



IT'S HELL TO GET OLD

by Paul Kemper

After losing his mentor, one hunter finds redemption in a chance encounter.

Going into the past hunting season, I felt ready. More ready than I had for any season prior. I'd found elk, tracked their travel throughout the summer, mapped out approaches, backpacked through the Bob Marshall and Scapegoat wildernesses in western Montana. I put upwards of 8,000 arrows through my recurve. I cultivated a positive headspace I was certain would lead to success. I felt like my preparation was whole.

Two weeks before the archery opener, I flew back to Pennsylvania to visit my family. It was my twin aunts' 60th birthdays and was the first time in years my grandparents' daughters, grandkids, nieces and nephews all gathered together. The occasion was a birthday celebration, but we all knew it was bigger than that. It was potentially the last time the family would share a table together with the same guest list.

PHOTO: DAWN Y. WILSON

My grandfather Francesco Fioretti, or Pops as I called him, was 86. He emigrated from Italy to America in 1951 when he was 19. He started a family, worked in the paper mill, helped his three daughters through school and fostered a garden that was the envy of the neighborhood. He raised beagles and canaries.

As a child, I watched Pops and knew I wanted to grow up to be a man and a hunter like him. He taught me how to be patient, how to pick my shots, how to sit still when you needed to, and to charge ahead. He shared stories of the West from a trip he took in 1965 with his brother Mario. His stories and lessons consumed me. I couldn't wait to grow up in hopes that one day I'd be able to hunt elk in Montana—and share my stories with him.

For the last four years, I had called him every Sunday to check in.

"How ya doing, Pops?" I'd ask.

"Paulie, it's hell to get old," he'd say.

I knew he was being honest, and I knew it hurt him to verbalize his reality. He'd overcome open heart surgery, prostate cancer and various other ailments over the years. Now he was fighting through his most recent challenge, esophageal cancer.

After the 60th birthday celebration, I returned to Montana and dove into hunting season with a full heart. I couldn't wait to return home at Christmas with stories of my first elk for Pops.

The previous season I'd watched a lot of elk just out beyond the range of my recurve. But with observation comes knowledge, and I was excited to take what I'd learned into the fall.

The elk were quiet on opening weekend, but my hunting partner Jared and I were thick in elk and had encounters with three separate bulls on public land. Those four days in the backcountry left hopes and

expectations high for the rest of the season

Two days after returning from the opener, I got a call from my mom.

"He's gone, bud," she said, fighting back tears.

Three weeks after my August visit home, I was back but on very different terms. I grieved, I cried, I laughed and celebrated the life of my best friend and hunting mentor.

As the hunting season progressed, I felt like I was one step behind at every turn. Little things I normally wrote off as chance or plain bad luck seemed to carry more weight. It felt like all my efforts were for naught. Jared and I had planned to check out a new area later in the season, but I felt lost and exhausted. The fire in me dwindled to a flicker.

I wondered how diving into an area I'd only scouted via computer screen would produce anything but emptied tanks of gas and empty miles. I yielded to doubts about my ability to kill an elk with a bow and looked for a way to coast into rifle season for a fresh start.

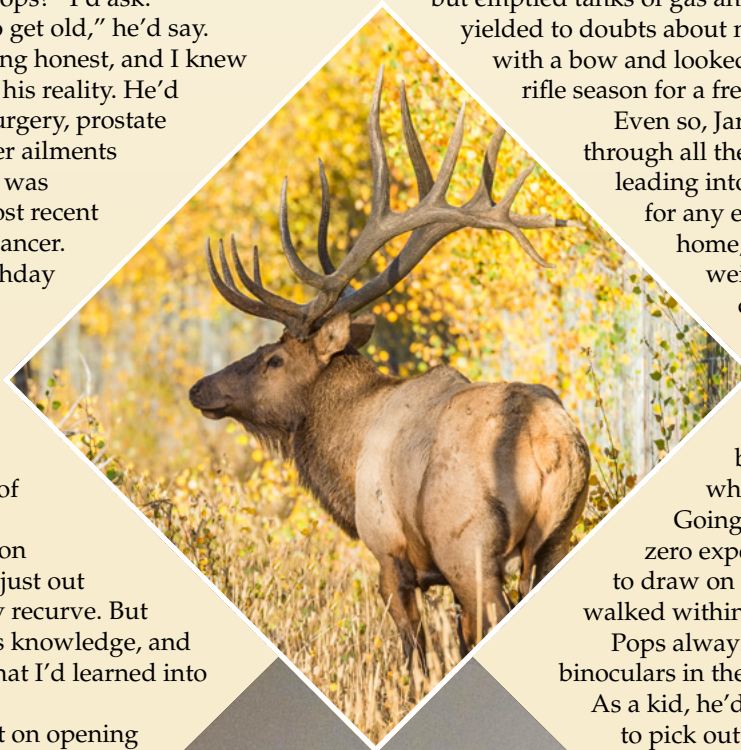
Even so, Jared and I panned through all the research we'd done leading into the season. I looked for any excuse to stay close to home, but I couldn't let the weight keep holding me down. I was on the

hunt for my first elk. I had come to full draw four times the year prior but never got a shot where I felt comfortable.

Going into this hunt I had zero expectations. I was going to draw on the first legal elk that walked within bow range.

Pops always kept a pair of binoculars in the front seat of his truck. As a kid, he'd constantly pull over to pick out a fox or a flock of turkeys on a hillside. Some of my earliest and most vivid memories are of glassing with Pops from the seat of his truck.

To this day, spending time behind the



It's Hell to Get Old

They were forty when you were ten
Those cowboys you looked up to
You trailed them like a shadow
Wanted to learn everything they knew.

At twenty you thought you were smarter than all
The best damn hand around
But they, being fifty, knew hell
And they'd laugh

glass is one of my favorite things. On the second day hunting our new area, that pastime paid off. Jared and I were glassing opposite hillsides when he spotted a small herd as they passed through the timber.

"There's a bull down there," Jared said. "He's not small."

I could only see the last few cows by the time I spotted them, but I was excited for the opportunity to move in on multiple elk. The bull was vocal and the wind was in our favor. We followed contours in the topography as the bugles in the bottom grew louder.

Closing in on the bull, we noticed his cows had dispersed. He was bugling from the next ridge trying to get his harem back. He continued to scream as I slipped in to 60 yards. The bull caught movement he couldn't quite make out and went over the ridge and jumped a fence into a timbered valley on private property. He kept bugling as Jared and I made tracks for the ridge.

In my haste to move in on the herd, I forgot to pack my bugle tube down the canyon. We chugged a Nalgene bottle of water, leaving about eight ounces in the bottom. I used the almost empty bottle as a bugle tube, matching the bull in the bottom bugle-for-bugle as we raked the tree behind us, trying desperately to lure him back onto legal ground. Soon, the bull's bugle sounded closer. Jared dropped back down below the ridge and cow-called as I bugled from the top.

After what was almost a constant shouting match, there was silence.

This was the hottest bull I'd ever encountered. How could he just shut down like that? There was no way he winded us. Thoughts swirled.

From the silence erupted a bugle that snapped me out of my purgatory. Moments later, the tops of his antlers crested the backside of the ridge. There was enough time for one last bugle. I belted out the angriest, growliest call I could muster. With an arrow nocked, I raised my bow as the bull approached the fence.

Head up, he scanned the timber for the bull that was trying to steal his cows. Jared could only see the bull's antler tops, turning left and right as he scanned. Jared held out as long as he could, then squeaked out a nasally, needy cow-in-estrus mew.

The bull hopped the fence. Ten steps in at the top of the ridge, he cleared the brush and stood broadside to me.

With no cover and no time to range him, I came to full draw, settling my index finger under my cheekbone. As my feather brushed my lip, I launched the arrow. He saw me draw, and the arrow hit as the bull whirled. He jumped back over the fence onto private land and pounded down toward the bottom.

I'd just shot my first elk, but was instantly faced with a flood of questions.

Was that enough penetration? Was it fatal? Will the landowners even let me look for him?

We heard coughing from the bottom, and Jared assured me the bull was down. I had no idea what to believe until I could physically confirm he was dead. After a season of disappointments, I felt like I'd blown my only opportunity. The weight of the season just got a ton heavier.

We backed out to find service and call the rancher. My call went through, and the lady who answered told me to call her husband and gave me his number. When he didn't answer, we had little choice but to cruise the dirt road hoping to find him. Three miles down the road, we crossed paths with him.

I explained what happened that morning.

"Sounds like you got yourself a situation," he said from the saddle of his quad.

"Yes sir," I said.

"Well," he paused for a long beat.

"It'd be a shame if he went to waste. You should go find him."

Awash with relief and gratitude, Jared and I hiked back into where the bull crossed the fence. We followed tracks over the ridge and down the hill. After 150 yards of empty tracking through the grass and mud, Jared called out, "I've got blood."

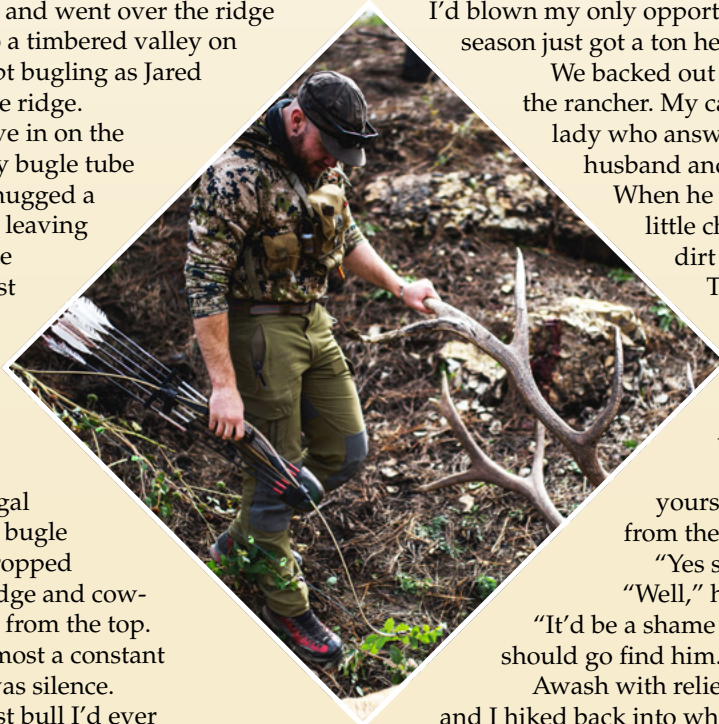
We bird-dogged the blood trail for 100 yards toward the bottom. The trail left no doubt he was hit hard. I scanned below me, looking for any sign of hair or tines.

"There's your bull," said Jared.

I dropped my bow and collapsed as I stared at the bull. He was motionless, 230 yards from where my arrow first made contact.

Like a broken record, I repeated over and over, "Are you kidding me, dude?"

I laughed. I cried. I hugged Jared. After the excitement died down, we broke down the bull and hung the quarters in the shade. Two trips later, we were back at the truck with the meat in coolers and beers in hand. A strange sadness set in as I realized



I wouldn't be able to call Pops to tell him. My favorite part of hunting always happened after the hunt when I'd call Pops and share all the tales from the woods with him.

After gathering myself, I called the ranchers' home instead.

"Hi, ma'am, this is Paul Kemper. We spoke earlier. I just wanted to say thank you to you and your husband. I recovered the elk. He didn't go far at all. Thank you for letting me go find him. He's my first, and it just means the world to me."

"Congratulations, Paul! Stop by the house on your way home," she said. "We'd love to see him."

When I pulled in the drive, she wrapped her arms around my shoulders and said she was proud of me. She thanked me for calling her first. A lot of people would have just hopped the fence and started looking, she said. Her husband shook my hand and gave me a pat on the shoulder.

Jared and I were prepared for a quick visit before hitting the road in search of a late night feast. When she asked us to come inside, we abandoned visions of bacon cheeseburgers for black coffee and pastries.

We washed our hands and sat on the couch. We shared the story of our hunt. They shared the history of the ranch. The rancher reached over and pulled a

piece of notebook paper out of a folder next to his recliner.

"I want you boys to read something," he said. "My daughter wrote me this poem, and I'd like to share it with you."

The title of the poem was "It's Hell to Get Old." It was a decade-by-decade account of the rancher's life as he moved up through the cowboy ranks. Now in his 70s and after taking a fall off his horse last year, he had trouble doing things around the ranch the way he had for a lifetime. It was tough for him to adjust as he traded a horse and saddle for an engine and a vinyl seat. He told his daughter after the fall that it's hell to get old.

In that moment, wearing Pop's old red wool hunting shirt, I felt like he was there, watching the whole experience unfold better than I ever could have relayed over the phone. In a way, he was sitting in the recliner across from me. For the first time since my mother's tearful call, I felt the weight I'd been carrying fall away.

Paul Kemper is the copyeditor and conservation lead at Seacat Creative out of Bozeman, Montana. In his spare time, you'll find him hunting any and all open seasons, chasing hungry trout or penning hand-written letters.



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