

THE STRAIGHT SHOT

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



Letter To The Author, November 1988:

"Made a medicine bag out of brain tanned buckskin, and filled it with cornmeal. Saw several deer from a primitive tree stand, but the one old boy was smart and stuck to the cover, while other three were illegal spikes and not for me."

They said Joseph wasn't one to "settle for less" — not that he could afford the finest things, but that he knew what he wanted in life, and would rather go without than accept any substitutes. These included things like an old Smith sixteen, quick to the shoulder. A vintage Dodge truck, even though parts were hard to get and the insurance nearly double. And a certain little piece of hard-to-get-to New Mexico property, when it seemed no where else would do. He'd had plenty of chances to get married, but at fifty he was still keeping one eye peeled for "Mrs. Right." He was holding out for a gal who would get as excited and teary-eyed as he did, gazing at a pine forest in first light.

I knew Joseph to turn down dates with exotic gals from the African dance class because he found them too "city-fied," and he stopped dating a beautiful equestrian sugar-mama after she failed to appreciate the smell of the soil when it rains. He passed on a shot at a passionate poet, because she didn't write any sonnets about New Mexico, or the Gila, or the rising Rio Frisco in the Spring. He'd wait as long as it took to find a woman who already shared his hopes and needs, values and beliefs. He wanted someone pre-equipped with the necessary intensity and commitment, arriving in the midst of signs and omens with her own canyon dreams. Someone with hungers that nothing "out there" could satisfy.

Ideally, she would have a child's capacity for laughter and awe, and a woman's wisdom and lust. She'd be familiar with the smell of freshly emptied shotgun shells and Tularosa catfish flaking and blistering over a backwoods fire. He pictured her loving both Hank Williams and Miles Davis, and being quick to skip and dance even when she thinks no one's watching. She would likely sport the brown skin of an Indian or a Gypsy, of someone who spends her best hours outdoors— with a river of dark hair coursing down a slender but muscled back. She'd stand strong in the face of beer swigging trespassers, but cry every time they put on a sentimental video ("Please let me go!," Heidi sniffs. I want to go back to the mountains with Grandfather and Goat Peter!). But if there was a single most important requirement for the woman of his dreams, it was this: she'd have to fall crazily in love with the same splendid chunk of planet Earth that he did, joyously tending to its every need whenever she's home, and aching to get back anytime she's away.

Joseph would promise to the right woman, the way he was promised to his land. He'd pledged to protect that forty acres from every present and future

threat, as one might guard the safety and happiness of a daughter or wife. And as is often the case, paying for the land turned out to be a necessary first step in its guardianship. With no work in the lower counties, he found himself three months at a time in too-trendy Santa Fe... much, much too far away.

Letter To The Author, November 1993:

"Still missing that ornery redhead, even though it's best for both of us that she split.

"Passed several does grazing at the golf course on the way home. A mite aggravating, I admit. But no matter what else I ever do, Fall will always be the season of the chase, its clarion call leading me to that heaven that is the solitary hunt."

Mercy, how he resented the barrios and ranches being perverted by the twin processes of gentrification and urban sprawl— but he hated the artificiality most of all: the framed walls, stuccoed over in such a way as to look like sun dried adobe. The over-priced hotels masquerading as ancient Indian pueblos. The poker faced tourists, hoping to look like locals in their mass produced concho belts and blow-dried hair. He liked to tell people how putting new shopping strips in the old city was like putting a polymer stock on a pre-'64 Winchester. He was sure something was fundamentally wrong about a community where plain ol' coffee was hard to find, but every convenience store had a selection of flavored espresso you could buy.

He'd found a good paying but uninspiring job (perhaps the most insidious kind of all!), working for a middle aged divorcee with a half inch of black goatee she proudly refused to pluck. A sympathetic ex-girlfriend gave him a good deal on a windowless studio in her fenced backyard, and the bulk of his check went to cover the installments on the land. What little cash was left over went to cover gas, medical, and an occasional box of number 8's just to keep the eye in shape. Every morning he'd get up and step outside, then face south towards the fabled mountains of his need, glowing like an Oz or Valhalla in his mind.

Oddly enough, it seemed like Joe saw deer everywhere he looked since he got a place up north. They'd work their way down from the Pecos high country and the range they call the Blood of Christ, graze right up to the ski resort at the upper end of town, and walk out onto the fairways of the Country Club below. They'd trip the electric doors of Santa Fe malls, and feed on the flowers bordering manicured lawns. But come season there were seldom any bucks to be seen, and Joe only hunted in season. On trips from Colorado to the Gray's Ranch on the border with Mexico, he stalked like the best of them. But quiet and purposeful as he was, the old vet hardly ever got within arrow range of anything with horns.

"How about that sweet Jane? She loves gardening, and can cook up a storm," my wife would ask him.

Letter To The Author, December 2000:

"Got a chance at a nice buck, but sunk my arrow in an alder instead (Note: there's no way to dig a homemade point out of the wood without wrecking it).

"Trying to get down to the land more. It's a struggle, but then I guess it's not supposed to be easy."

Some people think it's his hard-headed obstinacy that keeps ol' Joe going. Maybe so. But as much as anything else, it's been a belief in miracles that puts the powder in his barrel and the wind in his sails.

Joseph may have found that good things and genuine characters were getting few and far between. He could see that the odds were considerably stacked against the success of any noble or meaningful pursuit. But at age eight he'd discovered an obsidian arrowhead buried in a bleached deer skull, and it had been the heading of a dream that led him to his special land.

Just because something wasn't likely, didn't mean it couldn't happen. Humanity could grow to distrust developers, tune in to the wisdom of children, and cherish every wetland big enough to float a duck. We could create green belts around the cities, and regrow the neighboring wildlife habitat. It was possible that someone could start making an affordable double, and marriages could start lasting forever. That dams could be lowered for the sake of tummy-pleasing salmon. Raw logs could remain in the local economy instead of being sent overseas to multinational mills. Leather bound books could become more popular than plastic laptops, and the ugliest hound find a home outside the pound. He could get that deer during the last daylight hour, on the last day of the season. And his long lost love might be only a river bend away.

Perhaps she'd surprise him on his favorite hiking trails, and be just as pissed off as him about the increase in foot traffic. It was even possible she'd follow the river all the way down to his place, in search of the few deep spots cold enough for the elusive Gila trout. She could call him tonight, saying she'd heard he "knew a lot about guns," asking to meet and discuss the value of a silvered Colt revolver or inherited Fox double barreled shotgun. She might even be a cute UPS driver, looking beyond the shoulder of the road to the mountains between Silver City and Old Frisco. Could be that making deliveries was just a way to cover the rent on a little house on the outskirts of town, while she dreamed of moving to the country and finally settling down. Or maybe it would be an impassioned artist, showing her discomfort at having to wear make-up for a presentation at the Ducks Unlimited auction. A friend of a friend, coming to help with riparian restoration. A wild foods gatherer, in search of her archetypal hunter. She might arrive at any moment. And any season, could be the season of the kill.

"This is gonna be the year. I tell you, I can feel it!"

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