

Into the “Real” World

I bent down and traced the print with my finger. Each cloven hoof print arched gracefully, ending in a sharp and delicate point, which plunged slightly deeper into the cold dirt. Devoid of any dewclaw prints, I could tell it was a doe. Interwoven between each stride were almost identical tracks, slightly smaller and nimbly trod. For every breadth of distance marked by the larger set, the smaller prints seemed to cover less than half of the longer stride of the doe. Surely a fawn, likely born within the last few weeks judging by the size of the prints. Young and balanced daintily on stilts of bone and sinew, picking its way through the brush.

Above me, I could hear the muffled wingbeats of a raven as it flew above and gained a footing on a nearby sycamore. Its silken black feathers starkly contrasted against the weathered white washed bark of the old tree and its eyes followed my movements through the undergrowth. As I moved beyond the old tree, it dropped from its perch and alighted upon another branch to look closer at the intruder in the forest. I trudged on through the wooded place and up a hill until I came upon a clearing. Closing my eyes, my mind wandered back. Back to where it all started, back to where the spark was made.

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It was winter. It was cold. It was dark. The sun laid in wait, crouched behind the horizon, waiting to expose our movements as we trekked along the forest edge. The chilly air worked its way through the layers of camouflage, its icy chill mocking my bare face as if the three sweaters and coveralls were not enough. As we slowly made our way around the forest edge, each attempt of a quiet footfall would be rashly cut short by the breaking of a branch or the crunch of ice encrusted leaves below. We got to the stand and settled down, waiting for the forest to come alive.

First came the squirrel. Just as clouds began to blush a pale pink, the forest remained relatively quiet. The birds had not yet awoken from the night, but a single squirrel decided that it was about time to scout out the trespassers in its tree. Scuttling across spindly branches, it made its way down the trunk of the tree that supported our stand. Just inches above our upturned heads, it clung to the bark, black eyes unblinking and whiskers nervously quivering. Besides our muffled breathing, we tried to remain silent as it scoped us out, a staring contest between two species. Whether upon realizing that the pale faces surrounded by camouflage were of human origin, or simply out of satisfaction with its curiosity, it eventually turned and leapt into the canopy of the adjacent tree, chattering its way across the branches and back into its leafy drey.

The next half an hour seemed to go so long, yet so fast. My heart pounded as three does stepped into the clearing, barely visible over our left shoulder. Waiting to fill an antlerless tag, my cousin nudged me and tipped his head towards our visitors. One of the does walked ahead of the others, stopping every few feet to gain a bearing on the surroundings. Its wet nose wrinkled and ears would tilt forward, back, and the head would again drop to continue browsing on the field grass. My cousin slowly stood up and pulled back the bowstring as the doe passed behind branches in order to conceal his movement. He trained his sight behind the right shoulder as it

made its way towards the brush. Its amber hide glowed in the morning light, each step carefully chosen yet cautious. He grunted, and the doe stopped in its tracks, turning its head in our direction. In that moment of stillness, the string released and the arrow sunk into its side. Within seconds, it was all over.

I saw where she went down, several dozen yards off, yet the importance of finding the blood trail was just as essential as learning the movements and habits of the animal, and ultimately pulling the bowstring. To understand the ways of the land is as vital to a successful hunt as knowing how to take and field dress the downed quarry. As we drew closer, I found a drop of blood on the blade of grass, and followed the rest. We would find that the arrow had run cleanly through her, and fell just beyond where she was hit under a patch of dry grass.

Just as the deer relies on more than just sight, the true experience of watching wildlife cannot be fully encapsulated within a documentary or photo. Nor can it be experienced by peering through the bars of a zoo enclosure. No. A deer sees the world through its eyes, ears, and nose. It feels the world through its hooves, and senses it through its body. We tend to base our lives off of what we see. Entertainment, others' success, beauty. We uphold knowledge but forget the importance of hands on experience. We ignore the importance of paying attention to all of our senses in making long term decisions. Instead, we allow the senses that suit our desires determine our final choices.

I now go into the field to hunt. Not always for the kill, but for the chance to become so close to outdoors as to blend in to the surroundings and have the privilege of becoming part of a moment in time alongside some of God's most untamed creatures. To feel, see, hear, and smell the real world as it has been since the beginning.

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I open my eyes. It's a warm summer's day. I see the raven fly off the sycamore and into the forest. My head full of memories and heart satisfied, I head back to my dorm. Time to go back to the real world. Or is it?