

VOWA/Bass Pro High School 2nd Place Winner

Every Dog Has His Day

As the sun threatened to deliver morning, we abandoned the house in silence, save for the rhythmic clinking of a field collar. Its owner, Tucker, a peppery English setter, rode the truck's back bench-seat well. Curled in a ball of muscular fur and tradition, his position was suggestive of the hardiness and sophistication that often characterize upland hunting and its participants. I diverted my gaze, trying not to focus on his being more than was necessary.

The sun was smothered by the clouds and fog, presenting the day in a melancholy haze. A short drive landed us on the brushy banks of the James River, at a boat landing in the Hardware River Wildlife Management Area. The parking lot was empty, and with reason. Woodcock had long since abandoned the tangled successional growth of the riverbottom, squirrel and deer season had withered, and February's biting personality had fishermen frightened. For the season, the secrets of the James seemed secure under a sheet of thick fog.

Tucker glided out the back door tenderly; and Dad corralled him to adjust his collar and behold his soft, stringy ears. Few words were said before the morning commenced with a beep from Tucker's collar and our shotgun-toting footsteps crunching upon cut corn.

The weather on such days is enough to draw my thoughts inward and leaden my tongue in meditation; but there was something more spiritual at play. We followed our four-legged guide closely, observing *him* peruse cover, rather than observing the cover he perused. A rabbit dashed from cover. Tucker ignored it from good training. We took little note, our reflexes jaded by thought.

The communal element to bird hunting was as clouded as the sun; as Dad looked to Tucker for conversation. I understood. In past years, the two had enjoyed much together. From cool Minnesotan

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nights to fast-paced grouse shooting in the snow-blanketed forests of the upper-Midwest and Virginia highlands, their relationship was one of mutual dependency. Second only to their common love for grouse and woodcock, Tuck's affinity for crisp nights and his preoccupation with filching laps of scotch from his Master's unattended glass mortared a friendship only strengthened over years in the field.

Of course, the memories I perceived pouring from my father's pensive eyes were imparted to me as stories. My relationship with Tucker was different. He was introduced to our family just months before I. It was he who provided much of my early transportation, dragging me about the wood floors of our Fluvanna home by the stocking feet of my pajamas. I hunted over him—rather, pointed over him, with my training cap shotgun—as a young boy; but most memorable was his playful, omnipresent attitude that established him as a childhood friend and lifelong companion.

We entered the fourth in a chain of linked, riparian corn fields when we made the decision to turn back. Our halt lit the flame under the hooves of a 12-point buck bedded on the field's edge. The first solid words of the morning were uttered in reflexive excitement.

The shadow that had loomed over us soon returned. Our hunt was half over.

Tucker's attention was diverted to the tangled riverbank, where, after nosing about, he uncovered a magnificently large turtle shell. I dusted it off and found it a place in my pack.

It was New Year's Day the last time Tucker yielded me a prize of his own industry—a chukar taken on the wing from a game preserve in Southside Virginia. That was a different hunt, one filled with camaraderie and joy. Tucker zig-zagged cover unrestrained, ears bouncing loosely in the sun, feet treading deftly, on track to a bedded bird. At dusk, we collected our party and turned back. Tucker plodded exhaustedly in the lead, but caught our immediate attention when he froze mid-step, convulsing briefly. His movements that followed were a series of drunken, left-handed arcs. A nervous silence ensued.

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As we approached the truck by the river, the clouds seemed to lift. Conversation colored our packing and unloading as a statement of acceptance. With the setting of the sun yet another grouse season would expire in the mountains. But we were not hunting for grouse; we were hunting for a memory. All three in attendance recognized that the brain tumor that revealed itself in our beloved companion by every soulful step would make this season a concluding one, and this hunt, a last chapter—an epilogue worth writing and cherishing, forever.