

DOE EYES

I get this idea that I'll go out into the woods and get shot. That'll show the hunters. They'll be put off hunting for good, if they shoot a woman in the heart. Though I'm hoping it won't be in the heart. I hope for a flesh wound from which I can easily recover. I'll lie on a narrow bed at Mercy hooked to chirping machines. The hunters will come, tactical caps in hands, and beg my forgiveness. My husband will visit, too, and beg me to come home. Your brush with death has put everything in perspective, he'll say. He'll take me home and nurse me to health, feed me spoonfuls of Sprite with the bubbles stirred out. He'll change my leaky bandages and whisper that he loves only me.

I'm living with Dad on the old homestead, a ranch house in the countryside north of our university town. It's October, the start of deer-hunting season. Sunday morning I cook Dad breakfast. I toast his bagel how he likes it, four rounds until it's a puck of ash that I smear with peanut butter. The char must remind Dad somehow of his rustic and impoverished Ozarkian youth.

Dad crunches his bagel. I fill my throat with plain yogurt and stare into the yard. The dining room opens, via sliding-glass door, to the patio, a patch of concrete bordered by ruined marigold plots and

the clothesline where my mother used to hang her cotton nightdresses. Spring days, I watched their white bellies distend in the breeze. On the concrete my dad has sprinkled dried corn for the deer, but this morning the deer don't come. Earlier, gunshots. Orange flashes through the trees.

"They're awful close to the house," I say.

"Who?" Dad says, startled. He's already opened his thousand-page volume of Nazi war tactics. All day he'll hunch over the tome, jotting symbols in the margins.

"The hunters," I say. "They were here yesterday, too. Haven't they killed enough?"

"Hunters hunt," Dad says, his voice like a shrug. "That's the way of things." He looks at his book and is lost to me. Dad's a history professor. He teaches a popular undergrad class on WWII. He's writing his third book about Stalingrad. No surprise he doesn't care about murdered deer. His expectations are overall low.

I wash our plates and put on a deerish outfit. Brown corduroy pants I bought at Goodwill to paint in, when my husband and I moved into the house on Gilbert. A brown sweater of unknown provenance. For all I know it has existed in the bottom drawer of this dresser since the beginning of time.

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I slink out to the woods. Wet earth sucks on my sneakers. The hunters are in the meadow, a dad and his teenage son. I crouch behind a tree. They crouch, waiting for something to move so they can kill it.

I went with my husband to a shooting range once. It was in a strip mall. You handed over your ID at a counter. You filled out paperwork, put on earmuffs and goggles. In a narrow booth my husband stood behind me, wrapped his arms around me, showed me how to shoot. The gun was heavy and cold. I was wearing a pink shirt. I thought I would feel powerful with a cold, heavy gun in my hands. I fired at paper cut into the shape of a man.

That was when we were dating. I think it was the same day we went to Taco Bell and split a dozen hard-shell tacos. We ate them in the car, which was a police car, because my husband is a cop. It was one of the things we eventually disagreed about, his being a cop. But at first I liked it. I rode along and watched him ruin people's lives.

I wonder what my husband would say if he saw me out in the woods trying to get shot. *Get the fuck out of the woods*, is what he'd probably say.

The hunters' backs are to me now. I rustle some leaves in a way I hope is deer-like, but they're too far to hear. I slink back to the house. Their truck is parked on the gravel cul-de-sac in front of our house. I wait for them, watching deer videos on YouTube. I practice my deer gait on the carpet. At dusk they return. The grown hunter carries a doe slung around his shoulders. Her pink tongue lolls. A yellow tag dangles from her left ear. First murdered, then tarted up with cheap jewelry.

I run my fingers over the stock. His eyes glaze with desire. "I want that gun in the worst way," he says.

When we were dating, I asked my husband, over text, what he liked about me. "Your big beautiful dough eyes," he wrote. I pointed out his misspelling. He was a sport about it. It became

one of our running jokes. My husband says he's dyslexic, by which I think he means that he doesn't much like to read.

I study the regulations on the website of the Department of Natural Resources. I learn that it is legal to shoot crows from only October 15 to November 30. For two days in October the youths get first crack at the rooster pheasants, which have presumably grown sluggish and overconfident in the off-season. I learn there is continuous open season on groundhogs and pigeons. I learn that the euphemism for killing is "harvesting."

Monday, I go to the sporting-goods store. I peruse a rack of marked-down camouflage. I choose pants and a jacket in clashing forest prints. At the gun counter I ask to see their best shotgun. The young worker brings it from the safe. He gives me the rundown: 12-gauge, satin walnut, nickel-plated.

"It's Italian," he says. "A Benelli." He lets me hold it. I run my fingers over the stock. His eyes glaze with desire.

"I want that gun in the worst way," he says.

For dinner, I make venison burgers. Dad's reading another Nazi book. He

pauses to ask if it's beef, this meat already in his mouth. "Deer," I say. He nods as if a puzzle piece has fallen in place.

I go out after dinner to break in the camo. I get down on all fours. I lie on my stomach and roll across the frozen dirt, getting twigs and leaves in my hair. I curl my body around the trunk of a tree. I am alone in the forest. I miss my dumb husband, the cop.

November ends. I hope my husband will call on my birthday, at least send a text. But the day shudders into focus, then dissolves without a word.

It is now legal to kill deer only with bows. I watch the hunter and his son park on the cul-de-sac and get out of the truck carrying guns. I could report their violation to the DNR. I could use this as an excuse to contact my husband. I could call him as if he were an acquaintance from college. *Hey*, I would say, my voice incidental, a draft from a door left ajar. *I thought you might know something about this.*

But we are on county land, beyond my husband's jurisdiction. He'd say to call the sheriff, if he answered at all.

I hide behind my tree. A cluster of deer stands 10 yards to my left, velvet snouts in the soil. The hunters crouch at the lip of the meadow. The boy aims. His moment has come.

The boy shoots, and the deer scatter. He has missed. I jump out of my hiding place, utilizing all my deer talents. The forest falls silent. The hunters crunch toward me, faces puzzling me out.

"What the heck are you doing?" the dad says. "You're gonna get yourself killed."

Up close, he's handsome in a lush and disconcerting way, like a retired soap star. I have no answer for him. I run back to the house.

Shotgun season begins. On the ridge behind our house, four hunters stand overlooking the creek. I wear my ill-matched camo. I stroll along the dry creek bed. They shout at me to go away. I shrug, say I live here, this is our land. There's nothing they can do. They move along the ridge to escape me.

I seek out hunting hotspots. I locate a makeshift range off the road to Amana. Men and boys shoot paper targets pinned to bales of hay. I linger at the fringe. I edge beyond a line painted in dirt. They look at me and I leave.

I post an ad on Craigslist under "gigs." I write that I'm a PhD student. "I'm looking for a hunter who uses a muzzleloader to harvest small game," I write. "I'm conducting a survey to further my inquiry of masculinity in the American Midwest. I will pay each participant \$20."

I get five responses. Saturday afternoon, I rent a room at the Hampton Inn off Interstate 80. I schedule half-hour appointments back to back.

Four respondents are in their forties and seem to badly need both the twenty dollars and someone to talk to. The fifth is twenty-two and thinks he's going to get laid. I've created a survey, for verisimilitude. I ask the men questions about their mothers. I ask how much meat they consume in a typical week. I ask if they've ever fantasized about shooting a person.

“Not killing them,” I say. “Just a flesh wound.”

One by one, the older men shake their heads. “Well, maybe my ex-wife,” one says, then spends five minutes equivocating.

The twenty-two-year-old says that yes, he thinks about it. “Could be cool,” he says. My heart leaps. We face each other in chairs. He’s wearing a camo jacket, jeans, Timberlands, and a khaki-colored snapback. All the men came dressed in full hunting gear.

“Would you shoot a woman?” I ask.

“Sure,” he says. “What difference would that make?”

I unfurl a hypothetical. Say this woman wanted someone to shoot her. Say she longed to feel a bullet pierce her skin. He would be in no danger of prosecution. He would drive her to the hospital after. She would say she’d been walking in the woods and had been clipped by a bullet from pheasant hunters who had been too far away to even know they had shot her.

The boy nods. “Sounds kinky,” he says.

I put away my legal pad, on which I’ve been scrawling pointless notes on the

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psychological interiors of these men. I hand the boy a \$20 bill for the survey. I say I’ll give him \$80 more after he shoots me. Fear flickers his eyes and I worry I’ve transitioned too abruptly from the

hypothetical. But then he says sure, he just has to be on campus by 6 for a trig study group.

We drive two cars to my house, the boy following me in his dusty black truck. I stand in the meadow on a raft of trampled barbed wire. Dusk veils the woods. In another ten minutes it will be too dark to aim. The boy raises his gun. He peers through the sight.

“In the arm, right?” he says.

“Or the shoulder. Just clip me.”

He stands 10 feet from me. His hands shake around his gun. I close my eyes, breathe the smoke-tinged air. My mind empties.

I hear boots crunching hay. I open my eyes. He is leaving.

“Hey,” I say. “What the hell?”

“I can’t do it,” he says.

I follow him, offer him money I don’t have. My bid goes up to two, three hundred.

“No,” he says. “No offense, lady, but I think you might need professional help.”

My thoughts briefly turn to becoming a victim of urban gun violence. At dinner I tell Dad I might drive to Chicago to do some Christmas shopping. Dad looks up from his book with sudden lucidity.

“You shouldn’t waste your money,” he says. “There’s nothing I need.”

He’s cut through to the heart of the matter: I have no one else to buy presents

for.

“I wish you’d just make up with that cop,” Dad says. “He seemed nice enough.”

“He doesn’t want me,” I say. I go to my room, slamming my door like a teenager.

★

My husband sleeps with his Glock on the nightstand. He has never fired it in the line of duty. I imagine he would not hesitate to use it in the event of a home invasion. He would shoot to protect his girlfriend, the 24-year-old meter maiden.

Late, I drive to Gilbert. I wear black jeans and a black turtleneck. I park in the alley and pull a black ski mask over my face. I approach the back of the house. I find a good-sized rock in the garden I planted two springs ago. I regard the windows, considering which one to shatter.

The back door opens. My husband holds a full white garbage bag. He’s wearing a gray T-shirt, basketball shorts, rubber Adidas sandals. He looks at me, crouched in the garden. Slowly, I stand.

“What are you doing here?” he says. He knows it’s me, even with the ski mask. That’s how marriage goes.

I stand there holding my rock. I have imagined this moment for six months. There are so many things I want to say to him. He comes down the steps, walks twenty feet to the alley, puts their garbage in the can for collection. He pauses again at the door. We look at each other. I let the rock fall.

I stay late in bed. In the kitchen Dad chars his own bagel. The air’s warmed. Snow melts in gray mounds like piles of laundry. Corn molds on the patio, its luster gone.

I think about how my husband looked at me before latching the screen door. It was the backward glance you give a car you’ve just parked. There it is, you think.

I bet he didn’t even tell his girl about me when he went to bed. I stood still and deer-silent for several minutes, listening for my own echo.

Dad knocks on my door. “You hungry?” he says. I don’t answer. He’s too timid to enter uninvited, still traumatized by my volatile youth. I roll over twice more, hoping there’s sleep left in me.

At 11 I go to the living room. I boot up Dad’s PC, log in to my e-mail. The young hunter’s written. “I’ll do it for \$500.”

I reply that I don’t have that kind of money.

I roll onto the carpet and do core work. Dad comes in and sits on an ottoman. He peers down at me. Now I know how those books feel.

“Look,” he says. “Are you OK?”

“Fine,” I say. I make a big show of counting my crunches. Dad goes away.

A new e-mail pings. I kneel on the swivel chair. “Forget the money,” the young hunter has written. “I’ve got a bet going. I’ll cut you in for half. You game?”

I drive to the reservoir. The young hunter’s waiting in the picnic area with

two friends. They're slightly different flavors of the same human being, the only variables hair color and hue of plaid. They're drinking 40s. The hunter offers me one and I take it because it seems to mean something to them.

"You really trying to get shot?" says the boy with the darkest hair.

I shrug. "I've sort of lost interest," I say. They all look disappointed.

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to do," the blond boy says.

"I'm a med student," says the dark-haired boy. "I can tend the wound. As long as it's superficial."

"It will be," says the hunter. "I told you, I'm a good shot."

"But you don't have to do anything you don't want to do," the blond boy repeats.

I feel lightheaded. I feel like some new variety of pervert. I take a swig off my 40, say I just want to talk. We sit on a picnic table. I ask the boys about the girls they've fucked, the girls they wish they could fuck, the girls they've really loved and the ones who have hurt them. They all claim to have known heartbreak, but the details are superficial, the delivery void of affect. Carefully rehearsed stories that help them to score.

The sun is low. It's cold again and I zip up my jacket and stand. The boys stand, too.

"I'm going home," I say.

"Okay," the blond boy says, stretching the word out.

"You sure?" the hunter says. "I'm a really good shot."

I think, what the hell?

"Make it quick," I say, and the boys spring to action. They lead me to the spillway wall, show me how to stand, arms and legs splayed like a gingerbread woman. They ask if I want a blindfold. I say sure. I listen to the wind, to the thrum of distant cars on the interstate.

"You ready?" one of them says.

I say yes before realizing he wasn't talking to me.