
"The White Deer" by Matt McGovern

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Something happened today, something terrible. It's the kind of thing that made me sell everything I had 10 years ago and move to Hewers Island, Maine.

My name is Randall Pierce. I am 56 years old. My hair is thinning and gray, but I'm still in decent shape for a man my age. You tend to get that way when you live four miles out to sea, at the mercy of the wind and the rain and snow.

Back in the 1970s, I worked on the paper machines at the Warren Mill in Westbrook. I made a good wage, but it was a tough job with long hours and rotating shifts. One week I would work the day shift, then evenings, and then the dreaded overnight grind. A lot of times, the job left me with hardly enough energy for anything except eating and sleeping. It paid the bills, though, and kept the lights on, the phone working, put food on the table, and made it possible for my wife, Mary—God rest her soul—to stay home and raise our son.

Back then, I owned 300 acres in Scarborough, just outside of Portland, down in the southern part of the State. The land had been in my family since the late 1800s. It was mostly wooded except for a few old fields and pastures that remained from the days when my Dad and Granddad raised cattle for slaughter. Each summer, I would have the fields mowed and I would sell the hay to a family down the road that boarded horses. From the surrounding woods, I would cut my own firewood, and when the market called for it, I would have a local cutter harvest saw logs and pulp. The extra money wasn't much, but it was something Mary and I could put away for retirement, for our golden years.

Business began to boom in southern Maine around this time, especially in the greater Portland area. Big tracts of land were being swallowed up to make room for shopping Malls and housing developments. A lot of my neighbors jumped at the money the builders dangled in front of them, but I never considered selling my property. I could not bear to think of a shopping center or parking lot sitting where the farmhouse stood.

Instead, I took half of our life savings and planted 2,000 apple trees—healthy little Cortland and Macintosh sprigs—in my old fields. At the time, you could still make a profit in the orchard business provided you were willing to work real hard and Mother Nature cooperated. That was 1977.

I planted another 1,500 trees the next year, and within three years had more than 4,000 in the ground. My wife and I felt secure and happy with the future we had planned. We were tied to

the land, our well-being dependent only on our own sweat and what Mother Nature would bring.

Now I know what a foolish notion that was.



Late October on Hewers Island finds a smattering of changing leaves among the dark green fir and spruce. The leaves are just beginning to reach their peak. Each day has an obvious chill and dampness, which isn't unusual, but it's a drastic change from the hazy, stifling heat we experienced in July and August.

The past summer was a real scorcher, much more so than any in recent memory. The mercury must have topped 90 degrees a dozen times—which is hot for the islands. Most mornings are covered in fog, and the rest of our days usually bring a cool breeze off the water. August was by far the worst, with almost two weeks of oppressive, humid weather and drenching, noisy thunderstorms nearly every afternoon.

About 10 other families own either a lot or a cottage on Hewers, so I am not alone—at least not in the summer. I don't know any of them very well, though we are always cordial when our paths cross. I always try to help when I can, and the gesture is usually reciprocal. I like to think of it as an “unwritten code” of island conduct.

Most the others are from out-of-state. Most are very rich, and most come here to relax for a few weeks or months each summer before heading back to jobs and careers. They are all back ashore now for the winter —except, of course, for me.

Being the only year-round resident on Hewers leaves me alone for about eight or nine months out of the calendar, which I don't mind at all. I enjoy having the whole place to myself. It's quiet . . . peaceful.

One of my most peaceful times is when the Whitehead lighthouse and the beacon out at Two Bush Island sound their horns. It's particularly haunting late at night, when the skies are black and the sea is covered in fog and drizzle. Sound carries a long way out here and has a special way of echoing off the water and the islands. If you're an experienced listener, like I've gotten to be, you can tell each of the horns apart by their slightly different pitches.

There used to be a lobster pound on Hewers back in the 1960s, built by a group of local fishermen and investors. The pound was a wooden pier and granite breakwater that stretched across a sandy, natural cove, cutting off the inlet from the rest of the sea. Lobsters bought when prices were low were dumped into the pound to “fatten up” and harden their shells.

When prices went up, the lobsters were harvested and shipped to market for a profit. Supposedly, it was quite an operation. You can still see the remnants of the pier and the breakwater on the northern side of the island, not 100 yards from my place.

My place is actually the former pound-keeper's residence and about an acre or so of the land around it, including the old pound. There's no power and I don't mind the lack of electricity one bit. There used to be electricity when the pound was operating I'm told, but the big, gas-powered generator that breathed life into the whole operation has long since gone. The house is insulated, so I am able to stay warm on cold nights with the help of a small woodstove. I get most of the fuel for the stove by beach combing for driftwood or taking an axe to all the spruce blow-downs. I suppose I could chip away at the old pier for firewood, but I prefer to keep it as it is—a ramshackle reminder that nothing manmade lasts forever.

I catch rainwater off the roof for showers and washing. I get drinking water out of a hand-dug well in the back. There's no approved septic, so I make do with an outhouse. I don't know what's worse, making the trek to the outhouse on a sub-zero winter morning and braving that cold, cold seat or venturing out on a sweltering August afternoon.

I don't have a TV, and I don't miss it. I have a radio that runs on batteries. Mostly, I listen for news and weather reports, though I do find myself catching a Red Sox game every now and then or the local oldies station.

I go ashore for groceries and supplies about once a month. I have a 16-foot fiberglass boat and 30 horsepower Johnson outboard to bring me back and forth. That's usually about the only time I ever leave the island . . . and it's the day I look forward to the least.

It's just past noon, now. The sun's high in the sky and what fog and drizzle we had overnight has burned off. If not for a steady breeze from the east, I think the day would be unusually warm.

This morning, I brought a piece of plastic with me to my favorite "sitting rock" down on the shore so I wouldn't get my backside all wet. Relaxing on my sitting rock, which overlooks the back shore of Hewers facing the mainland, with a hot cup of coffee has become a morning ritual—weather permitting, of course. Sometimes I'll sit for an hour or two, coffee in hand, listening as the world wakes up to a new day and the lobstermen head out to check their traps.

Before I moved here, I had never sat and closed my eyes to listen to an incoming tide. I had never listened to the quiet roar of the waves surging then falling back, to the rush of water spilling down and through crevices in the rocks, to the squawking gulls riding the rolling water. You should try it some time. It'll make you come alive inside.

For several years now, an osprey family has been nesting in the broken top of a scraggly old spruce not far from my sitting rock. Each morning when I sit, I listen to the birds screeching. For a while I was worried I would scare them off, but I think they've gotten used to me. Often, I'll catch them glancing at me from their nest. It reminds me of how Mary and I used to have our coffee together every morning.

God, that seems so long ago, now.



I quit the mill back in the fall of 1989 after my third good apple crop in a row. It was a big leap of faith for Mary and me to give up my job and benefits. I certainly wouldn't be making as much to start with in the orchard business, but my time and what I did with it would be my own. Besides, 16-hour shifts and rotating schedules were for younger men. I was close to my 45th birthday and, like it or not, the hard work and odd hours were starting to take a toll.

To help pay some of the bills, Mary took a part-time job that first year as a secretary at Scarborough Elementary School. I can remember how excited she was when she brought home her first paycheck.

She died the next spring—four months after the doctor told her she had a tumor in her liver. I guess the cancer had been with her for some time. She was in such terrible pain at the end.

Looking back, I wish I'd had the strength to help stop her suffering. No man should have to watch the woman he loves slowly wither and die.

Good weather followed the spring we laid Mary to rest and I had my most bountiful crop to date. I like to think Mary had something to do with that.

By the time the next year's crop rolled around, my son, Garret, was beginning his last year at technical college up in Auburn. The orchard was doing quite well and my apples, they tell me, were among the best in the state—if not the northeast.

The following spring, Garret graduated near the top of his class with an Associate's Degree in agricultural engineering. He planned to come home and work with me, to help make his old man's orchard thrive.

But it never happened.

Three months after he graduated, Garret died in a car accident, up at the rotary on Route 202 in Windham. A drunk driving one of those full-sized Chevy Conversion vans hit his Ford Ranger head-on.

The accident happened late in the summer, little more than two years after Mary's passing. They say Garret died instantly, that he did not suffer, but who can tell? He had his whole life ahead of him. He never got to wed, never got to know the joy of raising a youngster of his own. If that's not suffering, I don't know what is.

I never got to hold a grandchild. I never will.

Garret was just 21.

From then on, the chores didn't get done. The sprays didn't get put on the trees and I didn't tend to the pruning like I should. That year's crop went mostly untended.

I didn't know it then, but it was my last crop.

That November, I heard from Central-Maine Electric. The big power utility had been quietly buying options on land around Scarborough for more than a year. Apparently, they were looking for a piece of land on which to build a converting station to link a new power line coming from western Maine with lines running south to Portsmouth and Boston. They approached me about buying 74 acres of my land, which would all but wipe out the orchard. They told me I could sell then, at a fair price, or they could take it later through eminent domain.

I was sick at the thought of losing my land. They were talking about destroying my livelihood, my home, *my place*. My apple trees were like children to me. I'd planted them all, nursed them all, pruned and shaped them all—even tended the ones that needed a little extra care to make it. My land was all I had left of where Mary and I had shared our lives and raised a son.

But the fight in me was gone.

By January, I had sold the 74 acres to Central-Maine Electric and the rest of my farm to a local developer. I sold it all for a damn good price, too—enough so I could invest it and live the rest of my life without the need for a paycheck. I'm sure that somewhere, someplace, my Dad and Granddad both shed tears when I closed the deal. Mary and Garret were probably disappointed in me, too. I hope when we all meet again someday I can explain . . . and they can forgive me.

That same winter I saw some land for sale in the coastal section of "The Down Easter." The name of the place sounded familiar. I had boated around Hewers and the other Mussel Ridge islands as a boy, so I knew the area quite well. I knew it could offer me the simple life and the solitude I so desperately wanted and needed.

But with what happened today, I'm not sure if that kind of life exists anymore.



Imagine the surprise my first summer on the island when I glanced out my kitchen window to see a doe and her two little ones grazing on a patch of grass behind my place. It's not exactly the kind of thing you expect to see on an island. Apparently, the deer get out here by swimming the shallow channels between the islands and rocky ledges.

The mother hadn't returned to the island after the second summer—maybe the victim of age, the elements, a hungry predator, or even a hunter's bullet—but the little ones kept coming back. One grew into a sturdy eight-point buck, the other into a healthy, child-rearing doe. They, too, each had offspring and the cycle continued from season to season.

Just two years ago, though, I saw the most remarkable thing.

One day, a white deer—that's right, a white deer—appeared on the edge of my lawn. It slipped from the nearby woods to a spot where it could graze on my thick green grass. When I first saw the deer, I thought, "I must be going crazy." The deer's coat was unblemished—as pure as fresh-fallen snow. It looked like a ghost.

I watched it through my kitchen window for only a few minutes, before it heard me accidentally rap the windowpane with my knuckle. I remember seeing the animal look up, sniff the breeze, and shake its impressive antlers. It turned, looking for the source of the sound, and then bounded effortlessly into the nearby woods.

I am a hunter. I have killed many deer and I did what was necessary to keep the animals from damaging my orchard. I figure if a man needs to eat or to protect his livelihood, then he has that right. Animals prey on other animals. It's a fact of life. They always have and always will. It's the way it should be.

But what happened today is different, unmentionable, such a waste.



I didn't see the white deer for another year, until late the next spring one afternoon as I was repairing the wooden treads on my front porch. I simply looked up from my work and there the deer was, nibbling on some freshly sprouted grass.

I watched the animal for quite some time, careful not to make any abrupt motions or noise. The deer eventually wandered toward the shore, down by my sitting rock. I thought of following, but figured I'd only end up scaring the animal away.

The white deer was back the next week and the week after that. Soon, seeing the animal was quite common, but that never diminished the awe I felt each time it visited. To see such a beautiful animal—wild and free, unfettered by human concerns—was inspiring. I began to look forward to its visits.

I never spoke of the white deer to anyone else. To this day, I don't think I could give you a good reason why.

This spring, I decided to put out a lick of salt for the animal and started buying feed grain on my trips ashore.

Lately, a feeling of trust (if that's possible between a man and an animal) seems to have developed between the deer and me. It's not a blind trust. The animal never quite relaxes when it slips from the protective cover of the woods, but I guess that's all a part of being wild. The deer has been visiting me more and more often, however, and staying longer each time. I suppose the deer knows I mean it no harm.

That's what makes what happened today so tragic. I feel, somehow, that I had a hand in what happened.



Right now, I'm sitting on my rock with a cup of coffee that's gone cold in my clenched hands. A feeling of sorrow that I have not felt since losing Garret (and before that my Mary) overwhelms me. I am looking at the bloody remains of a freshly killed deer. And though I want it to be otherwise with all my heart, I *know* that this is the white deer.

While I've tried over the last few years to deny this day would ever come, I think deep down I always knew it would. Not only is the deer dead, but it's been killed for the very thing that made it so special. Whoever did this (and I'm not sure who it was because this morning I made my monthly trip ashore for supplies) killed the animal for its skin and its magnificent rack. That's all that's been taken.

I would sooner have seen the animal succumb to the chilly salt water or to a pack of hungry coyotes—or even a hungry hunter's bullet—than to see it fall this way.

Overhead, the osprey is circling, screeching, incessant with its cries, berating me.

—screech, screech, screech—

I can't help but think its outrage is directed at me, not because I'm intruding on its hunting grounds, but because it knows what happened . . . and it somehow blames me.

The rising tide is wetting the sand around the white deer's butchered body, covering the remains, rocking the carcass in rolling, foamy waves.

I'm sickened. I realize now that my island is neither paradise nor sanctuary. It may be isolated by a four-mile stretch of sea, but that can't stop the rest of the world from intruding here—relentlessly, day-after-day, year-after-year—till everything that's good and right and innocent has been destroyed.

And even though I bowed out from playing that game years ago, I'm still just as much a part of it—guilt by association. Just ask my friend the osprey.

—*screech, screech, screech*—

That's what makes it so damn frustrating. There's nothing I can do.

For me, the white deer is gone. *Forever.*