

A large, weathered rock face covered in ancient petroglyphs and pictographs. The rock has a mottled appearance with shades of brown, grey, and white. Several large, dark, stylized animal figures are visible, including what appears to be a bison or buffalo in the center. There are also smaller, more intricate designs, including a human-like figure at the top left and various abstract shapes. The rock is set against a background of more rock and some greenery.

PART I
Across the
Years

The past is never dead. It's not even past.
— WILLIAM FAULKNER

Missed You

I CAN STILL SEE HIM, as clear as day in the mind's eye. A big bull elk, heavy beams and long tines. His frame was solid, almost fat, but you wouldn't know it from the way he went up the canyon wall.

It had taken days to find him. The Douglas fir and cedar go forever, in other places it's willow or serviceberry. At times you can glass for hours and see no sign of life. There's broken rock and tilted rock and dry stream beds. Red-tailed hawks on the thermals. Lower down it's rattlesnakes by day and coyotes in the high-beams at night.

We were using horses. If there's a nag in camp with a name like The Widower, Ol' Satan or Sir Boltalot, you can bet your bottom dollar I'll end up on him. But horses are what you need for some of the best hunts on Earth. Plenty of guys won't do it, and to them I'd say this: pain fades, but antlers are forever.

That trip was years in the making and half a world away. To make these things happen I generally have to work two jobs, sometimes three. It had been a fair drive just to get out there and I got to know every song Johnny Cash ever wrote, but the company was good and the charisma of the West is unmistakable. It's right there at every turn. It includes things that Americans probably take for granted, like diners. The USA may be famous for inventing jazz and conquering space, but let me tell you something: these people have also mastered breakfast.

We spend days scouting, stalking and glassing. Listening to distant bugling as one cold front after another moves through. In the end it was shine off his coat that gave him away, a glimmer in the deepest of the dark timber. There was a hard scramble through a rocky draw, leaving him out of sight for a long time, but when we got the glass back up he'd only gone a few hundred metres. He was moving in deep shadow, then paused for a short, urgent bugle. With maybe an hour of light left it was time for a go-no-go decision. We went for it.



He'd already started up the slope with his tail to us, and was likely to cross into the next basin. We followed as closely as we dared, placed maybe 500 metres directly behind as he moved. As he crested the ridge he stiffened slightly.

It looked good. Once he crossed over it would be an easy shot down onto a magnificent bull. We moved quickly, careful not to send any rocks clattering, and crested the rise carefully. I'd quietly chambered a round in the .30-06, safety on.

Three bare walls, a stand of oak and downhill more nothing. It was the work of a moment to set up for the shot. A jacket folded on the sharp, frost-shattered stone, one click away from ready. He had to be pinned in the small patch of timber. We gave it a few minutes, but with the sun not far from the horizon time was in short supply. Lots of things hurt from days of riding and climbing, but at that moment it didn't really matter.

There was no movement, no sign at all. The time had come to force the point. My friend slithered down the slope and began to work the timber. He trusted me to be careful and I was, but after a sweep through the cover it was clear enough. He came out and spread both arms wide in disgust. Nothing. Oh, we double-checked, but definitely nothing. The bull must have got a

touch of our scent as he hit the rise and then run down along the canyon wall, out of sight around the curve of the slope just as we hit the ridgeline.

We worked for days, but I never got another chance at him. They stay in the mind's eye, the ones that beat you, a trophy sometimes more vivid than a real one. All that was years ago, but I still think about him whenever I hear Johnny Cash.



Half a world away and a different year we're walking after Cape buffalo. And walking and walking. Down in the swampy grasslands and reed beds, up into the lofty sandveld forests, the msasa seed pods bursting like gunshots as you walk through cathedrals of shadow. Its winter in Zimbabwe, with the grasses dried to tawny gold, the great elephant tracks laid in summer's mud now dried hard in the mopane country.

At first glance the land is tough, spare, baked and thorny. Stand still and the truth will emerge, quietly and softly, from the shadows. A young bushbuck, delicate and tremulous, ears swivelling, and walking as though the ground is hot bricks. A blur of brilliant emerald from a pair of parakeets. Crawling through the long grass there's a tiny quail bursting from cover. It's all there if you have the patience to look beyond the sunsets and zebras. And so are the buffalo.

They don't want to know us, though. The slightest error with wind and they're gone in a thunderous rush. There are lions here, poachers too sometimes, and the buff know it. This is not their first rodeo.

A week in and I've stalked buffalo, photographed buffalo, been mock-charged by buffalo, and I can spot dagga-boy tracks from a moving truck in my sleep. There have been blown stalks following old bachelors in the mopane regrowth, hours spent wiping sweat-flies from my eyes as we lay down another long trek and stalk. Apart from the false charge I haven't even chambered a round.

One afternoon we follow some fresh buff tracks. They're ahead of us somewhere, feeding and moving slowly upwind. We hustle as the light starts to go, but there is nothing except tracks and dung and the occasional whiff of beefy farmyard. Eventually Zenzo the tracker pauses, head down and finger up, the universal signal to freeze. A moment later we all hear it. A deep grunt. Game on.

They're still moving. If the old bulls are at the back it might work. After really pouring it on we come up to a clear, grassy plain fringed by thorn bush, and find them spread out across it. The nearest cows are only 50

metres away, the rest — maybe sixty buff — strung out over a wide front. We all do the same thing at the same time, scanning bosses. Before I'm even started properly there's a low finger-snap from Zenzo.

I don't need his help to figure out what it is, and nor does anybody else. There's a huge bull out there, on the left flank of the herd. He's got it all: a rock-hard boss, good drop, curl that goes on forever. A brute. We all know it — you could hunt this district for a decade and not see a better one. Then comes the crashing reality. It's almost dark. Not late afternoon, but past twilight and into proper night. Zenzo throws the sticks up anyway and looks me square in the eye. Him I know of old. He means it.

Sure as fate, an old cow on the edge of the herd has picked us up. She's staring hard at us. It might have been Zenzo's movement, although much more likely an errant breeze has given the game away. The other buff start to notice her body language and get interested in what we might be. I put the rifle on the sticks and work the bolt. As I do, the herd swings to face us. I run the scope across them, the cows and the young calves and the wannabe herd bulls, and then the big chief himself. He's at a 120, chest-on. The rifle is an accurate .375. I can only see his silhouette; once the crosshairs move from grass to his black body they disappear completely. The boundary of the concession is just a kilometre away.

We all know it isn't on. The only thing worse than watching a warrior walk is to lose him wounded. They are so strong that even if the shot were good he might be gone, lost to the boundary and the night, the lions and the hyenas. Silently, bitterly, I lift the bolt handle. We worked so hard for this. Beaten by ten minutes. Nobody says a word.

I break out the video camera and use the sticks to zoom in on the bull with night vision. It seemed like a good thing to do at the time, but I don't need that footage. I can still see him, as clear as day, standing in his field of star grass as the African night swallows him. Head up and looking for our scent like a boss.

That was many years ago. He'll be long-gone by now, but I hope he put many calves on the ground. That's all you can do with the great ones really — let them burn into your memory and enjoy them. If you play fair, sometimes you're gonna lose.



Something really hammered this deer. It looks like it stood on a landmine and then got hit by a truck. A big one. Going fast. The prints and plucked hair around the body are clear enough. The deep marks on the throat stand

out, even in the dappled light of the palmetto. Puma, a big tom. He's taken the yearling on the edge of the grass and then dragged it a short way into cover. He's no risk to us, long-gone. Probably laid up and fed for a day or two before taking up his beat again. We take one last look at what's left of the beautifully spotted coat of the young chital stag and move on.

Of course we're here, deep in northern Argentina, for the same thing. Call them chital, call them axis, they are to my mind the most elegant of all deer. There will be letters over that — it's like declaring one supermodel better than all the rest. To those with pens poised, I can say only this: when you have seen them up close you might change your mind. When you have watched in awe as dozens of russet coats with impossible spots leap and stream through the shadows like running water, their high liquid bark ringing through the trees, you might change your mind.

I'm battling some kind of stomach virus. It makes the heat and the long stalks more work than they need to be, but it's a new part of the world and one that's easy to enjoy. We work on through that day and the next. Hinds, young stags. An old boy with broken tines and a scarred-up face.

The country is a mix of bush, palmetto and open clearings. One morning with a light chill in the air we set out across a wide plain of bleached grass towards a promising piece of country. We're almost across when we walk straight into a herd. Chital, lots of them. And at the back, dogging a mature hind, is the stag of a lifetime. They're moving quickly and the gap is not wide. After this we'll be into the thick stuff and the morning breeze will be at our back. We both know how that little scenario will play out: a bark from a big old girl and gone. It's now or never.

They're just shy of 300 metres away, and there isn't a stick of cover or anything to steady the rifle on. Not ideal. It's one thing to make a nice offhand shot at the range, quite another when it's the one and only chance you'll get at an absolute monster.

Enrique sizes it up and gives me the full-body shrug that in South America means so many things at once and is used for any disaster, big or small. It is regrettable, *si?* Ah, but is that not also the way of the world? I wish it were not so, *compadre*. In my heart I do. If it were in my power I would have it differently. But we must live with our fate, is that not so, *amigo?*

Then a flash comes over his face and he turns slightly to do the exact thing I've been praying he wouldn't do — cup his hand and pat his shoulder. Yes, the dreaded 'shoot-off-my-shoulder' trick. I hate it for two reasons. The first is that, unlike trees and fenceposts, people are not stable, not literally or figuratively. The second reason is even simpler: it does my head in. I'm

so worried about safety and not bursting their ear drums that the concentration needed for a good shot goes out the window.

I know where the rifle will print at that range. My pet loads in my favourite rifles — the 7x57, the 30-06 and the .375 — all shoot exactly the same. I only need to remember one set of numbers, minus 8 at 300.

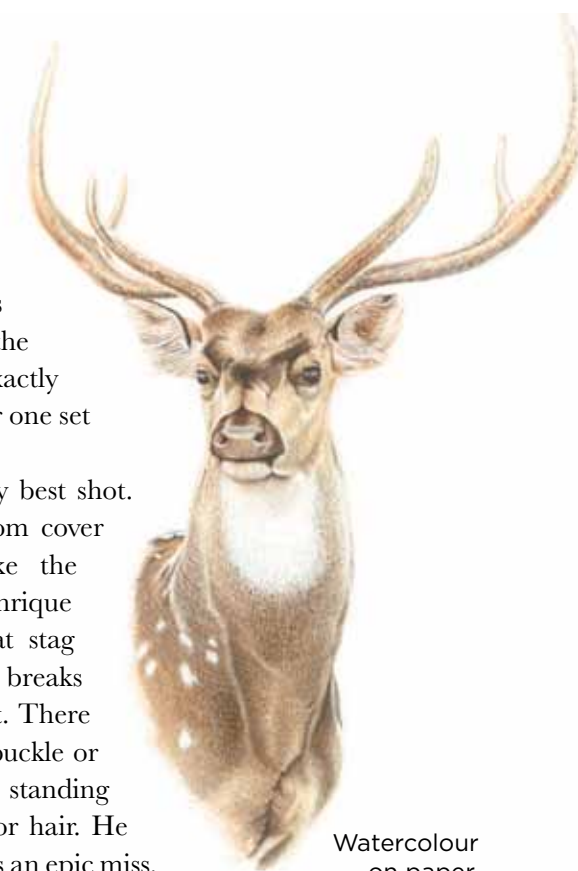
I give it, as the movies say, my best shot. The stag is only a few metres from cover when he pauses slightly. I take the pressure on the trigger, feeling Enrique sway under the rifle. Damn, that stag looks huge in the scope. The shot breaks just as the crosshairs pass his chest. There is no thump of a hit. He doesn't buckle or buck, just slides away easily. Later, standing where he was, there is no blood or hair. He might as well have been a ghost. It's an epic miss.

I've never seen another like him. And of course the realisation hits that, had I been carrying shooting sticks as I do in Africa, we might be thinking different thoughts than these right now.



I feel sorry for anyone whose only measure of success is shots fired. It's the experience of hunting — of being there with purpose, of being in the game not just watching it — that drives us. I like a win as much as anyone, but I don't need to touch a trigger to have a great day.

All of these little adventures — the elk, the buffalo and the chital stag — amount to the same thing. It is at once a cliché and a profound truth. Good judgement comes from experience. And experience, well, that comes from bad judgement.



Watercolour
on paper,
Sarah Trumble