

My father is a conservative, and I'm an anarchist. Hunting still connects us.

Kim Kelly

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My first real memory of my father is of blood and gunpowder. The dark of night, leaves crunching beneath my big rubber boots as I clumsily scampered after him. No stars above, no city light bleeding in. Just the beam of his heavy, black flashlight. Just me and him. And the deer.

The deer's body was still warm as my dad hoisted it out of the back of his pickup truck and laid it down on the ground between us. "Now, hold it steady," he commanded. I did as I was told, shining a light down on his knife as he worked it into the flesh of the deer's underside, and then, with a flourish, opened its belly with one cut.

Its stomach — yellow, waxy, smelling of rot and death — slumped out like a grossly oversize water balloon. Once he had cleaned out the organs and strung the carcass up in his butcher shed, I ran back to the house and tucked into a bowl of ice cream. He settled for whiskey.

I grew up in the Pine Barrens of South Jersey, where the sandy soil was like sugar and the creeks ran the color of black tea. When my dad was busy in his shed or out hunting with my uncles, I set rabbit traps, picked huckleberries and blackberries, and played with our hound dogs in the backyard. When he was tired from work on the construction site, I'd bring him beers and sneak pretzels out of his snack bowl as we watched "The Simpsons" together on the couch. Blood and guns never bothered me; they were just another part of hanging out with my dad.

As I got older, though, we began to grow more distant, maybe because he'd always wanted a son. As I busied myself with the soccer team, the French club and various dirtbag boyfriends, he took my male cousins out hunting and bought them their first guns.

When Dick Cheney showed up at my high school at the height of the Iraq War, I went to my first protest to rail against him; my dad scoffed. And when I started making friends with other scruffy longhair kids and going to Philadelphia to see heavy metal bands, he grumbled. When I started arguing with him about his racism and homophobia, he yelled. And after President Trump's election, I stopped coming home as often.

When I did make it back to the Pine Barrens, my dad said nothing much at all. He leans further right; I lean very far left. We argue over borders, immigration, capitalism. My father keeps a portrait of Ronald Reagan on the living room shelf; I'm an anarchist with a guillotine tattoo. He voted for Trump; I was at Charlottesville protesting the Klan. The two of us both like guns and hate the government, but that only gets us so far.

The one thing that we've never lost, though, is food — specifically, the wild game that he and my uncles and cousins bring home every hunting season. Even though I've left the woods, my greatest connection to my father is still the animals that he harvests from the land. He told me once that when my sister and I still lived at home, he had to shoot five deer a year just to keep us fed; now that we're gone, he's down to one or two. He still keeps his freezer packed to the gills with venison; sometimes there's elk and fish, and occasionally wild turkey. We ate the pheasants he hunted, their flesh sweet and pale. A few times we shared bear — the purple, tangy meat slow-cooked into a puddle.

Venison is always the big-ticket item, though. A freshly sliced backstrap with a little salt, black pepper, garlic and olive oil is as close as you're going to get to tasting heaven. Though we can't talk about politics, my dad texts me recipes from time to time, on the cellphone that he mostly uses to talk trash with his hunting club buddies. His latest culinary advice concerned how to properly brine a turkey, to tenderize the meat and infuse it with flavor. (He recommends less salt than you'd think, about a quarter cup, and emphasizes the importance of using both brown and white sugar.) Whenever I take the train down from Brooklyn to visit, he hems and haws and grunts as I raid the freezer, but I know he's happy that I still love wild game. Hunting is the connective tissue that binds us together.

At home, we putter around the kitchen, arguing over marinades and side dishes. If I get my way, we eat white rice with butter and corn on the cob, but my dad prefers green beans, which I despise. When the meat comes off the grill and he sets it out to rest, I snatch a few slices, letting the juices run down my fingers until he pulls the plate away, hiding a grin under his beard. Now that I'm 31, I'm pretty sure I can put away more venison at a sitting than he can — or maybe he just lets me think that because to him, I'm still a little girl with dirty fingers and crooked teeth, and he still likes to spoil me, just a little.

Talking about anything even vaguely political with my dad remains a struggle. Whenever he gets a few drinks down him and the issue of Trump comes up, his voice gets louder; when he starts ranting about "illegals" and "the wall," I jump in to counter his bigotry, my voice just as loud. The more we drank, the worse it would get, until over the years, we've come to a truce of sorts, deciding not to bring up politics when we can avoid it.

I thought for a long time that he would never change. The last big fight we had was a knock-down, drag-out, moonshine-fueled rager that ended when I told him that his racism was the reason I'd become so distant, why I'd stopped coming home. He considered that for a bit, then apologized.

These days, our conversations can still get ugly when the outside world butts in, but when we're sitting there together, beers cracked, fingers slick with grease, mouths full, it feels like home.

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