

SENIOR ESSAY – FIRST PLACE

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THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY

As I climbed down from the stand, I still had a glimmer of hope that we'd find blood, that we were wrong, but we weren't. There would be no deer for me this year.

Two days earlier, when we arrived at the camp, I shivered with excitement. No one was there. Jackson Point is a hunting club, consisting of twenty members, and we had the whole place to ourselves. It had not changed a bit since last year. The same old four wheelers sat below the flood ridden bunkhouse. The same rusty catwalk sat twenty feet in the air. The same old truck used as a walk-in cooler for meat sat idle. Nothing had changed.

We went straight upstairs and got our camouflage on. We all agreed not to shoot a doe on the first evening but to look for the nice bucks. Papaw went to his stand, Uncle Tim and Ty went to theirs, and I went to mine. A half hour into my hunt, I spotted the brown silhouette of a deer, stopped in the distance. It was only a small buck, who apparently had nowhere to go. He plucked berries and leaves off of trees as he strolled through the thicket. When he halted and gazed into the distance, I spotted a little four-point walking sixty yards behind him. Even though it was prime rut season, neither had a doe to chase.

After they left, I saw nothing else.

The next morning, we forced ourselves up at five o'clock and high-wheeled it out to our stands. I chose to go to my all-time favorite stand, the stand where I shot my monster 9-point buck the year before. The morning awoke with wood duck chirps overhead and shotgun blasts in the distance. Squirrels leapt from color-coated trees as I looked through the brush for brown hair and antlers. Then, all of a sudden, a burst of deer ran through the distance. I contemplated if I should shoot or hold my fire. As I eyed the doe, a rifle shot rang through the branches and scared her off. As quietly as possible, I clambered for the two-way radio inside my camouflage backpack. "Was that y'all?" I whispered into the moist mouthpiece. The voice responded, "Ty shot a big doe. Have you seen anything?" I then explained to them I'd like to stay a little while longer.

As I slumped in the stand, nodding off every once in a while, a curious doe not weighing more than sixty pounds walked out. I decided quickly that she was not a shooter. About a half hour later, I heard a frosted four wheeler crank, and a shivering voice on the radio asked if I was ready to get down.

That afternoon, we crammed into the buggy and went back to the same stand. Early in the hunt, I heard rifle shots in either direction. One was Uncle Tim, with a

beautiful 220-pound eight-point buck; the other was my grandfather with a respectable thirteen-point. At that very moment a pain shot through me like a knife thrust into my back. I had an awful realization: everyone had a deer... except me. I hunted extremely hard that evening. As I scanned the tree line, a medium-sized buck with a bladed G1 paraded out of the woods. I didn't want to disappoint my grandfather with a deer under the legal limit, but I also didn't want to disappoint my family with no deer at all. My mind raced as I decided what to do; I passed him up. After he shuffled out of sight, I was disgusted by my decision. I wished I could travel back in time. I would have given anything to have one more shot at that deer. As I sat in the stand, the same curious sixty-pound doe from the morning strolled out. She walked around my stand until she was directly below me. I looked over the side of my stand and grinned at her. I knew she could see me, but I didn't mind. At first, she seemed surprised, then settled back down and continued her business. As daylight disappeared and the sun faded, my thoughts turned to the next morning, the last morning we would hunt.

Back at the camp, I discussed the situation with my Uncle Tim who agreed to come with me for the final hunt, and I decided I wanted to chase the buck I had seen that evening. I would go to the very same stand I had been to earlier, my favorite stand. When my alarm went off, my groggy thoughts were again turned to the fact that I did not have a deer. I soon found out that Papaw and Ty would stay at the camp and snore like bears because they had already filled their tags.

The morning was even more beautiful, clear, and frigid than the one before. Wood ducks flew wildly through the frosted oak branches like shots from a rifle. The shotgun blasts were not so far off now, and then the most beautiful sunrise I have ever witnessed came. Hot colors became hotter, the clouds turned an orange that only God himself could ever paint with. By now, I didn't care if I saw a shooter. I was happy to dwell in God's creation, and I wanted to stay there forever.

And then, the woods woke with movement. Squirrels, raccoons, and deer came from between the trees. Two does came first, then a buck, my buck, the buck with a bladed G1, came in pursuit behind. I pulled up my rifle, and Uncle Tim spotted for me through his binoculars. It was not the clearest shot I had ever attempted. Branches, twigs, and vines clouded the way. I settled on a spot behind his shoulder, and squeezed the trigger. A shot from my gun flung through the branches, twigs, and vines, but not through the deer with the bladed G1. I missed. The poor deer was so distracted by that doe, he only kept following her. I had another half-clear shot. I hate to admit it, but I missed him clean again. The doe pivoted and walked off the other direction, and he pursued closely behind.

As I shimmied down from the chilled metal stand for the last time, I still had a glimmer of hope that we'd find blood, that we were wrong, but we weren't, there would be no deer for me this year. We looked far and wide for blood, for the pair of deer lingering in the brush. Nothing. As we sloshed back to the four-wheeler, a doe head popped up from the overgrown grass ten yards in front of us. My uncle Tim said in a low whisper, "Shoot it." I responded, "Where? All I can see is her head!" She soon bounded

off, but beside where she had lain popped up a deer, my deer, the one with the bladed G1. He ran off so fast I barely had time to think. Uncle Tim said, "Don't worry; I know where they're going." As we rounded a muddy path, Uncle Tim gazed through his binoculars. He saw nothing. We then checked the other side of the road, to see if they had crossed already, and they had, but again, they bounded off. By then, we had given up. We jumped back in the four-wheeler and putted away.

As we zipped up our rifles, packed our bags, and put the meat in an ice chest, I thought of all the opportunities I had to kill a deer. I wrestled with myself for a long time, as my Cousin Ty encouraged me. It helped, but I still mourned the fact that I had disappointed my family. I took off my camouflage, stuffed it into my bag, and brought it downstairs. I took a look around. I knew it would be a long year until I came back to this extraordinary place.

We had everything packed and ready to go, when I caught my grandfather smiling with a sly twinkle in his eye. "I left my coffee mug in the deer stand. Grab your rifle and come help me find it." I smiled and laughed as I realized what he was doing. Stalling. He wanted to go back out in the woods with me one more time. I was overjoyed.

We started our journey back to the deer stand by studying both sides of the road as we walked. I saw no deer and tried hard not to get my hopes up. Papaw stopped by a tree thirty yards from the stand and sent me to retrieve the mug. I walked slower than I've ever walked, made less noise than I've ever made, and looked harder than I've ever looked. I didn't see anything, so I looked to snag his coffee mug, but it wasn't there (of course). I climbed back down and splashed over to him. Papaw decided he had one more place to "check for his mug." As we approached an intersecting road, I had a tiny thought in the back of my mind: "If there's a deer up here I'm gonna....."

And there was.

Finally! He was calm, walking down the swampy road away from us, the deer with the bladed G1. My grandfather told me to shoot him when he turned broadside from us. After a while, he quartered away, and started walking towards the overgrown brush. With only seconds left, he stopped, and I squeezed the trigger of my model 700 and fired a shot. It connected. He flared up and ran into the briars and overgrown brush. "You got 'em" my grandfather announced. I was so excited, I almost fell over. We went, found tons of blood, and eventually found the deer with the bladed G1, a perfect quartering shot. As we took pictures of the 210-pound, seven-point buck, Uncle Tim said, "Congratulations, you just shot the dumbest deer at Jackson Point."