



The Hunter

A Short Story

By

Steve Rubin

Caleb Grenier couldn't remember a time when he wasn't looking forward to his twelfth birthday. He'd had the crossbow since he was ten. His grandpa Hank had crafted it for him by hand after Caleb had taken such a liking to '*Bighorn*', his grandpa's handmade crossbow that sat displayed high above the stone fireplace in his tiny mountain cabin outside of *Salmon*, Idaho. His grandpa had taken up permanent residence there less than one year after Caleb's grandma, Sofia, had died, four-years prior. The wooden crossbow was made mostly from ash and maple just like his grandpa's but his grandpa's was larger and had the name '*Bighorn*' burned carefully if not elegantly right into the side. His grandpa took to rubbing it with neatsfoot oil, which came from the shin bones of cattle and gave the wood both protection from warping and a soft glow, especially during dry times of July and August where he did so on a weekly basis. Caleb spent many nights looking out his window at night and dreaming of one day naming his crossbow "*GrayWolf*" or "*Skunk Bear*", a name ascribed to wolverines, or another like-carnivore but his grandpa said it wasn't right just to attach an arbitrary name, that Caleb needed to be patient, and that if he was patient one day a suitable name would come, although it wasn't a necessary thing to name a crossbow to begin with.

"You'll know soon enough," his grandpa said. "Boy shouldn't hunt before he's twelve." Caleb accepted this but he never quite knew his grandpa's reasoning. Some of the other boys and even a few girls he knew were allowed to hunt sooner, nine even, some with rifles no less. Of late, Hank considered hunting with a rifle to be unsportsmanlike; the matter was closed.

Caleb was torn; he loved the old hunting cabin but his grandpa Hank moving the near-thirty miles west from *Salmon* meant that Caleb could no long walk by his house after school, for a cold glass of lemonade and cookies from his grandma before she passed away, and always seemingly endless stories from his grandpa; about things like the great world wars, including the second, *WWII*, which had just ended; the advent of radio and then television; but mostly tales of hunting, including the *bighorn sheep* his grandpa had taken when he was a boy that stood to the day as the

largest ever taken in the state of Idaho. Unfortunately, the mount itself had long since deteriorated.

“Had a photograph of it, once. The mount. Lost it in the fire. Logged in the county record though, if anyone cares to see it.”

Caleb had heard about the fire also, too many times to count; how it had burned his great-grandfather’s homestead cabin to the ground in 1903 (Hank pronounced the date as: *‘aught-three’*); about his great-grandmother and three of his great-aunts and uncles had perished in the blaze. A tragedy beyond comprehension. His great-grandfather had been away for a night and was spared but then died himself shortly thereafter. Caleb’s ma said he died from heartbreak, she assumed.

“Back then we didn’t have no ‘lectricity.” Hank often droned. “Wind must’ve kicked up, come down the stove pipe and blew the damn door open. All it takes is a couple of sparks, boy. A couple of sparks.

“They’s a lot tougher back then. Today, we’s all spoilt. ‘Lectric this, ‘lectric that. Heck, one ‘a these days I reckon we’ll even be seein’ a ‘lectric motorcar.”

Caleb couldn’t imagine how that could be practical since he knew everything electric had to be connected by wire into the little funny thing in the wall. He lived with his ma in a small house down the street from where his grandpa used to live. They had two electric lights, but he had friends who had bigger houses and some had electric lights in every room. Some even had electric boxes to wash clothes and electric fans for hot summer days. Caleb’s ma was one of three teachers at school, forced to work after Caleb’s own pa had run off, before Caleb could remember when.

“Don’t talk none about your Pa,” Ma had told him once when he’d been asking questions. “Real man don’t run out on his family.” Her tone was rarely used and reinforced the intention that Caleb shouldn’t pursue the matter further. He knew that despite the rhetoric she missed his pa, sometimes a lot, especially at night or when she slept and Caleb heard her murmur his name. But she would never come out and say so. She did continue to use his pa’s Christian name and refused to remarry, until: *‘they either find the scoundrel’s body, probably in some gully’* -or he returned to *Salmon* and filed for a proper divorce.

It was the day after his twelfth birthday. The woods felt somehow fresher; cleaner; cooler.

Caleb didn't know how his grandpa Hank could sit so silently. Sometimes he thought the old man might be sleeping, maybe even dead, but then his grandpa would always catch him looking at him just before he did.

The crossbow, glistening from all of the coats of varnish now felt slippery in Caleb's warm palms. He tried alternately holding the weapon forward with one hand while wiping the other dry on his blue jeans but still it felt slippery. Maybe, when the time came, despite all of the practice he wouldn't be able to shoot straight! Hank had stressed repeatedly how important it was to shoot accurately, that otherwise the animal would be injured and might have to be tracked for miles through unforgiving terrain.

Caleb thought it best to move away from his grandpa a bit so he walked as quietly as he could through the woods to the other side of a small hill. Caleb understood that deer were prey animals and therefore always on their guard but sitting in one spot for an hour or more just didn't make much sense. He knew his grandpa was capable of tracking, definitely a small herd, and then if they came up on them from above the deer would be easy to see and they could get into position to shoot. This was Caleb's thinking but as always he deferred to Hank. Caleb picked a spot behind a small copse of trees where he could see down the animal trail in both directions. After a few minutes he set his crossbow carefully on some soft, fallen branches, and took a drink of water from his canteen. He took a minute to take in the forest, the sounds of birds and insects, the steady stream of unknown plinks and thuds as things fell to the forest floor, often after bouncing off branches after a gentle breeze. Generally, Caleb liked the sound of running water but there was none in this part of the hills.

He checked his watch. It had been less than fifteen minutes since he moved to this spot. He thought about eating the food he'd packed but then he'd just had breakfast two hours ago and figured he'd be real hungry later if they stayed out all

day. He wanted to hum, or explore around the small hill or maybe break some sticks but he was more grown up, on his own now with his weapon, hunting, and he knew that silence and stillness were vital to any success. He imagined the look of pride on his ma's face when they drove up, probably with a big buck strapped to the hood of his grandpa's farm truck and she learned that it was Caleb who'd shot it, alone, and not with some fancy rifle even but with a crossbow, handmade by his grandpa Hank. A single, perfect shot to the heart, killing the animal instantly. Caleb thought that maybe then his ma wouldn't miss his pa as much.

Caleb jolted, from more of a monotonous daze than actually falling asleep, a sound subtle but distinct; a branch broken underfoot.

Something was moving up the trail.

Cautiously.

Barely breathing, Caleb righted himself, so, so slowly, reaching for the crossbow, settling it back into his lap. He'd been leaning against a tree but now he sat cross-legged while he gradually snugged the crossbow into his arm and chest, then very slowly rose to one knee.

There. To the downhill side, about a hundred yards, he could see three or four deer, does, one smaller, maybe a yearling fawn. They were moving up the trail and sampling the vegetation as they went, unhurried; cupped ears flicking pesky flies, always stiffening and alert. Caleb tried to calm himself, remembering his grandpa's admonishment about how getting too *'breathy'*, as he called it, would make you sweat, and when you start to sweat you start to smell, and then a breeze turns unfavorable and you're given away without ever being seen.

Cautiously, Caleb wiped the sweat from his eyes.

He nocked an arrow, pulling carefully back with the *jackbow* until the crossbow was incredibly taut. .

Just then a buck, a big one came into his periphery, taking up the rear of the little herd. Caleb counted its antlers unconsciously, a *'ten-pointer'*, the way it was second-nature to count when you saw one strapped to someone's hood. If it was

large like this one, its antler rack would be boastfully displayed, probably driven around town a couple of times.

Caleb made himself very small as the deer made their way up the trail, maybe one hundred feet from him, the buck eating but keeping a wary eye behind the group, relying on the does to alert him if there was cause ahead. If he moved along the trail just a little ways Caleb would have a perfect vantage point for the buck's broadside. Caleb prayed silently that his grandpa didn't decide to come looking for him right now as his placement was almost perfect. Caleb quivered with nervous anticipation as if it had suddenly gotten cold despite the eighty-degree heat.

Two of the deer moved past and were reaching up to eat some leaves from the same bush. Caleb blinked several times from his intense stare back down the trail to see that the smallest of the does had moved off the trail and was rooting around in some tall grasses that were at best but forty-feet from him. He tried not to breathe at all, knowing that even the slightest movement or noise could spook the little one and then the herd in an instant.

The big buck continued to slowly come up the trail. Caleb cursed himself for not having his crossbow aimed and *at-the-ready*; if he even attempted to move it into position now the little doe would surely see and spook and it would all be over in an instant.

As he turned his head back to check, to his horror Caleb suddenly locked eyes with the little fawn, except it didn't seem to notice him at all –what? It appeared to be staring right at him, *right at him!* –as it chewed carefully, chewed on something green. Caleb remembered his grandpa telling him that deer saw things in funny ways, different from humans, a much wider view but they often had trouble focusing on things that weren't right up on them; they picked up movement from a broad area and figured to run first thing as a precaution. Caleb could see one of the deer's eyes and for a frozen moment he could see the white and even the cornea, the lid as the animal blinked; then, as always, the deer stopped and surveilled in a soft and total stillness before flicking its tail and leaning forward to eat again.

The buck moved even closer now, almost into Caleb's range. Fretting, Caleb decided that the worst thing that could happen was that his movement would spook then little one, then all of them, but maybe just around the small hill where at least his grandpa would get the big buck for sure. He moved the crossbow cautiously around, aware again of his breathing, trying to draw only slow, deep breaths. The little doe came up munching then stopped and stared again, once again seeming to lock eyes with the boy. But this time when the moment froze there was recognition in its eyes, followed by instantaneous fear.

Caleb flashed to the memory of his small friend Orin and the broken iron ladder, his best friend swinging out over the yawning precipice, fearing for his life. Terrified. Caleb blinked and like that the small doe was gone. But the expected, frantic flurry of activity for some reason didn't materialize and the small animal simply scampered back over to where the three larger does were grazing, paused to look back toward Caleb one last time before flicking its tail and joining in. Caleb was kneeling on only one knee and his leg began to throb, so badly that he simply stood up, suddenly feeling tired of the whole thing, unbelievably near to the point of not caring if he hunted at all.

The forest became surreal. Then, the buck stopped perfectly in broadside and turned its head away to reach for some leaves on a high branch.

Unsteady, with a dizzying combination of excitement, anticipation, fear and numbness, Caleb raised the crossbow and took careful aim.

Hank thought might have been dozing because his back was stiff against the tree. He'd seen the boy move off by himself some time ago and felt some pride, having raised him like a son when his daughter's *good-for-nothing* husband decided to get himself killed somewhere, or decided that seeing after his family was just too much of a burden to be bothered with. Caleb was a good boy, generally well mannered and disciplined. Heck, Hank himself and half the men in the valley had played around mineshafts they weren't supposed to when they were boys. He hoped that his grandson would at least get a good look at a buck, and if somehow he managed

to down one on his very first day of hunting, on his own, well, so much more the better. Hank had never seen a boy so eager to hunt and suspected it had a lot to do with growing up without having a pa around. Hank wasn't entirely sure if anything could stand up to the anticipation and just hoped that the boy wasn't too discouraged and disappointed if as was often the case he didn't see a thing at the end of a long day.

The big buck stood ramrod straight while it munched on leaves. Caleb had no idea if the does were even in the area any longer. He swore he could see the animal's heartbeat despite the thick, wavy muscles, and mostly smooth fur, some missing in ugly chunks, the result of catching on sharp tree limbs or fending off sharp antlers from a foe.

Breathe. Slowly.

The heart spot became an easy tin can sitting on a stump, just like Hank had told him a thousand times, and Caleb's right forefinger gently felt for the trigger. His breathing was slow and steady. His grandpa would be proud. He was finally ready to take the killing shot.

At that instant the buck somehow sensed him. It stopped chewing and turned its massive head and dangerous, heavy, pointed rack.

His finger squeezed firmly and smoothly back.

Just as Caleb fired, time seemed to stop altogether. Sharply, like a picture show, he flashed to the terror he'd seen in the little fawn's eyes moments before, Orin's eyes as he swung from the broken ladder long before that.

The razor-sharp arrow flew. It sailed over the buck's shoulders by a good six inches.

By the time Caleb blinked, the animal was gone.

Caleb found himself gasping for breath. He quickly scanned the area but all he could see were brush and grasses, trees and leaves.

He felt suddenly impossibly tired and unbelievably low. He thought about looking for the arrow but decided it must have somehow been poorly made and was

imbalanced for him to miss so badly. He was, however, grateful that his grandpa wasn't there to see. For a moment he felt sadness, deep sadness, and great shame. He sat on a rock and let the crossbow drop unceremoniously by his side.

After a short spell, Caleb decided to head back over the hill. His mood picked up a bit as he'd been told how challenging hunting could be at times for even the best outdoorsmen, men like his grandpa Hank, and how the old man always preached, and practiced, patience.

As Caleb came around the hill and tried to get his bearings he saw the hind quarters of another buck, a different one, only an eight-pointer by quick count. This time he was far enough back to swing his crossbow at the ready without fear of detection. Adrenaline flowed. Then, as he crept to follow, Caleb saw the animal move to within fifty-feet of where he was certain that Hank was secreted so he stopped stalking and made sure he was well hidden himself behind a tree. It was dangerous for two hunters to target the same animal, even with bows.

Caleb waited with renewed vigor, nearly the anticipation he'd felt for himself moments before as he watched then heard the familiar '*thwack*' sound and knew that Hank's arrow was loosed. In that fraction of a second the buck heard the sound too but didn't react in that instant, probably too stunned from the impact or maybe already in shock, Caleb thought, as he waited inevitably for the beast to get that queer death look and then fall. The buck took a step but not with any apparent pain or dismay, then slowly picked up its pace and disappeared.

Hank appeared from behind the small copse and acted momentarily startled to see Caleb come out from behind the tree. Caleb waved a hand, somewhat timidly, and moved toward the old man.

"Did ya see a big ten-pointer go by?" Caleb croaked in a half-whisper. "With three or four does?"

Hank appeared to be uncomfortable, like a man caught having a private, emotional moment, in the back room at a funeral home maybe when somebody opens the door without knocking first. "Nope. Sure didn't.

“Did you get a good shot off?”

“Yes, sir. Uh...I missed him though. A little high.”

Hank ran his hand through his white-grey hair and set his crossbow carefully on the ground beside him, then reached for his canteen. “Get a clean look did ya?”

Caleb didn’t really want to tell the truth nor did he want to lie, coming off the episode with the mineshaft. “Thought I did,” he mumbled.

“Ah, well. Don’t fret none. That’s how it goes sometimes. Animal was just fortunate today.” Hank wiped his forehead across his forearm.

Caleb wanted to comment on what he’d just witnessed but he too felt as if he’d maybe come upon an adult doing something privately. He just wasn’t sure how his grandpa could have possibly missed from such a short distance himself and thought for a moment that maybe his grandpa had been asleep and another hunter was around.

Then, frowning, Caleb got a strange feeling in his gut. He realized suddenly that he’d never seen Hank come back directly from a hunt before. Despite his reputation as an outdoorsman, and of course the certification of having taken the largest *bighorn sheep* in Idaho state history, and because he was such a good shot Caleb just assumed that Hank got what he was hunting for whenever he went alone. And, that the times his grandpa had taken him throughout his youth and they came back empty were just on account of bad luck, or because there were two of them there, overly sweating, for the game animals to smell. Now, Hank always had meat; but then again he had a lot of friends. Caleb thought hard. It wasn’t the old man’s eyes; he could still spot birds and deer at great distances. Or reflexes; he was still plenty spry around the cabin. Or shooting; Hank was dead-on whenever he had instructed Caleb with Caleb’s bow shooting at cans. Must just be bad luck. Hunting was uncertain and sometimes you simply didn’t come across any suitable candidates.

That night they sat on the front porch as the sun was going down and ate some supper. Because of the mountains the sun was nearly gone from the little cabin by

about seven-thirty leaving everything pillowed in a dusky glow. Hank could tell the boy was particularly quiet. Normally, if Hank wasn't telling a story the boy would be asking questions non-stop, or talking about baseball or things from school, or things he'd done or was planning on doing with his friends. Should be running on and on about his first hunt. How close he'd come to taking a big buck on his very first day. Hank watched him while he ate. He was still rail-skinny but muscle was starting to develop in his arms, and he was probably half-a-head taller than he was last summer. Caleb had his crossbow sitting beside him on the bench.

"We need to adjust your bow there?" Hank asked and motioned with his fork.

Caleb looked down at the crossbow then back at his food and shrugged.

"Maybe. I guess. Dunno."

"Well, you said you had a good look at him. Was it the distance? Did he spook at the last minute?"

The food had restored some of his strength but Caleb was still tired and a depleted. He merely shrugged again. "Might've been a bad arrow."

Hank sat back and took a good, long look at his grandson. "Been waiting for this day long as I can remember. Had your birthday yesterday and we went the very next day just like I told you we would. Had a look at a buck, a big one. *Ten-pointer* you said."

Caleb just kept eating.

After Caleb cleaned off the dishes and put them away he came back out onto the porch where his grandpa sat smoking from his corncob pipe, a sticky, blackened thing that had held Caleb's fancy for a while when he was younger but now just seemed unpleasant. While he didn't much care for the smell, Caleb always associated the pipe with long storytelling, and the night was cool and sweet, ripe for some.

Caleb set the crossbow carefully on the porch and sat lengthwise on the bench, looking out over the hills and small tendrils of smoke from cooking fires of hunters or distant neighbors. There was no electricity, and although it wasn't fully

dark Hank lit a lantern and hung it from a hook that dangled off of the porch eave. Said it helped keep the bugs at bay.

“Grandpa, how’d you miss yours? I saw it when I was coming back. Do you need to adjust ‘*Bighorn*?’”

Hank couldn’t decide if Caleb was being inquisitive or unseemly since it was now pretty obvious that the boy had seen him, seen him shoot and miss. Rightly, Caleb wasn’t entirely sure of the purpose of his questioning, either.

After a moment, the old man said: “Lemme tell you a story.” Hank began puffing so much smoke from the corncob pipe that it surrounded his head in great, cloud-like billows as he put it to flame. “When I was your age. Actually, a bit younger’n you. Up til the time when I was maybe ten-years old, my pa, your *great-granddaddy*, used to take my brother, your Great-Uncle Pete and me with him pretty much every time he went into the woods. Which was damn-near every day. Oh, we’d fish a lot, fool around mostly, but back then there weren’t no seasons for huntin’ or trappin’. You didn’t see many ‘a these ‘trophy hunters’ neither, like you see nowadays. Men hunted and fished because otherwise their families didn’t eat. Unless you were prosperous some way or another and bought everything you needed from the mercantile. Just meant someone else hunted for you,” Hank grumbled this last line then took a second to gather his thoughts, sitting very erect.

“I was a crack shot, even back then.”

“That’s when you got the record bighorn.” Caleb rarely interrupted the long stories but Hank never minded if he was interrupted by someone wishing to comment on the record sheep.

“That’s right. But ten-years old. Never would have had a chance at it neither if I wasn’t such a good shot. Don’t think your *great-granddaddy* could have hit it, even from that ledge I’d climbed up onto. We been over all that, you know that story.

“Anyhow, I was always taking deer, elk, even a buffalo one time. Had meat for a whole year after that buffalo, plus gave half away too. Big one,” the old man

reminisced. “Took that with the *Winchester*. Man’s lying to you, mostly, he tells you he took a buffalo with an arrow. ‘Less maybe he’s *Injun*.”

“Anyhow, my pa could get plum lazy sometimes, havin’ me around. Not Pete, though. Couldn’t shoot worth a lick. Didn’t figure he much cared to, either. Pete was more your...artistic type. Always daydreaming about this and that, ‘bout movin’ to a big city, taking to university, that sort of thing. But me, I couldn’t get enough of any of it, the huntin’ or the fishin’.

“The trapping...” Hank took another huge puff, then a drink off of a bottle of whiskey Caleb often saw appear after supper. Caleb couldn’t see the old man’s eyes in the dim light but they were getting a little rheumy. “Trappin’ was somethin’ my pa *was* good at. Real good. He knew where all the muskrats and the beavers was.

“Heck, for a while there, trader’d give you a nickel for every rabbit pelt you brought him, two whole dollars for a nice beaver, three maybe if he was a real good-sized *beeve*. Pa supported us on his fur trades mostly, for the things...so your *great-grandma* could get things she needed from the store. Clothing items and such.

“Sometimes, if we’d had a good season, and after we’d helped out any neighbors who hadn’t...or, like *Missy Franklin* who lost her husband and had no boys, or girls for that matter, who could hunt, after that sometimes we’d still have left over meat to sell. Grind some up into sausage,” the old man was mumbling more, talking mostly to himself. Caleb was used to it. His ma had told him that when someone lives off alone they often get to talking to themselves and not to worry about it.

“So, that was it. That was how we ate. That was how my pa earned a living. Good by them traps.” Hank took a strong pull from the bottle and wiped his mouth on his shirtsleeve. He moved his bulk and turned to lean nearer to the boy. “Any of your pals do any trappin’?”

Caleb shrugged. “Not really. Maybe. But I ain’t never seen none.”

“Okay,” Hank sat back a little and settled back in. “So, it was just before my eleventh birthday.

“Pete was older, by three years. Our pa, I don’t know, still don’t know to this day, but maybe he felt that, mm...” Hank absentmindedly scratched his head.

“Anyway, my pa bought Peter a used *Winchester* when he fourteen. Nice one. Figured he thought that maybe if m’ brother had his own rifle he might take to huntin’ a little better. I always liked shootin’ pa’s rifle, ‘specially since I was such a crack-shot. Always made him proud. But by that time, near eleven-years old, I started to get it into my head that I was the one deserved his own rifle. Not Pete who was always distracted huntin’ and barely ever shot anything at all. Heck, half the time Pete would be fidgety or makin’ noise, spook everything and never see a thing. So I asked pa about it one time but he didn’t pay me much mind, said they was too expensive and why’d we need more’n two rifles? That he was sure Pete would let me borrow his from time to time, lendin’ like he did with his gun.

“Now, he could tell I was hurt by it, kind of sore, you know. So then, later on that day he comes and tells me that if I could save up enough money by laying my own traps, well then he would let me buy my own gun.”

“How much’d they cost they back then? For a good one? A *Winchester*?” Caleb asked.

“Oh, I’d say a good one could run upwards of ten-dollars or more. Yeah, maybe ten-dollars.

“Well, let me tell you, that was a lot ‘a more rabbits than we had pro’lly here in the whole valley. And I didn’t know of no beaver dams that pa or someone else hadn’t already laid claim to so for a while there I stayed pretty sore.”

“Did you save it all up?” Caleb propped himself up on one elbow. Deep in some heavy thoughts, Hank didn’t seem to hear him. The old man took another long drink.

“Trappin’,” he muttered.

He looked hard at Caleb and despite the weak light Caleb felt more than saw the intensity in his eyes. “You’re a good boy, son. You make me and you make your ma real proud. You done good today, too,” Hank reached over and gave Caleb an affectionate squeeze on his shoulder. “You been followin’ everything I told you and

you deserve to have that fine bow. Last you a lifetime, you keep care of it proper.” Caleb nodded but was feeling a little uncomfortable and a bit confused by the old man’s sudden affection. “Now...now, I’m sure you’re gonna grow up an’ become schooled. You could be a doc, whatever you want. You’re smart enough for it. Huntin’ and fishin’ will always be just sport for you. You needn’t worry about ever having to use them to provide.” Caleb was used to some rambling and generally Hank got more animated as he drank. But Hank kept holding onto his shoulder and for some reason it was making Caleb feel sad, in the way someone might if they were telling you they were leaving you, dying even, maybe.

After a moment, Hank let go of Caleb’s shoulder and sat back into his chair. Now Caleb could see the old man’s eyes fairly clearly despite the flickering, weak, lantern glow. “So, did ya save up for that rifle?” Caleb ventured, and then was surprised when his voice cracked. His grandpa didn’t seem to notice that either.

Hank’s broad shoulders slumped some, then he leaned forward and rested his arms on his knees. He appeared to be staring at something through a crack in the porch. His voice became distant. “That October was real cold, unseasonable; like February usually is.

“One day pa wasn’t feeling right so he had me ‘n Pete go run the traps for ‘im. We was supposed to go together, for safety, but there was already some snow on the ground and a good wind kickin’ up that made you feel cold no matter how tightly you bundled. So, me and Pete decide to split up, take east and west of the *Shoshone*, then meet back at the river, go on home. Take half the time. Pa’d be none the wiser.

“Huntin’ had been pretty bad on account ‘a the cold that fall, and the trappin’ wadn’t much better. Plus, I had to move fast so I could check on my traps, too. I remember thinkin’ that if pa had some caught in his, well, how would he know if I told him they was from mine, you know? Not really stealin’ I didn’t figure as we’d be eatin’ the meat regardless. And I wasn’t thinking to do it with no good pelts, beaver or whatnot, maybe just a couple of muskrats. Trader paid a quarter for those, same as five rabbits. But it was bitter cold, like I said, and I was havin’ to hurry.

“So, I went by my traps first, had about maybe eight or ten of ‘em, but there weren’t nothing caught in ‘em. Not a thing. Then pa had a couple of rabbits but one had got tore up and et mostly by some other critter the night before so it’s pelt was no good. I remember being in a foul mood about it all. And real damn cold.

“The last traps was all beaver and set along the *Hellroaring Creek* and parts of the *Salmon*. Normally, when it’s real cold, by the time you got to ‘em they’s already froze to death, which was good ‘cause maybe the pelt is a good one on account of the beaver not thrashin’ around overly, tryin’ to get itself freed. So there are two fine beavers in the first two I check. And they’re both already froze. Otherwise I would have dressed ‘em out there so there’d be less to carry back.

“Now, I’ve got Pete’s rifle mind you, just in case we was to come across a deer maybe or an elk. Weren’t no huntin’ seasons back then, remember.

“I go all the way down to the last trap. And these froze *beeves* I’m carryin’ is damned heavy. And it’s still so damned cold.

“I come up on the last trap. And I see some movement. And it’s a beaver, a real big one, and he’s movin’ through the river pretty good, headed straight for that trap. So I set the two I’d been carryin’ down for just a moment, so I can creep up on this big one, figure I can shoot it if it don’t go into the trap, but then it does, it does right in front of me. I hear the trap snap shut.

“And then there’s this screamin’; sounded like sounds a young girl might make if she was getting’ hurt bad, noise like that, only louder, real loud. Had never heard that before. Then it stops, after maybe a minute or two, I don’t really know ‘cause I went back to pick up the other two what were froze. Not wantin’ to draw a mountain lion in maybe, they’s already gettin’ winter-hungry in that October.

“I take the two and I go back over to the last trap and the big *beeve* is caught in it good but ain’t makin’ that horrible noise no more. Trap’s right along the river’s edge, and as I’m making my way over I punch through the ice and one leg goes into the freezing water, ‘bout up to my knee. Good way to lose some toes to frostbite. Sure didn’t make my mood any better neither. No.

“So I come up on this *beeve*. And I sling the rifle around, not to shoot it, ‘cause that could ruin the pelt, but I figure to club it. Which I should really be usin’ a stick or a baseball bat, somethin’ like that, but I’m cold and now I’m wet so damn it all to hell I figure.

“The *beeve* is in some pain now, bleedin’ too.

“As I come up on him, he tries to stand tall, tall as it can, even with the busted-up foot caught. Brave-like I figure, at first, ‘cause that’s what most animals’ll do when they know it’s their time. Stand tall and fight for their life no matter the reality of the situation. But this *beeve*, he looks up at me. Looks me right in the eye. Looks to me for a moment like he might be cryin’. Cryin’?! I swear -a damn beaver!

“And...and he looks up at me, looks me right in the eye, and I can tell you that if he could’ve talked he’d’ve asked me: *Why? Why are you doing this to me?*”

The old man dropped his head lower. “Had no answer for that.

“Couldn’t bring myself to club him.”

They sit in silence for a moment.

“Let him out of the trap. Opened it right up, with the rifle butt and my one dry boot. He looks at me queer for a minute then limped off and swims down into the river.

“Not sure if he could’ve lived. That busted up foot.”

Hank sat leaning over for a moment longer, then slowly sat back up. He wiped a tear from his eye. Caleb had never seen the man come even close to crying before, not at any funeral. Never.

“Last thing your grandma Sofia did before she passed on was look up at me, in all of that pain. Couldn’t do nothin’ to help her. Nothin’ at all.

“Same look as that beaver. Couldn’t speak none by then, but Sofia, her eyes, she seemed to say: *why me?*”

“Didn’t have an answer for her, neither.”

“Oh, grandpa! I...I think I shot high on purpose,” Caleb burst into tears and hurriedly hugged the old man. “I’m sorry,” he sobbed.

Hank hugged the boy to him and stroked his back. “It’s okay, son. It’s okay.

“I shot high, too.

“Have been ever since my Sofia died.”