



**AFTER KILLING A
RESPECTABLE BULL,
A HUNTER WORRIES HIS
DAYS HUNTING ALONE
IN THE MOUNTAINS ARE
NUMBERED. THEN HE
DRIFTS INTO THE CAMP
OF A WELL-SEASONED
HUNTER WHO CHANGES
HIS PERSPECTIVE, AND
HIS TIMELINE.**

I sat on a clump of bunch grass so I wouldn't slide down further. I looked at the rack leaning against the tree trunk, the game bags, the core of my apple I had tossed a few feet away. The air still flowed down and out of the drainage, and the sun had just cleared the ridge. It filtered through the pines in shimmering beams. It was only the second day of hunting. A storybook hunt where it plays out like the script in your mind. Scripts flip, however. Tables turn. I sat there feeling sorry for myself. I sat because I could not stand. I felt sorry for myself because I had not yet met Mr. Preston.

Two hours before, I blew a last soft mew and dropped the call into my pocket. I pivoted on my knees to square up with where the bull's vitals would clear the sage. I drew my bow early and settled in, still as stone, because the bull and I would be breathing the same air at the shot. That close. I watched the top of his antlers glide and rise behind the swell until he could peek through the tips of the sage. He searched the spot he expected to see a big brown cow. I felt his eyes all over and around me. The coin was in the air and there was nothing I could do but hope it landed on him walking forward, instead of wheeling and thundering down the drainage. He took one step forward and stopped. Then two more. Then the one I needed.

The arrow zipped and landed with a crack that startled me. The shock of a shattered rib buckled the bull's knees as if I'd hit him with a slug. He dropped with a thud. I felt like springing to my feet, arms raised to the sky. As I gathered

my feet to stand, the bull rolled so that his legs were now downhill, then he slowly rolled over again so that I saw his belly, then his back. Then he mustered momentum. Back, belly, antlers, back, belly, legs, picking up speed as he steamrolled sage and grass and shale. He vanished over the horizon, and the absurd thought struck me that he was getting away, making a break for the willows at the bottom of the river drainage.

I raised my bow to clear the brush and shuffled and slid after him to keep him in sight as he traveled another 40 yards. The dust drifted and settled on the hillside. My breathing slowed, and the clattering of shale faded away, returning the space to the steady rush of the river. The urge to raise my arms in triumph was gone, and a sense of relief replaced it. I sat down. The bull lay on his side with remarkable composure—legs outstretched, head and rack resting on the ground as a horse would lay and sleep. I paid my respects as we do, with the tinge of sadness we feel at that time. But I kept my thoughts moving. I had work to do, and I was by myself.

I laid out my pack above a tree stump and pulled out my tag, game bags, and knife. I examined the apple I was saving for lunch and propped it up in the grass above my pack—a reward for the job ahead. As I worked, I considered how lucky I was to have a good bull down on public land again. I knew it wasn't because I was a great hunter. The secret to my success was showing up, driving across four states then up a ragged logging road, erecting a Spartan camp, hiking two hours in the dark, then dropping a thousand feet into a drainage. Then, I would run my hand across a burned snag, smear the ash on my face, and wait for first light. And I would brim with hope. Every day, I brimmed with hope.

I am the slightly below-average employee they keep around because he shows up on time with a good attitude. I can say one thing with my bugle, and I think it's "Hey!" If a bull responds with a challenge or a query, I answer him with "Hey!" That, and some simple cow calls make me sound like an easy mark for bullies. I have killed several nice bullies.

I was on an incline with no trees for an anchor point, so I was forced to wrestle the bull, holding his legs out of the way with my legs or shoulders or forehead. If my wife could see me now, I thought. It would not play well. My wife tells me she would like me to "stop doing that." She says a man pushing 60 should not be running around in the mountains by himself. She says the key to my success might someday



Mr. Preston bowhunting the backcountry in 2023. A little later, he packs out the bull he killed late in the evening.

be the key to my demise. The thought made me smile and shake my head as I cut away the last backstrap. It comes from caring, I thought. Too much at times. But, too much of a good thing is still a good thing. I hung the last bag and sat down with my apple.

The sun's light grew bolder in the valley. I heard the river run and run and tried to grasp that it would always run. I could see the water through a gap in the willows. It was just getting started at this high elevation—narrow and



FAR LEFT: Mr. Preston fishing in 2011 with his stepdaughter Mary-Beth, great granddaughter Emmy, and granddaughter Lottie. **MIDDLE:** Circa 1985 Utah with a pile of bucks, Mr. Preston, son Rusty, Uncle Willy, father-in-law Norm, mother-in-law Char. **FAR RIGHT:** Tagged out in 2023, son Cade, Mr. Preston, and son Rusty.

eager. The water rushed and foamed white over the rocks on the near bank. But on the far bank, on a smooth disc of black water, a single aspen leaf floated blood red with accents of orange and blackened around the edges. I watched it glide in a circle. I watched it until I thought it may swirl in that place for days. In that moment of stillness, I acknowledged I had made a big trade. Killing a bull on the second day, I traded another week of this. Maybe next year, I thought, I should hold out for the big one.

MAYBE SHE WAS RIGHT

I finished my apple, tossed the core downhill, and stood. Pain shot through my left knee so bad my leg collapsed beneath me. I grimaced and glared at my knee. Betrayed. It had bothered me for years, but it had never failed me. I stood again and put weight on it. Toothache pain flared, and I pulled it up again. Once more, changing the angle on the hillside. Nope. I sat back down. And just like that it all looked different. I could only see it through my wife’s eyes. Deep in a crease of a remote drainage, white and red bags hanging from trees like ornaments, a mahogany rack frosted with white tips leaning against the base of a tree. She’d think, “He dug his own grave then decorated it.”

I pulled out my satellite tracker and looked at the SOS button. Fear sank in but not for my safety. I sat next to a river on a nice day with 200 pounds of meat cooling in the trees. I didn’t fear the cost of extraction or my wife saying she told me so. I feared my family saying I couldn’t do it anymore. I’d crawl to camp before pushing that button. But, I could send a text. My buddy Cade was a few miles away camping with his dad and brother. After the text bounced off a satellite, and if I caught him crossing a ridge, and if his phone was turned on, he might get my text.

Even then, I had not even met his dad and brother. Was I going to wreck their hunt? They might agree that a man pushing 60 shouldn’t be up here by himself anyway.

So, I did what any man would do. I stood up and thrashed my leg from stop to stop as hard as possible, cursing at it, like you might a vending machine. Then, I held my hands out, put my foot on the ground, and pressed. Good. I took a step, then another. Shaking a vending machine may not make those chips fall, but it’ll sure fix a limb in the field. I kept my knee centered under me, and two days later I was packed out, meat on ice, dignity intact.

MEETING MR. PRESTON

I found my buddy Cade’s camp late afternoon. A couple of trailers and a fire ring nestled next to a stream.

“Mike?”
 “Yep, Rusty?”
 We shook hands.
 “Cade said you might come by.”
 “I just dropped in to see if you needed help packing out.”
 “Your timing is perfect. We just finished bringing in my bull, so you’re off the hook.”
 “Perfect.”
 We laughed.
 “Cade is still in the field.”
 His dad came over, holding a paper towel on the back of his hand with a band-aid between his fingers.
 “Dad, this is Mike, Cade’s buddy.”
 “I’m sorry Mike, just one second.”
 He held his hands out to Rusty, who took the band-aid and held it ready to apply. His dad raised up the paper towel, and Rusty placed the band-aid over a piece of skin that had been scraped back.
 “My old skin is getting thin. I bumped my hand and it just tore like paper.”
 Bandaged, he held his hand out

and I shook it—firm, calloused, but I felt it had been stronger at one time. Or maybe I was making assumptions. Mr. Preston was small-framed, thin. He wore a jacket that he had weathered but was a shade large on him now, as if he had shrunk up a bit recently. His eyes, though, were young and cheerful and humble. In a word, they made you feel welcome.

“Yes, sir. Mine is thinning, too, I’ve noticed.”

I felt bad as it left my lips; it was such an obvious attempt at empathy, trying to say I was right there with a man in his seventies.

“Mike, can I get you a bottle of water, a beer?”

“Beer sounds good. Thank you, sir.”

Rusty and I took a seat at the fire, and Mr. Preston joined us with three beers. We went straight to elk. Rusty was a guide with so much experience and knowledge I kept him talking as much as possible. It was like attending a free clinic. He talked about the ones that got away from them and about the lessons they had learned or relearned. Mr. Preston watched the fire and nodded. I wondered how many times he had made it into the field so far. I hoped it was as much as he wanted. My dad’s last hunt was at the same age, 76, but he didn’t make it out of the cabin.

I told them about my hunt, minus the part where I almost called them to rescue me. It would have been depressing for me, knowing my days in the mountains were numbered if my knee was worn out. We discussed hitting a rib, broadheads, and draw weight.

“Yeah, I’ve had a few shoulder surgeries, so I just pull 65 pounds,” I said.

“Yep, I’m down to 50 this year,” Mr. Preston said. “I had a couple of knee surgeries and I guess my shoulder atrophied while I rehabbed my legs.”

“Well, 50 pounds was enough yesterday,” Rusty said.



**IT'S NOT SOLITUDE
MR. PRESTON AND I SEEK,
BUT THAT THING THAT
ONLY HAPPENS WHEN
YOU ENDURE SOLITUDE.**

Mr. Preston in 2018 with a limited-entry Utah rifle bull.

"No kidding? That's awesome," I turned to Mr. Preston. Again, I could hear my own patronizing tone. He didn't volunteer to show me the bull's rack, and I chose not to ask. Any elk with a bow at his age is a trophy.

Mr. Preston stood to tend the fire. He picked up a long, straight, bare limb that tapered to a point that was charred from use over the last many days. He reached in with the limb and maneuvered three logs. He touched the limb to the end of one and rotated it 90 degrees, then rolled another to touch it at a right angle. Then, in three moves, none of which had to be repeated, he rolled the third log up and onto the first two so that it sat on top of them. The flame boiled to life in the pocket within and I felt its heat as if it were aimed at me.

"You have done that before," I said.

He laid the limb aside and said, "Well, yeah."

"So, I'm curious," Rusty said. "Why do you hunt alone? You camp alone? For 10 days?"

His earnestness caught me off guard, like he had been wanting to know the answer for years even though we had just met.

The question itself made me

uneasy, too. I could never find the words to answer that question. I told myself that it might be the challenge, or time to think, or I hunted better alone. But none of those felt complete. In the end I could never find words to explain it to myself, much less someone else. I couldn't even say I enjoyed it. It was more akin to needing it.

"I just like the solitude," I said. Just another word for alone, but fancy enough to conjure an image of Henry David Thoreau lost in thought in his cabin. Question answered. Off the hook.

"Yeah, I get it," Rusty said, disappointed.

Mr. Preston watched the fire and nodded.

We sat in silence for a long moment.

FIRE STORIES

"So, nice one? Did you bring the rack with you?" Rusty asked.

I smiled big and said, "Of course I brought it with me. I'll be right back."

I went to my truck and pulled the rack out of the back seat of my cab. It was not a bruiser, but I couldn't help but smile as I walked back to the fire ring with it.

"Good-lookin' bull. Symmetric," Rusty said.

Mr. Preston took it and held it out. "Nice bull, Mike. Congratulations."

I leaned the rack against a chair so we could all admire it. Then Mr. Preston tipped his hand.

"You know, any public-land bull with a bow is a trophy." He declared it with authority and with a faint, thin hint of pity. I picked up on it because I had done it to him twice already.

"All right," I said. "Let's see it."

"No, no, you don't want to see that thing."

"Yes, yes, I do want to see that thing."

"No, you really don't."

He couldn't contain his smile now. "Yes, Mr. Preston, I really do."

I leaned over and punched his shoulder.

"Ok," he said, holding his shoulder as if I'd hurt him.

We walked to the bed of his truck. He dropped the tailgate, and the bed was filled with a massive, heavy, six-by-six rack. Symmetric, deep chocolate brown with ivory tips, tines that turned and swept with strength and style.

"Oh, my goodness. That is a giant."

"Its thirds are weak, but the mass would help the score," Rusty said.

"I don't know about that, but I do know this is a work of art," I said.

Mr. Preston held a brow tine in his hand and ran his thumb across its tip. Then I noticed something. He had sawed the skull cap off with the hide attached. This rack was destined for his garage, or at best leaned against a wall in the house. It would be the bull of a lifetime for me—maybe a pedestal mount, knock out a wall to make room. Mr. Preston was hunting more than inches of bone.

“That sun is dropping fast. I’m going to go start on dinner. They’ll be back before long.”

Mr. Preston turned for the stove. Rusty and I returned to the fire.

“That is really impressive at that age,” I said to Rusty.

“He put in 12 miles on that bull yesterday.”

“Twelve miles?”

He nodded.

“And just had two knee replacements?”

He nodded.

“Over the last couple of years.”

I was thankful I hadn’t whined about my long days, or my sore knee, or my age.

“Cade and I are going to have a talk with him. After watching him pack that bull out yesterday.”

“Yeah. My dad’s last hunt was at that age,” I said.

“I mean, he’ll just take off by himself for a week, two weeks, up into the mountains. Comes back with giant animals, but dang.”

“What?”

“Yeah. By himself.” Rusty shook his head. “I think he should stop doing that.”

And just like that, I had a real answer. Seeing it in someone else, it came to me. I looked over at Mr. Preston grilling elk steak for his boys. I thought about how warm and engaging he was. He was no lone wolf. As Rusty talked and I watched Mr. Preston shuffle pans on the stove, I remembered seeing an adrenaline junkie explain herself from a hospital bed. She was a base jumper, a skydiver without an airplane. But she said she was not chasing adrenaline. What she was hooked on was the moment in her brief freefall when there was only now, the present, just being.

I imagine it as the silver skin-thin space between the past, where our regrets haunt us, and the future, where our fears hunt us. An eddy in time where it does not stop, but where you stop participating. It’s not solitude Mr. Preston and I seek, but that thing that only happens when you endure solitude.



The author and Mr. Preston with their public land archery bulls 2023.

I picked up his stick and examined its charred tip. I pictured Mr. Preston’s eyes transfixed by the flames of a campfire. I saw the magpies perched atop his bull’s cape. I wondered if he had ever cussed a knee into working. Seventy-six, I thought. My days may be numbered, but maybe the number is bigger than I thought. Bigger than my wife hoped for.

Cade and his friend Brandon rolled into camp and lit it up with excitement.

Brandon dropped his pack and replayed the day for Rusty who laughed. “No way. No way. Oh man,” he said. Mr. Preston buzzed around the stove and listened and worked and paused to listen again. Cade echoed the story to me as the fire popped and sparks raced up into the black. The elk were there he said, and so close, and the day was so full and so hard and he brimmed with hope for tomorrow. Mr. Preston cut in, commanding dinner was ready and you better not

let the rice get cold. “Ok, ok. Hold on, hold on, Dad,” they yelled back.

But I saw it all from a distance. What I heard was, welcome back and I love all this and I love you and I love you, too. The pack was back and gathering in the moonlight, howling and yipping and swirling toward each other.

Mr. Preston insisted I sit and eat, but I explained my mother had cooked meals for me. I’d be in trouble if I didn’t put a dent in them. He understood.

I thanked them all for their hospitality and made the rounds with handshakes, coming to Mr. Preston last. He and I leaned in for a hug just as easy as autumn leaves. Fellow freefallers, just trying to get by until we jump again.

“Take care, Mr. Preston.”

“You too, Mike.”

As I drove to camp, I thought aloud, “Compassion, my ass. That man is my hero.”

I heard Mr. Preston had given his rack to Cade before they even left camp. ■