

Western Voices 2013, English 180, First Place, (Professor, Barbara Ashwood)

A Memory In The Woods

Ryan Ricketts

Just a short year ago my best buddy Dan, his father, and I were walking out of these very same woods: the woods where I failed to shoot a deer last year. This past season was my first year of hunting. We had spent every day of the past two weekends sitting in our tree stands. My buddy Dan and his father are both veteran hunters and shot deer that gun season, and I had come up empty. The first weekend I sat in the stand, shivering all weekend, and I did not have a deer close enough to me to take a shot. The next weekend, I finally had a deer close enough to me, and I shot but aimed too low and missed. I was extremely disappointed. The walk out to the truck that day was the most disappointing walk ever. I was terribly mad at myself for missing. I knew that it would be a whole year before I got the opportunity to hunt again and redeem myself.

A year later, we rolled up next to the entrance of the farm at 3:30 A.M. It was a cold, crisp morning, and a sheet of white fluffy snow covered the ground. The moon shone upon the snow, and as it reflected off, it was so bright you would have thought it was the middle of the day. We pulled the red Toyota Tundra up to the edge of the cornfield. I could hear the cornstalks snap off as we rolled the tires over each stalk. It was the opening day of shotgun hunting for deer in Illinois. I was thirteen years old. I looked forward to this morning all year long, like a kindergartener looks forward to Christmas.

Being outdoors is a passion of mine. There are no better sounds, sights or smells than the countryside. Being outdoors provides the peacefulness of being away from the city lights, the raging people, and the much too chaotic world that it has now become. The smell of fresh air, the sound of the birds chirping, the swoosh of the current blistering down the creek bed calms my nerves and releases built up stress. Being able to see the wildlife first hand makes me appreciate the uniqueness of the world we live in, such as watching a hawk swoop down and catch that mouse, watching a male deer fight with another, punishing each other to the point of near death just for territorial rights and the pass to breed the females in the area. This is my “get away” place, a place where I can go and forget the rest of the world and be thankful for what God has blessed us with and the amazing environment we are put on.

It was me, my best buddy Dan (who convinced me to start hunting) and his father. Each one of us got out of the pickup quietly, shut our doors and put on our boots, facemasks, stocking caps and gloves. We each relieved ourselves. We knew it was possible we would be in our tree stands for possibly six hours; we did not need to be stuck up in our stands having to use the bathroom. Then we helped each other fasten our safety harnesses on one another. This is arguably the most important part of preparation for the hunt: to come back safely without having fallen out of your tree. We unlocked the back of the truck, and one by one grabbed our shotgun, put our sling on it, and made sure nothing was in the chamber. It was dark and you do not want a loaded gun walking into the woods in the dark. We were now ready for the hike into the woods.

The three of us marched across the field, gun slung around our shoulders, and ready to go. I was nervous; I still had not got a deer yet, and I was bound and determined to get one this year. We arrived at the woods and split off towards our separate tree stands. I walked through the brush, snapping twigs and trees with every step I took. I was for sure scaring all of the deer away: for every step I took I could hear one more animal running away. When I finally got to the tree my stand was hung on, I turned my headlight on and prepared for the thirty-foot climb up the ladder to my stand. It was the most dreaded five minutes of the hunt. I hate heights and the thirty feet I climbed up the ladder on the tree seemed like I was climbing up the side of the Sears Tower. I finally got to the top, nestled into my tree stand and fastened my safety belt around the tree so I would not fall out. The wait was on.

I sat in the stand for a half hour before the sun came up, trying to be quiet as possible in hopes the deer would stay in the area and not run away. The sun finally began to rise over the trees. I loaded my gun; I was ready to go. I would not let my opportunity sneak past me this year. The sun had an amazingly orange-ish red color to it. It reflected off of the snow ever so brightly. It was a calm morning with not a hint of wind coming across my face. It was very chilly and a puff of hot air rose out of my nose every time I would take a breath. The birds were chirping as if they were a chorus in the first pew on a Sunday morning service. The stream was running down the creek bank as fast as the Jamaican bobsled team, making a steady waterfall sound. It was as peaceful as could be, away from the scurrying of the world in what was seemingly heaven.

The first hour was quiet. I had not seen a deer at all yet. Then I looked behind me and without a warning there stood two deer. They were does –female deer- however, and I thought and thought about shooting but did not. I was picky. I wanted the big buck, the king of the woods, so I decided not to pull the trigger and patiently wait; after all, I would much rather be where I was than anywhere else. I waited another hour and all of a sudden I heard a loud snap! Next came a loud thud and another thud. I slowly turned around and could not believe my eyes. On the same trail that the two does were on earlier was what I was looking for. It was what I froze my butt off all of last year for. It was that incredible, unique deer. That deer you only see once every ten years as a hunter. He was a nice thirteen pointer. It looked like he had antler points coming from everywhere off his head. He was king of the woods. Mr. Big himself was walking down that trail with his nose to the ground, sniffing, smelling the ground in search for the does that had previously walked past; however, he failed to realize I was only 25 yards away.

I slowly got up and stepped on the back of my tree stand. I could see all thirteen of his points. He was a great example of nature at its finest. This deer was an old, mature, big buck for a reason; he had survived the harsh winters, the fights with older deer, and the coyotes looking to kill for their food, and all of the hunters until this day. He looked beautiful, just like what you see on hunting shows. He was right there in front of me, just like I had imagined he would look like every day of the off season. I raised my gun up and leaned next to the tree. The big buck walked behind a tree and then his head popped out. I put my eye through the scope and let him walk until his chest was right in the crosshairs of the scope. I was shaking, I could not breathe, and I could not feel my finger. Was this really about to happen? I pulled the trigger. Pow! Smoke filled up my eyesight, and my heart had stopped. Then out of the bottom of my eye there he was, rolling down the hill. I could not believe it; I had shot him, the monster of the timber! I got out my phone to call everyone. Being able to get out into the woods and watch nature at its finest

that day was amazing. I truly felt like I was part of those woods and being able to hunt and kill a trophy was like participating in the wildlife's "survival of the fittest" that takes place every day. It is was just like a coyote tracking down baby deer or a hawk swooping down to catch a mouse. I had risen to the challenge and hunted down food for the freezer, a trophy to go on my wall, and many memories for a lifetime! I got out of my tree stand, climbed down, and my buddy Dan and his dad came over and took my picture with him. "I've hunted my whole life and have only seen one or two deer like this kiddo," Dan's father said to me. Dan gave me a hug and said, "Way to go Ryan! Your first deer!" We all took pictures around him as I replayed the morning hunt over and over in my head. I knew for sure he was getting mounted and the king of those woods now resides on the wall in my bedroom.