

A Perfect Day To Die

When I was nine years old, we lived in a semi-wooded area on the approach road to Mt Tamalpais. My friends & I had taken up bow&arrow shooting after watching Errol Flynn be Robin Hood... and many Westerns in which we identified with the Indians. We had formed a "Hill Gang", with a fort and a manifesto. It was written by our senior member, a twelve-year old, and dedicated us to defending all pets from harm. Sometimes we took turns shooting at a simple target on the playground next to my house. It took a long time for this to bore us. Once I missed my target but on retrieving the arrow found that it had split the stem of a fennel plant. Perfect! Just like Robin Hood splitting the wand at Nottingham! We were always able to imagine our way past the lack of heroic settings & deeds.

Whenever we went on 'hunting trips' we confronted a practical problem that brought us down from the fantasies. Trooping through the woods was great at first, pretending to be masterful scouts... silent as reptiles, wary of cougars & bears. We talked of our brothers in other tribes, & rescues of maidens, etc. Then we might see a bluejay and think it was worth a shot. Flick! flick! The jay would look at us, cock its head and fly up a few branches. Now we had to go get the arrows. Behind the jay had been perhaps a tangled mass of poison oak and blackberry vines. Or very tall grass. The next hour might be spent looking for the arrows because we only had two apiece...or those were 'our best' ones. When we resumed the hunt, it was with a less giddy mood, and after another couple of shots at "something that moved" we'd give it up & go home.

On the way back one day with my best friend, I brought up the whole vexing subject. What could we do about losing arrows? Jonny thought maybe if there were a Skye King signal on the arrow, we could find it. That made me think of a whistle that just needed air blowing across it. If the arrowhead had a little hole in it, it would whistle in its flight and then...oh damn, it would stop when it hit the ground. Then we passed to the other problem. We had never hit a bird and we knew we weren't good enough to, even if one would hold still. We should try for bigger birds I said. Yeah, like a vulture? Yeah, that would be perfect...but they're always way up in the sky, we can't shoot that high.

This was left to bubble & simmer awhile until later at my house, we got the idea of luring a vulture down to our level. If a vulture were to land on the ground we'd have a chance. But they never did...unless...unless there were something dead! Hmmmmm. What if we got something dead...Yeah, like a cat that was run over on the street. Yeah. But we might wait for ever to see one.

I don't know who to credit with this idea, but I'll assume it was me since we were at my house. What if one of us pretended to be dead? I mean like we do in our war games. I thought I was terrific at death agonies. that was my favorite part of war. It kind of short-circuited the games because I wanted to get shot. A guy would almost have to say "No I didn't get you!"

“Did too!” “Did not, I missed you by a mile, you’re not dead yet.!!” You get the idea, it was upside down. But now it was the right talent for the job and I was starting to really see this in my mind. Jonny reminded me that vultures go by smell. They wouldn’t come down because of my performance, they’d have to smell dead flesh. HmMMM.

Suddenly I had an inspiration, the key to the whole thing. Hamburger! Jonny saw it too and we rushed into the house and cornered my mom in the kitchen. “What do you guys want, are you hungry?” “Ummm....Mom we need some old meat.” “What?” “we need some old meat , like hamburger, we really need it.” “To eat?!” “No. not to eat, umm, it’s a something we want to do about the animals we’re friends with. Umm. an experiment...?” I’ve heard my mother tell this part of the story to friends and she usually got a funny look in her face when she remembered herself back then looking at us two ragamuffins asking for dead meat. She said she couldn’t resist it. Had to just give some and see where we went with it. Figured she’d find out eventually. So she took out some hamburger and gave us a fistful in some wax paper. We couldn’t believe our luck. It worked! She gave us some! Wow. We headed out the door tripping down the stairs in a rush to the playground.

Now we were all business. The heady fumes of adventure and craftiness were focussing us like great wizards, like...the Merry Men! Little Jon, & me, Robin! The plan evolved like this: Jonny would be the Shooter. He would get behind the park bench where there was bushy cover and lurk there waiting patiently for a clear shot at the vultures. I would of course be the dead meat. I smeared the hamburger in clever places so it would seem just like part of me rotting away. Some around the ankles, some in my back pockets, some around the neck and face and wrists. When I was well-anointed, Jonny told me where to start, like an “X” up on stage where he thought he could aim perfectly and not too close so they would see him but not too far for his skill level. In other words about ten paces away.

Now it would start. He got nestled in there, flexed his bow a few times, nocked the arrow in and aimed right at me. “Perfect!” he said as he realized he could put an arrow right in my chest. Then I began the death throes. This was for all the marbles(that really meant something to me then, I had a huge marbles collection). This was on the world’s biggest stage, Real Life, Real Adventure.... a duel to the death with Death as a Second! I breathed deeply, nearly gagging on hamburger-in-hot-sun fumes, quickly translated that to Perfect! Smells like I’m dead! and started writhing. I figured I could go on as long as I liked. The point was to attract the vultures, not to get it over with. For about five minutes I clutched my belly , twisted & turned, called out in agony, threw my head back, staggered, lurched, flailed my arms & moaned. Then I went down in a diving crumpling athletic roll that I knew was my best ever. This could be in a movie, this was like High Noon. Of course the death wrestle had to keep going and I groaned on the ground in splendid contortions for another ten minutes or so. Once or twice calling out to Jonny if he saw any action in the sky? Nothing. Finally he said to take a break. I sat up and looked at him...he was aiming right at me with an arrow poised. It struck me a little odd but I brushed it away. We talked a bit & I decided to do it again. The sky was a crystalline blue and there was a gentle breeze, just right for vultures. They’d be able to see easily, the summer heat was cooking the meat, and the breeze would waft the smell upward. We just had to be patient.

This time I stretched everything out longer and Jonny was urging me on. “Great, it looks real, yeah!” After the long second act of ground wrestling, I let Death win at last. Jonny said to be still. This was the hardest part. It was hot. I couldn’t get comfortable without moving again which was forbidden to dead people. But I was not giving up yet. Ten minutes went past, I started begging the Great Spirit to please send us a vulture. Jonny said “nothing yet” and I tried to go to sleep.

Then I heard a familiar sound. Pad-pad-pad...a loping sound of soft feet. coming closer. A slight panting sound, Heh-heh-heh...Then a friendly nuzzle. It was Guard! my dog - who was allowed to run loose as we had no fence. I was very glad to feel her presence...at first...and it was sort of a diversion that she was licking me. But then I saw her buddies come up! Three other neighborhood dogs, and they were all interested in my body. They too started licking. Around my neck, in the pants legs... slowly it dawned on me that they were attracted to the hamburger. I was snapped out of my role, I wasn’t really dead! Darn. Now they’ve blown my cover, it’s all over...But Jonny braced me with this observation: “Stay right there! It looks great, looks like a pack of wolves is eating a carcass. Don’t move!” So I hunkered down in my act again, closed my eyes and let them have their way with me. Slurp slurp slurp. Every part of me was getting washed clean of hamburger. And beginning to tickle and feel weird. When they started trying to roll me over to get in my pockets I had had it. “The hamburger is all used up, it’s over!” I announced and got to my feet. The dogs were all grinning madly up at me, some still worrying my ankles. Okay, okay, scram already! I was bummed. Everything was going wrong after such a perfect start.

I don’t know when the story got around. I think my mother grilled us pretty mischievously when we came in and I tried to clean up. I think we so totally exceeded her expectations that she didn’t even get mad about the pockets filled with meat. Later we did some target shooting and ended up agreeing that it was worth it, and anyhow...we didn’t lose any arrows. We had no idea of the legs this story would have in both our families. We had no idea that in taking this inspiration to the hilt we had truly fulfilled a Quest, had made our dint. No one had ever done that before. And any of you who read this who have not yet become braves..don’t get any ideas...this one has already been done. Perfectly.