Deadfall

Daniel Doran

*Iowa State University

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Abstract

The old elk stopped when he reached the timberline and tested the air...
The old elk stopped when he reached the timberline and tested the air. He hesitated, then tossed his giant rack and began the long climb up the barren grey rock face of the Spanish Peak. The scent was growing stronger; a thick, musty stink that filled his nostrils and sent waves of hatred through his body. The old bull could see clouds below him now and a wisp of vapor played across his polished antlers as the rising sun turned the sky pale grey. He reached a small clearing in the scrub brush and stopped short; a dark form stood motionless on the other side, shrouded in mist, alone. The bull turned and began to circle the clearing to catch its scent when a sudden gust of wind blew clear the veil of clouds and the opponent was in sight.

“No, boy! Watch again.” Ben Johnson slid the wooden crate up higher on the mule’s back and expertly tied a diamond hitch in the stiff manila rope, easing the weight of the pack down gently onto the animal’s back so that it pulled the knot rock-tight.

“There, you try it.”

Ben held up the pack on the next mule and the boy beside him worked the stiff rope into a loose hitch, then jerked it tight.

“OK Ben. Let it down.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

Ben released the canvas bundle and it promptly swung under the mule’s belly, bolting the animal into leaps and braying as the pack flopped and spilled its contents up and down the trail.

“Sonofabitch!”

The boy chased down the trail after the bucking animal and Ben shook his head as he checked the packs on the other
two mules, shifting a crease out of the saddle blanket on one and tightening the cinch strap on the other.

"You get him loaded, Alan?" He called down the trail where the boy and mule had disappeared. There was a muffled curse and a bray and Ben laughed out loud as he heard the underbrush crashing and the mule raced by him, spilling a trail of pots and tin cups in its wake.

The sun was well up in the sky before they got underway and black flies were beginning to swarm around the heat of the horses, gathering on the tips of their ears and at the corners of their eyes. Ben and the boy rode beside each other with the three pack mules training behind in a long string.

"Hey, Ben." Alan urged his horse up closer to Ben's. "Do you think we'll make camp by night?"

"We should, unless the mules wear out. It might be pretty late though."

"Oh. You think we'll have some luck?"

"That's real hard to tell. There won't be much luck to it if we play our cards right; we just have to wait and see."

"Jenny said she's sure we'll get some."

"She did, huh?"

"Yeah. She said as long as I kept your nose out of a whiskey bottle, we'd be sure to score."

"Damn! You sure she said that?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. She worries about you, especially since that last job when. . . ."

"You'll do well to mind your own business, that's between your sister and me." Ben stared up the trail and said nothing more.

Alan rode quietly and fell back a little, watching Ben's horse pick its way over rocks and around the giant tumbled snags of brush and deadfall timber.

The old bull elk stood motionless and waited for the other elk to make the first move. The mist had cleared away and the challenger began to pace back and forth on the other side of the clearing. He was much younger than the old bull, two or three years at the most. His antlers had not yet forked; they rose in two straight shafts that were honed needle sharp at the points. The old bull watched carefully; he'd fought spike bulls
before and knew well the killing power of those smooth tines. The young elk was starting to move now, blowing hard and pawing at the earth in the middle of the clearing, flecks of foam rising across his shoulders and at the corners of his mouth. The old bull moved in to meet him; it would have to be quick. He'd have little chance to outlast the younger animal. He'd have to come in low and move to kill, try to stay clear of those two long spikes. A wind began to rise as full morning broke and mist seeped from the scrub brush, swirling across the mountain's side as the battle began.

Hazy shafts of sunlight filtered down through the aspens on the slopes below, burning patterns of dryness on the dew-soaked canvas tents. Ben poked at the breakfast fire and shifted a bit more upwind to escape the smoke hanging close to the ground.

He squinted over at the smaller tent. "You better haul it on out of there or miss my cooking, boy."

The canvas bulged and tossed, finally spilling Alan barefoot and bleary-eyed onto the thick mat of pine needles. "Ohh shit." He staggered behind the picket line of pack animals as he pulled at his fly. "Your cooking is about the last thing in the world I need right now."

Ben smiled to himself and shifted the boiling coffee tin out of the heat. "You know, boy, there's those who say if you can't hold your liquor you'd best leave it alone."

Alan's muffled reply was lost to the screeching of a blue camp jay that teetered and pitched on a small limb just above the fire. Alan walked over and stretched his feet toward the warmth.

"You been getting kind of old and crotchety here lately, Ben."

"Nope, you're dead wrong as usual. I'm getting kind of sweet and mellow as time goes by. It wasn't me that woke up bitching."

"Nah, shit, you've got to check and see if your heart's still beating first. You feel lucky today?"

"Yeah, sort of lucky. If we can add some meat to those mule deer quarters, your sister and I won't starve this winter."
“You don’t think they’ll hire you back on?”

“Not now. Maybe in the spring when they need carpenters bad. They weren’t too happy with me last I knew.”

“Well, you’ll land on your feet, you always do.”

“Tell that to Jenny. She figures we’re bound for debtor’s prison.” Ben rubbed a thick piece of bacon across the skillet and began cracking eggs. “You know, boy, as much as I hate to admit it, that wasn’t a half bad shot you made on that mulie yesterday.”

“Half bad! Half bad my ass. You’re too old and shaky to hit anything that isn’t staring you right in the face. You’d have never touched a hair on him from that distance.”

“Sure, you go ahead and kid yourself. We’ll see after tonight who brings . . . wait!”

Faintly, drifting, gone. The high wail was just barely perceptible; three notes drifting down the mountain, rising in scale and then falling back down, repeated once, then again.

Ben caught Alan’s eye for a moment and slowly smiled. “That’s him, boy. He’s mine.”

The old bull was on his knees, sides heaving and a bloody foam dropping from his mouth. The young spike was dead, withers and soft underbelly torn again and again by the rapier antlers of the older elk. The sun had burned off the mist and fog, leaving the mountaintop bathed in sunlight as the old bull struggled to his feet. He slowly rocked his massive head from side to side and located the spot on his flank where the spike had pierced his hide, and the other spot higher up where it nicked a lung. Breath was already labored and a deep rattle had begun in the damaged lung. The herd; he had to get his cows back to the water where he could lay up and heal. There would be more young bulls, more challengers before the rut was over, and he had to recover. As he slowly picked his way back down the mountain, he paused to look at the fallen body. An ancient surge stirred deep inside him and a cry from centuries past welled deep within his soul and echoed across the Montana timber.

Shadows were growing long and pine scent was rising from the forest’s floor as Ben turned the gelding back toward camp. He twisted a little in the saddle to take the weight off his
crotch and looked down at the .270 Weatherby in the saddle boot where it had stayed all day. It had been his father's, one of the few things he'd left Ben when he died. "It'll have to go," Ben thought. "The truck too if I don't find work by spring. You deserve better than this, Jenny. You had your chance."

He made a click in the back of his mouth and coaxed the Appaloosa over the maze of deadfall timber. They picked up the pace now as they reached the river and the game trail that would take them back to camp. There had been a single shot in late afternoon and Ben knew that if the boy had scored he'd be damn hard to live with.

The gelding rounded a bend in river and the trail began to get swampy and overgrown from the backwater of a beaver dam. It was a natural masterpiece of engineering, rising twenty feet above the river's bed and backing a small lake into the wilderness. Ben eased his way along the pond, the horse's steps muffled by the soft ground. There was a hatch of mayflies on the water, and as he watched, one dipped a bit too close and disappeared in the tiny whirlpool suction that was a trout's rise. Ben smiled. He'd have to bring the kid here tomorrow, it looked like a good spot to take some fish.

The gelding picked his way down the trail, tired, head down . . . then stopped short. Ben froze in the saddle and knew something was wrong. He could feel it through the horse, through the earth, through the pit of his stomach, something out of place.

There! Head and shoulders motionless, a cow elk was standing at the edge of the beaver dam. She fidgeted at the sight of so much open land and turned to run back for the safety of the trees but was stopped by a deep snort in the timber. She picked her way back to the edge of the dam and waited nervously, shifting her weight from one side to the other. Looking upstream and down, she gathered herself up and sprang on top of the dam, scrambling and sliding through the mud and sticks until she reached the other side.

In one fluid motion, Ben slid from the saddle and slipped the Weatherby from its boot, easing his feet silently to the ground. There was another cow waiting at the dam now and Ben leaned the rifle across the gelding's back and clicked off the safety. Through the scope he watched the next two cows
cross the dam and then three more. He knew the bull would push his herd across the clearing first, making sure that any danger fell to them.

He waited. Moisture from his eye fogged the scope and he looked away and blinked. The beavers lay motionless in the water and the cows began to relax and graze among the young aspen trees. The insect hatch drifting across the water sent out a steady, low buzz that . . .

Four flat tails smacked the water hard and Ben just had time to see the big bull leap from the timber and land right in the middle of the dam before the gelding reared and knocked the rifle from his hands.

Ben grabbed the gun and ran to the water’s edge where he could see the bull floundering in the mass of mud and sticks that gave way beneath his enormous bulk. Ben kneeled. Holding his breath he fired, hitting the elk just behind the right shoulder. With a mighty lunge, the bull broke free, leaping into the air as the second slug hit just ahead of the first and he was down, sliding over the far side of the dam.

There was silence, the cows nowhere in sight, the pond empty. The gelding was spooked, but he’d be back. He hadn’t run toward camp, of that much Ben was sure. He let out his breath in a long silent whistle and slowly worked the bolt to eject the second shell.

Ben jogged over to the dam and saw the huge rack first, seven points on each beam and at least six feet from side to side. The bull was lying at an angle, feet up toward the top of the dam and head pointed down the long slope of sticks toward the river below. Ben threw a rock against the bull’s side, then carefully worked his way out onto the dam, stretching out the barrel of the Weatherby he touched the eye—nothing. Smiling now, Ben laid the rifle down and pulled a length of rope from his coat pocket. As he looped the rope around a hind leg, he noticed two puncture holes on the animal’s side, and the rusty stains of dried blood on his antlers.

“You were a fighter, eh? Wish I could have been there to see that one.”

He pulled the loop tight and leaned back on the rope, pulling the leg open and leaning down the dam for better leverage. The leg was sticking almost straight into the air now
and Ben could tie the rope off and begin to dress him out. He gave just one more tug and the bull began to slide. Slowly at first, like a slow motion movie, the giant elk began to turn and slip down the dam, then all at once in a slide of mud and sticks and water he crashed down on top of Ben and together they rolled end over end, fifteen feet to the bottom of the dam.

Ben opened his eyes and it was completely dark. He could see stars and treetops above him and his arm was cold and wet as he realized he was in the water. He tried to flex his arm and streaks of pain screamed across his back; there was no pain in his legs, no feeling at all. He could see the bulk of the elk lying to his left, pale antlers driven deep into the sandy river bed and his head turned round almost double. Ben propped himself up on his good elbow and looked for the gelding. He whistled.

"Damn, I wish I'd named that horse."

There was a rustling and he saw the Appaloosa approach the river looking skittish and confused. He coaxed the horse closer, speaking quietly and in an even tone. Ben could see the horse’s eyes roll and his nostrils flare as he saw the elk.

"You never mind him, boy. Just come right this way."

The gelding drew up alongside him in the water. Reaching up, Ben grabbed the stirrup and slid his arm through, resting the weight of his body on his armpit, legs dangling uselessly behind.

"Git."

The young horse began to wade to the shore, angling a bit downstream and pulling Ben up to the bank. Suddenly he was right below the elk and blood swirled in the current and every equine sense reeled and panic turned to blind terror as he broke into a dead gallop, dragging the weight in one stirrup up into the woods and over a deadfall before shaking it off.

Ben opened his eyes again, slower this time. The pain was dull, rock-hard, gripping his lower back and sending waves of nausea through his stomach. It was full night now, the stars shone between towering pines and moonlight filtered across the forest’s floor. Ben closed his eyes and concentrated on the pain; where it began, where it ended. It became a tangible force, a thing with weight, white hot. He found its heart, its
center and stopped it, denied it, refused its existence. There
was a rusty taste in his mouth, a sour copper penny on his
tongue; familiar, like too many fights in too many bars. Ben
concentrated with difficulty, pain was returning, pain of
memory, of Jenny's dark eyes when he came home in the
morning after being out all night. Those nights long
forgotten, no, denied. She was alone again now, needing him,
needing his time. That's all she'd asked for, just time to be
alone with him. He'd wasted it, wasted it all, and now she was
alone. Ben watched the north star between the trees, watched
the universe pivot around it, timeless, pacing stars in endless
repetition of patterns and cycles. There was no pain now, only
emptiness as he felt himself hurled through the endless void,
broken, alone. Totally alone for the first time; if he'd only
known it would be like this, so soon .

There were shots. He could hear them in the distance—
three shots evenly spaced, each echo dying out before the next
report. Ben smiled, it would be all right. That was Alan and
he'd fire three more times in five minutes and when Ben didn't
fire back he'd come looking. He was a good kid, learning fast,
but he had to know, he had to be told about time before it was
too late.

But it wasn't too late, no, the boy will be here soon, Jenny
too. She'll be proud of that big bull, of Ben, he wouldn't leave
her this time . . . stay with her all the time . . . to be
inside her, part of her again . . . and morning would be a
different morning, it would be all right.

Five minutes later a fox squirrel perked his head up and
crawled along a log in the deadfall. He froze as he heard the
first shot, then flashed his tail and darted back to his den. On
the pond, the trout quit feeding for a moment as the second
shot rang out, closer now. A small rainbow slid up behind a
pale moth fluttering in the moonlight and took it with a gentle
slurp. The squirrel poked his head out again as he heard a
soft, rattling sigh, and a weight settled deeper into the logs.
The cow elk milled nervously on the side of the mountain,
unsure of themselves, then ran back toward the timberline,
toward the ragged summit of the Spanish Peak. There was
nothing else around the pond to hear the third shot, and the
aspen leaves rustled with a gentle breeze.