



## DEAR HUNTER

(Picaresque fiction, w.c. 2987)

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“Looks like we’ll get six-seven inches opening day, Grace.” Ted Kronkite peered out the kitchen window, his nose close to the glass. A hazy circle formed as he spoke.

Grace swirled a wooden spoon in the simmering Northern Beans, dropped the lid back on the pot and grimaced.

“So you won’t hunt in the morning, Dear?” Her voice didn’t betray her thoughts.

“Na, not worth the effort. Hiking in snow up to my ass. Hell, deer trails will be covered. Like shootin’ in outer space, if you asked

me.”

“You say that every year. Snow or no snow. Ted, you just don’t want to get your sorry-ass out of bed in the morning.”

“Don’t talk like that, woman. I work construction fourteen hours a day all summer so I don’t freeze my ass off in damn cold weather.” Ted’s hand balled into a fist.

It struck a nerve. Grace gripped the wooden spoon tight but wished an iron skillet was close at hand. An argument, though, meant an ice-pack makeover and she had her heart sat on watching CSI. Why spoil the evening?

Impulse, though, won over logic.

“Yeah, who works all year long so there’s food on the table? It’s time you get off that double-wide ass and get a deer. Real meat. Been saying you would since the day I married you.”

Grace’s sharp tongue brought Ted closer.

Scraggly brows narrowed together like a thick moustache above coal black eyes. Ted’s glare cut the icy air. He should just smack her. Shut his dear wife up for the rest of the night. Suck a six pack with a porno flick.

If he did, though, she wouldn’t cook for a week. Plus, out of the warm bedroom for a month. Only room in the dang house that made you want to sleep. Thing was, he liked the Serta more than the three-pillow couch that sagged in the middle. What pissed him off when he had to sleep on it was one lumpy cushion always slipped out during the night. His ass rubbed against the wood frame. Real inconvenient.

He raised the snout of the cold beer bottle to his lips.

Seemed no matter what he did, Grace got the better of him. A man had to think before he acted. Ted scratched his long black beard. Pot roast, potatoes and carrots. Venison. Why not?

Grace gritted her teeth. She hadn’t missed Ted’s fingers curl into a fist. Enough said for now. She gazed at Ted’s backside as he walked out of the kitchen. Faded blue jeans hung three inches below

his waist. Grace want to spit. She glanced again; anger on the rise. Ted's ass looked like he'd taken a fall. Split ran right up the middle to his brain. Why the man didn't hitch up his pants was beyond figuring.

"Sorry son'of a bitch," and covered her mouth.

Then she remembered their first date. Him trying to hitch up his pants after she said no. Foolish her, second date didn't end the same way.

A chuckle grew, then wore off just as fast. Grace returned to the pot, brought the spoon to her mouth and slowly sucked the thick, pale broth. Twenty minutes and they'd eat warm corn bread. Enough time to look in the hope chest, try on the outfit she'd bought four years ago. Didn't hurt to think she'd fit into it.

Deer hunting season again. By November 15<sup>th</sup>, that first year of their marriage had taken on special meaning.

When Grace got back to the kitchen, she took the best dishes from the cupboard. Why not make the table look special? A pre-celebration—just in case. She set out blue cloth napkins alongside the yellow flowered shallow bowls her mother gave her as a wedding present. A large spoon and a table knife on either side. Butter dish next to Ted's plate. He'd spread his unfair share of the half pound stick on the hot slices of crusted yellow bread.

"Ted, dear. Supper's ready."

Ted's feet thumped on the hard wood floor. What the hell? Was he whistling, too? A drawer closed and then the closet. Why would he rummage around in the spare room? Looking for the plaid shirt he wore last winter? The one she'd thrown out the end of spring. Bean soup down the front, splotches of tobacco juice and foul body odor. Spots under the arms the size of dinner plates. The smell made you think a skunk visited all winter long.

Shirt gone. She'd never have to tolerate that green and blue plaid shirt on sorry-ass Ted every again.

"Ten minutes gone. I'm eating." Grace had no intention of getting her stomach in an uproar over his sorry-ass delay.

Grace took a cup size ladle and filled Ted's bowl. Then hoisted a cup and a half in her bowl. The try-on session confirmed she could eat an extra helping. Might as well have a couple of beers, too.

"Smells damn good, Grace." Ted straddled the chair. "Got to give it to you, you're one hell of a mean-ass cook. Take away bitchin' and you'd be the perfect wife."

Grace's patience had worn thin, "Eat and shut up. Don't ruin a nice meal with flattery." Grace cut a thick slice of cornbread and lathered it with butter.

"Got enough leftovers for tomorrow? In case, I hunt late."

Grace looked up, propped her hand under her chin and sniffed. Was this load really gonna try his luck at a doe? She hesitated.

“Enough beans in there for a week. You can fart your heart out after hunting.” Grace scraped the side of her bowl and scooped up the last of the broth. She never liked beans all that much but they kept a few more dollars in her pocket. Who needed hamburger or pork every night anyway? The beans she didn’t eat could be thrown back in the pot for sorry-ass to eat. He’d have another bowl or two before he went to bed.

The next morning, Grace peeked out from under the thick double blanket. She eased her hand toward Ted’s side of the bed. Her fingers sprang back from a cold spot. The covers had been thrown back. Grace bolted up in a start.

“Damn him, he snuck out.”

Grace tossed aside her covers and shoved her feet into open sneakers at the side of the bed and eyed the clock. Five-twenty-five. Dear Ted couldn’t have been gone very long.

Thank God she’d called her boss late yesterday. Set the stage. Told old Burger Henry she had a sore throat and it was getting the best of her. Coughed twice and hung up. No guilt on her part. Grace hadn’t missed a day in a month, so it wouldn’t be held over her head.

Enough warning and Henry would get his old geezer friend to fill in. Anyone could flop an egg between slices of toast. Didn’t take years of training or Grace’s experienced hands to feed a bunch of early birds. A rush of luckless hunters would appear when their feet got so cold the thrill of killing a hapless doe seemed a waste of time. First wave an hour or two after sunlight. Those guys never tipped well. Saved their extra bucks for booze.

Grace ran down the stairs, the untied sneakers flapping like paddles, and pulled the back door open. A rush of frigid air struck her face. She gasped and pulled her nightshirt to her chin.

Tracks led toward the woods, beyond the couple of acres that defined their lot line. Ted out to hunt. What a feat.

“Oh happy day,” Grace shouted. “One damn happy, glorious day.”

She shut the door with a push that made the wall rattle. A quick turn to the refrigerator to take out last night’s pot of soup.

“Beans to you.” Grace carried the pot into the bathroom. It took several flushes to get the congealed mass down the toilet, but once out of sight, a burst of glee ricocheted throughout the house.

“Oh happy day,” she sang in her best bar room soprano. “Oh Happy Day!” The screech continued as she rushed to the sofa.

Tossing pillows to the floor, she found old popcorn, pretzels and a beer can in the foundation of the Salvation Army purchase. What she wanted was safely tucked underneath the back section of the worn sofa. Her fingers grasped cold metal. Her heart skipped a beat.

How long had she waited? A lifetime it seemed.

Her next stop was the hope chest. A present on her sixteenth birthday. From her mother, too. Five years before, when hope made her smile.

Thank God, she had the wit to prepare for better days after the first horrendous year. Hope hadn't been abandoned.

Five years of Ted's foul mouth, five years of pawing hands, five years of slinging burgers for a sorry-ass, double-wide, lazy man who said marriage meant he could sit around all winter and do nothing.

Thank God, she'd groomed patience to a fine art.

Yes, she worked her skinny butt off all year long and managed to pocket a few extra dollars. Five years seemed liked fifty. Ted got more service than he ever gave.

Back in the bedroom, Grace pulled out the garments she hid in a cardboard box with 'books' written on it. She slipped into the splattered green-brown pants, pulled a long sleeve thermal shirt over her nightshirt. Next, put her arms through the matching wool shirt she'd bought at K-Mart four years before. Fit like a glove, warm and tight. The outer jacket and orange vest covered breasts from view. In case she encountered a straggler hunter. Lined boots to keep her feet dry, a brimmed cap over her ears, neck and forehead. Chestnut hair tucked away. Dressed like a seasoned hunter.

Deer Hunter. Dear. Freedom.

Yes, she practiced twice a week. Sometimes more when Ted went on a drinking binge and didn't come home for days. Counted on that around summer holidays. Yes, she hoped he wouldn't return but he'd always steal in about dinner time. A wet puppy grin on his face. He missed her cooking.

Sorry-ass would eat road kill if she put it in a pot.

Grace took a deep breath, opened the back door and gazed at the heavy gray ominous sky. She planted her feet in Ted's faded path in the yard and struck out across the snow covered acreage. Out to the edge of the woods. She keep her head down; the sky now full of blinding snow. More would come, Grace knew. Listened to the report before she fell asleep. Twelve more inches? Tracks could disappear before she got into the thick of the woods. But she'd find Ted's trail under the pines bows.

A gust of wind pushed a shower of snow from a laden branch and landed on Grace's head. She jumped but didn't make a sound. Damn, even with light coming up, it was spooky as hell in the barren land. Grace hugged the rifle close to her chest, her eyes not veering from the path. Watch the tracks. Don't lose sight of the mission.

Ted had stopped several times. Sorry-ass. Too out of shape for a steady pace. She came to a spot where boot prints dug deep in the snow. Stomped his feet up and down, Grace guessed. A large spot of urine marked the pristine snow. Amber like the dark beer Ted drank until his eyes hurt. Ted pissed like an animal in the woods; not enough sense to stand by a tree.

That made Grace angry. Well, more than angry. Angry and justified. Yes, justified.

She'd find his sorry, double-wide ass and make sure he never pissed in the woods again. Not in her territory ever again.

A rustle of low branches caught her attention. Deer? Another clump of snow fell from the pine branches. The wind howled, a flurry of dry snow swept up her face. Through the haze, Grace caught sight of movement beyond the thicket. Muted color, flicker of green-brown between the thick gray trunks of hard wood. One, maybe two deer huddled together? Movement again. Meat all winter long?

Nice thought.

Grace brought the rifle to her shoulder. Thank God for practice. Sharp shooter, she was.

When the first crack of the rifle didn't produce a scurry in the thicket, she knew she'd made a drop-dead shot. A second shot wouldn't hurt. She had to make sure the poor critter wouldn't hobble deep into the woods and suffer a slow, frostbite death. The sharp crack whistled and popped in a split second.

Grace inched closer through underbrush. Sweat eased down her sides as she slowly separated the thin, bare branches with her Mossberg.

Dead. Tongue hanging, eyes wide. Legs spread, not a kick or wiggle. Dead.

Too heavy to haul to the tree line. Let'm lay. In good time, she'd get help to haul the carcass in.

Grace retraced her tracks to the open field. Snow, the size of cornflakes, continued to fall. The sky hadn't even opened up yet. The best kind of snowflakes, as big as saucers, nearly as big, were on their way. There'd be enough to cover a hefty mass or anyone's tracks. No way to tell who crossed the open field.

Grace laughed. A warm dinner tonight. A bottle of Bud Light? No. A trip into town. Pick up a bottle of Crane Lake Merlot. Seen it advertised on TV two nights before. An ad during the weather report. M-e-r-l-o-t. Did they say Mer-low? She'd blow ten-bucks on a bottle of wine and love every sip of it.

She laughed again. A large buck jumped out and raced across her path. Damn. Grace dropped to her knees and took a deep breathe. Recovered, she raised the barrel, put the stock to her shoulder and fingered the trigger. Too late.

As Grace lowered the rifle back in safety hold, a doe sauntered from the patch of pines, about twenty yards from her path. Full of confidence, the graceful animal lifted one leg, then the other. A perfect motion, no hurry. Grace shifted and took aim. One shot. The doe fell to its side, kicked out its legs as though it were running and then snorted. One last loud snort. Dead but not instantly.

Meat to last beyond winter. Work to get it back to the house but she'd figure it out. Freezing temps gave her time. Get help when the snow settled down. Grace hoisted her rifle to her shoulder and trudged toward the smoking chimney.

A few yards from the back door, Grace stopped at the old well site. She pulled off the bright orange vest, unbuttoned the camouflage jacket and slipped out of the hunting pants.

“Burr.” Grace shivered momentarily and then laughed. Another line of sweat eased down her back. Even if she were stark naked, excitement burned enough body fuel to get her back in the house. As she slipped the thermal undershirt over her head, large clumps of snowflakes fell off her cap. Yesterday’s hairspray didn’t smell like apricots anymore. Perspiration smelled like wet wool. No matter.

“Good bye perfect outfit. You served me well.” Grace tossed the garments down the dark hole. The Mossberg followed. Boots clunked along the stone wall until they hit bottom.

“Out of sight, out of mind,” Grace sang as she hustled across the porch.

She slammed the door, arms around her chest. A smile on her face. A few logs in the wood burner would insure she’d be extra warm during a quick shampoo and blow dry, before a peaceful morning nap.

Grace dried her hair, reset the alarm and walked to the bedroom window. Her eyes drew a line out to the edge of the woods. Snow thick, no tracks. None. Not her’s; not Ted’s.

Ted wasn’t much of a hunter. Didn’t plan very well. Grace laughed.

Sorry-ass ain’t gonna have meat for dinner tonight. No. Not tonight.

Grace fell into a hard sleep and didn’t know if an hour or two had passed when she first heard the back door rattle. “God damn wind.”

She tossed Ted’s pillow toward the bedroom door. “Bastard can’t fix anything.”

But the creak of the stairs made her turn in the bed. She drew the covers to her chest.

“Who’s there? Damn you, is that you, Ted?” Grace didn’t believe it. Yet the old dry stairs always moaned with his weight.

A blast from the open door took Grace beyond any doubt.

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“Looks like a double homicide.” Sheriff Higgins said to his deputy as he shuffled around the mound of snow. “Ted half covered in snow. Grace propped nice on the bed in a pool of red Jello. Not a pretty picture, Fred.”

“Good thing Henry called to check on his Grace. Three days and no help slinging greasy burgers. Old guy’s screaming bloody murder. Said she never missed even two days in a row.”

“Wouldn’t ‘a found them till spring with more snow coming.”

“Yep, poor Ted should’a stayed out hunting. Saved himself the trouble of finding a stranger after Grace.”

“Looks like he took a hit to the chest. Defending the wife. Sad case, if you ask me.”

“Bullet tore through his arm, too. Ted probably in a lot of pain ‘fore he died.”

“Died trying to save his Grace,” the Sheriff said. “Got half way in the garage for his car ‘fore he keeled over. Yep, should’a stayed in the back woods. Get himself a deer for the winter.” The deputy slapped his hat back on his head.

“Damn shame. No meat. No wife. No killer. Can’t track in this weather. Six inches every day for the last week. More coming.”

The Sheriff put his hand to his chin. “When’s it all gonna stop?”