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A moment of truth

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A Moment of Truth

By Pam Klein

In my daydream, I had a mug of hot cocoa in one hand, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* in my other hand, and a space heater at my feet. I had no reason to shiver, no reason to want to be elsewhere, no reason to wonder why Cody and I had spent the night with Cody's parents, which made it nearly impossible to get out of deer hunting. In my daydream, I had no reason to wish Larry and Lori didn't suspect I would accidentally burn their house down if I'd stayed behind to cook them supper. In my daydream, I wasn't deer hunting.

In reality, I was sitting on a folding stool halfway between the top and the bottom of a hill. A pile of branches hulked behind me, and a skinny tree stood in front of me and to my right. In my left hand was my weapon of choice: a recurve bow with beautiful green-stained wood in the handle section. My middle three fingers curled around the bowstring where my orange-shafted arrow was nocked. I was cold, I was bored, and I suddenly realized I wasn't alone: a deer – my quarry, my prey – was walking down the gentle slope of my hill.

Damn.

As the deer approached, he walked slower and slower, sniffing the ground, giving me every opportunity to shoot an arrow at him. Realizing that Chuck Adams, TV's deer hunting authority and star of the hunting show "Whitetail Country", would laugh at me for hesitating, I gripped the handle of my bow more tightly.

"I don't want to shoot you," I said. "If you just keep on walking, I'll tell Cody and Larry that you came by too fast for me to shoot."

At least, that is what I *wanted* to say. I wanted to say or do anything that would speedily send the deer on its merry little way. Instead, I thought about how all I had to do to shoot the arrow was raise the bow, draw the string to my face, and let go of the string. Simple. But not so simple: I'd never killed anything aside from assorted house bugs and a pheasant that looked at my oncoming car with an expression of dread on its face.

As though the deer could hear what I didn't say and intended to ignore me, he stopped walking. He looked down the slope to the field below. And then he looked straight at me.

"Go on, get out of here!" I glared with the intensity of what I wanted to shout. Maybe he caught some sense of my annoyance that he was there because he seemed to shrug. He looked down the slope again. I didn't see what was down there – the stumps of corn stalks, probably – but it seemed like the deer knew and would rather stay by me. And he apparently wasn't too keen on going back where he came from. Perhaps catching a glimpse of Larry's hunting van, which was parked at the far end of the mowed-down corn field at the top of the hill, convinced him to stick to the cover of the grove. He returned his gaze to me, his brown eyes beseeching me.

"Fine," I muttered, realizing it would take more than telepathy to chase the deer away. I half-drew my bow, hoping my movements would do the trick.

He just watched me, doubting I would do it.

"Fine." I raised my bow all the way and drew the string back. I focused on the deer's kill zone, the area in the deer's body just back from the shoulder blade. But at the moment before I released the arrow, I jerked my bow to the left and shot the arrow behind the deer.

He sprinted forward a few steps, but then stopped to look at me reproachfully.

“If you don’t run now, I’m going to get another arrow from my quiver and I won’t miss with that one,” I thought at him.

He shrugged again and resumed sniffing the ground, flicking his white tail nonchalantly.

Irritated that he felt safe around a mighty hunter like me, I grabbed another arrow. “Look, you can’t stay here.”

He looked at me, then went back to sniffing the ground.

I nocked the arrow. I drew the bow. I shot, but once again, I made the subconscious decision to pull my bow to the left and miss the deer. This time, he barely jumped. With a growl of frustration at his continued lingering, I grabbed another arrow. “I’m serious. You have to leave. I really will shoot you.”

He ignored me.

Fine. I called up all my reasons for wanting to shoot a deer: I wanted to make Cody, who had patiently taught me how to shoot a bow, proud; I wanted to avoid explaining to Larry how I shot three arrows and still didn’t hit the deer; I wanted to stop waking up at five in the morning to freeze in a farm grove; but mostly I wanted to know how it felt to kill an animal, to know if I would feel the pride, the glory, that hunters like Chuck Adams seemed to feel.

I drew the arrow back. I stared hard at the deer’s kill zone. I held my breath.

Deer hunters on TV – especially Chuck Adams – often whisper into their microphones about “The Moment of Truth” – the moment after they send their arrows

from their bows, the moment those arrows hit or miss the deer, the moment that proves or disproves the hunters' manhood. Luckily, I don't have to worry about proving my "manhood," but I did have to worry about whether or not I hit the deer, whether or not it was a killing shot. I didn't actually see the arrow hit the deer. I figured it must have because the deer ran back to where he came from; the next moment, he was standing near the top of the hill looking down at me. His fur blended so completely with the tree branches and fallen leaves that he seemed to fade into ghostliness. But when he moved, the optical illusion ended, and I saw him walk away.

I knew from Cody and from a hunter safety course that you should wait at least half an hour after shooting a deer, before you go looking for it. Otherwise, you might end up chasing it further away, making it harder to track. I trembled for the entire half hour that I waited, even though I wasn't cold anymore. The late afternoon light dimmed to darkness. Eventually, I turned on my flashlight and got up to look for my arrows, and to look for what I dreaded seeing: a sign of the deer's blood.

Cody, who had walked in with me on his way to where he hunted, came back my way as he usually did to go back to the hunting van. He saw me find my second arrow. He didn't need me to explain that I'd shot at a deer.

"Did you hit it?"

"I don't know. I shot three arrows, and I haven't found the last one. It was standing right here when I shot it." I told him all the details, from where the deer came from to his reluctance to go to the field at the bottom of the hill, to the two shots I took to try to shoo the deer away, to the last shot I took. Cody very considerately didn't laugh at me, and we searched the area for anything – my bloody arrow, tufts of deer hair, or a drop of blood.

It didn't take long to find a spot of blood on a fallen oak leaf.

I led Cody to where the deer had looked back at me. Blood painted the grass and leaves. From there, smears of blood on branches and weeds, and drops on pale brown leaves were easy to find. We had a blood trail.

On previous hunting trips, I had helped follow the blood trails of deer that other hunters had shot. Then, I had felt like a forensics expert on "CSI". Then, I understood the excitement of deer hunting. As Cody and I inched our way through the grove, examining any leaf or stick that may have gotten blood on it, I wondered whether or not other hunters felt what I now felt: regret, and some species of wistful sadness. Chuck Adams would probably throttle me if I suggested he felt the same thing, but deer hunters get a close look at some amazingly beautiful animals. I think that the only hunters who don't feel a pang of regret when they kill a deer are those for whom familiarity has bred contempt.

The deer had went to the corn field at the top of the hill, and where his blood dropped onto the soil, it disappeared. Enough of his blood landed on corn leaves, though, for us to know when he went back into the grove and down the hill. Larry and Lori saw our flashlight beams from the van and joined us as we were about to head back into the trees. I told them the short version of what happened. With four pairs of eyes, we easily found the deer, lying at the bottom of the hill with his feet in a creek.

"He looks so much smaller than he did," I murmured to myself.

"Not bad for your first deer," Cody said.

"Good job, Pam! Venison burgers for supper!" Larry joked.

Lori, Cody and I groaned. "I think I'll just have a salad, thanks."