

Author's Note: Yes, I hunt. At the time of this story, I only hunted deer. It was part of the culture where I grew up and I embraced the toughness that came from being a part of it. I have since married a hunter and now hunt deer, antelope, elk, pheasant, chukar, quail, and grouse. I have my concealed carry permit (and yes, I do). And I fish as well. I believe God gave us these animals to sustain us and entertain us with their antics, provided we are ethical and don't waste or take what we aren't supposed to. There's something about hunting; knowing that I can lead a quartering pheasant at 20 yards, dress a deer, pack out and process an elk, and cook a sweet-and-sour chukar dish-- start to finish, I can do it. And I'm proud of that. But this story isn't about that. This story is about so much more than that.

Chapter 2

Rudy's Tamarack * November

Decades after Rudy was in the Air Force, he was our mailman. He didn't live too far from us and started helping my dad and uncles with their many projects on the weekends. Pretty soon he and his wife were at all our family gatherings and adopted as "Uncle" Rudy and "Aunt" Betty to us cousins. Rudy listened more than he spoke, always thought 12 steps ahead, and did everything well.

He also hunted deer with us for as long as I can remember. He was one of those people who was always in the right place at the right time when it came to deer hunting. He could stand stalk-still for hours, like a sentry, in that long army green overcoat he wore that came down to his knees. He had a deer stand in a tamarack tree where the swamp bottlenecked between two pieces of higher ground. Deer preferred the cover of the swamp and at least

half a dozen deer trails crisscrossed the area like a slack cat's cradle design, funneling the deer right to him.

Some months after Rudy passed away, I claimed the tamarack. I didn't want it to rot or be overgrown, so took it upon myself to maintain the stand-- thereby claiming all rights to hunt from it as long as I did so. That fall, I cleared the shooting lanes and replaced the ladder rungs that looked a little iffy. It still hadn't snowed and was looking to be a warm opener.

By the second day of the season, someone had chased a nice buck into a swamp adjacent to the bottleneck. I volunteered to stand in Rudy's tamarack, effectively blocking the deer's escape to a parcel of land we didn't own and couldn't hunt. I got the nod and left the group to get into the stand, leaving them to hash out the drive based on wind direction, and the location of additional stationers based on that. Knowing how they liked to argue, I had about an hour to get in the tamarack.

I drove past Betty and Rudy's house, thinking of them as I made my way to Rudy's pine plantation. I parked in the field and walked to the southernmost area of the field, almost missing the walking trail to the stand. The field had been mowed in the late summer, but the trail was overgrown on this side. The trail was wide enough for a four-wheeler, but the tall grasses camouflaged it well. True to Rudy's luck, a well-used deer trail kept at least a portion of the trail beat down. When I maintained the stand a month ago, I'd come in from the west side. From this east side, the trail passes south of the tamarack and keeps going to a pine plantation of my dad's, then my uncle's pasture for expectant heifers.

I remembered this portion of the trail from last winter when I cross-country skied all the way through to Rudy's house. My favorite spot is a clump of cedar and fir trees so thick and dark during the day it resembles a tunnel. Just beyond that an orange flagging ribbon flapped at me. Time to turn north and find the tamarack on the edge of the swamp.

Careful to climb the tree without banging the gun, I snaked around limbs and crawled onto the platform. I stood there, ~20 feet above the ground, and thought of Rudy. I stood like I'd seen him stand so many years, with his gun--barrel up-- tight to his side, slightly leaning back, and looked out over the swamp and tried to see it through his eyes. In a silent salute, I closed my eyes a moment--then decided Rudy would probably want me paying attention about now.

Then I closed my eyes again, trying to slow my breathing. The walk in and the climb up weren't that challenging— if you weren't hunting. The warm clothing is enough to slow you down exponentially in order to not sweat and thus, get cold. Then there's a certain amount of apprehension comes from others depending on you to cover your ground and bring home meat. I knew that a Seasoned Hunter could sneak up on me at any time and judge my hunting (was I quiet? was I still? could I fool a deer into walking right to me?) Right now, I wasn't so worried about being judged for my stealth. The more experienced you became as a hunter, the more you were trusted to cover the areas the deer tended to go. Rudy's tamarack covered just such an area. And I was in Rudy's tamarack.

With the dry grass, I'm sure I sounded like a herd of elephants, or at least one elephant to the animals that live here. The proof came when I couldn't hear anything but the deafening sound of blood pounding in my ears; I'd scared the animals to silence. They were gauging

their next move based on mine. I took some deeper breaths, slowing my heart rate some more. Most of the animals that heard me couldn't see me-- another testament to how loud I was coming in here. So, if I got quiet and stayed quiet, I should be able to hear them, once they believe I'd disappeared for good.

The blood pounding in my ears slowed but was still deafening. I craved some sound--any sound to gain back some audio perspective. As I waited and breathed, I opened my eyes and started memorizing trees, bushes, rocks, clumps of grass, and anything else that would tell me what things were and where they were so that I could identify a deer if it snuck in and stayed more still than I knew I could be. My only advantage was my height over the swamp. I couldn't be more quiet, but I could be still enough to not be noticed at the height I was.

"Caw! Caw-caw!"

Finally, some sound. Some crows had soared in overhead, clearly on their way elsewhere. My eyes flickered upward, but I moved my head slowly skyward to avoid once again being the center of attention. The large black birds moved with more grace than the feverish flapping of ducks, but less grace than the smooth fluid movements of a swan or heron. A few more "caw"s and they were out of my range of hearing. I turned my head and attention slowly back to my shooting lanes. I scanned the lanes first for anything I may have missed admiring the birds I've previously watched in disgust as they picked at a carcass in the ditch. I know about the cycle of life, and I could appreciate it, but I still prefer the nasty-smelling parts of it at a distance.



Some small chickadees had flown in from somewhere. They were fluttering from bush to bush, hopping along some branches, chasing each other from one to the next. I counted seven of them. Their playful, carefree nature reminded me of how us cousins used to be. Our thoughts only as long as those chickadees stayed on each bush. Our games not that much different from theirs. Their quirky, quick movements were inquisitive, light and never serious. Not quite graceful, but quick to react.

I recalled one of my first years hunting; a time of my life when the hardest thing I had to do was drag my butt from my warm bed to get up and go hunting or to school. I'd been in my spruce stand (about four miles from Rudy's tamarack) for an hour or so and the morning sun decided to warm up the air from frigid to tolerable. In my tiredness, I'd convinced myself that if I closed my eyes, I'd still be able to *hear* something if it came near my stand. And in the thin rays of sunshine, with my eyes closed, I'd fallen asleep until a group of chickadees fluttered in around me and ...on me. I opened my eyes but stayed still. One was

on my hat, hopping around. One was on my gun. The others were hopping on the branches around me. I'd never seen wild birds this closely before and I recall being surprised that they didn't see me as a threat; just a soft place to land for a second before chasing the others along to the next thing that piqued their interests. It was truly amazing to be a part of their world for a moment.

The chickadees in my shooting lane now continued their touch-and-go pattern until they were out of sight. They were quiet to begin with, so once they left my sight, I could no longer track their progress. My legs were starting to grow tired, and I was shifting my weight from foot to foot. In order to stay as still as I needed to be to go unnoticed, I'd need to sit, so I scanned my entire range of responsibility and decided to take the chance on sitting down. There were two branches I was leaning against, the top one slightly more forward than the lower one. I ducked under the top one and slid my butt up on the lower one, resting my arms over the top branch. There was also another branch behind those two, so with that as a back rest, I was almost seat-belted into the tree. It was ...comfortable. Probably the most comfortable tree I've ever sat in to this day. I was able to sit still and watch and I even stayed awake.

The sun peeked out periodically, but the sky ultimately threatened snow. It smelled like snow. The air was getting crisper-- almost thinner-- as I breathed it in slowly and steadily. The clouds darkened and rolled in lower and lower throughout the afternoon. This would be the first snow of the year, if it came as promised by Channel 9.

I heard a rustling behind me in the dry leaves. My heart jumped and started pounding. More rustling. *This had to be a deer!* (Lots more rustling.) *That's a lot of racket for any*

smaller animals to be making especially if they don't want to get sucked up into the cycle-of-life today. It's probably a big deer! I forced deep, calming breaths in and out while I tried to stay as still as possible and figure out how I was going to turn around without being noticed. The rustling got louder and closer, now slightly to my left. *Good! If the deer would move to my side, I can turn my head slowly and not be noticed.* I can remain calm all season long but as soon as a deer walks in (and Lord, help me if it's a buck) and I about have a panic attack. Seasoned Hunters call that Buck Fever.

The rustling got closer, and in an instant, my mind ran through 40 scenarios. In about 35 of the scenarios, I did things too fast or made too much noise and the 10-point buck ran away after seeing me. In the last few scenarios, I have infinite patience, wait for the 16-point buck to walk under, or to the side of Rudy's tamarack. I'm able to silently maneuver the gun in the direction of the now-30-point buck and the ground quakes as the monstrous animal falls with one swift shot, expertly placed. It will take at least 5 of us to haul him out, based on the noise he was making.

It felt like a week had passed by the time the rustling got under Rudy's tamarack. I slowly looked down and around the platform I had been standing on. My heart fell; the scrawniest red squirrel I'd ever seen was tearing apart the ground beneath the tree, inevitably looking for the pinecones he hid... or maybe another squirrel hid... for a quick meal. Clearly, he needed the meal; his determination sounded like nothing less than herd of elk moving through.

I had to be careful now; as disappointing as his arrival had been, if he spots me, he'll chatter at an impressive decibel level to warn every animal in a 2-mile radius until I leave or

nightfall comes. The deer pay attention to tattletales like him. But so do I. And sometimes the squirrels work in my favor. ...like when they chatter at the deer moving through. Like right now.

Quite a ways to the west, I heard a faraway squirrel barking rather ferociously. Not wanting to alert Scrawny, I slowly straightened up and searched the shooting lanes again. When my eyes followed the sound, I saw a flash of brown, not unlike the hind end of a deer jumping. I stayed still, not wanting to get excited like I did over Scrawny until I knew it was something to get excited about. Unfortunately, when the deer jumped, it landed and stayed planted behind a thick alder clump. I tried to anticipate where the deer would again be in my line of sight.

While the deer was so far away and unable to see me, I slowly and quietly moved the gun up on the branch and in both gloved hands. I could shoot from here quite comfortably, I decided. Scrawny hadn't noticed me and scampered off to scrape up pinecones from somewhere else, so I was safe as long as I could stay quiet and patient. Then I saw another couple flashes of brown deeper into the swamp, probably on the same trail and behind the first deer I'd seen. Nothing to do now but wait.

The first deer finally arrived on the other side of the alder bush like I'd predicted. I saw ears twitch and swivel, trying to determine the safety of the area in front of them. They were still too far away to see if there were any antlers between the ears. There were times I'd been in the stand for so long and stared at the deer for so long that I either made antlers disappear or kept seeing them when they weren't there. Seasoned Hunters also call this Buck Fever.

Then all 3 of them startled towards me. Something (or someone in orange, more likely) had spooked them right into Rudy's shooting lanes. A Mama and her two fawns from this year eked forward, uncertain of the safety, but certain of impending doom behind them. Mama led, taking 2 or 3 steps at a time, surveying potential threats quickly, and moving forward. They halted altogether when she reached the most prominent shooting lane directly in front of me. I saw the steam coming from her nose as she exhaled into the cold air. She scanned the lane up and down before tiptoeing in. Two steps in, her look shot up to where I sat in the tree. I hadn't moved. I didn't even dare breathe. Her coat was thick and bushy, no doubt warm from the cold. Their hair is thick and hollow to help insulate them from the frigid winters. Her eyes were alert and black as a country night sky. Her ears never stopped pivoting, her determination clear to even me—to keep her and her babies safe.

Just then, the smaller fawn bringing up the rear pranced into the shooting lane ahead of Mama. She shot him a look of warning that this was indeed serious business and he'd better pay attention. Then she gave up trying to sneak, and walked through the remainder of the opening, one step at a time, head bobbing—trying to get a fix on the scent that caught her attention. When all 3 of them were back in the trees, I watched their broken forms jump over some downed trees and move into Rudy's Christmas tree plantation.

I hung the gun back on the branch in front of me and scanned back to the west and waited for the next arrival. Within 10 minutes, the squirrel to the west alerted me once again, and the first flashes of blaze orange appeared on the same trail Mama and her fawns had been on.

Where we hunt blaze orange is mandatory during rifle season over the head and a majority of the body. Everyone has their hunting outfit that they wear year after year, so based on the location of the orange and the amount of fading, one's identity could be determined about $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ mile away. Rudy had a wool cap that Betty had sewn blaze orange onto the top of. In addition to being able to be still for hours, Rudy never complained about the cold. When the ear flaps were down, his hat had a two-toned blaze orange/faded orange-yellow look to it and you could bet that it was at least 20 below zero. You could set your thermometer by it. Rudy's nose and ears would turn bright red before he'd put his ear flaps down. Rudy also had a newer thin cotton blaze orange vest that he wore over his army green, knee-length insulated trench coat. He got that right around the time we got a fresh batch of rookie hunters with us.

The orange hat bobbing toward me now was a bright new blaze orange beanie. A rookie. That would be our neighbor's son (14 years old) or Dennis' nephew (13 years old). And I thought Dennis' nephew went home after lunch. The form coming toward me wasn't very quiet. A slow and steady slogging through the brush and grass told me he'd had the hard stretch through a half-frozen swamp. I smiled. I'd made that drive before; my first and probably second year. This is one you don't come out dry on the other side. You're hot from breaking through the swamp ice and sinking into the soft mud, almost losing your boots to the suction with every step. You've shed every bit of clothing you can and still follow the Blaze Orange law. The alder thickets snatch the hat right off your head and fling it back the way you came, and that's when the branches don't smack you in the eyeballs as you're trying to calculate about how much swamp is left to pick your way through. You're wondering if deer hunting is really worth it, trudging along not seeing any animals at all,

much less a deer. And in the back of your mind, you're wondering if the Seasoned Hunters put you to drive this swamp because they think you need to appreciate the hunt or because they just don't like you. (For reference, we hardly don't like anybody, but there are dues to be paid.)

I watched our neighbor's son take his hat off and wipe his face with it, muttering something. I could now see the bits of alder branches stuck to the beanie, clear it had been flung a time or 2 recently. I smiled wider. He had no idea I was there. He slapped his beanie back on his head and stomped forward. I was pretty sure a herd of buffalo could have moseyed 20 yards on either side of him and he never would have known.

A Seasoned Hunter will walk a bit, then stop and listen to see if the deer are trying to cut back in between the hunters. A Seasoned Hunter also knows the drives well enough to not get stuck driving the middle of the swamp on years when it wasn't totally frozen over. And a Seasoned Hunter will also stick to the high ground and place the don't-know-how-to-be-quiet rookies to the thickest mess of the swamp to scare the deer out to the stationers or other drivers.

I looked down at Rookie, who still hadn't seen me, as he stopped for a moment to reposition his gun and sling higher up on his shoulder. Not very observant, these young ones. Kinda reminded me of that prancing fawn from 15 minutes ago. Or, honestly, me-- eight or ten years ago. I wondered if he even knew he'd spooked out 3 deer to me. Inwardly, I shook my head. Ah, the price of youth.

About a minute after Rookie stomped through, I heard a whistle behind me. I felt my cheeks grow hot as I realized my dad had gotten the drop on me. The original Seasoned Hunter, he'd walked in undetected and was at the bottom of my ladder, looking up at me. I pretended I knew he was there all along and looked down. He put his gloved palms up and shrugged. (In hunting sign language, that's "did you see anything?" or "did anything come through?") I took my gloves off and put up 3 fingers and then ran my palm over my hat ("3 baldies" or "3 does/fawns"). He nodded, his breath fogging up his glasses for a moment, as he scanned my largest shooting lane. He whispered loudly (because there's no sign language for battle plans), "We're going to make another drive. Stay here. Come out at dark." He paused and assessed me. "You warm enough?"

I nodded and gave a thumbs up. He nodded and walked back to the high ground to the south, mentally finalizing the next drive. When he was out of sight, I glanced at my watch. Awfully dark already for the time; the storm was coming in faster than Channel 9 had anticipated. The Blue Period had begun.



The Blue Period is the time of evening when the darkness closing in turns everything to shades of blue. This phenomenon is especially prominent in the winter months when the blues are more amplified by the snow. It's my favorite time of day.

My eyelids were just beginning to shut for longer and longer periods of time when I heard the first snowflakes. When everything is so dry and the air is so crisp, the first layer of flakes float down and land with more sound than you'd think possible. It's a magical sound. Like skeleton keys falling on to a bed of pennies, but softer and gentler, as if courteous that the listener has a headache. Nothing else sounds like it on earth. With no wind, the sound of each snowflake landing is given its own time to be enjoyed, which I was doing. I watched

the flakes land on my sleeve and studied their never-duplicated patterns until my body heat melted them into the tiniest droplets of water. Hard to believe such a small amount of water could make such a complex structure when its form was altered.

I looked out over the swamp. The snow came down faster now, and in bigger clumps of snowflakes, no longer wanting to travel alone, I guessed. I still had about 45 minutes left of safe shooting light, so I watched the snow pile up on everything. The grasses got so weighted-down they bent over and formed a blanket to cover the ground. It looked like the world held a white double of itself just a few inches off of the colored original. The Blue Period was intensifying with royal blues and navy blues into black. I wondered if God had names for all of the individual shades. I envisioned Him calling them out, like a Bob Ross instructional painting on PBS:

"And now you're going to need to just dab your flat brush into Blue Sienna. For this part, we're also going to use Ocean Depths, Aquamarine, Glacier Blue, Midnight Sky, Navy Blue, Burnt Blue, Caribbean Waters, and Arctic Ice. Just go back and forth on the canvas to cover it completely and then we'll shade it in as we go..."

When the snow fell so fast and hard that I couldn't see 6 feet in front of me, I decided I'd best call it a day. The deer can sense weather changes and know to hunker down for storms. You rarely see a deer out moving in a storm unless they've been ousted from their hiding place. I carefully climbed down from Rudy's tamarack and slowly tracked back to the car. There was 6 inches already, but the ground was dry underneath, so I knew I could get out just fine. I wiped as much snow as I could from the gun and unloaded it completely and cased it. It's illegal to drive with an uncased gun in a vehicle, and my dad was always on

us about gun safety. I put the case in the back seat and got the car out of the field and back on to the road. The road was worse for driving than the field, so I was careful to take it slow. The snow was still coming down heavily and, in the headlights, it was easy for the eyes to try to follow the snow instead of the road. Snow hypnosis, they call it.

I was almost to Aunt Betty and Uncle Rudy's driveway when a flash of brown crossed the left headlight, and then the right. And antlers. I had seen antlers. They were big antlers. I stopped the car and reached on the floor of the passenger side for the spotlight (legal until 10:00 PM). The deer stopped in the ditch and looked back at me as I trained the light on him from out the driver's side window. From what I could count, he was a 10. Tall. And wide. I blinked deliberately twice and looked again. I swear I saw the faintest hint of a smile before he flashed his white tail at me, waving goodbye, as he trotted into the snowstorm.

Tomorrow...