

Hunt

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[p. 21-29]

Many would disapprove of his behaviour up on the hill. He's known as an industrious, trustworthy citizen. Not everybody needs to know his thoughts on life. There are thousands of points of view, but at the end of the day, you have to find your own way and live your own life. It's better to act covertly on your deepest convictions, than live out in the open with only half a conviction, that's his motto.

He looks down the hill.

Total darkness. His hands rest on the gun. He feels its cold trigger, runs his fingers over it, stopping at the magazine holding the bullet. He's still got plenty of time to take off the safety catch. Erik tenses and relaxes his muscles, his toes, his knuckles; he grimaces. It's a good night for it, still warm beneath the cloud cover.

Then there's movement. Lower down, there, something creeping between the trees. Low to the ground, a plump, dark creature. A young boar perhaps. Erik takes aim. The animal disappears behind a tree. He hears the eagle owl again. A warning? Are those animals all in it together? He keeps an eye on the tree. Time passes. Perhaps the animal has dug itself in.

After a few minutes he gives up. The animal has escaped him. He lets his gun drop. He didn't think for a second that it would be easy. He doesn't doubt the steadiness of his hand, nor his patience or calm.

Some would dismiss it as cowardice, robbing an unsuspecting animal of its life from a distance. They'd label it murder – vulgar, sordid murder. He's also convinced that there are people who'd understand him, understand he can't turn his back on nature. It's his right. The circle of life.

He lifts up the gun again and clicks off the safety. He looks through the sight. Darkness, but he sees the shadows, the contours, the spaces between the trees.

There's no better hunting place in the whole region.

Again, he feels like lighting up a cigarette but he has to be patient. That moment will come.

Is he trying to pluck up courage?

Don't think too much, trust what's left of his instincts and intuition, feel life's great driving force. And listen! Yes, he hears snorting. Down to the left.

Erik peers through the night binoculars, the gun balancing in his other hand so he can act fast.

This time a wild boar comes out of the bushes. Erik sees its broad shoulders, its bowed head, its tusks. He wants to put down the night binoculars and shoulder his gun, gauge the exact distance, draw a bead on the figure, pull the trigger – all in a fast, flowing movement, just as he has imagined it. But just as he is about to lower the binoculars, he catches a glimpse of another two, three boars, and another one, and another. Astonished, he continues to look through the binoculars. A herd of seven animals is standing at the bottom of the hill. They lower and raise their heads, sniffing the air and grunting.

I don't stand a chance, Erik realizes. I shoot one, then another. After that the other five will get me, despite the harpoon gun. A herd of old and young animals. I can pick out the two smartest, the most virile and perhaps stop another in his tracks, but then I'd still be up against the remaining four. They're a group, they're sure not only to react as individuals.

He thinks about his children, infants still, a son and a daughter, sleeping; Connie's warm body in bed. He won't survive this bloodbath. He didn't see any herds this big on any of his practise runs. Now they are slowly snuffling around, grubbing between roots in the marshy ground, but if angered, they'd come storming up the hill in no time. No. He'll leave these superior forces undisturbed. The night is still young

He lays his gun across his knees.

Luckily, the wind is favourable, his smell won't be driven down the hill. The herd scratches around and then disappears between the trees down to his left.

He's escaped unharmed.

For a while, he can hear their grunting and snorting, and cracking branches. Then it's quiet. Erik breathes again.

Now he has to refocus, not allow this to throw him off balance.

The hill seems abandoned.

He peers around, from tree to tree, following his instincts, no system or method. And then he sees...

But it's the cloud cover breaking open and moonshine gliding over the undergrowth and moss.

It's nothing, only the light moves. The gun hovers in one hand again. His wife and children are asleep. Only he is awake.

The clouds slowly close up again.

Then he sees two eyes gleaming on the hillside, closer to him. The animal must be approached silently. He could hit it with a stone. Can it smell him? He lets the binoculars drop, raises his gun. The eyes gleam towards him, low to the ground, it can't be a deer. He aims through the sight. He sees the muzzle, the broad, pointy ears in a weak flicker of moonlight. A fox. He can easily take it out.

But what's the point? Nobody eats fox meat.

If he pulls the trigger, it will be over.

He stays calm, it would be better to wait for a red deer or a doe, or a solitary wild boar. The fox slinks closer and seeks cover behind bushes, the roots of trees, rocks, its gaze fixed on the hidey hole. Then he makes a couple of leaps forwards, almost level with the place Erik has taken up position, but further along, so that it's impossible to aim at it from his hiding place. The fox sits down and barks.

Maybe he's trying to say something, the intonation of the barks seem both mocking and enraged.

Could the fox be warning somebody?

There is a long silence.

It must have gone away.

The thermos flask is almost empty. Dawn gradually begins to curl into the air. Not long now until he'll be able to lay aside the night binoculars. When morning fully breaks, he'll have to make himself scarce.

He resists having a cigarette again.

All of a sudden, the animal is there at the bottom of the hill, its antlers sticking out above the bushes. Erik shoulders his gun. A doe appears next to the buck. Both of them magnificent specimens. If he's quick, he can get them both. Which one first? The buck lowers its head, its antlers sweeping through the bushes. The doe nibbles at a twig. The doe will be easier to carry afterwards.

Both of them are entirely unaware, he's got plenty of time.

He picks the doe. She goes down with a jolt. The buck is startled. Erik has a new bullet ready immediately. The buck is already leaping through the trees with giant bounds. Erik keeps its outline in his sight. He pulls the trigger without hesitation.

He sees the buck stagger, its antlers rock precariously, then the creature seems to recover, managing to disappear with broken leaps into the thick undergrowth.

Erik has another bullet in the magazine, too late though.

The buck is wounded but the doe is done.

He hurried down the hill, feeling in his pockets for the pack of cigarettes, his gun dangling in the other hand.

When he gets to the doe, he sees a fawn darting skittishly amongst the bushes. The fawn seems to be murmuring something. Erik doesn't understand it, he shoulders his gun and takes out the young animal.

Day is already in the air, he has to hurry. He still takes the time to light up a cigarette, reloading his gun just in case.

He lifts the fawn onto his shoulders, the gun gripped under his arm. He pushes his free arm through the folding chair, using his hands to carry the case and the thermos. The cigarette smoke stings his eyes but he doesn't have any hands free to take the cigarette out of his mouth. He'll have to come back for the doe in a bit.

Loaded like a mule, he trudges to the dip in the road where his car is parked. He lays the corpse on the ground, leans the gun upright against the car and opens the boot. He hears the barking of a fox again.

He throws the binoculars, the thermos, the empty case and the folding chair into the boot. Then he turns and bends down for the fawn.

He hears a crackling in the bushes.

Troating madly, the buck charges right across the sunken road, limping. Yes, luckily he's limping, which makes his gait uncertain and slows him down.

Erik just has time to jump aside, but the ploughing antlered head hits his hip and leg. Then there's the dull thud of antlers against the car.

The buck stops, dazed, for a moment. In the same instant, he hears the muffled bang of his gun. The thud against the car must have caused it to fall and go off, he hadn't put the safety catch back on. Erik hobbles as fast as he can around the car, tears open the door and heaves himself up into the driving seat.

The car is at a slant. Its left front tyre has been shot to shreds.

The buck butts the vehicle with its antlers; it shakes horribly, threatening to tip over. Erik starts the engine and lurches down the hill. The boot lid is still open and flaps like a deranged wing. The buck chases after them. Erik hears the derisive yelp of a fox. He has left his gun and the doe behind.

The car is difficult to steer.

Lurching and bumping, it races downhill. Erik only has his harpoon gun if the buck manages to get at him, it's in his coat pocket. There's more daylight at every bend. He has to hurry.

Erik is able to keep the buck at a distance on a straight stretch of road, but the animal catches up with him again on the bends. His antlers sway threateningly in the rear mirror. Erik fumbles for the harpoon gun. There's nothing to suggest he'll be able to shake off the animal. He

hears the burst tire clapping and the determined pounding of the buck in a synchronous rhythm; above this, the angry troating that is barely tempered by the bouncing boot lid, more like sucked inside in booming waves. A raw, ominous call in which, however unclearly articulated, the curse 'you filthy bastard' can be made out again and again through the repetitive vowels and vitriolic intonation.

Erik has to concentrate on the bumpy hillside track until he can turn onto the foot of the concrete road. At the same, he has to get rid of the animal, since the first vehicles to the city might appear on the road. A car with a flat tyre, chased by a buck that is foaming at the mouth, is sure to attract attention. All it takes is one person with an overzealous sense of citizenship noting down his number plate and he can expect an investigation. A gun and a dead doe are on that hillside.

Every bend is a feat of daring. The car steers against him and a couple of times, Erik fears he is going to run off the road, or worse, tip over. The dead fawn might roll out of the boot and that would set off the buck big time.

I know the way, a hairpin bend coming up, that will settle it. I can't accelerate any more. The buck seems to be losing ground and God help me, here's the bend.

He jerks the wheel, the car slips, is lifted from the ground onto two wheels for a moment, and stops diagonally across the road. The engine cuts out.

The buck storms around the bend at full speed. Erik braces himself. The buck hits the motionless car with a dull thud and the grating of antlers. Erik is thrown about, his pistol in his hand, his shoulder smacks the door, the harpoon gun goes off. The dart shoots through his right boot, scratching just one toe, yet pinning the boot by its sole to the floor of the car, right between the brake and the accelerator.

The buck lies on the road, dazed. The troating has turned into a panting groan. Erik doesn't manage to get his foot out of the boot. He has to get away before the buck scrambles to its feet. After three attempts, the car starts. Erik jiggles his free foot over the pinned leg towards the accelerator and carefully turns the car so that its nose is pointing down the track. Changing gears is difficult, the gearbox rattles each time as though it's being torn apart. The flat tire claps, the boot lid bounces, the right side mirror is hanging off and there's a large crack in the passenger seat window. The door must be dented but he can't see that from the inside.

He drives onto the concrete road in the wet light of the burgeoning day, the top of the hill is already glistening. His gun and the doe's corpse are up there between the trees. The tracks left by the three tyres and the rim are dead easy to follow.

The car advances slowly. Erik wants to rumble as far as the bridge over the river; deer rarely venture so close to the city.

Quite a way from the bridge he finds himself forced to stop the car on the side of the road. If the buck did show up now, he'd be able to ask passing drivers for help; all he has is a knife.

Erik bends to his boot, cuts open the rubber to free his foot. A couple of times he feels the blade cut into his skin. Finally he uses both hands to pull the sole free from the floorboard. He hops around the car on his broken boot, throws a tarpaulin over the fawn and gets the jack and the spare wheel out of the back.

It hits him now that he's shaking, sweat is dripping down his neck. The car is badly damaged, the passenger door jammed.

Erik straightens his back before changing the wheel and looks at the morning glow that has never before slid so beautifully over the hill.

He's almost done with the wheel, he is wiping his hands on his trousers, when he hears the calm step of a hooved animal. For a moment a cold chill grabs his heart – is he being stalked? Is it the deer? – but he realizes at once it can't be, the tread is too heavy and regular. It must be an ambling horse. And yes, there's a horse with a cart and after it, a fox. What are they doing here?

Erik bends over to the wheel, keeping his head low, the animals don't need to see his face.

They walk by without greeting him, nothing to do with one another, each in their own world, that's good. When they've turned the corner, Erik gives the bolts one last turn, throws the broken wheel into the boot and gets into the car. The morning glow is red, the colour of a deer's blood, as though he'd imagined it.

[p110-111]

SHE RECOGNIZES HIM from his coat, he was here this morning. And yesterday. And at the bus stop.

All of a sudden, he rises up to his full height before her. Slender, svelte, with strong ribs, plenty of meat on his chest. She holds her breath. For a second, she is dazed, she doesn't know what is happening to her. He is not threatening her, on the contrary, he seems to be greeting her. He taps his paw to his forehead, nods at her.

Good evening, he mutters. That's what she thinks she hears.

Good evening, she says back. She wants to go on her way. He moves aside, doesn't want to hinder her, but it's as though he wants to ask or tell her something. He swallows his words, though.

He stares at her in such a way she almost blushes. She sees it at a glance, before she turns her head away. The depth of the gaze he is probing her with.

She feels in her pockets for the key to her front door, looks back quickly one last time as though to make sure... She's not mistaken.

The Rottweiler is still standing on its back paws, fumbling awkwardly with its coat, it's trying to do up the buttons.

She almost retraces her steps, she almost asks: Shall I help you with those buttons?

She stops herself just in time. In that brief instant, his movements cause the coat panels to part slightly. She sees her suspicions confirmed and recoils.

He has been looking at her, he is still looking at her. He sees her as a woman. Just as real as that sly red tip against his belly.

She closes the door behind her, astounded.

She has come to a stop, she realizes, perhaps for mere seconds, like a statue, and she wants to move but she can't.

She stays there, while knowing exactly how to continue, one foot after another, along the hall and into the living room. She stands there and it's as though her mind has been so fully taken over by her thoughts, there's no energy left to move.

She is shocked and literally paralysed. It's as though a warm shudder has run through her, from high up at the back of her head to her heels; she even felt the wave splitting in two, just above her collarbone, and continuing with an identical tremor down to both feet.

[p163-165]

CAREFUL, KARLA!

Of course, of course she keeps telling herself that. But the intensity with which the Rottweiler looks at her in the bus is so overwhelming that no caution, suspicion or warning can hold her back. She tingles and shimmers inside in a way she has seldom felt. What's to stop her from giving herself over to it?

The Rottweiler bows to her – amazing how he's managed to learn all that – as he allows her to move ahead of him when she gets off the bus. And that draw to his muzzle, she knows now that it's a smile. Glimmers of tenderness and longing sparkle in his eyes, she can see that. They walk the last few metres to her door, arm in arm. She's a head taller than him. She only has to bend her neck to kiss him on the top of his head, above the eyes that are so firmly focussed on her, and she can hear the way he is growling softly, almost humming.

What he feels cannot be articulated.

She opens the door and pulls him inside with her.

I haven't got a clue what kinds of things you like to eat.

I've learned to eat a lot of things. As long as it's cooked. I'm not keen on fresh fruit or raw vegetables.

I'll make something simple.

He nods. I'll just have a look around the garden, OK?

Of course.

Once he's in the garden, he makes sure Karla isn't watching him before he sinks down onto all fours and snuffles around the places the cats have been sitting.

An old woman is watching from the house next door, her posture betrays total suspicion. The Rottweiler shakes his head, he can smell Karla has put the pans on the stove.

Karla is moved by the way the Rottweiler sits at the table with seeming effortlessness, as though it's only natural, a fork clamped in his left paw, eating from the plate.

She sees him prick up his ears. A while later she hears Josée doing something with a bin bag in her garden.

They smile.

When he's finished his food, the Rottweiler puts down his fork and is tempted to lick the plate clean. He stops just in time and licks his lips instead.

Karla looks at him.

He wags his tail.

She doesn't have one.

He notices, her gaze follows his tail, to the left, to the right, like a metronome.

Then he stops abruptly, his tail erect.

He looks into her eyes, curls his tail.

It draws a small, honest smile from her – that's how it should be in his mother's books. But this is real.

Karla tilts her head to the left.

Now the Rottweiler copies her movement with his tail.

Karla leans her head to the right: his tail follows suit. She smiles again.

Her bright smile is something the Rottweiler doesn't have. But his nose quivers, his eyes search.

Karla reaches across the table for his tail. At the last moment, he pulls it away. Like at the fun fair. She can't catch him.

Then she raises her arms, makes a knot in her long, dark hair and shakes her head.

Now he tries to grab her ponytail with his paw.

Karla is as quick as lightning too. He misses and gently lays a paw on her shoulder and leaves it there.

What a shimmering, what a trembling in the air, in and around her, the warmth in and around him, a trembling in the air, a glowing, but also courage, her shoulder, his paw.

They stare at each other awkwardly. Unsure.

The dinner is finished.

His closeness, her closeness.

They amuse themselves on the sofa. Karla strokes his back under his sky-blue coat: how soft his fur is. She feels the strength expressed by his shoulders and thighs.

The Rottweiler touches her face with the soft cushion pads of his paws, he licks her throat, she closes her eyes, giving herself over to his teeth with tender willpower.

Later, she can still clearly picture that one powerfully-charged, chilling, accelerating moment during which she unthinkingly, irrationally, with a near contempt for death – she was aware of it – her tender flesh at his disposal, waited to see whether he would bite or not. She felt the incredible strength in his jaws and the way he reigned in that strength.

He licks her and she realizes there is nothing like seventh heaven. Her hand feels how tight his balls are, as hard as nuts. She lets him come, his teeth around her throat. He jolts and jerks and high above her, she hears him crying, a high-pitched sob, triumphant, which the whole street can hear.