

A CLEAN SHOT

J. Annie MacLeod

First day of open season, and the stars were still gutting like candles when Teddy Edwards dressed, loaded the guns and the dogs in his truck, and hustled his still-nodding son into a jacket, ready to drive. Waiting by the car in the flat black of early morning, Dean skimmed sleep, a stone across water. His father was all movement, spare and tight like a quarterback. Other than bourbon, hunting was the only thing Dean's father seemed to love.

"Just in case," Teddy said, tucking Jim Beam under the driver's seat, but Dean already knew that no matter what happened, kill or no kill, on the way home his father would twist its cap.

This year Dean was eleven, and for the first time Ted brought along the 16-gauge shotgun for him to use. At ages nine and ten, Dean had used the .22 with his father's fixed idea that it would steady his hand, but Dean had missed every squirrel, exploding branches into matchsticks. Even at eight, when his

father had first set the butt in his palm and he'd been surprised by a weight that seemed too clumsy to steal breath, Dean could hit cans off a sawhorse at forty yards. "Not bad for a momma's boy," his father had said, cans somersaulting, a lift in his voice like the beginning of laughter. Yet as soon as they walked through the drop and rot of last year's leaves, the targets flitting and flickering like villains in a videogame, Dean missed. He missed every time.

Before becoming a real-estate agent, Teddy Edwards had been raised as a farmer and was a spectacular shot. At thirty, on a once-in-a-lifetime hunting trip with his own father all the way out to Alaska, Ted had downed a big-horn sheep with a scope at 1,500 yards, mounting the horns above his office door. He showed no patience for his son's skill at Donkey Kong or Pac Man, but Dean was a city kid—and while Ted had taken him on a few hunting trips, he was no boy scout. Dean had never even been camping, not once.

It wasn't that Dean didn't have a love of something outdoors. He'd read about trappers and Indians, had imagined his backyard before the sod was cut, exposing earth's bones, before rows of corn and wheat were sown, before trees were planted to slice the wind and prairie dogs poisoned to keep them from burrowing their underground towns. He'd even pretended to be a red man, lying flat against his father's freshly mowed lawn, stretching his bow at slow

bison. The idea of open country, a bowl of sky above, dark earth below, could twist the stem of his heart as much as his father's.

But for two years running, Ted had said, "Shit, son," or "Better luck next year," or even "Damn, I'm not sure you could hit the side of a barn," laughing a hard laugh, emptying most of the bottle of Beam on the rides home. Both years Dean had stayed quiet, watching the snow-furrowed fields out the window and wondering if it were possible to be a man and not hunt.

But this time, Dean all of eleven, Ted had decided they would try for quail—a clearer target, salt-and-pepper wings against a winter sky. All fall, each and every day after homework, his father had run target practice, being more committed in this than in work or even drinking. At Saturday barbecues or tailgates with neighbors or friends, Ted had retold the past two seasons as jokes. The sights were way off. Dean had stepped in a hole. Or just that his son needed to grow up, learn to get off his rocks so that he could shoot straight in both senses. Ted needed to see Dean kill a quail. Ted's lust was to see Dean kill a quail, to kill it cleanly, with a single shot.

Now, the sky as deep and black as a pupil, Ted tapped the shotgun behind Dean's seat. "Surely, son, you won't miss with that."

As they drove, Ted whistled hymns with an old lady's care, "How Great Thou Art" and "Our God, Our Help." The sound was like a song from the earth itself. Dean imagined not missing—his muscles against steel, the soft drop of a quail hitting the ground. He could smell the iron and salt of the truck getting warmer as they drove.

"This time," Ted said, "this time I'm going to take you where I know you won't miss."

During the long drive and even longer walk in, Ted whistled and told stories. The stories were common as corn, but they were his—the pregnant doe his buddy had accidentally shot, the quick mornings when he'd gotten his quota in an hour, the big-horn sheep he'd bagged just shy of thirty, the skill of that shot, shouldering the sheep's head like a warrior-king. Dean had heard them all, knew the shape of their happiness. As the two of them stepped across the frozen fields, his father's shotgun felt like a new, lean limb.

The sun rose, and Ted stopped them against a copse of windbreakers at the edge of a field. "Quail forage for bugs along these rows," he said. "Look sharp. We got to get up a covey." The dogs waited, knew to be quiet. "I think you just might get one today."

Looking to the trees, Dean thought how the plains were once nothing but a vast stretch of grass, wind-whipped as the sea. A trapper or an Indian, a hunter's hunter, might feel love for his prey, might try to be the "ah bob white" of its call, its plump waddle and shy pecks at the ground. So Dean tried to think like the quail, collecting her food, bug-bug-bug, aware of her nest, always her nest, whether there were snakes or foxes in the rows. Entering the rill of her anxiety, the pump-pump-pump of her heart, for a moment, for just one moment, Dean knew it as his own.

The dogs turned stiff. Dean squinted and thought he saw her, a little quail pecking stubble. Ted turned his wrist, and the dogs took off, the silent world filling with barks, loud as metal tools dropped all at once. The quail got up, three of them darting fast against the sky at about forty yards, the distance Dean had worked all autumn, the one he knew by sound and sense more than anything else. Sighting his gun, Dean forgot the hard beak, the soft body with the reddish feathers. He forgot the tiny heart. Instead he saw a can on a saw-horse, spinning, spinning. He heard his father's hard-laughing voice and took his shot. He missed. A moment later Ted's gun went off, and the quail fell.

"Come on, then," his father said.

Up close, the bird still looked small, shrunken into its jacket, as if collapsed from the inside.

Ted hooked his hand on the back of Dean's neck, the same way he curled the mouth of a bottle. "A clean shot," he said. "Damn near perfect."

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