

Where The Deer Had Been

I wear a watch on my wrist. Every tick sounds a second. I'm out in the field waiting for a deer to show. I waited for what felt like days. The sun was starting to set when I finally saw a deer peep from behind a bush in the distance. I steady the rifle in my hand, holding my breath to stop the natural shake in my body. Through the scope, the deer looks up. Suddenly it's staring at me. I stare back. The deer stills, as if trying to intimidate me.

Beep. Beep. Beep—

Crap. I forgot to turn off the alarm on my watch.

The noise startles the deer, and it runs off. I groan, my fist slamming into the ground. I stalled too long to get the shot. All season, I hadn't gotten a single hit. It felt like I was losing my element. I fell back and stared at where the deer once was. It was getting dark, and I didn't feel like moving. I felt like I couldn't do anything right. Not at work. Not in my marriage. Not as a father. Not at hunting.

So I sat.

I sat until the field disappeared into darkness. Cold air crept into my lungs as distant coyotes filled the night sky. The sun eventually took her place again, letting me bask in her morning warmth. I could feel the wasted night on my face and hunger rising in my body. Still, I sat—rifle in my hand, staring where the deer had been.

Morning dew soaked into my clothes. In the corner of my eye, small white dots scattered through the grass. I hadn't noticed them before. Snowdrops. They reflected the early sun in their purity.

Beep. Beep. Beep—

My watch went off again, waking a version of me that should have been asleep in bed. I turned it off, took a breath, and grabbed my rifle. I was determined to get a shot. I could close my eyes and imagine the deer's fur, the rough antlers, the metallic smell of blood.

I opened my eyes and stood. My boots dented the grass as I scanned the field again. One deer. One shot. I lowered myself onto my knees and forearms and pressed the scope to my face. I steadied myself and waited—not for the deer, but for my hands to stop shaking for reasons beyond the cold. The field stayed empty. Somewhere, time continued without me.

I clicked the safety on and stood. The grass rose back into place, erasing any trace of me. As if I wasn't meant to be there at all. And for the first time all season, I knew when to stop.