

# Hart

by Lisa Bucki

The slim, juvenile fingers released the bowstring, flipping a slick ash arrow on a furtive path through the trees. The bowstring hummed and reverberated as it resumed a stiff line. A buck 50 yards away couldn't save itself. So the buck went down, bleating as its front legs crashed down on brittle leaves, expelling a mouthful of blood and mucus with a rasp as its body forced the arrow all the way through a flooded lung.

"It's mine, Dad, it's mine!" a boy shouted. Daniel was 15, the oldest of his friends who had not claimed a buck. The silence of the stalk crowned his years of anticipation and had left Daniel feeling distended, full of action and noise that he should have already used. Releasing the arrow had released his kineticism; he leaped ahead and yelped in pleasure as he approached his buck.

The call darted and bounced among the trees reaching the man in the black and red checks. Hart took the arrow from his own bow and, reaching over his back, placed it in the deerskin quiver. Daniel's voice ended Hart's hunt also, but Hart's expression and stance changed little. The mottled brown and gold of his eyes was not warm, just flat, dry. The eyes scanned through trees as if they could hear the direction where the voice came from. The eyes acted instinctively, animalistically. When the eyes stopped mid-sweep, Hart set off in the direction of their focus.

Hart followed no path, preferring to clear his own way with the heavy soles of his boots crushing the fragile, spidery brush that formed a mat around the trees. One step of the truck-tire soles pressed a still-tender sapling to the ground, and when it was released it sprung upright and slashed at the man's calf in indifferent revenge. Its contact with Hart's leg produced a whistling slap whose sound reached Daniel; but Hart only blinked. He continued on a straight path for Daniel, who was crouched beside the honey-skinned animal he had slain.

"Funny, Dad, late fall and he still has his antlers," Daniel said. "Only two points. He's young, but he'll do."

"Points or no points, you kilt 'em, and we'll be eatin 'em," Hart commented flatly. "Now we'd best haul 'im home."

"Yes, Dad," the boy answered, his emotion flattened by his father's tone. The boy noticed how anything he said seemed to bounce right off his father.

Hart turned his back on Daniel to find a beam to use to carry the buck home. His eyes moved in their turrets, seeking through the trees. Several yards away, a thin tree lay on the ground. Hart strode unswervingly to the tree, pulling a hatchet from his beltline as he

stepped through briars which swarmed and curled on the forest floor. On reaching the tree, Hart raised the hatchet and systematically amputated the many limbs of the tree. When he had stripped a six-foot section that was as big around as his son's forearm, he severed the roots and the crown. Hart turned back toward the buck, pulling the beam up to his shoulder.

It had only taken Hart a few minutes to prepare the beam and return to Daniel and the buck. The boy had pulled a long length of rope from beneath his hunting jacket (which was also checked like his father's) and was straightening the buck's forelegs before the crisp cold could stiffen them. Steam flowed through the fall air, coming in intermittent puffs from Hart and Daniel and coming in a steady curl from the buck's bloody wound.

"That's it, boy. Good thinkin'," Hart said, his voice more droning than praising. Daniel acted as if it was the best kind of compliment his father could give, his voice rising to a pitch that offensively overrode the soothing shush-sh-sh of leaves tickled by the wind.

"Thanks, Dad. Are we about ready to get it home?"

"Well, I got to pull the arrow out first so we can lay the body flat and truss it up. Then we tie the legs around the beam with a figure-eight knot."

The buck was young, fairly light. But the angle at which the arrow had entered forced them to lift it high to pull the shaft out, almost to an upright position. The buck looked as if it were grazing, its head falling in a graceful line to its knees. The ash arrow was still straight, but the steel killing point had lodged itself in the lung; Hart worked the arrow in a circular pattern to loosen it, then disengaged it with a snapping jerk towards his body. The sucking sound made Daniel turn his face away, but Hart ignored the boy's reaction.

They lowered the buck, rolled it over, and quickly lashed its legs to the beam. Slinging their bows over their left shoulders, they both swept down in an awkward dip to catch up the beam; Daniel had the front, and Hart took up the back. The father and son did not speak. Rather, they struggled along at their separate ends of the beam, each feeling the tension of the other's pull. As they guided the buck's body among the trees, they swayed below the beam in tiny, fitful arcs back and forth.

Now that they had their buck, there was no need to be noiseless. Their success even made them careless in the way they kicked the leaves along and splintered Fall's branches beneath their boots. Hart said nothing as he walked behind Daniel. Because he was almost six inches taller than the boy, he had to stoop a little so the weight of the buck wouldn't slide forward on the beam. In that crouched position he looked as if he were drawing down to gather force to leap forward and pursue — pursue an animal with all his energy. But Hart remained steady and taut behind his son, his eyes still sweeping back and forth across the forest. Hart's scope passed directly over Daniel's head, choosing the easiest route ahead. He only let his view fall to the narrow back in front of him when he felt it was necessary to redirect the boy's path with a grunting "Right!" or

“Left there!”

Daniel's only reactions to his father's mutterings were sideways steps to change the aim of the beam. Sometimes, when the forest became more dense, it was difficult to maneuver the unwieldy beam between the tree trunks. In those thickets, Hart's eyes stopped sweeping and instead darted from point to point as he helped Daniel guide the beam with an increased frequency of grunts. Hart didn't even slow his steps through the close tree trunks, pushing the beam so quickly that Daniel sometimes lost control of his feet and tripped over roots. As they walked farther, the thickets became more frequent, and Daniel began to stumble more often.

“Dad, I need a rest — just a little one,” he said. His voice had settled in to the whine of a sleepy five-year-old.

“Um-hm, boy, but only for a mite,” Hart said shortly.

They pulled the beam from their shoulders and dropped the buck to the ground, allowing it to roll on its side as they released it. Daniel pulled his bow from his other shoulder so he could sit on a fallen log. The wood felt chill and spongy through his jeans, and each time he pressed his hands into the moss on it, beads of water grew and ran from his fingertips and dropped to the ground. Daniel looked away from the log and looked at his father's back. Hart had not spoken while they rested, but he seemed to feel his son's movement and immediately spun around and pointed his hand towards the buck. After Daniel pushed himself up they arranged their bows and beam on the appropriate shoulders and continued through the thicket in silence.

They conquered three large hills together, and then there seemed to be more space between the trees, making their steps come easier. Soon they faced the end of the forest, and a pattern of brilliant spaces lay between the subdued trees. Hart and Daniel maneuvered out between two trunks and light drenched them, the red checks in their jackets seeming to be illuminated to a new hue — almost orange. They had stepped into a field, and a cabin made of logs with the bark still on them lay not far ahead. Daniel turned around to face his father and smiled, but Hart seemed only to notice the cabin ahead.

In a minute they had reached the cabin and had dropped the buck. Daniel followed his father into the structure; the door swung loosely from its hinges. Square beams of light filtered in through the windows, making the dust particles floating in the muggy air glimmer like fresh snow. Daniel passed through one of the beams and took a candle to the embers in the stone fireplace. He touched the wick to the embers and blew softly; the embers flushed, then glowed an orange-white and lit the candle. The candlelight seeped through the heavy air, almost pushing its way to the corners of the room.

Hart had scuffed over the sand that coated the wooden floor to the dark area that lay beyond the candlelight's fingers. He crouched near two narrow beds that were crowded together in the corner. Reaching under his own bed, he groped for a minute and retrieved one of his treasured possessions. Hart stood, and came slowly to where Daniel stood holding the candle. The orange reflection of the

candle flame bounced off the object in Hart's grasp and tinted Daniel's pale skin. He was still as his father approached, with glinting steel rising from a calloused hand.

"Let's skin 'em, boy," Hart said in a subdued voice, and he turned and walked outside. Daniel set the candle in its holder on the table and returned to the buck.

Hart directed Daniel to take up the beam again. They carried the buck to a chestnut tree with low branches that shaded roots which arched over the dusty soil. The father and son left their jackets on in the coolness. At last they bent and released the buck from the beam. Daniel watched Hart tie a noose in the rope and then throw the other end over one of the sturdier branches. Daniel lowered himself to a kneel and positioned the noose around the buck's hind legs, pulling the free end with one hand as he steadied the knot with his other. He rose and looked at his father, who had been scrutinizing his work. Daniel put his fragile hands beneath his father's on the rope, and together they heaved the buck up and tied off the rope.

Daniel had seen his father dress out a buck before, but this time it was his own buck, and his eyes never left his father's moving hands which whipped the knife through the animal. First Hart slit the throat so that the blood raining out formed a sticky, brick-colored mud beneath the carcass. Daniel probed deep in his coat pockets with his hands, and as he watched his father he kicked tensely at the dirt, puffs of dust rising from beneath his feet like smoke from a smouldering log.

"Get me a hacksaw, boy." Daniel turned and quickly trotted a few yards over the packed dirt to a toolshed to get the saw. He slammed the shed door behind him, and noticed that some amber dust had clung to spots of blood on his boots. He returned to the buck and his father with the saw.

Hart slit the buck's belly and cleared out the gelatinous organs, throwing them in a pile far to the side. He used the saw to cut open the chest and to sever the head and the front legs. He handed Daniel the heart and threw the rest of the chest filling onto the pile he had created — flies had already attacked the malodorous intestines.

Hart took the knife and slipped it between the hide and flesh, using smooth strokes to work the skin off in a neat sheet. As he reached up to start a new stroke, Hart slashed his hand that was holding the sheet of skin. He dropped the knife to the dirt and brought his hands together, clasping his good hand over the wound to stem the flow of blood. He didn't cry out; he only turned to look at Daniel, who had sprung to stand next to his father.

Daniel knew that the wound was deep because blood was already seeping into the lines in the skin on Hart's clasped hand, pushing out into a pattern like that of the autumn-bare tree branches above their heads. Hart looked down into his son's smooth face. Daniel's eyes gaped wide, and his lips opened and closed as if he wanted to speak but couldn't.

"Can you finish 'em, boy?" Hart asked Daniel.

Daniel didn't answer. He crouched quickly and turned to where the

knife lay in the dirt. He picked up the knife, wiping the dark blood thickened with dirt onto his pants. Daniel finished skinning the buck with the same type of strokes his father had used, setting the skin aside when he finally cut it loose from the carcass. Daniel turned to the buck a last time and flicked the knife along a shoulder, cutting off even filets of venison which were freckled with blood.

"We'll finish 'em later," Daniel said, turning to his father. "I wanna eat some now." Hart smiled and nodded his head.

Daniel sprung to the cabin and grabbed some twists of straw from a splintering bucket on his way in. He placed these on the embers and covered them with kindling. A few easy breaths, and flames began to consume the straw and wood Daniel had laid. He put a heavier log on the fire.

Hart had followed Daniel into the cabin and had torn some strips from a cloth. Daniel came to his father and bound the bloody hand with the strips of cloth in a figure-eight fashion — around all the fingers then around the thumb. He didn't look up at his father but turned and strided to some hand-made cupboards along one wall of the cabin.

Daniel cleaned the knife and sliced some vegetables — potatoes, carrots, and turnips. He put them in an iron stewpot with the venison, sprinkled in salt and pepper, and poured in some water from an iron hand pump by the cupboards. He carried the pot over to the fire and crouched down to where Hart sat stretching his hands out towards the fire. Hart looked up, and Daniel stared back into his eyes. The light of the flames danced between them and across their faces. Hart smiled and Daniel turned to hang the pot on an iron hook that swung over the fire.

They got up and sat at the grey, faded wooden table to wait for their venison stew.

