

# THE STRAIGHT SHOT

*The Quest: A True Story Part 1 of 2* by Jess Hardin

Every hunt is in its own way a quest, not for meat so much as meaning. And true love can be as elusive as any deer. I've saved most of ol Joe's letters, the way I collect certain old magazines, small mammal bones, and various worries and cares. His handwriting has never been very good, mind you, nor is it getting any better.

Letter To The Author, November 1967:

"Got my first deer today, on my 16th birthday. Imagine that! Used a swell Springfield, and took a picture of Pa squatting next to it. Feeling fuller than I ever have, sad and satisfied all at the same time. Spread commmeal near his mouth where he fell, like I read the Sioux used to do."

Joseph's been hunting the rugged mountains of the Southwest every Fall for a full two decades now. It's on these long rambling walks, carved osage bow in hand, that he thinks about his deceased father the most. Usually he pictures him standing like a tree clinging to the vertical banks of a Dakota dry wash, anchored by roots of will and unspoken love of place, resisting the storms of change in proud silence.

His dad had always been a stoic sort, who seldom spoke about how much he loved his wife. But it was clear from the half century they spent together through thick and thin, and from the way he regularly visited her grave after she died, head bowed and hat in hand. He always drove his old station-wagon out to the cemetery when it was too hot or stormy for the exercise of casual sentiment, at those times when nobody else was likely to be there to notice the tear in the corner of a softly blinking eye.

Nor had the old man talked much about his love for the treeless hills and rabbit grass where they lived, but it showed in his allegiance. Seldom did he go even as far as the closest town, except for essential supplies like seeds for planting or a good deal on motor oil. Neither county fairs nor rumors of a circus ever seemed like a good enough reason to travel more than thirty miles in any direction from the place he called home. His idea of a vacation had always been seven days in a row where you didn't have to go anywhere, and nothing less than a funeral could draw him out of state. His "boy" had inherited the same stick-to-it-iveness, and in time it would become the source of his greatest suffering.

Perhaps that's what being "indigenous" is all about: a certain unwillingness to leave, passed down from one generation to the next. True, the boy grew up to commit his life to a different skyline, several states to the West—but they both adhered to the same primal creed: find the place that feels like home, and then stay damn close to it. For Joseph this meant the southwest corner of archaic New Mexico, ten miles from any satellite dish, thirty miles from the near-

est unscrupulous real estate agent, a two hour drive from any yuppie boutiques or New Age workshops, six hours from what passes as the halls of state government... and over a thousand miles from New York and the site of the collapsed Trade Center, from Miami rush hour traffic and "The World's Largest Mall." It meant a certain watershed, a particular canyon, an exact bend in that river that maps called the Frisco. But to Joseph it would always be the "Sweet Medicine."

Letter To The Author, Nov. 1973:

"Not sure I'll ever be able to hunt again. Thought about taking the Marlin to look for squirrel, but it just isn't the same anymore."

He didn't start hunting again, in fact, until ten years after the end of "that crazy Asian war." And when he finally did, he was determined to make it a sacrament, an art, a quest.

He hadn't killed anything bigger than a fly since getting back from Nam— had promised himself, in fact, never to eat another piece of meat until he could take it in the ways he imagined the Native Americans took theirs: with love and with prayers. He'd seen too much blood spilled without a pause for meaning, the squealing hogs hoisted on hooks above the slick linoleum floors of the Custer slaughterhouse, the bodies of pajama clad Viet Cong, the amputated arms and legs of his fellow marines shipped home in black plastic ziplocks. The boy hunter, the lover of ribs and chops and gravies now asked that nothing but vegetables and breads be served him.... until that magic moment when he could make the taking of life sacred again.

When Joseph next killed it wouldn't be because of either necessity or orders, but rather, as a rite of passage back into the food chain— into the cycles of birth and perish, spirit and flesh. It was going to be a ritual, as all the best hunting had been before meat started being something that comes from a cold cellophane wrapper. It would be the re-welding of a link to his and our ancient primal past, a rite of passage into the responsibilities of life through the ministrations of an honorable death.

Letter To The Author, December 1981:

"Made a fine bow, the old way, and covered it in rattlesnake skin.

"Hunted near the land once, and spent another three days checking out the area between Cuba and Chama. Sure felt good to be hot on a track again. Didn't see any fur this week, but I'm sure I will next."

Joe was a very "particular" fellow, and he could only see it happening one way: with a stove he'd scraped and cured himself, loosing an arrow fitted before a ceremonial fire, unleashing death like a song, like praise, like love. At that moment he would know himself as in-

separably connected to the deer he would finally eat, and to the spirit in all of life. With the release of the string he would be washed clean... and perhaps in the process, find himself just a little bit closer to home.

He found a scoped rifle lacking for a number of reasons, and considered taking an animal at long range out of the question. It reminded him of the arcing mortars and laser guided "smart bombs" that prevent the predator from locking eyes with his prey, the killer from feeling the terror and indecision of that which is about to be stilled. No, it had to be a bow, hand made from wood he gathered in North Dakota after his daddy died. He'd use arrows made true in an ancient shaft straightener found in a New Mexico cave, and fletched with the feathers of a road-killed hawk.

After all, a bow would bring him closer to the quarry—in a deliberate act as intimate as making love, and as intimate as blood. He would revel in the holy connective moment: that second when the four legged becomes conscious of the price it will pay for its inattention, and the two legged assumes responsibility for its intentional demise. Joseph sought no exemption from the turnings of the wheel of mortality or the unyielding laws of karma, but rather, an opportunity for personal redemption — redemption that required his re-becoming a conscious participant in the dialog and dance of death. This time he would feel in his own chest the animal's lungs, aching from a futile uphill run. He would wince from the shock of the arrow, as it slices between the ribs and on into the beating heart of his deer.

Yes, on top of everything else it had to be a deer, and not a dove or elk. For reasons only Joseph understood, no other species would do for the sacramental spilling— whether a ten pointer or fork-horn, lithe Sonoran whitetail or heavy mountain muley. Maybe he wanted to see his approving father again, reflected in those brown saucer eyes. Or maybe it would symbolize the closing of a circle: a man returning to what he remembered as the beginning, so that he could finally start again. Either way he passed up shots on javelina, as easy as it was to locate and approach them. Sun dappled turkey were entirely safe, even when he was lucky enough to surprise them chasing grasshoppers through the windswept beeweed. Gorgeous merganzers and gambels, immigrant ibex and white fleshed fish might work their way back into the larder later, but not until a maiden carving of dark red venison.

"No way around it, this is the year! Be watching for me to surprise you with some steaks."

Joseph felt bad anytime he had to refuse my wife's fine roasts or heirloom chicken soup, but he'd make up for it by eating an extra slice of her woodstove pie.

(continued in Part 2)



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