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The Hunted

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The Hunted

— J. Murdoch Matheson '96

“Will you just come down from there. Please!”

“No. I couldn't possibly. I must stay here until the hunt is over.”

“Oh, for cryin' out loud! Felix, come out here and get your father.”

“Damn it! Janet!” He squatted in the tree and surveyed the terrain surrounding him. “They are coming my dear. I'm certain they will be here very soon.”

“Oh, no. Look, the neighbors are going to notice in a minute. Honey, please get down from there.”

“I think I see one of them now.”

“A sasquatch?”

“No, my sweet I'm afraid those are out of season.”

“Oh, my, I mean to say. In the name of all that is holy. What are you hunting now?”

“Imps! Imps I tell you! And they are fruitful. Today will be a good Hunt!”

“Felix!”

My father hasn't been the same since the fall season. In three months it will be a full year that he's been like this, and we are entering another scorching Arizona summer. My father's name is Reginald, but everyone has always called him Pinky. He was once a great Hollywood stuntman in his younger years. That's where he met mom. She was a nurse's assistant and spent her time cleaning up on the sets as her ticket into fame and fortune. Father was the best in the business, but due to the lack of respect he had for his body he spent most of his time in bandages. It turned out that mom was the one cleaning his wounds so I suspect the two of them found a little magic in *Tinsel Town*. They moved out here to Juniper 'cause mom's sister got her a job as an Avon lady. Dad made his green hunting mountain lions in the northern hills, and selling their hides to those who make a wrong turn and pass through our world.

I have a brother named Elvis. He spends most of his time sharing stories and drinks with former football pals down town at Uncle Ed's Saloon. He makes his money working the grounds at the high school he never graduated from, and living up to the reputation he built for himself. My sister, his twin, works two jobs, one out at the stables and the other wiping up tables at Ed's. We like havin' her there, to keep an eye on Elvis. My parents named her Elvira.

I finish up at the high school in a week and plan to take on full time at the stables where my sister and I have been working since before she graduated. This all rests on whether or not I have to baby-sit my father.

“Hey Man. Where'd you find that shirt?” I stepped out on to creaking wooden boards of our front porch and cleared the sweat from my forehead. Mother, with a helpless expression, held out her hand to me, then went inside to test out new products on herself. “Hey, I say. How'd you get

that flashy-

"Hey you say!"

"That's right Pinky, I say hey."

"Go inside boy. I, ah, I . . . I don't want you gettin' hurt out here."

"Aaahh, c'mon. Nobody's hurtin' anybody out here. . . but mom, mom doesn't like it much when you do this stuff to her. You here me up there, Pinky? Mom wants you to stop, and ah, and so do I."

"Let's go, you little demon bastards, I'm waitin' for ya'!"

"What's the hunt today?" He was silent and I couldn't see his face, just his silhouette, squatting, staring, hunting. "Do you remember?"

"Imps."

"Well, tell me about 'em."

Irritated, he turned to me. "Why don't you go inside and bring out some beer. Some crackers too they like crackers."

"It's too hot for beer. Come down, we'll have a cigarette and talk about it. C'mon down from there, dad."

He stared at me a minute, than looked out across the dry dirty fields around us. Like an orangutan he stretched out his arms and dangled from a branch. Dropping himself on the dusty hard ground and rubbing his stomach, he walked towards the house. "Time to see the Captain."

"Crunch?"

"You got it, boy. Captain Crunch!"

The doctor gave us no solid explanation for why he started acting the way he did. When it all started he woke up mother in her sleep with a pistol to her head whispering. . . *The big game season is comin'. We're all gonna' have to fight. The big game hunt is on its way. We're the big game.* Mother had packed her bags the day after that, but when she called her mom my grandmother swore it had something to do with where dad came from, and insisted that mom stand by her man. Dad's ancestors came from Tasmania, and mom's mom says that Criminals and lunatics come from Australia, so that satisfied all of us for a reasonable answer. Dad never threatened her after that but he hasn't been the same since.

Dad crunched away as I tapped a pack of Lucky Strikes on the cutting board. I pulled out a plate full of cold pizza and slid them over to him, slurping the sweet milk remaining in his cereal bowl he glared at me with one eye. "Do you go to school?"

"Ditched."

"What'd ya' tell 'em?" He snatched a cigarette from the table and clinched it between his lips.

"Do you work?" I said.

"Ditched," said he with a jeering smile, then waved a flame in front of his face.

"What do you tell them?"

"I tell 'em my boy needs me at home."

"Oh, you shifty old man. You got them beat don't ya'?"

"There are more important things to tend to lad." With two fingers he picked his sunglasses out of his pocket, and secured them about his face. "Lets take a ride. Fetch the keys, I'm drivin'."

"I'm drivin the car Pinky." I stabbed what I had left of my cigarette in to the cold pizza on the table blew smoke from my mouth and nose.

When I stepped outside he was sitting shotgun and tugging on another cigarette. I swung the keys around with my index finger and smiled at him. The car was a 1969 Oldsmobile convertible, banana yellow and V-8 engine that roared like a lion. Dad had the stereo loud, and tapped his hand on top of the windshield to the beat of rock and roll music. I laughed and hopped over the driver door and into the seat.

"Felix! Don't you go near town!" Mom stuck her plastic face out of the window, and shook her finger.

I stomped on the gas pedal and we held our hands up in a cloud of dust.

We motored across the dirty red country roads that seemed to lead to nowhere. Dad ran his hand over his head, and sweaty oil slicked back his hair. I drove fast because I knew he liked it that way.

"It's Weird I say."

"What's that Pinky?"

"Well, like they say--"

"Who say?"

"Well, I was gettin' to that." He paused and looked at me. "They always call sunglasses, a pair of sunglasses. Now, to the best a' my knowledge this is one object." He held his Ray Bans out from his face with a curious look, than returned them to his dark weathered face and waited for me to respond.

"I hear your music Pinky. It's like a pair a' boxer shorts, or blue jeans or somethin' right?"

"Atta' boy." He muttered. He stayed quiet a moment and looked around at the country, then sang to a song that was on the radio. *Wild Horses* by the Rolling Stones. Then he turned to me.

"Where are we going?"

"I thought we'd get on a horse. Go see Elvira. Maybe get out to along the Big Chino. When's the last time you went to the river?"

"Aaah! Those damn Mexicans at the stables hate my guts."

"They don't even speak English."

"They don't have to."

"Look, we won't even see 'em. We'll just show up and ride. It's a good way to meet the day."

"Aaah, 's too hot."

"Too hot! Shoot Pinky, you got a Hawaiian shirt on. You're dressed for the outdoors on a day like today, man."

"This is my camouflage!"

"Is not! You're dressed for a damn Fantasy Island episode."

"Watch it--"

"Eh, bossth, de plain, de plain bossth!"

"Shut it, boy."

We passed over the old wooden bridge that crossed over a dry river path and led us down to the ranch. When we pulled up Elvira was hosing down a dirty white pony and did not finish when she noticed the car. I left dad alone so I could go talk to her.

"Vi'--"

"What's he doing here."

"C'mon Vi', he'll be okay. I'm gonna' stay with him the whole time. I just think he needs to get out is all."

"This is just like the last time Felix. He took off for the whole damn day and I was makin' excuses for a lost stallion. It almost cost me my job and it isn't gonna' get *you* a job here any quicker either."

"We wouldn't even know *how* to ride if it weren't for him. You owe it to him now."

"I do not. That Mexican--"

"Pablo."

"Yeah. He still wants to press charges for when he got put in a head lock."

"Sleeper hold."

"What ever."

"The sooner you get us two horses the sooner we let you do your job. C'mon, help us out."

"Okay, but you get to help me tonight."

"With what?"

"Big E."

"Fuck that."

She cocked an eye at me and held away two bridles.

"I'll do it." I shook my head and started to help her with the horses when a short and skinny Mexican man came charging into the stables.

"El hombre esta enferma en la cabeza. Esta loco!"

"What's the matter Chewy. Que paso? Digame!" Elvira was holding him by his shoulders trying to shake him to his senses.

He kept pointing his finger outside and whining hysterically, "Mi hermano, mi hermano!"

I ran to the door and saw dad with both arms curled up and fists clinched swaying his head from side to side. Chewy's brother Eduardo was scampering around the car, stirring up dust and

dodging occasional jabs delivered by my father.

“Come here, you little greaser. Don’t run away from me now. I’m gonna’ wax ya’, ya’ little bean eaten’ weasel.”

“Hey! Knock it off.” I bear hugged my father from behind.

“This little sucker’s tryin’ to squeeze an inch in on me somewhere.” Dad was furious with dust and sweat sticking to his red face. His fists still clenched he jerked his head in all directions and prepared to defend himself.

“Eduardo, ven aqui.” Elvira stood with Chewy and Eduardo went to them. She spoke silently with them and they left shaking their heads at my father and me, got in a pick up truck and drove away for lunch.

We still got the horses and dad and I rode up into the Juniper mountains to a cliff overlooking the Big Chino river. Dad liked to take Elvis and myself there when we were younger. It had been years since I had been there, and I loved being back. Mom never came out here. She did not like going on dad’s adventures. She’d complain about the heat, the faint sound of a rattlesnake, or a hawk’s cry in the clear blue sky. It was Elvis who loved the river. When Elvis was a small child, Dad would harness him to his back and hunt mountain lions. He took all three of us to the mountains when we were young so that we could learn about horses, and hunting, but it was Elvis who lost interest.

The cliffs were overwhelming to the eye. The steep rock walls stood like towers over the serenity of the dirt and the slow trickle of waters below. We tied up our horses and threw rocks, shattering the still surface below. Dad smashed up his shoulder so many times that he throws like a girl. I laughed but did not say anything. Neither of us said anything for a long time.

“Pinky.”

“Hmm.”

“How come you hunt Imps today, but you set traps for big-foot last week?”

“Ya’ know I got an uncle who caught one a’ those hairy monsters-”

“Yeah, ya’ told me that story. I want to know about the Imps. What are the hunting seasons? How come you never go out after mountain lions any more?”

“Felix.”

“Yes.” It was the first time he used my name in seven and a half months.

“Hunting seasons change like the wind and the weather. And there’s no one man, can predict it. You see, when a man hunts, it doesn’t have to do with where he crouches or how he baits his prey. It’s got to do with a fourth dimension of things. There’s a flow of all nature that we human beings are completely blind to. If we don’t pick up on it, than we become the easy prey. We become the hunted. A good hunter doesn’t hunt when the laws tell him to. A good hunter is always lookin’ for the kill. Nature has its ways, boy, and it is that way that we must follow, because it will direct us to a path of divine strength, and survival.”

I said nothing.

"We ride," he said and swung himself upon his horse.

Elvira came home in the early evening where she had an hour off before going to work at Uncle Ed's. I spent the late afternoon wrestling with dad so I could tire him out before dinner. Mom liked to put him to bed as early as possible. I fixed him some pork chops and a baked potato, then set him in front of the television so that mom could deal with him when she got back from painting everyone's faces. I left with Elvira.

We entered Uncle Ed's. Blanketed with a thick smoke and distorted by country western music, Elvis was anchored at the end of the bar with four empty Budweisers keeping his company. Overrun with locals, dart competitions, the exchange of crumpled cash on the pool tables, and loud continuous rumpus. Here, everyone told a lie.

"Hey big E." I straddled the stool next to him and dropped both elbows on the bar holding my hands together. "Long time no see."

"Hey, hey, Felix the cat, where you been all my life." He reached out and took a cigarette that I offered him.

"Home." I smiled.

"How's Pinky doin'? Okay?" He held up his finger and stopped me before I could respond. "Yo! Charley, can you get a beer here for my little brother?"

"I'm not servin' any minors," the bartender responded from the other end of the bar.

"Wha . . . hey . . . he can drink it."

Still the answer was no as the man named Charley shook his head.

"Aw'right, I want two beers then give me two." Amazingly enough, they slid two more Budweiser bottles to my big brother. He opened them and put one in front of me. "There, now you don't look like such a little pansy ass."

"Oh, you drive me ape you big Gorilla."

Empty bottles collected around him like corpses that he killed and as we moved late into the evening he had constructed a cemetery. Elvira never cleaned up his area of the bar. Things had gone as I thought for most of the time. I listened to him talk about the victory over Junction City. Then the seven sacks against the Sun Devils of Gold Water High. Fists pounding on the tables, cheers, and high-five's all around, then someone got brave.

A tall and fat man silenced the room when he emerged from the haze. "Hey Dove. Why don't you quit gettin' drunk here and go home and baby-sit your old man? Leave your little brother here. He deserves the night off."

Elvira was clearing a table behind the fat man who said it. "Why don't you go stick a cactus up your ass." She walked around to Elvis and me.

"Well, I don't think so sweaty. I think I was talkin' to the king over there. Elvis, Why don't you quit braggin' and gettin drunk and go look after that loony father of yours."

"Mr. I don't think I know you."

"Well, does it matter."

"Wha. . .?" Elvis muttered.

"Is he a wacky bird or isn't he?" The tubby man laughed at the three of us and encouraged the rest of the bar to join in. "Coo coo, coo coo." He laughed harder.

Blood boiled with in me as I looked around at their sick faces. I smashed my bottle on the table. The shattered bottle turned a switch in Elvis and like a leopard he sprung at the man. He clinched the man's fat cheeks with both hands and swung him around with a furious roar.

When we returned home and I washed the blood from my hands it was only then that I found the glass lodged under my thumb. Until then I had just assumed it was the blood of the fat man. The same blood that Elvis was covered in. I had never seen Elvis 'curb' anyone before, although I had heard that he used to do it. He beat the tar out of that fat man. He beat him silly. Then I watched Elvis drag the unconscious body out the door of Ed's and into the street. Like a dead fish he yanked open that man's mouth and dragged him to the curb. He looked like a fat old beached whale that Elvis had gone out and caught. Elvis propped that man's mouth around cement of the curb, left foot on the sidewalk, hand on the parking meter, he stomped his right foot to the back of the fat man's head. knocked out molars.

Elvira cleaned Elvis' knuckles and dug the glass out of my hand, and the three of us sat in the kitchen as if we knew we had to wait for something. It was good to see Elvis in the house again, it had been months since he'd been there. Once dad had left his senses, Elvis moved away. I smiled at the two of them and we drank milk that Elvira poured for us. I smiled until I saw the blue and red lights flashing down the driveway. We moved very little until the officer pounded on the door. Elvis dropped his head and stared into an empty glass of milk.

"May I help you, sir?"

"Is this the household of a Mr. and Mrs. Reginald Dove?"

"Yessir'."

"Is there an Elvis Dove on the premises at this time."

"Ah, we . . . ah-"

"I'm Elvis Dove." Elvis walked up behind me and rested his hand on my arm."

"Elvis, It seems the sheriff Clifton picked his younger brother out of a pool of blood outside of Uncle Ed's Saloon."

"Is 'at right?"

"Yeah, yeah that's what happened so he's the sheriff's brother from out a' town, and well . . . he's layin' in critical condition they say, and the Sheriff is plenty pissed off about it. Doctor says that he may never be the same again."

"Well, I hope not, 'cause he sure was an asshole." Elvis moved me out of the way and

walked out the front door. The police man put handcuffs on him right in front of us on the old creaky front porch.

When I got up the next morning dad wasn't in the tree. He had not yet come out of his room after hearing that Elvis had gone to jail and there was not a sound to let me know that he was in there. There was Captain Crunch all over the kitchen counter and for the first time mom made coffee. She sat on the sofa surrounded by Kleenex balls crying her make up off. Black mascara smudged down her cheeks, and it looked like *she* had been beaten up. She had the day off and without her car she was stranded at home with me unless I could get away in the banana Oldsmobile.

"How could you let this happen?" She moaned.

"Me let this happen? I did everything I could do. Maybe I could get a leash and collar for big E. Then some beef jerky treats for him too. Then, when he's a really good boy, I could give him a shot of Wild Turkey, to ease his rage."

"You're not being fair to me."

"What! Aah damn it," coffee spilled down my wounded hand. "You want me to look after big E and I did. You want me to look after dad and I do. I don't even have time to look after me. I'm not being fair to you? You're not fair to yourself."

"Oh, the horror of it all!"

Just then the door upstairs slammed and dad strutted down the stairs.

"What on god's good green earth are you going to do now," exclaimed mother, holding her head up with her hands.

He was wearing a baby blue cowboy uniform that he wore as a double for an old Lone Ranger episode shot about sixty miles north of Juniper. He had a double holster loaded with two Colt 45. pistols. The suit was tight in most places and stretched and ripped at the seams. He pulled down on the dusty white stunt-double Stetson, then drew his pistols.

"The big game hunt has begun!" He shouted. "I'm goin' into town and I'm not comin' back with out my son. I'm going hunting. You listen to nature, boy, it'll hold your hand and walk with you all the way down the path." He spun his pistols on his fingers and into his holster. He winked at me and took bow-legged steps out the front door.

"Mom, shut your mouth or you're gonna' catch some flies in there."

"You think this is funny? He's gonna' get himself killed."

"How's he gonna' get to town when I got the-" I reached in my pocket for the keys to the banana convertible. At that moment I heard the engine roar and out the window I watched the dust fly. "Pinky!"

He was shot six times by Juniper police officers, taking one of them with him. He staggered out of the station that he had just blazed into and his lifeless body dropped in the sunshine. His blood ran rivers down the steps and into the street on that early summer morning. No one stopped when they saw who it was.