THREE

Opening Day

DOUGLAS THAYER

Doc and my father got up at 4 o'clock to light the fire, heat water on the Coleman stoves for washing, and get the breakfast started, then woke the rest of us. Standing outside of our white tent in the cool darkness, I buckled on my heavy cartridge belt and breathed in deep the smell of wood smoke and sagebrush. I looked down Blind Canyon and then turned to look up at the black silhouette of the ridge under the stars. I knew the bucks would already be out feeding in the draws. The ridge ran east and west, and we hunted the draws on the south and north slopes. I still felt the old excitement of the opening day of the deer hunt, an empty tight feeling as if my whole body were being squeezed. I still wanted to see the big mule-deer bucks jump out of the oak brush ahead of the line, shoot them as they ran. But then I hadn't expected to have absolute control over my emotions just because while I was on my mission in Germany I had decided to stop hunting. When I got married and had sons, I didn't want them to hunt, but I knew that it wouldn't be easy for me to stop killing birds and animals.

Bliss, Dean, and Ken stood by the fire, and Jerry washed in the pan of warm water on the end of the table. The light from the fire

and the two Coleman lanterns glared off from their red hats, sweat shirts, and jackets. When they moved, the handles of their hunting knives, aluminum lids of their old GI belt canteens, and the shells in their full cartridge belts glinted.

When the rest of us had washed, Doc asked me to give the morning prayer and blessing on the food; he said that we had to keep the returned missionaries busy. After we ate we got our rifles out of the cases in the tent, saddled Bliss's three horses, and put the lunches and the two walkie-talkies in the saddlebags. We turned off the lanterns, shoveled dirt on the fire, and we were ready, each of us carrying his rifle slung. My father, Doc, and Bliss, who were older and worked on the Union Pacific Railroad together, rode the horses, the rest of us following in single file across the sagebrush flat to the start of the trail at the base of the ridge. Every hundred yards we had to stop to rest, our breath white in the flashlight beams as we sat breathing hard.

I had been home from Germany four days, and while I was gone I had decided to quit hunting. Two years of knowing that I would probably be drafted and sent to Vietnam, hearing the older Germans talk about World War II, and every day preaching the gospel of Christ changed me. I felt guilty because of all the rabbits, pheasants, ducks, geese, and deer I had killed, which were beautiful and had a right to live. All things had been created spiritually before they were physically. Our family ate the meat, but we didn't need it. We weren't pioneers or Indians, and we were commanded to eat meat mostly in time of famine anyway, and then with thanksgiving. The deer herds had to be controlled, but I knew that I hunted because I liked to kill, not because I was a conservationist. A mule-deer buck was a beautiful animal, sleek and grey, powerful, had a being all its own. To kill was to deny the influence of the Holy Ghost, which I wanted to continue to develop.

I had started three letters to my father to tell him how I had changed, but I couldn't make them sound right, and I knew that I would have to wait until I got home to tell him. I had three older married sisters but no brothers, and my father and I had been very close. Even before I was old enough to buy a license for anything

or even shoot, he took me hunting. He helped me make my bows and arrows, bought me a BB-gun, my Browning .22, and my Winchester .270. For my birthdays and Christmases he always gave me something for hunting, although I had bought my own knife when I was eight. We built a walnut gun cabinet, a duck boat, and we cleaned and repaired the camping equipment together every year. Every month we read and talked about the stories in *Outdoor Life* and *Field and Stream,* which I saved.

We had even planned my mission so that I would have the deer hunt to look forward to when I got home. When I met my family at the Salt Lake airport, all my father could talk about driving home to Provo was the opening day Saturday and how wonderful it was having me home again to be with him in the deer camp. Upstairs in my room I found my .270, knife, full cartridge belt, and red hunting clothes laid out on my bed. My father had bought me a new red hat, cleaned and oiled my .270, and loaded three boxes of shells for me to use for target practicing. When I went back downstairs, he took me out to see the new sets of antlers he had nailed to the back of the garage the two seasons I was away.

I knew then that I would have to hunt the opening day. I couldn't disappoint my father. We could have Friday night in camp together, and all day Saturday I would drive the draws, help clean the bucks if I had to, pack them on the horses, but I wouldn't kill a buck myself. I would shoot just to stop questions if a buck jumped up and a member of the camp was standing where he could see me, but I would miss. We always came home Saturday night to go to church on Sunday, and I would tell my father Sunday about my decision. I wouldn't hunt during the week or next Saturday, which was the last Saturday. My mother always said that my father should have been born an Indian two hundred years ago so that he could have hunted elk, wolves, buffalo, and grizzly bear, hunted every day.

Climbing up the trail I was the last in line. Ahead of me the flashlights lit up the high oak brush on both sides, and the horses' hooves clicked against the rocks. Doc, Bliss, and my father stayed on the horses when we stopped to rest. Because we knew the ridge, organized our drives, and hunted hard, we always got bucks. A camp

needed horses to haul the bucks off the high ridge, so we had little competition. Sitting on the edge of the trail, the sweat cooling on my back, I picked up little white pebbles, flipped them away, thought about Germany.

Although I had sold more Books of Mormon than any other elder in the mission and been assistant to President Wunderlich my last five months, I had baptized only two converts in two years. The younger Germans weren't interested in the gospel, and when the older Germans invited me and my companion in, they often talked about the war. They showed us pictures of their sons that we had killed, and they wanted to know why the American army hadn't joined the German army to fight the Russians. They showed us pictures of whole families of relatives burned alive or buried in the rubble during the great Allied bombing raids on Nuremberg, Hamburg, and Dresden. They called Hitler a madman and asked why the English and French governments didn't stop him before 1939. They wanted to know how there could be a God if he let such terrible things happen, and I told them that it wasn't God that caused wars but men. If all mankind would just live the gospel of Christ there wouldn't be any more wars. I wanted to get a doctorate in sociology so that I could teach at B.Y.U. and help people to live together in peace and harmony.

On the streets in the German towns, older men who had been invalided in the war wore yellow armbands with black circles, a lot of them amputees, but there were no beggars. My first fall in Germany, a German brother took me and my companion on a Saturday out to visit a small German military cemetery near Offenbach. One of the caretakers raking leaves under the oak trees said that most of the soldiers had been killed fighting Americans. I picked up a handful of the leaves. In Utah in the fall I had followed wounded bucks by their blood trails on the leaves under the oak brush. In the places where they lay down, the blood soaked slowly into the pressed leaves.

The trail led onto a little flat, and above us the ridge was still black under the stars. In every direction were ridges, canyons, mountains, but they were still black and indistinct. Points of light

flashed where hunters climbed other ridges, and in the bottom of Blind Canyon fires still burned. As a boy at night I dreamed about the ridge. Although a lot of big bucks hid in the short, steep, pine-filled draws on the north slope, I liked the south draws best because I could see the bucks running up through the oak brush, shoot for three and four hundred yards if I were on a good ledge. In my dreams I shot and shot, killed the running bucks, their antlers flashing in the sun like swords, rolled them back down the steep side of the draw. And I dreamed too that we jumped five and six bucks in one bunch, and it was like a battle with all of us shooting, but because we gang-hunted I wanted to fill all of the permits myself. I wanted to feel all of the thrill, cut the throats, the blood spreading out through the leaves, holler up to the others how big the bucks were, how many points on the antlers. If we shot too many bucks, on the way down Blind Canyon going home we always gave the smaller ones to other camps, didn't waste any. One opening day I shot three bucks, but they were all singles.

When we stopped on the trail again to rest, Jerry leaned forward to pour some dextrose tablets into my palm. "Quick energy, Troy," he said. "It takes a while for you returned missionaries to get back into shape." Chewing two of the tablets, I sat and held my .270 between my legs, the barrel cold against the side of my neck, rubbed the stock with the flat of my hand. Up the trail one of the horses stomped.

A Winchester Model 70 mounted with a 3-9x variable scope, the .270 was a present from my father on my sixteenth birthday. The evening I got it, in the sitting position on my bed, left arm tight in the sling, I aimed at the pictures of bears, lions, and deer on my walls, and, later, out the windows at cars and people passing below on our street, centered the cross hairs. Then I broke the .270 down, oiled each metal part, reassembled it, broke it down again. And I kept filling the magazine with shells, worked the bolt over and over to flip them out on my bed. That night after I showered, I got the .270 out of the case again to hold it against my body. I had a .22 pistol, .22 rifle, .22-250 varminter, two shotguns, but my .270 had always been my favorite gun. I had waited for it, knew that my father

would give me a deer rifle too when I was sixteen, which was the first year I could buy a buck permit. I liked to take my .270 out of our gun cabinet just to hold it and work the action, wipe it clean with an oiled cloth.

I thought of my guns when I saw the filled-in shrapnel and bullet holes in the old stone German buildings that hadn't been destroyed. If the older German sisters talked long enough about the war, they always cried, and I never asked them about the concentration camps, the SS, or the Gestapo. On a street in Darmstadt after I was transferred from Offenbach, I saw a legless, armless blind man sitting on a padded box singing while another man played a guitar, but there was no cup or dish in front of them and they weren't begging. Some of the older Germans said that they were sorry for the young Americans in Vietnam and asked if my companion and I would have to go too. I knew that if I couldn't get a student deferment and go back to B.Y.U. to start my sophomore year, I would be drafted. It was impossible to get into the Utah National Guard. I would kill other men, shoot them in the jungle or running across the rice paddies, their blood turning the brown water near their bodies red. And I knew also by then that the excitement of killing a man must be a little like that of killing a buck.

When we got to the top of the ridge, we sat and watched the band of white light grow over the east mountains, our red hats, sweat shirts, and jackets almost black in the half-light. Excited, my heart pounding hard even though I was rested, I pulled the cold shells from my belt to load the .270, heard around me shells clicking into magazines. "Good luck, son," my father said when he stood up, shook my hand. "I hope you nail a big one first thing." The others came over to shake my hand and tell me how good it was to have me back on the ridge again. Separating, we spread out along the top of the ridge to take the points we had drawn Friday night.

Ten minutes later, cradling the .270, I stood on my ledge in the half-light looking down into the pine-filled basin at the head of Sheep Draw on the north side of the ridge. Trembling a little, my mouth dry, I watched the clearings for movement. The light grew and the first shots came booming along the ridge. Then below me

two does and a little two-point buck stepped out of the pines into a patch of brush. My body tight, blood pounding in my throat, I slowly raised the .270 and centered the cross hairs over the little buck's heart. I fought the desire to ease down into the sitting position, tighten into the sling, squeeze the trigger slowly. I wanted to hear the explosion, feel the .270 kick, see the little two-point hump and drop, feel that satisfaction again. The first season I carried the .270, I had killed a two-point at first light, had been unable to wait for the bigger buck I wanted. Fighting that feeling, I closed my eyes, opened them. Suddenly the three deer tensed, then crossed the clearing and slipped back into the pines as quiet and smooth as gliding birds. Glad I hadn't shot, I lowered the .270.

At 9 o'clock the camp met to drive Porcupine, the first draw on the west end of the south slope, where we always started. Jerry had passed up a small two-point, and Dean missed three shots at a big buck some hunters had pushed up from below. While Doc and Jerry tested the walkie-talkies again, I scoped the draw and the basin. Broken only by ledges and scattered pines, the leafless oak brush and scrub maple were like a smooth low-lying haze. But a dozen bucks could be hiding, waiting. You never knew. Each draw was a surprise. Everything would be quiet, not even a bird moving, then two or three bucks would be running in front of the line, running grey and beautiful, heads up, antlers gleaming in the sun, going for the top and the thick pines on the north slope, and then the shooting would start. It was as if you had waited all year for just that one moment because it was the best time out of the whole year.

I stopped the scope on a patch of scrub maple where I had killed a three-point the season before I left to go on my mission. To the left was the clearing where Jerry had killed the biggest buck ever killed on the ridge, a big eight-point with a forty-inch spread. He had the mounted head in his real estate office. I knew where all of the big bucks had been killed. We cut the legs off the bucks at the knee to load them on the horses, and sometimes I found legs from two and three seasons back. There was always a black stain on the ground where the entrails had lain the year before. In twenty-five years the camp had killed over a hundred and fifty bucks on the ridge.

"Okay," Doc said, "let's get the big ones. There's one down in there for you, Troy, a nice big fourpoint." The clear sky was dark blue, and now the warming sun brought out the dusty smell of brush and dead leaves. Lines of blue ridges and mountains extended to the horizon on every side.

Doc and my father stayed on the rim, and Jerry led the rest of us down into the draw to organize the drive, Bliss riding his horse. We formed the line, each of us a hundred yards apart across the bottom and up both sides, and started slowly back toward the top. Expecting to see a big buck jump up any minute, excited but controlling myself, I walked tense, stopped, checked the openings ahead on both sides, listened for deer running through the brush. Across the draw, Dean and Ken vanished, reappeared, stopped to throw rocks ahead of them, their red hunting clothes bright against the grey leafless brush. Jerry and Bliss were above me where I couldn't see them. I stopped to toe the fresh droppings with my boot, knelt on one knee to look at the fresh tracks in the deer trail I was on. Mouth dry, hands sweaty on the .270, I froze when Ken first jumped seven does and fawns, which I scoped until they vanished over the top, their white rear ends flashing. Shooting echoed from ridge to ridge, some of it coming in sharp bursts like machine-gun fire, and far down the draw four hunters stood together on a knoll. When I was a boy, the shooting from the other ridges always made me jealous.

I had just walked out onto a ledge at the bottom end of the basin topping the draw when Dean yelled, "Buck! Buck! Buck! He's in the bottom!" Dean shot twice, shot again. Warned, my heart pounding in my throat, I half raised the .270. Another rifle started. Then I saw the big buck moving through the high scrub maples, head down, going smooth like a cat, not making the big ten-foot bounding jumps. But when I jammed the .270 into my shoulder, got the cross hairs on him, he was already blundering, crashing into the brush. A round patch of blood widened behind the shoulder on the grey side, and his mouth dripped blood. Lung-shot. Hit again, he came crashing, rolling back down toward the bottom. He got up, shook his head. Hit again, he humped and dropped, lay in a

clearing. The whooping started then, and Dean, Ken following him, jogged down through the brush, hollered for directions twice. They hollered up that he was a fat four-point, cut his throat, then got out their cameras to take colored slides before they cleaned him. Breathing deep, I tried to stop trembling.

"Aren't you coming down, Troy?" Bliss asked me when he came past leading his horse through the brush.

"No, I'll stay here. They don't need me."

"I shot but I think Dean got him, unless you did."

"No, I didn't."

"Too bad, looks like a nice buck. Jerry's going to stay put and watch for anything pushed up from the bottom by the other camps."

I sat down on the ledge, laid the .270 on my hat and ate a Hershey bar, rinsed my teeth and drank from my canteen. Dean, Ken, and Bliss bent over the buck. Watching two hawks circle out over the draw, I picked up a dead branch, broke off pieces and flipped them away.

Before I was sixteen and could shoot a buck, using my own knife I cut the throats of my father's bucks and other bucks I got to first. My father taught me how to clean a buck, cut around the genitals, up through the stomach and ribs, reach up into the chest and grab the severed wind pipe to pull everything out together without getting my hands bloody above the wrists. I always cut the heart away from the blue pile of entrails to hold up and see if it had been hit. Afterward my father poured water on my hands from his canteen, and I wiped them clean with handfuls of dry leaves. Yet even with two or three of us shooting, hit several times, a buck still might not go down. A buck with both front legs shot off would still lunge forward, work his antlers through the low limbs, crawl to get away. Following blood trails, I had found pieces of entrails snagged on the oak brush and splinters of bone lying on the leaves.

The limbless blind man made me think about the fantastic pain I caused by just squeezing the trigger of my .270 to send the hundred-and-fifty-grain slug at three thousand feet per second slamming into a buck. I saw the man once more before President Wunderlich made me a zone leader and transferred me from

Darmstadt to Heidelberg. He rode in a big rucksack on his friend's back, just his head showing, bobbing, as if he saw the passing people and into the store windows. His friend carried the guitar and the padded box. When I ate, dressed, showered, I wondered how he did those things. Lying in bed at night I tried to imagine what it would be like for him to be in bed, and I wanted to know if he was married. I knew then that I couldn't go on hunting and killing when I got home and still expect to feel the full influence of the Holy Ghost in my life, be spiritual, which had to be earned. Breaking off the last few pieces of the dead branch, I flipped them over the ledge. Then I got out my clean handkerchief and wiped off the scope and the .270.

Ken, Dean, and Bliss loaded the buck on the horse, and we hunted the basin to the top of the ridge, where they hung the buck from the low limb of a big pine. In Middle Draw, the last drive we always made before lunch and the draw where I had killed the two-point when I was sixteen, Doc and my father both shot three-points as they came up out of the basin over the top. I didn't see either buck but stood cradling the .270, counted the shots, felt empty, then heard Jerry hollering after he talked to Doc on the walkie-talkie. When we got to the top, we helped drag the bucks over to the trail to hang them up. I broke sticks to prop open the stomachs so the bucks would cool faster. We always hung our bucks in the garage to cure for a week before we had them cut up for the freezer. Skinned, the heads cut off, they hung stiff and white upside down, the blunt front legs sticking out, spots of blood on the cement floor.

"Well, Troy," my father said when we all gathered to eat lunch on the ledge above Doc's draw, "I wish that you had been on the rim instead of me. Those two three-points came sneaking up through the brush ahead of you boys in the line just perfect. It couldn't have been prettier."

"No, I guess not," I said. Ken, Jerry, and Dean had black dry deer blood on their red sweat shirts and blue Levis. You couldn't wash the smell of the blood from your hands unless you had hot soap and water, but you could get the blood out from under your fingernails with the point of a sharp hunting knife.

"Oh, we'll get Troy a nice buck today or next Saturday, don't worry about that," Doc said. Doc and Bliss had taken the bridles off the horses and poured some oats for them.

"Sure," Jerry said, unwrapping a piece of cake.

Eating my sandwich, I looked out over the draw toward the lines of blue ridges out past Blind Canyon. Doc had killed three bucks one opening day in the basin as they ran past him at seventy-five yards; after that everybody in camp called it Doc's Draw. Each line of ridges was a different shade of blue. All the shooting had stopped. I was glad that my father had Doc and Bliss to hunt with. They had worked on the Union Pacific together for thirty years. My father had never been on a mission. He had written me long letters about the duck, pheasant, and deer hunts and sent me the best colored slides he had taken. Every month he mailed me his copies of *Outdoor Life* and *Field and Stream*. When I was a boy and my mother made me turn off my bedroom light, I used a flashlight to reread my favorite hunting stories.

After we ate lunch, the others got their red jackets from the saddlebags to use for pillows, pulled their red hats down over their eyes, and lay back on the ledge to doze in the warm sun. Below me nothing moved in the draw. I picked up white chips of rock and flipped them over the ledge. Although I wouldn't hunt I planned to do a lot of back-packing, learn the names of all the Rocky Mountain flora and fauna, and at night study the stars. When I got married and had sons, I wanted them to see the real beauty, design, and completeness of nature, which God had created. I wanted to be as close to my sons as my father had been to me, but without guns and killing. I wouldn't let them carry .22s or varmint rifles to kill the hawks, rabbits, rock chucks, and squirrels they saw, as my father had let me. I wanted them to understand the pioneers and Indians, but they didn't have to hunt to do that. We could start an arrowhead collection and visit all of the historical spots in the state.

A chipmunk came up over the face of the ledge, found a piece of bread. With the shooting stopped, it was very quiet. I flipped a chip of rock. I had read an article by one of the apostles who had visited the Mormon servicemen in Vietnam. He said that in one

meeting the men came to the tent carrying their rifles. In the prayers they prayed for the Mormon boys killed the week before, prayed for the spirit of the Lord for themselves. After the testimony meeting some of the soldiers told the apostle that they had met him as missionaries in Europe nine months before when he was touring the missions. In the German magazines I saw pictures of American wounded being carried to helicopters on stretchers, medics running alongside with lifted plasma bottles. Wrapped in their ponchos the American dead lay in rows like packages, but the Viet Cong dead were never covered. I flipped another piece of rock and the chipmunk vanished back over the face of the ledge.

Before we dropped down into Doc's Draw, three hunters on horses from another camp came along the ridge trail. They wanted to know where we got the three nice bucks we had hanging up. "They don't organize and they don't know the country, so all they get are spikes and two-points," Doc said after they left. "They might as well stay in camp as come up on this ridge and ride around."

We jumped one bunch of six does and fawns at the lower end of Doc's Draw, and in the basin Ken, who was across from me, shot a big four-point. Hollering, he directed me to him in the thick brush. One antler dug through the dead leaves into the black dirt, the big buck lay on his side, the four points on each side of the antlers white-tipped, the blood bright red on the leaves. Standing there I wondered if I had scared the buck out to Ken. I didn't pull his head downhill to cut his throat. He was still perfect, the eyes not yet glazed. He still seemed alive, still had that beautiful grey live symmetry as if he might suddenly jump and run. Bending, I ran my hand over the hard antlers, along the neck and onto the heavy shoulders. When Ken and Dean broke through the brush, I told them that I would go and show Bliss the best way to bring the horse down.

"Okay," Ken said. He leaned his rifle against a rock and got out his camera.

"Looks like you really busted a nice one, Ken," Dean said.

"Good work."

"Finally."

Climbing up through the brush, I heard them talking. I had actually prayed for a big four-point like Ken's the first morning I had carried the new .270. My father beside me on the ledge overlooking the basin at the top of middle draw, I gripped the Winchester, whispered the prayer to myself, and I would have knelt down too if I had thought that it would do any good. But when in the first light I saw the little two-point standing in the patch of sagebrush with a doe, I moved into the sitting position, tightened into the sling, and killed him with a perfect heart shot, started then to run. When my father got down to me and the little buck, he put his rifle down and hugged me. I cleaned the buck, holding up his shattered heart in my hand to look for pieces of the slug. I had killed a lot of pheasants, ducks, geese, and rabbits before I was sixteen, but I had never felt like that. My father nailed the two-point's antlers over the garage door next to the biggest spread of antlers he had ever taken.

At 2 o'clock we crossed from the south slope of the ridge to the north to hunt the smaller steeper draws full of thick pines. It was cooler there than on the south slope. We jumped bucks, but they were hard to hit running through the pines, and they all got away over the top past Doc and my father. Because the bucks liked to hide in the pines, there was a lot of sign on the deer trails. I saw a beautiful little spike but didn't even raise the .270 to put the scope on him, just watched him until he moved. It made me happy just to watch him. Other years I had found blood trails in the pines from the deer wounded lower on the ridge that sneaked up in the thick cover to die. The second year the scattered bones were white, with hair left only on the legs and skull.

In the next basin, ahead of the others, I sat down against a pine. I cut a Baby Ruth bar in sections with my knife, drank from my canteen, rinsed my teeth, the air cool against my face and throat. Taking off my heavy cartridge belt, I laid it across my knees, began to line the shells up in the loops so that they were all exactly even. I pulled one out and fingered it. The hundred-and-fifty-grain slug with the lead tip and core was built to explode on contact with bone or heavy muscle. In junior high school every fall, I took some of my father's shells with me to class so that I could put my hand in my

pocket and feel them. I took my hunting knife one day, but my home-room teacher picked it up and kept it in her desk until school was out in the afternoon. After my father gave me the .270 for my birthday, I loaded my empty brass on his reloading outfit. At night I poured three or four boxes of shells onto my bed just to run my fingers through them. Alone, I dressed in my red hat and shirt, wore my knife and full cartridge belt, cradled the .270 in my left arm to look at myself in the mirror.

Below me in the pines a small bird lit on a dead branch. Everything was in shadow. The German forests seemed always to be in shadow, as if the season were always winter but without snow. The .270 shell I had taken out of the belt was heavy in my palm. One Saturday afternoon a week before President Wunderlich called me to Frankfurt as his assistant, my companion and I rode our bicycles out into the woods near Heidelberg to an area where a German brother said there had been fighting. We walked through the trees until we came to the top of a hill dotted with shallow pits, which I knew must be old shell holes. Some of the pines looked as if they had been hit by lightning a long time ago. Scratching with a stick, my companion found an American hand-grenade pin and three empty rifle shells so corroded that he had to scrape them on a rock to tell if they were American or German. He offered me one of the shells, but I told him no. When we got back to our room, he put his find in a little box to save and take home. Placing the .270 shell back in the belt loop, I took out my handkerchief and wiped off the scope and the rifle.

At 4 o'clock Jerry organized the drive for West Draw. It was the last drive before we went down the ridge to break camp and start the long trip out of Blind Canyon and back to Provo. The shooting from the other ridges had stopped again. The lines of ridges were darker blue now, some of the ledges white like patches of early snow. The Ute Indians buried their dead high in the canyons in the ledges, but I had never found one of the rock-piled graves. I had always wondered if the Indians had hunted the high ridges too or whether they found enough game lower down. As we stood together at the top of the draw, in the afternoon light the hats and

sweat shirts seemed darker red. I was glad it was the last drive and we were going home.

Because Jerry wanted to take me out of the line and put me on a point above an opening in the pines called the bowl, Doc held out his walkie-talkie to me. The bowl was the best spot in the basin at the head of West Draw. "No," I said, "I'll go down in the pines and help make the drive. You take the bowl, Bliss. You haven't filled your permit yet."

"Now, Troy," Doc said, "you've hunted hard in that line all day without any luck, and this is your last chance until next Saturday, unless you and your dad get out during the week for a little afternoon hunting. We'd all like to see you get a nice buck."

"No. I don't want to do that."

"Go ahead, Troy," Jerry said. "We all got nice bucks the last two seasons. We're not sweating it."

"Oh no."

"Go on, son," my father said, and Doc put the walkie-talkie into my hand.

"Sure," Jerry said, gripping my shoulder.

Ten minutes later I climbed up to the ledge to the left and nearly to the top of the bowl and sat down. The oak brush was all knee high, stunted, and fallen leaves covered the rocks and bare spots. Because of the timber, none of the others could see me, so I wouldn't even have to shoot if a buck came up through the bowl. I had never killed a buck in West Draw. Sitting there, cradling the .270, I thought about Sunday morning and meeting everybody in church after two years away. I was anxious to tell about all the things that I had learned while I was in Germany on my mission, tell of my experiences, and I wanted to bear my testimony of the truthfulness of the gospel of Christ. I breathed in the cool air full of the smell of pines.

"You ready, Troy?"

I raised the walkie-talkie. "Yes."

"Keep your eyes open. There's an awful lot of tracks and droppings down here on these trails."

Picking up a handful of the wind-blown oak leaves caught in a

crack in the ledge, I let them sift through my fingers. Perhaps my father and I could find something else we liked to do together. One of the reasons I wanted to get my doctorate in sociology and teach at B.Y.U. was so that I could live in Provo and raise my family there after I got married. Because my father had given me my .270 for my sixteenth birthday, I would always keep it, but I would get rid of my other guns and my eight-year collection of *Field and Stream* and *Outdoor Life*. I didn't want my sons to get started on them.

"Keep your eyes open, Troy. Something moving out ahead."

I reached down and clicked off the walkie-talkie. Nobody shot. Nothing moved. I waited. Then right at the bottom edge of the bowl, a buck stepped out of the pines. Chest tightening, I slowly lifted the .270 to bring the scope to my eye. A nice three-point. Another buck stepped out, another three-point, moved up to the first. Heart slamming, I scoped them both, when two more moved out of the pines at the same place. They were both four-points, the last one a beautiful big buck with a wide heavy set of antlers.

Bent forward, breathing deep, the blood beginning to pound in my ears, I held the scope to my eye. They were beautiful. I just wanted to watch them, prayed nobody would make it to the edge of the pines in time for a shot. The bucks stopped to look back, started moving again, the big buck leading now. Slipping my arm into the sling, I got into the sitting position to steady my scope. The bucks were nervous but still walking. Beautiful. Biting my lower lip, I shifted the cross hairs back up to the big buck. The antlers were perfectly matched on each side. My pounding blood sounded like rushing water in my ears, louder and louder. Beautiful. I closed my eyes against the feeling, gripped harder, breathless.

The .270 slammed my shoulder, the explosion part of my feeling. Heart-shot, the big buck humped and went down. The other bucks ran now in high leaping bounds, instinct driving them toward the top and me. I shot over the leader, adjusted, got him through the back at seventy-five yards, and he went smashing down. I shot at the first three-point as he came level with me, missed twice. Kneeling, I crammed in more shells, cursed, slammed the bolt home, held the cross hairs on him, saw him come rolling back down the slope. Alone, the last buck was nearly to the top. I shot, missed, stood up, spun him around with a hit in the front leg, got him just as he topped the skyline. He came crashing end-over-end back down the steep slope into the bowl. I found the raised head of the back-shot buck in the scope, shot, and everything was quiet.

"Oh no, no, no," I said, "oh no." Grabbing the short oak brush with my free hand when I slipped, I angled across to the last buck. "No," I said, "no." I laid the .270 down to pull the buck around so that his head was down-hill, then cut his throat. I had to shoot the second buck again to kill him. Whooping and yelling, somebody was climbing toward me up through the brush. "Oh no," I said. I cut the big four-point's throat last, my knife and hands red with blood, his antlers thick at the base where I grabbed them with my sticky hands. "No, no." Still trembling, I knelt down by the big buck's head. His pooled blood started to trickle down through the oak leaves. "Oh, Jesus, Jesus," I whispered.