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Hunting

Elizabeth Knight

I married a hunter.

Doing so has forced me to consider the consequences and complications of that word, that world, which would have otherwise remained distorted in simple black-and-white terms. Lad is a hunter, not a killer, a distinction important to him in the face of the gun-crazed, shoot-anything, “D’ja gitcha a buck?” culture that surrounds the sport. He is a scientist, a wildlife biologist who spends his summers tracking mule deer fawns, monitoring their survival rates and writing scientific articles about his findings. He devotes his autumns to watching adult male deer and elk, finding “the one” for that year, spending weeks hiking into remote locations and observing its behaviors and patterns, before the season opens and he finally hunts and sometimes kills it. It’s tempting as I write this to draw some parallel between his approach to hunting and the development of our relationship, which involved a six-year observation period as good friends, then, with a single conversation, an abrupt transition to dating, and, very shortly after, engagement and marriage. Though I’m hardly a trophy wife in any sense of the word.

When we married, people said to us, “You two have so much in common!” and “You are so perfect for each other!” which was surprising to me. They were speaking of the time we spend outside, but I am an outdoor enthusiast for the sake of being in nature, and he is a wildlife enthusiast, an interest that often takes him into nature. We spend most of our leisure time outside, but we argue over whether it’s going to be spent ice fishing or cross-country skiing, running rivers or looking for elk. While the end result of being outside is the same, we are worlds

apart in our motivation, and I often wonder if life might be easier if we each simply lived our respective lifestyles and had dinner together in the evenings.

But there are things that transcend this cultural divide. He is one of the kindest and most intelligent people I've ever met. He plants his grandparents' garden every year and takes my young nieces fishing and lets them reel in every fish he catches. He drives a purple truck with lightning bolts painted on the hood (such a great price and so dependable!), and his complete lack of conceit prevents him from understanding why I'm a little embarrassed by its gaudiness. We laugh together often—hysterical, snorting, hooting laughter—and when he says to me “You're a huge dork,” I know he means he loves me.



Once, during our friendship, I went elk hunting with him in the Uinta Mountains. We left his family's cabin in the dark of 3 a.m. and didn't return until that evening, after seventeen miles of intense elevation changes, hellacious wind, and bitter cold. We stopped several times throughout the day for Lad to “glass,” part of the lingo I had yet to learn, across whichever basin we sat atop. At our first stop, he lit a fire and I tried to dry out the wet socks that had numbed my feet. Our next stop a few hours later revealed that the matches Lad was carrying had gotten wet. We tried our best to dry them out, and I could do nothing but stare blankly as Lad tried one by one to light each match and each failed. He paused before the fifth and final match, and he might have prayed. The fire was entirely for my benefit; he was better prepared both mentally and physically for the day and so accustomed to believing we had so much in common that he assumed I would know to bring more layers and my own matches or lighter. When that final match broke in half, he shrugged, handed me his extra fleece jacket, and went back to his spotting scope. I had been cold and miserable in the outdoors many times before, but always for the sake of something I loved or had a stake in. Here I was neither passionate nor a leader, and that void, that acceptance of his jacket, that sense of being superfluous, left me colder than I'd ever been.

As a child, I'd had friends whose fathers and brothers hunted, and I would sit uncomfortably in their living rooms beneath the glassy-eyed stuffed heads of large mammals, trying not to think about the process that morphed a life into such a garish display. When Lad had asked me to come with him on that first hunting trip, I'd said yes, envisioning

simply a nice hike, and only later considered the idea that he might actually kill an animal. We didn't see any elk that day, or at least not any old enough for Lad to feel okay about shooting, and I was relieved. I hated that relief as I sat nestled in my down coat at our next stop, wearing leather hiking boots, eating the jerky that Lad had brought for us. Relief felt like hypocrisy while I continued to benefit from the bodies of countless animals. For me, there was no justification if I wasn't willing to do the dirty work of killing an animal. And I wasn't ready for that.



Lad is the oldest son of Terry, a tense worrier, and Dennis, an easygoing hunter. Or perhaps he was a killer. And maybe he wasn't as easygoing as he's remembered. I'm trying to piece together the strands of information available about the man who developed a brain tumor when Lad was eight years old and died only a few months later, and all memories of the dead tend to be romanticized a little. Lad spent the rest of his childhood and much of his adolescence quietly angry, learning to do on his own all the things his father would have taught him and leaving the room when Terry tried to start conversations about Dennis. She is stalwart in her refusal to acknowledge the nickname Dennis's family has given her son and only ever calls him by his given name, Eric. Eric Dennis.

When Dennis died, his family closed ranks around the widow and her three young children. Lad's love for wildlife and the outdoors was nurtured by two of his father's siblings who, single and childless, had time to devote to a young nephew. When his aunt Patti married another Eric, Lad received his nickname, "the young lad," to distinguish between the two Erics. Big Eric sat in the front of the temple sealing room with my father as a witness during our wedding ceremony, fulfilling all the terrestrial responsibilities that a father would have, and—at Lad's request—leaving an empty chair on the front row, in case the spirit of Dennis stopped by.

I seldom think about Dennis and wonder if I should feel ashamed of that. The family rarely talks about him, save for the occasional caustic joke on Father's Day or in reference to some cancer awareness event. I know his death still weighs heavily on Lad's mind, yet I seldom pause to consider that their family once had a father. My sister's father-in-law passed away recently, and after visiting her family and seeing the sadness in her husband's eyes, without thinking I commented to Lad that it must be horrible to see your father die. He smirked and responded, "No kidding!"



I went elk hunting again with Lad near the family cabin the autumn after we got married, this time accompanied by his uncle Eric. We started out much later, at 6 a.m., which may have been in kindness to me, and I knew better what to expect and packed accordingly. But even my best efforts, my pastel green rain jacket and swishing black pants, felt like an intrusion alongside the camouflage that made Lad and Eric silent and invisible.

We had been hiking for just over an hour when we came to a thick stand of trees. Eric went around one side, Lad around the other, and I docilely followed him. Then, in a wave so strong that it should have been seen or heard, the gamey smell of elk surrounded us and Lad was walking faster and for a second, even though I don't like elk meat and didn't want to see death, my heart leapt and I felt the thrill of the hunt. This smell meant almost sure success, and success meant a kill.

One shot. "Was that—" Eric, I was about to say, but didn't finish.

Another shot. Pause. A third. Then horrible, anguished bleating.

Lad started running toward Eric and the dying animal. I stood still. I walked a few steps. Stopped again. Turned around and walked away. Turned around again. Stood still. Maybe they would finish whatever they were going to do before I had to go see it. Of course they wouldn't. But maybe the elk would stop making those noises before I got there. Maybe it would stop thrashing.

When I finally joined them a minute later, Eric was grinning, in the midst of narrating the sequence of events. Of the three shots he had fired, one had delivered a mild wound to the gut, one had missed, and the third—we saw later—had obliterated the animal's heart.

"Finally!" he said. This was the first elk that Eric had killed in the ten years that the two of them had hunted in this area, and he was more inclined than Lad to evaluate the success of a hunting trip based on the amount of meat brought home. Lad had always claimed to be just as happy in the mountains with a spotting scope as with a gun, and though I suspected that he was exaggerating, I loved that he believed it of himself.

Eric had fired uphill at the bull elk as it stood atop a ridge, silhouetted against the lightening sky. After the final shot, the animal had thrashed down fifty feet of steep hill and died where it lay. Together we hiked the last hundred feet uphill toward it. Its eyes were open, glowering, and already revealing the glassy look that, had it sported a larger

rack, they would display for years to come on someone's wall. Its skin was twitching.



My cousin and close friend Laurie was killed in an accident on a river trip four years before this second hunting trip, and I've wondered ever since if the accident could have been prevented if I'd been there. I wasn't; I was out of the country and wrote about it in my journal the day after my mom called to tell me. I danced around the issue for several paragraphs but finally wrote the words "Laurie is dead," then wrote them over and over as if the page needed convincing, as if putting those words to paper would end the otherworldly uncertainty I felt from being several thousand miles away.

Laurie was dead, but not fully so until I returned home two months later and saw the river equipment that had been damaged in the accident, until I saw her sisters wearing her clothes, until I lay awake all night underneath one of her quilts, until I saw her death date engraved on her headstone. Lad and I were merely friends at that time, but during one long drive in his purple truck through the Uinta Mountains I found that I could tell him everything I'd been holding in. He listened, with none of the religious platitudes I'd been hearing and none of the distracting sarcasm that surrounded his own father's death. Our friendship started to change after that.



The elk's tongue was hanging limply out of its mouth, looking unnaturally long. How strange to see a completely limp tongue. I relaxed my mouth, focusing on each of the muscles I was aware of, trying unsuccessfully to allow my tongue to go completely limp. I'd seen what I assumed were embellished artistic depictions of dead animals with long, limp tongues, and I realized now that they had hardly been exaggerated.

I remember playing some game with imaginary guns as a child. Whenever anyone got shot, there was always a dramatic death scene, full of spasms, groanings, and clutches, and inevitably ending with the victim splayed out on her or his back, tongue lolling out in complete defeat. The limp tongue was always a symbol of death.

The elk's blood covered the few inches of snow on the hillside, pooling into a dramatic red slush underneath the animal and diffusing outward into a pinkish spray. I was hesitant to step directly in the blood. Even stepping over the body felt disrespectful.



I found a dead body on a river once. I was nineteen years old and in my first summer guiding commercial river trips on the Colorado River. I came upon it with two other guides and our group of passengers on the second day of an overnight trip. It was halted by a group of rocks in the swift water that rushed along the right bank, an island in between it and the boat ramp. Its limbs were gray and bloated and covered with swarming flies, which we could hear buzzing from where we pulled over on shore twenty feet downstream, discussing what to do next. As we stood deliberating, the current moved one of its legs, bobbing it up and down in the kicking motion I saw every day from people swimming in the river. And each time that happened, I caught myself inhaling the breath that would have voiced the words, "Wait, maybe he's not dead."

Later, after we'd crossed the river to the boat ramp and after the sheriff, the search and rescue team, the National Parks Service, and the EMS team had arrived, I asked my passengers in my chirpy guide voice if they were ready to get back on the river, only to receive glares and stares of incredulity. They couldn't think of it, under the circumstances, and seemed appalled that I would suggest it. I suspected that several of them were simply trying to ante up the drama of the situation, based on earlier interaction with them, but realized the impropriety of openly judging anyone's response to death. I was left to call in to our company office and request several vans to come pick us up four hours early, and to wonder about the state of my insensitive soul.

The man's death was a suicide, I found out later. He had driven from his home in Grand Junction, Colorado, to Moab, to stand on the bank of the Colorado River and shoot himself in the head. We found him several days afterward, obviously, and five miles downstream from his car, which had offered no note and no identification other than the registration. I could never generate much sadness for him, even after learning how he'd died. Perhaps the news came too late. Having never known the man or witnessed whatever it was that drove him to take his own life, or even seen him as human, I had approached his already decaying body with the same benign and impartial curiosity with which I would approach an unusual rock or tree. And, indeed, he might have been a rock on the opposite bank, given the casual and desensitized nature of conversation among the emergency response teams who retrieved his body.

And yet this elk felt so sacred. I knew that Lad felt the weight of the animal's life and would express gratitude when we prayed together

that night. I felt a strange and uncharacteristic desire to pause and pray openly over the elk's body. But along with that, I also wanted desperately to justify my presence there by being helpful, to show myself and Lad and Eric and their extended family back at the cabin that I could subsist in this world, that Lad and I were—in fact—equally yoked if not perfectly matched in lifestyle and interests.

The same motivation that forces me to look straight at my vein when I'm having blood taken forced me to watch as Lad sawed the testicles off the elk. On the drive out of the Uinta National Forest, hunters with bull elk tags are required to show either the antlers or the testicles to prove that their kill had in fact been male. Those inclined to not follow these regulations could easily remove either of these items from someone else's unattended bull elk and show them to an official, knowing that the meat, once butchered, is gender neutral. Eric and Lad would leave the gutted and cleaned elk hoisted in a tree overnight to drain the fluids and allow the animal's natural enzymes to tenderize the meat.



As the valedictorian of her class in medical school, my friend Marian spoke at her class graduation. In her speech, she thanked the family of the cadaver she had worked on consistently in several of her classes, for the priceless donation they had made to her education. Whenever she treats a patient for a heart ailment, she said, and considers that mysterious machine, it will be the heart of that cadaver she envisions. That person's bone structure, internal organs, and muscular system will be the standard by which all others are measured. One life represented all others.



Eric and I each held a hind leg, splaying them out while Lad worked. Such an undignified position, like he should be a she and we should get her an examination table and a set of stirrups and a creepy gynecologist who tells her to “scootch” to the edge of the table.

I thought of the surgery I had had the previous summer. I had a tumor growing on—eclipsing—my left ovary. It was the size of a medium grapefruit when a doctor confirmed to me what it was, but it grew to the size of a honeydew melon by the time I had it removed six weeks later. I could have had it cut out sooner but was clinging to the statistics I'd heard from the doctors indicating that it probably wasn't that big a deal.

The night before the surgery I drove from my house in Salt Lake City over to the Huntsman Cancer Institute, just to look around. As I drove,

the reality that I was having this procedure done at a cancer hospital sank in, and I had to consider the possibility that the tumor might be cancerous. After weeks of being glib about this tumor, making jokes about looking pregnant, it occurred to me that I might die.

I didn't die. I reverted to my flippancy when accompanied by my mom to the hospital the following morning. I had tried to convince her that she didn't need to sit around and wait during the whole thing. I could take the bus to the hospital and she could come find me afterward. Had she done that, she wouldn't have been told by the doctor mid-surgery that it was likely the tumor was cancerous, and she wouldn't have spent the next two hours reliving her experience with my sister's cancer, petrified at the thought of having to face that a second time.

The panicky fear returned to me as soon as the anesthesia kicked in. The doctor held my hand, saying reassuring things while I drifted off, uncharacteristically clinging to him. Once unconscious, according to the surgery report, I was moved into the "frog leg" position and sliced open. The tumor was removed in three pieces, along with my left ovary, and the eight-inch vertical cut on my lower stomach was sealed with twenty staples. And fortunately, they remembered to tell my mom that it wasn't cancerous after all.

We arranged the elk into the "frog leg" position, and Lad sliced cleanly through its skin from anus to sternum. A thin layer of fat, skin, and hair was all that protected this animal's internal organs from the outside world. Eric peeled back this layer to expose and loosen the mass of guts inside the body cavity, and I wondered at how easily this once living body, with the loss of a conscious spirit, had become an object. The animal's guts went sliding down the hillside in an amoeba roll; they would later feed coyotes and other animals in the forest. Pink foam boiled up out of its mouth, and all I wanted to do was prod the limp tongue back in.



Lad's best friend got married six months after he did. Lad and Nathan have known each other since they were two years old and have a type of friendship that I'm not sure I'm capable of—their anger at each other occasionally took them to blows as adolescents, but nothing can ever damage or diminish the friendship, according to Lad. I can generally do a fine job getting over a friendship and moving on when I feel that circumstances dictate. This may be indicative of the different approaches to life that Lad and I have. He keeps his world full of the comfortable,

the reliable, the secure, which is always good enough, whereas I keep mine easily escapable.

Nathan married Tamara at a restored turn-of-the-century dairy farm on an August afternoon. The wedding's western theme reflected the couple's mutual interests. Both are team ropers, both own horses, both drive enormous Dodge trucks, both enjoy fishing and hunting, and both share the same harsh sense of humor that I'm still trying to understand. The groomsmen all wore blue jeans and cowboy boots with their white shirts and sage green vests, and the bridesmaids all wore cowboy boots under their ruffled purple dresses. The bride was tanned against her white strapless dress and artificially blonde hair, and the wedding party danced down the aisle.

I stood behind Terry as she signed the guest book: "I hope you have a long and happy life together." I hadn't realized that I was peering over her shoulder until she looked up and said a little defensively, "Mine wasn't as long as I'd hoped."

I asked Lad once if he wished that I actually hunted with him instead of just coming along for the hike, and he said it didn't matter: we both knew I'd never be able to pull a trigger, and we certainly wouldn't need any meat as long as he kept hunting. But I wondered, and I looked at the pictures Nathan and Tamara displayed at their wedding—several showing them dressed in matching camouflage, each holding a dead deer at the base of the antlers in the traditional "trophy" pose—if that practicality was answer enough.



Once we were able to look inside the empty cavity of the animal, we hauled it a little further down the hill to the base of a tree. Eric took a length of rope out of his backpack and threw it over a branch above our heads. Then, fitting the end of the noose around the antlers, he and Lad hoisted the animal until it was about eight inches off the ground and could drain all remaining fluids overnight. Lad tied the other end of the rope off securely, and we started back for the cabin.

We hiked back in the following afternoon to butcher and pack out the elk meat, accompanied by Eric's family, including nine-year-old twin boys. For three hours, I was helpless, inexperienced, and unsure of what needed to be done. I tended the fire that we built to keep warm, as if it required constant attention and care, but not very well, apparently; every time anyone else came over to where I stood, they would rearrange what I had just done.

The animal's head was removed from its carcass and set aside to be packed out, not to have it mounted—its rack was not impressive—but so that Eric could cut out its ivory teeth later.

Elk ivory is evidence of the evolution undergone by elk over the centuries. Their upper rear teeth are composed of the same material that once made up the large tusks they used for fighting, foraging, and other tasks now fulfilled by antlers. As their antlers developed, these tusks receded into the two small teeth now found in the back of their mouths. Most of the Native American tribes that relied on elk for sustenance held these ivory teeth sacred. The Lakota gave every newborn male an elk ivory, which they believed to represent long life. The Crow people believed that these teeth promoted health and healing. The Ouray tribe, which inhabited the area that is now the Uinta-Ouray National Forest where I tended that fire, used elk ivory to decorate the ceremonial clothing worn by women of their tribe; some ceremonial dresses had up to a thousand ivories on them. Good hunters were extremely valuable, and a woman's status in the tribe was more tied to her husband's abilities than to her own.

This essay by Elizabeth Knight won first place in the BYU Studies 2014 personal essay contest.