

Marty's Hunt

by Brian Day

Marty walked again today. I knew it in my heart. The hideous monster Multiple Sclerosis no longer clenched him fast in its wheelchair fist as it had done for over twenty years. Today, he would stride these hills again with me, as we had hunted together so many years ago. Although I would not see him, I knew he would be there.

"Get your boots on, Sleepy Head," he would call from his Jeep in the driveway, "We're wasting daylight."

"Did you run out of your house without your shells again this morning?" I wondered. "I don't have any 16's to lend you if you did."

He had not forgotten his ammunition this morning, as he had so many times years before in his haste to reach the grouse covers. With a mock look of impatience and a cigarette dangling from his knuckles draped over the steering wheel, he watched me go behind the house to get the dog. Duncan sprinted to the tailgate of my pickup, leaped into the box, and settled onto the old Plymouth bench seat that I kept there during hunting season.

"Get out of that seat, Lazybones. I know where there are some easy chickens for you close to home. Come on; we're walking," I growled with a smile.

We wandered up on Locey Hill to visit our friends the aspen and the beech. Anticipation hastened our footsteps and stole our breath. A thorn apple fortress on the crest of the hill beckoned us to come crawl among its berry briar children. Duncan stalked the ancient rabbit runs while I struggled through the sparser borders. He emerged from those crimson tunnels and froze, as I hunched beneath a thorn apple limb. Our bird was in the hazel clump at the edge of the field ahead. If I read my Brittany right, a woodcock was anchored there. The real trick would be to get that thorn out of my ear and slip ahead quickly into a clear space for the shot. Dropping to one knee, I did my best Tango step forward, the bird flew, my Red Label came up (more like a forkful of hay than one of Ruger's finest), and somehow the doodle bird dropped.

"A tolerable good shot, eh Marty," I mentally challenged over my shoulder as Duncan retrieved the bird like a Brussels sprout, spitting it out five feet away from my grasp.

"You can't fill a limit on luck," he was replying, whether I could hear him or not.

I admired my feathered gift and ruffled the dog's ears. Aspens bathed the field in a precious golden light seen only in

October. Just what was the gold of aspens on this autumn day? A girl came to mind with hair the color of these gilded leaves - a girl with eyes blue like this morning's sky. A soft breeze caressed my cheek, soft as eyelashes, gentle as arms around my neck. A scent came to mind, clean and sweet, but not a scent of this day. It was the scent of a misty Spring evening strained through her golden hair - and tears.

She would have clung to anyone that night to brace her injured heart, and there I stood, alone and lonely. I could have taken her for my own - taken her from the man who had been so careless with her feelings, so reckless with her love. We were young. Bonds were weak. Wounds healed quickly. She could have been mine forever and he could have found another. But that would have been wrong. I sent her back to the one that had caused her wounding, because she was Marty's girl and not mine.

Marty was free now. He walked again beside me. Helen had stood beside him all those years when he could no longer stand. She loved him in his chair as strongly as she had loved him on that Spring evening so many years before. She loves him still. She bore him two fine sons. Some day soon, his sons would hunt with me as well. I would make certain of that. Perhaps my own daughter will join our hunts in years to come. I smiled at the vision of my daughter's golden hair and blue eyes dancing in the splendor of Autumn color before me.

"She has her Aunt Helen's eyes, you've noticed," I commented to my shadow.

"That family favors women in particular with good looks. Now why those women choose to favor bums like you and me with their company, I will never understand," was his reply today, just as it had been on the day when I informed him that we would be brothers-in-law as well as best friends.

"Some things are meant to be," I answered.

A hazel bough nodded in agreement on some invisible breeze.

Mist rose from the frosted grasses of the field like pensive thoughts drawn from a Spring evening's missed chances. Luckily, Duncan's keen canine brain never wandered. While I daydreamed, he had crossed the corner of the field to a dense patch of maple saplings where he had turned into bloodstained marble. His stature said, "Grouse!"

Master Ruff waded the red-gold leaves, strutting in full view among the silver columns, oblivious to his audience. Forgetting his wings, he strolled contentedly among those maple saplings clustered dense as bamboo. I eased in, nerves on edge, gun at ready. I glared at him over the barrels. If he flushed he was mine. The little Cro-Magnon in my head shouted, "Shoot! Shoot him now! Grouse tastes just as fine from the foot as from the feather!" But again, it would have been wrong. I watched

the bird saunter out from the other side of his wicker cage to fly away safely, screened from any possible shot.

"Ah too bad! Another fair bird gets away," Marty chuckled. "Maybe you'll catch some luck someday, Old Fella."

Taking a deep breath of the cool morning air, I smiled at the Sun. "I've been lucky enough," I replied.

Poor Duncan, quivering with his own inner wolves, turned his bewildered canine eyes to me with questions that I could not answer. I called him to me to scratch his ears in reassurance and apology. The fault was not his, but mine. He could not understand how men decided what was right and what was wrong. Sometimes we had only our hearts to find the truth as he had only his keen nose to scent the feathered phantoms of his dreams. I gave him what I knew he would understand - gentle arms around his neck.

The End