouldn't be so bad, I thought to my self. I'd be done before my father got back from the trap range.

Father returned two hours later, and I smoothed a three foot by three foot square right in the center of the boat. Dad stood to the side of him and watched my handiwork. He didn't say a word, he observed only, and his son did not look up. He turned and moved through the garage door into the house. I looked up only once. The door slammed shut from the tension in the spring.

The old fiberglass dust irritated my forearms, and I went inside to get a long sleeve flannel shirt to protect my skin. The nine foot square grew and grew. At one point the boat acted like a horse. I straddled the sides and let my feet dangle over the bows. A sander worked best with a moderate amount of pressure. Too light and the grains couldn't bite into the material, but too hard and the grains dug too deep and the motor inside didn't rotate efficiently.

I misjudged everything in the glassing process. The movement of the fibers worked their way up the long sleeve and made tiny red blisters on my forearms. I even deposited some on my cheeks when I wiped the sweat out of my eyes.

The fiberglass became thicker and thicker with each passing minute. Soon the resin coated half the fiberglass with a clear glass, and the other half of the material laid exposed on the sanded hull. I added too much hardener to the resin. The job remained incomplete and I didn't have another bucket to pour the resin into. My eyes burned from not opening up the side door to encourage airflow. The scratchy feeling

on my forearms begged to be scratched, but the gluey coating on my latex gloves prevented a satisfying rub.

Father opened up the door. “Whoa, You can get a contact high just from walking in the garage.” My father took up the location next to me he occupied earlier.

“This sucks. The resin turned to a blocky ice cube, and there is still more than fifty percent of the boat to glass.” Father nodded. “I’m not even close to being finished, and it’s getting late.” Father looked up at his antlers that adorned the side of the garage.

“What do you want to do?” My father questioned.

“I dunno.” I looked crestfallen and a bit embarrassed. Hours ago the project spread before me like a field full of cock pheasant. Now it looked like a disaster.

“Go clean up your hands. Take it easy with the acetone. Your skin will sting from all the fiber micro abrasions. They will not sting anymore in a day or two. Throw out the clear wooden block, clean up the sander, and put away the sandpaper. You did a good job on the sanding. Don’t worry about a thing.” I remained silent and did as I was told.

Father efficiently moved around the garage. It seemed like a purpose resided inside of each movement. Soon I materialized with a big orange Home Depot five gallon bucket. As I walked out to put the sandpaper away and watched him pour the bucket half full of resin and just ten drops of hardener. By the time I accomplished all the clean up tasks the clear resin buried the exposed fiberglass cloth in a neat layer of glass. He cut the bow and stern cloth pieces to size and tried them out as I quietly left the garage. “Good night.” I murmured to my father sadly.

“Night.” Father worked without looking up.

The next morning, I rose up earlier than the rest of the family. I felt like a boy investigating his Christmas stocking before the family opened presents. In the cement room, with the garage door opened a quarter and the backyard door opened all the way for air flow, rested the completely fiberglassed boat. *How did Dad do that?* A faint odor of fiberglass inundated the partially closed space. The boat dried slowly. When I put my finger on the stern, it stuck like duct tape to my skin. I left the white sprinkled swirl of my index fingerprints. A halibut ocean craft newly renovated whispered bent rods and ocean

sprayed sunglasses.

At breakfast I ate my Cheerios quietly next to my father . “How do you like the *Pound Dog*?”

“ *Pound Dog*?” I looked confused.

“We picked up a stray black Labrador at the pound yesterday. We trained it and now she will retrieve halibut and ling cod for us.” He kept sipping his coffee without a facial expression. I laughed and my father joined me . Father still chuckled a bit when he set down his black coffee mug with pictures of his family around the sides. “Take your time, Jo ey . A whole elephant devoured in one sitting gives you indigestion.”

Chapter 4

Father flipped on my light at four o'clock in the morning. “Get up. I'll have cereal and milk ready for you in the kitchen. ” The opening day of deer season finally arrived . In my sweaty palms I held my first deer tag. Although A zone was not known for large animals, it provided more than enough tags to residents somewhere in the amount of 60,000. The area took up a large portion of the state and eked out a small hunter success rate at around twenty percent. Most of the bucks brought home for dinner were in the forked horn category.

I quickly tied my boots and double checked my wallet for both my tag and hunting license. A forked horn buck made more than a dream for me.

“Your father was going to go hunting and leave me to drive myself to the hospital on the day you were born,” my mom joked the night before. “ You've been waiting for this day since you got to Earth.” I felt happy to hear that story told over and over again as part of my family history. Thank goodness father decided against the hunt. It would have been messed up to leave my mom alone like that.

Pop, my grandfather, hunted almost everyday in the season, and I grasped the obsession that came over the Crowheart men when early August rolled around.

Pop, father , and I drove to the forest in Pop's Dodge Ram pickup. I got out of the truck to unlock the top gate at the junction of the asphalt road and the dirt road that led into the hunting grounds. The headlights of the gasoline machine illuminated a circle in its path. Outside I closed the door to shut off the alarm ringer. I stayed off to the side to keep my shadow out of the light and work the key and lock.

A miss match of the key teeth made the lock fight back against my hand. It remained locked. Now I felt my father's eyes on me. I wondered if he thought, "*He can't even open the gate. How will he find a buck?*" Oak trees above me whispered in the early morning air. Dry leaves cracked beneath my boots. Dust from the top of the dirt road pulverized over decades swirled a mist all around me and the lock. It smelled like talc and tickled my nostrils. Crickets played violin all around him. They started up the symphony once I arrived at the locked gate.

I switched side from the lock and went over to right side of the lock to employ my right hand. Light coated the entire brass Master Lock padlock. The matching key slid into the pathway with a small grainy protest from the dust inside, but I applied slow steady pressure and the key gave way to the right. Mechanism housing opened and exposed the unlocked half circle bars. The solid steel pole slid back toward the fence and I pushed the gate open with a Halloween like screech. The entire process only took fifty- five seconds, before the truck rolled past the gate in neutral. It felt longer because the key wouldn't function in the lock. "*Did the gate protect the bucks within the land?*"

"Did the lock give you trouble?" My grandfather at the steering wheel clarified.

"Yeah, the key would not slide home into the grooves," I responded.

"Hmm. I got a good feeling about today. Your father and I saw a buck in the velvet when we came in to check the gates before the season."

My grandpa seemed eternally optimistic about the Peach Tree. I kept my doubts to my self. I watched Pop sight his rifle in the week before the gate check trip, and we only saw five does. Pop drilled three bullet holes into the longitudinal line of the target at the top of the nine ring almost all through the same hole.

"This Springfield is a tack driver," he observed and jacked the final round out of the chamber. Back four feet behind Pop I watched the brass trace a projectile arch through the air and land almost touching a poison oak red tinted leaf at the side of the bench we set up. It spun in the air like a top helicopter propeller and bounced once before resting next to the poisonous plant. I kicked the casing clear of the urishol and picked it up. I picked up all the metal Pop left on the ground. Litter bug commercials didn't function on the Greatest Generation.

“I’m done. You give your rifle a try,” he said. I walked over to the blue Dodge Ram and retrieved the case that housed my Winchester 243. Pop said the smaller caliber would help me learn to hold steady because my cheek would not get kicked like with a 30.06. It sounded like a good reason. Yet, when I set up on the bench and squeezed the trigger just like he instructed, my rifle did not drive any tacks. In my three shots, one would be somewhere in the 9 ring, but the other two were all over the place. Sometimes, I completely missed the target and the punched paper only showed two bullet holes. I kept taping up the old holes and walked back to the bench for another try. I wanted desperately to shoot like Pop, but it didn’t happen. After I drove twenty-four rounds through the overheated barrel Pop said, “That’s enough for the day. Let’s take a little ride all the way to the back.”

I disappointed myself as well as Pop. I double checked my empty rifle and returned it to the case. I placed mine with the barrel pointing toward the floor next to the gear shift.

I hopped in the truck as Pop slid into the driver’s seat. “Don’t forget our target.”

“Oh, yeah.” I ran out 100 yards to the target’s box and looked at my final three shots. Where there should have been three holes, there was one. I threw the box into the truck bed and slammed the door.

“Don’t slam the door,” Pop snapped. “Let’s go. Forget about those shots.” I didn’t listen.

Those memories kicked around inside my skull as we waded through the early morning darkness to the forest service gate. That gate had no lock, and I opened up the gate much quicker and stood by smelling the mix of baked yellow oats and burned gasoline.

We arrived at the Peach Tree Spring. “Go down to the spring. Side hill it to the east part of the hillside. Watch in the shade for bucks,” Pop advised. I popped open the truck door and thumped the rest of the way down to the spring.

When Grandma Alice’s father found out the federal government sold off pieces of land to homesteaders in the early 1900, he gathered what little money he had to go in with other family friends to buy the land. She said once that her Dad got tired of all the squabbling at the council meetings in Santa Ynez and wanted land for himself. He knew the land didn’t truly belong to him, but the Feds said he had to put up an old shed to represent a homestead, and he bought the land for cents per acre. Cents were worth a lot more back in 1907, but it still represented a good opportunity for grandma Alice’s family.

They even bought the mineral rights underneath the acres of his shed that all his friends purchased together. All and all my great-grandfather owned a twenty-five percent share of 120 acres of waterless, dusty, hot chaparral with a few scattered oak trees. Mostly worthless, but a dream of his land on the white surrounded by green National Forest on the map.

The federal government kept one piece of land for the forest that created value beyond gold, a water spring. The white private parcel on the map my ancestor owned snaked around a spring. Many utilized this spring cattlemen, thirsty prospectors, and mountain lions. In accord with the Dine from Canyon de Chelly, my great-grandfather planted a single peach tree. He placed a sturdy five foot tree from his own orchard in Santa Ynez at the upper part of the spring. In this way the roots of the tree sunk down to marry the water deep beneath the earth. The conjoining of roots and water created a symbiosis. The subterranean water gave abundant water to the growing tree and its anchors. Roots from the tree dug deep down into the strata centimeter by centimeter and held the earth at bay to allow a passage for the water to travel up to the surface for the spring. Even during dry spells the spring contained water in a deep pool for all the animals to drink.

I pussy footed passed the water and thought of grandma Alice's story and my failure earlier that month at the rifle range. The sounds of scrub jays rustled out both the happy and sad thought. I peered into the underbrush and saw a lightning flash of blue light and a loud *squawk, squawk, squawk*.

The bird escaped into the early morning haze, but I went in to investigate further what the bird dug up. The leaves formed up small dark holes in a circle about a foot and a half in diameter. I moved my hands into the moldy leaves. After fishing around by feel, I uncovered an inch and a half green acorn. That bird must have just picked the seed off an enormous tree and flew all the way over to this spring to save it for later. The only tree around here with valley oaks that big was a mile away on private land. I wondered how many of the acorns, the bird brain remembered to dig up and eat. I imagined the ones the scrub jay buried near the spring would be easy to remember because the water marked the food's spot.

Humans tried to domesticate oak trees for nurseries for centuries, but they never turned out efficiently like apples or peaches. The oaks worked out an agreement with squirrels and jays to spread out offspring in return for tasty meals. Acorn dropped into my pocket, I turned to the south to pump out

some water from the spring with my Mountain Safety Research water pump. I developed a taste for earthy tasting water over the last few years of hunting quail around this dry landscape. Sure that the blue bird acorn connoisseur hid many more in the toyon and coyote underbrush I planned to care for the seed in my nursery at home.

The spring collected all the run off from beneath the peach tree spring in a pool about the size of a hot tub. The depth hidden by duckweed and silky green algae flowed out from the bottom like naiad hair flirting with him as they did in the time of the ancient Greeks. Cattle probably frightened away the mythological creatures with gigantic urination and cow like bellows.

I sunk my knees into the mud lining the spring. Water seeped up under the pressure of my 135 pounds and wet my knees to the skin.

Tiny black tadpoles clung to the green strands and the brave st ones seemed to swim up to the surface to get a better look at the curious adolescent human. The baby frogs stared back at the young man with equal curiosity.

I remembered sitting next to the water after sunset when blackness reached its zenith. I listened to the frogs that deposited the tadpole eggs sing arrias. How did these creatures thrive in this dry climate for eons? The separation of populations next to water were at least one mile away? A tiny creature like the western toad or pond frog; even with its skin that needed moisture all the time, made that journey. They made that trip to other waters to find mates at night. All this life teemed, but no deer tracks pressed into the wet earth.

Finally, I entered the small deer trail that ran half a mile on the south side of the mountain. This part of the mountain protected the spring from the morning sun. Dirt and small granite pebbles scratched the bottoms of my Danner's, and even the small path kept the poison oak from brushing my pants. I obsessively watched for the urishol ridden plant, so he didn't get an itchy rash later that week. Sometimes the rash showed up even two weeks after busting through the brush.

Thankfully father hunted another slice of mountain this morning. If he saw that I dug for acorns and stared at tadpoles, he'd be irritated. On more than one occasion during hunts together he'd say, "Quit monkey'in around." Then, he'd trudge off straight ahead not even waiting for me. I finished watching

meat bees crawl out of the ground. Sometimes I examined a wasp boll on an oak branch for too long. I found satisfaction in all the curious things I found during the hunt. For me, it wasn't only about killing a deer; although, I sure noticed that created a litmus test for a great hunter.

The trail led me around the mountain to a place where Pop parked the car and glassed with his rifle across his legs. We hunted the same piece of canyon and Pop always hoped that I would kick something up that normally would have stayed hidden in the brush as the truck motored by to the back. I took my time and practiced hitting the dirt on his butt to steady the rifle between my knees and elbows in a modified human tripod. I held my breath and let off thirty percent of the air in my lungs. Then I focused on a small fallen branch at an oak tree 150 yards away. The trigger squeezed to the back of the trigger guard. A circle of light filled with the image of the target entered his brain through the surrounding scope's black outline. Shaky, the crosshairs moved too much for a killing shot. The culprit responsible for my one shot off the box a few weeks ago no doubt. More and more I practiced by walking a few hundred feet along the brown path and setting up for a pretend target. As time passed, I got shakier.

I decided to just practice a slow creep and minimize my sound. That turned out much more to my liking. While out scooping up gravel for the gullet, a group of quail remained unaware of my presence until I got within ten yards of the male sentry bird. All four limbs touched the ground when I crawled to within the danger zone of the birds. They all burst from the path in a loud flurry of rumbled wing beats. I looked under the shadows of the oaks and sage and found not one sign of deer.

The last one hundred yards of the jaunt I spied a nice buck track. A huge dew claw reinforced maleness in the nine inch long track. I knelt down next to the sign and put my thumb and forefinger outstretched in an L shape to estimate the size. The dew claws pressed into the earth well beneath my palm. I wondered how long ago the buck made the track. Last night? Last week?

Pop's mariachi music echoed in the canyon, and I figured that closed out the opportunity for the early morning hunt. "EEE, EEE, EEE," Pop shouted at the top of his lungs just for giggles. Then he laughed as his grandson neared the truck. "Do you like the music? Maybe I should try out for a mariachi group." He danced a small cumbia move in the dirt and kicked up a small dust cloud. I remained in a dark cloud of not seeing a deer. Pop tried his best to cheer him up. "It's only the opening day of the season. We have

forty days to find Mr. Forked Horn.” He reminded him patiently.

Pop and I dropped father off at the top of the horseshoe turn. He liked to walk down to the asphalt road from a dirt path with two locked chain gates. Vegetation on the road showed few people owned keys to the locks. Animals used the road more than vehicles. Father always spotted deer sign and sometimes bear scat. I heard no report from his Springfield, so Father had the same type of luck on his reconnaissance as me.

The Dodge Ram slowly motored up the steep incline. Dry wild oat made Pop a bit nervous with the hot exhaust tail pipe, but he made sure to keep the wheels directly inside the flexible ruts of the smashed plants. Pop reminded him, “Look down in the shade right next to the car. Sometimes, old bucks will stay motionless like a statue and hope we drive by them. I’ve killed a few bucks driving really slow.”

I thought it sounded like a fish story. Why would a smart old bucks stay anywhere near a smelly loud truck? Pop possessed plenty of experience. Months ago a n older teacher at school once commented that my grandpa was one of the best hunters around. I wanted proof and asked a clarifying question. “How do you know?” I thought the teacher would retell a story of physical prowess like packing a buck out of a canyon.

“I saw all the antlers suspended from the rafters in his garage. There must be more than 100 in there.” All true, Pop’s garage created an homage to cervidae.

I looked down, but saw no bucks. The spindly oak tree on the way to the back looked newer than the others around. “Was there a fire here? Look how the trunks of these trees are all skinny. They all seem to have grown here about the same time.”

Oaks near the spring and the road to the forest service gate boasted enormous girth. Some near the old trailer measured thirty feet in diameter. I figured a fire swept through the area about seventy years ago on the present hillside, so the trees passed that much time on the hill. The other elders held space on those sunny locations for hundreds of years. The truck topped out on the climb, and the brush opened up to an airy mini mesa.

“The Dalton burn came through in 1953,” Pop remembered. “You’re right those hills fueled the path of the fire, so any tree there today sprouted after the burn.” I noticed the oversized shed like

aluminum water tank.

“Does that tank feed water to those two troughs?” Pop turned off the truck while his grandson noticed more water.

“Yeah. One of the cattlemen put that tank in there to run cattle in the summer time. You know how hot it gets up here,” Pop told me. Grasses moved with the mid morning thermals. A swishing sound like shades slid across a glass window. The grass played with light and shimmered as I slung the rifle across my shoulder. We walked the final 800 yards to the end of the Jeep road to be more sneaky. A possible bedded buck underneath the shade of a mighty oak made both hunters quiet and more observant of the shadows.

Pop slipped through the grass on another small deer trail at a steady pace. I followed behind my grandpa because I couldn't believe the stories my Dad told about the early 80's. My grandfather moved with amazing strength considering he contracted Gion Biret years ago. The family thought he'd never walk again from the nerve damage. Along the back of the Peach Tree, he knelt down and showed his grandson deer scat. “This elongated scat shows evidence of a doe. If the pellets are round and fatter is shows a buck.”

Again how Pop knew that kind of stuff I didn't know. Did he watch an elongated scat drop from a doe's rear? I figured it would not be good to ask my grandpa. It might show that I doubted his hunting skills. Once I asked Pop why we should get down wind to wait for ducks and received an irritated response.

A bowl opened up before us at the last part of the deer trail. No trees grew inside its radius. The exposed ground took full sunlight in the morning before noon. Instead of oats in the area, a sticky weed with a tiny sunflower like head with flexible spikes grew all over the steep sides. A couple of yuccas shot toward the sky. The white flowers held nectar for bees, and the waxy black seeds inside could be used for soap. Pop walked around, then stopped. “If you are up a rocky hillside littered with these plants step right in the middle to get by. It lays the sword like leaves down, and your next foot can get by without getting poked.”

I looked up to listen to my elder, and forgot to watch my footing. The needle sharp head of the

green yucca leaf jabbed into my calf. I looked down at the injection that passed right through my Wrangler jeans. When I inspected my backside, the rifle swung too close to my grandpa. “Watch your barrel. Even if something unexpected happens like that yucca, keep it in a safe direction. Come on. You’ll have a momento of that misstep a month from now.”

We crossed the top of the bowl and moved along beyond the jeep road. Pop moved into the grey sage and the dust tickled my nose in a spicy way. I gazed out across the canyon as it heated, and hoped a buck bedded in the shade. We hadn’t kicked one out on the jaunt. Pop sat down and I joined him. Beneath the sky line between two big sage bushes our human outlines broke up like split kindling. Binoculars clutched in my hands and elbows rested on my knees to steady the lens. We glassed the hillside quietly together for half an hour. I exerted a lot of effort to keep up my concentration in one place. I preferred walking and exploring springs and oak leaf duff. “Pop let’s keep walking.” I protested.

My grandpa chuckled and didn’t even respond. I let the binoculars drop to the length of the cord below my pecs. A redtail hawk rode a thermal out three canyons beyond the one they looked for bucks. Faintly, a cry of joy blew out from his beak clear and high.

What a view that bird had. He saw bucks this morning with the amount of ground he covered in the sky and the fifty power vision let down to the ground. At night the redtail hawk roosted in a tree and imagined that he possessed super strength to sink his talons into a deer and feed on venison for a day. That dream happened when the hawk found no squirrels to poleax.

“Look underneath that oak. The one straight ahead next to the open hillside that makes a bench next to the thick oaks. There’s a deer there,” Pop said quickly. I threw up the binoculars to the spot and only saw plants. “See it?” he clarified.

“I don’t see it.”

“You can see it with your naked eye,” Pop whispered. The soft voice made me think that maybe the deer was a buck. For some reason my mind rushed a bit, and the slightest bit of panic seeped into my search on the hillside.

“Let your eyes go mushy and take in the big picture,” Pop advised. “Look for shapes and color

differences, not the whole deer.”

I let in the whole area around the meadow Pop pointed out. The shape of a deer butt materialized from the shadow. Once I acquired the shape, I put my binocular up to my eyes by marking the closest tree. In my binocular lens a tawny deer rested against a giant oak. Steady on my knees, I admired the animal within the magnification of the optics. I tried to make out the head, but the enormous branches obscured the view. I let the binoculars go again, and settled the rifle into the nook of my knees, elbows, and hands.

“Steady now, Joey. We don’t even know if it is a buck yet,” My grandpa reminded me. We both waited in anticipation. That deer rested there the entire half hour without Pop detecting him. Perhaps it moved into the spot from the other side of the thick tree. I noticed how deer, especially bucks, materialized like ghosts only to disappear as quickly as they came into view.

I watched the deer move and even scratch its ears like a dog with its hind hooves. The head never moved out from beyond the branches. “Why don’t we ground check him?” I asked my grandpa. It was a term I’d heard some of father’s friends use. They would shoot and kill a deer in a position like this and check for antlers while standing above the carcass on the ground.

“That is a terrible idea. We don’t need to kill a buck so bad that we aren’t sure of whether it is a doe or a buck. If you start your buck hunting by shooting does, you will become a slob hunter. Next thing you know, you’ll think it’s okay to shoot shapes or sounds that appear to be bucks. No, you sit tight.” We waited for ten minutes while the deer took in the surroundings. Finally it stood up and mosey over to the open meadow. I could see the top of the head before it reached the clearing. A doe bent down to snip off some oats from the grey dirt.

“It’s a doe,” I commented sadly to Pop.

“I know,” Pop replied. “Aren’t you glad you held off on the shot. You would have killed a doe for your first deer. You don’t have a doe tag.”

We walked back to the truck and didn’t see anymore deer. By creeping out of the sagebrush and not putting backs on the sky line, the doe remained undisturbed. She kept feeding as I moved out of eyesight. On the return walk I led the way on the deer trail. Without Pop to set the pace I made a bit more noise

through the underbrush.

“Be quiet ,” Pop reminded me . “You never know where a buck could be in bed. Keep hunting the whole time you are outdoors.” I knew he was right, but the excitement of seeing the deer only to not be able to take a shot made me lose focus. I started to think of the breakfast later that morning. The high sun beat down on my camouflage hat and the sweat dripped into my eyes. It took more of my energy with each droplet that seeped into my hat seam.

At the truck, I got into the cooler and attacked an orange Gatorade. The sweet liquid quenched my thirst like four pints of water. I held the icy plastic to my head to cool down and started to focus . If I wanted to kill a deer, I had to stay mindful of the surrounding hills and spot one in the brush. Gawking off and feeling sad about the doe would not put my crosshairs on a buck.

“Why do you like hunting so much?” I asked.

“I like it because it is what I do ,” Pop responded immediately.

“No. I mean really what is it about hunting that gets you up before the sun to endure heat and cold. You could be warm in bed under the covers. Next, you could get up and go to Pappy’s to have three cups of hot coffee in a mug not just one.”

“Joey, you’ve been asking meaty questions since before you were five years old.” Pop grinned at the boy . “I guess I hunt because my father showed me how to do it. Did you know your great grandfather was the son of Manuelito, a great Navajo chief who outsmarted the famous mountain man Kit Carson? He showed me how to find sign and skin a deer and make jerky by the sun. I think it is something I can do to honor my father.”

I nodded. “What about all the skill that goes into killing a deer that lives in the mountains ? Nowadays we are visitors. The bucks live there permanently. Or the beauty that surrounds us all the time here. It isn’t like a city. These mountains have been similar to this for the last 10,000 years. I get happy to be a part of all this splendor not just a spectator, but a participant. I am a participant just like that turkey vulture. Look at him ride that thermal. I bet that is fun.” This made sense , but I wanted more clarification from Pop.

“Yeah. I agree with all that stuff. When you asked why I do this, it is because of my father. Now

that I am the older generation, this is good too.” He patted me on the shoulder.

Above the horseshoe turn, they picked up father. “Did you see anything?” Pop questioned.

“No. I stepped as quiet as I could and took my time in the morning, but I didn’t see any bucks. I did see three does and a fawn. You know where the first open spot is where someone set up a tree stand?”

Pop and I nodded our heads. “On the way back up this morning I kicked up a doe and her fawn feeding just outside the open spot in the shade of the oaks. The other two does were right above the asphalt near the horseshoe turn.” Dad soaked his shirt through with sweat. A dark stain made its way all the way to the small of his back. The green shirt changed color to a dark green almost black from all the liquid.

Heat and steep hills made all the exertion felt throughout the body.

“Here have a Gatorade.” I handed over another icy drink. Father winked at his son and climbed in the front seat.

“Let’s get the hell out of here.” Pop grouched. Joseph gladly welcomed the end of his first deer hunt as a giant failure. There was no choice left, but to improve.

Chapter 5

In seventh grade the days couldn’t be over fast enough for me to get out and hunt for my buck. Last year was a wash. I hunted mostly the Peach Tree with Pop. We got up and hunted early. Sometimes we dropped Dad off at the Horseshoe Turn, and sometimes he rode in the passenger seat with cartridges in the magazine and the chamber empty. Pop drove. I begged Pop to take me on lazy Saturday afternoons when nothing happened around the house. A whole day’s wait remained until the family BBQ on Sunday. We devoured delicious butter venison ribs seasoned with only salt, pepper, and rosemary. All those different tactics and timings came up with nothing. I ended up sipping tag soup at the end of the season with the tag I’d waited four years to obtain.

Ever since I turned eight and devoured my first dove stew and polenta, I decided twelve would be a good time to kill a buck. If I could hunt birds at eight years old, then I would need a few more years to get ready to skin out a large mammal. Everything seemed lined up for success, but nothing materialized. All opportunities vanished for me that year. When my uncle Jeffy shot a nice forked horn from a steady rest on a wire fence, the animal looked like a mythical beast from old 8mm film footage.

In seventh grade, I assured myself this season would end in meat on the BBQ pit. I listened during math, and kept my mouth shut during the boring explanations of long division. I welcomed seat work because the practice kept my mind working on something akin to a puzzle. The fitting numbers around an answer at the back of the book focused my brain. During the lecture, I imagined a buck walked out of the overhead and into aisle number five between my desk and the wall. Next, a mountain lion padded into the same space from the bottom brick lining at the back of the room. Finally the two beasts melted into each other's flesh and sunk into a pool at my feet.

I doodled the two animals and invented a way for them become liquid. Brown and yellow mixed at the bottom of my long division notes. During lecture the cartoon showed a pool of the two animal's flesh. At the top of the page of the three sides of notes, I sketched the antlers gripped by lion fangs. In the center of the notes, a tongue extended out as if looking for something to feed on in the three dimensional space I occupied. I lusted after a buck.

Maybe, I should have paid attention to girls. After all, junior high hormones kicked in and pretty girls in skinny jeans should have attracted more of my attention. My focus stayed on the pursuit of deer. The antlered animals combined with all that transpired in the mountains, made one mysterious ambrosia. Excellence in school and sports eluded me on big occasions. The girls with skinny jeans gave out numbers to boys with fancier clothes. All those trophies seemed beyond my grasp. Although I failed last year to fill my tag, the hunt carved out a trophy I could hold.

An oak whispered ancient secrets on the wind, and I possessed the time and desire to translate the meanings. Pop, father, and uncle all showed me by example how to walk along those paths through the trees. My faith flickered a picture of me as a man who walked with the same strength and confidence. Each time I entered the mountains, my step became more like my predecessors.

Finally, the water, which attracted all life from the humming bird's buzz to the burrowed western toad all filed past my eyes. When I witnessed this great procession, I moved in the same tempo as the other animals.

All these things I held in my mind, not allowing anything to slip out in conversation. I doubted I could clearly articulate any of this.

With nose to the books, I passed through the hours till recess when I could run and play soccer. After school, I completed all my homework and wished Wednesday into existence. On Wednesday, I filed into the Dodge Ram for a midweek hunt with Pop .

The waits increased in intensity with the troublesome taunting of some of the eighth graders. My friends and I liked to play soccer at the field edge of the playground. The eighth graders took the pitch closest to the school classrooms. They played this trick of waiting until someone had a goal kick. Once the defender moved toward the ball, the eighth graders lobbed in three soccer balls at the seventh grade players. They hit my goalie on the back of the head. Two times they arced the throws to hit me in the nose while I concentrated on making a good goal kick. I decided to ignore them. It passed like that for days. Between the boring math lessons, and the static stirred up by the eighth graders the hunting time never arrived quick enough.

After a thoroughly difficult lecture, I blew off steam with my friends shooting goals. We didn't even have a game going. Just as my friend Eugene squared up to kick the ball two rockets came in from the eighth grade turf and smashed into his face. Eugene turned around, and put his face in his hands, clearly in pain. I picked up both the balls and one at a time drop kicked them over the fence into the field scattered with high dry mustard.

“Retard ! Those are our soccer balls. Go over there and get them.” Chester the eighth grade ring leader demanded .

“Go get them yourself. Chester molester.” I retorted and walked over to see if my friend was okay. Chester ran over from his side of the field and pushed me .

“You wanna go, Crowheart ? ” I pushed him back. A push fest ensued and about ten boys circled up around the two combatants. Chester, bigger than me , used his size to try and intimidate. I kept coming back at him and planting my feet close by and striking with the palms of my hands more than pushing. I wanted to kick him in the nuts and end the fight, but something held me back. Chester swung with a southpaw strike and clocked me in the ear. While my ear rung, I charged the eighth grader and wrapped my arms around his waist and drove him backwards like a red rover participant. I let go after difficulty, knocking out his feet for the take down.

“Stop throwing stuff at us. You hit my friend in the face ,” I screamed in his skull and released his waist. By this time, another boy hopped the fence and kicked the balls from the field back onto the soccer pitches. An eighth grader collected the disputed balls and headed back toward the classrooms. One of the boys taunted me as he backed onto his side of the field. “Jo ey got rocked. Jo ey got rocked.”

*

On Wednesday, I played basketball with some friends to let things blow over with the eighth graders. They stayed over at the field which was fine with me . I went to the board for a couple of math problems and got them both right. Shamed by the lost fight yesterday, and bored from the school lesson I waited for my grandpa on the front steps with all my gear.

I rode silently with Pop on the 166 out to the Peach Tree. I unlocked the top gate. The key slid smoothly into the grooves on the padlock. Gravity pulled the truck down the hill. A dust plume lifted up from the inertia of the back tires. We reached the forest service gate and crept along the exposed tracks within the brush.

“You okay?” Pop let his grandson sit with his own thoughts.

“Yeah,” I lied. I wanted the anticipation of a silent buck to distract me from my feelings .

At the spring, Pop reminded me, “ Pussy foot along the mid-point of the mountain. Keep your eyes peeled.” I liked the old words Pop used to describe things. Somehow, the mixture of uncommon words that Pop used contained bobcat logic.

On the walk down to the spring, I jumped up a covey of quail. The rooster spotted me first and clucked, as his wings buzzed like a pack of cards shuffled for the first time at the blackjack table. About thirty of them sheltered feathers twenty yards in the buckbrush. I noticed they flew close by to escape, so the whole covey felt safe. They’d return to the water as soon as I rounded the corner. A downy feather talked to me .

Psst. Pick me up . I bent down and the needle part flowed out with white fluffy material. The end of the feather formed a sanded triangle with a darker grey than sagebrush and white lines to break up the outline. The birds colored them selves with shade all around them E ven pieces of feather whispered vibrancy.

On the path, I sat down and glassed across the canyon to the largest oak. Underneath the shade, only grass hid from the afternoon sun. I separated the hillside into places likely to find a deer. The binoculars set up on each of those locations for a couple of minutes. A doe walked right into my frame when she fed outside of it just a moment ago. Times like these reminded me of all I learned last year.

I arrived at the car. Pop listened to the Dodgers game softly. I wore a serious grin when I sat down in the passenger seat to the soothing voice of Vin Scully. “Or e l Hershiser is having a great season. Ball three and two strikes. It’s the bottom of the sixth inning. The Dodgers need to get on base in the next inning to hold the lead.”

We drove to the back. I didn’t like baseball. I was a soccer player, yet I really enjoyed sitting next to Pop in the Dodge listening to Vin announce the games.

“I lost a fight yesterday, Pop. I could have kicked him in the nuts, but didn’t want to hurt the kid too bad. He threw a ball and hit my friend in the face, so I drop kicked their ball over the fence into the field.”

Pop listened intently. “Strike three. And now a word from our sponsor. Farmer John,” Vin crooned out from the speakers.

Pop’s voice soothed over the situation that troubled me. “Joey. Only dogs fight.”

Chapter 6

A week later we went bird hunting. Dove flew over the truck in every direction possible. I jumped out of the truck, but then settled on a hillock spread thick with mullin grass. “Look. The whole flight went up there to eat mullin grass.” Pop said. I loved the tangy spiked smell of the sticky star shaped weed. I waited for dove to fly into water for the night from below the ridgeline near a cattle trough. I crushed the grass under my shoe. Next I stood and inhaled the spicy scent that wafted up to I nostrils. I imagined the smell as a purple cloud like the haze Hendrix sang.

Crouched down with three shells in the dirt next to me, I waited for the flight to make a pass through the skyline. Thoughts of unscrewing the magazine and taking out the plug entered my mind, but I quickly disregarded those misdemeanor emotions. All the opportunities I desired suspended in the air above me. My heart pumped fast. A fat dove cupped his wings with the low pitched sound of a broken rocking

chair. I blasted thin air . Then I recovered the flow guided the barrel back up toward the beak of the bird and sent another cloud of number seven shot toward the flapping bird. Another miss sounded empty into the draw. The dove got speed again and with its increased momentum rocketed ten yards above my head. I worked the model 12 20 gauge threw out the spent shell shucked my last yellow Winchester into the chamber and swung directly above my head to keep pace with the bird ' s speed. The recoil pushed back against my shoulder, and I figured I missed the dove completely like my first two shots. To my surprise the lightly salted tail and flight feathers pin wheeled horizontally through the air until the bird hit the ground with a soft thud. I blinked once and felt elation at the skill to make a moving shot on a fast flying dove. Before today, I 'd only killed dove for the stew pot off barbed wires and fence posts. I reloaded my shotgun with the shells placed neatly on the ground next to my butt. From now on the best place for the shells remained inside my vest pocket in the elastic bands meant for five shotgun shells on the left and five on the right. I found out even with lots of birds in the flight, I loaded my weapon much slower than Annie Oakley.

A dove nestled the ground with its head bent back underneath its sleeping body. Wind rustled the feathers, and for a split second I saw the breast meat that made Grandma Alice's polenta and stew yummy. I bent over, picked up the bird, and with a deft motion dropped it into the pouch of my upland vest. Happiness with my new found skill glowed throughout. The following silent thought stayed with me even at the end of the evening when Pop and I relived the events. "Phil Robertson, the duck commander, has got nothing on me." I locked that emotion away because it was completely boastful, and Pop didn't like a braggart.

The trough toward the bottom of the hillock beckoned me . The flight stopped using the skyline as an alley way to get to the water. They flew like Frisbees straight over the coyote brush right to the water. I found the lead with my first dead dove could be replicated. Each in range dove that went in for water got a salute from my Model 12 in the form of a big peppery cloud of shot. After twenty minutes my game bag felt substantial with four dove as I scanned the tops of the coyote brush and willows for more meat. If they were in range, then it felt effortless. Almost like shooting them off the posts early in the seasons when Pop drove me around the ranch.

Pop, a meat hunter through and through, simply said. “Go get that one.” When a dove sat too long on the wire, he was in trouble. Pop taught his young grandson the motto: ground sluice. Now I extended my hunting to wing shooting as well. I felt grown up.

A dove skirted the tub of water at a hard right angle. I lifted the shotgun from the field carry within touching distance of some dark green willows. The birds used extra energy to zip directly out of watering area. The shotgun found its own nook within my shoulder, my cheek down on the stock with eyes trained on the target. I found a lead about a cigarette’s length in front of the speeding plumes. The trigger depressed and the shotgun grunted. The dove folded his wings and sped through the air without his wings extended. She crashed into a tumbleweed that cushioned her fall. I retrieved my own bird. My hands smoothed out the feathers. Tail feathers in the dovetail position made an imaginary spike that I touched with my index finger. Such a sharp point flexed easily into half moon shaped just outside my palm. Satisfied with the small lines of visual poetry I lowered the dove into the pile in my vest.

Flow of metal and wood continued to trace the paths of the small feathered pilots. I took what I learned on the hillock and applied it to the other nine dove. When I picked up my tenth bird for a limit, I sauntered back to the willows to wait for the sky to turn black. I savored the perfection of the tiny hunt with my Grandpa who watched from the dirt road one hundred yards away.

Pop let me post up on the best watering hole on that side of the ranch. I felt gratitude to the birds that fit nicely in my game bag. Soon they would be plucked to make a savory rich brown stew to top sputtering hot crushed corn meal.

We drove home across the bridge that separated Santa Ynez from the southern ranch. Clunk, clunk, clunk, tires of the Dodge smacked against the seams in the cement with a regular frequency. “Pop, I made some shots on flying dove.” I bragged.

“Yeah. I saw that.”

“Did any fly by you?” I questioned.

“I got a few, but you got the lion’s share.” Pop looked straight ahead at the road. “If you give Grandma a big hug, I bet you can talk her into making polenta and stew.” My mouth watered at the mention of one of my favorite meals. I knew the meal increased in value because I contributed to the

menu with time and effort. The value also increased because the dinner could only be attained with an accurately wielded Winchester.

We parked the car in the garage decorated with Pop's dusty antlers from seventy years of commitment. A couple of the horns, adorned with metal tags, looked like items from a 49er's mining camp. Pop harvested all of those animals to feed people he cared about. I opened the back door to the cozy home and walked through a portal never locked. Grandma Alice stood at the sink, sipped tea, and watched the steam pour out from her big four quart pot. She already predicted what I was going to ask. "Gram." She wrapped him up in a big hug. "I got a limit of dove with Pop at the ranch."

"I knew you would." She replied without a doubt.

"Would you make some stew with them tonight." Joseph asked.

"Of course. Go out back and gut the birds in my gardening trash can. When dinner is plucked and drawn bring them inside and rinse off the blood in the sink. Put in the drain strainer, so the leftover feather don't get in the pipes." She turned around set down her tea and walked into the family room.

I got right to work. I enjoyed holding the quarry in my hand and always admired the beauty of the perfectly crafted feathers. They set together in a mathematical pattern. My math teacher would give me a point for the right answer, if she knew I saw geometrical pattern in the skin that held the feathers by the pins. When I clipped off the legs and wings it created a meal fit for the pot. They fell through the air and landed on a pile of feathers inside the gardening trash can. As I cut through the neck to clean off the head, I uttered a quiet farewell to each little bird. I didn't know why seeing the head fall into the rubbish affected me this way. The small good bye snapped me out of the sadness I internalized.

I carried the pile of twelve birds with smeared red blotches into the kitchen side sink. With grandma's direction clear in my mind, I snapped the drain colander into place. The redness traveled down the water's flow into the drain, and left the birds grayish white and ready to be browned in vegetable oil. Grandma placed a big round metal bowl next to me. I dumped the birds into the bowl in double hand scoops. She recovered the vessel and set it next to her fry station already sputtering a bit of oil onto the floor from the black cast iron skillet.

Hiss. The skillet sounded angry at the flesh lowering its roaring hot temperature. Grandma

Alice deglazed the cast iron skillet with Carlo Rossi Burgundy. Little bits of fried dove flesh and bits overcooked to charcoal black mixed into a nectar that coated the meat. An exercise in patience remained, so I didn't ruin my appetite with jerky from the buck my father killed on opening day. I snuck into the cupboard to snack on the dried goodies and thought grandma wasn't paying attention. "Don't eat too much jerky. You'll ruin your dinner." I smiled sheepishly and stuffed my mouth full with the last piece of jerky.

"He shot really well. You should have seen him grandma." Pop stated to his wife.

"I'm not surprised." Grandma encouraged. "He even holds his rifle and saunters to the truck to load up like the older Crowhearts. Go watch Bonanza you two. You are getting under my feet." She hurried us out of the kitchen. Pop and I obediently walked out to the backroom.

After about an hour and a half they heard grandma's voice. "Dinner time. Come on you two." I flipped off the boob tube.

Once in the kitchen the warm smells of good food poured over my shoulders. I sat down to the circular table already set with crusty French bread heated in the oven, richly brown dove stew poured over a thick slab of polenta, and finally a separate plate with a slab of iceberg lettuce.

I ate like I had hunted all afternoon and only snacked on three pieces of jerky. I burned my forefinger and thumbs when I tried to pluck off a piece of dove breast too soon. I scooted the main course to the side of my plate to cool for about five minutes. Gingerly I lifted a triangle piece of polenta smothered in stew gravy to my lips. My tongue moved the bite around quickly, so I didn't burn the top part of my mouth too. Next I wolfed down the lettuce with orange colored dressing. The milk washed the meal into my belly. The cooled bird trapped within my fingers plopped into my mouth. I chewed with gusto and notice the delicate taste reminded me of fresh liver. Once the meat slid down my throat it returned to a poultry taste. I enjoyed that sensation that some classified as gamey. I decided to eat six of my game birds. Grandma spooned more gravy onto my plate to season the meat. Pop and Gram sipped the same Burgundy used to deglaze the skillet. They eyed each other and nodded at me with a downward motion to indicate my enthusiastic chewing.

"Eating your dove is delicious, isn't it?" Pop smiled at his grandson.

Optimistic thoughts built up a pile of great ideas for me in my second year of deer hunting. My father suggested hiking more and spending more time glassing oak shade. It sounded good to me. Pop dropped my father and me off at a place for a long walk hunt. “I’ll be back to pick you up about half an hour after dark.” I knew the last hour of sunlight made for the best hunting. The deer moved from their afternoon beds into the meadows and open areas beneath large oak trees. Bucks liked brush like oaks to provide cover and 60 foot towering oaks for acorns and feeding.

“Ok, good luck Pop.” I called out to my grandpa through the open truck window. My father raised a farewell palm. Pop motored down the jeep road. The wheels caught in the soft Monterey formation rock and spewed shards of rock backwards.

“Let’s find you a buck.” Before long I sweated heavily and trudged twenty yards behind my father. We stayed at the edge of a big circular meadow that stretched North from the dirt road to a mountain. It reminded me of irrigated fields I saw once from an airplane ride. Only this green grew up from rain water and not channel ditch water.

I practiced patience rather than call out to my father to slow down. He’d only get irritated with me for a forced slower pace. All the running and soccer playing helped, but the inclines of the mountains created a new type of exertion. I also watched for the line between the wild oats and sage that formed a small dirt path. The roots of sage sucked up all the moisture around the turf they lived, so the oats grew in a steady line six inches away from the thick grey bushes. I looked up to the ridgeline of the mountain and saw a destination with ample shade at 2:00 in the afternoon. As long as I continued to put one foot in front of the other, I could take a rest there.

Father continued his quicker pace. His experience with many trips to this location melted anticipation to reach the glassing point at the ridge. Legs toned from running everyday, and a firm desire to help his son kill a buck made him go faster than normal. He looked backward to his son. “Come on.”

“I’m going as fast as I can.” I snapped back.

“Quiet. You’ll scare the bucks. I’m not gonna molly coddle you.” Dad continued to the top. I

listened to my pulse resonate from inside my opened mouth. A raspy drum thud from pushing oxygenated blood all over my body.

I struggled to keep up with father's pace. I still carried my grin as part of my gear. "Check out that deer trail. It heads back down toward the creek." Without a word of warning I followed the path toward where we started. Dad shook his head with disdain. A backtrack would lose us time glassing the better oak feeding grounds from the top of the ridge. Father stayed stationary in his tracks and watched me walk within the thin dusty line toward a valley oak. After I disappeared around the tree he heard, "Father, come here." I called out urgently.

"Did you investigate a tarantula stalking a stink bug or some other insect like activity." Father chided.

Father walked over to oblige me. Around the tree he saw me knelt down next to some desiccated skin. He crunched leaves loudly with his boots to stand behind me. In my hands rested the perfect form of buck antlers attached to the skull. A forked horn buck dead months ago from a mountain lion kill. One that would have been perfect for my first deer. I gazed at the rack from every angle. The skull cap changed positions with each turn and left a faint odor of moldy sweat.

"Do you think it's a mountain lion kill?" I asked

"Yep. They eat one deer per week. This buck already grew his antlers. So it got eaten after July. Let's make our way to the ridge. There's another one out here." Father turned around and crunched to the sage path.

Blue sky sparkled above. Two turkey vultures with ink black outlines circled near the sun's golden orb. Thermals propelled them the entire mile of the hunting grounds in less than a minute. I wanted to get up there and fly with them. The high perspective would help me find more alive antlers.

The blue from the reflection of the rays on the atmosphere made me happy. Yet the explanation of the light bending to the blue part of the spectrum didn't have the same type of joy. I liked science, but mythology stories were cooler and added drama to the natural phenomena all around me. Zeus must be happy today. The vultures must be a favorite animal of the Lord of Olympus because they used his domain to find food on the ground. Maybe vultures were friends of Hades as well when the scavengers turned

death back into life again.

I kept up better with my father on the climb, and a slight breeze cooled my forehead on the way. Father topped the summit and continued to the center of the mountain. I peered into the next valley. I saw what father meant by a good spot to find parts of the herd. Spread out below us were acres of oak woodland with no brush for two miles. Deer in that part of the mountain exposed themselves in return for loads of acorns to eat. The temperature below the canopy in the shade cooled the hot animals by ten degrees.

Father dropped down to his bottom, rested his Springfield rifle on his lap, and took out the binoculars protected underneath his long sleeve shirt. I did the same and stowed my Winchester in the opposite direction. "Get comfortable this might take awhile." Father reminded.

They glassed for two hours. My concentration wandered to what I wanted to eat for dinner at Pappy's diner. I thought of delicious fried chicken, but it took an extra thirty minutes to receive my dinner because the well done chicken took longer than my usual omelet.

A ground squirrel scurried out of its burrow and barked at us. The squirrel probably asked me if I liked squirrel meat. I bet that ground squirrel on this peak didn't see too many humans. The road, located one mile away, guaranteed a person had to walk to get here. A walk comprised the best strategy to see the country and get to talk to ground squirrels like I did now. "EEEE." I chirped my best imitation of a squirrel. The furry mammal darted back underground.

"That must have been squirrel for run for cover." Father chuckled. "Are you losing your steam?"

"Maybe a little bit. What are you going to have at Pappy's?" I wondered to his father.

"I think I'll have the steak omelet. Pay attention now. A buck could be walking into that opening right now. We don't want to be gawking off and miss an opportunity." He pointed at peaceful meadow three hundred yards away. Looking down toward the open expanse instead of choked chaparral made me feel sleepy. I sucked in a big breath of air and slowly let it out. Concentration on breathing helped me focus and made my extremities tingle. My soccer coach taught me to breathe in deeply through my nose for an eight Mississippi count, then breathe out almost sounding like Darth Vader through my mouth. The technique calmed me down enough to score several penalty kicks over the season. Surprisingly I found it

worked to help me be focused through long periods of looking through my Vortex Talon binoculars.

Pop bought me the binoculars as a birthday present from the classified section of the Santa Ynez newspaper. Sometimes I took them out, walked outside my house, and gazed up at the Figueroa Mountains just for fun. The mountains too far away to make out any wildlife held the promise of a commune with nature.

“Joey.” My father’s voice made me look over my shoulder to him. “I think we are in business.” Father confided intensely. “Look right down there to the field I just pointed out to you. There is a buck there looking right toward us. We’re too far away for him to sense us, but don’t make any sudden moves.”

I used the trick Pop showed me. I let my eyes go soft and took in the whole picture to find a piece of a buck where my father suggested. The buck materialized quickly in the shadow. I couldn’t hunt with a bullet in the barrel, so I wracked the bolt open carefully and tried to slide a cartridge from the magazine into the chamber. “Easy does it.” Father advised. “I don’t want you walking around with a loaded rifle during this stalk. Men are killed most often with bucks in sight. Put that shell back in the clip and dry fire the trigger. We need to get a little closer before you load the rifle.” I did as I was told and put the cartridge back in the magazine.

We belly crawled back to the sage, then moved in a crouch to close the gap between us and the buck to 120 yards. Luckily the big trees acted like a screen to prevent the buck from seeing us. The wind blew from the bottom of the canyon right into the soaked bands of our camo baseball caps. Father crab crawled to the side of a tree and motioned for me to come and sit right beside him. I loaded the rifle and put it on safety. I positioned himself next to my guide and rested the weapon on my knees the way I practiced in the Peach Tree.

“Hold on.” Father’s voiced commanded. “It’s a spike.”

“Are you sure?” With the safety still on, I trained the crosshairs on the animal. I counted one point on the left and one point on the right. “Let’s wait till he looks to the front before we make a decision.” I reminded my father. We waited and finally the little buck turned to look straight ahead. No forks, just single antlers that moved up about six inches above his ears. It appeared to be a light tan unicorn from an angle when the antlers lined up exactly. “Maybe California has a season on unicorns in the A zone?” I

joked. Medieval knights rode into battle with chain mail and long swords under the protection of the unicorn flying from banners. How did the unicorn ever make a transition to an effeminate icon from such a bloody history? I waited until a legal buck showed himself. It needed at least two antler points that forked out enough to hang a ring. I didn't want a trophy. A deer to butcher and share sustenance with Pop and father would make my year.

"It would have been perfect for a first buck. It is healthy. Once it gets out of its bed a broadside shot should present itself." Father lamented softly. We sat motionless and watched the year old male.

Eventually the afternoon cooled enough so it could walk around and not get bogged down by heat. It shook its head. Then the ears flopped from side to side and his tail swatted at invisible backside flies. Hind legs extended first, next the front shoulders rose. Finally he stood solidly on all four hooves and showed his vitals to the invisible hunters.

I squeezed the trigger in my mind with a steady held traditional reticle. Wind swirled around us a moment and picked up some leaves. Human scent traversed to the cervid olfactory nerve and he snorted explosively. His feet punched the earth in aggressive bursts. With his quick run the buck made its escape deftly from the human predators never to be seen again.

We returned to the original glassing position. At 6:00 o'clock not much time remained to find another deer. "Let's start back." Father said. We continued to the western side of the bowl which also used sage to frame the entire visible mountainside. A shadow covered up three quarters of the open meadow. Crickets detected the decreased sunlight and began a serenade accompanied by the scent of pungent mullein grass. Evening made smells even more powerful than the day. Perhaps nature liked to unwind to good smells as the sun set, just as humans lit candles for light and scent. Twerp twerp.

Crickets slid wings together gracefully like a violinist swayed through the meat of a movement. When we neared a group of singing insects, they abruptly shut down the concert. Then they resumed the music once we kept hiking down hill to twenty yards away from the orchestra.

The crickets made a racket that soothed my feelings of getting skunked again on this night. The Western part of the meadow set down a jeep road we used to rendezvous with Pop. Stars twinkled in breaks between the leaves of the oak. Walking in the dark i lost my edge. A black vampire like shadow

swooped down between me and my father. Imagination on a run, I saw the form materialized from the mist into a man with a widow's peak and ghastly skin. In reality it wasn't Count Dracula who visited us, but an owl startled by the sound of our boots. The owl screeched and pummeled the air with foamy wing beats. I stopped while my Dad stepped on to the meeting point. Light fell out of the headlamp at my forehead when I depressed the button. I wanted to see if the big bird left behind owl pellets. I estimated the closest trajectory of a barfed up meal from the night before to be about thirty five yards from the trunk. On all four I searched with the light. A skinned palm and rock dented knees were all I received for my effort. Maybe that was the owl's sleeping tree. He must perch in another tree to regurgitate the fur and bones of the voles he captured.

Tired and disappointed I unloaded my rifle in the dark and laid down in the soft dirt. Sleep started to slow my breathing when a rumble vibrated my ribs and a bright beam of light stung my eyelids. The familiar sound of Pop's Dodge and a faint Vin Scully undercurrent reached my ears. "Tomorrow's another day. Your buck is out there somewhere." Father encouraged Joseph.

Chap 8

Jeffy, Dad, and I shuffled wader boots through the Circle K. Dad and Jeffy filled travel mugs with black coffee. Neither man sweetened the drink with milk or sugar. I thought of drinking down that hot liquid with a bitter bite. I shivered. I stepped in front of the hot chocolate machine and pressed the big orange button on the front of a picture of a delicious mug of cocoa. The machine shook and buzzed a little bit and hot chocolate already mixed with milk and sugar splashed into my drink carrier. Sounds of water poured on top of water and left the top of the cup white and foamy. My stomach growled from contractions inside. Although not a healthy breakfast, it sure injected my blood stream with a high power dose of sugar powered energy. I needed a glazed doughnut to round out the 5:30 a.m. food.

The large clear plastic box protected the assortment of real doughnut shop doughnuts Circle K provided for its customers. There snuggled in a bed of sugar the glazed doughnut waited for my plastic tongs to snatch it up. Once into a white paper napkin, I deposited the fried flower right to the taste buds. A sugar explosion burst inside my maw. They waited for me at the register. I placed my drink on the counter. "I got a glazed doughnut." I reported to the cashier.

“I see that.” The cashier smirked. “Four dollars and seven cents.” Father handed him a five spot. “Ninety three cents change.” We all walked out together into the cold dark. A black night sky still covered the ponds.

The blue Subaru ferried them over to the big lake, and father parked it on the top of a hill far away from the eyes of the ducks below. I stayed in the car while father and Jeffy moved quietly toward the edge of the hill. With binoculars they scouted the location of ducks within the big lake.

I stayed behind inside the blue all wheel drive vehicle. Wind howled outside the blue car, and gave the impression of a horror movie to a world outside the glass windows. It reminded me of a reoccurring dream that terrified me once or twice every year. While my father and uncle pinned down the ducks, as youngest member of the team let my imagination run wild inside the transportation.

In the dream I sat in the Subaru below a steep road topped with a medieval castle. Lightning bolts illuminated the silhouette of the sturdy brick fortress. Inside to keep me company Pop zoned out with his face away from me. Thunder clapped right above our shelter, and I saw a figure running high on tiptoes with ripped clothes. I could only see the human like figure from the lightning flashes which froze up my brain at the same time the claps of thunder pounded my eardrums. Pop looked calm despite all the surroundings. My heart struggled with bursts of exertion inside my ribcage like a fish tugging against a poorly tied knot.

Inhibited by the restraints of the Subaru, we huddled together as the figure came into view. A fully grown werewolf sprinted toward the car and shouted, “I’m hungry get out.” I froze. I hoped the window of the car provided enough protection for us to use as a safety strategy. We made a big mistake. The werewolf howled loudly outside the car just as a thunder clap drowned out the din. The hair on the back of my neck stood up like disciplined soldiers. With the end of the thunder a hush descended on the three figures. The werewolf reared back like a blue heron ready to strike at a rainbow trout near the bank’s edge. He plunged his muzzle through the glass. Pop, as his quarry, yielded to his razor sharp teeth. The beast grabbed the old man by the jugular vein and dragged him out of the broken window head first.

Weakly my ancestor looked back at me duly with a blood smeared forehead and chest. I screamed and fought back against the werewolf by holding onto both of Pop’s ankles. Then I woke up.

I didn't like that the entire recording of the nightmare came back now while waiting for my father and uncle. I should be brave and not scared of meaningless dreams. A knock at the window startled me. I sucked in air just the way I did when I woke up from the nightmare. My heart beat strongly.

Uncle Jeffy chuckled outside the widow, he realized he caught his nephew off guard. He mimicked a deftly swung shotgun and said bang bang softly as if he just shot a double. "Let's go. There's a big flock of one hundred ducks down there." The muffled sound vibrated through the window and seemed to come from the big gap between his teeth. Jeffy's teeth didn't sit together and I always thought it made everything he said more intense. His jokes were funnier, and his war stories more chilling because of the gap in his top two incisors.

Father popped the trunk and we all rummaged through the contents of the back by the light of the cab. I dumped a box of number fours to go inside the Model 12. Each hunter owned his own bag, so shells didn't get mixed up. "You and Joey go to the far side and stay down. I'll take the near side. When it gets light enough to see color I'll scare the flock over you with a shot on the water." Again he smiled with his gap tooth in the dim light.

Father and son got into position. Since the big lake filled up the bottom of a natural valley, there were no dikes to hide behind. We belly crawled up to ten yards from the banks of the lake. The temperature throughout the summer hot with no rain created a smaller lake than the hunters were used to. Yet, it made for an easier approach in the dark. No weeds pulled them back or broke under the weight of my legs. All sandy beach greeted them until the position. Luckily a big island of tules grew up thirty yards out from the set up. The mallards milled around on the other side. If smart grass grew right near the edge, the hunt would have been over before it started. The suspicious greenhead can see far even in low light. They would have flown away. Tules protected me and father from observation.

We waited half an hour. A small field mouse scurried next to my fingers. It pretended to be a melon vine. It looked right at me and fiddled with a seed from some vegetation. It turned the seed over and over. Then it examined its meal. Back hunched over, the mouse used both hands to steady the seed in its five fingers. The front incisors munched in a rapid up and down motion.

I heard the crack and compression of little rodent jaws. As quickly as it appeared, the small creature

disappeared. I hoped it would return because I liked listening and watching it eat. A comical bite combined with its fastidious hands provided entertainment. Meanwhile, I waited for the morning flight of ducks. Sadness sunk up on me that the mouse moved onto another part of the shore.

I rolled over carefully and folded up my baseball cap to rest my head. Above me the night sky faded to a deep purplish blue. The majesty of the stars melted into the bright light rising in the East. I could still see some of the larger constellations like Orion, on the last part of his evening sojourn. What would the mighty Greek hunter think of my soft feelings for the puny field mouse?

Quack, Quack, Quack A pair of mallards vocalized by a loud mouthed hen rose up on breezy sounding wings into the constellation. Only they knew the reason for the sudden departure. I sighed a breath of relief that the rest of the heterogeneous flock didn't join them.

I'd seen fifty ducks get up to follow a single duck that got nervous during a sneak to the edge of the embankment. Today the rest of the flock swam about on the water, happily whistling and splashing. Hopefully when the time was right they would circle back a few times to try and get on the water again. In this way I could get more than one round of opportunities to make roast duck.

A loud boom rocked the basin, and two more shots rang out. The sound and upward motion of the other birds sent the entire flock into the air. A group of fifteen teal flew directly over me and my father. I picked out the bird on the left of the lead bird and shot in front of him with a miss. I shucked out a shell and loaded another. Once on the bird again with it moving almost behind me, I pulled off in front on the hen teal and touched off the trigger. It folded up midair and sunk into the edge of lake's mud.

By now a cloud of more than 200 ducks filled the dimly lit sky. The first opportunity comprised the best of the morning until the birds funneled back one more time in mid morning. With so many birds: greenhead mallard, teal, and spoonies I couldn't focus on one bird in the air. A look up to see so many ducks froze me up for a couple of seconds. The beautiful wave of shore life made me pause as well.

My right hand pushed up on the elastic of the vest to free up two number 4 into my thumb and fingers. Without looking at the pump mechanism, I loaded two shells. Immediately a pair of mallards that wanted back into the cozy alcove of tules circled above a little too low to us. "Wait till I give you the word." My father reminded me. We didn't do a high ball imitation of a hen well, so we sat silently in the mud. The

beginning of the season made the quarry less wary. The pair circled again by us. I squirmed and my father put his hand on my shoulder. The mallards circled again and again at the same height. My heart beat fast watching the flight. We kept heads down not to flash reflective faces up at the scanning birds. Finally the pair committed with a decision that the coast was all clear. They descended from the safety of the air with wings cupped and flapping backwards for a smooth landing right in front of the tule patch. “Take the greenhead on the left.” My Dad whispered.

The team rose up on knees and flowed the beads below both descended birds. My mallard burst in a puff of white feathers from a cloud of shot that centered the bird. The hen also fell from my father’s browning auto 5. My ears rang a bit from the two loud noises. “Good shooting.” My Dad smiled. I felt accomplishment at the two delicious ducks floating next to the island of green stalks.

I went out to get the ducks in hip boots, but the water level quickly rose to mid thigh. “Come on back Joey. You don’t want to get water in your boots. You’ll be cold and miserable all morning.” Father cautioned. He gave it a try, but it went up to his chest and the birds were still a good 20 yards beyond him. By this time all the birds scattered to the cooling pond of the nearby sugar plant. A few scattered flights moved up in the cumulus clouds that blocked out the early morning sun.

Father returned to the shore and moved back with his son to the brush that surrounded the high water line of the lake. “Let’s sit and wait for more flights.” We stared out as the sparkles danced on the micro waves of the water. Each tiny indentation in the water caught the morning light and reflected it back brightly like a spotlight. Taken together the conjoined water and photons looked like bright diamonds. I turned around at a big crash in the brush. Jeffy stepped on a large wall of coyote brush to make his way next to his family.

“Any ducks?” I eagerly asked. Jeffy turned around to show me his vest’s game bag. Heads drooped down of two brightly colored red feathered cock wood ducks. “Wood ducks.” I exclaimed.

A fluke of luck put the rare birds in front of Jeffy when he moved into position to take the shot on the water to get the birds up. Those types of ducks preferred slow moving eddies near willows and sycamores as homes. That wood ducks happened to be in an open water lake on the outskirts of the Pacific Flyway demonstrated Jeffy’s good luck. “I crawled down until I could see color on the green

hills up by Highway 1. I could just make out the plumage of the wood ducks. I waited even more for them to swim in front of the low lying thistles at the water's edge. When they swam within 20 yards of me, I eased the barrel through the foliage and shot the first drake on the water. The other three flung themselves from the water before the rest of the flock, and I picked out the other most colorful duck. He dropped back down into the water with his companion. Great way to start off the morning."

"There were a lot of ducks on the pond this morning." I clarified.

"This is the way it was in the olden days when a storm pushed them down from the North. Right, Tom."

"We had shoots like this all the time in the seventies." Father said and looked off to the emerald hills.

"Joey, you and I should stay right here together. Tom you drive the Subaru over to the fence line next to the cooling pond and honk the horn. See if you can convince the ducks to get off the pond and come over here again."

"Sounds like a great idea." Father responded. He got up and climbed back up the hill Jeffy just descended. Jeffy looked over at the two hen teal his brother and nephew laid out.

"Not bad. You got two teal, a greenhead, and hen." Jeffy noticed.

"We can't really count the mallards yet. They are still out in the Big Lake." I said frustrated.

"Don't worry about a thing. We'll get them."

"Too bad we don't have a dog." I lamented. Jeffy looked up to see his brother's progress. They heard the slight sound of the car's muffler all the way down by the lake. I hoped all 200 birds would return with a little honking from the horn.

About thirty minutes passed and the ducks hadn't arrived. "Joey those two mallards are right up against the tules. Go around to where they grow into the mud bank. Then see if you can fold over the thick tules, and use them like a floating mat to grab the ducks. Here use this." He handed me a twelve foot dry mustard stalk. Rake them toward you if they are a bit out of reach or waves from your approach push them back." Jeffy snapped off all the branches when I wished the flock would return. He left the branches and frond looking growths on the last foot of the fabricated rake.

I entered the thick tules and could barely pass through. I took that as a good sign. If they grew just as thick near the entangled mallards, then I could reach them. Slow progress allowed me to grab a bunch, fold it over, and then walk on it. The duck path created made a direct line from the mud to the ducks safely above the water. Waves caused by the last movements to get to the ducks pushed them back out to the pond. I tip toed out with only the long mustard stalk. As soon as they moved, I snagged them both with the pole. With one deft motion I plunged my left hand into the liquid and recovered both mallards by the neck. A gentle relief spread over my face.

Jeffy yelled, "If you slip through just turn around a grab the folded tules. You're light enough the plant will support you." I hadn't thought about that. Gingerly I returned to the mud. I dropped the birds into my game pouch and picked up my shotgun. Back with Jeffy I had a sly grin on his face.

"Let me see that mallard." Jeffy commanded. He turned it over in his hands and nodded his head.

I anticipated the sharp sound of rushing air when it greeted my ears. It sounded like a soft jet, if jets were made of meat, bones, and feathers. It looked like the entire morning flock returned. We cocked our heads slightly to track the position of the birds. The myriad waterfowl milled in the air almost like a kites at an April festival. Then suddenly, they committed and landed at the far side of the pond. Jeffy and I smiled at each other. Jeffy whispered, "Go down the gulley and take the long route all the way back up to the top of the hill near the road your Dad just drove. Go all the way back to where we parked this morning. Belly crawl down the hill to those thistles I told you about. They are where the water makes a small crooked finger. Crawl up and wait till some big ducks swim in front of you. Shoot 'em on the water. We are meat hunting this morning, no need to be sporting. That will put some of the flock over me, so I get a chance."

I did exactly what I was told. At the top of the hill where we parked the Subaru earlier in the morning I saw what Jeffy meant. The best belly crawl of my life was required to get to the edge of the water. The chance the ducks would see me up on the hill making my way down to them was above 60%. From the top of the hill looking down the open space of the hill enclosed me in quiet a dilemma.

I crisscrossed my legs the way I watched Pop do sometimes by a backcountry fire with no pit. Pop scooted up as close as he could without burning his clothes. He commenced to stare at the fire until the

words came to him for one of his good hunting stories.

I sat and stared just like my elder. A path down the hill with slanting cover would keep me away from the duck eyes. A snake of mustard and coyote brush green along the slope made more cover. There must have been a micro gulley there to water the plants over the last couple of years.

In a slow crawl with one hand then one knee I made my way down to the water. A coyote bush ten feet away became my goal, and my back stayed down. As long as I kept my backside down, the ducks swam tranquilly around the hole of water. I raised up just a bit to slide my shotgun toward the heart shaped foamy leaves of the bush. Carefully I moved my barrel. It stayed slightly pointed up, so the metal's blueing didn't sink into the mud. If I made that mistake, the hunt would be over. There would be no way to clear out the mud plugged barrel without alerting the ducks.

I arrived at the coyote brush half way down the hill. I could get close enough for a shot at the group of six mallards that milled around below my coyote brush patch. I wondered if a real coyote tried the same strategy to pounce on some land sleeping coots.

The ducks beyond forty yards still awaited out of good range. I needed to crawl to twenty yards away, and keep my head down. Thirty yards out I started to get a little giddy that the plan would work. Adrenaline pumped out of my glands a bit and increased my breathing.

The Subaru up at the top of the hill announced its position by sound before I turned around and saw it. In an effort to make the hunt easier my father drove up to the parking spot. Then he continued to the Big Lake about thirty more yards down to the edge where it got too steep to drive the blue car. I knew my slam dunk at the mallards passed. I saw the ducks get nervous. They swam back and forth quickly with all their necks craned up to get a better view of the human machine rolling down into the duck sanctuary. I naively thought I could creep forward and still take the pot shot before they flew. Wrong, the mallards vaulted from the water at the same time as I glanced back.

Up on my knees, I shot at the closest duck thirty yards away. I should have knocked it out of the air. I wiffed it. Flustered I made two rushed secondary shots, and the mallards flew farther and farther away. Nothing. I shouted out an expletive. One I saved for when no adults were around.

Jeffy's duck gun reported three times. I couldn't tell if birds fell from the air. All my attention

focused on the water ahead of me out beyond twenty yards. My father walked down to the water's edge and realized what his good deed caused for me. "Father. I snuck up on those mallards. I wanted to shoot one of the greenheads on the water when you scared them away. You should have waited up top." I winced.

My father paused. Next he looked out to Jeffy holding up two mallards and apologetically explained to his angry son. "Sometimes things don't work out."

Chap 9

Despite the missed mallards I still enjoyed the hunt. I told my friends about sneaking within 30 yards of the greenheads. My friend Eugene listened intently while the rest of the boys played soccer at lunch.

After my tale, Eugene regaled me of his adventure that same weekend off highway 166. "We didn't even have waders. We wore our jeans into the cold water. I got one mallard that flew right in my face. My Dad didn't get any because he walked toward them, and a shot on the pond would have resulted in a peppered face for me."

Pop took into account that kind of accident every time Eugene and I hunted together. "I'll take you two, but only one shotgun for the both of you." We worked out a system that one would shoot, then the next ducks we spotted the other one got a chance. We played rock, paper, scissors to choose the first gunner.

"The pow wow is this weekend. Are you going?" Joseph asked.

"Of course I'm going to try out my new buckskins. It took me an hour to cut the trailings after I sewed everything together." Eugene said

"I made an antler head dress to channel a buck spirit." I pranced around the playground with my hands on my head and my middle and index fingers spread like a big forked horn. All my friends laughed at my antics. They were accustomed to my over energetic behaviors. The pantomime was a bit strange for someone who lived in Santa Ynez with all its street lights and traffic.

"Your grandpa didn't tell you he was coming today to do the friendship dance with our class?" Eugene clarified.

"He told me. I forgot to mention it to you." I explained.

“I found out the last time we went duck hunting in the Suey.” Eugene said.

Later that day the whole 7th grade gathered on the baseball diamond for the dance. We all circled up. Our group held hands and backed up until the reach of the hands stretched as far as it could. Then we dropped each other's hands and listened to the elder Crowheart. Pop told the class, “The Indians who lived here and live here are called the Chumash. It is fitting that you have oak trees around the school because they are a source of food for the Chumash. You can't just go pick it and eat it off the tree like an apple. You get the acorns and smash them up and boil them. They have acid in them that comes out in the water. It is called tannic acid. Once the acid is out you can make dough with it like masa. Today we will do the friendship dance to make a strong bond of friendship with everyone here. I want all of you to think about how everything on this planet is connected. The oak tree is connected to all of you and humans to the acorn. Human beings are all connected together, no matter how different they might appear on the outside. We all come from a mother. We love. We return to the Earth when we die. That's why we dance in a big circle. Life moves in a circle and a circle is a sacred shape. Remember who you are and why you are.”

I was a bit nervous doing the dance with some of the boys in the class, but at least none of the eighth graders were there. Everyone took my grandfather seriously and listened to his words. The dance played out over the years for him, and he felt a bond with people he danced it with. My auntie brought her infant baby and helped Pop set the ceremony by burning white sage inside an abalone shell. He inhaled deeply the smoky sweet smell. It reminded him of hunting late in the afternoon just as twilight came onto the hillside.

The drums one of Pop's friends played beat with the medium pace of a human heart lub dub, lub dub, lub dub, lub dub. So many symbols of life woven into the dance made me think that only friendship could come of it. As my feet moved to the rhythm, I held onto Christy's hand and Eugene's hand. My aunt moved in the circle with her young child. I thought back to the ducks I chased with my grandpa in the dark. Pop taught me about more than ducks.

The whole class shuffled in a circle on top the red dirt of the baseball field. Many of the students in class I knew since kindergarten. I hoped they stayed in my life for many years to come. Most kids let

their feet shuffle during the dance. The sound of the drum and the movement of the Earth, and the breathing of the children all made its own harmonic sound.

The sage in the abalone shell still burned incense in the air. Every time my part of the circle got near it, I looked at the small burning ember. A waft of smoke came up from the heat and coated each person that danced by the drum. I didn't understand how the smell could bring in all positive energy, but it was something I felt. The gratitude pumped in my veins. I didn't feel that way often. Outdoor activities like hunting and fishing brought the feeling out in me, but not things at school. This morning when I looked at my principal holding hands with the biggest trouble maker in class, Matthew, I knew Pop's wisdom worked.

We danced two more types of dances one slower the other faster. It added a special quality to the dance that I held Christy's hand. Her hair with tight black and brown curls stirred something in my chest. When I said silly things to get a reaction out of her, she burst out with a giggle and her eyes sparkled too.

Pop stopped the dance. The class looked around and laughed with the Chumash ceremony we just created. Even the principal of the Catholic Elementary school, St. Ynez, was completely a human being for a moment. There weren't any tests or computer gadgets inside the sacred circle we made. Joseph's principal, a nun for 25 years, danced the way ancestors of that land danced for 10,000 years. It was ok the whole ceremony wasn't housed in a wooden Catholic frame. Pop's dance and drum wove a rope that conjoined us all.

I went up to Pop as he packed up his things. "Thanks for leading the dance here at school." Pop smiled as he made his way back to the Dodge ram, "My grandfather did the same for my friends. We danced in secret, and we are all still friends. Each generation should improve the way for the next."

On the first weekend in October right after the last weekend of deer season all my family went to commune with others at the festival. If the friendship dance tied my classmates together, then the pow wow built a village of good feelings to return to year after year. I invited my friend Eugene to experience the gathering. Since we were both too young for a license Pop drove us.

Chumash existed in the modern world. It was a testament to the power held in ceremony and the

ideas that percolated in my head from the hot water my grandfather poured into it. The Spanish tried to assimilate the tribe. Next the Mexicans ignored them. Finally the Americans wanted to exterminate the people, but I stood for that failed federal plan.

“Even though the friendship dance was well received, the 8th graders called me casino Indian even before my fight with Chester. It bugs me because in some ways we haven’t evolved beyond cowboys and Indian from back in the 1800’s. Some people just want to kick the Indians around no matter what the situation. No one questions a Chief Executive Officer about the millions of dollars they earn. Why do some people get so upset about revenue generated from gambling on an Indian Reservation?” Joseph got on a roll. It surprised me my grandpa didn’t jump in and add to my arguments. Pop drove along while quiet permeated the truck. A few weeks passed since the classroom dance. I still missed opportunities to kill a buck. Another deer season ended. Maybe I could learn something at the pow wow that would make me a better hunter.

Eugene picked up my ideas and added more. “Those kids who mention your ancestors in anything other than a positive way are jerks. It’s not cool to talk of a person’s roots in a dismissive way. That’s racism. Some of the stuff people say to you; especially the 8th graders, is just a sour grapes. They think you have money, they don’t have. Instead of being happy for you, they want to try and put you down. I’ve seen you get right back in their face with a calm demeanor. Besides it is a nice problem to have. With that money you can afford to bring a friend along with you for out of state deer hunting.” Eugene elbowed his buddy in the ribs since the Dodge squished all three of them in the cab tightly.

Joseph responded immediately, “I’ll get you tag, but I get to shoot first.”

“Just like your father.” Pop said, now deciding to join the conversation. “Today we’ll watch and chat with our relations. Most of the people at the event I haven’t seen in a long time at least over a year.”

“I heard that John Trudell would be there at the Tomol crossing presentation and offer some spoken word poetry.” I reminded Pop.

“Yes, just between us he will be there. I don’t like to go around blabbing that he is at our pow wow. I don’t think the Feds have ever crossed him off the list of people they watch. Not after he gained so

much power in the American Indian Movement. He started to get other Americans to wake up and realize the plans laid down for the United States of America. As long as clear thinking stays in a segment of the population, the Federal Bureau of Investigation doesn't pay much attention. When a leader brings in human beings from all walks of life, then they watch. So yeah, he'll be there. He will show up, and most of the members in the pow wow won't even know its John. The open mic poetry will start, and people will take notice once he turns on the background music and truths spills out of his mouth." Pop sounded more excited than normal.

They drove passed Lake Cachuma. "I've caught a lot of trout there." Pop deftly changed the subject. The morning unfolded in quiet splendor. The heat of summer burned out and left chill mornings in early October. Mornings bit with a nip that got people out of bed and out in the mountains. I looked forward to October because it was a consolation month after deer season. School in full swing let me show up and take in knowledge. I didn't feel anxious like in September when I constantly wanted to be out swishing through wild oats on the prowl for a buck.

Another reason October seemed great was the pressure let off from my shoulders about his buck. I dared greatly again this year, and I failed. Like Roosevelt said, "His place would never be with those cold timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat." Ducks always provided plenty of opportunities. Every season I relished the ducks I ate in the silver roasting pan with bacon and poultry seasoning to round out the dark wild meat flavor. Ever since 5th grade I shot ducks and ate them.

On the last incline on the way to the big campground, the sun shined directly in our eyes. At 7:30 a.m. in the morning the road's direction pointed right the traffic directly East. Pop put the sun visor down, but still couldn't see well. The intensity of light blinded all three of them. The hill moved the road East again, but pointing down and the shadow of the sun fell inside the cab. The light show finished. An electric traffic sign stated Pow Wow October 2-3. Pop made a left turn into the driveway for live oak. There were signs along the path to read that were inspired by Burma Shave. Please silence your cell phones. Listen to the Earth. Dance, acorns, coyote's mirth. The last sign had a big Western toad carved into the bottom of it and the top boasted 28th Annual Chumash Pow Wow.

We parked the truck in the shade of a valley oak and walked up to the dancing area. Some people rode electric golf carts to the top, but Joseph, Eugene, and Pop walked. A blue jay screeched three times when it flew out from beneath a poison oak clump. It reminded me of the shady portion of the Peach Tree Spring that always hid scrub jays. “He says welcome to Live Oak.” Pop smirked

We reached the top and a fire burned in the central pit next to the big awning that protected the picnic area from the sun. Many people warmed themselves next to the fire pit, to get rid of the morning cold. The Santa Ynez River strangely silent encompassed the Northern part of the campground. I preferred regular rain years when that part of the area whispered with water over the rounded rocks. Maybe this winter Santa Barbara county would get enough water to fill the aquifer, and the left over could spill out to the sea via the river. The pow wow was long over when the banks filled to river capacity. Anyone who tried to cross it understood from soaked clothes and strong current the meaning of the word river at that location in the watershed. Yet that amount of water probably wouldn’t come until February.

“Come on.” Eugene said. “I’ve got an insulated jacket on. I’m plenty warm. I want to go get some fry bread.” I followed him over to Chief Roman Nose Fry bread. It wasn’t the bread that brought me and Eugene to the stall every year. Although the delicious bread soft and light melted in my mouth from the hot oil fry. I liked reading the biography of the chief while I waited in line for my breakfast. The story reminded me of the human beings that came before me, and the will to get thrive in any conditions.

This chief lead a group of Sioux on the plains until he needed to surrender and take his people to a reservation. The band received rations of flour and oil, but it wasn’t enough to fill the bellies of all the community. The mothers made dough with the flour and fried it in the oil. All of those cooking methods filled up bellies better than other recipes. They took all the ingredients available and made something better with it. A common story around the world when people didn’t have a lot of money: menudo, pork rinds, fry bread. Food stuff others thought of as scraps turned into deliciousness. Now the good grub filled bellies at the pow wow. Eugene and I filled up and headed over to the chairs near the dance area. We sat down as the first couple of participants.

I read about anthropologists who arrived at the Chumash community back in the early 1920’s. The ways of the people changed drastically. The outward story given to others comprised a feint that most of

the culture got destroyed with the first round of missions.

The elders set up a quiz question for the anthropologists to pass. “Did you come here to watch us pray or pray with us? The anthropologists who didn’t understand the question were kindly informed that the Chumash had fully assimilated into American culture and didn’t have enough information to put into a textbook. The ones that replied, “We have come to watch you pray.” received what they wanted. An elder, usually a grandma, would show them how to use manzanita and night shade. Information that blew the academics away included the ability to heal wounds with black sticky sap from poison oak. They usually left at the end of summer quite happy with all the information they acquired. Some reciprocity occurred, but mostly the textbook writers emerged from the experience much wiser.

Finally the anthropologists who understood more of the world view of a matriarchal society answered the question in this way, “We came to pray with you.” Those researchers jumped into the heart of the Chumash worldview. They listened to the story of the Rainbow to the Channel Islands, and the humans that fell off into the water to become dolphins. They moved from being observers to being participants. My intention with my friend Eugene was to become a participant today not an observer. I came to pray with the dancers, just as I did days ago with my classmates.

Pop also discussed coyote who fit into matriarchal roots. These stories, told on the planet before patriarchal ones, embraced the concept of a trickster, the coyote. The Christians and their ancestors Zorastrians spoke of an eternal battle between forces of good and evil. Both these stories grew in a patriarchy. In the Chumash world view the battle of good and evil didn’t function the same way. They lived in an eternal universe as well, but the opposite force of human will was the coyote. He pointed out the foibles of the human beings. Through playing tricks on them, he helped them to raise up consciousness. When the anthropologists separated themselves into categories of knowledge, it wasn’t to punish them. They only received information they were ready to process with their hearts. The elders like the oak and the frog gave out lessons in the same way to humans. Matters of the heart permeated the lessons of the planet. Only someone ready to communicate with Maria Sanchez could enter into the canyons of the Figueroa Mountains and talk with the green relatives like an old time mountain Indian.

I liked the idea of no right answers. Knowledge came to me when I was ready. Maybe that’s why

I missed out on making venison BBQ for two years.

Three men sat in the arena around a large skin taut drum. They wailed in unison a morning prayer. It wasn't the silent morning prayer when the night creatures tucked themselves into burrows. This prayer resonated for the people at Live Oak. They sang their song to help the dance later that day. I closed my eyes and let the organic sound wash over me. Eugene did the same.

BOOM, boom, boom, boom, BOOM, boom, boom, boom, BOOM, boom, boom, boom, Heaaaaaaaya, heaaaaAAAAAya, Heeeeeaaaaaya, Each man's voice layered on top of the other and supported the sound of the drum to transport me to a year not entirely located in 1993. It felt like we all got to the gathering place by walking. Instead of metal chairs to sit and listen, I imagined a wood stump beneath my bottom. Sounds absorbed by the oak boughs passed through my heart on the way to the acorns. Vibrations stirred up water in my eyes, and I did not dam them up even in the presence of my friend. Three men in a circle joined together intention that passed into my hardness like an arrow through a hay bale. A perfectly held release of the bowstring that passed through the bull's eye as if the arrow originated in the center. I let the tears flow down and clean out my emotions. The salty water cleansed me. Crystal clear waves of salt cleansed my wounds like the Chumash used to do for open cuts in the ocean before pollution.

Eugene looked over at me and closed his eyes. He didn't want to disturb whatever I passed through. Sound emitted from the drum, and the tears kept coming down from me. Since big muscular men hit the drum, I felt no shame in letting the tears flow out. A silent cry happened.

I thought of letting down my family mostly because I had not killed a buck the last two seasons. Uncle Jeffy and Dad set the bar high, and I couldn't clear it. Mostly though the tears came from deep hole of sorrow that I could not pin down on any one reason. Then as the tempo and aggression of the wails and drum subsided my tears returned to the ducts they came. An organ within my skull that could demonstrate any emotion of great intensity. I almost cried once at a soccer game when I made the game winning penalty kick. It didn't only happen clothed in sadness.

I always carried a red handkerchief, the ones with the old western designs. When I went into circle K to get doughnuts in the morning, I sometimes bought a hanky. With tears dried and nose blown, the

emotional creek became sand again. I hoped my friend wouldn't mention my tears.

Eugene showed tact and walked quickly to the craft booths after the spontaneous drum circle. This avoided any conversation. Around the main arena all kinds of different craft vendors sold items that ranged from buckskin moccasin tools to hand carved wooden flutes. I walked around in the buckskin tent. I aimed to make moccasins from some buckskin Pop provided. Scissors I already owned, but I needed a hole puncher, large thread, and a needle. With new foot wear maybe I could get closer to the deer I hunted. The slipper like footwear only came up to my ankle. A rattlesnake could reach above my ankle to place two fangs sunk up to the hilt with venom. Maybe I should just stick to boots.

Then I walked into the tent of a flute maker. A wooden music maker rested on a display like a sword at a Japanese sushi bar. Eugene asked the owner, "How much are the flutes?"

The owner narrowed his eyes. "Hello." Then he turned around to look out toward the empty river. My friend paused a moment. "Hi. How much do you sell the flutes for? There are no price tags on the flutes displayed."

"There are no price tags because you need to name a price." The craftsman reminded him sternly. Eugene didn't even know where to start with a price. Accustomed to prices, he asked the man out of curiosity. He realized he didn't really want a flute, he just wanted to chat. I went over to Eugene.

"Let's go over to the open mic. Maybe the poet already arrived at the podium." I said to my friend.

"Thanks." I nodded to the musician and led the way over to the end of the awnings. A knife tent protected old looking pieces with steel thrust into antler.

"I did something wrong at the flute tent." Eugene mentioned. "The flute maker seemed irritated I asked the price. I didn't mean to annoy him."

"You didn't do anything wrong. It's just impolite to jump right into a business transaction with someone. This is not Walmart. We are here to be part of a tribe for awhile. Just like at the drum circle, commerce is not functioning on the codes of modern day. Where else can you eat fry bread like that? The elder said a prayer before all the dancers began. He reminded all the people that dancing is an honor. If you have not danced for a couple of years, or were not invited to dance just watch. These are

all subtle reminders of Indian protocol. When the polite interactions get crushed it is uncomfortable.”

Eugene nodded thinking of what I just said.

“Don’t worry I’ll only scalp you around your ears. I won’t take all your hair. It will be more like a haircut.” I grabbed a fist full Eugene’s hair and used a pretend knife to cut at it.

Chapter 10

Pop came up to the boys near the knife station. “Stop foolin’ around with those knives so near. Let’s go on down and listen to Trudell. He will read off poetry before the main dancing starts.”

Along the dusty path electric golf carts kicked up pea gravel near the bathrooms. We walked west to a small natural amphitheater created by a semi circle of trees. The ground sloped toward the trees. I made my way to the front row by keeping my left leg bent and stepping down with his right. It looked like a step hop. I sat with his legs crossed the way I did before a fire.

John Trudell reminded me a little bit of John Lennon with his eagle’s nose and wire rimmed tiny glasses that just covered his eyes. He wore a black beanie, and white and black long hair escaped out the sides. He sat on a three legged stool. A young girl, slightly older than Joseph showed John a small Betty Boop notebook. I guessed the girl with tight curls wrote thick poetry with cursive pen stroke inside of Miss Boop.

I realized the girl was Christy from my class. John spoke to her above a whisper. I sat close enough to eavesdrop some of the words. The girl and poet spoke in an easy Spanish. An intensity about the conveyed message struck into me because I noticed her attractiveness. Beauty and brains made a stunning combination. John nodded his head and returned the book of poetry.

She sat down next to me and Eugene. Pop remained on the other side. I blushed. Glad none of that cleansing drum music played right now. I settled into my own spot. I smiled at the girl, and she looked right through me to the back of my skull.

Trudell sat on the stool and tapped on the mic. He said, “Test, test. Can you all hear me ok?” The crowd yelled yes and he nodded without a smile. “I wanna jump right into this. Thank you all for being here with me today and holding this space. We are all human beings. We have been programmed from a young age by the powers that be to say we are something other than human. Sometimes we say we are an

Indian. Sometimes we say we are a cowboy. Others call themselves black. Here at the Chumash Pow Wow we know we are the people.

That's what the men and women living on the island that Christopher Columbus lost his boat on called themselves the people. We are all one people. Human beings. Just that being. Human beings store a vast amount of power within the marrow of their bones. Power and energy. Energy and power."

I couldn't wrap my mind around all of what he said. The vibe to his voice made me feel calm and safe. John spoke the truth. A forked tongue attached itself to politicians. John protested plans to take leftover uranium rods from Diablo Canyon Power Plant and bury the poison on Navajo land in the desert. Although I used that electricity, its energetic harmony created disease. John spoke with energy.

The elder, whose grandfather fought against injustice in the same cause of Emiliano Zapata, expounded more for the people. "When the police bound my feet and hands. When they threw me to the ground with the trash and the dirt. They didn't realized they deposited me into the embrace of my mother. Mother Earth is soil, dust, and even refuse. Refuse. There is no trash in nature. A waste product of one creature is the food of another. Look at the vulture who eats death and creates life with the rotten flesh. The protest to raise awareness about the energy inside each human being, and the problem of nuclear energy are the same. The power of corporations sent the muscle of the police to silence my poetry, to silence my voice. I am not quiet. I speak for the next generations. This land, borrowed from our descendants, must be cared for. They threw me on the ground, and I pulled strength from my relatives. You see, the great country of ours is a mining operation. The United States of America is the greatest mining experiment of history. Corporations mine the water for electricity. They mine the land for uranium. They mine the oceans for oil. They mine the soil for food. They program our minds over the generations to mine its energy. Now that we all know about the mining. We can think in a coherent way and live with Mother Nature with her natural cycles. Human beings can set up their own set of programs: patience, love, kindness, reciprocity, joy. Human beings can live in the sacred circle of life passed down for eons in a matriarchal society."

The poet went on for about twenty minutes. My mind expanded with each stanza. I took this message home with me. Live in accord with nature and her cycles. Cooperate with other human beings,

and nations can flourish for another five hundred centuries. Conserve the renewable resources the Earth and all her elders share with us. As one of the youngest species on the planet, it behooves us to learn from the wisdom of the grizzly bear, toad, and Sequoia.

Chapter 11

Eugene and I danced after the invitation from Pop. The steps came easy and the sweat poured off both of us by the end of our time in the arena. By night time Pop dropped Eugene off at his house then me.

“Thanks Pop. I’ll see you this weekend for our hunt.” I said.

“Come over and stay at my house so we have an extra twenty minutes in the morning. Grandma will make your favorite stew.” Pop said.

Before I closed the door, I paused a moment. “I thought we already ate all the dove from the opener?”

Pop shook his head and made a sound with the tongue on the back of his teeth. “Tsk, ts, ts, ts. You aren’t the only one I go hunting with. I took Grandma during the week when you were at school.”

I shut the door and thought to himself quietly. *I didn’t know Grandma liked to hunt.* I waved after my grandpa dropped me off at my house and drove away.

About to drift off to sleep, a thought of something my grandma told me once whispered in my ear. She said at the beginning of deer season. “I watch you walk out there with your father and grandfather. All three of you have the same demeanor. If you were horses I’d say the same gait, but you know what I mean. You hold your rifle scabbards the same way. All three of you have the same shit eating grin on your face when you come back from hunting. I used to pray for your Dad. Please let there be a deer out somewhere for him when he first started hunting. Now he’s grown up. I say the same prayer for you. The places to hunt deer shrink with each generation. You have to be lucky to have a place to go, lucky to see the deer, and lucky to make the shot.”

Grandma’s voice subsided a bit. A spider web strand intersected grandma with my tears and the movements of the poet. Connected to each other, all the human beings on the planet spun a web. The idea of each generation going into mountains to find deer and eat them resonated deeply within me. I killed

the animals I focused on over years of a search. The quest held nothing of dying within my mind. On the contrary, the deer instructed me on life. I killed the deer. I loved the deer.

I fell asleep. I dreamed the back of the Peach Tree full of deer. They pranced and hid in the shadows of the oak trees. Three bucks kept the herd moving. One had four points on each side and a twenty five inch spread. Not even in the stories of my grandfather did I ever hear of a buck that large in the Tepesquet. The herd moved from one shady spot to the next. Does saw when I tried to steady myself for a shot, but they moved toward brush. Always outsmarted by the instincts of the deer, I moved to keep up with them.

When I awoke in the morning, I felt groggy from the intensity of the dreams. I didn't feel like going to school, but I packed a lunch of sharp cheddar cheese, big hunks of sourdough bread, and jerky. On the walk to school I smelled the damp earth and sharp smell of autumn coming into the valley. Ambiance of wet leaves made me want to roll around in a pile of them. I restrained myself because the mess I tracked back to the carpool would leave the driver upset.

My next door neighbor, Amy, had her mom drive a group of us to school every third week. All the moms in the neighborhood owned minivans to drive a squad of children to school and pick them up. My brother, Amy, her sister and I listened to Michael Jackson's Dangerous. The CD graphic stared back with Michael's eyes. One of the music videos that went along with his song had people's faces morph into other people's faces. Even though I listened to it on the car stereo that morning, I imagined my face changing into Amy's face, and then Amy's mom's face, and onto people I didn't even know.

The rest of the week passed by with each day melting into the next like an MTV video marathon. My Dad dropped me off at my grandpa's house. I stored most of my hunting gear there like my 243 Winchester rifle and pack. The rest of my gear like the binoculars and canteens I put in backyard shed. I made a list and looked at it before each hunt, so I'd remember all the items I needed. Once during the first season, I forgot my glasses and his knife. It made the hunt more difficult not to be able to see far away, or use a knife. With my checklist, I didn't make that stupid mistake again.

Grandma made the dove stew just like Pop said. Right before bed we watched TV to relax. Grandma got to choose the show, so we watched Golden Girls. Grandma Alice laughed so hard when

Sofia the mother made jokes about her daughter. The sexual innuendos were so blatant even I giggled inside. I laughed to myself. If Pop and Gram knew I understood what was going on during the show, then I would have to go to sleep earlier.

I went to my room to go to sleep after Pop set his wind up alarm to 4:00 a.m. As I drifted off into dreamland, I thought how easy it was to get up for hunting rather than school.

The next morning seemed to come five minutes after I closed his eyes. We ate stale corn flakes from the cupboard. We washed it down with sweet tart orange juice. Pop made salami sandwiches with thick slabs of salami smothered in butter. The meat stayed captive between two pieces of Wonder Bread. On the way to the truck I always got a spooky feeling in the early morning. Something around in the air watched me, maybe not harmful, but definitely not around during the daylight hours. I looked up at all Pop's antlers suspended from the naked two by four rafters.

No traffic on the 166 highway at that time of morning let us make good time out to the mountains. We passed all the locked gates and got to the east side of the spring before the sun came up. Pop led the way to a spot with scattered yuccas. We waited for the sun in the dark in the space between the wild oats and sage brush. I liked the spot because I could glass the entire field. The sage in front of me broke up my outline. Last year three does crossed right over the road in the dark.

A bit chilly Pop pulled out a thermos and offered me the first cup topped with steam. Pop poured himself a cup. "Good coffee." I noticed my grandpa was complimentary of himself in most things. Once in awhile he looked at himself in the mirror before breakfast and uttered mostly to himself, "You're a handsome devil." That confidence extended to most things in his life. The coffee flowed from the top of the thermos cup and passed his lips with a quiet slurp to cool it off. I burned the top of my mouth letting the hot liquid into my mouth to fast. Pop quietly slurped again and said, "It's gonna be a beautiful day." I nodded and remembered I still burned my mouth just like at the Circle K.

I wrapped my arms around my shoulders and shivered quickly. The Columbia hunting shirt I wore let in the nip. As soon as the sun got up, or we decided to walk a bit my body temperature would be comfortable. In the eastern horizon over forty five minutes the sky changed color from deep dark purple almost black. Stars behind Orion on the celestial plane moved up to about forty five degrees in the

black part of the sky. I wanted to know their names too, but Orion and Cancer were easier for me to pick out. Those old constellations appeared in the sky when I ran in the morning too.

Then only along the ridge, the sun painted an orange line. At the same time the orange decorated the tops of the mountains, the purple changed to electric blue. Now three colors hummed a tune to announce the arrival of the sun again. The colors held fast for a good ten minutes and stayed the same. Most of the crickets stopped the violin music around us. Little gray birds took up the orchestra sound with tweets and happy sounds of warmth. Harmony of the birds used an instruments in between a flute and a muted trumpet with the cup over the hole. Different tones from each brush bird made a melodious tune.

Now if I could see through the mountains, the sun would be about ten degrees below the mountain. I could tell of the imminent arrival because now the blue turned to sky blue, and the orange on the line of the ridge disappeared into blue. The black retreated all the way up to the zenith. All the stars hid within the light for another twelve hours.

Light bathed the forest around us, and I glassed all the likely spots for a buck. The three deer that sped across the road last year did not make an appearance. The binoculars lowered and I stared ahead.

“It’s not over yet.” Pop reminded me. “Walk the Peach Tree Spring trail from this side. Pussy foot over there. You could jump up a buck going to water. Now go on over there and take a look around the spring.”

I tucked my binoculars into my long sleeve shirt. The boots crunched through the dry grass. Deer must have tough stomachs to chomp through this stuff. The path cut two thirds of the way down the hill. Always on the lookout in a field about seventy five yards from me, I expected to see a doe pop her head up from the thick wild oats. There weren’t any deer there.

At the Peach Tree Spring I put my rifle on top of my hat over the ground. Kneeling next to the water I put my hand inside and let the current of coolness crawl up my arm. It was the middle of summer, and the water had a feel to it almost like snow melt. The tadpoles came up to look me in the eye. The adults that laid eggs in the water disappeared long ago. They knew the water would be here long enough for the young tadpoles to mature. A mama frog didn’t have to hang around and care for the young the way a mammal would. Amphibians made up a group of hardy water and land dwellers. To be comfortable in

two worlds , I knew about that. On the mountain I brought my own food and water. Before I sat down I checked for scorpions.

Tadpoles defended against the racer snakes as they slithered by with stillness. The tiny water creatures whipped tails into the water weed. Next they pretended to be bits of mud the algae carried slowly to the mid column of water. Baby frogs stared at him, like he was an older brother out to see the world of dry land. Now that he returned to the spring, they greeted him with eye contact. Slowly they lost interest in the giant human. One older youngster with legs that dangled outside his tail made laps around the spring. It swam on the surface to the side spring. A big round sedimentary rock peeked out from the mud. The tadpole used his immature legs to flop him forward underneath the rock to its shade.

Joseph moved away from the spring. Next to the spring a path in the coyote brush opened up. The sun reached forty five degrees above the horizon, and replaced the morning chill with a mellow heat. I lied down in the center of the path like a rattlesnake powering up for an evening hunt. Eyes closed. I relaxed next to the water. Sunlight danced on my sleeves. Cotton heated up to make me get even sleepier. Baseball cap covered my eyes to protect them from the intensity of light. I heard himself sleep in that disoriented place of almost asleep, but awake enough to hear my breath gurgle in my throat. Perfectly still I tried to be like a land tadpole and not move at all. The camouflage blended into the brown dirt and reddish buck brush to make a piece of the landscape that moved with each breath.

When I woke up from my small nap, I could feel something watching me . My neck raised up just a bit, and I noticed a slow catlike movement between my feet. Boots hid the head lift. I identified a spotted coat about thirty yards away. A bobcat smelled me , but couldn't find me . Quail enticement near the spring encouraged the feline to stay. One of the few North American spotted cats hunted near me. As he moved his spine rested completely horizontal, only his paws made forward motion. The paw bent back toward his tail. It stayed like that for the entire forward momentum. Just as it touch the ground for a step the paw flicked forward to press into the Earth. This cunning predator seemed to remain stationary and reel the land toward its form. Quail although quick fliers and observant of all hunters still fell to the stalk. I hoped when I saw a buck I could move stealthy like a bobcat

It struck me strange that to have a bobcat stalk me was bad luck. A bobcat signified someone

around me who wished me ill. I felt abundant and completely safe. There were exceptions to all beliefs. The rays continued to heat me. I became anxious and ready to trek up to the road and meet up with Pop. Sitting up on my butt, my outline became strikingly clear to the bobcat. The feline did not bolt as I expected. Instead the spotted cat put his movement into reverse. With the same stone like spine, he backed up into the ravine. There at the edge of the brush the branches obscured his body. At forty yards the cat spun directly around and sprinted down the gulley. I heard one stick snap.

The sprint signaled me to get off my sunbathing vibe and get back to the car. At 9:00 a.m. there still remained time to spot a buck and make an opportunity happen. Pop waited on the road. He sipped a Gatorade and munched a salami sandwich. Before I got around to his side of the truck Pop asked, “Did you see anything?”

“No deer, but I stared down a bobcat for a good ten minutes. They move so quiet. It is difficult to tell when the paw actually touches the dirt.” I stated.

“Let’s go back to Haggerty trailer. There might be deer there underneath that big valley oak this time of morning.” We drove around the top part of the road that led away from the Peach Tree Spring. A covey of quail ran ahead of us.

“To bad it’s not quail season.” Pop mused

These last two years during deer season I saw many quail. When October came around, and I moved through the sage flats with my model twelve I saw deer. Instead of the phenomena making me upset, I laughed at the irony. Giggling I let out, “Pop maybe the animals have a calendar. They know the times to hide and come out.”

“They do have a calendar.” Pop clarified. “Quail can read the moon and measure electromagnetic fields. It is not a big stretch to figure that mother nature tells them the time humans in trucks aim to kill them for supper.”

The covey stayed twenty yards ahead of us. Close enough to see the light scale looking feathers and the white patch beneath the eyes. With the window rolled down, I heard the scatter of leaves and the cluck to gather some scattered birds from the group. The sound amazingly traveled all that distance to my ears, even over the rumble of the engine.

“Watch them fly at the turn in the road.” Pop predicted. When the truck approached the turn, all at once the covey lifted into the air and sailed gracefully the entire way over the road, beyond the clearing, and to protection of the chaparral. He liked to watch them all act at the same time, like all the bird brains had a connection and acted as a single organism.

“How did you know they wouldn’t continue on the road?” I asked.

“Quail and upland game birds in general like to run straight lines from predators. Then once they have run out of corn rows or road, they fly to cover. They don’t like making turns. Quail jump up together into the air because it confuses predators like the bobcat you ran into earlier. With all the birds in the air at the same time the bobcat can’t zero in on one to catch.”

Pop continued on and stopped the car above the trailer. “Pussy foot down to the horseshoe turn. I’ll drive around the trailer for a bit. Once you are done come back up, and I’ll wait for you here.” I got out of the passenger seat. I double checked my canteen, shells, knife, and rifle. All ready, I moved as slowly as the bobcat did. I pushed my boots into the Earth quietly.

“I’m a bobcat.” I whispered to Pop.

“Be careful down there, you knit wit.” Pop chuckled

The sun beat down for the first two hundred yards. Then I walked along the path directly beneath the canopy. I arrived at the field where I hoped to spot a buck. Instead a small herd of horses greeted me skittishly. Three brown quarter horses, and an all white mare. The white mare turned my thoughts to one of my favorite books, *The Last Unicorn*.

In the book humans lost the connection with the unicorn. Since they did not treat the unicorn well, she disguised herself as a white mare. Only those with childlike fascination could see the unicorn for what she was. All other people got confused. They believed they saw a regular old white mare.

I approach the unicorn respectfully. “Hello unicorn. I bet you haven’t had a human greet you with so much understanding in hundreds of years. Don’t you feel upset human beings don’t give you the respect you deserve.” The white unicorn stepped forward as if she recognized me. She put her forehead down for him to rub. I introduced my smell to her first like I was meeting a big blue nosed pit bull for the first time. “You want me to scratch the center of your forehead? I bet that feels good. You might get it against

a tree, but fingernails feel better.”

I scratched her and looked at her long flowing tail. It hung loosely behind her butt. No weeds or burrs caught inside. That surprised me because the terrain all around had stickers growing everywhere. The brown horses looked at them surprised. A human and a unicorn interacted as acquaintances. One horse circled around them and whinnied.

I let her know my plans. “I am a hunter. I need to find a buck this year. I recognize you for what you are because I have spent so many hours waiting under trees. The deer taught me patience. The frog taught me to live in two worlds. The oak taught me to sink my roots into the earth. Would you tell me where the bucks hide?”

She wouldn’t say anything. Her cobalt eyes sunk into my pupils. I saw my reflection in the dancing transparent water that peered through me. I nodded my head, gave her one more healthy scratch and continued on my way. It smelled dusty farther away from the unicorn and the horses. Little gray birds scratched up insects in the decomposed leaves. Mugwort and poison oak grew together underneath the shade of a big tree.

The horseshoe turn spoke back to me silently the stories of the past. Before my time there was a big fight about the area I stood. An old double wide crumbled three hundred yards below me. Annie Arrell still owned that, so said the cowboy Vaughn. Back in 1983 Pop liked to drive into the Peach Tree from Tepesquet Road. The paved road curved in a horseshoe from the west back to the west again. It winded to make its way up the steep mountain and allow cars to utilize its beauty. The Crowheart family always approached from that direction to get to the hunting grounds. There was no use to driving all the way to the top gate. Also the deer numbers dwindled in that part of the forest.

The Arrell’s owned the road that connected to the public forest land. Annie Arrell blocked Pop at the road one evening, and she told him to use the top gate and bypass her section. Pop disagreed and continued on his way. She threatened him and said she would sue him for trespassing. Pop put the truck in gear and motored up to his land. He said out the window he had the right to get to his land because of his use over the last thirty years. She shook her fist at him and growled. Her face curled up in the threatening countenance of the Witch of the West, only she didn’t have green skin.

I thought of the story told to me over and over by my dad. Only that was just the beginning of the troubles.

A doe snapped me out of my thoughts near the infamous turn. She clipped off sage in a big clump. Perfectly still, I walked right by her. She jumped because I stood in one place and quietly looked back at the pavement. Her strategy worked only as long as people moved. It made her nervous I stood still at only thirty yards away. I only got to see her three bounds because she jumped up higher on the hill and the tree obscured my vision. Only a doe, but if it had been a buck I would have completely missed him.

I sat down on the ground and used my binoculars to enlarge where I last saw her. She disappeared. After the three hops her sounded muted also. She could have been anywhere. Sitting down let me rest my legs. I looked at the sage she ate. My binoculars adjusted so well that I saw the bits where her incisors clipped off the tips of the brush.

I got up. I dusted off my pants and smelled the same ground up rock smell near the horses. That smell worked its way into the happy place of my brain. A part of me wondered why dirt could make me smile. Slowly back up the path I went. The unicorn and her horse companions fed into another hillside. When I made my return trip through that part of the mountain, I thought I'd see them. They needed more green grass, so they headed to the bottom of the canyon where water collected. Tracks descended in that direction, and I hoped the green grass made a delicious meal for them.

Pop waited for me right where he dropped me off. We drove on a ways, and I asked, "Pop why didn't you just work out a deal with Annie the way you do with everyone else. Remember the time you brought Toomie an orange? He smiled like you gave him one hundred bucks. Why didn't you give her an orange or something?"

Pop said, "I just saw a buck near the horseshoe turn the other week, and I was excited to drive in there and find him. I didn't want to waste time dealing with her. She probably would have forgotten about it. Things would have blown over if I were more patient.

I went back in there with your dad and Jeffy a while later. She must have heard Jeffy opening the gate. This time Annie brought her husband, a big six foot fellow, with a red Pendleton shirt. She said the same thing, and I said the same thing. Mr. Arrell grabbed my arm. Jeffy ran over and grabbed Ferrell by

the arm. Your uncle Jeffy went back like he was going to punch him right in the forehead.” Pop drove the truck with his left hand, and he pulled his right hand back in a fist like he was going to punch the windshield. “I yelled don’t Jeff just before he started the punch forward. Arrell let go of my arm and Jeffy let go of Ferrell. I told uncle Jeffy to get back in the car. We hunted that night too, but my heart wasn’t in it. I didn’t want all that stuff to keep going. I definitely didn’t want my son in trouble for assault and battery.

I got a letter in the mail later than month. Annie kept her word. She sued me. I had your dad represent me. He did a great job, and we won the right to use the horseshoe turn. Then she took the case to the appellate court. She cited some reason that your dad was a lawyer in town and the judge knew him. Since the judge knew him, she didn’t think that he could provide an unbiased decision. She wanted the case seen before a higher court. In the higher court she won her case. Now today we drive by the horseshoe turn. You can walk down there and still look for deer.”

“I jumped a doe down there.” The silent horseshoe turn made me stop and look at it. “When I stopped for too long the doe leapt up and vanished.” I retold.

“They like that area. It was part of the reason I pushed hard to maintain the easement. Now all that is left of those troubles is Annie Arrell’s decrepit trailer. It almost looks as bad as that one.” He jerked his head back at the trailer Haggerty pulled up to the ridge they just left. The only part of it left was the floor. Everything else of the aluminum travel trailer laid in ruins. Annie’s didn’t look that bad and Pop’s comparison made me laugh.

“I heard the poor thing died of cancer. Her daughter comes up to visit the land. She likes to ride horses when she gets a chance, but she is getting older too.”

“We all are getting older. Joseph, if cancer doesn’t get you a stroke or a heart attack will.”

Chap 12

“Pop look a buck.” I whispered intensely. As the truck worked to get up an incline a buck craned its head to look at what disturbed it’s midmorning nap. At eighty yards away right at the edge of the road underneath a tree, I didn’t need binoculars to make sure it was legal. The bucks antlers grew high above his ears. His coat darkened by the summer sun shimmered a bit from the direct sunlight. After the chilly

nights in the mountains, bucks liked to soak up sunlight at a comfortable pace. The sun flashed in the buck's eyes and was part of the reason he looked back at us instead of running straight into the brush. The brush would make him invisible just as it did to the doe earlier in the hunt. Pop stepped on the brake.

Next he put on the emergency brake. Finally he opened the door, lunged out, and pulled the rifle out with him all in one fluid motion. The buck stood. He saw a man emerged from the loud metal machine. For some reason, maybe the sun, he stayed to satisfy some type of curiosity.

I waited and waited for the rifle crack. It never fell. I looked over and saw Pop moving his eye back and forth near the scope. The rifle laid steady in his arms. The buck still looked back at them. Although I was sure the buck would not hang around for much longer.

Pop cursed a bit under his breath. The deer on Pop's side realized what was going on underneath him on the dirt road. I wanted to get out and take a shot at the buck himself. After all Pop killed many bucks in his day, and I had never had an opportunity at one yet. This was getting into the meat of my third year of deer hunting. Surprisingly I didn't feel perturbed at Pop getting out of the car so fast. The actions of my elders fascinated him. The confident way they manipulated the rifles. A quick sureness to motion when a buck presented an opportunity. I knew someday he would move like that. Also the absent chances at a buck frustrated me, but I never second guessed my choice to hunt deer. There was nothing else I would rather do with my time. Hunting overshadowed soccer, school, and books. All those things satisfied me. Hunting provided a proof of my skills, and a connection with the world around me that nothing else could compare too.

A few times Uncle Jeff said when I discovered girls I would lose some of my zeal for hunting. I wasn't sure what all that meant. Couldn't I be interested in girls, take them to the movies, kiss them, and still be crazy about hunting? I didn't understand how the two might be mutually exclusive. The fact all this processed in my head before my grandfather got off a shot indicated something was amiss.

Finally the buck realized the error of his ways and stood up. He still looked back a couple of times at the humans who stirred up a terrible curiosity. Slowly the male deer stepped into the chaparral. After a few seconds his entire body covered by the brush blended into the surroundings. If I wasn't following the deer the entire time, I would not find him again. Then the hill curved just a bit and both the brush and

the angle of the hill swallowed up the form of the deer entirely.

Pop said, “Shit.” aloud, not under his breath this time. “This damn scope wouldn’t center on the reticule. All I could see was black. Then I would pick up the reticule, move it to the buck, and the scope turned black again. Those Tasco folks built a piece of shit.” Pop didn’t always carry the patience and wisdom of his seventy something years. Joseph knew there was a chance for him to grow wise and make mistakes just by being around his grandpa.

It was a little funny to watch one of the best hunters in Santa Ynez fiddle with a scope and miss a buck. “Don’t be too hard on Tasco. You get what you pay for. Father told me that scope cost less than \$100. Why didn’t you put some better optics on that rifle if you wanted to use it this year?” I asked out of curiosity. I hoped giving Pop some questions would take his mind off the buck. At least he didn’t fire a shot and miss. Then we would have had to worry about a possible wounded deer or the sting on the ego of a missed shot at a stationary buck. I heard plenty of those stories when I was around other hunters, and they drank a couple of beers. I hoped I’d never miss, but I also knew I was human.

“Bullshit. That scope should have worked fine. The buck sat there at less than fifty yards for more than two minutes.” Pop complained.

“Come on Pop. Let’s keep going we’ll jump another one. Pop eased back into the driver’s seat. Not the fast graceful move he’d used to get out of the truck to take the shot. Now the moment over, he seemed to shrink back to his normal time and place. He inhabited his regular years. We drove silently to the Forest Service gate. Once we got through the gate, Pop began to tell a few other stories of missed shots. The dirt road kicked up dust behind us. In the heat baked into the ground by the hour that approached noon the land took on a spicy smell. The sage and buck brush expanded into the hot air easily. I tasted the bitter flavor by smelling the wind. I rolled down the window. Hot air assailed my face with a claw like scrape. Happy to return from the mountains, hours near noon were best spent eating or sleeping.

Pop rolled down his window too. He lit a Marlboro red. A heavy scent of tobacco with a bit of sugar mixed with the hot spicy smell of the cooked sage. I drank a cold Gatorade from the cooler in the back of the truck. Gatorade iced down came out of the cooler when I opened the gate. Pop wasn’t thirsty. “Just because I smoke these doesn’t mean you should. Don’t tell grandma.” He admonished me

and asked for a favor all at the same time. It made me feel like his real hunting buddy. Someone who knew the ropes and could be depended on to accomplish stuff like butchering meat.

“I know. I won’t tell Gram.” I calmed Pop down. Surely Grandma knew Pop smoked when we went hunting together. She noticed everything.

“Jeffy, your Dad, and I were in the back on a day like this. It was real hot and we hadn’t seen one deer. Jeff drove the car. I carried my other rifle the one I normally use. The one I should have brought with me today. Anyway, a great big four pointer stood on the hill opposite the road. He stopped the car. I jumped out and got a rest off the hood. I squeezed the trigger and off he ran. I thought I missed. We all walked over to the spot and found blood. By the time we got to the deer some other hunter that walked up from Colson stood by the buck. They said they wounded the buck and just found it. I walked over, and I know they heard me shoot. They pretended not to hear. I looked over the buck and admired its size and width. Even in those days four point bucks were few and far between. There was only one bullet hole in that entire buck. I lost a buck that day too.” Pop abruptly finished.

I just nodded my head taking in the story.

We arrived at the Tepesquet Road gate. I moved to open the gate, so we could drive through. Pop smirked and hit me on the shoulder, “Hey, let’s just forget about this day.”

Chap 13

I didn’t forget about that day. It gave me hope he could kill a buck. If my grandpa could miss, then it could happen to anyone. Although I didn’t have any misses, I felt like a worse hunter because I couldn’t even find a deer to miss. Pop’s mistake bolstered my faith. I shut my mouth about the cigarettes though.

I bought some Forest Service maps, and I decided that Mattias Portero would be a good place to find a buck. Maybe all the action around the Peach Tree spooked the deer into the brush until nightfall. I wanted to try out some new territory further south in the county. Pop looked over the maps and thought it was a great idea “I made that loop for a hunt when I was a youngster. I think you came up with a good idea. Let’s try it out next weekend.

I got together a map, canteen, and a carry case for shells to attach to my belt. I threw in a couple

of cans of tuna fish, and figured since Mattias Portero would have water at the campsite my one liter canteen would be enough.

Pop and I rose earlier than normal to make the drive to the south part of the county. That part of the county contained more water, but more private land. I considered himself a public land hunter, but some day I wouldn't mind hunting some of those private ranches. During the buck contest the Santa Maria Gun Club hosted more than one monster buck came from those ranches.

We reached a ridge and mountains sped out from the truck in all directions from the ridgeline road. At about 6:00 a.m. I still shivered a bit in my long sleeve shirt. I looked forward to beginning the walk when the chill disappeared with my footfalls. "Be back around 6:30 p.m. I don't want you walking that trail at night. When you see a buck just squeeze the trigger." Pop always said squeeze by stressing the double e sound in the word. I thought it sounded like a guaranteed hit when he said it. "I am going to drive Camino Cielo Road and glass the meadows along the way. I might even go down to Gibraltar dam and take a little nap next to those benches." Pop smiled. I had a good feeling about the hunt. It would be one of his longest walks by my self hunting. Jeffy had to work today. Dad had a swim meet to go to for my brother. It was just the oldest Crowheart and his protégé to make it happen today.

"Mouth of the wolf." Pop shouted to me before I disappeared into the trail. I turned around and waved.

The trail began a steep descent from the paved road. A small walkway of crushed rocks marked my course between large manzanita bushes above my head. A small backpack lightly pulled on my shoulders. The water and the tuna cans inside gave me comfort. I had something to snack on during the longer walk. A crow flew above me on a thermal and cawed. I cawed back and hoped for a response. None came.

Boots on the ground moved up the dirt and compressed the sand in neat vibram soled patterns. It created the most noticeable sound in the lonely canyon. Once the path descended enough to reach another mountain, it carved into the side of the hill at a horizontal arrangement. At the switchback between the steep part of the path and the new mountain rocks piled up. Forest volunteers pounded in rock catchers to hold the path in place even during steady rains. The trail work allowed a year round path. The exposed

part of the rock catcher looked like woven metal. It reminded me of a cattle guard put on its side.

The sun beat down on my neck. I wished I wore sunscreen. There would probably be a couple of painful showers with the water stinging where it hit. I might even peel off my skin. Next time I'd remember the SPF 30. My profuse sweating drove me into the shade with still a mile to go to Mattias Portero. I retrieved my canteen and drank deeply with my a dam's a pple keeping time with each gulp. At the campsite I could refill my canteen. A quiet whisper of a warning blew through my brain. *Don't drink more than half your canteen until you know you are back to the car.* Pop warned me more than once. Why should I worry about that? There was more than enough water at Portero.

The sweating only increased because I just input more water into my system. When I peed, the color of dark yellow watered the base of a manzanita. I saw that and realized dehydration walked with me in addition to the heat. My tongue rolled around the inside of my mouth to keep it smooth. At another shady spot I checked the map and found I would arrive soon. The trail descended again wrapped around another switch back and a yellow meadow spread out before me. Wind snapped the wild oats back and forth. I looked for the site. A conspicuously large oak tree grew up out of the field at the south side. I knew a campsite usually nestled beneath the trees of oaks because of the coolness of the shade. My pace quickened. The brown metal forest sign proudly displayed the name Mattias Portero. An accomplishment I added to my hiking resume. A running total of all the campsites I'd hiked to accumulated in my mind.

My demeanor quickly changed when I saw there was no campsite water faucet. Heart thudded a couple of times intensely. I felt the I screwed up feeling come on super strong. I encountered it before. Once when I got too deep into the brush, I had to crawl my way out instead of walk. I ended up in a return location much different than where I anticipated to come out. I also got the feeling when I earned bad grades.

I talked to myself out loud to calm down. It worked during those other times, so I used it now. "Ok, you screwed up. You should have brought more water. That's a rookie mistake. Also now you know just because a location has a campsite, doesn't mean it carries a water faucet. The water faucet sites are at developed places right off the road like Lake Cachuma. A place like Portero which is primitive, even

desolate, does not have water.”

With two lessons learned and not wanting to make the situation worse I decided to eat a snack of tuna fish. I would try and save the last 500 milliliters until later in the afternoon. The Leatherman can opener cut through the top like cream cheese. Water waited inside the can to fill my belly. I slurped down the water first, then spooned out the fish flesh with my index finger. Two more of the cans of tuna fish ended up in my guts. The weather still baked the landscape. The protein snack, bonus water, and still a bit of water in my canteen I felt the uneasy feeling subside. A nap slowly massaged its way into my eyelids. I got up from the small table a boy scout put together in 1988. The large oak's shade offered ten degree cooler temperature. I got down on my butt, and laid down. Sleep came easily.

I dreamt about snow. Mountains one mile away from me called my name out. They serenaded me with promises of adventure and cotton tailed rabbits hiding within the sage. Junipers decorated the tops of the mountains, so along the ridgeline far away only black remained. No snow gathered on the junipers with their blue and green berries within the scaly leaves. The snow condensed in areas without trees. White burst forth in the midday sun in the high desert mountains. Snow so fresh it appeared as powdered sugar.

I snapped out of the snow mountain dream. It made me nervous that I went to sleep so fast in the hot weather, conked out for only twenty minutes, and reenacted snow during that time. My brain felt funny. On my feet again I took a survey of my equipment. The rifle and shells would be no use in procuring water. Tuna cans eaten only one remained because I couldn't stomach anymore of the salty protein. My most important item amidst the low ninety degree weather, a canteen half full of water. With that I dusted off my pants, turned toward where I came, and began the ascent up the trail.

I walked for half hour, and got woosy. The panic feeling came back, and I doubled my efforts up the hill. Sweat poured off my body until I reached the second switch back. At 2:00 p.m. I still had a few hours until Pop expected me. With the wind that picked up it cooled down my body temperature a bit. Then I noticed something of concern. I wasn't sweating as much anymore. Mouth dry and sticky my tongue moved around to smooth out the inside. Except the inside of my mouth felt like gravel. Slowly I trudged up the steep path. Instead of the clipped pace that made brisk crunching sounds I heard a shuffle.

Boots felt weighed down by glue, and they responded slowly. My body entered a lethargy I'd never experienced before. I threw off my pack and kicked it beside a toyon tree. The yellow fruits on the branches looked appetizing to my dried out mouth. The fruit stayed on the branch because I never tried out the seed before. I needed to know if it required boiling or some other process to make it palatable. Again the momentum from my previous couple of hours propelled me up the mountain. Yet the glue like feeling thickened around my ankles. It finally sunk in. All these phenomena told me one thing. The early stages of heat exhaustion took hold of my body.

Even if Pop came to look for me, it wouldn't be any good. Pop in his condition would try to get down to help me. Yet, even if Pop made it down the two miles to me, he couldn't do anything. Hopefully he'd bring me water, but that still left me there on the mountain with heat stroke. I'd need to wait until my father could help me back up the mountain.

I felt my breathing heavy along with my legs. A ringing in my ears annoyed me. I picked up a rock and sucked on it to develop a bit more saliva. It built up a bit of the liquid, and now more than anything I wanted the last milliliters in my bottle. In my scattered thinking, I ditched the water with the back pack. Panicking I breathed in through my nose and exhaled out my mouth slowly. Again I repeated the process to calm myself down. A continued panic would send me into a downward spiral and not improve anything. If I was going to improve my situation, I needed to think clearly.

Gravity pulled me down to the back pack. As I rolled along I heard in my ears, water, water, water. It seemed like my cells had more sense than me. They called out discreetly a command that needed to be fulfill. I also knew my body responded this way to inform me of my situation. As long as I kept my wits about me the body would endure more than this hot day could dish out. I drank the wonderful water methodically. Water stored in the body helped much more than being carried around. Now to pass the rest of the heat away I sought cover under some shade.

No oak trees grew this far up the mountain away from the drainages that collected water. I imitated a buck. I crawled into the chaparral. Thin shade wrapped its arms around me. The temperatures dropped just a few feet off the trail out of the direct sunlight. Then I waited for the sun to drop. I sang songs. The song waterfall played over and over as well as a couple of Tom Petty's songs. "You don't

know how it feels. No, you don't know how it feels. You don't know how it feels. To be meeeeeeeee.”

After an hour of waiting and singing the ring in my ears disappeared. My mouth still stuck together like a peanut butter sandwich, but the intensity decreased. The brain fired away, and thoughts lined up better than they had just two hours ago. I sighed a breath of relief. Heat stroke passed me. As long as I stayed safely hidden in the brush the temperature dropped as noon became twilight. I planned to meet up with Pop at dark.

I still had two miles to get to Camino Cielo road, so I waited until the sun set to climb out of the basin. At the right time I scooted out from beneath the brush. Next I made two deer like looks to the left and right to see if anything moved along the path. Still all alone I stepped up the dirt strewn way. The two miles reeled in easily to stronger legs. The glue seeped back into the sand. It left my legs alone, and I pushed against the floor with regular strides. About half a mile from the road I noticed the mountain topped off. I could see Pop, but I knew he was there waiting. Night air felt delicious on my dry skin beneath the long sleeve. I pondered eating the last tuna fish can because my appetite returned.

At the trailhead I looked at Pop sitting in the cab of the truck listening to the Dodgers. Now the sky turned from blue to black. A few stars peeked out beyond the eastern horizon.

When Pop saw me he shouted, “Did the wolf get you?” I threw the pack into the truck bed. I unloaded my rifle, put the shells in the case, and double checked the barrel before putting it away in the scabbard.

“Yeah, he ate me.” I replied.

They drove the road toward Santa Ynez and listened to the Dodgers. Pop finally asked, “Why were you so late? I started to get worried once it got dark. I wanted you back before dark.”

“I thought that Mattias Portero had water.” I admitted. “I think I started to get heat stroke. I crawled into the brush and waited for the sun to set before I walked up the rest of the trail.”

“What? A backcountry campsite outfitted with a faucet for water? You knit wit that is a dry camp.” Pop tussled my hair with his right hand roughly. “Joey, always bring enough water.”

Chap 13

Pop and I kept each other's secrets. My dad would have gotten really upset if he knew I almost

got heat stroke. Mom might have instituted a rule about three Crowheart men must go hunting together until further notice. Everyone knows it is not the best situation to go hiking alone anyway. The family remained in blissful ignorance of Pop's adventures with his descendant.

We continued to hunt on the weekends. Each hunt worked out like others for three years. I saw all kinds of wildlife and spent time alone in the woods, but no bucks. Pop listened to the baseball games and gave pointers. Ultimately, I wore the responsibility to kill my buck. No one in the family was going to pay for some outfitter to increase my chances. I needed to find that forked horn on the family's land. When the time was right, the deer elders would choose to give up life so that I could live.

"Pop, I want to spend the night back at the Peach Tree Spring. If I can't kill a buck by being there all the time, then maybe it's just going to take longer than I thought," I pleaded.

"Joey, you don't need to sleep out there in the backcountry to find a buck. Be patient it will happen. Your mom will not like you out there by yourself."

"I won't be by myself. You will come and check on me every day." I had an answer.

"There are mountain lions. The weed will be in season anytime now," Pop reminded me of all the adventure I liked.

"I have my rifle for the mountain lion. The growers are my friends. They said I am welcome here anytime. I'm too young for that stuff anyway," I said.

"Well, let's just wait and see," Pop waited a bit.

"What is that you say? There's no time like the present. Besides, you're an expert at dealing with mom. When I wanted a BB gun, you took me to Kmart and bought a Daisy. When I wanted to go dove hunting, you got a Model 12 20 gauge from your friend. This is the same thing. I want to get a buck. This is the way to do it," I had practiced the speech in my head. It sounded pretty good to me, and it must have sounded good to Pop as well. He pondered the eloquence of his young grandson.

"I'm not making any promises." Pop walked out to the reloading room. We worked together in silence. I crimped the shotgun shells in groups of twenty-five. Pop reloaded the plastic Winchesters with more shot and powder.

Later that afternoon, Pop drove the truck across the bridge for Twitchell Reservoir. After reloading

his shells, he grumpily agreed to drop me off in the Peach Tree alone for three nights.

“You see. I told you that we’d be able to do this.” I almost gloated on the way out to the hunting grounds.

“There is one condition to all this. You have to make sure that all your grades stay the same. I don’t want to hear through the grapevine that your algebra teacher is unhappy with your scores. If you don’t uphold your end of the bargain, you’re going to stay home for opening day of duck season with your father in Los Banos ,” Pop reminded.

“I’ve gone over everything on my checklist. I like school. This isn’t going to affect my grades. Also this is a hands-on project. I read the college brochures from Cal Poly. Learn by doing.” I spouted my roll of high ideas.

“Don’t get too carried away big shot. Probably the only reason we all get to do these adventures is that your mom understands the value. Women hold the sacred pipe.” I nodded solemnly.

“I’ve got all my supplies and the tent you gave me the other day. How do you think I should work it? Should I stay in the back and glass the oaks? Should I stay by the spring and try to catch a deer coming to water at midday?” I eagerly asked more questions. We passed the horseshoe turn. At the top of the mountain I got out and opened the gate for the truck.

“It’s better not to use the horseshoe turn anyway.” Pop threw out that idea and let it marinate in truck while I looked intently beneath all the trees. “Keep your eyes peeled. Always be ready. Even when it gets hot or you haven’t seen a deer in hours stay alert. The Tepesquet has a way of lulling you into a stupor only to have a giant buck leap in front of you just when you succumb to heavy eyelids.” Pop tried to dispense some last minute ideas.

At 4:00 p.m., we hunted together in the back. We sat down on the last sage hillside and glassed where Jeffy wounded a buck a couple of years ago. I examined each part of the hillside with my binoculars. I thought when I received more expensive Vortex Talon binocs that deer would jump into the clear view piece. Yes, the crystal clear binoculars focused nicely, but the bucks still needed to be around. It seemed this afternoon the deer used another hillside.

In the truck we drove back down to the Dalton burn site. A place with thin oak tree trunks left over

from that burn decades ago. I set my tent up earlier in the afternoon before the glassing session. I put my backpack down next to the tent. Inside the backpack I double checked my supply of toilet paper. There was enough paper in there for a lot of relief. Next, I checked my 243 to make sure the safety stayed in the on position. Everything looked in its place, I walked over to the truck where my grandpa puffed slowly on a Marlboro red. He blew smoke up into the black turning sky, and said something he normally didn't talk about.

“This type of hunting alone, with a few supplies, and in the fourteenth year of life is aligned with the way our ancestors hunted. To become a Chumash man, one needed to go on a vision quest. It is important to let the young people get in contact with the old ways of their own accord. Many emotions will pass through you especially at night. Welcome all the emotions as long lost friends .

I'll put down a bag of my homemade jerky for you each evening to check on you. Make sure you eat the bag and put both these weights back inside of it to be refilled each morning.” Pop handed me an abalone shell and a turquoise rock. “No one can tell you what will happen on this quest. In many ways it is more important than killing your first buck. I'll give you one more piece of advice. You will want to quit for some reason between now and the third night. It is okay if you quit. It is okay if you continue. Just know that because your intention is to kill a buck between now and Monday morning, then you need to honor that intention.”

Pop liked to dispense wisdom, but never so much all at one time. I didn't know how else to respond, so I said, “Okay. Pop.”

Pop nodded. “Mouth of the wolf ,” He said and drove off down the road to the bottom of the Dalton burn grove. I listened to the engine drive far away. When the truck rounded the final turn of that side of the valley the sound disappeared.

I didn't want to spend much time thinking about how alone I was. In some ways it felt like I was the only human being for one hundred miles. Even though I knew that wasn't true because my grandpa just drove the truck off.

I focused on feeding his belly. A can of beans would fill me up, and keep me regular even while eating Meals Ready to Eat. My trusty Leatherman sliced through the can easily. Then I used my camp

spoon to eat right out of the can of cold beans. The crickets played their lovely concerto number five. A waning crescent moon hot on the tail of the sun danced in the bluish western sky. Venus peaked out from behind the east with her feminine charms thrown out for all who enjoyed twilight. I circled my head from the east to the west pretending to be in control of some early night celestial body. The stars would keep me company tonight. When I identified their positions, it made me feel safe. I felt safe even though darkness closed the curtains on the land, and all the night creatures came out of their beds. They brought with them all the energy of darkness.

I knew darkness did not equate with evil, but I still liked to pull my sleeping bag up over his head and allow morning to come quickly. I preferred deep slumber to listening to all the skunks and opossums check out my camp all night.

I pulled out my elderberry talkie stick to make music before I drifted off to sleep. Elderberry has a pithy center in the middle of hardwood. Months ago I cut off a branch two inches in diameter and split it in perpendicular lines down the center. Since the stick stretched about two feet long, I stopped the cut and wrapped the bottom part in buckskin. The cut part of the stick I hollowed out with a screw driver. All the pith fell out of the wood easily.

Sound occurred from the cut ends of the sticks hitting together like clacker toys. I called it a talkie stick because I imagined the elderberry sang with me. For some reason even when I sang my songs all alone, just like now in the dark canyon I got just a bit embarrassed. Maybe something listened to me, so I wanted to put out good sounds for my audience. Tonight the coyotes probably listened from far away with excellent canine hearing.

First I sang the monarch butterfly song. I used the beat of the heart the drummers at the pow wow used only a bit faster to reenact butterfly wings. The story my friend told me about the song depended on the transformation of the butterfly.

While reading books on Sitting Bull the great chief of the plains, he noticed a butterfly on his rounded hat. Upon further investigation Sitting Bull reported that he admired the butterfly's ability to change. It started out as a caterpillar and transformed its shape into the butterfly. The chief of old noticed the powerful medicine of the aerial insect who loved milkweed.

Joseph's friend at the pow wow went on to explain another tie to the story. For decades after the miners of the gold rush came to California, humans cut down giant redwood trees for fuel and building material. All the old houses that remained standing after the big San Francisco earthquake were constructed of that wood. There were some people in northern California who realized the power of the oldest life forms on Earth and wanted them conserved for future generations. To protect all the trees from being cut down they climbed into the trees and lived in tree houses for months.

Many times, the forests grew on private land. The landowners complained the tree sitters were communists and didn't want anyone to make any money or live in a capitalist system. Those owners were wrong. The tree huggers accepted the need to make money. They didn't want to stand by and watch as every last redwood fell to the ground. Some of the tree sitters reminded the owners that Pacific Lumber cut down trees in a forest they owned. That company owned hundreds of thousands of acres, and the owners were good stewards of the land.

One company owned by a man who thought money was the only measure that mattered, cut down thousands of trees in one year. Big rain clouds came and washed away the soil that the tree roots could no longer hold in place. The rivers turned muddy, and the salmon's eggs all suffocated in the silt from up on the mountain.

A woman of great commitment climbed up into one of those trees on the company's land. She spoke only kind words to people. When company workers shot at her during deer season, she asked, "Do you feel better?" They were not acting like good hunters. Since she treated them with kindness, they returned with food for her. She made a connection. As word of her courage spread all over the country the corporate leaders got nervous. They sent a helicopter to fly over her seven foot by seven foot living space. The blades moved so fast they shook the tree and threatened to throw her to the ground and break her body. She clung to the tree for support. The winter storms came with icy weather and frostbite clung to her toes. As one of the most violent storms in ages rocked the tree back and forth, she screamed back at the clouds of rain. She heard a small quiet voice, and it said, "Let go." The only trees that make it through the storm are the flexible ones. Bend with this storm. She passed through the storm and in many ways woke up to a new type of life. The woman's power animal was the butterfly. Since childhood, her name

was butterfly.

I thought of all these stories as I sang my song alone in the woods. “Toki toki ha hamina. Toki toki ha hamina. Toki toki ha hamina, we na chuga ha hamana mi.” I sang the words not in English, but in my heart. In whatever language the words represented. My friend told me the language, but I forgot. I did remember the story which was so similar to the butterfly stories I carried inside. I liked to think of them in the woods.

The loneliness melted away and solitude replaced him. Solitude felt peaceful, and loneliness felt needy. I preferred solitude.

Only a slight wind blew on the hillside to distribute my scent. Without wind the tent shell stayed in one place. I unzipped the door and threw in my sleeping pad, bag, and water bottle for the night. The rifle I brought in carefully with a round in the chamber and the safety secured. I placed the rifle on the opposite side of the small tent and stretched out the mat.

With my boots off, the tent air smelled of fetid feet, but my nostrils were plugged up from the dust anyway. I crawled into my sleeping bag and didn’t bother to take off my pants. I laid the long-sleeved shirt on top of the bag to dry it out a bit over night. The shirt added loft to my sleeping set up. Half open the cold weather tent let in enough air to refresh me as I let sleep take over. I hoped that a buck came out in the open.

In the morning, the little gray birds woke me up like an alarm clock. The dark black sky covered the earth like a sheet with a blanket. Only a small bit of blue showed in the western horizon. All my things gathered, I stepped out of the tent into the chilly morning air.

I dug a quick seven inch hole far from my tent near the trees that circled around my site and made a deposit of metabolized tuna and beans to the soil. The toilet paper cleaned up any mess. I kicked dirt over the small hole, so I didn’t even know what occurred there.

My favorite place to glass under the oak tree in the back of the Peach Tree was less than a mile away from my camp site. A little water to wash out the morning funk in my mouth, and I put my backpack on with some apples and water. The brisk walk uphill in the morning dusted my forehead with sweat. Little gray birds continued to tweet. They made me smile. A soft whistle escaped my own

lips softly.

Underneath the tree, I rested my back against the sturdy oak. Out came my water and apples, so I could snack while I observed each portion of the mountain within my field of vision. I thought about patience, so the bucks just under where I could see would eventually walk out in front of my binoculars.

About 7:30 a.m. it finally happened. I did a double take because after three years of searching, the treasure walked right in front of me, less than two hundred and fifty yards away. After the buck came out of the underbrush, two does followed. They made a beeline for the old live oak tree that let go bushels of acorns. The tree was close to the mountain lion track I saw a couple of years ago. As I traced the path of the buck through the binoculars, I reminded myself the deer was real. In some ways it felt fabricated like a movie, as if the buck would disappear any moment. Two hundred and fifty yards made a shot too far for me, so I planned a quick stalk.

I didn't want to wait for the buck to bed down or any other kind of waiting strategy. I knew that there was a balance to conservative and aggressive actions. This time required an aggressive stalk. I saw the Jeep trail on the ridge and knew I could step in the crushed sedimentary rock to muffle my steps. A shot at one hundred and fifty yards or so would put the deer in the danger zone. Another advantage for me, the trees formed a screen between myself and the buck. The back stayed behind by the tree. I double checked the safety on the 243, and quietly crept behind the tree that supported my back. The road showed the path. Trees provided cover for the predator instead of the other way around.

The first fifty yards of the stalk I walked. All three deer concealed behind the branches had no idea of my movement. With seventy-five yards to go, I saw the does on the hillside. If I spooked the does, it would be over before the shot presented itself. On all fours I crawled forward beneath the cover of the wild oats. The bobcat entered my body. I did my best to move my limbs quietly and deliberately as I observed the spotted cat do.

At one hundred and fifty yards from the meadow the buck fed under, he raised up his head. The buck lowered its head to vacuum up acorns that littered the area beneath the mighty oak. I rose up to my butt. Acorns distracted the prey to the predator's advantage.

I centered the rifle between my knees just as I'd practiced with Dad so many times. My body shook with excitement. I expected all the physiologic functions to get amped up to the max on my first buck. Full blown buck fever would guarantee a missed shot, so I breathed in many deep breaths. The buck cooperated perfectly like it was all meant to be. The shaking subsided a bit, and I figured that now was as good a time as any to make a shot. I inhaled deeply through my nose. The scope's reticle settled right behind the deer's broad side shoulder. It X'ed out the area of the anatomy most vulnerable to a 120 grain bullet. The breath let off about thirty percent, and I held in the air to circulate oxygen to all my muscles working on the shot. I squeezed the trigger. A small kick smashed into my steady shoulder. The boom of the gases escaped from the muzzle and exploded into the silent morning air of the meadow.

I expected the buck to flop over instantly. That did not happen. The buck's neck and head catapulted up from the acorns and looked directly at me. The prey traced the predator efficiently. In three giant leaps, the buck escaped into the safety of the branches that obscured my opportunity for a second shot. Everything spun out of control. At that moment the picture in my mind switched from a dead forked horn buck to one running. I panicked.

I jacked the round out of the chamber and shoved another round in with the bolt action. A silent prayer went out for just one more chance. Ninety nine percent certainty sunk in. I missed my opportunity. Deep disappointment descended into my pounding heart.

Dirt dug its way into my jeans. Three breaths moved in and out. I sat and stared out into the yellow meadow and blue space just above where the sky made a background. One of the does moved into the place where the buck was. My anger flared. I thought for a moment of taking a shot at the doe. I was alone and no one would ever know that I killed her. Meat hung up near my camp in the shade would keep for at least the three nights, even if by the third night it turned a bit stinky. It was the wrong thing to do, and it quickly passed out of my mind. The doe continued to feed as if she didn't have a care in the world.

Boots and legs pushed me up to full height. When the doe saw the standing outline of a human, she bolted as fast as the buck scared off by my missed shot. I dragged my feet over to the last spot the buck stood. The rack grew in my mind as I realized more and more firmly I missed the shot. It clearly had

antlers high above his ears and seventeen wide. Now that the buck was lost, my imagination stretched the horns out to twenty wide. The chance of a lifetime around Tepesquet.

Light tan skin in front of the oats at about twenty yards from the tree put the buck right where I stood. If I hit the animal in the shoulder or below on the stomach, there should have been some blood. The oaks moved back and forth in the morning breeze. I got down on all fours and crawled all over the last sighting of the buck. Starting at the position of the shot, I crawled and crawled in small circles. I pulled up my hands and moved just on my knees because the weeds and heads of the wild oats irritated my palms. I searched for any trace of blood or tracks. Nothing. Not wanting to give up even after an hour of looking, I walked behind the giant oak tree hoping the buck would be dead somewhere half a mile away. Nothing. Then I tried the same tactic the opposite direction.

With head down, I walked back to the spot where I began to look for blood. The awful feeling started in my stomach and spread out to my armpits and crotch. The sadness filtered into my bloodstream like food coloring added to clear water. The clouds of blue expanded like smoke to spread the sorrow. It wasn't a good cleansing cry like at the pow wow. This cry had loud tears. I was ashamed for caring so much about hunting and missing the shot at a buck. The only witnesses to my lack of control and machismo were the bluebirds and the oak trees. I let the cloud of emotion rain down on me. Faster than I expected it passed. I blew my nose in my black handkerchief with the old west designs on it. That was the last of the sadness. The rest of the feeling stored up in my brain as dull disappointment.

I looked out at another hillside and figured I had two more nights to hunt and maybe I'd get another opportunity. A hike in the woods would do me good and take my mind off the blown shot. A path through thick brush was required for the rest of the morning until noon. On a belly crawl I passed through one particularly dense section of gray brush. A large oak offered shade even in the high sun of noon time. The wash of emotions and the exertion of crawling through brush while avoiding poison oak caused a heavy sleepiness to come over me. I napped in complete rest underneath the oak's shade. When I rose up again, two hours passed. Back at my camp site I noticed Pop refilled my bags with jerky. At the top of the meat were the weights for the empty bags: an abalone shell, and a piece of large turquoise. Our silent signal worked, each knew the other was ok.

I wanted to call off the hunt and go home. Probably I missed my only opportunity of the three nights. Yet, I remembered my intention to stay. Honor for that remained important. The next day passed similar to the afternoon after I missed the buck. I picked the thickest brush to move through to get to an open meadow. In some ways I wanted to punish myself for my terrible skills. The brush meted out those consequences nicely. In some places only bits of the sky lit the tops of the brush when I looked up. I wasn't really even hunting because making my way through the brush was so loud, all the deer knew I was coming. If any deer bedded down in that particular cover, they moved away long before I could detect them. Then I napped. Finally I returned to the camp for my last night of the hunt. The first night started out so optimistically with song on the talkie stick and thoughts of butterflies. I devoured the tuna fish and beans. Even the vanilla shake, my favorite part of the MRE, went into my stomach without its usual delicious taste. I sang my songs: the welcome song, the butterfly song. Then, I sang "Riders on the Storm" without the stick. With no fire there was no reason to stay up any longer. I snacked on some jerky Pop gave me and looked up at Perseus. The zipper on my tent whistled loudly on its teeth. I thought of Christy at the pow wow with long hair. With eyelids heavy, it annoyed me that I needed to go outside quick and take a leak. The zipper gave me a way out, but I stopped my leg from moving down to the ground.

There in front of me sat a western toad. The small amphibian peered right into my pupils. In my mind I asked, "What are you doing here?" As quickly as the question popped into my mind, the creature responded. I clearly heard the silent answer in response to my question.

"I'm your spirit animal. Dummy."

I must have gotten too much sun today. I figured why not play along?

"My spirit animal, how?"

"You went on a vision quest. I am your spirit animal: the toad."

"I have a spirit animal?" Now I spoke out loud to the toad. I wasn't dreaming. The answers to my questions popped immediately into my mind. I thought I was going crazy. It was the longest I'd ever been in the forest alone. Yet, I was compelled to learn from the toad. I sat down in my tent cross legged. The urge to urinate passed away.

“Of course you have a spirit animal. Everyone has a spirit animal if they go on a vision quest. I am the result of your quest. You are a little thick headed aren’t you?” The toad certainly seemed surly. I felt a great compassion locked within the sarcasm. This was the toad’s best way to instruct me.

“Why do I have a toad? I’d like a mountain lion or a big predator,” I complained.

“I am your spirit animal because you are a toad. Our energies are simpatico. You were here camping. I came to teach you. You don’t have a mountain lion because if you opened your tent and a mountain lion was sitting there waiting to be your teacher; none of the lesson would get through that thick human skull of yours. How ungrateful.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You should be.”

“I feel so lucky you came to talk to me. Thank you.” I finally remembered gratitude.

“That’s more like it. You’re welcome.”

“I’ve heard elders talk about this. A young man goes on a vision quest and draws a circle around themselves. Then the animal that approaches to cross over that circle is the spirit animal. Elders from days past spoke to the animals just like humans.”

“What do you think we are doing now, bright boy?” the toad questioned.

“Didn’t that kind of communication stop back in the early 1900’s?”

“It only stopped because human got caught up in their narcissistic way of viewing the world. They think they are the only life on the planet. Most humans have forgot about the wild others.”

“I didn’t fast or stay in my circle. How come we get to talk?”

“You sang your song. The intensity of your intention was correct. You are earnest, young Jo ey. All those are things are more like guidelines, not rules.”

The toad blinked.

“I’m happy I am a toad and not a mountain lion.” I said after a beat. “A toad lives in water or land. They can bury themselves and hibernate in dry spells. Humans can enter other dimensions with the help of a chemical in the toad’s skin. Also, predator animals can get sick and die if they eat a toad.”

“So glad to see you are paying attention during school,” the toad remarked and tried to hop into his

tent.

“What are you doing?” I questioned.

“I told you I am your spirit animal. I want to hang out with you.”

I shooed him away. “I don’t want to touch your skin. I could damage you. Please stay outside.”

The toad hopped to the side of the tent. Joseph gently moved him to the back of the tent. The toad kept hopping then paused. A big stink bug came trouncing through the wild oats. It moved right by the toad. In one giant hop, the toad swallowed the stink bug whole. Then, it opened its mouth for some reason and the stink bug escaped. An insect lucky with its life continued on its way behind the tent. The whole predator prey scene was like something out of National Geographic. I watched the entire series of events right in front of my nose.

“Why didn’t you eat that insect? It was right there for you,” I said aloud. The hunting action seemed to break down some of the interspecies communication. I waited for an answer, but nothing came through like before. Then, I watched the toad hop away in the direction of the Peach Tree Spring. *What did letting the stink bug go mean? I asked myself. I just talked with a toad. For a few minutes, it wasn’t 1992 anymore. It felt like I’d always imagined it would in the time of my great great grandfathers.*

I got out of the tent and finished taking a leak. I was too tired to ponder what just happened to me. The sleeping mat beckoned me, and I answered. Soon, my snores mixed with the sounds of the other night creatures all around my camp.

In the morning, the water at the Peach Tree seemed like a good place to stake out deer. I rose up before sky even turned blue in the east. It was a short walk from my tent. While making my way to the spring, I thought about the connection between water and urine. If the urge to pee hadn’t occurred at that moment, I would have totally missed the chance to learn from the toad. Did the toad have some control over water? The toad reproduces in water, and urine is water. Water connects all life. The toad used one of the primal elements to talk with his own counterpart in the human world. Oak leaves crunched beneath my boots when I got close to the spring. I moved slowly. I didn’t want to spook anything that drank there.

I peeked my head around the coyote brush, but saw nothing. I waited at the spring until an hour after daybreak. No deer came in to drink. Some little gray birds flew into the surrounding coyote brush and tule. Little feathered songs emitted from their beaks. I didn't see them often, so I listened and noticed how they dipped their necks

just before sound came out. The camp waited for me from my early rising. I saw no deer. That was my signal to get back to the tent, break it down, and sit by the road for Pop.

The tent came down easily. Once the tent rods pulled up from the metal holders, they snapped out like a released bow. Careful not to let my face get too close to the kick back, the tent settled on top of the ground. The folded material fit snugly into my pack, and I sat down next to the road to wait.

I glassed the far hillside. A crow picked at something in the ground. The caw vibrated across the canyon to me. The truck announced its visit like the crow. I heard the rumble and crunch of rock before I saw it round the bend in the dirt road. Pop drove the machine in stealth mode for my fourth day in the Peach Tree. Through the window, I saw Pop wore his optimistic face. Morning still gripped the low spot near the road and the camp. A nippy bite strung itself around his nose from the space between all the trees. "Good morning sunshine." Pop greeted me.

I put the backpack in the bed of the truck and jumped into the truck with the heater pumping out comfort. My nose thawed. "Morning. Let's take a little ride to the back." We climbed up the steep jeep trail. As the truck topped out, all I could see was the hood. I hoped the buck didn't change its position from the oak tree to near the water troughs. The vehicle would scare them into the brush. Pop parked the truck, and we both walked over to the tree where I first spotted the forked horn buck.

We glassed the hillside with the giant oak. "I missed a buck the first morning. Thanks for the jerky and checking up on me. I am a terrible hunter," I lamented.

"You're welcome. That's too bad about the buck. Just forget about it. You did complete your intention of three nights by yourself," Pop reminded me.

I thought about telling him about the toad, but the words to explain what happened disappeared.

Chap 14

We finished the hunt. Two does jumped the asphalt road at the Horseshoe Turn. I returned home

and a contentment settled down on me as I went about my routine at school. I stayed out in the dark all by myself for three nights. If I didn't possess hunting skills, I showed determination to stick to my convictions. I saw the value in bull headed stubbornness. After school I hunched over a grueling algebra word problem. Father poked his head into the room. "How's the homework coming along? Pop said you missed a buck the other morning. I want to take you into a spot near the mine. You need to try again this Saturday," Father ordered more than asked.

"That sounds good," I replied. The word problem swam on the page and the solution for x showed the wrong value. I looked in the back of the book and found my error. A slight rush at the beginning of the problem caused me to divide incorrectly.

The next morning, father drove his truck in the early morning darkness. Pop wasn't with us, as he stayed to prune the roses for Grandma Alice. I wished he had come with us too. I liked when all three generations of Crowheart drove into the forest together.

We got back to the hillside with the lost buck. I sat down at the tree, but father hiked down a small trail and didn't even look back. "I guess we're not going to glass like normal?" I questioned. My father motioned with his neck down toward the rest of the path. I pushed both feet against the oak duff. Up on my feet, I jogged after my father who was now about thirty yards ahead of me. "Don't you want to glass?" Confused by the happy feet of my guide, I tried to make sense of the new strategy.

"I think you had too much time to think when you saw that buck last week. Today, we'll implement the strategy of get out and wander around." The chill of the morning burned off quickly with the marine layer in the canyons below. Clouds made the peaks above the canyons look like islands in the sky. Did ducks ever get confused and try to land on the clouds above the ground?

"Remember that time we found the desiccated buck in Hog Flats?" My father whispered.

"I wanted that buck to be alive so bad. Then, the spike got our hopes up, too," I remembered. Just then, an irregular pattern in the sage brush caught my eye. A deer remained quiet like a deserted room. "Look." I pointed out the doe seventy yards away. I caught it with my naked eye.

"Good eye." My father complimented me. "Let's wait here. It is the rut now. Maybe a buck will follow her out of the brush." We waited for thirty minutes. The doe bounded up over the slope. No

forked horn trailed.

We hunted all morning and took a siesta at noon. I woke up first and glassed back toward the hillside we just came. I looked out of idle curiosity. The expectation of finding game on the place we just walked from was low. Seeing nothing on the hillside, I walked over to another tree to get a look up the hillside from a different angle. Father got up and led the way to the mine about a mile away.

I looked at my father's broad shoulders while I followed him up the trail. How would I ever pack a buck without shoulders like that? Maybe I'd cut it up into smaller pieces. We topped out the trail and looked across the canyon below the mine to a field about 150 yards away. Two does fed in the waning light of the afternoon. It took them longer than I expected to reach the spot father talked about. Perhaps, the drive to reproduce compelled the deer to be out moving into the meadows earlier than normal.

"Two does. Do you think that one of them is the doe I spotted earlier?" I mouthed in hushed tones.

"It's hard to say. Wait a minute. Joey, there is a third deer coming out of the brush with his head down near the doe's butt. It's a buck," Father spoke with a calm assertive tone. "Get ready."

I already had a cartridge in the chamber with the safety on. I set up my backpack for a rest. "Take your time. That buck's not going anywhere. He is too love sick for those does."

Boots sunk deeply into the dirt. My butt rested on the smooth wild oats like a one pound deep sea fishing weight at the bottom of the ocean waiting for a ling cod to bite. With a smooth internal frame the pack slumbered next to my chest with the rifle balanced on top between my hands. The scope came into focus effortlessly. I dialed it up to twelve power. A nice forked horn buck, maybe the one I missed a week earlier filled up the view lens.

"Take your time," My father calmly repeated. "Just squeeze the trigger." Everything felt right. It was nice my father coached me through the shot in round pear shaped tones. I didn't shake as much as last time. Breaths transpired in and out slowly to calm down all my muscular nervous system to lock in an accurate shot. Ready, I sucked in air let out a bit and held the rest of my lungs taut. I pulled back on the curved trigger. Nothing happened. At least I was solid and there was no jerk to the shot. "Nice practice pull. You have the safety on still. Flip off the safety, set up again, and kill that buck," My father said. Just a bit of excitement crept into his words. I did like Uncle Jeff, the marine, executed on

his shots.

I completed the cycle again starting from the beginning. This time when I squeezed the trigger the rifle exclaimed sharply into the canyon. To my great satisfaction I heard the bullet hit with a loud wop a millisecond after the shot. The scope stayed on the buck to track its movements. Then, I jacked the round out and another in deftly.

The buck hunched up, indicating a shot near the shoulder. It sprinted down the canyon covered by the thick branches of the woods. This shot felt different to me. This shot felt like a success. My breathing zoomed and my hands shook a bit. A hand made ready to get up out of shooting position. “No. Sit tight. I think you’ll find him at the bottom of the canyon dead. Put your safety back on the rifle. The time accidents occur are when bucks are around. Safety first.” My father sounded confident, but not sure yet.

We sat and waited for fifteen minutes. The time moved even slower than a boring algebra lesson. Sun at twenty degrees above the western horizon promised at least an hour left of light to find the buck. I knew we’d look with headlamps if things descended into disarray at the canyon’s nadir. A red tail hawk circled with his feathers screaming in aerodynamic perfection. My body buzzed with the same apex predator boil.

“Let’s go down there and find that buck,” Father commanded. I led the way. I’d been down the path before toward Anellini’s mine. The company dug shale out of the top of the mountain and sold it for fancy brick and block work on homes in places named Elk Horn and Foxen Woods. The path spiraled back and forth to the part of the canyon the buck would be.

In the cleft between opposite sides of the hill grew mugwort and poison oak. Thankfully, up just a way from the bottom where water run off supported the fertile plant communities the dry sage brush spread out branches. I cleared my way toward the location of the buck with the help of the sage. I stayed out of the moist canyon bottom with plenty of poison oak.

Up the ravine I scampered up over sage branches and between Manzanita. “Over here.” I shouted. There against a large boulder, the forked horn buck rested peacefully with his legs kicked out toward the hill and his rack nestled at the bottom of the rock. From where I stood I saw a red dot on the side of the

buck about two inches above the center line behind the shoulder. A shot run through the ten ring. I ran over to the dead deer and knelt down next to it. I put my hand on his neck and uttered a silent prayer of thanks to the buck and to the creator that put this whole hunt into motion. Father came over and sat down next to me and remained silent.

The whole moment tasted surreal like a dream. Maybe the buck would vanish. After three years of effort, I finally killed my own buck. My heart filled up with a liquid of paradox. I killed the buck. I loved the buck. My heart turned icy for a moment because I didn't want to cry in front of my father. With concentration on the elation of making a good clean kill, the urge to let out all the water of emotion passed. I was so excited I could yell. Instead I kept saying over and over, "Thank you."

"Nice shot." My father joined in my happiness. "You walked right up to him, like the two of you are connected."

I looked back down at the bullet hole. I grabbed the buck by its forked horns and turned it over. The red hole was the exit wound. An entry hole barely visible cowered in the hollow of the animal's shoulder. I needed to get to work cooling the meat down, so we could skin it back in Pop's garage on the single tree. With my father's help, I didn't need to chop up the carcass into pieces. We could drag it out whole.

My father began another lesson. "Grab a handful of hair with the skin and use the point of your knife to cut the first incision. Don't go all the way through to the belly. Leave the stomach intact. You can open up the feed bag later and check out what the buck ate lately. We need to get all the guts out to help cool down the cuts of meat. Let's not dilly dally. I'd rather drag this buck out with some sunlight rather than the head lamps."

I cut through the hairy skin first. Next I pinched off some belly muscle and slid the knife close to my thumb and forefinger to open up a hole in the belly from the penis to just below the ribcage. The sharp knife opened up the deer like a tent zipper. A pungent sweet smell peppered by the metallic copper aroma of blood spilled into the air around us. I rolled up my shirt sleeves to my elbows and reached my forearms into the cavity with full commitment. The guts attached strongly needed to be loosened up with a few sweeps of my knife. All the guts rolled out of the deer's torso and spilled onto the wild oats

in one neat package. The sheen of the large and small intestine reminded me of an slippery baby oil. All the organs quivered with recent life. I cut out the liver to save for the skillet. I placed it gently into my backpack. Next I fished out the kidneys, spleen, and stomach. The knife opened up the stomach, and I turned it inside out to dump the milkshake looking consistency of half digested acorns. An acrid smell of earth and tannins rose into my nostrils. All the sights and sounds blended together in a soup of life from death. It didn't seem gory, but was visceral in a similar way to most of life's important moments like healing from a cut or passing out from too much exertion.

“Reach both hands up there to the diaphragm. Cut out the muscle that separates the heart and lungs from the gastric system. Leave the heart attached because it makes a good meal mixed in with the breaded liver.” Dad walked me through the next steps.

The knife cut away gingerly at the muscle liked I'd done it before. Cleaning all the dove and ducks over the years got me ready for this task. The lungs fell away with deft cuts heavily into my hands. The center aorta I left attached to take out with the whole deer. I'd remove it during the skinning process.

Father grabbed a hoof and put his index finger and thumb right next to it. “See how a forked horn like this has a cloven hoof and dewclaw? That's just a little bigger than the area between my thumb and index finger made into an L shape. Sometimes, if I can't tell if the track is from a spike or a forked horn I put my index finger down.” He pretended to be estimating an imaginary track next to the dead buck. “It gives me focus to know I'm chasing a legal buck or one to wait on for next year. See this?” He pointed to the inverted knee of the buck. “It is rut time. You can tell by looking at the swollen neck of this buck.” He slapped the buck's neck with a solid thud. “This tarsal gland right here has the odor of annoying musk, not the good stuff from the blood and mashed acorns. If you touch it with the knife, it gets all over the meat and gives it an off flavor. Stay away from that gland when you skin a buck. We'll cut it off at Pop's house tonight.”

Just the organs in the backpack felt heavy. I sat next to the pack and dug out my wallet from my back pocket. I punched the date on the deer tag, so a game warden would know I tagged my deer. Out came my hanky, and I ripped a cut in it with his teeth. With both hands, I ripped down in opposite directions like I separated a folded piece of paper into two pieces for origami. In my right hand I held a

piece of red hanky an inch thick. I tied the heavy poster board green tag onto the buck's antler at the base. The other portion of the tag would be filled out once I got to the truck to record the time and locality of kill. He liked how the tag used cool hunting words like locality instead of something regular like place.

"Let's go." My dad held onto the right horn with his left hand and started dragging the buck through the steepest part of the ravine where he settled. The buck's fur quickly got a coating of poison oak and mugwort oils. "Take the shell out of the barrel and put it down in the magazine. I don't want you to drag out this buck with the muzzle near your head and a round in the chamber," Dad reminded me and kept pushing through the underbrush. I unloaded the 243 and pulled the trigger to take the stress off the firing pin. The weapons were now safe because we needed to open up the bolt again to fire a shot. A plan to shoot another buck in the waning light was clearly not on the docket for the evening.

"Wait up," I shouted. I wanted to be involved in all levels of the hunting process from dropping the hammer to putting the backstraps in a Ziploc bag to go into the freezer. The rifle sling adjusted to go across my chest like half a Zapata bandolier. I hung onto the other side of the horns with my right hand. Together, father and son covered more than a mile to hoist the buck into the truck. I felt fatigued even though I'd run many miles to train for this moment and did push ups every day. My father exerted power from someplace deep and primal. It reminded me of videos I saw on Marty Stouffer's *Wild America* of a mountain lion clutching a doe and lifting it into the V of a tree branch for safe keeping. Father's frame deceptively held great strength. Thank goodness for all the older Crowheart's help. Eighty pounds of dead weight moved over rocks and sand was not fit for a weakling. I knew my brawn added to the ease of my father's effort.

Father moved until he reached the truck. Then, he threw the buck's rack to the side near the tires, opened the tailgate, and sat down exclaiming, "Back in the day, Jeffy and I would start in on a six pack of beer each. Tonight, I'm happy to drink an Odoul's." Father opened up a non-alcoholic beer with his pocket knife. "You remember you've got drinkers on both sides of your family. Don't take alcohol lightly." I was confused why I needed to know this right now.

I sat down next to him on the tailgate and quenched my thirst with a red stained canteen from inside

my pack. “You made a nice shot today. Good work getting him back here too.” My father extended his hand, and he shook mine heartily. Then, he got down off the tail gate and gave me a big hug. “I rehearsed that over and over the last few months. I almost started talking fast when you tried to shoot with the safety on. How did I do?”

“You sounded really relaxed. It was helpful to hear you walk me through everything. This time was a lot different than the last time,” I commented.

“What last time?” my father clarified. “You center punched the first buck that gave you a good opportunity.” My father grinned from ear to ear. We sat and watched the silhouettes of bats chase moths around with sonar as the blue of the day faded back to black. I got my bearings with Celsius the sea monster in the southern sky. A sound of silence and crickets let us know it was time to get back to Santa Ynez and show Pop the results of tonight’s hunt.

Father and I parked the truck in the back near the garage. We walked in the large wooden brown gate to the back door which was open. Pop and Gram were already in bed watching television. “Pop, I shot a buck in the Peach Tree. Father and I hunted all the way back to the mine. I hit him right behind the shoulder.”

“Well I better get my skinning clothes on to help you two. Go call uncle Jeff. Tell him to come over and look at your buck.” Grandma Alice got out of bed, too.

“I’ll get the camera and take some pictures of the mighty hunters,” as he said only part in jest. I called Uncle Jeff quickly and hung up the phone.

Then, I went outside to see what father was up to. Father already had the garage door open and backed in the truck. With the truck bed centered underneath the singletree, father cut holes into the hind legs of the buck. “Hold the singletree hook in that hole,” he said. Next, he steadied the hook into the other side of the deer’s extremity. “Hold the metal part of the triangle,” father snapped another command. I held the hind legs in place and my father hoisted the skinning device up by a rope until the deer’s body hung upside down with only the head and part of the neck touching the truck. Father tied off the rope so the buck remained suspended in midair.

He got in the truck and started the engine up. Before he moved into the driveway he told me.

“Spread a bunch of newspapers on the floor. I don’t want to get a lot of blood on the cement of Pop’s garage.”

Five minutes later the newspapers spread out sufficiently, a thin layer of processed trees caught most of the red liquid. “Hold the buck’s antlers so it doesn’t sway.” I held onto the antlers as father slowly pulled the truck into the driveway. The buck dropped down to six inches above the cement floor.

“Get down close to the buck. I want a picture of you and your first buck.” Grandma Alice snapped a picture. Pop came in with a whetstone and his navy knife. He put all his skinning utensils down and walked over to me.

“Congratulations Joseph. Nice work.” Then he slapped the buck solidly. With that slap on the buck, I felt like a man. Pop even called me by birth name, Joseph.

“Do that again.” Grandma told the oldest and youngest Crowheart. “That is a great picture of you two shaking hands.” We obeyed the matriarch.

Uncle Jeff walked into the garage from the opened door and whistled. “Well, well. Joseph got himself a buck in the Peach Tree.” He slapped his nephew on the back and then brought me in close in a half hug. I felt my shoulders collapse under the extra pressure of my uncle’s biceps and forearms. The move immobilized me and Jeff squeezed while he shook me back and forth a couple of times. I saw Grandma’s camera flash again. Uncle Jeff let me go, and he pulled a Barlow out of his pocket and began to work next to his brother on getting the skin off the hindquarters.

“Did he get buck fever?” Jeffy asked his brother.

“No. He squeezed off a round slow and steady. He even helped me drag it back to the truck. I was so excited I don’t think I slowed down the whole way back.” Father retold.

I stood on the side of the garage near the refrigerator and watched all the action. Pop kept sharpening two of his knives. One of the knives was a skinning knife with a big curved blade almost circular. The other knife encased in clear plexi glass owned the look of a dagger, complete with a hand guard at the tang. “I machined this on the battleship on the way to Hawaii. It’s good steel.” Pop ran his thumb along the edge of the metal testing its mettle with the ridges of his thumb.

“I wanna help skin,” I called out.

“I wanna help skin. Let me pack him.” Jeffy imitated me with a higher pitched nasal twang that accentuated my cracked voice. He backed away from the buck and motioned for me to step in. He used an exaggerated hand motion and bowed like the maitre’d of a fancy restaurant who just pulled out a chair for a lovely lady in a black evening gown. Everyone had a laugh from Jeffy’s antics. I helped with other bucks, but this one was my responsibility to turn into meat cuts for the BBQ.

The way the skin separated from the meat with a moist pulling sound always amazed me. It sounded like the whole animal was clothed in skin that got attached to the muscle by masking tape. As the knife moved between the skin and the red almost purple muscle the two divided from each other like two pieces of tape being pulled in opposite directions. A white material held the animal covering the meat. I cut with my knife by aiming for that material. The cuts of meat were left completely intact. I didn’t want any small cut marks on my hindquarter steaks.

The skin came off the buck like stepping out of winter ski clothes. In everyday life, I used knives to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Sometimes, I used a knife when I felt the call to place a thick piece of cheddar cheese on top of a hunk of sourdough bread. Pop handed me his navy knife. It cut so swiftly I put a hole in the skin. I used less pressure while separating the rib skin from the rib cage along the white fascia that held it on. The white material looked like spider webs stretched so much they lost the shape. I turned a living animal into two inch thick pieces of steak for the BBQ pit with the help of a sharp knife.

Father and I finished skinning, cut off the head with a bone saw, removed the antlers, and rolled up the skin for tanning. Then, we pulled up a buck sack over the entire carcass that now looked frighteningly similar to a human body in a horror movie. I quickly removed that image from my mind and replaced it with Rocky working out in the refrigeration room in the first Rocky movie. At least those red hanging pieces of meat didn’t have any nefarious implications. The buck sack kept the flies off that night. In the morning Pop and I would slice the buck into cuts of meat. Each cut of meat would get a label and a place in the freezer to become ice until the right time to have a BBQ.

Father and Jeffy cleaned up all the knives and saws with water and clean rags. Everything was put back in its place in the garage. Everyone said good night. I decided to spend the night at Pop’s house

and eat a breakfast of liver and onions in the morning.

The next morning, I rose up early to sit at the table with Grandma. She drank her daily orange juice. She got up every morning and walked when it was still dark. I figured that was the way she stayed so young and sharp. She seemed to know a lot of things. Grandma had knowledge about everything from Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals to the best rates on certificates of deposit.

We sat at the breakfast table silently. I thought of the skill it took to kill the buck yesterday. A happiness glowed inside of me. It was the polar opposite feeling I experienced when I ate tag soup for two seasons in a row.

I even thought to make tag soup by gathering all the ingredients and taking a picture of all the potatoes and carrots boiling away in a pot. My tag floated on the top. I wanted to take a picture of the recipe just to poke fun at myself and get a laugh out of my friend Eugene. I never got around to it.

“I have the liver cut up into thin pieces for you,” Grandma broke the silence. “Liver is an organ meat, so the heaviness of the sustenance allows for eating less grams. You won’t be able to stomach ten ounces of liver the way you would one of Uncle Jeff’s venison steaks.”

I got out the black cast iron skillet. I spooned in two huge tablespoons of butter and waited for them to melt down. Once the globs turned to runny, slightly browned, sweet smelling liquid, I dredged the liver in bread crumbs and laid them next to each other in the pan. All the pieces of liver lined up to make a pattern like fat wide brown crayons in a circular container. Then, I cut up thin slices of onion and flipped them on top the meat. Finally, I added six pieces of thick cut Farmer John bacon. The bacon was the exact same type that Vin Scully advertised during the breaks between innings of the Dodgers games.

The whole mixture in the pan smelled like something the Chumash would have made at a hidden camp after they traded for a metal pot. The aroma whirled in the kitchen with a mixture of fire, sugar, salt, and misty water. I supervised the cooking of all the ingredients by flipping the liver slices once three minutes passed. They sizzled and released aromatic bubbles with a hint of acorns earthy sweetness. The onions sweated out to translucent rings of crispy hot water. Meanwhile, the bacon basted the entire dish in a bath of fatty buttery oil. It coated the liver and the onions with one unctuous gravy that made my mouth water. I also noticed an intense hunger from all the activities last night.

The stove clicked off as I turned the knob clockwise. I removed a hot plate for a casserole dish and placed it on the table. Some of the meal I forked out for my Grandma onto a plate. This I placed in front of her with a thud of ceramic on wood. Next, I put the entire cast iron skillet onto the hot plate. I sat down and dug into my own breakfast from the liver skillet.

Aromas from the cooking foretold a delicious meal. The liver broke down in my mouth to release a metallic tang. Bacon and onion juices covered up the slightly bitter aftertaste of the liver. The whole plate finished off with an explosion of melted fat and the soft mouth feel of bacon. Yummy salty bacon. I enjoyed eating the liver of my first buck, but I also knew everything tasted good with bacon. I devoured all the slices my Grandma cut up and soaked overnight. She thought we'd get three meals from such a hearty liver, but my appetite ate through that number. "I didn't think you'd eat the whole liver," Grandma noticed aloud. I grinned and scraped the last bits of melted bacon grease and liver onto the fork with my thumb.