

Elk Man

Chandler Cook caught a flash of movement out of the corner of his eye, something in the doorway—a reflection. The shadow of a figure? He had only the briefest glimpse. A fragment, nothing more. When his eyes lifted from the computer screen—there was nothing, not even a residual image. Those momentary intrusions had been happening all his life. His new wife said they were echoes from his other lives. He didn't give that idea much credence.

You're getting old, he said to himself, bending back to the tax return he was finalizing. He didn't believe it—not really. Wouldn't believe it. Thirty-six wasn't that old. At twenty, he couldn't begin to picture middle age. At twenty, all he'd wanted was to survive a year in the war—to see the next sunrise. He'd loved being with his squad. He could've died there, but he didn't. Since then, the clarity he'd found in war had softened around the edges.

After graduate school, he'd developed an affection for the way the numbers fell neatly into place on a spreadsheet, the order, the columns of figures—a different sort of clarity. A glance told him what sort of person he was working with. His clients were mostly friends or had at least grown into friends. With Cook they had no need to fear the IRS.

Two sides of his office were walled with glass. He could see sky, trees, shrubs and the movements of birds all reflected in the screen of his computer. Every so often, he'd swivel around in his chair and glance at the tiny patch of nature that surrounded him. In the distance were hills capped in cloud. It would be snowing in the high country. Spring was still a long way off.

A red light on the console winked. "Your three o'clock just cancelled. Weather coming in." Yvette's voice was devoid of inflection. She'd been working with him for nearly two years.

In that time she'd rarely evinced emotion at work. Unlike Cook, she took no comfort from numbers. When she did smile, she kept her lips sealed to hide the gap between her front teeth.

Cook's fingers maintained their even tempo on the keys. He was good at what he did. Everyone who mattered in town knew him. He was liked. Tapping "Enter" twice, the rows of numbers coalesced into a kind of ordered perfection. A few seconds later, a sequence of forms began to print in the outer office. Saving everything to a flash drive, he let the screen go blank.

In the outer office, sounds of Yvette rustling with folders and files brought him a vague sense of contentment. He turned and stared out at the far horizon. Darker clouds had now settled over the corrugations of foothills. Somewhere to the north, among vast tracts of forest were herds of elk—standing in the trees like sentinels waiting for the storm.

He recalled the deep blue depths of their pupils when he watched them from the window of his cabin high in the canyon—observing them as they grazed over his carefully tended landscaping. Seven females and a lone male ate their way through his weeping cherries, nipped the buds from lilacs and forsythia. They trimmed the lower branches of the crabapples with precision. Winter coming, they needed whatever nourishment they could find. Moving solemnly, their giant torsos propped on delicate, stilt-like legs, they had picked their way through the underbrush. Watching them, he'd felt some affinity he couldn't name.

Yvette came over the speaker, "Sylvia is on one."

"Did she say what she wanted?" He knew the answer; Sylvia never said. His first wife refused to speak to Yvette and hated the young female gatekeeper that now stood between her and Cook.

The red light winked.

Finally, he picked up. "Sylvia—"

“I stopped in yesterday. Your girl said that you were at a client’s office. I think she was lying.”

“I was out,” he said. “Yvette told me you’d dropped by.”

“You didn’t call me.”

“No.” Movement drew his eyes away from the window. Yvette stood in the doorway. Wearing her duffle coat, a canvas bag slung over one shoulder. She looked out at him from under a fringe of blue-black bangs. Hearing Silvia’s voice, she raised her eyes to the heavens, then she was gone.

“I’m wondering how often that twit with the big eyes sucks your cock.”

“What is it you want, Sylvia?” He felt his stomach go sour. He flipped off the lights in his office and watched the afternoon turn into dusk. Water dripped from the eaves—trunks of the trees black as stone.

Sylvia’s voice was tinged with acid. “This isn’t working. I need more money if I’m going to be forced to live in this godforsaken town while you fuck your teenaged secretary.”

He understood she’d been drinking, could hear the hatred in her voice. At one time, Sylvia had disguised herself as a good person—all through the separation she’d maintained some self-control. She had boyfriends. She had the house in town they’d bought when they were first married. He hadn’t begrudged her any of it.

Outside, a shape darted past his window. His palms began to sweat. He’d never been guilty of anything other than a desire to escape. Fight or flight—he’d picked flight. There was nothing honorable about it. He’d chosen survival, that was all.

“I’ve got to go,” he sighed into the phone. “The divorce was final nearly three years ago. Please let it go.”

“No, you insufferable prick, I won’t let it go,” she hissed. “Goddamn you! I hope your dick rots off.”

He rang off.

The office had emptied. He heard a few muffled voices from the street. Trying to let go of the tightness in his chest, he remained at his desk until his pulse returned to normal. He tried to summon one single un-horrible memory of Sylvia. He could not.

From the center drawer, he withdrew a small blue envelope. Cheap paper—nothing written on the outside. Inside was a note card with his name scrawled on the front in a cramped, childish hand. Opening the card, he read the inscription, *“You’re so hot!”* There was no signature, only the imprint of a kiss in pale, pink lipstick.

That silly note had changed everything.

Slipping into his parka, he locked up. A few lights were still lit in his building. Yvette’s Rover was gone from its spot. Sounds of traffic came from the main road. Headlights illuminated a mist that hung in the air. It would snow later on.

Cook followed a slow chain of traffic through the center of town, found a parking spot behind the Alex Johnson Hotel, and entered O’Neill’s through the back way. It was early enough to find a seat by the front windows. When Ginny came over, he ordered a glass of red wine and settled in.

A few minutes later, she set a glass in front of him. “Better drink up. You’re looking entirely ragged out.”

“Tax time. Death and taxes,” he smiled up at her. “Right about now, I’d welcome a quick and merciful demise.”

“You always say that this time of year,” she said, waving to someone in a group of college kids that banged through the front door.

He watched the newcomers for a while then he turned his attention to the heaps of last week’s snow piled at the edge of the sidewalk. Water coursed in the gutters. The streetlights winked on. He sipped at his wine, trying not to think.

Ginny brought him a second glass without him having to ask. The place started to fill up. Voices bellowed, rain-slick coats hung on the backs of chairs. Cook stared at the tabletop in front of him. He felt mercifully invisible.

His mind wandered back to the army. Days spent dodging among pine trees bowed with white, boulders the size of houses, a knife-edge ridge. Feet skidding—eighty pounds on his back. Placing one frozen boot in front of the other. Two thousand feet down to the valley floor. Snow, thick and silent. He remembered the eyes of his comrades. Another day. Another week.

Two years before the army, the day of his sixteenth birthday, saw him lying flat on his belly on a rocky ridge west of Custer. He watched for movement through the scope on his Marlin 338. Frigid wind blew under his blaze-orange jacket, under his down vest, burrowing into the meat of his back. He waited with his father—waited for hours. Then he saw them. A small herd of elk crested the ridge opposite where he lay shivering. First came nine cows, huge in their own right, then a giant bull, massive antlers brushing the sky.

Hardly breathing, he let the dark form enter the scope’s field of vision—waited until the crosshairs centered just behind the shoulder. Exhaling he started the slow squeeze of the trigger.

“Shoot, Chandler,” his father whispered in his ear. “Now!”

Without warning, a flash of something white cut into his peripheral vision. He pulled the shot wide. With the sound of his gun the elk were gone.

“Dammit! Chandler,” his father swore. “That was your elk, son. Your elk.”

“Sorry.”

“Never mind,” his father cuffed him on the shoulder. “You’ll get it done one day.”

“Yes sir,” he’d said.

Cook never hunted again. Word got around. Soon enough, he was known sarcastically as *Elk Man* among his school chums. *Shoot, Elk Man, shoot!* The cheerleaders yelled when he played ball. It became his rueful legend. He shrugged, tried to laugh it off.

A shout came from the tables behind him. A crash of shattered glassware. Someone whistled, ironic clapping. Ginny turned the music up.

Through the window, cars moved in the dusk. An image popped into his head. A distant memory—Ginny wearing marled wool socks to bed in their drafty apartment. He pictured the coarse-knit material, her bare legs, T-shirt hiking up—the feel of her skin as she slid in beside him under the heavy duvet. He recalled her scent from those days.

No. That was wrong. That had happened in Wisconsin, far too long ago. The girl couldn’t have been Ginny. Someone else. He couldn’t summon a face. It was before Sylvia. It must have happened in graduate school, after the Army.

He *was* old.

“Jesus fuck, Cook.” Ginny’s voice broke into his thoughts. “What are you doing? You’re not stoned, are you?”

He looked up at her, hadn’t realized she was standing beside him. “What?”

“You do know that you were talking to yourself just now, right?” Her forehead wrinkled into a motherly frown. In her hands was a tray of empty glasses.

“Was I?” He looked around, suddenly aware of his surroundings. She set the tray down and slipped into the chair opposite. “Having a senior moment, were we?” She smiled—perfect teeth—a smudge of lipstick on one incisor.

He flipped her the bird and gave her a fatalistic shrug. “Long day. Same old shit all the way to April 15th.”

“Yeah,” she said. “So how’s ‘Vette doing these days? She doesn’t come in here much. Not like she used to.”

“Doing good. Studying for the state exam,” he said. “I should probably get home.”

Her foot nudged him under the table. “Got you on a short leash?”

“I’d better get moving.”

She said nothing, looked at him with gray eyes. Tiny wrinkles creased the corners where none had been before. “I always wanted to be her, you know.” She let out a quick breath, took a sip from his glass. “She had everything then.”

After a short pause, he said, “Maybe it just looked that way.”

“Remember Senior year, when you visited our math class? Taught us about taxes and everything?” She cocked a brow at him.

“I remember.” He pictured that classroom visit—his lips moving, words coming out automatically—thirty pairs of bored, teenaged eyes aimed at him. Yvette, with her dark bangs, her otherworldly gaze sitting in the front row—Lakota girls never did that, never sat near the front. Ginny in her yellow dress and long hair one row behind. He’d spoken for an hour, heard nothing of what he’d said—only the rush of blood in his ears. Yvette admitted later that the collision of his gaze had left her a little loopy for the rest of the day.

He hadn’t jumped the rails exactly.

As if reading his thoughts, Ginny said, “You do know, we swapped seats that day—me and ‘Vette? She must have told you.”

“Yes,” he lied. “It feels a long time ago, doesn’t it?”

“Four years—not so long.” She made a move to pick up her tray but remained seated. “She knew what she wanted—had this weird magic—not like the rest of us. She and I were planning to move to Denver after graduation, get a place together. Start life.”

He glanced at the window, her reflection in the glass—profile like a Greek statue. When he turned to face her she blinked, opened her eyes wide. She appeared to be thinking about something far away. He wanted to make her see him—the real him—but he couldn’t do it.

“She’s working hard to pass her boards this time.” He reached for his wallet.

“I know she’ll get it done this year. ‘Vette’s always been clever.” She stood up to leave. The noise around them was deafening. “I’ll bet it’s already snowing like a bitch up in the hills.”

“I better head up-slope while I can,” Cook said.

She gave him a look. “You could stay here in town.”

“Better I go,” he said.

“Suit yourself.” She picked up his glass and slowly, ceremoniously poured the last swallow of wine onto the tabletop. “For the gods.” she said, standing, hoisting the tray. A second later, she turned her back, heading off toward the kitchen.

He laid two twenties on the table, pressing them smooth—flattening out the creases until the bills were half-soaked with red wine. *For the gods.*

South Canyon Road snaked up through the valley toward the town of Nemo. The blacktop was glazed with snow and rills of run-off that were quickly turning to black ice. As the grade increased, he slowed to a crawl. There was no traffic. His hands clutched at the wheel, eyes

straining to peer through the first sheets of falling snow. The defroster blasted hot air into his face. Now and then all four tires broke traction, he let off the accelerator, holding his breath, feeling the truck drift until it found its grip again.

When the turn-off to Estes Creek appeared, he breathed a sigh of relief. Only a couple of hairpins left between him and the cabin. Approaching the steepest turn, a right-hander whose outside edge jutted out over a vertiginous drop, he gunned the engine just a bit, wanting to enter the hairpin with some momentum. There were no tracks to follow. Yvette's Rover must have made it up okay. Now there was nothing but hummocks of drifted snow giving way to patches of glare-ice scoured by the wind.

At the apex of the turn, his tires began a long low whine—spinning futilely on the slick surface. “Fuck,” he said, as the forward motion of the truck slowed then ceased. His tires were still spinning, but now he was gliding backward—toward the drop-off behind him. He let off the accelerator and touched the brakes. His rearward slide slowed for a second, then continued in a juddering descent as a few patches of bare pavement alternated with smooth sheets of ice.

Cook's breath caught. His eyes fixed on the rearview mirror. The truck slid gently down toward the edge. It was a long way to the bottom. He jammed the steering wheel hard to the right, and let his foot off the brake, hoping to catch the inside wall. Nothing. The truck continued its glissade. With a flash of conviction, he snatched at the door latch. Frigid air whipped into the cab. For a moment the snow blinded him. He caught a glimpse of himself floating down in the emptiness. Unfastening his seatbelt, he bailed into the roiling white. The door slammed the side of his head as he fell from the cab onto the roadway.

Stars swam before his eyes. His left shoulder hit hard on the ice. When he landed, he felt something inside give way. The dark shape truck slid past him. A front tire grazed his leg. His body spun hard into a rock the size of a suitcase.

Cook lay there for a second, waiting for the sound of the truck tumbling down the precipice. The wind whined in his ears. His head hurt. His shoulder hurt. He lay still. Slowly, he opened his eyes. Ten feet below him the truck rested at the edge of the escarpment, wheels spinning lazily on the ice, engine droning. Its rear fender butted hard up against a boulder. He let out a long, rasping sigh.

On all fours, he slithered down to where the truck was hooked on the rock. Tentatively, he levered himself up on the doorsill, turned the ignition off. Tires ceased their rotation. Snow stung his skin, clumped in his hair. "Goddamn you!" He balled his fist and slammed the quarter-panel. Pain shot up his right arm. He started to laugh.

Pulling himself up by the doorframe, sucking mouthfuls of frigid air that made his lungs ache, he inched his way toward the rear of the truck. In the bed he kept a two-gallon can of ash from the fireplace. Cinders and some rock salt were mixed into the concoction for grip. He tried to remember how much was left. He needed fifteen or twenty feet worth of traction to get to more level ground. The silver tin was there, lashed tight in the corner of the pick-up bed with bungee cords. Cook wrestled it out, popped the lid. His hands were shaking. There wasn't much inside. Maybe enough. Dragging it out, he pulled himself along the side of the truck with one hand. When he reached the front fender, he tossed a handful into the teeth of the storm. It flew back, into his face, coating him with gray, salty grit.

All he could do was laugh hysterically, doubled over by his own futility. The wind whipped his eyes full of tears. Kneeling down beside the front tire, he patted a handful of ash

onto the ice, inched forward on hands and knees, and rubbed more ash onto the ice-covered roadway. He worked his way up the steep slope. The knees of his jeans were soaked, his joints throbbed, gloves coated in grime. By the time he reached a patch of snow, the canister was nearly empty.

Stowing the can in back, he started the truck and let it idle for a minute or two. Closing his eyes, he rested his forehead against the steering wheel. The defroster whined, blowing hot air. He rolled the window down. Gingerly, shifting the truck into gear, he eased the four wheels into motion. There came a momentary slippage that made his stomach lurch, but the ash coating did its job, and soon he was climbing upward at five miles per hour.

Upon reaching the deeper, drifted snow, he breathed a long sigh of relief. The big, knobby tires bit in and the truck settled into a slow, purposeful slog in the direction of the cabin. When the incline leveled out for a stretch, he was able to take his eyes off the road. Dark shapes moved like ghosts among the pines. As he rounded the last curve, his headlights caught a giant bull elk standing on the verge. Dark at the thick base, bone white at the tips its enormous antlers spread like the branches of a great tree, higher than the truck's cab. Snow dusted its back. The animal stood motionless, watching him pass. Its eyes were a deep blue—a blue without bottom. Then it disappeared into the darkness. Cook cranked the window closed.

The rest of the way was on a gentler slope. Still, he knew he'd never make it up the drive. Not now, with ten inches of new snow—soon they would be measuring in feet. Years before, just after the cabin was built, he had carved out a small parking pad on the road at the mouth of the driveway, three hundred feet below the cabin. He planned to nose the truck into that spot and pray the plows would miss it when they steamed down the pass in the morning.

Before the final bend of the road, he spotted the lights of the cabin high above. The entire place was lit—glowing like a beacon through the storm. He rounded the last curve in low gear, wheels struggling for traction. By memory and some guesswork, he found the narrow space he'd chiseled into the hillside and eased into it at a clumsy angle.

Cook sat for a while, feeling shaken. The truck's engine pinged. Snow melted on the windshield until it grew cold enough to ice up. He pulled up the hood of his parka and opened the door. The wind had let up, but the cold was brutal on his face. Zipping the parka to his chin he climbed out into the silence.

Side-stepping up the steep gradient of the drive, he wished only to be warm again, maybe some coffee. Parked at the top of the drive, the Rover was covered with snow. He could barely make out its boxy shape docked close by the cabin's front porch.

Trudging up the steps, he heard muffled music from the interior. Before reaching for the doorknob, he brushed a frosting of snow from the windowpane. Inside, Yvette, dressed in a T-shirt, leggings, a pair of gray wool socks on her feet, was dancing around the living room. He watched as she lip-synced the words to an old K.D. Lang ballad—a song recorded long before she was born. Swaying atop the coffee table, she sang the lyrics into the mouth of a beer bottle.

Her thick black braid flared out when she spun. Opening the door, he stepped into a tropical heat. A fire snapped and spit in the stone fireplace. Yvette shot him a huge grin. Hopping down from the coffee table, she swayed over to where he was standing.

“Baby, you're home,” she said, helping to unzip his coat. “I was worried you might desert me and stay in town tonight.”

“Neither rain nor snow—”

“Nor gray-eyed beauties will keep you from your wife,” she finished his line. “Ginny called an hour ago, and said she was sending you my way. I lit a fire for you.” She swung her arm over the interior of the room.

He smiled at her upturned face.

“You’re kind of sooty,” she said.

Cook glanced at his reflection in the tall Moroccan mirror that dominated the entryway. His face was gray, coated with ash. He looked like a tramp from a 1920s movie.

She reached up and gently drew four vertical lines down his cheek with her fingernails. “Now you’re one of us,” she said, stepping back and smiling.

He shrugged off his coat and hung it on a peg. Before he washed his face and hands at the kitchen tap, he looked hard at his reflection in the mirror. Sunken-eyed, the whites stark against his gray skin, four vertical marks like scars on one cheek—he wondered who it was that returned his stare. Finally, he scrubbed away the ash and dried off with a dishtowel. He turned around just in time to see Yvette jump up on the couch and began to dance. Music rattled his eardrums, the scent of burning pine, and the faint, residual molecules of her scent filled him.

“I saw that herd of elk at the horseshoe turn,” he said. “The big bull was with them. I think he saw me.”

“She grinned and said, ‘I sent them to guide you home.’”

“It worked.”

“Evidently.” She laughed, jumped down, and came over to where he stood. “Wine?” She laced her arms around his waist, planting the point of her chin squarely in his chest.

“I’d kill for a drink,” he said not letting go. Like a child at a dance, she placed her feet on top of his boots and pulled his mouth down to hers. Entwined, they stilt-walked down three steps

to the living room and paused before the picture window set into the cabin's north wall. Yellow light from the interior lit up a universe of falling flakes.

Finally, pushing away, she filled a balloon goblet with his favorite, and rejoined him in front of the window. "You're back home." Yvette's eyes were black liquid.

She was without limits. He would never know anything true about her. Draping an arm around her shoulders, he saw their reflection in the glass. "I'm sure he saw me this time." The headlights of a vehicle appeared on the road below.

"Of course he did," Yvette said.

Cook examined his image in the glass. Light from the fireplace flickered across his ordinary features. A movement at the edge of the forest caught his eye.