



The Perfect Day

The good news, I told myself, is I get to keep hunting.

BY RICK BASS. ILLUSTRATIONS BY STAN FELLOWS

The best hunting seasons are not necessarily the ones in which you are fortunate enough to find an animal early in the year, or even necessarily at all. When I was young it seemed that way, but the older I get the more pleased I am at the end of a day in which I simply see new country, and perhaps get close to an animal, but do not take one, for whatever reason. Even a stumble, a mistake with the wind, or the cracking of a twig that blows out the herd doesn't upset me anymore; that's just how it goes, sometimes. I've been fortunate to kill a lot of elk over the years, so that more than ever, it's the quality of the hunt I anticipate, not the outcome. I used to hear older hunters say that kind of thing all the time, and I didn't understand what they were talking about, and wasn't sure it was something I looked forward to: becoming such an old-timer myself, and losing my obsession, and the uncomplicated way of measuring success—meat—that was so well-defined. Because I loved that equation, and the way it pulled me over and through the mountains, I did not want to let go of it, and viewed its going away or metamorphosis as a lessening.

It is not a lessening, though. It is a deepening and a widening. The pinpoint precision of the kill is no longer the focus, but everything else is still there, and richer.

All week I had been hunting new country, new ridges and basins, and had been finding fresh tracks, though not the animals. I kept bumping them late in the day, and rather than pushing them too hard, I had backed off and then returned the next day. At one point I found where the elk herd had bedded down in an old abandoned hunting camp, which would have made quite a Christmas card, if I had known the old-timers who had once briefly inhabited it. I envisioned snapping a photo

of the elk all arranged warm and cozy beneath the bare lodgepole frames of the tent-spars, the bulls' sweeping antlers like the spars themselves, and sending the photo to the old boys in their rest home, with a caption, Wish you were here, or, The neighborhood's not the same without you.

I may not be explaining it clearly. When I go to bed each night, knee-sprung and leg-hammered—groaning, I'm so tired and sore—that ache, that diminishment, is my gain. Someday soon I'll be like those old gone-by codgers, unable any longer to enter the territory I so love, and with the prey, always, ultimately victorious. These days, the longer I go without killing an animal, the richer my days are, for the thing I love does not end.

Still, when I cut new tracks in the fresh snow, I do not feel that way. When I come in behind them and have the wind in my favor and the elk are wandering through the woods just ahead of me, I never feel that way, and I still want them as badly as ever.



Some nights when you go to bed you just have a certain feeling, a certain confidence, about the day to come. Part of it is an anticipation and excitement, but part of it is a calm. The fact that new snow had fallen the night before deepened this feeling the next morning. It wasn't so much an overconfidence as an awareness that all the conditions were right, and that it was easy to imagine things falling in place as they had in the past. I knew there were elk on the mountain, there was new snow, I was rested and had an early start, and the breeze was out of the north; I would go in from the south, walking quietly in that new snow. Best of all, the place where I was going was far enough from the road that I wasn't likely to encounter any other humans.

I drove and daydreamed, vaguely conscious of the idea that I was on one side of a dividing line—

not having meat—and that at the end of the day, driving back, I might well be on the other side. It wasn't overconfidence but instead more like the examination of possibility.

I turned up the old logging road, pleased to see no tire tracks in the new snow. The place I was going was steep and rocky and gnarly and the way there was difficult. Good choice, I thought, extending my goodwill to the seven billion humans who had chosen not to climb this particular mountain before daylight on this particular morning, you made a good decision. Stay in bed, sleep, be warm, read the paper. Enjoy your coffee.

Starting up through the forest, with every inch of new snow mine, I grinned like a kid, laughed out loud at how wonderful it—life—all is. I wish I could remember that every day of the year, but I confess to forgetting it sometimes.

I was surprised not to find them at first light in the basin where I had been seeing their sign. Maybe I had been a little overconfident. I had to decide whether to ascend to the ridge and work back downwind, back toward where I knew they sometimes bedded, or push farther on.

It was a joy, having the mountain to myself, and so much new snow. I decided to push farther on. The day was mine; why not? No other animals were moving, not even the deer—I always choose, in my excitement over fresh new snow, to conveniently forget how, in those first hours after a big snow, elk, in particular, hunker down, knowing that they are vulnerable. No matter: The farther I went, the more it would increase my chances of cutting tracks. It was the logic of overconfidence. I didn't know where the elk were, but every step I took was bringing me a step closer to wherever they were.



Near noon, I climbed up out of the clouds and into the yellow sunlight. I was in a stunted high-elevation lodgepole forest, up on a plateau, when I found them—or their tracks—looking as freshly laid in that deep new sunlit snow as they could possibly be. It seemed to me that the snow in the little craters of their hoofprints was still tumbling down into the wells of their prints—that the elk must be right in front of me, close enough to touch, and that somehow I simply wasn't seeing them, was looking straight through them. I could smell them, and their wandering trail bespoke an attitude of extreme leisure.

In the old days, I would have surged ahead. Here in the new days, however, I wanted to savor the moment—the butter-yellow sunlight on the new snow, the freshest tracks ever, the blue sky with its frost crystals shimmering, the perfect stillness in the woods, the solitude, and the extreme good fortune of my having slipped in downwind just behind the elk, rather than coming across a skein of tracks just a smidge upwind—and though I was eager to see what lay ahead, and very much wanted, with the familiar old intensity, to shoot an elk, I also wanted to look around and think about things a bit.

It was a big transition, to have gone from so many hours of trudging on through deep, silent snow, without seeing so much as even a squirrel, to suddenly being in the midst of the hunt, the midst of the moment. I wanted to retire all my previous daydreaming, and yet the daydreaming would not easily go away. It was a confusion of demeanors, a convergence of two entirely different rivers, and I sat on a fallen log and ate my lunch and waited for the elk to get a little farther out ahead of me.

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They weren't going anywhere. Where could they go? All the world was snow, and all the world was deep forest, and there had been no humans on this wayback mountain all season long.

They wandered in a braid, cows and calves and young bulls and surely at least one giant bull. Some of their tracks stepped over logs and branches and others went around them. The sunlight was beautiful; it seemed somehow like the light that might exist on another planet, with a shimmering sundog when I looked at it, and the snow so cold and dry and deep that I made no sound at all, further accentuating the idea that I was living in a dream, or another world.

With the clock ever so slowly starting to wear down on my body, I was hunting hard, intently, but savoring it. It was a perfect day: How many days are perfect? Maybe all of them; but some, I think, are more perfect than others.



They were moving so slowly: stopping to paw at the kinnikinnick far below as if digging or mining for buried treasure. I had never encountered a more leisurely band of elk—eight, ten animals?—and I couldn't believe they weren't right in sight. Only the density of the forest prevented me from seeing that short distance ahead, into the future, and I hunted on, as carefully as I knew how, totally immersed in an intensity of awareness of sight and sound and cautious movement. I had the wind in my favor, and the level sun behind me as it trudged slowly from east to south toward west. The only thing less than perfect about the whole set-up was how godawfully far I was from the car, but so what? I had all year to pack out. I like packing out: not getting in a hurry, just humping one big packload out after another, one a day, for days on end—a slow transition away from the dreamtime world of the hunt, and back into the routine workaday world of man.

There was lazy movement behind a tree right in front of me. A big, dark animal with a nest of antlers was nibbling at something on the other side of the tree, not ten yards in front of me, and calmly I lifted the rifle and looked through the scope and saw that the antlers were those of a mule deer, and then the deer—a big one—stepped out into the open and looked at me, standing there so very close.

The woods were filled with calm. Sometimes there are just days and moments like that, and we move from one to the next, it seems to me, as if across stepping stones in a broad and shallow river.

The mule deer was still chewing. He looked at me a long time—somehow he understood he was not in danger—and then, almost as if with resignation, he stotted off, his swagbelly swinging: the requisite escape, but maintaining his dignity at the same time.

Back following the elk, I could see that the big bull's tracks separated from the herd; he had peeled off to the north to bed in some thick timber, while the herd went to the left, and I was faced with a decision: meat or antlers? The herd would be bedded down in the patches of sun of the old larch and pine forest just ahead of me—but the big bull was closer, and I wanted to see what he looked like. About the old assertion that big bulls are tough—which they sometimes are—I wasn't worried: I have found no bull so tough that 30 days of aging won't tenderize and flavor the meat into the same exquisite taste of a younger animal.

It was like something from an elk-hunting textbook: The bull was high-stepping over logs and pushing through chest-high brush. The snow had spilled from the leaves and branches and needles as he sought to cover his backtrail in such a way that the approach of another would be audible.

When he jumped up off his bed in front of me, not 15 yards away, I thought he was a moose, he was so dark and tall. There was a clump of trees between me and him and I simply didn't have a shot. He kept those trees perfectly between us, and

all I could see was an occasional wide antler, or a patch of dark body, galloping up the hill.

I didn't think he'd seen me. I crouched and hid and watched the downwind ridge, knowing he might circle around to take a look at what had so rudely interrupted his midday rest. I waited 15 minutes, then took off after his tracks, and found where indeed he had done that, and had peered down at me and seen or scented me without my seeing him, and then bolted. I followed his tracks down the slope to where he had come barreling through the midst of his herd, spooking them, and taking all of them down the back side of the mountain, into what for me was terra incognita.

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The bull stayed with them for only a short distance, then must have seen or scented or heard me again, for his tracks bolted straight up the mountain, while the herd continued down.

I decided to save him for another year, and to follow the herd this time—in part because I knew an old bull like that would never let me get the drop on him, once he knew I was there, and in part because he was running ever-farther from the car, while the herd was at least for now headed back in somewhat that general direction—south, rather than east, toward where I had parked, but at least in roughly the same quadrant, the same hemisphere.

I followed them all day. They went straight down, through cliffs and rock chimneys and into little creeks, charging down slopes so

steep I needed to hold onto lodgepole saplings to keep from sliding. Then they went up. I followed quietly, sidehilling, thinking they would calm down, but they never did; always, the line of their tracks was the panicked single-file exodus of fear.

It was a couple of hours before they came up out of the creek and began, ever so gradually, to ascend and spread back out, believing they had shaken me, and not even really knowing what I was, only that something had frightened the bull.

It was all new territory to me; I had a general idea of where I was, and how I would get home—with or without an elk—but every step was new, and I liked that. After a long while—another hour or more—the tracks finally began to unravel, spreading back out into a tentative wandering that soon enough grew more confident, though the elk had not stopped to feed again, but were instead still moving, passing through the same long slants of cold yellow sunlight that I was. We were on a north slope and the forest was growing colder; puffs of steam rose from my breathing.

They led me to another plateau, more densely forested than the sidehill, and I knew they had to be getting tired, and looking for a safe afternoon bedding spot. I crept up over the edge of the hill and about 20 yards in front of me saw what looked like three vertical black bars hanging beneath a leaning lodgepole. The black was the exact color of the shins of an elk, though it puzzled me that I couldn't see the animal, just those three slender shins, and I wondered why there was not a fourth.

I raised the scope and peered at the shins through the dark forest but still could see nothing else, just those three vertical black bars. I crept a little closer for a better vantage, looked again—it's got to be an elk, I told myself, even as another part of my brain told me elk have big orange-yellow bodies, tall antlers, dark eyes—and still the shins had not moved.

How odd, I thought; it must just be three trellises of moss hanging straight down. I crawled in a little closer and the shins unfolded into a tangle of elk, and then there was the herd busting loose all around me, with some animals galloping south and others north; and once again, the chase resumed, the trailing through the deep snow, the never-ending saga of failure and desire.

Half an hour later I saw the young bull moving carefully through the lodgepole and yellow light, his antlers like those of royalty—not huge, but what elk is not beautiful?—and when I fired, he dropped in the deep snow, and—except for the gutting, packing out, butchering, and wrapping—the year was over, and my gratitude for the great luck of the day was no less than it had ever been, and all the more so, for having been led by the herd into new country.



As I was packing out at dusk, an immense mule deer buck—the largest I'd ever seen—blocked my path, coming up the game trail I was heading out on. It was blue twilight, still legal shooting light, and he wasn't ten yards in front of me. For long moments we beheld each other. He clearly did not want to step aside to let me pass, and doubtless smelled only the bull I had just killed. I felt that I could have reached out and touched him with the end of the rifle. The



woods were thick on either side of the trail.

Do you know what I mean if I say that his antlers were too large, and the deer himself too large, and, in the blue dusk like that, too regal, and too easy, and that my day had been already almost too perfect?

All my life, I have heard older hunters speak of such things—of letting trophy bucks pass—and now I was at that same place, as if at a threshold of something I didn't quite understand, but maybe didn't need to understand.

It just didn't feel right. I would never see a bigger mule deer but I had all the meat I needed and then some, and I had been hunting elk, not deer. Part of it might have been my advancing middle age and part of it might have been the cultural pivot of history itself—the new post-recession austerity—but in the end, a large part of it, I think, had to do with how beautiful the woods were that evening, and of how I did not want to break the quiet communion of the long

pack out with the sound of a gunshot.

Reluctantly, the giant deer took a leap to the downhill side, and then high-stepped around and past me, walking, not running, as if having known all along what decision I would make during this most perfect of days in one of the most perfect seasons, and situated perfectly and halfway between who I used to be and who I was on my way to becoming.

I suppose in theory every day is like that for each of us, but that particular cold, starry evening, there on the new mountain, it felt very much that the buck had opened a gate for me, and I had made the right decision, and passed on through it, as had countless other hunters before me, in all the generations of mankind. A point where hunger yields to pleasure, and a point where enough is enough. A point when beauty matters more than ever before, and with the day's shadows, though slightly longer, ever more beautiful, ever more meaningful. 🐻

