

Validating Our Manhood

I was only slightly taller, and not much bigger around, than the 12 gauge shotgun I was lugging into the woods that opening morning. Yet, the feel of that big chunk of steel in my hands made me feel ten foot tall. I'd dreamed of this day for weeks, and my big buck bagging aspirations had grown as lofty as the towering white oaks my dad was leading us to. Of course, I'd be following in some mighty big footsteps, him being a local hunting legend and all.

Just upwind from the three-wheeler we arrived at a place called the bottleneck. Dad motioned for me to sit by a little persimmon tree, so I leaned back against its rough bark and slid down to burrow my bony bottom into the dewy leaves at its base. "When those dogs get to running," dad coached, "You keep your eyes peeled. That double-ought buckshot art to put one down."

I nodded like a rat terrier lapping up a thermos of truck stop coffee. Dad, sensing my over-excitement, wisely decided to run another gun safety lecture by me before heading off. He also secured a promise that I wouldn't shoot at any more squirrels. I scoffed, "That was last year daddy. I'm grown up now."

For the next twenty minutes my senses were alive to every detail of the forest. I could almost smell the ridicule emanating from those cocky little squirrels who mocked me from the treetops. I was 'One' with the woods. If I could only kill a deer, surely it would secure my rite of passage to manhood. Dad would be so proud. Therefore, it kind of shocked me later when I found myself suddenly snapping awake. Wiping away the puddle of slobber collecting on my lapel, I quickly looked around to make sure dad hadn't caught me nodding. That's when I noticed it. A good sized deer was standing out in front of me, not thirty paces off.

My heart began drumming the inside of my ribs, and that gun seemed to levitate to my shoulder. My finger felt about frantically for that little safety do-hicky daddy always made me use. I was just about to fire off a shot when I suddenly remembered, "I'm supposed to look for horns."

"Dog," I huffed after a quick scan, "A dumb doe!"

The deer must've heard me, for he twitched his big ole' ears and revealed that he did indeed possess a little rack of horns! Faster'n that revelation could fully reach my understanding the gun was leaping in my hands. Then, to my surprise, the deer was also leaping; off into the foliage! My jaw slung open. I swallowed hard to fight down a tear. I'd missed from thirty paces.

In no time, dad appeared. Cautiously he instructed me to reapply the safety and he began his questioning. "How far was he? Which way did he go? Yada yada yada..." He wanted to line the whole place off like a police scene; like that was going to help! I didn't feel like harping on the past, so I sulked back to the three-wheeler and began revving the engine until he finally got the message.

The next day we drove out to the deer camp for lunch. A group of fellows was congregated out front, admiring a nice buck hanging from the skinning rack. Everybody was slapping a young fellow on the back, congratulating him and so forth. When they saw us, the ring leader spoke up. "Emory, wasn't you and your boy hunting the bottleneck yesterdy?" A hush came on the crowd as he continued. "We found a little hat-rack six point lying dead not forty yards from where I saw your boy sleeping. We was gonna drag em' in, but the meat done spoilt in this heat and all."

"Boy," dad shouted, slapping me with his orange cap, "You told me you missed that buck!" Then to save face, he went on to recount how I'd fired up the three-wheeler and disrupted his tracking plans. Everybody shook their heads somberly. (They take deer hunting mighty serious in Mississippi.)

Needless to say, that little six-pointer wasn't the only one who ran off with his heart shot out that weekend. I just felt sick. I moped for a month. My rite of passage would have to wait for another day. In fact, I'm not sure I ever did make that macho trip to manhood. If I did, I'm not sure when. After all, what constitutes being a *real* man? How do you know when you got what it takes? When have you killed enough deer?

But anyway- The more I've grow in my relationship with Jesus the more I've started to realize, manhood is not something we attain to, it's something we are called to. There's a difference. One looks to outward deeds, the other develops the inward seeds; the ones God planted. The truth is my manhood should not be based on this world's warped standards. God has already called me a man. Therefore I am. The more I understand my identity in Him the more I am set free to realize- "The true measure of a man is the measure in which he allows Christ to live through him."

I used to wonder if I should've gone ahead and shot one of those dumb squirrels. Maybe I would've gotten a little acceptance. What I didn't know at the time was, I was already accepted! (*To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved. Ephesians 1:6 KJV*) Guy Sheffield 8-7-07