

## Hunting Trip

By Michael Boyles

*“Take the rifle. Put the stock into your shoulder. Steady. Aim for the heart. Breathe deeply, and squeeze...”*

He must have gone over this a thousand times at home in his father’s makeshift outdoor shooting range.

*“It’s time to step up now. Breathe deeply, squeeze the tr...”*

He tries to focus, tries to remember everything his father taught him, but he can feel his heart pounding inside his chest trying to escape, breaking his concentration. The child is eleven years old and this is his first “big game” hunting trip. His father taught him how he learned to shoot in the army, all he has to do is squeeze the trigger, but he isn’t sure if he can bring himself to kill.

*“Aim for the heart. What if I miss? Aim for the heart. Dad’s watching you. What if I can’t do it? You’ve practiced too much, you won’t miss. Breathe deeply. But what if I can’t?”*

He looks fearfully to his father just behind him and to the side. His eyes say, *“but she is so beautiful, do I have to kill her?”* to which his father’s cold expression, anticipating this disappointment in his son, replies, *“It’s just an animal.”*

The boy looks back down the long barrel of his rifle. So much power in such a small movement of the finger, a slight of hand, a magician’s trick making life disappear, he wonders why such a simple movement is such a hard thing to do. He can feel the shame encircling him like a fog creeping around him, like the tenth plague on Egypt, like smoke from a steel factory, rapping him up, penetrating his nostrils and choking him. It’s too much. The boy whites out for a moment *“Stay conscious, stay conscious...”* He feels his stomach churning, fighting off the shame from his father. Gravity begins to pull his gun down. The boy is no longer in control of his body; he is a marionette doll being tugged in two directions by family shame and an innocence fighting for survival. His father makes a slight movement toward the boy, the shame becomes unbearable and suppresses the boy’s will completely.

*“Focus on the target. Aim for the heart. You can do this. Breathe deeply, and squeeze...”*

Seeing that the boy is back in aim, the father goes back to his neutral position. The shame begins to ease up so that the boy can breathe.

*“Breathe deeply, and squeeze the trigger.”*

The boy gets his shot off, bull’s-eye, right in the heart just like his father had taught him. His target goes down immediately; those around panic and run in all directions. One stands over the victim not knowing what to do.

The father puts his hand on the boy’s shoulder, telling him the one thing the boy had always wanted to hear his whole life, “Son, I’m proud of you.”

This doesn’t soothe the boy. He doesn’t feel comfort or pride just emptiness, a hollowed out hole being slowly eroded by the wind.

“Now you’re a man” his father says.

The boy does not respond. What could he say? His eyes are still focused on the target. *“A magician’s trick.”*

In the distance there is the sound of sirens coming closer, a helicopter, people screaming, his father tugging at his arm shouting at him, “We have to go now!” but he can’t respond, can’t move his legs, can’t move his eyes. He is completely transfixed. His father picks him up and carries him off the rooftop and down the flight of stairs of the abandoned building on the eastside

of town. He puts the boy in the car and takes him home, puts him in bed, but the eyes of the child never move once. They are still looking at the face of his mark bleeding on the ground without any expression at all. The boy just stares at her, confused that a black woman's blood would be the exact same color as his.