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PROVOST'S PROSE
WINNER: SEVEN POINTS

Power.

It feels like power.

Coursing and crashing and dominating.

I don't brag or flash cocky smiles. I don't actually say much of anything on the way down the fern-crusting hill. It was too hard to speak anyway while trying to find footing through the bramble. Eli didn't mess around with the clear-cut or thinned forests near town. Out here the forest was still untamed although not untouched. You could lose someone twenty yards away if you weren't careful.

The grey fog banks and dim sky formed viscous walls around the hills. If you look through the corners of your eyes the trees would lose their place in the world and look as though they were standing side-by-side. Monochrome judges with interlocking arms and massive twisted feet.

"God *damn*." Eli kept yelling the same thing all the way down.

"*One* fucking shot. Boom! Down!"

The kill shot had only been moments earlier, two-hundred thirty yards up the hill. High enough that the snow was thick when we had lain on the stump, and still as thick on the way back up. We had been side-by-side on the white round, each resting our left elbow in the cold. I was

familiar with the rules by now. With two people there can only be one killer, the other is spotter. Whoever takes longer to set up their shots is forced to play back up, to keep their scope on the target no matter what. Eli had underestimated the time it took for me to steady a scope. I hadn't let my eyes rest on the immense breadth of bone growing from each side of its head, hadn't let my heart speed up and pull my arms around.

I had already made that mistake on the other side of the ravine. Eli had been relieving himself in the stream, leaving me to adjust my scope and rifle strap. The bull came down the middle of the small valley, always lifting its head and looking around before taking a few more steps. I was kneeling and trained on it seconds before the wind shifted and threw my scent in his direction. He'd looked right at me then, standing so still, but every muscle ready to move if I even blinked an eye.

I should have taken the shot then, his heart was right in front of me.

But his stillness caught me off guard. He knew what I was, I could see a flash of recognition in the way he eyed my gun, but he stood his ground. It seemed as though the enormous web of darkened bone should have hindered him as he made his way down the steep embankment – the exposed, polished tips should have become raw in the biting wind. He should have fallen face-first down the hill with a long cry of despair with so much weight

holding him down. But here he was, holding his head high, his hooves ready to make light of the thick brush. Stunning.

Eli had come back then, noticing the beast two seconds too late before it was only a blur through the trees. I had been embarrassed, and rightfully so – no self-respecting hunter let such an easy shot get away because she was making googly-eyes at the target.

I swore the second time I saw that beast, he wouldn't get away.

Barely over two-hundred yards. Aim low – you're 30-6 is dead on at five-hundred. Wait for its head to come up, you want its spine over the shoulder blade.

Breathe steady and relax your fingers – don't grip the fucking gun so hard you'll jerk it when the pin strikes... Jesus, stop thinking about your kill range, you'll only psych yourself out.

Good, give the beast no chance to escape.

Full breath in.

Full out.

Fraction in, hold, PULL.

One shot. Boom. Down.

No, I did not brag all the hours taken to skin and cut and bag. The air was cold and damp but when we got to the beast I had taken off my jacket, leaving a long-sleeved shirt that I pushed up to my elbows. At first I shivered, trying not to

grip the cold knife too tightly so my fingers would continue to work correctly. My arms weren't cold for long. The chest cavities of an elk are hot and humid – like opening the door to a greenhouse.

“Seven fucking points on each. My rifle ends barely touch either side.”

He insisted on a picture with my gun set between the sharp protrusions of dirty antler. I shrugged and reached for my rifle. There was no smug smile, but I couldn't help making my arms as visible as possible – they were caked red almost to my elbow. Thick, although it was too cold to stay glistening or drip for dramatic effect. Shame.

“Shit. First day of second season! Three more points than Dave, he's going to be pissed out of his mind.”

I resisted the urge to outwardly compare my points to Eli's. Seven more. Seven. My heart swelled painfully, beat hard once, and shrank.

My father would be proud of his girl. My mother would be devastated. She was a complicated, gentle woman, and strongly believed in purchasing her meat plastic-wrapped and shipped from somewhere it could barely turn around. I didn't blame her, she was normal like most people.

I used to be normal.

Before I met Eli, I had never touched a gun in my life.

The guns weren't what kept me from

returning to my former self, I could have gone back easily enough. But after watching Eli kill for the first time, there was no returning. Possibly no desire to.

Eli was whistling when we pulled up to the house, slapping his hands on the steering wheel to whatever tune was inside his head. On the ride back I stared out the window and tried to pick out shapes beyond the black trees. A few seconds after we had hit a paved road, we flew under a street light and two shiny eyes flashed in the side mirror. I tore my eyes away immediately. A bull elk's eyes never seem to want to close. It's like they don't want to miss anything. Short of boiling the head to bone their black marbled eyes stay open – not even death will keep them from possessing their surroundings.

Dave's elk greeted our headlights near the shop door. Eight sharpened points stretched themselves from an already skinned head.

"He works fast." I couldn't help but smile, excited to see an old stranger.

Eli made a sound of agreement and cut the rumbling engine. The headlights died with it, leaving Dave's kitchen window a yellow cutout against furry black. Mist was already gliding up the hillside, filled the valley to the brim, and then escaped through small crevices and roads in the hills. There was too much and the excess

swirled around the tires of Dave's truck and the foundation of his house.

Outside was thick, isolating silence; the kind where no matter how close your neighbors were or how loud they were being, you were the only one who existed in the world. Fog had a way of doing that around here. My favorite kind of night.

In the dark of the jeep I heard Eli move slightly and felt his hand on the side of my face, stroking his thumb along my cheekbone. Despite the nakedness of his hand and the broken heater his palm was warm – hot almost – and somewhat soft even after a day of hunting. The finest grain of sandpaper. Slight pressure from his hand a moment later had me leaning blindly forward to receive an almost demure kiss.

*MY FATHER WOULD BE
PROUD OF HIS GIRL.
MY MOTHER WOULD BE
DEVASTATED.*

"Maybe not take a shower before bed tonight?"

My heart grew too big and pushed against the outer walls of my chest. His thumb passed over a smudge of dirt on my neck, pausing for my response.

Glaring light flooded the cab, the warmth

fleeing with the hand as Eli turned toward the source.

“Do I see a big-ass rack in that jeep?”

Dave was standing in his doorway wiping oily gun powder off his hands with a rag. Garth Brook’s “Shameless” played from the ancient CD player on top of the kitchen cabinets. Dave never seemed to muster the energy to find a ladder and change the six repeating discs, but he never tired from two jobs and a full-time hobby.

“I doubt it. Eli still won’t buy me that boob job.”

Dave’s laugh reminded me of that old cartoon with Goofy.

“Right. And you’ll never believe who stuck the fucker.”

He threw the rag over his shoulder and furrowed his brows. “No.”

I shrugged and my cheeks twitched slightly.

“More than two points?”

“Seven”

“No.”

“One shot. She spined the dammed thing.”

“Horseshit!”

The room Eli and I stayed in was cleaned and organized, very much unlike the rest of the bachelor’s house. The conversation Dave and I had was still making me dizzy. Eli had gone to do something, possibly

check the doors and windows of the shop as a thank you for the leftovers Dave let us heat up. We were standing at the sink scraping food scraps into the garbage disposal. I had offered to help immediately, turning on the faucet to run the plates under with Dave chatting away like old times. I wavered when the hot water washed some of the blood and dirt off my forearm.

Dave had looked at me in that moment and caught my glance toward my stained arms.

“Oh right,” he said hastily. He had taken the plate and handed me a towel that wasn’t for wiping the tight bands of sweet, coppery blood off my arms, neck, and chest. He meant for me to wipe away the water that was threatening to erase my victory.

I smiled sweetly at the gesture of an old friend, genuinely appreciative. Dave and I hadn’t known each other very long, but we were closer than most - the kind of close that only results from a certain kind of knowledge.

Suddenly everything in the room was outlined red, like a warm sepia picture. My face felt swollen and just as red as the room around me, the blood pushing frantically in my neck.

“Oh, and don’t worry about me tonight. My room is on the other side of the house from yours.” Dave had turned the water off and stood wringing his hands

on the towel.

“We won’t worry about it if you won’t.”

Afterwards I had slowly made my way back to the room Eli and I shared. He was piling his hunting clothes in an empty laundry basket only a few feet away but I stuck myself to the bed. Patience.

I placed my cool hands on the back of my neck to calm the rushing skin. I wanted something fast, something I could share with Dave the next day.

Eli must have sensed something. He knelt in front of me, balancing on the balls of his feet, naked.

He fingered the dried bits of blood at the ends of my hair. “My huntress.”

Huntress.

I smiled and let him kiss the remnants of bull elk off the places it had stuck.

Sometime after I lay down with Eli, still encased with blood and fur, I found myself lying on the snow-covered stump we had shot from. My heart had grown too big again, overtaking the muscles in my chest and arm, yanking them with each beat. Too fast... too big... the scope at my eye would not stay still. I winced my as my left hand spasmed tighter across the barrel and my finger slipped into the curve of the trigger. Nerves in the ends of my fingers seemed to catch and pull along the metal half-moon. The feeling – like rubbing raw skin the wrong way – was

starting to affect my other fingers, and then my hands and wrists.

A twig snapped behind me, pulling my ears back. Wet elk filled my nose and throat, coated my lungs in thick, sliding tendon. I took a deep breath and coughed up chunks of dead fur.

Using my gun I pushed up and flipped over in time to see a dark flash of bone before the end of an antler penetrated my abdomen. It was one of the seven horns that protruded forward from the beast’s head.

The bull’s eyes were below mine and it stared up at me and snorted a steamy breath of air, digging in further. I raised my arms and placed them against the base of his antlers to push him off. I didn’t have time to wonder about the lack of pain or disgust I felt at his thrust before he lifted me slightly from the ground.

The rutting bull let out a bugle as I pushed, making me stop and look him in the eyes again – it was long and high – cackling, mocking laughter. Like a hyena or baboon, a screeching laughter. He was so incredibly close that his call reverberated through my abdomen and up my spine, shaking warmth into the recesses of my body. Rutting males called the loudest, any cow within several miles could be his.

But he had chosen me.

I leaned back, my hand resting against the rigid base where it had once pushed. The bull responded slowly, setting me

back onto the forest floor, withdrawing the antler until just the smooth end remained

My body was so hot that I yelped with surprise when I found myself once again lying in the snow.

Where had he gone?

Now that the bull's power was gone the bitter chill seeped back into my bones.

I picked up the rifle next to me, pulled the bolt back and pushed the clip out. Empty.

I needed to find him.

Brown and tan drifted through the trees.

I froze immediately, eyes narrowing toward the movement, and knelt behind a jagged stump, fixing my eye to the scope.

How many points, dammit?

I shifted my knee, snapping a branch that lay beneath me.

His head came up.

Eli.

He was standing less than a hundred yards from me, rifle leveled on the part of me that was still slick.

I tightened my finger around the trigger uselessly, my clip was empty, and I was defenseless.

My knees were starting to freeze in the slush, spreading quickly toward my

hands. Soon my fingers or hands wouldn't be strong enough to steady the barrel – and I wanted to watch.

I wanted warmth.

He pulled the trigger; eyes locked on mine – not closing them against the kick of his rifle – One hundred eighty-five grains of a red, hollow-tipped game shot.

One shot. Boom. Down.