

The First Rule of Hunting

by Josh deLacy

Daisy howled the whole length of Used Car Road, and Mitch turned down his pre-hunting playlist to let dog excitement and dirt road crunching and old truck rattles fill the cab. After six miles of Daisy yowling and Mitch grinning, we spilled out of his truck and into the pre-dawn cold, and Mitch let Daisy explode from the truck bed. She raced every which way, sucking in all the good scents of sagebrush and dust and Autumn air and replacing them with the foulest farts I've smelled in my life, even though Mitch said Daisy's way past her prime now, and I should've been there when she was a pup and ate that whole package of cookies off his dad's kitchen counter.

We buttoned up new layers and shrugged on orange hunting vests, loaded our shotguns and stuffed shells in our pockets. On my first few hunting trips, Mitch had given me his gun and he had made do with an old .410, but ever since my parents' Christmas present that year, we both carried semi-auto 12-gauges, although mine was newer and nicer. Mitch delivered the customary, "If I die, the keys are in my right front pocket," and then he squatted next to Daisy and held her protesting head in his hands. "You got this, girl? Yeah, you do. Find us some birds." He kissed the top of her head and let her squirm away. She raced off, and then we stepped into the brush.

That first step off the road is beautiful. It's the step that takes us out of our routine, away from our jobs at my family's hardware store and into a world where we make our own paths and shoot our own guns. That first step is terrifying and empowering, and with that first step, the morning's 4:30 wake-up was worth it.

We hurried forward, frosted plants crackling underfoot, anxious for the blood to start flowing and keep us warm. Once Daisy realized we had started out, she raced in front and forgot to hunt. She leaped the small sagebrushes and careened around the larger ones like a madwoman, her legs working faster than her nose.

When we were far enough from the road and warm except for our fingers—fingers never really heat up when you're carrying a cold shotgun—we slowed our pace and spread apart, and Mitch had Daisy hunt between and little ahead of us. She settled into her groove: nose to the ground, working quick but thorough, the dawn showing up like gold on her fur's white patches. Mitch and I shouted encouragement and unnecessary commands from time to time.

We talked back and forth as we went, stories about work and college, gossip about Mitch's messed-up family down south, plans for the jobs we would find once we got our degrees and the recession ended. He wanted to stay up here, he said, but it would be cheaper back home, and sometimes you just can't get around money. "My Dad'll keep us on at the store 'til we get something better," I said. "Don't write off Washington before we've even graduated." Going for birds might not give you the most meat, but I think being able to talk and walk while you hunt puts it way above deer hunting.

After about an hour in, Daisy had given us a handful of points, but whenever we set up in position and tossed a rock into the brush, no birds flushed out. The scent was always old. Mitch didn't exactly glare at Daisy when she gave us a false point, but he never shouted any "Find the birds! Good girl!" for a while afterward, either.

We made our way up over a rise of hills, Mitch and I each working one side of a draw with Daisy scouting out the middle. We reached the top without excitement, aside from spotting a few songbirds that neither the law nor the cardinal "only shoot what you'll eat" rule allowed. Between

the now-risen sun and the effort of tramping uphill, we had both worked up a sweat, so we both stripped off our jackets and stuffed them into our vests' back pouches, where they mixed with the smell of dead bird that never seems to go away, even between one hunting season and the next.

As we looked down on the land falling away in front of us, land grooved with dozens of tiny valleys, Mitch pointed to a grove of trees not more than a mile ahead. "Quail are shit today," he said. "Let's try for grouse a while." On a typical hunting trip, we would have taken at least three shots by the time we had gone this long and this far, and unless we were both having really off days, we would have had a bird nestled in one of our back pouches—usually mine, since whenever we couldn't tell who had actually brought down the bird, Mitch gave me the credit. So we made our way down the back side of the hills and crossed the plain that separated us from the trees, a plain entirely devoid of birds. Daisy's couldn't find even a hint of a scent. "The grouse will be worth it," Mitch kept saying.

The grove was at least new country. Open land littered with stunted sagebrush and patches of clumpgrass changed into a dense mess of black cottonwoods, hawthorne, and some sort of low-growing bush that kept tying itself around our ankles and tripping us up. We couldn't see more than a few dozen feet in any direction, so we'd call out every so often to keep track of where the other was: "Where's the dog?" or "I'm still over here" or—after a solid half hour—"Mitch! Mitch, get over here! There's a grouse up here—don't spook it!"

Grouse are dumb. This one, perched on a branch not more than a dozen yards from me, was more than dumb. It completely ignored Daisy, tail whipping back and forth and running in tight circles beneath the tree, then rearing up with her nose stretched high and her front paws batting the air. The bird gazed down at us, as Mitch hurried into position beside me and we raised our guns. It ruffled its feathers and closed its eyes.

Another rule of hunting: only shoot the bird in the air. That's just basic sportsmanship.

I broke a branch off the nearest bush and tossed it at the grouse. The stick hit the tree and the bird cracked open one eye. After a second throw, it flew. I tracked the bird's lazy route above and behind us, keeping the gun barrel in pace with its flight, and then Mitch's orange hat filled my vision. I snapped my gun up as Mitch fired, a hail of pellets snapping through leaves and twigs. He shot again and Daisy bolted through the brush, searching for a bird she wouldn't find.

Mitch cursed and called her back. Without having to say a word, we decided another chance at the grouse was worth more bushwhacking. On a slow hunting day, any chance at a bird is worth taking. The grouse had disappeared in the trees, so we guessed the rest of its route and plowed through the underbrush until, almost at the edge of the grove, we saw it.

This time, the grouse spooked right away and flew straight, flapping slow and away from us. They say you don't aim a shotgun so much as point it, since you've got a wide spread and not enough time to line up a perfect shot. But this bird was slow. I lined up the beads, breathed out halfway and held it, and squeezed the trigger.

The grouse tumbled from the air.

I hollered and Daisy bolted after the bird. Mitch and I raced after her, and by the time we made it into the open, the dead grouse was already flopping in Daisy's mouth as she pranced back to us. It was a hen, hit in the back and the wing—a solid hit, and from far enough away that the meat wasn't mangled at all. Mitch smiled and said it was a good bird, but after hours of disappointment and a few missed shots, it's hard to act like you aren't a little jealous.

“When a bird’s still warm, right there against your back—that feels pretty damn good,” I said. Mitch cussed at me and grinned. He called Daisy and knelt down next to her. “You’ve gotta help me out, girl. My reputation’s on the line, here. Best shot in the county, and a schmuck got the first bird.” I could usually gauge Mitch’s mood by his bragging: best shot in the nation, best shot in the state. He had lowered himself to the best shot in the county on a few trips, and once to “best shot on Front Street” when—twice in one hour—he had lined up a perfect shot only to find his safety still on. Best shot in the county after just a few missed birds surprised me, so I didn’t rib him any more.

I wasn’t just trying to get a rise from Mitch, though—the feel of a bird really is pretty good. So after another hour with the sun at its peak and sweat soaking through our t-shirts, I still kicked every sagebrush we passed and carried my gun at the ready. Daisy was still birdy, too, and she just about bounded as she hunted. Mitch trailed a little behind us, still blaming the tree that kept him from even seeing my grouse the second time. I refused to let him spoil my mood.

We hunted in a wide arc around Mitch’s truck, which I guesses was a good two or three miles away, and at the edge of another grove, we stopped for a late lunch of beef jerky, trail mix, and dog food that Daisy wouldn’t finish. She never did eat more than a few bites on a hunting trip, but Mitch always brought a full quart bag every time, just in case.

As we ate, Mitch spied a wasp’s nest nearly a foot in diameter, hanging from a nearby tree. He traded his bag of raisins, nuts, and melted chocolate for his shotgun. “I need to shoot something today,” he said, and he did.

It’s amazing how loud a shotgun roars when you don’t have adrenaline running through you. I flinched and Daisy leaped up, ready to retrieve whatever Mitch had just killed. But the nest didn’t so much as sway. Mitch fired again and it still didn’t move. He jammed two new shells into his gun and stuffed his trail mix into his pocket. “Let’s go.”

The shots had inspired Daisy, and she leapt back into hunting. But I trudged, feeling guilty about the bird in my vest. We kept on our arc for another mile, but then, without comment, we both started veering toward the truck. My legs ached and I felt the first tingling of a sunburn. The trail mix and beefy jerky had left my mouth dry, and even though the real heat of the day had passed, I wished I had another water bottle. Neither Mitch nor I bothered to check even the largest, most likely sagebrushes anymore. Daisy kept hunting at a trot, but dust and heat and hours of use had dried out her nose.

We kept at it until Mitch stopped. “Hold up.” Daisy was a little ways ahead, poking her head into a bush. Mitch thumbed off his gun’s safety.

“Do you see it?” He pointed off to his right, but all I saw was a stunted, dead tree with a pair of chipmunks playing around its roots. “We each take one?”

Even if our shotguns somehow didn’t obliterate the chipmunks, there wasn’t even a mouthful of meat between two of them. I shook my head. “I’m okay.”

Mitch shrugged and raised his gun, and this time I plugged my ears. He fired, and a patch of bark exploded into dust and splinters and the chipmunks darted away. Mitch swore and ran two steps and fired again. The chipmunks raced across the ground and Mitch chased after them, trying to line up a clean shot for his last shell. Daisy tore off after them, coming from almost directly behind Mitch. He stopped and aimed, and Daisy passed him just before he fired.

The gun blasted, and Mitch screamed.

He dropped his gun, and I realized I was running toward him. Daisy skidded to a stop, looked at the remaining chipmunk and then at Mitch. Face white, he sank to his knees, hands limp at his sides. Daisy trotted back to him with her tail wagging.

I slowed to a walk, and then I stopped. I let Mitch hold his dog and hide his tears. She licked his face once and then squirmed free, ready to hunt some more.

Mitch and I sat in the dust in silence. Neither of us looked at the other. He started to speak, then stopped. "I'm not working tomorrow," he finally said. "Your dad let me go." Mitch rubbed his hands into the dusty ground. "He had to downsize. I'm not mad at him." Daisy circled around us, happy and oblivious.

"I'm sorry for ruining the trip," Mitch said.

I guessed at how much I needed to cover rent and food and gas for the next few months. "I'll talk to my dad." I figured I had enough saved up to keep me going a while at part-time.

Mitch nodded, his fingers curled and forgotten in Daisy's fur. After a while, he stood on trembling legs and picked up his gun, and he followed me back to the truck. Daisy hunted beside us all the way.