

FORGOTTEN



By Hannah J. Ryan

It was a cloudless afternoon on the prairie and the world was still. The grey blues and yellow browns of sagebrush and bunchgrasses wove together in a mesmerizing tapestry. I ascended a gentle knoll, my hunting buddy and boyfriend, David, by my side. Angling toward a bluff to give us a look at a sweeping landscape, we were whispering about strategy. We had just bounced a group of does and my mind was still with them when I looked up and caught the outline of a deer against a lanky clump of sagebrush. I dropped to all fours, motioning at David to get down.

On our bellies, we scoped him out. He had just enough inches in antler height to make him legal. We backed out of sight and David asked if I wanted to take him. I hesitated. We knew there were bigger bucks in this country and with a day and a half left in our eastern Montana hunt we might get a chance at them. I looked out over the stark, open, and undulating country. Meat was my priority on this hunt and I'd rather swallow my ego and put the stalk on this opportunity.

Rewinding a few years... To provide a little background, this hunt wasn't the result of a recent interest in hunting. I have been participating in hunting since before I could walk. As an infant, my dad stuffed me in his coat when calling in coyotes. In the following years, I would trudge along behind him on deer hunts before I was old enough to carry my own rifle. The fall after I turned 12 years old I took a dandy of a pronghorn. My dad still brags that he hasn't harvested one larger than his little girl's first goat.

Then, around the time I hit high school, my interest in hunting evaporated. Academics, sports and boys became the most important things in my world. I then spent a year in Chile as an exchange student. While abroad, my world exploded with new ideas, languages and ways of living. I met vegetarians. Their reasons for not eating meat were strange and hip, so I too decided not to eat meat.

Through my phase of meatlessness and anti-animal killing attitude was brief, the damage it did to my relationship

with my dad lasted longer. Being a dumb, rebellious teen, my rejection of the game meat my dad harvested was a kind of a betrayal. He lives and breathes hunting and fishing. For his closest to completely shun what he is most passionate about, it hurt him more than I knew.

Fast forward through college and a subsequent job working as a newspaper reporter in Costa Rica. I came back to the West with the promise of a position in conservation. In between my job interview and the job's start date, I packed into the family archery hunting camp. It was an incredible culture shock to go from living and working in urban Costa Rica to riding our family's mules up into the alpine, stalking big bulls and bucks, and sitting around a campfire with the two most influential men in my life, my dad and uncle.

This hunt was a drill I had participated in many times growing up, but I was different that September week. Something in me had begun to change when I was living abroad. I had been living in

metropolitan areas of Central and South America on and off for the past six years and the smog, traffic and environmental degradation of those places had me yearning for the open, quiet places of the West.

'That hunting trip and the mountain-top conversations with my uncle and dad made me realize what an incredible blessing it is that we can hunt and harvest wild animals in our backcountry. It made me realize that this meat we chase is the most organic, free-range protein a human can find. It made me realize how stupid I was to ignore my heritage as an American hunter. That week reshaped my perspective on hunting, food and family. It threw me headfirst into making up for lost time learning the family trade.

Back on the Montana prairie...

After circling around to get a broadside angle at the bedded mule deer, I crept up to within 170 yards and put my 243 Ruger No. 1 crosshairs on the back edge of the deer's shoulder blade. Taking my time to slow my breath and gather my focus, I slowly pulled the trigger. Zing! It was the sickening sound of a ricocheting bullet. I had shot high and the deer's head jerked up, alert and tense. I wricked another copper load in and shot again. He was hit but I didn't know how well. He jumped up and I got off one more round as he trotted down his side of the draw toward us and then out of sight. Thinking he was a runner, I reloaded and leaped up to see where he went. Within a few steps the nauseating feeling that had instantly surged through my body disappeared. My deer was draped on the ground a hundred yards below me, not to move again.

We gave him some time before I walked up to examine my first mule deer. Two thoughts consumed my mind: First thought was that my dad was going to be so stoked. Second thought was full of awe at the absolute perfect build of this animal's body. 'This muley didn't have a giant crown of antlers but his backstraps would

prairie-wide areas of succulent steak medallions. His neck was thicker than my wrist and would shred deliciously when slow roasted. His heart could be prepared in a number of elegant ways. My thoughts and emotions soared on the fact that this buck would feed us throughout most of the year. 'This was simply thrilling.

Though I abandoned hunting for years, I imagine it was a rite of passage. Because I experienced other ways of living, perhaps I appreciate a return to hunting differently. My boyfriend and I delight in planning our hunts, studying the country, philosophizing about what the wildlife are thinking and later preparing the game we harvest. We treasure the meat we bring home, the time together in the field and the solitude of the backcountry.

'This is my own, unique journey as a hunter and it is only just beginning. I am still the little girl my dad showed how to respect the antelope she just harvested by putting a little piece of sage in its mouth; thanking it for the bounty it will provide us. I am also the young woman who seeks out her own meat and the physical and mental rewards that comes with it.

As we field dressed my little buck, a musical whooping reached our ears. High above us a string of a hundred Sandhill Cranes was flying south. Those long, haul migrating birds were headed to happy winter feeding grounds, just like we were.

LOCAVORE

In popular culture, the term locavore is becoming a trendy way to describe those that make an effort to eat locally grown or raised food. The generation of men that would pass on the knowledge and love of hunting to their sons is no longer the vast majority of hunters and locavores. A growing wave of locavores that are women and self-taught hunters motivated by food values are going into the field and making their own place in the hunting world.

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