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The Rabbit Hunt

DOUGLAS H. THAYER*

When Allen got back to his bedroom after brushing his teeth, he opened his gun cabinet and took out five boxes of shells and his Browning .22 automatic rifle. It was Saturday. In twenty minutes he was supposed to be at the chapel to pick up the boys from his Sunday-school class for a rabbit hunt. He taught the class only for the summer while he was home from college, where he was in his second year of pre-dent. The hunt was a reward for the boys' being quiet during July (the girls were always quiet). And he knew that if he were ten minutes late they would be potting the pigeons off the chapel roof. But they were pretty good kids, and they should all have a swell time, although it would be hot.

The snake-bite kit! It was too hot for rattlesnakes in the open sagebrush during the day, but there was always some chance, at least around rocks. His father had warned him again at breakfast about the deep gullies, particularly in Dog Valley. Because the sage always grew right to the edge of the sheer clay sides, an excited kid chasing a wounded rabbit could take a twenty-foot dive into one. Wouldn't that be jolly. Each of the kids had gone through the required state gun-safety course. All he and Larry needed to do was to keep them in some kind of line and out of the high sage. The mothers had all given their permission.

Allen unbuttoned his faded Levis and pulled his white T-shirt tight across his stomach, then buttoned up again and combed his hair. Because Cathy liked his hair sun-bleached, he wasn't wearing a hat. He winked at her picture. They had a date at seven. His summer construction job paid well, kept

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him in great shape—and he had Cathy, which made for a big summer so far. He picked up the Browning and shells, then stood to bow his head and say a short prayer. Buzzing, a big yellow hornet bumped at the window screen.

Going down the hall he banged on Danny's door. "Hey, Mom said to get up!" Danny groaned. "Come on, kid, it's Saturday morning, hit the deck." Danny hunted everything with him and his father, ducks, geese, pheasants, rabbits, deer, but had a special piano lesson for his recital, so couldn't make it this time. Coming down the stairs and into the kitchen, Allen heard his mother on the back porch talking to Mrs. Miller. His father had left for the office. He got his canteen, moved some of the breakfast dishes aside to fill it at the sink and then took his lunch out of the refrigerator.

"Good morning, Mrs. Miller," he said when he got on the porch.

She greeted him and she and his mother went on talking. He smashed two flies trapped against the inside of his windshield and then had to clean the glass with a Kleenex. One thing he didn't like about hunting in August was the flies. The boys would have to keep moving.

When he started his engine, his mother came down the steps. "Have a good time, son, and see that those boys behave themselves."

"I will, Mom." She squeezed his arm, then waved as he backed out. Behind her over the garage door hung the antlers from a dozen deer hunts, some of them bleached white. He and his father always nailed up the biggest antlers each fall.

He waved back at his mother, shifted to drive and moved down the quiet street. Danny would have the yard work to do alone. Mrs. Wayne stopped her raking to wave. She hadn't always been quite *that* friendly. When he was a boy she used to chase him off for sniping birds out of her big trees with his BB gun. But he never shot songbirds, none of the kids did, just starlings and sparrows.

The boys saw him when he crossed Third South. Dressed in cut-offs, carrying sack lunches and guns, they came charging off the church lawn, whooping, excited, their white T-shirts and naked legs flashing in the new sunlight. He made them put all of the guns in the trunk on the old blanket.

They groaned. They wanted to hold their guns—they would be careful. “Not on your life,” he said. He made sure each action was open before he laid the guns on the old blanket.

Larry drove up. They gathered in a circle for prayer then left, driving south on 91 toward Levan. They would hunt near Levan first then drive farther west to Dog Valley at the base of Battle Mountain, where the best hunting was. The boys wanted to look for arrowheads and bones at the mountain, until he told them that there had been no massacre.

Larry right on his tail, they made Nephi in less than an hour, even though they had to stop once to get a hornet out of the car. The valley grew wider and more barren. Except for the black pinion pines on the low, rounded mountains and squares of dry-land wheat on the flats, sagebrush covered everything. Patches of fur showed where cars had pounded jackrabbits into the asphalt, and every mile or two a hawk sat perched on top of a power pole.

Speaking over the rush of warm air, the boys told hunting stories. Allen told them about the time he and three friends had killed two hundred jackrabbits on a single overnight hunt. They used a spotlight to blind the rabbits along the old roads, and he still had the sugar sack full of tails somewhere. The boys already had a tail contest set up. Later, when those in the back seat started to tell dirty jokes, their voices muffled, he had to tell them to knock it off. “This is still a Sunday School class,” he said. Embarrassed, they quieted down. They were good kids, a little rowdy at times, but still basically good kids. They liked him because he had played high school ball.

“Hey look,” Bruce hollered, “pheasants!”

Allen caught just a glimpse of the small flock in the corner of a cut wheat field. Two roosters. The boys wanted to know when the season opened. Judas, how he liked to walk through the corn, kick up the big roosters, and then blast them down in long trails of bright feathers. Last year for the first time in his life he had made a triple, jumped three roosters simultaneously out of one weed clump and killed all three. His father walked clear across the field to slap him on the back and shake his hand.

At Levan (UNINCORPORATED, POPULATION 247), Allen turned off onto the dirt road and drove across the sage flats toward the mountains and the power line. With Larry

half a mile behind him in the dust, Allen pulled off at the usual place. While he waited for Larry, the kids mined two of the big ant hills with cherry bombs, exploding them in sudden bursts of dust. But already they brushed at the flies. "Okay, *brethren*, gather over here," he said finally. They groaned. "Now stay in line, keep out of the high sage, and don't fall into a gully." They laughed. "And don't shoot song-birds."

"Ah, Allen, why not?" somebody asked in a phoney voice.

They shoved and pushed when he turned to open his trunk. "Just take it easy." As each boy received his gun, Larry spaced him in the line. Allen picked up the Browning and closed the lid. They would follow the power poles to the ledges, where they would trap the rabbits and get the best shooting until Dog Valley. He walked into the space that Larry had left him in the middle. "Okay, load your guns!"

Brushing a fly away from his mouth, Allen dropped the inch-long shells into the tube magazine, then poured the rest of the box into his pocket. T-shirts off, brown backs already gleaming with sweat under the sun, the boys waited, brushed flies. With his light complexion he couldn't take nearly the sun they could. Larry was ready on the north end. Allen raised his arm, a ripple of shouts, and they started. Directly above his head the power cables crackled and buzzed. The poles would help to keep the line straight. No bad gullies cut between them and the ledges.

Allen walked alert, finger on the safety. He liked the tight sensation, the feel of the Browning. Next to him Ken dropped a sparrow in a puff of feathers. "Come on, Daniel Boone," he said, "we're not after sparrows." Then the shooting started at the south end, but nobody yelled, so he knew that the rabbit got away. Five minutes later Merrill got the first jack, whooped, held it up for everybody to see then dropped it to rip off the tail.

The cracking of the .22's increased as they crowded more rabbits in front of them. But the boys had killed a dozen between them before Allen got his first good shot. The jack crossed close in front of him, ears laid back, really moving. He held the trigger down, read the spurts of dust, both eyes open, the thrill shrinking his guts. A little more lead, then "W-h-a-p," and the jack somersaulted into the dust, squealed.

Holding it with his foot, he put the barrel next to its head and pulled the trigger.

"Okay, let's take five!" he yelled. He didn't want anybody dropping from heat exhaustion.

Squatting, they drank from their canteens, loaded their guns, shouted to each other about how many they had killed. The white T-shirts stuffed into their back pockets looked like tails. Allen reloaded. Twice as big as a cat, the jack was a soft grey color except for the white tail and underbelly. Already flies buzzed around it, and a big ant crawled in one of the long ears. He reached down and jerked off the tail.

The shooting got better. Pairs of robins and small flocks of bluebirds and larks flew ahead of them. Twice they jumped hawks, and once an owl, but always out of range. A quarter of a mile from the shimmering ledges he called the boys in. "Okay," he said, "we always get a lot of rabbits here, but don't climb up into the ledges." Vaulting the sage clumps and yelling like Comanches, they went back into the line.

Trapped, the rabbits ran back through the line or around the ledges and up the hill. The automatics cracked, the other guns slower, bullets ricocheting, zinging. Five or six rabbits flashed through the sage ahead of Allen, others trying to sneak by. Mouth dry, heart pounding, he shot, loaded and kept shooting, the Browning slick with sweat. Broken-backed, one jack pawed the ground dog-fashion, and he finished it. The line got ragged, the boys shouting now, some cursing. He and Larry yelled them back.

Then Allen got two, one sitting, front legs out like hands. "W-h-a-p!" and it caved in, the head half gone. The second he toppled back over a rock shelf. As they neared the ledges the shooting crescendoed, then suddenly slacked off, the rabbits gone. The boys ran back and forth to head-shoot wounded rabbits, argue over kills, rip tails, count the score. Then they stood there all together, wiping the sweat from their eyes with their shirts, drinking, sorry it was over, laughing.

"Okay, pretty good," Allen said, "we'll rest under that big pinion over there." They could find rabbits higher up, but the pinions and ledges made the hunting too tricky, and there could be snakes.

Sitting in the warm shade, they piled the tails in the little mounds before them, kidded Allen and Larry about not being

top guns. With the last of their water they washed down the Hershey bars. Allen dampened his handkerchief and wiped the grey dust from his face, neck and arms, then ate an apple to clean his teeth. The black flies they brushed away lit on the little piles of blood-specked tails. Below them the aluminum-roofed barns glimmered and on the highway windshields flashed the sun.

The big excitement gone now, resting, they talked hunting or smoothed the dirt to play ticktacktoe. They wanted to know more about the big rabbit hunt when he and his friends had killed over two hundred. He gave them all the details. He told them that when he came home for Christmas vacation he would take those, whose mothers would let them, on a two-day hunt out in the west desert. They would hunt ducks at Fish Springs during the day and rabbits at night along the road with a spotlight. They might even get a coyote or a fox. But he told them that they would have to prove themselves today.

"Hey, look!"

Allen turned. Below, one of the brown hawks had lit on a power pole. Allen watched, then slowly reached for the Browning. "Okay, you jokers, move aside," he said, "and we'll see who's the Daniel Boone around here." He winked at Larry. "We buy the root beers if I miss; you buy us malts if I drop the hawk." Larry laughed.

"Okay," somebody said, "you're on."

Even from the prone it was a long shot with a .22, although with his deer rifle he had killed hawks at four times the range. But, at the crack of the Browning, the hawk fell lazily from the pole. Yelling, T-shirts bobbing, the boys charged down the hill after it. Lon and Bruce, who brought the hawk back, wings spread between them, claimed the talons if Allen didn't want them. Allen held the warm, soft hawk. "Neat," Randy said. With his pocketknife Lon cut off the talons, which he and Bruce hung around their necks with string. The other boys groaned. Danny or Cathy's little brother Bobby would like the talons. The hawk's black eyes still glistened.

Before they left, Allen jacked them up about the swearing he had heard. "Now there's absolutely no need for that," he told them. "What about that lesson we had two weeks ago?"

They promised. He had to keep after them. The line of power poles led back to the two cars glimmering in the expanse of grey-green sage, but they would cut north. The sun was hotter.

At first they got shooting, but then it thinned out, as it could sometimes. Bored, the boys shot the pencil-long grey lizards, mined ant hills or shot at the large yellow-winged grasshoppers that flew up to light in front of them. Verlin killed a squirrel. They formed firing squads to kill the sparrows, tried to find three or four in the top of the same dead sage. Twice Allen had to stop the boys next to him from shooting the robins, larks, and bluebirds. They laughed, yelled, "Hey, Allen, can I shoot this beat-up old robin?" Just after he brought them in to cross the one deep gully at a spot he had found, he had to shout at them not to shoot toward the cars. All he or Larry needed was a hole through a windshield.

The boys jumped when their naked backs touched the hot plastic seat covers and sat forward, groaned when Larry drove out first. Five miles west of Levan they pulled off at the grove to eat. An artesian well flowed in the center of the cottonwoods, and out behind was a small sink-fed slough. Allen made them all wash, and they blessed the food. After he ate he got his kit from the jockey box and brushed his teeth and combed his hair. The boys grew quiet. Some of them flipped pebbles at the hornets settled near the edge of the water around the well. Hornets liked anything wet. Clean a deer, rabbit or even a pheasant, and the smell brought hornets. He told the boys how good the hunting would be in Dog Valley. The last part of the drive was always fantastic, so they should save plenty of shells.

Feeling clean, Allen dozed and came awake to a duck squawking. Twisting and turning, a drake mallard flew from the slough out through the cottonwoods. He watched it disappear. A flock of mallards coming into the decoys was even better than rooster pheasants exploding out of the corn. Heart thudding, he liked to crouch in the blind, wait, then stand suddenly to kill just the green-headed drakes out of the flock. A fly lit near his mouth, tickled.

By two o'clock they were on the road driving west toward Dog Valley. The land was barren, empty, not even fences, only the power line. Then they topped the last rise, and Dog Val-

ley curved off to the northwest in front of them; Battle Mountain, the highest peak in the Tintic Range, was on the far side. The sage clung to the bottom, some of it head-high right at the edge of the deep center gully. He told the boys that the best drive was on the east side coming back. There a deep wash cut into the main gully at right angles to form a trap. Ahead the power line left the road to cut down across the middle of the valley.

The boys asked about deer in the Tintic, and he told them that the biggest rack of antlers nailed on their garage came off Battle Mountain. It was the year before he could legally carry a rifle. His father had made a fantastic three-hundred-yard shot that dumped the big four-point buck in a crashing tangle down the side of the ravine. Blood up to his elbows, he had cleaned the buck for his father. When he got his dental practice going, they would hunt elk in Wyoming and grizzlies in Alaska. Allen braked to turn off the asphalt, and the heat came in through the open windows at them.

Standing next to the car, Allen pulled off his T-shirt and stuffed it into his back pocket. The boys whistled. "Hey look, it's Mr. America," somebody said. They laughed. He got the suntan lotion from his kit. When he unlocked the trunk the first thing he saw was the blunt-legged hawk stuffed in between the spare and the jack. David wanted to show it to his mother. "Okay, okay, don't shove, brethren," he said. He had told Larry to leave him the spot next to the gully. It was over twenty feet deep in places, a seep in the bottom, and with all of the good shooting coming up somebody might get careless. He closed the lid, and then reached down to pinch an ant that crawled through the hair just above his sock.

They got better shooting than at Levan, but it wasn't so fast that the boys didn't take time to pot sparrows and lizards. Just after they crossed under the power line Randy shot a big blow snake. He screamed rattler, jumped back and started shooting, and everybody went charging over to where he was. Allen ran. He had warned them twice about snakes. The blow snake lay tangling itself, white-bellied against the yellow and black, shot through the body half a dozen times from four guns and not dead yet. "Better be careful your *rattlesnake*

doesn't bite you, Randy," he said. They all laughed, but they were disappointed it wasn't a rattler.

Twice Allen ducked into the high sage to find a spot to cross the center gully. They crossed at three-thirty. While the kids formed the new line, he stood at the gully's edge and watched the hornets around the stagnant puddles in the bottom. Tired, the boys began to drag a little, but then Merrill gut-shot a pregnant rabbit and that brought them back to life. Some of the boys shot at the hawks that circled, riding the hot afternoon thermals. Hunting the trap where the wash hit the gully would be an excellent way to end the hunt, which the boys would appreciate. His father always said that it was the best spot in the state.

When they had hunted back to where the power poles crossed the valley, Allen signaled a halt. "Okay, take five!" He wanted them to rest before the last drive. Those who had water shared it, which he liked to see, and then they sat brushing at the flies, their front pockets bulging with tails. By the time they counted the tails, stopped in Nephi for drinks (they would get their root beers anyway), and had the prayer at the church, it would be after six before he got home. Thirty feet in front of him three robins lit in the top of a dead sage.

Allen stood up. A mile farther on the two cars glimmered at the edge of the road. It had been a good day, but it would be nice to get home, shower, dress in cool clean clothes, and go over to Cathy's. Maybe they would watch TV—wait for Bobby to get lost. Sunday was always a good day too, quiet, with church, dinner, and then in the evening homemade ice cream out on the patio with Cathy and the family. After that maybe just a walk down the sidewalk under the trees.

Behind him they talked about the pregnant rabbit, some of the older boys whispering, snickering. Suddenly there was a ragged "C-r-a-c-k!" One robin flew from the top of the dead sage, two dropped in puffs of brown-white feathers. "Ah, one got away. You guys are a bum firing squad." Allen turned. Lon, Bruce, and Phil stood holding their raised .22's, David beside them. It had been David's voice.

"Now what did you do that for?"

"Ah, Allen, they're just birds."

Lon and Bruce still wore the hawk talons, the string dirty now. All four smiled. He looked at them, then slowly shook

his head, started to grin. What was the use. "Okay, okay, okay," he said, "just forget *all* about what I told you. But I'll be very glad to get you home to the care and keeping of your mothers." They laughed.

Across the valley a big stake-bed cattle truck kicked up a plume of dust at the base of Battle Mountain. Reaching down, Allen took the Browning from against the sage where he had leaned it. "All right," he said, "let's get back into line. This is the big one." Rested, eager again, they trotted back to their positions, T-shirts bobbing. "Take it easy!" he hollered. Above him the power cables sizzled and popped, the tall poles extending across and down the valley to infinity. He waved to Larry.

The shooting began slowly, grew, became a steady crackle, the boys started then to yell. They went on. Rabbits flashed through the sage everywhere, ten or twelve breaking into the open at one time, running back from the walls of the wash, trying for the hill. Rabbits dropped or went somersaulting. Wounded, spurts of dust jumping around it, one rabbit ran in a tight circle. Rabbits squealed. Excited, yelling, cursing, leaping over the sage, the crackle of their guns growing, the boys broke from line, whirling to shoot to the side or back, anywhere. Caught in a spur of sage, Allen saw it. Larry was waving, shouting something.

Running now because he had to stop the boys, scared, Allen got just to the edge of the high stuff when he heard the clip, clip, clip of the slugs from an automatic cutting the sage in front of him. He felt something hit him twice, like slaps. His legs went weak, he stumbled, dropped the Browning, and fell forward, hitting on his right shoulder in a small clearing. Dazed, he lay on his side facing the sun. He looked down at the two little black holes in his naked stomach and chest. They didn't bleed. Cheek against the dirt, he saw the dusty Browning, the pebbles and twigs.

Then very gradually the pain began, became finally hot coals, spilt acid, knives pushed into him, and beyond all he had ever believed pain was or could be. Amazed, he curled, wrapped his arms around, squeezed, trying to stop the pain. Then he saw only a white glare. He couldn't tell if he had limbs, arms and legs, the pain blotting out all feeling except pain. There was a center to the pain, an intensity, which

seemed beyond feeling, only void. And he wanted to stop the pain, squeeze harder, and curse, scream, but he couldn't make any sound.

Slowly the pain faded, almost like noise, and he felt his body relax, his arms. Then a hornet swung back and forth over his feet, above his hands, over his face. It lit on his cheek under his eye. But he couldn't raise his hand to brush it away. He couldn't feel it. Someone stood over him blocking out the sun, knelt down. He couldn't open his mouth to speak, tell them what to do, get to a telephone and call his folks. He couldn't hear anything. A blurred face vanished in the weak yellow glow. He began to choke and gasp against the blood filling his throat and mouth. And then he couldn't see.