

Chasing Shadows

Killing animals has never really appealed to me, but when my friends Doug and Skinny invited me to join them in Michigan's wild upper peninsula for deer season, I embraced the opportunity to spend some time in nature. Michigan boasts a vast population of White Tail deer, and Doug and Skinny hunted every year. They were the experts, equipped with the proper clothing, rifles, gear, and know-how.

"Just bring money," Doug said.

"And beer," added Skinny.

I had both of those, as well as time. I had just been discharged from the US Army, where I had served two years in Germany. I thought I deserved a little R&R. I was drafted at 18 and sent to Basic Training at Fort Knox, Kentucky. I was fortunate not to be shipped to Vietnam, but I was never one to shirk my duty. I would've gone to defend my country. Unfortunately, I lost two good friends there and more than a few guys I knew from the neighborhood.

The drive from Ann Arbor to the Upper Peninsula took about ten hours on I-75, made longer by the folded camper trailer we towed. Traffic diminished as we ventured further into the northern country. The towns we passed grew smaller and smaller, while the distance between them increased—separated only by vast groves of white pine.

In the late afternoon, we crossed the Mackinac Bridge, which connects Michigan's lower and upper peninsulas. Far below, the deep and frigid Mackinaw Strait marked the meeting point of Lake Huron to the east and Lake Michigan to the west. We continued for another 100 miles or so before we came upon an abandoned wooden church with its steeple askew. Doug pulled over onto the dirt shoulder, turned to us, and whispered, "This is my secret turn-off."

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He turned left onto a trail and, after a few miles, coaxed the Suburban onto an old fire road, sliding into the ruts of icy mud. We felt the camper bounce several times before finally settling into the ruts behind us. After about five miles of switchbacks and dead ends, we pulled into a small clearing. Doug positioned the camper by driving the Suburban in several tight circles, like a dog preparing its bed. Finally, he stopped and turned off the car. We sat in silence for a minute. A drizzle fell, and a mist hovered just above the ground. Giant pines, firs, and other conifers surrounded us. Doug rolled down his window and took a deep breath.

“This is it, guys. The Michigan wilderness. This is our home for the next five days.”

Skinny pulled out a bottle of Wild Turkey bourbon and said, “I’ll drink to that.” He took a long swig from the bottle and passed it around. I took my obligatory deer hunter sip, but before I could hand it to Doug, he stepped out of the car.

“We’re burnin’ daylight. Let’s get the camper set up.”

Doug knew his camper well. He deftly unsnapped the cover and began to bark orders. Skinny and I felt like day laborers working for a prick boss, but we complied. We were all eager to establish our new home. Before long, we unzipped the entrance, and Doug lit the propane stove. Soon, the camper was aglow with warmth and safety, and we shared some smoked Menominee fish we had picked up at one of the many roadside shops along the way.

“No snow yet this year. Gonna’ be hard to track,” Doug said between mouthfuls of Menominee.

“You’re right,” Skinny said, tilting the Wild Turkey and dribbling some on his bare chest. “But it’ll show up.”

Gathering around the propane stove, we shared stories, creating a lovely refuge from the winter wind and rain that pelted the canvas roof of the camper. When the discussion turned to hunting tactics, I

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climbed over the small kitchen table to my upper bunk. I cozied into my zero-degree sleeping bag, opened a small, zippered window next to my head, and looked outside. The cool breeze felt refreshing against my face, still warm from the propane stove. The rain had ceased, and I listened to the collected water dripping from the wet pine needles, hitting the ground with gentle plops.

I pulled out my old portable radio and extended its bent antenna. The only signal I could pick up was from a student radio station, WUPX, at Northern Michigan University in Marquette. I heard the sweet voice of a student DJ named Cindy, who called herself "Cinnamon Girl," likely inspired by the recently released song by Neil Young. Through the crackling radio, she announced,

"You have the pleasure of spending the night with Cinnamon Girl on WUPX radio, 91.9 on your dial, bringing you all the latest groovy hits from the campus of Northern Michigan University. This next one is for all you 'Deer Daddies' out there. Only about 24 hours until opening day, so I want you to be sure and take your families waaaaaaay out to your best hiding spots and don't come back until the gunfire stops."

Then, she played a song called "Feel Like I'm Fixin' to Die" by Country Joe & the Fish.

The next morning, I woke up to the smell of fresh coffee brewing, and Doug served up a nice breakfast of bacon, eggs, toast, and more smoked Menominee. After we got squared away, he unfolded a topo map of the area and pointed out where we'd be setting up for the hunt. Each of us would be about a mile apart. Later that day, we ventured out to explore the area. From the camper, we took a main trail heading north, all of us dressed in our orange hunting suits and wet weather gear.

As we walked, only the sound of our footsteps could be heard on the damp ground, although we caught glimpses of small forest animals scampering across the trail ahead of us, in full retreat to their secret places. From morning to dusk, the sky presented only subtle shades of gray. Angry, dark clouds

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scudded over the tips of the giant evergreens. The area possessed a remarkable, colorless beauty, even in its wintry grayscale.

We reached the end of the main trail, which split into several paths: one heading east, one west, and another that followed a small creek flowing northwest. That was my route. Doug pointed out that there was a slight rise about a mile in that overlooked a valley.

“It’s a great spot to set up a blind. Keep an eye out for deer beds along the way. Once you arrive, make sure to position yourself agin’ the wind,” lectured Doug, stroking his black beard.

It was enjoyable to hear him say “agin’.” His vocabulary had transformed into that of a true outdoorsman. It stood in stark contrast to the precise language I’d heard him use as a chemist.

I followed the path along the creek until it began to curve into a densely wooded area. The path shrank to an overgrown rut, and I did my best to navigate it. After about an hour, I stumbled upon a fallen log blanketed with thick green moss. I sat down to rest and enjoy the quietness.

Eventually, a Snowshoe Hare wandered into the area, and when it saw me, it sat back on its haunches and sniffed the air. Sensing no danger, it slowly continued on its way. Then, two Fox Squirrels appeared, playfully chasing each other around and up a tree trunk. Suddenly, very close to me, an easy-to-identify Pileated Woodpecker—a large, striking bird with a red crest and black body—landed in a tree, the slender branch bouncing several times under its weight. Soon, its machine gun-like staccato began as it searched for insects. Observing how the wilderness comes alive when you sit quietly and become part of nature was a real treat.

The rain picked up again, so I decided to head back to camp. When I reached the camper, Doug and Skinny were already inside. Doug was going over his maps, and Skinny was stirring a large pot of chili with a mess kit spoon.

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“Smells good, Skinny,” I remarked as I walked in.

“Oh, it will be,” he replied. “Don’t forget the rule of deer camp cooking: if anyone complains about the food, he becomes the cook for the rest of the trip.”

“Thanks for the heads-up; I’m sure I’ll love it.”

“There you go, you’re catching on.”

We sat at the table, and after a questionable chili dinner, Doug and I told Skinny it was some of the best chili we’d ever had. After cleaning up, we played poker for the rest of the night and hit the sack around eight p.m. Doug wanted to wake up early, walk the trail in the dark, and be in place when dawn broke. I climbed up to my berth, fully intending to sleep. But after a few minutes, I reached for my radio and tuned in "Cinnamon Girl" to hear more of her woodsy philosophy. I caught the end of “Papa Was a Rolling Stone” by The Temptations.

“Cinnamon Girl here on WUPX Radio, broadcasting from the campus of Northern Michigan University. I’ll be with you until about midnight tonight, bringing you some special vibes to help you study for finals, so don’t go anywhere. This isn’t the time for beer pong. Also, today marks six months since my little brother started his camping trip in Vietnam. Happy sixth, Justin! We all love and miss you.”

“Well, sports fans, tomorrow is opening day, and it’s open season for just about anything with four legs. To all you hunters out there in your manly deer camps, they’re calling for more rain tomorrow, so why not just stay high n’ dry and play cards all day? Much more fun than shooting Bambi.”

Then she played a song called “I Ain’t Marchin’ Anymore” by Phil Ochs.

At four a.m., Doug’s wind-up alarm clock rattled me awake. I hung my legs over the edge of the bunk and closed my eyes, hoping for just a few extra minutes of peace. But Doug and Skinny were

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already up, banging out a quick breakfast and brewing enough coffee to fill our thermoses. I slid to the floor and got dressed. Fifteen minutes later, we hit the trail, flashlights guiding us through the light rain. It was still dark when we split up, and once more, I made my way back along the creek and into the woods toward the valley.

After an hour of hiking through vines and underbrush, I heard something ahead. I switched off the flashlight and fell silent. Something was moving around me, but I couldn't see what it was. I lowered myself to the ground, sat cross-legged, and waited until it was light enough to see.

As it grew lighter, I spotted the outline of an animal about ten feet away. Then I noticed the unmistakable Zorro mask. It was a large raccoon digging in a puddle covered with wet leaves. I turned my flashlight back on and moved toward it. It stretched onto its hind legs, flailing its arms over its head like some lunatic. It growled, hissed, and swayed back and forth, baring its teeth at me as if it wanted to rip my throat out. I jumped back, startled by the level of aggression. I slowly backed away and found a way around it.

I resumed my patrol, searching for signs of deer. Running out of trails, I pressed on through the Tag Alder, stopping every few feet to free my boots from the thicket. It was exhausting. After about half a mile, I came across a meadow. Then, just as Cinnamon Girl had predicted, the sky opened up. The rain turned into a deluge, and I was getting soaked even through my wet weather gear.

At the meadow's edge, I saw an enormous fir tree with long, verdant branches flowing away from the trunk. As the rain poured down on me, I ran to the tree, lay on my stomach, and crawled underneath the foliage toward the center. The forest floor beneath was covered with dry, brown needles. The wind outside howled, moving the branches up and down menacingly, but I was warm and comfortable inside this natural cathedral, enough to remove my wet outer clothes and hang them on a branch. I wrapped my rifle in my jacket, laid it to the side, leaned my back and head against the trunk,

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and took a deep breath. I pulled the winter air into my lungs, along with the earthy smell of fresh pine needles. I decided this would be my bivouac camp until the weather cleared.

I unwrapped a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and poured myself some coffee. It was just light enough to read, so I took out a paperback I had brought along titled “Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance” by Robert M. Pirsig. A writer friend had recommended it to me, and what better place to indulge in a bit of Eastern philosophy? After reading a few chapters, the words became blurry, my eyes closed, and the book slipped from my fingers.

When I woke up a couple of hours later, the wind and rain had finally stopped. I crawled to the edge of the tree branches and poked my head out. The entire forest was blanketed in about a foot of snow, and it was still coming down. It was already getting dark, so I put on my outerwear, grabbed my backpack and rifle, and crawled out from under the tree. I stood up and looked around. The old trails were completely concealed. I began trudging through the thick snow in what I believed was the right direction to camp. After about an hour, I came across some fresh tracks and, thinking they might belong to another hunter, bent down for a closer look. To my horror, I realized they were my tracks. Somehow, I had walked in a big circle.

I felt a panic growing inside me. I didn't want to be out here in the dark. I guessed a direction and scrambled as quickly as possible through the snow-covered brush, my heart racing. I got about 50 yards and suddenly came face-to-face with a buck. I stopped, breathing heavily, probably hyperventilating. Neither the deer nor I moved. It felt like both of us were stunned by this unexpected and bizarre encounter. Our eyes were locked for what seemed like minutes. I had the time to gaze into its soulful, dark eyes, see the vapor rising from its nostrils, and watch the falling snow settle on its long black eyelashes.

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I slowly pulled up the rifle and pointed it at him, safety off, index finger on the trigger. Let your breath halfway out...squeeze the trigger. I thought about what would happen next. There would be a loud explosion in the silent wilderness. A chunk of hot lead would zing through the air, separate the velvet fur, penetrate the heart, and its eyes would fade into a dull, blank stare. A pool of red blood would slowly spread on the fresh white snow. I felt sick.

I reflected on the futility of shooting this beautiful deer. I remembered the moment I heard the news about my friend, lost in Vietnam—his lifeless body, face down in a rice paddy, far from home. What was his sacrifice for? How is this any different? A life is a life. I knew if I didn't kill it, there's no way Doug and Skinny would understand how I felt.

“What? You didn't shoot that fuckin' deer?!”

But if I did kill it, I didn't think I could deal with it. I thought Cinnamon Girl would understand.

I lowered my rifle, took one last long look, and slowly walked away. I heard the deer bolt and dart off into the woods. The buck had slowed me down, and serenity replaced the panic. I pulled out my compass, a small map I had drawn, and my flashlight. Over the next two hours, I methodically made my way to the creek, the path, and the main trail leading back to camp.

On the main trail, I noticed the faint footprints of Doug and Skinny heading in the same direction. When I got within a quarter mile of the camp, I saw two flashlights approaching me. As soon as I flashed my light, the flashlights abruptly turned around. It's nice to be missed.

That night, there was the usual banter about sightings, snow, poker, and drinking. I turned in early and listened to Cinnamon Girl, who still voiced her concern for the deer.

“Heard a lot of gunfire last night, and I hope you're all talking about the ones that got away. Breaks my heart to think otherwise. Tonight, I have a gift for y'all from John Lennon.”

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I unzipped my window a bit to watch the snow continue to fall. Tears welled up as I reflected on my experience that day. I wanted to call Cinnamon Girl and share what had happened. I wanted to talk to her about a war we couldn't win and let her know I would pray for Justin's safe return. For the first time, I felt a profound sadness for the friends I lost there and for my only brother, who was killed at the Siege of Khe Sanh. I drifted into a troubled sleep listening to the song "Imagine."

The End