



SHEDDER

Lee checked his watch after they got settled in the blind. It was 6:57 and the sun was due up at 6:59. The feeder was set to scatter corn at 7:20.

He looked to the side and down, to James, his only son among three children. The boy was studying the fog with slit-eyed concentration. His mom had wanted him to wear an orange vest over his jacket, for visibility, but James talked her out of it. But he couldn't talk her out of the orange stocking cap. His sisters called him pumpkinhead when he first tried it on.

Lee smiled and turned back to the feeder. It was a dark green tower that looked black in the pre-dawn light and fog. A rutted game trail led past it, and the brush around its base had been trampled down. Deer would soon be swarming to the spot. The clatter of scattering corn breaking the silence would bring them running out of the cactus and mesquite, and James would make his first kill. He was eight and that was when Lee shot his first deer. The tradition would continue.

James had laid his rifle on the blind's wall and left it there, aimed at the feeder. Lee held his gun across his lap. The blind was just a U-shaped pile of tree branches and chopped brush with a couple of old lawn chairs behind it. The setup was primitive but time-tested.

Lee shifted position and felt the weight of the bottle in his coat pocket. He'd brought a half pint of bourbon. Normally he would have taken a nip against the chill, but he didn't want James to associate his first hunt with drinking.

His own father never had any qualms about

warming himself with liquor while hunting. He devoted himself to work for the bulk of the year, but shifted chores around during deer season so he could enjoy some downtime. And at Christmas the family would gather at the ranch for a hunt. They'd have a feast in the big old house on Christmas Day, then after a sleepover the men would rise early and tiptoe out to the back porch and their guns.

Lee and his siblings inherited the ranch. His brother and sister moved away but he stayed on to work the place for the lion's share of the profits. Because of modernization he didn't have to work as hard as his father had, but the daily grind got boring and he always looked forward to Christmas. The family still gathered at the house for the big meal, and the men still crept out the next morning to hunt.

Martha suggested once that they clear the hundred or so acres of brush so the entire ranch would finally be open grassland. But they were already running plenty of cattle and Lee wanted to keep the thicket the way it was. He felt that his children were owed a piece of the past.

"Do you think we'll see him?" James whispered. Lee gestured for silence and saw that the boy's face was red from the cold. He reached over to tug his stocking cap down over his ears, and James turned back to watch the fog.

Lee thought of the buck they'd seen earlier in the year. It was a hot day in July and he was working on the tractor near the edge of a field. James was with him. It was quiet and then there was a crashing sound as something broke out of the thicket. They looked up to see a big white-tailed buck, not twenty feet away, glaring down its nose at them. His ten-point spread was magnificent. The antlers were covered in golden velvet that seemed to glow in the sun. After a long frozen

moment the animal snorted and then leapt back into the thicket.

At least once a week since then James talked about the deer. He and Lee guessed at its weight and age, and Lee explained how the antlers grew year by year through a process of shedding velvet. He was glad that James took such an interest in the animal, because that gave him a reason to present the boy with his first real rifle.

James had already learned the fundamentals of shooting with a pellet gun, so Lee felt comfortable placing the .22 hornet in his hands. It was the same gun his father gave him at eight. The .22 was a small caliber but the bullet had lots of powder behind it and was deadly if placed right. Lee sat with James to practice shooting at twenty yards, thirty, and then forty, the distance from the blind to the feeder. James got to where he could place a group of shots into a two-inch circle. If the buck appeared that morning he'd die with a bullet through the heart.

Lee looked at his watch again. 7:06. The day was lightening and he wondered what the other hunters were doing. His brother, Alan, and Martha's cousin Aaron were in blinds set up at other spots in the thicket. He hoped they would spare James' buck if they saw it. James told them about it and they'd seen his excitement, so maybe they would hold fire if the deer passed their way.

As they left the house that morning James asked Lee if he'd seen lots of tracks when he filled the feeder earlier in the week. Lee said yes, but really there weren't many tracks because the feeder was empty. He'd filled it in the middle of the month, and there should have been some corn still in it, but there wasn't. And the feeder had footprints around it. They were smooth-soled prints, not like those from Lee's knobby mud boots. He figured one of the neighbors had made them a

couple of days before. Plenty of people in the area were experiencing hard times and struggling to provide for their livestock, so one of them sneaked over to pilfer. Lee wished they'd just asked him instead. He wouldn't begrudge a little corn for livestock.

Thinking of neighbors lacking feed made him feel a twinge of guilt for the meal his family ate the day before. It was wonderful, with a fat turkey, all the trimmings, and three kinds of pie. The refrigerator could barely hold the leftovers. There used to be no more than a morsel of scrap after Christmas dinner, but each year fewer and fewer people showed up to partake. The government always rolled out a new Covid fear campaign just before the holidays, and Lee had watched as the campaigns took progressively bigger bites out of Christmas attendance at the ranch. This year his sister didn't come. She said she couldn't risk being around anyone who wasn't vaccinated.

James fidgeted and Lee reached over to lay a calming hand on his shoulder. The boy looked at him and Lee held his hands up to the sides of his head. He spread his fingers wide, imitating antlers, then made a sign to keep watching. James settled down and squinted into the fog.

A belch of late-night pecan pie returned Lee's thoughts to the Christmas meal. Martha came from a religious family, and her uncle Jeremiah had insisted on saying grace before they ate. He started out calmly enough by praising Jesus and his infinite mercy, but then he got onto the topic of the godless communists in the government. The prayer turned into a sermon. A fiery one.

In particular Jeremiah blasted the politicians that he said hailed either in body or in spirit from San Francisco. He walked everyone through a history that told of the benign old liberalism of the East Coast giving way to the malignant progress-

sivism of the west. “New York,” he said, “used to be a place of humble immigrants who erected enormous churches in thanks to God, but San Francisco is a hedonistic cesspit that’s more interested in erected . . .” He stopped himself before he finished the sentence. “But the city’s foul inclinations,” he growled, “have been made manifest in the politics that it’s forced upon the Democratic Party. The tired old generals like Pelosi and Feinstein and Boxer have been replaced by new and energetic spoilers who are no less determined than their predecessors to drive America into the pit of Hell.” At this point Jeremiah’s son, Aaron, began to stamp his feet in an uneven cadence and let out an occasional Amen. Jeremiah upped his volume and said there could be no political solution to a spiritual problem. He said America was founded as a Christian nation and had grown strong nurtured by the tenets of love and honor. But leftists now encouraged the opposite of love and honor—hate and disrespect. “Americans once strove to be on the right side of God,” he said, “but now everybody wants to be on the right side of history. And since history is written by the winners, that means that the worship of power has replaced the worship of the Almighty.” He went on to condemn gays in the military and the elevation of environmentalism to religion, and then he railed against the medical tyranny that had taken over America. He said Covid was God’s punishment and the country would not be free of it until she returned to the path of righteousness. Aaron continued with his stamping and Amens.

Lee sat at the head of the table and listened, to the prayer at first, and then he listened for an opening. Finally, when Aaron let loose with an especially loud Amen, Lee thanked Jeremiah and stood up to carve the turkey. He asked who wanted a drumstick before anybody could suggest warm-

ing up the food. Someone might call for another prayer when it came back to the table.

Lee saw movement near the feeder. The day had grown brighter but was still foggy, and he saw a deer step out of the mist. A doe. She approached the feeder, sniffed a metal leg, then began nosing around the ground.

James saw the deer too. He leaned to his rifle, but Lee gestured for him to wait and he sat back.

Another doe appeared, then another. Lee checked his watch. 7:15. The feeder would trigger in five minutes. If the buck hadn't appeared by then but was in the area, he would hear the clatter and come for the corn or the mating.

A minute dragged by, two minutes, and then something spooked the deer. They all threw their heads up and looked up the game trail in the direction of the county road. They looked, then one snorted and they all scattered into the brush. James said, "Awww" in a low voice and Lee signaled him to keep quiet. The does might have been running from an approaching buck, part of the mating ritual. They'd looked at the trail before bolting, so Lee did the same.

A few seconds later a man came walking out of the fog. He carried a gray five-gallon paint bucket in each hand. Lee could tell that the buckets were empty by the way they swung around his knees as he negotiated the trail's twists.

The man was tall and thin and wore a dark fur cap. Lee lifted his rifle to look at him through the scope. He saw a sandy blonde beard that was neatly trimmed and about an inch long. The man seemed to be about thirty, and he was dressed too lightly in a dark blue sport coat, blue slacks, and black leather shoes that still showed a bit of shine beneath the muck they were picking up.

James tugged at Lee's elbow and he lowered his gun. He leaned down and James asked who

the man was.

“I don’t know, son. Let’s watch and see what he does.”

But he already knew what the man was going to do. Government policies were making it harder and harder to find food in the cities. No telling how many had starved to death in America in the six years since Washington began using Covid as an excuse to clamp down on the production and distribution of food. The cities were hit hard. From what Lee saw on the news, store shelves were picked down to nothing. City dwellers had to look elsewhere if they wanted to eat, and many of them drove to the country to buy their food. And some came to steal. Lee hadn’t been affected yet, but some of his neighbors talked about stolen pigs and chickens. He should have known from the slick shoe prints around the feeder that he’d been robbed; his neighbors wore mud boots like his. The man was probably from Waco or Dallas, and since he got away with raiding the feeder once, he was back again.

“Sit tight,” Lee whispered to James. “He’s after the corn.”

But the corn was barely food, Lee thought. Deer could starve to death with a belly full of it. It was tasty but had next to no nutritional value. The city man wouldn’t know that though. He wouldn’t know much at all about food that hadn’t come from a grocery store.

The man reached the feeder and set the buckets on the ground, and when his coat spread open Lee saw dots on the chest of a gray shirt. He felt his hackles rise.

He lifted his gun again, and through the scope he saw a cluster of twelve enameled stars. In the center of the cluster was the blue one that meant the man had gotten the most recent Covid shot. The other stars, different colors, showed that

he'd been vaccinated regularly since 2020. The pins allowed him to move freely in whatever city he was from.

The man picked up one of the buckets and climbed the feeder's ladder. He laid the lid of the bin back, upended the bucket and scooped. He filled the bucket with corn and climbed back down. When he was on the ground again he set the bucket down and rubbed a shoulder like he'd strained it.

James tugged at Lee's sleeve. He lowered his gun, leaned down, and James whispered, "He's got pins on his shirt, dad. You have to . . . to do something." Lee didn't know what to say. He wished that James was still in bed, tucked away from what needed to be done. And the boy knew exactly what needed to be done.

"Don't look," Lee said, and he watched to make sure James turned his face away. He looked down and to the side and covered his ears.

Lee raised his rifle and rested it on the wall of the blind. He put the scope's crosshairs on the man's head but then thought of the mess the 30.06 would make. There would be nothing left but a bloody stump, and he didn't want James to see that, so he lowered his sights. The man was still massaging his shoulder and his right arm was crooked across his chest. Lee had a clear shot to the heart.

He placed his finger on the trigger and concentrated on slowing his breathing. In and out, in and out, and then the feeder went off.

The clatter of corn spinning out was faint from forty yards away, but up close it was loud enough to make the man jump and turn to face the feeder. Lee still had a shot to the heart. He fired.

The quick double thump of shot and contact would tell the neighbors that he'd hit his target,

but they would assume it was a deer. He'd lie and say it was, and he would never, ever tell them about the stranger laid out on the ground.

Lee watched through his scope for a minute to make sure the man was dead, then he stood up and told James to wait in the blind.

He walked to the body but stopped about ten feet away. The man had fallen so that he was twisted at the waist, with one shoulder and his face against the ground. The front of his coat was laid back and the stars on his chest were partly visible, but the shirt they were pinned to was now blood red instead of gray. A kernel of corn was among the pins because the feeder's spinner was still going when the man fell. The folds of his clothing had caught other kernels, and one was even lodged in his ear. A spot on the ear's lobe looked like blood, but it seemed to sparkle. Lee leaned down for a closer look. The spot was a gold stud set with what might be a ruby, and just below the stud, nestled in the man's beard was . . . something. Lee grabbed a mesquite branch from the ground and used the tip to part the beard. And he saw a tab of skin, about a half inch long, bent slightly and articulated like a . . . was it a finger? He leaned as close as he dared and thought he saw a tiny fingernail on the end of the tab. Was it some kind of mutation caused by the Covid shots?

Lee shuddered and took a step back.

"What is it?" James asked from behind.

Lee turned and saw James standing a few feet away. He moved to shield the boy's view of the body but realized the action was pointless. There was no escaping deed and consequence. He looked over his shoulder at the man, at the way he'd fallen face down, and he was thankful that at least James wouldn't be haunted by a dead stare. But what might haunt him instead? The memory

of his father killing another man?

“I had to do it, James. You saw from the pins how many Covid shots this man took. He was stealing corn today, but tomorrow he might’ve tried to steal something from our house. And then he could have infected us all.”

“I know, dad. You had to do it.”

Lee felt relieved. James wouldn’t grow up thinking of his father as a murderer.

Lee stepped to the body again and used his stick to go through the man’s pockets. He fished out a set of keys and a wallet. He pulled the wallet toward him on the ground, then he took the bottle of bourbon from his coat pocket. “I, uh, I brought this for emergencies,” he said as he doused the wallet with liquor. “The alcohol’s a good disinfectant.”

He dug through the wallet until he found the man’s driver’s license and vaccination card. He laid the items faceup on the ground, washed his hands with liquor and motioned James forward.

“Let’s see what we can find out about this man, son.” He pointed with the stick. “His driver’s license says his name’s Nicholas Bascomb, from Arlington. That’s between Dallas and Fort Worth. If he’s still at that address then he had to drive about three hours to get here. I imagine they’re hurting for food in Arlington, with two big cities to feed just outside. Not many delivery trucks would make it through.”

“How’d he find our feeder?”

“I don’t know. Maybe word of mouth. Or satellite pictures from the internet.”

Lee used the stick to pull Bascomb’s vaccination card closer. He studied it for a moment and then pointed to the bottom line. “Here’s his last shot, about three months ago, and up here’s his first, for Covid-19. He got the brand that caused so many strokes. A bunch of countries outlawed it

and the company finally stopped making it. More than a hundred million people got that one, as I recall. And here . . .” He skipped down a couple of lines and said, “This shot was for one of the early variants, in 2021. They discontinued it too because it caused so many heart problems. The shots produce spike proteins that collect in major organs, like your heart, and kill you. All of the shots do that, but some are worse than others.”

Lee continued going down the list and telling what he knew about each shot. Over the past few years they’d been proven to cause kidney and liver failure, blood clots, and immune disorders. And senility. That was the latest side effect sweeping across the world. The controlled media reported that it was just a rise in Alzheimer’s among an aging population, but really it was spike proteins collecting in the brain on top of aluminum and lead and pesticides. A lifetime of sponging up pollution, capped off with the spike proteins, had led to an explosion of dementia. The afflicted were being mandated into nursing facilities, where they were diagnosed with Covid so they could be placed on lung-rupturing respirators. Covid and its treatments had become the most successful depopulation program in the history of the world.

When Lee finished with the vaccination card, he used his stick to shove it and Bascomb’s other personal effects under his body. Then he took a step back and flung the stick into the thicket. He washed his hands again with liquor.

“What do you know about shedders?” he asked James.

“Well, the shots change your cells, so when you shed them, they’re not natural. I mean the cells aren’t natural. They’re mod . . . mod . . . what’s that word?”

“Modified. Changed. And this man had his cells changed more than anyone I’ve ever been

close to. He's barely even a man anymore."

Lee looked at Bascomb and hoped that James hadn't seen the deformity buried in his whiskers.

"You shed the most right after you get a shot," James said.

"That's right. For two weeks. And the problem is that everybody gets their shots and boosters at different times, so the shedding overlaps. We're exposed to mutated cells all through the year."

"Mom says the cure's worse than the disease."

"She's right," Lee said. He started to pat James on the head but stopped himself. "Here." He held up the bottle of bourbon. "Let me wash the soles of your boots, in case you got anything on them."

James lifted his feet one at a time and Lee poured. He did his own boots too, then used the rest of the liquor on his hands. He tossed the bottle and told James they'd need to wash at the trough on their way past the barn.

"What are you going to say about the shot?" James asked.

"The shot?"

"The rifle shot. I bet Mom and everyone heard it."

"Yeah. And my gun's louder than yours, so I'll say yours jammed and I shot a deer but it got away. And we didn't go looking for it because there were other hunters in the brush."

"Okay, dad."

"But I'll tell your mother the truth, later. She and I don't have any secrets. She won't tell anyone else, and you can't either, son. Not even your sisters. You can only talk about what happened here with me or your mom. All right?"

"All right."

On the walk back to the house Lee made a mental list of things he would need to do. First let the visiting relatives depart, then find where Bascomb had left his vehicle and move it to the

highway. Leave the keys in it and with luck it would get stolen in the heavy holiday traffic.

After the car he would come back to the feeder alone and search Bascomb's body for a phone, credit cards and anything else that might act as a tracking device. He should have destroyed that stuff already but hadn't thought things through. But later he'd pull batteries and burn things, then dig a grave somewhere in the thicket. If all went well he would be finished with the burial by dark.

Lee noticed that James seemed downcast. He didn't have the spring in his step that he'd had on the earlier walk.

"I'm sorry you had to see all that, son."

"I know, dad. It's okay."

"Well, we can talk about it if you want, after the relatives leave."

Lee thought how different James must have imagined the day would be, this day when he was supposed to kill his first deer, and he said, "We'll come hunting again next week, son. We'll go to one of the other blinds and try to bag that ten-point."

Lee saw the spring return to James' step.

"Can we really, dad?"

"Sure. Maybe New Year's Eve. We'll come out in the morning, and the afternoon too if we have to. And if you don't get a shot by sundown we'll shoot off our guns like firecrackers, to celebrate the New Year."

James broke into a skipping step at the happiness of the thought. Lee smiled, but as he did he felt something on the back of his head, like something scratching. He thought of the nail at the end of the little finger in Bascomb's beard, and he imagined it trying to pick its way into his conscience. He rubbed the feeling away and watched James line up beside him to match their steps.