



THE DEERLY DEPARTED

by Joe Herring

Gray, cold weather has begun, and a number of camouflaged tourists have been tromping through our local stores. These hunters reminded me of the last time I went hunting, years ago.

Like most things I do, I do hunting wrong.

I know that the primary purpose of hunting is to hang around in drafty shacks with other guys, far from the pleasant company of women, while cleaning firearms and generally enjoying a coarse day or two, with or without the help of alcohol.

Unlike others, I generally hunt alone. And I always take a book. It helps pass the time while I wait.

The last time I went hunting, I spent most of a cold and wet day quietly stalking a small herd of deer over the rugged hills of my cousin Don's place near Bushwhack Creek.

I followed the deer until mid-afternoon, never getting close enough to take a safe shot. Reluctantly I went back to town to attend to a family chore, leaving the deer on a hillside.

As things turned out, I finished quickly in town and headed back to Don's place. It was late in the afternoon, and the cloudy skies had fallen right onto the hills, covering the place with an eerie fog. There is a small canyon on my cousin's place, and as I entered its mouth the weather and the failing light made the entrance a little scary.

"Why are you afraid?" I asked myself after a moment. "You are carrying a gun."

As stealthily as possible I entered the canyon, carefully pulling back the branches that blocked the path, and avoiding noisy sticks and twigs. Behind me the

branches crossing the path closed up like a curtain. Further into the gloom I crept.

I saw the buck before it saw me. It was halfway up the canyon, its head down, feeding. Nine points, the smaller of the two bucks I had been following earlier in the day. It was only about fifty feet away. It still had not seen me.

I crouched down slowly and took the gun off of safety.



My wife once asked me what I think of at that moment, right before pulling the trigger and taking the life of a beautiful and free wild animal. It's a valid question, but it assumes there's time for introspection at that moment; there is not. The truest answer I could give her was this: I ask myself if I have a clean shot. Then I shoot.

As I crouched there the buck looked up and turned its head in my direction. In the next moment it would bound away. I had a clean shot.

That animal weighed almost forty pounds more than me, and it was a good way up the canyon where it fell. As I struggled to bring it to my old truck, night fell quickly, like black paint from a full bucket.

I worked a long time field dressing the buck. In the wet cold air, wisps of steam came from my hands, my

shoulders, and my breath as I worked; it seemed that steam was rising from everything, even the fallen deer.

When I was finally finished, exhausted, I straightened up my old back and stood over the deer's body in the high beams of my truck's headlights.

Over my right shoulder the moon broke through the clouds. I felt like an ancient one, at once barbaric and complete. It's a feeling that's hard to explain.

I haven't been hunting again since then, the night a Comanche moon shone over my shoulder and the world was quiet and dark.



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