

THIRD PLACE—SENIOR ESSAY

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Age 17

GIFT OF A KING

It all started in the early 1940s when I was only 8 years old. I was born to a poor family in southern Montana. We did not have much, and predominantly lived off the land. She was our provider and benefactor. She gave us all we needed and more. I have many vague, but fond memories of my father bringing home trophies to add to our stew pot.

My first excursion with him is as fresh in my mind as if it happened yesterday. We set out in the old grizzled farm truck towards the hazy mountains in the distance. They were barely visible as the golden streaks of a new day came over the horizon. It was a cold day, and I had every piece of clothing I owned wrapped around my body like a swollen Egyptian mummy. When we arrived at the foothills, we parked and began to make our way up the growing incline. Snow was lightly falling, sparkling among the forlorn aspen groves. I remember it being like some strange ballet the snowflakes were performing with my father and I being the sole audience members. As we neared the top of a steep ridge, my trance was broken by the familiar bellow of the majestic bull elk or wapiti. It originated from deep within the valley below and continued to echo around the surrounding hills for what seemed like an eternity. My heart jumped into my throat and refused to go back down. I will never forget that first bugle of my nemesis and later friend.

We began our long descent through the crowded underbrush and families of trees. All of a sudden the land opened up before our eyes into a fair meadow with a sea of grass that flowed and rippled with the wind. Across this pasture several dark shapes were contrasted against the wall of white aspen trees. As the wary sun rose and breached the top of the opposite mountain, the herd of elk became easily distinguishable. At the front of them with towering antlers reaching towards the cloudy sky stood the most kingly of creatures that ever graced the Earth. He was clearly the creator of the beautiful music that we had recently experienced atop the ridge. He seemed to possess an aura of sage knowledge through many years spent ruling the mountaintops. The immense crown branching from his head was quite obviously his symbol of authority over the throngs of lesser creatures of which I felt a part.

My father and I stood awestruck and looked at each other in order to confirm we were not hallucinating, but when we looked back up, the mystical bull was gone along with his royal court. We searched the snow-covered forest for hours, but never found any sign of this regal animal. This was my first experience with the one who would, from that day forward, be known as "The King."

Over the next 20 years I pursued the noble beast zealously, at first with my father, but later alone on the wind-stripped mountains. He haunted my every waking moment as well as my glorious dreams. Occasionally I would encounter him as a single antler flying through the brush or as a distant bugle that could not be mistaken for anything else but His own composition. Yet he forever eluded me, never presenting me with a shot. Other hunters learned of The King as well and traveled from far and wide to try their luck with the ghost of the forest. They all eventually returned home, travel-stained and weary with no tangible evidence of His existence. The others' failed attempts only strengthened my resolve to go on with the chase.

The day of November 19, 1962, I set out once again towards the royal mountains on a crisp, clear day. I found a likely crest where the trees were evenly spaced and provided clean views of the steep slope below. I sat with my back to a lofty maple and soon drifted into a light sleep with The King on my mind. Some primitive instinct stirred me from my slumbers, and as I opened my bleary eyes, all I could see was a polished crown of antlers. I had to reassure myself that I was not still dreaming. He had come like a thief in the night and now stood a mere 30 yards away. His features were a thousand times personified from my first memories of Him. I could not help but stare for a few, breathless moments, but then I thought to my rifle curled in the crook of my arm. I slowly raised it to my shoulder and leveled it on his barrel chest. My finger went to the trigger, but I did not fire. My gun lowered from my shaking body, and I stared at my adversary. His magnificent head turned towards my unworthy form, and his deep, black eyes focused on mine. I felt something deep within me change. We understood each other. His eyes seemed endless all-knowing, and I could not wrench myself from their gaze, nor did I want to. My stupor was broken as He ghosted through the undergrowth with only the tips of His crown showing.

After that day, I was forever changed. I finally understood why The King has come into my life. Through the tireless pursuit of him, I had learned patience, determination, and what it truly meant to live. I was 28 years old on that day and had a full life ahead of me, which I spent in pursuit of other game, living as my father had and his father before that, with the land to support and provide for me.

I am now an old man, and although I can feel time's final kiss creeping towards me, I have never, and will never, forget the prince of the forest that taught me so much. Even now as the shadows lengthen and the sun drops below the mountains, I can sometimes hear the wonderful music of His timeless bugle in the distance.