

Just One Bit

FINALIST

By Kimberley Sweigart

The iron skillet was hot. Butter was sizzling in the pan. The air was heavy with a delicious aroma. Who would have thought that one bite of venison would impact my life in such an astonishing way? It was tender, juicy, flavorful, and best of all, it was organic and free.

My roommate, Josh, grew up hunting, and to him it was just another day in the kitchen. For me, it was a new experience. I knew that if I wanted to partake in more of this goodness, I needed to learn how to hunt.

I am obsessed with eating healthy, organic, free-range meat, and buying it in the grocery store is somewhat expensive. The thought of being able to go out and fill my freezer with healthy, lean, free protein was very exciting.

I was not planning on being Josh's roommate forever and didn't know anyone who went hunting. So, I asked Josh to teach me how to hunt. I had to beg and beg for him to teach me. A few weeks later, he reluctantly agreed to take me hunting with him.

I had no idea that hunting is such a thrilling adventure. Josh purchased a two-person tent, which is called a blind, for us to sit in. Picking the spot to put the blind is part of the fun. There are so many options on the farm. Should we set it up in the woods, in the tall grass in one of the fields, by the stream, or hide it in the pine trees? The choices are endless. Strategy and planning are involved. We ended up setting the blind in the middle of a field that was about 250 yards from the back porch of the house. This field had been cut at the beginning of summer, so by the end of October, new tender grass called fescue had grown. The deer love to eat this dark green grass. We had often seen deer grazing in this field just before dusk, when we would look out the sliding glass doors from the living room.

We set the blind up a few days before we went hunting so the deer would get used to it being there. We sat inside making sure all the windows were open enough for us to see out, while still being camouflaged. We took two buckets that were laying around the shed, turned them upside down and put cushions on them for us to sit on. Josh made sure my bucket was sitting off to the side, as I was just an observer and needed to be out of his way for him to shoot.

I was so excited when the day finally came to go hunting. We snuck out to the blind about an hour before dusk. It was still a little warm outside for October. I

was apprehensive with anticipation. All I knew was I was on a new adventure. Being out in nature, smelling the fresh air and the grass in the field, and feeling the warm sun on my face before the sun disappeared was delightful. I could see the birds flying nearby and the squirrels playing as they chased each other up and down the trees. For such small creatures, squirrels can make a lot of noise. The sound of them chattering made me laugh. They had no clue we were there, watching them.

As it started to get dark, we saw about seven does off in the distance. They were over 70 yards away, and out of reach for Josh's muzzle loader. Josh had to remind me to sit still and be quiet often. I loved sitting there, just watching the deer eat the grass in the field. I had never experienced nature like that before, and it was exhilarating. Suddenly Josh said, "Don't move," I was looking out one side of the blind, and he was looking out the opposite side. I had no idea what he had seen, but I did not move. Within a second, my ears were ringing from the sound of his gun going off. I continued to sit still until Josh spoke. He said, "I just shot a big buck." My heart was racing! We couldn't see the deer. I said, "Come on, let's go." The anticipation was overwhelming. Did he really kill the deer? Did he miss? I was hoping that it wasn't lying there, injured and suffering. After about 20 minutes, Josh said it was safe for us to get out of the blind.

As Josh and I walked over to where the buck had been standing, I started to feel anxious. I didn't know what to expect. Thankfully, it was a perfect shot, and the deer had run only a short distance before falling over. As I approached the deer lying there, lifeless, I felt an overwhelming sadness, and tears began to roll down my cheeks. It was such a humbling experience. I leaned over, petted its fur, and said, "Thank you." I had been buying my meat from a cooler in the grocery store, not giving much thought of the lives that had been taken.

Four years later, I am an avid hunter. I do not enjoy taking a life but am grateful to be able to fill my freezer. Every time I go out into the woods or fields, it is a new adventure. I have spent hours sitting in the darkness waiting to feel the hot rays of the beautiful sun on my florid cheeks. There are moments when I have felt my heart race a mile a minute. More than once, a black bear has meandered past. My nose and fingers have been cold and numb, while gigantic, fluffy snowflakes fell from the sky and formed a glittering, white blanket over everything. Vibrant, colorful leaves have fallen all around me as I swayed back and forth amongst the trees. These memories that I have made are truly magical, and my life will never be the same because of that one bite of that savory, tender venison.