

On Falling in Love in Elk Country

People think it's so romantic when I say Joe and I met at the library. I thought so, too, until I discovered he was just looking up the latest harvest numbers posted online by Wyoming Game and Fish.

So here I am at Windy Mountin' Taxidermy again. This time, instead of delivering lunch, I am learning to sew one of Joe's elk capes onto a foam mannequin, and I can tell that my clumsiness is testing his patience. But we forge ahead. He teaches me to prep the surface by scoring the hard, shiny foam with a metal brush. This creates texture that will help the glue adhere to the foam and the animal's cape. I use my bare hands to spread the goo because Joe's latex gloves are way too big. I don't like the stickiness between my fingers or the chemical smell that comes from the 5-gallon bucket of adhesive, but I'm determined not to complain. Learning how Joe creates an elk shoulder mount will help me understand him better, and that's important to me. Besides, nothing about creating a mount is particularly glamorous,

at least not until it is closer to being finished. That's when this elk will come back to life and be beautiful again.

I rotate the form on its stand, tipping the head down toward the floor so I can reach the creases next to the muscles in the neck. After 15 minutes I am finished and feeling rather impressed with my work. "Ta da," I say. As I turn around, I bump into the form and a streak of glue gloms onto my jeans. "That's not coming off," I mutter.

Joe just smiles and shakes his head as another gob of adhesive falls to the floor.

I grumble an apology and scrape up the glue with a wooden tongue depressor he uses to mix Bondo when he sculpts ears. I am no longer surprised by all the unusual tools of the trade. Before I met Joe, I had never considered what might be included in a taxidermist's tool kit. But after

seven years, I've seen him use all sorts of equipment to get the effect he's looking for. He has an array of air brushes, grinders, routers, saws, toothpicks, Q-tips, knives and sharpeners, and a special baseball bat for shaping clay. He even uses the drumstick I caught at the Doobie Brothers concert in Jackson when we first started dating—the tip of the stick is perfect for helping flip the ears inside out without puncturing the leather.

Returning to the task at hand, I pivot the elk back into an upright position and Joe carries over the tanned hide. The cape is heavy with dampness, but we manage to drape it over the mannequin without letting any glue come into contact with the hair. It's an awkward process, and I have no clue which part of the cape goes where, but Joe's done this a thousand times before and

expertly pulls the hide into place. Then he starts adjusting the cape by pulling together the seams, pinning, placing the ears up onto the head, pinning, tucking the elk's armpits into their creases, pinning, adjusting the eye sockets, pinning. He works quickly, and before long I can see that this creature has a future. It will be an elk once again.

"Taxidermy is all about arranging the skin. Just think of it like we're taxiing the hide into place," he says with a mouth full of pins.

He hands me a needle and thread and says, "Get to work."

He is amused, I can tell by the glimmer in his eye. I huff and take the needle in my hand. I know how to sew, I think to myself, after all I've hemmed my jeans, patched torn shirts, stitched the buckles back into my busted up saddle bags. But I have no earthly idea how to go about sewing together an elk cape.

I landed in the center of the wolves' kill, my entire body caught by the elk's gaping rib cage, which protected me from loose falling rocks and the 500-pound snow machine that rolled down the hill behind me, pinning me inside the beast.

He grins when he sees my hesitation and takes the needle from me. "Here, you have to start at the base of the horns." He threads the needle with heavy-duty brown twine and begins deftly stitching the cape back together. "The key is to keep the hair out of the seam and to make sure you are matching up the edges of the hide evenly," he says. "You can use a whip stitch when you get farther along past the shoulders, but up here next to the horns a baseball stitch works best."

He places the needle back in my hand, and it only takes one

stitch for me to realize that this is easier said than done. The elk hide is tough and thick, not like sewing fabric at all. And keeping the hair out of the seam seems impossible to me. He reminds me to pull the stitches tight. But apparently even this is a delicate balance, because when I look back I see the line I've been sewing has puckered up like Frankenstein's Monster where I've pulled too tight. I'm frustrated and ready to give up.

I take a deep breath and start over. The process is tedious. By the time I have sewn down to the shoulder blades, my fingers are tender from the pressure required to force the needle through the thick hide, and I still have at least two feet of stitching along the back to go. *The things we do for love*, I think to myself. Then I laugh out loud because I've just had a flashback from our first date and my first visit to the taxidermy shop. Seven years ago, I never

would have pictured myself standing here stitching up an elk mount.

Falling in love with a taxidermist-hunting guide-cowboy wasn't on my list of intentions when I made the journey west. I had just graduated from one of the most liberal colleges on the East Coast and was on a soul-searching mission, hoping to find direction in the wide-open spaces of Wyoming. I took a job as the winter caretaker on an 8,000-acre ranch in Dubois, where I was in charge of a small flock of sheep, a herd of horses, a few barn cats and an aged, incontinent, partly senile sheep

dog named Scottie who liked to chase his own tail and bark at dark corners.

I also took on a part-time job at a bakery to make some extra money. The rest of the time I spent painting, journaling, reading and hiking around the ranch. I wasn't opposed to dating—after all, winters in Wyoming are notoriously harsh, dark and long—but it wasn't a high priority for me at the time, and falling in love certainly wasn't part of the plan. Until I met Joe.

On a cold October day, I was spending the afternoon in town when an incredible storm whipped up on my walk to the library. Sleet, snow and rain poured from the sky, and by the time I made it to the front entrance my hair was plastered to my frozen cheeks. I sat down at a computer and didn't even notice the person in front of me until our eyes met over the computer screens. People think it's so romantic when I say Joe and I met at the library. The English major in me thought so, too, until I found out he had little interest in researching books and was busy looking up the latest harvest numbers posted online by Wyoming Game and Fish.

The storm was still in full swing when I left the library and Joe offered me a ride back to the coffee shop. Later that night he called the ranch and asked me out on a date. It was a bold move, and I said, "Yes." That weekend, he took me to lunch at a little roadside lodge about 20 miles from town. I can't even remember what we talked about because less than a half hour after we ate I came down with an embarrassing case of food poisoning.

I was grossly sick and trying to hide it on our way back into town. As we got close to my truck, which was parked right next to the public restrooms, Joe asked if I would like to see where he worked. What I really wanted was a bathroom, but this was our first

date. How could I say no?

It was also my first venture into a taxidermy shop and it was the peak of hunting season. Not exactly the best place to be with my stomach churning. The dumpster outside shimmered in the heat of Indian summer and I could smell it from yards away. Streaks of blood had dried on the floor in the receiving room from an elk brought in that morning, a salted-down hide lay spread eagle on the floor, and all I could focus on were the beady little eyes of a ferret sitting on the mantle above the toilet.

After that, I developed an aversion to Joe and his shop in the same way one might cringe from a bottle of Patron after a long night out on the town. Months passed before we would see each other again.

But winter in little Dubois can be a lonely existence. The town rolls up its sidewalks at 8 p.m., leaving a handful of locals to gather in the Rustic Pine Tavern, where Joe and I eventually bumped into each other again. I was on my way to the dance floor when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

"Hey," he said, "I thought you had disappeared." I scrambled for a lame excuse for not returning his calls, but before I could get the words out he asked me to go snowmobiling with him. He was persistent, even after all these months, and I couldn't help but say yes again. Little did I know that a second date with this taxidermist would lead me to my first up-close and personal encounter with a bull elk.

It was Super Bowl Sunday XLI and I had no idea what I was getting into when Joe picked me up early in the morning to go snowmobiling. He had borrowed a Polaris 600 from his friend, and we drove north up Horse Creek Road to meet with the rest of our small group.

When we arrived, Joe told me to take the machine out for a spin

around the parking lot and asked if I would like some pointers. "I've got it," I said, as I hopped on with a casual arrogance. I mean all I had to do was sit on the machine and press on the gas. How hard could that be, right?

We took off from the trailhead in a noisy cloud of fumes, like race horses sprinting out of the gates. We headed up the trail

together, me riding toward the back of the line so the machines in front could pack down the trail, which in theory makes it easier for a beginner. We were headed toward Brent Creek, when one of the guys stopped near a rock-strewn hillside beneath a snow-covered cliff. He had discovered the carcass of a bull elk that had been attacked by wolves

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sometime before dawn. The animal was sprawled on its side beneath the cliff, and under its body the snow was red with blood and pocked by wolf tracks. The bull's horns were sunk deep into the powder, and its rib cage was dark and gaping where wolves had devoured its soft innards. With the exception of a large wound in its neck and its gaping body cavity, the elk was fully intact.

After examining the elk, we took off again. As I crested the hill, my unwillingness to ask for riding instructions caught up to me. It all happened so fast. My machine began to tilt, and before I could think to lean the other way, I tumbled from the snowmobile and the landscape became a blur as I rolled down the rock-strewn cliff toward the elk carcass. I landed in the center of the wolves' kill, my entire body caught by the elk's gaping rib cage, which protected me from loose falling rocks and the 500-pound snow machine that rolled down the hill behind me, pinning me inside the beast. My helmet shielded me from a blow to the head and from the partially savaged innards the wolves had left behind. My long braids were not so lucky.

I lay inside that carcass for what seemed like an eternity, waiting for someone to come pull the machine off the carcass. And I have to admit that I cried. *What was I thinking going on a second date with this guy?* I muttered to myself.

But a few minutes later, when Joe pulled the snowmobile off and helped me out, I was never so happy to see anyone. He gave me a hug and asked if I was okay. When I nodded, he proceeded to dust me off and get the gook out of my hair. Then he patted me on the helmet, helped me on the machine and said, "Let's go."

We rode more than 60 miles that day, exploring the snow-covered meadows that lie beneath Ramshorn Peak and taking in the vivid-blue Wyoming

sky. Being a novice, I got stuck more than anyone in our group. But each time I found myself buried in the powder-sugar drifts, Joe came over and patiently dug me out. I remember the exact moment I fell in love with him. He was standing in a snowdrift about 20 feet away. He had just helped pull another member of our group from the deep powder and he turned and gave me a wink. His cheeks were red from the cold and exertion, but his eyes were bright with happiness. It was as if I had seen him for the first time, and I knew that I would never find anyone else like him.

I laugh out loud with the memory and then look down at the work before me. My stitches aren't perfect, but they are better.

"What are you thinking about?" Joe asks as he looks up from the dark-gray mule deer cape spread out on the table in front of him.

"Our second date," I reply.

He smiles and says, "You know, I still think it's unfair that Ted laid claim to those horns. You definitely got to them first."



Traci McClintic and her long-time boyfriend Joe live on a ranch bordering Wyoming's Shoshone National Forest, where sightings of elk, moose, foxes, coyotes and bald eagles are a near daily occurrence. Traci makes her living as a personal chef/backcountry cook when she's not moonlighting as a taxidermist's assistant.

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