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The Compassionate Hunter

IT'S A COLD NOVEMBER MORNING. A thin layer of snow covers the forest floor, reflecting the silver light of the moon. I have been sitting silently in my hunting spot for maybe 15 minutes, trying to be as still as possible. The forest, however, feels anything but still. There might not be a more active, intense time all year in these woods than this window of time during the annual mating season, or "rut." Bucks are roaming the woods chasing the scent of fertile does with little regard for anything other than sex and establishing dominance. Does, likewise, are less cautious as they start to ovulate and their bodies fill with excitement for a partner. Their changing scent will bring in potential lovers. For a time this annual dance of courtship and intimacy eclipses all else. For a while the deer are possessed by an insatiable urge.

As I sit shiftlessly in the woods, the feeling is palpable. The forest is quiet, but there is an overwhelming sense of activity, electricity and excitement silently buzzing through it. Maybe I'm imagining it because of all the activity I've seen over the past couple days in the forest; either way I can feel it. My eyes are wide open, watching. My ears soak in every noise with anticipation. On mornings like this, it

is somehow very easy to sit silently in the woods and stay energized. Even if I don't see any deer, I'll still have harvested a deep feeling of groundedness. After sitting like this for some time, I think I hear something in the distance. A faint crunching of crusty snow.

It's barely audible, far off in the distance, but steadily approaches. I straighten my back, trying to keep still as my anticipation grows. My breath condenses in the freezing air in front of my face, reminding me how cold it is.

The morning light has now fully taken over from the moon, which has dropped out of sight.

The distinctive noise of hooves crunching gets closer as this deer meanders along. It comes into view, through the bushes. It's a buck, with antlers shaped like two pronged forks rising from his skull. He is heading right along the path that leads by me, and will pass about 20 yards from where I sit as it heads toward a nearby clearing. I should get a clear shot. As I sit, watch and prepare myself, I notice how beautiful he is.

As he approaches, seemingly unaware of my presence, I prepare. I flick my safety off and ready myself for a shot, adrenaline pumping through me. As he comes directly in front of me, I lock my aim over his heart. Then he pauses.

He is probably surveying the area for the source of a sound. I must have made a noise. At the end of a deep exhalation, I squeeze the trigger. He makes a sudden bucking movement, digging his hooves into the ground, and bounds into the bush.

For the next thirty minutes I stay put, not wanting to spook the deer and cause him to run farther if he has bedded down nearby and is alive. When enough time has passed (and it feels like an eternity), I get up and walk to the spot where the deer was standing when I shot. There is blood staining the snow, accompanied by some hair, too. I definitely hit him. On this morning the snow is my dear friend, as it holds a trail of blood that may lead me very clearly to my prey.

I only have to follow the patchy, red-stained path for a couple minutes before I come upon him, collapsed amid the protection of a

thicket of salmonberry bushes. His body is motionless, tongue sticking out of his mouth, eyes wide open. He appears to be dead. Still, this is a large, strong creature, so I grab a fallen branch and gently touch him with it in tender spots—his mouth, his belly, an eye—testing for a reaction. There isn't any, but I still stand and wait a few minutes before going any closer.

I stare at his body, his body that had been so full of life just a few minutes before. I look into his eyes. Eventually I approach him. I get down on my knees and give him a hug. His body is warm, his muscles loose; there are few chances to be so close to such a beautiful, powerful wild creature.

I say a simple “thank you” and admire him for a while longer in silence, before beginning to dismantle his body. I will spend the next several hours working steadily; first gutting my kill, then carrying it home (or, rather, pulling it along the snow and heaving it up over logs and other obstructions), skinning and butchering it right away, before it has time to freeze solid in the ice cold air. Feeling grateful.

I was initially going to call this book *The Ethical Hunter's Guidebook*. It is meant to be an exploration of and guide to hunting from a conscious, ethical perspective. It is a guide for those that come to the act with pure intentions, motivated by a desire for healthy food that comes directly from the land where they live, rather than an incomprehensibly complex industrial food supply; a practical manual that explores the ethics of killing at the same time. There are, after all, countless ethical reasons to point a caring person toward hunting.

Wild meat is more sustainable, comes from a happier, healthier and more ecologically intact place than even the most elegant organic farming can approach. None of the customary manipulation and abuse that humans employ to make the land say *food* (clearing, plowing, irrigating, weeding, fertilizing, spraying, feeding, etc.) are necessary for this nourishment to exist; it's not a product of human meddling. On the contrary, it comes into being of its own will, in accord with the land. Depending on how and where one hunts, the environmental footprint can be tiny. Hunting doesn't support big

agribusiness. It's as local as it gets. And, of course, it can be an incredibly valuable resource for individuals and families that want an affordable source of nutritious, local, ethical, grass-fed meat.

Hunting one's own meat also provides one with the most honest, intimate understanding of its true cost. Once one's own hands are stained with blood, the mind and heart are also touched by the complex, humbling and profound reality of this relationship. It was while thinking about this relationship, the dynamic interaction between predator and prey, hunter and hunted, that I realized my initial title for this book, *The Ethical Hunter's Guidebook*, wasn't going to cut it.

Ethics are by definition products of the rational mind; logical conclusions about the nature of reality from which we build our sense of right and wrong. They are matters of the intellect—matters of the intellect that are incredibly important and valuable, but we're talking about hunting here. Or, to be more exact, we're talking about *killing and eating*. About life and death; subjects that can only really be approached in all their fullness and complexity by going into the *heart*.

To adequately address the depth of the subject, this had to become a guidebook for *compassionate* hunting; for those who hunt for any or all of the above ethical and economic reasons, but who also feel a sense of deep respect and reverence toward their prey, who are interested in approaching hunting (and all of life) as something sacred.

On one hand this book is a practical guide, filled with basic information that will help beginning hunters approach the act with fundamental knowledge and confidence, and offer even experienced hunters some information on how to use their kill more completely. But it's also about much more. It's about consciously coming into contact with death and how that death is transformed into our bodies and into life. It's about acknowledging and embracing aspects of reality that our society has become disconnected from. It's about breaking ourselves open to a sacred experience that is completely

grounded in the fabric of our lives; in the food we eat and how we get it.

Compassion and hunting

I can honestly say that the deer I described at the beginning of this chapter, who I quietly spied on that cold November morning, was one of the most beautiful creatures I have ever seen. He was one of the most beautiful creatures I have ever seen, and yet I killed him. This sounds like a terrible mistake, like it never should have happened at all. But there is a place deep inside me that knows it was right, a place that knows it made complete sense. I saw that deer in its aliveness, grace and beauty. I felt admiration and respect for him. And I then extinguished that flame of life. To nourish my own. This is a relationship that feeds, humbles and fascinates me. It's also the paradox of compassion and hunting.

A friend recently told me how ironic it is that some of the most impressive conservation work being done in the US is funded by organizations made up of hunters. How bizarre, she remarked, that the people preserving and protecting habitat for wild creatures are the very ones who make a pastime out of killing them. As a hunter, I didn't find this bizarre or surprising at all; hunters have more directly invested in the preservation of healthy wild ecosystems than most other people. As someone who at one time was not a hunter, and who still remembers the popular conceptions and misconceptions around what that label means, however, I completely understood what she was saying.

Many people have a picture of the *hunter* in their imaginations that looks a bit like this: a macho, male, aggressive, over-stimulated, gun-toting redneck who likes to blow the heads off of innocent wild creatures for kicks. Someone with no respect for nature or life. Now, I have to acknowledge that this image is based on a certain level of truth. The fact is, there is a spectrum of hunters, a spectrum of what hunting can be and can mean. On one end of this spectrum are

people who head into the bush to shoot something just for the thrill of it. That's all. They might have a picture taken posing proudly beside the grizzly bear or bull moose they have slain to document their impressive feat. They do not eat any of this animal, they just take its life for fun, as if it was a character in a video game. While this kind of conduct represents just a tiny fraction of hunters, and is illegal in many states, it does still happen. Then you have hunters who actually take the meat from the creatures they kill for eating, and at the very other end of this spectrum you have those who use all of the meat, bones, fat, organs and skin of their prey, when possible. These subsistence hunters aren't hunting for "sport," and the creatures whose lives they take are not part of a "game." They are hunting so they can eat, and taking personal responsibility for all that entails with humility and respect. They have a deep respect for the animals they kill, since their own sustenance depends on those very animals. This book is about those hunters and that kind of hunting.

Hearing stories about disrespectful hunters and declaring that hunting is wrong is about as thoughtful as seeing pornography and deciding that sex is wrong. Both acts can be beautiful, sacred things, but both can also be senseless, oppressive and outright ugly. Which direction they go in has less to do with the simple, mechanical act itself and more to do with how it is approached; the integrity, empathy and respect of those involved. Hunting itself is neither inherently good or bad. It can be a very humane and responsible way of getting food. It also has an inherent potential to crack the heart of the hunter open, to stir up from the depths of their being huge questions about the nature of life and existence. But it can also be as shallow and disconnected from emotional and energetic reality as pornography is. This all depends on perception and empathy; on whether or not the hunter is open to *seeing* their prey as a sentient being worthy of respect, *feeling* the depth of what is really going on when they choose to take its life and fully honoring the sanctity of that life.

Take, for example, the "sport" of catch-and-release fishing. Every fall I sit on the banks of my local river during the salmon run and

watch, in a kind of disbelief, this strange phenomenon. If you aren't familiar with catch and release, it is a type of recreational fishing where one catches a fish, then carefully reels it in as it struggles and fights against you, pulling with all of its force against the metal hook that has pierced its mouth or lodged into its body. Depending on the size and species, this struggle can take a good few minutes. Once you have successfully landed the fish, pulling it into your boat or dragging it onto the land, you remove the hook from its face or body and toss it back into the water from which it came, a little bruised, battered and torn.

In the fall as I sit on the riverbank and watch this strange phenomenon—dozens of grown men in hip waders torturing fish for fun—I wonder to myself: *What the hell is going on here?* Fish are not characters in a video game—they are living beings that feel pain. What are these guys doing?

This is where perception and empathy make a difference. Presumably the anglers that play this game with unfortunate fish don't see the fish as having feelings, as being sentient. Or, if they do, they don't see that as mattering. They don't empathize with the fish; they don't at any level feel what the fish feels, cringe at the pain they are subjecting it to for no reason besides entertainment. What is really interesting about this is that most of the men I have watched practising catch-and-release fishing are passionate nature lovers, naturalists and outdoorsmen who truly love getting out and being in the wild. These are men who have a great deal of knowledge and respect for the natural world, men who are generally very kind people yet somehow have a certain inner switch that has been turned off with regards to these fish; the switch that controls empathy.

I am interested in living with that switch flipped on, because one experiences a shallower level of reality otherwise. Those fish *do* feel pain. And, in the context of hunting, when we kill something, *we are* taking the life of a sentient being out of this world, something beautiful and worthy of reverence and respect. If we don't acknowledge and open ourselves to this reality, our experience is just a fraction of

the truth. To approach hunting (and all of life) with an open, compassionate heart is the only way one can actually experience its full reality. It is this subtle difference in perception and empathy that distinguishes what I call the *compassionate* hunter. And despite popular perceptions that would suggest otherwise, a great deal of hunters fall into this category.

Compassion, of course, is not something people typically associate with hunting. After all, killing animals and having compassion for them don't really add up, do they? The answer to this question is complicated, but my own journey and experiences have given me plenty of insight into it. Whenever I am confronted by this question, my first thought is that we might be asking the wrong question. A better question may be: *Is there any way of living that doesn't require death to sustain it? Is there really an escape from this dilemma, or is it actually hardwired into this reality; an inescapable, integral and (nowadays) hidden part of everyone's sustenance that hunting simply makes obvious?*

Yes, that's a better question.

Hunting is different from other ways we get food because the associated cost, the loss of life, is made unmistakably, unavoidably apparent. Hunting means killing. It means blood and death. There's no escaping it.

Buying a loaf of bread or a brick of tofu, however, don't appear to have anything to do with this harsh reality. But if we go beneath the surface, the idea that these foods are somehow less harsh, less costly to life, quickly reveals itself to be an illusion. Allow me to explain.

There are in fact countless invisible lives that are extinguished as a by-product of modern farming; combine harvesters alone (used to harvest grain crops) are responsible for mincing any rodent, groundhog, snake or other unfortunate creature in their path during harvest. These lives are invisible to us and disappear unnoticed. They are collateral damage. This fact alone pops the bubble of guilt-free eating that many vegetarians might live in.

I want to dig a bit deeper than this, though.

It is an incredible thing that wild animals such as deer are the product of a rich, healthy, wild ecosystem. It is incredible that one can sustainably harvest food from such a place. Indeed, harvesting some animals, in some instances, is very beneficial to their home ecology. The reason I find this so incredible is that most of the food we as a society eat comes from a place that is almost the exact opposite. In order for a field of corn, soy, tomatoes or wheat to exist you need to actually remove a healthy, intact, wild ecosystem. You need to eliminate habitat for many wild animals (and, consequently, the lives of many wild animals, since their population is a function of food supply, aka habitat), not to mention the lives and homes of countless other wild plants, insects and so on, in order to plant your chosen species. There is no land that is simply sitting, empty, waiting to be planted and cultivated by the hands of humans. You have to make it produce, and this process, if we extend our empathy to all of those unwanted plants and animals that need to be removed or killed in order for it to happen, begins to level out any moral superiority the farmer might have thought they had over the hunter.

Within this framework, hunting is actually incredibly graceful. The only moment where the flow of life is disrupted is the very last: the moment of the kill. For every other moment of its life, the hunter's prey lives in a state of completely unhindered wildness and freedom, wandering through distant lands, looking for love in all the wrong places and sometimes the right ones. In farming, on the other hand, the flow of life is disrupted from beginning to end, and in the end there is still a death, even if it's only a carrot that is killed.

My point here is not to make a case that hunting or gathering wild plants are morally superior to other ways of getting food, but that nourishing ourselves involves a loss of life, some kind of death or killing, *any* way we do it. This is one of the great paradoxes of being alive and being human, and one that hunting, because of its explicit connection to this truth, brings us face to face with.

The hunter knows exactly what the cost of their meat is; they saw the whole story unfold with their own eyes. The consumer, on

the other hand, can never really know how to measure the true cost of their food, what pain and loss might have been part of its creation. There is a safety in this, a protection from disquieting truths, but it's the safety of ignorance. In this sense hunting is more honest, more raw.

In the coming pages, I hope to fully embrace the two sides of the act of hunting that I have touched upon here. This book is filled with practical, how-to information, but it also has that switch I mentioned earlier, the one that controls empathy, turned on, because otherwise it would only be holding a hollow shell of the truth. Hunting can connect us in a very deep way to the web of life, to a reality that is pure, that is grounded in the timelessness of the earth and the processes of creation that furnish our sustenance. Killing creatures for food has fed and continues to feed me on many levels, and has also challenged and continues to challenge me on many levels. That's what makes it interesting.