

Curt's Buck

By Brian Day

Lanty pulled the buck's head close to the truck's tailgate. "Tag says you shot this deer," he said to the boy seated on the hay bale in the rear of the Dodge.

Curtis smiled. "Yes sir. He came out of Farmington Swamp. Dad put me on watch on the hedgerow toward Case's Grove."

"That your first deer?" Lanty asked, settling the five-point's head back down into the pick-up box.

"Yes sir," Curtis answered again.

Lloyd Butler leaned over the tailgate of the truck. "Looks like you made a good shot, son, right behind the shoulder. How far away was he?" he asked.

Curtis chewed his lower lip for a minute. "About forty yards maybe... standing," he replied slowly.

"Yeah, they do that on that hedgerow, bucks with a year or two of age on 'um," Lloyd agreed. "They slide out there kind of quiet with their head low, watchin' the does pile out the swamp bottom. That old 30-30 you're carrying has killed a lot of deer. I think Clayton was about your age when I bought it for his first buck. Can't remember who I bought it from - maybe Wimpy Lambert. It has been around the neighborhood so many

times it ought to have a card on the stock, like a library book. I think I've owned it at least twice."

Two or three other men wandered out from Houghtaling's Garage to check the back of Ross Fuller's pick-up. Holding thermos tops of coffee or bottles of Orange Crush, they leaned over the gunwales of the pickup to peer at the buck and the smiling boy. Ross himself strolled up to the truck bed and handed a 7-UP to Curtis.

"That really look like a 30-30 hole to you?" he asked Lloyd in a low sly voice.

Lloyd studied Ross's face for a second, then he looked at Curtis. The boy wasn't smiling anymore. "Looks like a 30-30 hole to me," he said confidently.

"You better pay more attention to what you're looking at Lloyd," Ross said and walked back toward the garage.

Some of the men looked at the bullet hole and then at the stone-faced boy. They smiled little knowing smiles to each other and slowly walked away from the truck.

Lanty shrugged his shoulders and pitched his cigarette butt into the gravel of the parking lot. "Hell, I can't tell one bullet hole from another, even after all these years. How 'bout you, Lloyd? A .243 looks just like a .375 to me. Range and point of entry makes a big difference in how any caliber hole looks, I think."

"Nah, I can't tell one bullet hole from another either," Lloyd agreed. "You comin' in to have some lunch, Curt, or you just gonna' sit out here and admire that old deer?" he asked the boy.

"Dad shot the buck," Curtis said through clenched teeth. "He told me to tag it. He said I only had the one day off from school and that he could hunt a couple of more days if he still had a tag. He said he wouldn't tell."

Curtis wrapped his arms tightly around his chest and studied the tips of his Red Ball boots with downcast eyes. Lloyd could see that he was doing all he could to keep from crying. Lanty had already walked several paces away and tactfully pretended he did not hear the boy's confession.

"How many of us old timers do you suppose had our dads kill our first deer for us, young fellar?" Lloyd asked the boy. "If you're gonna' hunt with the men, you might as well learn a little bit about thinkin' like one. Us old boys got a lot of secrets about each other. Most of us know enough to forget about each other's poorer moments. That's why we're still friends. I don't give a damn who shot your deer and none of these other guys do either - long as you're havin' a good time. I don't know why your dad had to lip off about the bullet hole. He probably forgot how important a boy's first deer is to him - that's all."

Lloyd gave the boy a minute to think it over. Curtis's face seemed to relax a little after a while. He put his hands down on the knees of his dungarees and dried the palms.

"Now let's go have a sandwich, before somebody else eats your lunch. You can't trust that bunch in there," Lloyd said, opening the pickup tailgate. "Open the action on that jack handle, would ya' please, before you lay it down on that hay bale. Let me see that it's empty."

"Oh yeah," Curtis said and pulled the lever open on the Marlin. "Sorry, I forgot."

"You can't forget your gun handlin' safety, no matter how bad you feel. That's how people get hurt," Lloyd said.

"I'm not mad. I just forgot."

"Yeah... ya' are mad. I can see it. That's why I'm remindin' you. I'd do the same for your dad and I hope you'll do the same for me someday," Lloyd said, patting the boy on the shoulder.

"You don't ever get mad, Lloyd."

"Sure I do. Just not near as often as I did at your age."

As they entered the garage, Ernie Borden was saying, "I think we ought to drive out the gullies after lunch. Rex's gang pushed through the Churchill Woods just before lunch and Lloyd saw deer moving into the gullies on his way up the road."

"Any horns?" Kevin Hayes asked.

"They were movin' in the brush in the crick bottom and I couldn't tell," Lloyd explained. "The last one moved like a buck though. I'd bet he was."

"Always deer in the gullies," Ross said. "I'll take the drivers around by the Christmas tree plantation and set them out. I'll take the top drive."

"Nah, you still got a deer to kill, Ross. You're a working man. I'm retired this year, remember?" Lloyd suggested. "Why don't I take old Dead Eye Curt here with me on the top drive? He's killed his deer and we can use him for dog the rest of the day."

"You don't mind babysitting him for me, Lloyd? He walks too fast and he's noisy."

"Is he a whiner?" Lloyd asked with a twinkle in his eye. "I can't stand a whiner."

Ross lifted two ham sandwiches out of the cooler resting on the workbench beside him and handed them to his son. "You'd better eat up Curt, if you're gonna walk a drive with Lloyd this afternoon. Him being retired just means he's rested up a lot. He's gonna walk the legs off of you."

"Is he whiner? I asked ya' if he was a whiner," Lloyd repeated.

Ross studied his son with a look of pride on his face, as the boy ate the first of the two sandwiches. "No, he aint no whiner. He does what he's told without complaining."

"All right then, I'll take him along," Lloyd said, pulling a sandwich out of a brown paper bag.

Ross slid a bag of potato chips over to Curtis. He fished an apple and some homemade, chocolate-chip cookies out of the cooler and passed them over to his son. "You need another pop?" he asked, "or some of this coffee?"

Curtis stared at his father incredulously. "You know Mom says I'm too young for coffee, Dad!" he blurted out.

Ross held out the steaming cup, "Your mom's not here. Try some if you like."

Curtis took the cup carefully from his father's hand, then took a slow sip of the hot black beverage. He was surprised at his disappointment with the flavor. So this was coffee; the stuff was kind of bitter.

"Well, what do you think?" Lanty asked from across the room.

Curtis grimaced and handed the cup back to his father. "I'd rather have hot chocolate," he said.

The grease-stained walls of the garage rumbled with laughter. Kevin Hayes poured something creamy brown into a mug

and walked over to the boy. "I'm still a hot chocolate man myself," he said, handing the mug to Curtis.

"He's too honest to be your boy Ross," Lanty chided.

"Oh, I've heard his mother lie once or twice, so I guess we can't judge his parentage by his honesty, now can we," Ross laughed.

"Come some cold winter night, he'll learn to drink coffee and tell a fib or two, before too many more years have gone by," Lanty speculated.

"Both vices caused by a woman, no doubt," Kevin added.

The place erupted in laughter again. Curtis chewed a bite of apple and smiled a bewildered smile.

Finished with his lunch, Lloyd got to his feet. "We aren't killing any deer in here poking fun at this poor boy's eventual demise from the spells of women. Let's get going. Curt, you're coming with me. Get your rifle."

Curtis looked at his father and then at Lloyd. "I don't have a tag now," he said, "I can't shoot anymore."

Lloyd rubbed his whiskered chin for a moment. "Well you can't leave it banging around in the truck cab unattended. You might as well have some practice carryin' it. You kids are always bumpin' your guns into stumps and rocks and things. You might as well be bangin' that tough old Marlin into the brush

some more this year, so you'll be ready to carry a higher dollar gun in years to come. You can leave it unloaded."

Curtis looked questioningly toward his father.

"Do as you're told Curtis. I can't be with you every minute," Ross directed.

Curtis ran for the garage door to retrieve his 30-30 from the pick-up.

"No running!" Lloyd snarled. "Remember, you're handling a firearm and it is always loaded!"

Curtis slowed to a walk immediately.

When the boy had exited the garage, Ross turned to Lloyd, "Thanks for taking him with you this afternoon, Lloyd. I shouldn't have opened my mouth about the bullet hole. I'm sure he's upset with me and he has got a right to be."

"Yeah ya' should a kept quiet all right. You've always been too competitive about things, Ross. It doesn't bother me nor the other guys any, but your son's just a boy yet. Try to remember not to compete with him. The best times I had huntin' were when Clayt was that young. You better learn to enjoy these years with Curt while you've still got them. They go by way too fast."

The men in the garage gathered the remains of their lunches and headed outside. Curtis stood in the parking lot by

the passenger side of Lloyd's green International with the 30-30 tucked under his arm.

"Drivers in the back. Curt, get up front," Lloyd ordered.

Lanty, Kevin, and three other men clambered over the tailgate and settled on the fender wells, spare tire, and a discarded backseat from a junked car that Lloyd had provided. Everyone dropped the bolts or pulled levers open on the firearms they carried. Lloyd climbed into the driver's seat and turned the ignition. Curtis slid into the passenger seat with the 30-30 muzzle pointed at the floorboards. The old Scout thundered to life and Lloyd pulled onto the hard top road. Ross's pickup headed in the opposite direction, carrying a half dozen men to serve as watchers.

Curtis studied Lloyd's rifle, which rested on the truck seat beside his Marlin. Its stock glistened a warm amber color beneath layers of hand rubbed finish. The metal resonated a deep blue, dark as the depths of Seneca Lake. A four-power scope arched over the jeweled bolt, its optic eye cold as a shark's.

Lloyd glanced over at the boy. "Keep those rifles from fighting, will you Curtis? Pretty thing isn't it? I built that .270 for Clayt a few years ago. My eyesight is getting kinda' poor, so I decided to try a scoped rifle this year. Clayton

loaned it to me so I could see how I liked it. Doesn't get much use these days anyhow."

Curtis said nothing. They circled around Jade Mountain and climbed to the top on a dead-end road. Christmas trees of various heights grew in neat rows on either side of the road's end. The men piled out of the truck bed. Lanty led the drivers down over the opposite side of the mountain from the road. Lloyd and Curtis remained with the truck. Half an hour passed before Lanty's war whoop sounded from far down in the creek bottom, followed by the distinctive howls of each man up the line.

"Yee-oooh!" Lloyd shouted. "Now we walk," he directed, striding off parallel to the ridge of the mountain.

Three inches of fresh powder had fallen the night before, providing quiet walking for the hunters. After traveling a hundred yards, the drivers let out another series of howls and wails.

"Your turn Curtis," Lloyd said.

Curtis looked at Lloyd hesitantly.

"Come on boy. The rest will think we've fallen behind if you don't holler. The deer will slip around us."

"Whay-oo!" Curtis shouted.

They continued along the face of the mountain, repeating the calls every hundred yards. The men's howling made a primal

music as it echoed down the snow-covered valley. Curtis felt a part of something old - something prehistoric. How many years had men marched this slow deliberate parade through the wilds, howling like two-legged wolves? Perhaps ages past, in ancient Europe, wolves had taught men to drive the deer, then shared the bloody spoils on some distant steppe. Curtis could almost see gray canine shadows streaking through the low brush and hedgerows of the abandoned farmland.

"Stop daydreaming boy. Get your eyes open," Lloyd hissed.

"Sorry Lloyd."

"We're coming to the head of the first gully now. These deer will sneak up the gully from the crick bottom. They can keep well hid until they get to the top where the ravine peters out. Then they got to come out and that's where we catch 'um!

Something flickered for an instant, far down the side of the mountain among the dark tree trunks of the gully. Another patch of brown flashed again, where the first had winked between the trees an instant before. This time, Curtis made out the shape of ears on the brown blur.

"They're coming!" he gasped, "I see them! They're coming up!"

A single doe broke free of the brush at the gully's termination. She spotted the man and boy, spun around, and ran back down into the gully.

"Damn!" Curtis cursed under his breath, forgetting he was in the presence of an adult.

Lloyd looked sideways at Curtis with a wry smile. "Yeah, damn is right. You have to be quick to get a shot on this gully. More 'n likely, that bunch will try to break over the hill again at the next gully. We'll have a better chance there. We can see the head of that gully from farther away. You and I will sneak up on it a little slower."

Curtis looked wistfully at his empty rifle. "I sure wish Dad hadn't taken my tag," he mused.

"You're huntin' aren't you, boy? You may not be shootin' but you're not sittin' home doin' nothing. Lots of boys' dads don't take 'um anywhere to do anything; no hunting, no fishing - ever. Your dad brought you along and he always will, as long as you want to go. He might have messed up a little this morning, but there's lots of hunting seasons yet to come. You'll get your buck yet and it will be because he wanted to share this with you. Don't ever forget that."

Curtis hung his head a little. "Sorry. I am glad to be hunting. I just wish I could shoot."

"You got any shells for that old gun of yours?"

"Yeah," Curtis answered slowly, "I have five in each pocket."

"I might just change my mind about using this scoped gun and I might change it quick. Stuff half those cartridges of yours into that Marlin, but keep the chamber empty. Don't forget to pull that hammer back half a click to the safety."

Curtis stopped walking and regarded the older man skeptically.

"Go on Curt. Load it up. I won't have time to load it myself if I want to kill a buck with it at the next gully."

Curtis pushed five cartridges into the side of the Marlin and pulled the hammer back one click.

Lloyd watched him carefully. "Good, now mind where you're pointin' the muzzle of that thing. Keep your eyes open. We can see into the next gully as soon as we go over the top of this little rise ahead."

As they crossed over the knoll, Curtis could see the antlike silhouettes of four deer hustling up the tree-lined gully. The last deer in line hung back a few paces with its head down. Suddenly, Curtis could make out a set of horns between the ears of this deer.

"It's a buck!" he whispered.

"Can't see a damned thing," Lloyd grumbled.

Curtis began to specify the last deer as he turned to look at Lloyd, but stopped in mid-sentence. Lloyd was squinting awkwardly through the scope of the .270.

Lloyd dropped the rifle to his waist. "That's better!" he said, "Now hand me that 30-30." Trading rifles quickly with Curtis, he worked the lever of the 30-30. "Damn!" he snarled, "I've jammed it." He looked hard at Curtis. "It's your shot Curt. I can't see a damned thing through that scope. Shoot that deer and I'll tag it."

The buck had reached the clear ground at the head of the gully. Curtis knelt in the snow. He could see the forked antlers clearly in the scope as the buck hesitated at the edge of the trees.

"Now squeeze that trigger easy," Lloyd whispered.

The crosshairs settled on the deer's shoulder, but Curtis's conscience would not settle on the trigger. This buck could be his buck. He could see himself greeting the other men as he dragged the buck out to the truck; he could feel the smooth antlers in his hands. Lloyd wanted him to shoot it, too. But he wanted his father to be there. To shoot the deer without his Dad somehow seemed a betrayal. The buck turned away and Curtis squeezed the trigger. Snow spurted up a foot in front of the vanishing buck. In three bounds, the fork-horn disappeared into the brush of the next hedgerow. Lloyd and Curtis watched the buck's escape in silence.

Lloyd put a hand on Curtis's shoulder. "Nice try Curt. He jumped at just the wrong time."

Curt let out a long, deep breath. "Guess it wasn't supposed to be my buck," he said. "Thanks for letting me try for him, Lloyd."

Lloyd studied the boy's face. "That's all right Curt. I've shot at lots of deer. At least you got to pull the trigger this year."

"Yeah, that was great!" beamed Curtis.

"Yeaaaa!" Lanty howled from the creek bottom, followed by other calls along up the slope.

"We had better get a move on," Lloyd said, handing the 30-30 to Curtis.

"Hee-yo!" Curtis shouted in answer to the other drivers. Exchanging the .270 for the Marlin, he levered five cartridges out into his palm with ease. "Let's get going," he said. "I hope Dad had some luck."

Lloyd watched the boy stride ahead. "Oh I think he's lucky enough," he said.

Bars of sunlight pried their way through a blanket of gray to strike silver rims on smaller clouds below. Drifting like fish seen from a lake floor, the little clouds bumped into the mountain across the valley, spilling snow squalls into the distant, forested hollows. Falling snow sparkled like vales of gold dust in places where the sun-bars struck it. The drivers' primitive song traced its melody sporadically across the face of

Jade Mountain. Snow squeaked under foot: breath hissed in and out. Cottontails burst from tufts of winter-cured grass. Fox tracks stitched their embroidery across the landscape. A muffled shot cracked far ahead. Crows grumbled, shrugged their shoulders, and flew across the valley into the snow showers. Lloyd stopped and pointed up into the lowest crotch of a shagbark hickory.

"See that porkypine up there?" he asked.

"Yeah," Curtis said, "Cool."

The porky eyed them warily as they passed beneath. They came to a barbwire fence at the far edge of a wood lot. Lloyd handed his rifle to Curtis, climbed over the fence, and then took both rifles.

"This is the end of the drive," he said as Curt climbed over the fence. "We'll go down this fence-row to the cemetery in a few minutes. Your dad is on watch there, with his truck. We need to wait here a little while until the drivers are all out of the woods."

Curtis stood with Lloyd in silence, watching the crows play tag beneath the silver cloud fish. Golden squall curtains wavered in the distance, framing the great stage of the valley. Lanty's orange vest broke free of the brush in the creek bottom below and he stopped.

"Let's go," Lloyd said and started down the hill. Curtis followed after. Ross stood by his truck on one of the lanes that led between the gravestones. The other drivers moved toward him.

"See anything?" Kevin asked.

"Four deer went over the top, but I don't know what they were. I think one of the Perry boys may have shot over there," Ross said. Turning to Lloyd, he asked, "Did you shoot? I heard a shot from your direction."

"Yeah, I flung one at a little buck coming out of the second gully. I guess I'm not used to this scope though. Missed him clean."

Ross opened his mouth to say something, then closed it and looked at Curt. "This boy behave himself? Did he keep up all right?" he asked.

"Yeah Ross, he's fine company," Lloyd said.

"Good," he confirmed. "Get in the truck, Curt. We're going to drive Monk's Hollow next. I think there's a couple of candy bars in the glove box. You better have one, because the next drive is a long one."

Curtis climbed into the passenger side of the Dodge and pawed through glove box for a Baby Ruth Bar. He found two. Unwrapping one for himself, he laid the other on the driver's seat for his father. Another pickup-load of men pulled into the

cemetery and the hunters gathered around it. After talking to the men in the other pickup briefly, Ross returned to the Dodge.

"Thanks," he said, picking up the Baby Ruth as he slid into the driver's seat. "Carl Perry killed a fork-horn over the ridge."

"Uh-huh," Curtis answered over his candy bar.

"You're lookin' kinda' sickly to me, Curtis," he said with a sly smile. "Maybe you should stay home from school tomorrow. In fact, I'm not feeling so good myself. I think I'll call in sick."

"Mom won't like it," Curtis said, "Besides, I don't have a tag."

"If I say you need to stay home, then you can stay home!" he bellowed, then more softly, he added, "I doubt she'll raise any fuss at all. You stick with me tomorrow. We still got a tag to fill."

Ross fired the engine up and men began to find a seat in the rear of the Dodge. Kevin walked up to the passenger door and opened it. "Slide over, will you Curt? My feet are cold," he asked.

Curt moved over to the middle of the cab.

"Get in here Kevin," Ross directed as he counted heads in the back of his truck. "Where's Lloyd at?"

Curtis pointed to the lone figure of Lloyd standing by a graveside, some distance away.

"Oh..." Ross said.

"He said to pick him up after the next drive was done," Kevin explained.

"What's he doing?" asked Curtis.

Ross put the truck in gear and started toward the highway. "He's gonna' hunt with Clayton a while this afternoon - I think, Curtis. He is gonna hunt with Clayton."

"Got any more candy bars?" Kevin asked.

THE END