

CHASING WILD

MORGAN SNYDER

PART 1

Luck is the combination of
preparation and opportunity.

– C. HAZELWOOD

“We pierced the veneer of outside things. We suffered...and had grown bigger in the bigness of the whole. We had seen God in all his splendours, heard the text that nature renders. We had reached the naked soul of man.”

- SIR ERNEST SHACKLETON

The arrow flew intuitively, almost of its own volition. For that moment, my bow and I had become one. Upon impact, the bear whirled on its hind legs and thundered back into heavy cover. I was deep in the wilderness of Colorado's high country, the sky still colorless in dawn's early light. Little did I know, the adventure was just beginning.

Many years ago, a hunting mentor spoke these formative words: “Luck is the combination of preparation and opportunity.”

Never before had the relationship between opportunity and preparation been more apparent to me than on that crisp September morning.

Needless to say, the idea of “getting lucky” has taken on a whole new meaning. In the field, I consider it over and over again: “Luck IS a combina-

tion of preparation and opportunity.”

Mostly, the preparation is our portion, as students of the land, the animals, and ourselves. Opportunity is largely up to God. We train and we trust. We train that we might be ready, and we trust that we are sons of the Living One who has our best interests at the center of His soul, all the way, all the time, whatever the outcomes may be.

My hunting pursuits began over 15 years ago. I didn't grow up in a hunting family or in a hunting culture. Far from it. Argyle socks filled my drawer, and my wild adventures were confined to small pockets of untamed land gridlocked in a maze of suburban sprawl. God's wooing drew me into wilderness and hunting, the prize of which is much more primary than meat in the freezer (though that is a high value in our family culture).

Wilderness—and chasing Wild in its infinite forms—has become the central context for my validation as a son and my initiation as a man.

As this hunting season drew near, my good friend Brian and I drew a pair of rare and coveted archery tags, and with them, a dream of harvesting both an elk and a bear on the western slope of Colorado. I was going in for three days prior to Brian's arrival, both for final reconnaissance and, more importantly, for the time of annual solitude with God that my heart craves. Heading out in my truck, I began praying and consecrating the trip, connecting my heart with the Father and sloughing off the shroud of stress that the previous days and months had cinched around me, then settled in for several hours of open road.

Driving into the Arkansas River canyon and happily leaving cell coverage, I eagerly fired up the Scriptures on an audio app I'd downloaded, anticipating my soul being rinsed clean and fresh during these precious

hours of transition. I started with Psalm 1, moved into Psalm 2, and then... silence. The app just went out—so much for the grid independence the app promised.

But the verse that it stopped on was Psalm 2:8. Here's how it reads in The Message:

“You're my son, and today's your birthday. What do you want? Name it. Nations as a present? Continents as a prize? You're my son, and today's your birthday. What do you want? Name it.”

For a good 30 minutes, I brawled with the app, trying to coerce it into working, until finally it dawned on me what Father was saying: for this hunt—and not only for me, but also for Brian—this was OUR verse from Him.

“You're my sons and this is your birthday. What do you want?”†

When I hit cell reception again, I texted Brian and shared the verse, savoring the irony that both our birthdays were months away. “Happy birthday, buddy. Make sure you ask Father for what you want for this hunt. I'm starting to ask Him now.”

Hours later, as I neared the spot we intended for base camp, I noticed my apprehension rising. I'd prepared for months for this bear hunt—read several books on bears, trained my body for the backcountry through countless workouts on stairs and off-trail ascents with a 50-pound pack. With the exception of an eight-day filming trip for work, I'd shot my bow 55 days in a row, and I'd brought all my working knowledge and experience from past years—mostly failures and a few successes—along with me.

But this was a new level of apprehension. I knew I was pursuing—with only a bow and arrow—an animal that, if provoked, was far more capable of harvesting me than I was of harvesting it. Furthermore, this game unit was uniquely rugged and bear-enticing. Graced with undulating hillsides of ancient oak brush, the region attracts bears from up to 200 miles away. A hunting buddy who'd been there the previous year described that when the wind blew, ripe acorns pitter-pattered like raindrops as they fell from heavily laden branches onto the ground cover. Such prolific food offered ripe hope for an archery hunter heaven-bent on a close encounter.

Physiologically, autumn in the high country is, for bears, a season called hyperphagia. Bears feed up to 22 hours a day, putting on as much fat as possible to sustain their hibernation during brutal Western Slope winters. With these optimal conditions, the collision between opportunity and preparation can come at any moment of any day.

† To appreciate this verse is to understand that it is meant to communicate the radical and intimate generosity of a Father who loves to bestow gifts on His son. The journey from the self-sufficient life to becoming a son is revolutionary and has been the heartbeat of my walk with God these last 15 years. To become the kind of person who can risk receiving—both from God and from others—has been a harrowing and holy process. It is only through the continual process of extracting the deep question of my masculine soul from the many people and places I have given it over to, and bringing that back to a Father as the true place for which that question is intended to be answered, that I am, slowly over days and decades, becoming the kind of son who can anticipate and expect gifts from my Father.

It took this verse on this day to remind me of what I had again forgotten. My Father knew this verse was necessary to call me back from the erosion of self-sufficiency and living as an orphan to turn me back to the place He has portioned out for me, for each of us in His Kingdom.

The first morning, I hiked to a secluded watering hole we'd identified on the maps that could be attractive to bears in the midday heat. Interestingly, grazing leases for domestic cattle dominate this section of National Forest, and groups of cattle regularly shuffle through the drainages, feeding on grasses and leaving behind endless cow pies. As I navigated the chokecherry and snowberry thickets, the stench of cow pies smoldering in the heat of the day was noxious. I harnessed my senses and stayed as still as I could, settling in for hours of vigilance over the water hole. Between the heat, the stench, and the still-lingering racket from the world inside of me, it was an appropriately jarring baptism back into the wild.

After five hours, I sensed movement and glimpsed first sight of a bear out of the corner of my eye. I was caught off guard, as I'd seen so few bears in hunting situations before. This was a small bear, and I immediately registered that it could be a cub. And if it was a cub, there was sure to be a vigilant sow following behind. Colorado hunting laws prohibit harvesting a sow with cubs, and though I was tempted to draw my bow, I thought, *I am not going to arrow a cub and end up with an angry sow hunting me.* Yet I felt the dilemma: if it wasn't a cub, I didn't want to pass on what could be my only chance.

Feeling the pull of opportunity, I began to draw, knowing I had a fraction of a second to make a decision.

Here was the moment: I had this bear in my sights...and then discretion edged its way into my soul.

I lowered my bow, choosing to pass.

In my past as a bowhunter, I have at times been quicker than I'd like to admit. And in recent years, I have specifically asked Father to grow dis-

cretion in me, that I might be quick to assess a shot but slower to release an arrow. I've learned the hard way: with both a bullet and an arrow, once it's released, it can never be called back.

As quickly as I made my decision, the bear moved on. Sure enough, no mother ever came, suggesting in fact it wasn't a cub. (I have learned since it was most likely a two-and-a-half-year-old bear, which is the first year of independence. Two-and-a-half-year-olds are typically small and easily mistaken for cubs.)

Several days stacked up, void of any more bear encounters, as I covered mile after mile, boots on the ground, glassing and looking for both bear and elk sign. In drainage after drainage and hillside after hillside, I noticed that most of the scrub oak were completely barren: no acorns. Even the chokecherry and serviceberry bushes, though lush with leaves, were virtually naked of fruit. The reality began to sink in: though this section is typically a berry and acorn bonanza, there was almost no feed. And without feed, there would be far fewer bears in the area than seasonal population data suggested. (We later learned there had been a Mother's Day freeze that decimated the acorn and berry population. Bears that typically traveled from hundreds of miles to feast in this particular section had headed to different country in search of food.)

As I prepared for Brian's arrival, I realized the likelihood of harvesting a bear this year was plummeting. Discouragement crept in like a slow-moving winter storm. I'd spent six years accumulating preference points and six months training for what perhaps was the hunt of a lifetime, and I would very likely go home empty-handed.

In the darkness of the third morning, I headed to explore another remote drainage. Praying and worshipping under the flume of the Milky Way and



FRESH BEAR TRACK IN SOUTHWEST COLORADO

the unwavering stance of Orion, my perception of God's presence heightened. I felt our Father's nearness, His overwhelming kindness, and His unfaltering leadership over my life. Quickly, my soul ignited with Presence. I was receiving the greatest treasure of any hunt: an overwhelming awareness of God Himself that often prevails after several days in the context of wilderness and solitude.

Then I heard these words from a Father to His son, from my Father to me: "Son, I invite you to let the primary mission of this trip be to help Brian harvest a bull." The clarity of Father's voice reoriented me: I could immediately feel my taut muscles relaxing.

Over the next several moments, my soul relaxed as well, shifting from the pressure of strategizing about arrowing a bear to ease in the abundant goodness of my Father. I knew the Father was interacting with me and inviting me to choose love for my friend Brian, and to love Brian's dad and his brother, who also had highly prized hunting tags. He was assuring me that while my day would come in the fullness of time and in His abundance, I could relish coming through for Brian. (Brian and his dad had both patiently invested 16 years of preference points for this particular opportunity.)

By then, the first light of day was brilliantly coloring the horizon, and in this intimate space, I shyly felt like it was being painted just for me. A deep sense of peace pervaded my body: I had my orders for this mission. I consecrated my motives afresh to God, and as Isaiah said thousands of years ago, set my face like a flint toward assisting Brian and his dad (Isaiah 50:7).

PART 2

The Beckoning of Divine Adventure

“Before the battle is joined, plans are everything. Once the battle is joined, however, the plans go out the window.”

-GENERAL EISENHOWER

The distant glow of Brian’s headlights was a welcome gift as I sat alone by the campfire in the evening light. More than a decade of chasing Wild together had hewn our friendship, both in the wilderness of Colorado and on the frontier of the masculine soul. It had all begun in 2004, when I’d walked into a course at the Colorado Division of Wildlife called Elk Hunting 101 (which could also have been called Elk Hunting for the Unfathered). I didn’t know the first thing about bowhunting and was eager, hopeful, and nervous. There were three instructors: two were crusty and intimidating, and then there was Brian, a devoted bowhunter, earnest about the land, the animals and the chase. He embodied the kind of skillful, passionate, and conservation-centered hunter I wanted to become.

I pursued Brian and, in time, we responded mutually to the friendship that our Father was orchestrating. Over the years, we spent time in the field together more and more regularly, both of us growing as men and hunters. Brian mentored me in the ways of the Wild: in hunting, species, habitat and biology. And I, in turn, had the privilege of offering him some thoughts and invitations along the interior path of the masculine soul. The

opportunity to help him harvest this bull of a lifetime was a deep joy, more than a man could ask for in any adventure chasing Wild.

Though we were hunting a sought-after public unit that claimed a strong population of mature bulls, the weather over the next few days posed to be a nearly insurmountable foe. From before sunrise to after sunset, we were in the woods in search of elk. Hot, dry days and moonlit nights kept the elk quiet and secluded. The few elk we did spot were at distances well beyond the reach of our primitive hunting equipment; try as we might, we could not close the gap. As those who archery hunt on public land can attest, encounters are rare, and the advantage is on the side of the beasts of the forest.

One hot afternoon, we decided to offload most of our gear in order to scout a fresh section of remote country. While we had pored over maps and it looked promising, this would be our first chance to put boots on the ground. Given the ambitious distance we wanted to cover, traveling light would help conserve vital energy.

After an hour of two-track on the ATV and several miles of bushwhacking on foot, we found ourselves enveloped in lush elk country. All around us were signs of intense rutting activity: tree after tree ruptured where rut-crazed, battling bulls had laid them waste, ripping off both bark and branches as they polished antlers and deposited scent to declare their dominance over other giants of the forest.

As we initiated our return hike back to basecamp, the maps of the terrain suddenly coalesced in my head: there was a line of several unexplored drainages through which we could piece together a possible hunt from where we were back to base camp.

After double-checking the map, I said, “Eagle, I have a plan. What if you hunt solo from here back to basecamp? I’ve scouted the first few miles of this drainage from the basecamp side, and it’s incredible country. While you hunt this line, I’ll hike out the way we came, get the ATV back to basecamp, and help your dad with his hunt tonight.”

With a full heart I looked him in the eye and said, “Bri, you enjoy this. Receive this as a gift from your Father. Do what you love. Be who you are. Wild is waiting.”

And, recalling the advanced Word the Father graciously brought to us days earlier in the river canyon, I finished with this: “After all, it is your birthday.”

To grasp the significance of this opportunity, it helps to understand a bit of Brian’s story. Brian is a Senior Wildlife Biologist by vocation, and, like many good men, much of his strength is spent coming through for other people. Professionally, he navigates the complexities of a government agency to come through for hunters and outdoor enthusiasts by crafting conservation-minded and sustainably based management of land and animals. When not at work, he is devotedly coming through for two young kids, his wife, and friends in sacrificial and heroic ways. Yet for Brian and me both, our coming through is not always from a place of wholeness and love. Sometimes it’s from a place of hustling for worthiness, to borrow Brené Brown’s phrase. In our unfinished places, we tend toward the God-void belief that “I am only worthy of love when I come through for people.” The desperate false self tempts us to miss and minimize the soul care that Father brings, foregoing the living water intended to sustain us over the long haul.

In this sacred moment, Brian was being extended an opportunity to respond to the invitation of Psalm 2: “You’re my son and today’s your birthday. What do you want?”

He was at a juncture in the masculine journey familiar to us all: Would his heart risk rising in sonship or shrink back in fear of judgment and disappointment?

I knew, as his friend, that few things in this world would give him more joy than hunting through this rugged, elk-rich terrain in the lush dusk of this September evening. And all the more from a place of sonship at the right hand of his Good Father.

We were as unprepared for the evening’s hunt as a couple of guys in a rowboat asked to pull a waterskier. While we had our bows, we were short on the food, water, rain gear, and first-aid and survival gear we always carry for a backcountry hunt. But combining everything we had, it was enough. I laughed out loud imagining Brian’s towering, 190-pound frame relying on the rain gear I packed for my 5-foot-10, 150-pound body. Picture a look-alike contest between Arnold Schwarzenegger and Danny Devito. Within minutes, however, bow in hand, my friend was ready to plunge into the wild.

A hush fell, not only on that dense stand of aspens, but on our souls as well; we were in the holy terrain of true brotherhood. Both internally and externally, we had covered a decade of rugged, body-breaking, heart-demanding, transforming ground together. We had received so much from Father in all of it; now, we were suspended on a precipice of receiving even more. For a moment, we were soul to soul.

C.S. Lewis says this: “Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another, ‘What? You, too? I thought I was the only one.’”

I looked him square in the eyes. “Eagle, take your time. Be present. Receive everything God has. Oh, and happy birthday.”

He descended into the drainage and was quickly obscured under the amber glow of an ancient canopy of aspen. I could feel the Father’s affection for Brian on a surpassing scale, my heart flooding with a holy willing for his good. Worship and awe flowed with tears.

Oh, Father, thank You that through a decade of excavation You have allowed me to become the kind of man who can begin to ask the questions: What is God’s story? What is God asking of me, and how do I will what is Good for God in this moment? In this story?

Thank You for training me. Thank you for transforming me, by day and by decade.

The fruit of this training and transformation was the privilege of participating with my Father to love my brother. And the privilege of witnessing a man being who God created him to be, doing what he loves, in the sublime universe of His great and generous Father.

It was well after dark when Brian’s dad and I returned to basecamp from our evening hunt. And when we did, we found Brian, with one less arrow in his quiver and a remarkable tale to tell.

After the steep descent into the drainage, he’d entered habitat that had fresh testament to the presence of elk and virtually no sign of human activity. After still-hunting through compact oak brush, he was soon pinned down by a herd of feeding cow elk for nearly an hour. When they fed into the distance, he meticulously advanced, drawn to what sounded like a bull

wallowing in the late afternoon warmth. Though thick cover obscured Brian’s view, the sounds intensified, and his hunch was confirmed: a regal king of the forest was slathering his majestic ivory-tipped antlers in a muddy wallow like Michelangelo slathering plaster on the Sistine Chapel. Brian moved in closer, still undetected, yet unable to put his eyes on this giant. The raucous elk soon moved from the freshly torn up wallow to decimate a stand of young oakbrush.

With the wind just right, Brian continued to advance on the bull until only the thrashing oakbrush was between him and the great Wapiti. All went quiet for a moment. Brian instinctively nocked his arrow, preparing if Opportunity offered a shot. And it did: the unsuspecting bull chose to head down drainage, providing a momentary window for Brian to shoot. Already at full draw, he released the arrow for a full pass through.

Dusk was advancing quickly, and Brian knew he would have to wait until morning to recover the animal. Still in awe, he trekked the long miles back to camp. Around the campfire that night, we insisted he recount every detail. Based on the facts of Brian’s story, we were convinced he’d successfully harvested and, God-willing, we’d find the elk at the end of a blood trail at first light the next morning.

Nonetheless, Brian contended with the fear all hunters face: What if he had only wounded him? Sleep eluded us as we played back the story over again and again in our minds.

At our 4:30 a.m. wake up, I greeted Brian with a “Happy Birthday!” and rattled off some potential names for his bull I had dreamed up during those sleepless hours. Years before, we had established a tradition of naming every animal we harvest to ensure that the story endures long after the

blessed meat has been consumed. More than anything else when we are chasing Wild, we are hunting a story of which to be proud for a lifetime.

Setting out in the dark, we covered the five-mile two-track from base camp in the ATV, then moved quickly by foot toward the site of Brian's harvest, our headlamps casting narrow tunnels of light through the dense undergrowth.

We positioned ourselves in the ravine and began to piece the story back together. Soon, we found a promising blood trail; then, after several drops, it vanished. Sinking to our hands and knees, we spent an hour scrutinizing leaf and log, twig and grass blade, reviewing the iterations of routes the bull could have taken after the shot. It was as if the dense foliage had swallowed all sign of the trail. Every intuitive direction held no clues, and we were only 75 yards away from the point where Brian had connected his arrow the night before.

"Please, God. Please, God." I could hear Brian muttering under his breath, and he could hear me muttering the same under mine.

Suddenly, responding to a hunch to check out the more counterintuitive direction, I walked at a 90-degree angle from the final pea-sized drop of blood. Only a short distance away, I saw a large brown mass perfectly curtained under major growth in a hollow of the drainage. I moved forward. Sure enough, the mass was crowned with a giant rack of antlers with six ivory tips on either side.

It was the pearl of great price.

For a moment, suspended outside of time, I looked over at Brian with a grin so wide that nothing could possibly remove it. I had a succulent secret to savor.



Finally, when I could bear it no more, I casually spoke up. “Hey, Eagle, if there were a large, brown object with big antlers lying in this brush, could that possibly be your bull?”

Immediately, this typically well-mannered man shouted, “Don’t mess with me, Snyder! Don’t mess with me!”

He ran straight toward me, jumping logs and pushing through brush like a crashing bull himself. When he saw the animal in the underbrush, his face ignited with disbelief and wild joy. Tears come to me now as I remember the elation of that moment. We were brothers in the deep backcountry, together with our Father, harvesting a story of a lifetime.

And now the real work began.

We spent the next few hours field-dressing and butchering, carefully carving out all the edible meat and loading six full game bags. With meat, head, and hide, we hiked precariously up the ravine until we could get the spoils of war safely to the shade of a rough single-track trail. Brian’s dad returned to camp with an ATV and brought back the Carney Cart for its debut.

The Carney Cart is a single-wheeled, meat-hauling wonder. We had dreamed it up in past hunts, and Brian’s brother Terry, a true craftsman, had made version 1.0 come to life in his metal-working shop.

There was nothing quite like running the first field test of the Carney Cart with a giant bull. It turns out, a small deer would have been a stretch, but this bull was an impossible match. As an idea, the V 1.0 seemed ingenious: instead of hauling the meat out on our backs, we would load it onto a welded frame with long handlebars on each side that straddled a 26-inch mountain bike wheel. With the dual handle bars, one of us could push and

the other pull at the same time. Working that Carney Cart loaded with 225 pounds of meat through the thick brush was agony—and utter joy. We bitched and we moaned and we laughed as we slowly trudged our way up the trail, dreaming up versions 2.0 and 3.0 of this gloriously failed first attempt. I felt a fleeting camaraderie with the likes of the Wright brothers, and we longed to rewind the clock to 1903 to share a pipe and a pint and hear their tales of the first flight of man that had lasted a glorious 12 seconds and extended a whopping 120 feet.

Finally, 200 yards from the trailhead on the last load, the Carney Cart collapsed as the welds gave way and the entire frame tacoed upon itself. We had no alternative; deliriously, we shouldered the meat bags one at a time and labored across the happy finish line at the top of the trailhead.

Hugs and cheers abounded. Eleven hours after wake-up call, we had accomplished our goals: recovering the magnificent bull, caring well for the meat, and successfully transporting it all back to camp. We broke open a couple of cans of Starbucks espresso shots stashed in the ice cooler and set our sights on the elk steaks we’d feast on in celebration that night.

Yet there was still one more chapter of Chasing Wild to unfold. At that moment, the unattended remains of Brian’s elk carcass we’d left behind offered an unplanned opportunity to come face to face with a hungry bear.

With the minimal availability of acorns and berries this year, it was likely a bear would seek out the protein-rich remains of the elk carcass. Though it was a promising opportunity, it felt unthinkable to plunge back into the wild after we had labored to the brink to get out.

Looking back, I realize my decision to keep going wasn’t a merely rational decision; it was primal—I was compelled. Instinct took over. I have



become a hunter. And I have become the kind of man who knows that our most formative experiences come when we dare to consent to the invitation of Wild and join a quest on the frontier of the masculine soul.

I tipped my hat and turned back toward the deep wilderness. Now all preconceived plans were discarded, for in the words of General Eisenhower, “Once the battle is joined... the plans go out the window.”

I was going on instinct. And hope. Dreaming of a confluence, yet again, of preparation and opportunity.

We were chasing Wild. Little did I know how wild it would truly become before this story came to a close.



THE INFAMOUS CARNEY CART

PART 3

The word adventure has gotten overused.
For me, when everything goes wrong –
that's when adventure starts.

– YVON CHOUINARD, 180° SOUTH

“War is romantic only to those who are far away from the sounds and turmoil of battle... War brings out the worst and best in people. Wars do not make men great, but they bring out the greatness in good men.”

~MAJOR WINTERS, BEYOND BAND OF BROTHERS

Bow in hand and bear spray at the ready, my trudge back to camp that night was one of the longest I can remember. The adrenaline of the day's earlier events gave way to physical and emotional exhaustion. The solitary light from my headlamp created an eerie sense of loneliness and vulnerability in a sea of deep darkness beyond.

Earlier that afternoon, after depositing the final load of Brian's bull at the trailhead—and a brief celebration—I had refueled with water and calories almost mechanically, then headed back into the wild. While my best energy had been spent with Brian on the pack-out of his bull, the hope of an incoming bear called me back toward that faraway ravine.

By early evening, I arrived back at the bull's carcass. My strategy was to set up an ambush for a bear that might be drawn in by the scent of the

remains, which the thermals would carry down this drainage and beyond. The challenge was twofold: I needed concealment and a productive shooting lane. Thickets of oak brush, snowberries, and willows radiated in every direction, obscuring the carcass. I improvised, cutting a few branches as best I could to establish a possible shooting lane. I kept scanning the immediate landscape, noting every probable approach and hoping very much that the approach from directly behind me would not be the bear's first choice.

It was a 28-yard shot from the top of the rim to the carcass. The rangefinder showed me that from a 23-degree angle concealment, the most probable shot placement for a bear committed to this carcass would be 25 yards. The placement would have to be high, as the goal was to thread my arrow between the ribs and into the center of the vital area.

Pick your spot, place the 20-yard pin, up three inches, release.

I repeated the protocol to myself again and again.

I was ready. All senses on full alert.

And I waited.

Hour by hour, scanning, glassing, listening until the light waned. As shooting light faded to murky twilight, I conceded there would be no bear harvest tonight.

As the Navy Seals say, there are no easy days—"The only easy day was yesterday."

I arrived back at camp to discover that Terry, Brian's brother (and master craftsman of the Carney Cart), had arrived. With him came fresh provisions in the form of caribou steaks, cold beer, and endless stories. We laughed and toasted to Brian's bull that he had appropriately named Favor,

recounting each detail and nuance of the hunt again and again as shooting stars traversed the long slope of sky above us.

Given the Father's counsel, and now with Terry's arrival and another bear-hunting license in camp, I suggested Terry take the next opportunity to set up an ambush on the carcass. We made a plan to sneak in under the cover of darkness to be ready at first light for an encounter.

In the last moments of the night, tucked into a sleeping bag and savoring the starlit sky, I found myself returning to Father's original words to me: "This is primarily a scouting trip."

At 4:45 a.m., we set out in the dark and were soon padding through thick timber and oak brush. We shed much of our gear for our final approach on the canyon rim, hoping a bear would be below, ravenously gleaning the last bits of meat and marrow from the carcass. Terry carefully negotiated his way to the rim of the canyon, clearly a man who has put him time in chasing Wild for many years. I watched from a hundred yards back with joyful anticipation as he came to full draw.

Nothing. The carcass had been untouched.

We sat in ambush for a good number of hours before I made the trip back to camp, affording Terry the solitude of this holy place for the remainder of the day. He waited on full alert, patiently hidden along the rim rock of the drainage, until night's advance brought him back to camp.

At shooting light the next day, Terry faithfully returned to that lonely rimrock, waiting in ambush again all day: persisting through cold, heat, wind, rain, and—most challenging of all—drudgery.

And still, nothing.

Until 6:30 p.m.

He heard a tugging, the unmistakable sound of a bear pulling at the ribs of elk remains. In stealth mode, Terry worked his way over the rim.

Sure enough, there was a bear. Based on the positioning of the bear, there was no ethical shooting lane, so Terry waited again, hoping the bear would reposition himself. When it did, Terry quickly stood, preparing for a shot. And almost instantaneously, the bear caught his scent and looked up squarely at him. Abruptly, the bear turned and evaporated into the brush.

The hours of maintaining alertness in ambush mode are grueling, and the ecstasy and agony of a close encounter had taken its toll. Terry elected to use the next morning to refuel.

That left the early morning hunt on the carcass open to another hunter. Brian was eager to execute a particular strategy for his dad's elk hunt the next morning, and all the men agreed that the opportunity for this next attempt went to me.

Though I set the alarm for 4:45, Holy Spirit woke me promptly at 4:00 a.m. through the rustle of a coyote moving through our camp. I crept out of my sleeping bag, dressed for another long day, and plunged solo once again into the untamed backcountry to see what Opportunity might have in store.

After an hour on foot, I made it to the oakbrush knoll and initiated a painstaking stalk toward the ravine, repeatedly checking the wind. I stopped: the approach wasn't right. Given the subtle direction of the wind, my scent would likely alert any bear that might be feasting on the elk remains. Backing out and rethinking my approach was the only viable option. Yet to back out of an approach is one of a hunter's most difficult choices:

you've already invested in the current trajectory, and momentum invites you to set your hunch aside and stay the course. But I've learned the hard way over many years that you can't beat the wind in the backcountry, all the more against a bear and his exceptionally keen sense of smell.

Discretion won again. I backed out and headed north, working my way around the mountain to hopefully approach the carcass upwind. The sun had yet to break the horizon, and I came upon a beautiful granite boulder positioned like a pulpit in the center of this land of ancient oakbrush. I sat and recovered my breath, gazing at the sea of stars, and rested. I watched shooting star after shooting star skip across the sky's glassy surface. A thought came to me: This piece of wilderness has seen more Native American Indians than it has ever seen white men. Remarkably, less than a hundred years before I was born, the Ute Indians still hunted these lands with bow and arrow. With the exception of a more modern bow and an emergency location device in my pack, perhaps—if only for a moment—I was not unlike these hunters whom I admired so much. Sitting on that granite boulder in the silent pale of predawn light, I felt a deeper kindredness with these men who had gone before me than at any other time in my life, and the gladness and aliveness I felt was beyond description.

I was home. I felt deeply and uniquely me.

The words of Gerard Manley Hopkins came like the cool, morning thermal flowing past the left side of my face: "What I do is me: for that I came."

Before changing out of my layers to minimize my scent for the final stalk, I made a decision about this sacred place. I marked a waypoint in my GPS with the intention of one day passing it along as an inheritance to my wife and my children. Should I leave this world sooner than anticipated, I wanted them to be able to find this holy spot. I thought of my heroes John Muir,

Aldo Leopold, and Teddy Roosevelt, whose pioneering work in conservation would protect these wild, public places for centuries to come. I wanted to invite my kids and their kids to someday journey to this speckled, smooth, granite seat on this hushed mountainside for a Colorado sunrise or sunset. I prayed that one day they could come and feel connected to me and to the Source of the magnificent beauty that stretched in every direction.

Morning's first light was fast diffusing across the eastern sky. The GPS showed me I was still a quarter of a mile away from my goal. I began working through the oak brush, drawing upon everything I knew, everything I'd trained for, everything I'd learned through all the days of shooting, all the books I've read, all the experiences in the field—and most important in this past decade, all the failures. I had become a student of Wild, and I knew there were no promises out here. It's a very unforgiving land. And yet, as I took step after step, anticipation of an encounter brightened nonetheless.

I closed in on the ravine, the oak brush abdicating to aspen. As I neared the final destination, holy Intuition reminded me that the morning's cool thermals would pull my scent right over the canyon rim with an invisible grip the moment I drew close. If there was to be an encounter, it would have to be quick. *Go time.*

In one primal motion, I rose up, came to full draw and leaned over the ravine, quickly scanning the brush and the carcass.

There was no sign of a bear.

And then, movement.

There he was: jet-black, shoulders slighted humped, head lowered deep in the brush.

He turned, sensing danger. For a moment we were eye to eye, soul to soul, alone in the wild.

It's now or never.

Pick a spot, 20-yard pin, three inches high.

The arrow released faster than my consciousness, and what I registered next was a dark blur as the bear made a swift 180-degree turn and thundered at a full sprint down ravine and out of sight.

It happened. This moment. I touched eternity. Alone with my Father.

Chasing Wild.

I worked my way down to the elk carcass, where I hoped my arrow had connected with the vitals of the bear. Sure enough, I found my arrow and evidence of a full pass through: blood stretched from broadhead to fletching. The shot had felt solid, which was notable because I've released many arrows that were lethally accurate but lacked the sensation of a good shot. I truly believed that at the end of this blood trail, I'd recover the harvest of my first bear.

I hiked back to the granite pulpit, knowing I needed fuel for my body, and waited.

An hour's pause is the typical protocol before pursuing an arrowed animal to avoid bumping one that has bedded down to expire and driving it into far country without a blood trail. Against every instinct to pursue this animal immediately, I waited. Ingesting water and food, I celebrated with my Father. What I sensed was His delight and His words of intimacy and validation: "Happy birthday, son."

An hour later, I proceeded to the blood trail. It was much smaller than I'd hoped for. I followed it for several spots, then realized this trail was taking me out of the drainage and into even deeper cover. The distance the bear was covering introduced a doubt: perhaps the shot had not been lethal. Perhaps I was tracking an alive and wounded bear. I shifted strategies, deciding that was something I didn't want to do alone. I would attempt to find Brian so he could back me up in case this was a wounded animal I was pursuing. I started hiking out, moving really fast, faster than is probably wise.

It took me about an hour to reach Brian's truck by ATV. From there, I set off on foot to find Brian and his dad. With every half mile, I questioned my decision. *Should I have just gone in on my own after the bear? Should I turn around and go back now?* Fear of this story ending poorly mounted with every mile, compounded by the rising temperature of the late morning and a hostile concern that I was running out of time.

After more than a mile and a half, I sensed the Holy Spirit affirming me to pull out and pursue the bear on my own. I'd read that, unlike some other animals, when a bear is wounded it will not bed down, but will run until it expires. My fresh hope was that after a full pass through, the blood trail would eventually lead to an expired bear and not a wounded one. I left a note on Brian's truck asking him to come to help me as soon as he could. Within 30 minutes, I was back at camp, grabbing my full-frame pack and setting out again after this bear.

Pepper spray in hand, I painstakingly picked my way through the grass, willows, and snowberries, following one drop of blood at a time. After an hour expending the incredible energy required for blood trailing, discouragement and the first wave of panic rolled over me. More than four hours had passed since I'd shot, and I wasn't more than 150 yards from the point



of impact. The bear's path of travel seemed strangely haphazard, and I was finding less and less blood. Finally, the trail vanished. Minutes quickly turned into hours. I began going in incremental circles around the last pin-head-sized spot of blood.

Nothing.

Holy Spirit, would you please show me where to go?

The year before, I'd arrowed a beautiful six-point bull but never recovered it. The memory haunts me every day since. This would be two in a row. I'd done everything I knew to do; I'd practiced everything I'd learned, applied it all, and the shot had felt perfect. But the sharp discouragement of this withered blood trail cinched mercilessly around my heart.

If luck is indeed the combination of preparation and opportunity, I'd surely maxed out every bit of preparation possible. I was now banking on opportunity. And that felt painfully out of my hands.

Holy Spirit, where do I go? What do I do?

I sensed a leading to move toward a precipice at the end of the oak brush flat. It was a series of cliffs that plummeted off into obscure land below. Could this bear be at the bottom of the cliff? It made no sense, and so I went back to the last blood, searching, looking, losing hope.

And then, a bugle. It was Brian, making the agreed-upon location call. I cow-called in response.

In the eleventh hour, the cavalry had shown up.

I saw Brian, his big shoulders and his infamous meat pack and custom-made meat sling, charging up the ridge from below me. And I lost it. Everything I'd been holding together finally broke.

Like all good things of the masculine journey, this story was too much for one man to carry.

In my tears, in my exhaustion, Brian just wrapped his arms and his big frame around me and held me up. It was a moment of brotherhood and an experience of what it is to be loved only experienced in intense circumstances. Talking about brotherhood like that, the Fury tank commander said, "It's better than good."

I found my strength again, and my thoughts anchored in conversations we'd had over the years around Sir Ernest Shackleton and his monumental voyage with his brothers to the Antarctic. Though the scale of their courage and the intensity and longevity of their suffering eclipses anything I have known in the field, his words have become infinitely meaningful to our fellowship over this decade.

"In memories we were rich. We had seen God in all His Splendour. We had suffered,...heard the text that nature renders. We had touched the face of God. And reached the naked soul of man."

I knew that these moments chasing Wild with Brian were forging eternal memories of masculine fellowship and that, indeed, we were touching the face of God.

Calmly, Brian looked into my eyes and said simply, "Tell me what I need to know."

I walked him through every detail of the story and took him to the last spot of blood. Instantly, we were on our hands and knees again. Very quickly, he found a drop I'd missed. Hope revived, deftly untying the coil of discouragement that had constricted my heart. And now, breathing more deeply, my vision clearing, I found another drop, then Brian another. With renewed energy, we were meticulously working our way yet again on the trail.

A few hours later, Brian's dad and brother graciously showed up with fresh eyes and much-needed calorie-rich sandwiches from basecamp. Hope filled us all. Four sets of eyes piecing this trail together—we'd able to stay on it, at least for a while.

And then the trail seemed to lessen again. Brian moved toward the cliff and asked, "Could this bear have gone over the cliff?" Knowing I'd had that same sense earlier, I headed around the edge to see if we could navigate the rocky face. To my dismay, the compressed growth gripping the base of the cliff seemed impenetrable. Walls of thorn brush, chokecherry, and oak brush tangled with boulders the size of trucks. It seemed impossible for a man—or an animal—to go down into there. So I backed out and up to last spot of blood. Try as we might, we couldn't figure out a way over the edge.

And then we found blood. Significant blood.

It led straight off the cliff. All four of us stopped, silently registering this last blood that led over into the abyss.

"We've got to follow that blood." Brian grabbed a handful of branches and slipped over the edge.

It was unthinkable.

I took off again to the bottom, thinking Brian's route was impossible, so I'd have to find a reverse route from the bottom to the top. Once at the bottom, I used handfuls of foliage to pull myself up over the lowest boulders as Brian was using handfuls to ease himself down the steep face.

It was a tangled, glorious mess.

At last I had drawn close enough that I could see the side of the cliff above me. Then, resounding from the foliage above, these words:

"Snyder! I found your bear!"

It didn't compute, but I kept moving upward, determined to reach Brian.

Then I came upon a sight that will have me marvel eternally because of its scale of wonder and joy:

Brian and our bear.

Mortally wounded at the impact of my arrow clean into its vitals, this bear had taken off at a full sprint and attempted to find refuge in the dense brush edging the cliff. As he crested the edge, he expired and tumbled down the precipice, landing over 60 feet below with his body pinned against a crevasse within the cliff face. The structure of the rock serendipitously provided the essential shade that preserved the meat and hide during the long recovery in the heat of day.

Seven hours after the shot, we had found the bear with the meat and the hide intact.

It was supernatural.

We looked at each other and embraced. War whoops and tears all around.

The whole way through that pursuit, these words had anchored me, been my mantra:

You're a good Father. Your heart for me is not on trial. Your goodness is not dependent on outcomes. It's who You are—You write the best stories.

And a better story could not have been written.

Terry managed to lower my bow from above for a photo that captures a glimpse of the eternal moment. Then he made his way up from below with supplies to field dress Discretion, the name we fittingly bestowed upon this bear. The three of us were committed to one-trip the bear to camp—we all agreed that no one wanted to come back to this jungle anytime soon.

When we arrived, we tapped the Sons of Thunder keg once again, and story after story streamed around the campfire like the shooting stars from the night before.

That day, something was completed on that cliffside in the wilderness of Colorado. Some long-held question was settled deep in my soul.

The settling was quite independent of the positive outcome, and far more significant.

It was the harvest of a *knowing* that had been ripening in my soul slowly but surely throughout this decade of excavation.

God really is a good Father, and He truly does write the best stories.

I have a lingering habit of resisting His invitation to chase Wild. I have a lingering habit of holding back my participation and my consent to becoming more of a student and becoming more of a son.

But what my Father used this hunt to reveal is that those stubborn habits are breaking, and a deep, glad, trusting willingness is being forged. *Thank you, Father. May more of me belong to more of You.*

On that rugged cliff face, our souls had chronicled another chapter of Chasing Wild.


As hunting mentor Steve Rinella says, the meat crisis was over for yet another year.

But even more rich: While the meat will come and go, the stories live forever.

The hunt is still on.

And I will never stop chasing Wild.





What is your wild
and how are you
chasing it?