

Season of Obsession



Joel Spring



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by

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DEDICATION

This is for Greta.

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INTRODUCTION

“You are obsessed.” I get that a lot. From friends. From family. From coworkers. Just yesterday, I found out pheasant season had been switched from the third week in October to the first. My vacation had been scheduled for the third week so I could bird hunt. What to do? Rather than change the vacation, I decided to keep it where it was, realizing I already had a long weekend for the new pheasant opener. By the third week—my vacation—I’ll be worn out from bird hunting, having devoted every free minute after work that I can to it, and ready for a few leisurely days of deer hunting with the bow in the Catskills. Of course, that means I’ll have to start making travel plans and figuring out who can go and when and how and what the moon will be like, and how the apples and the acorns are this year and so on and so on. As I was puzzling over schedules and calendars yesterday, making calls and sending e-mails, my boss walked into the office, shaking his head sadly and repeating the familiar phrase. “Do you know you’re worrying about something that isn’t even going to happen for another four months? You are obsessed,” he said, with no small amount of pity.

OK, I am. And it never really ends. Even after the last shot has been shot, and the last gun has been cleaned and put away, and the last of the venison has been eaten, the obsession continues. There are always more plans to be made, more dreams to be dreamed. It’s a full-time job—as if I needed another one. Did I mention the caribou hunt I am planning exactly 485 days from now? You can’t start obsessing too soon, you know.

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PRELUDE

*Something in the wind speaks to me.
Something in me hears.*

August 10—The Dogs

I feel bad for the dogs, especially Maggie. I wonder if Maggie understands. I know the season is coming. I can feel the slightly cooler nights and shorter days and I'm sure the dogs can, too. But unlike them, I have a calendar at eye level. I know the time of the year I live the rest of the year waiting for—hunting season. It is only a few days away. Maggie, on the other hand, must really wonder what happened. One day last winter we were happily chasing rabbits and grouse and the next, the guns were cleaned and put away. The tired old clothes were relegated to the back of the basement closet. The whistles and leashes were tucked into the back of my hunting vest, now hanging forgotten in the back hallway. The piles of shells in my truck that gave it a rather volatile quality were placed back in boxes—some even in the *right* boxes—in yet another corner of the basement. That was months ago. The last day of the last season—rabbit season—was five months ago, an eternity in a dog's life, I should think. I wonder if she thinks hunting season has ended forever.

Sometimes, especially in August, I feel that way.

Ted doesn't know. The Lab is still a pup and hasn't spent even a single season chasing pheasants and ducks, rabbits and squirrels, grouse and woodcock. He'll learn these things this year or start learning, anyway. For now, Ted thinks hunting is chasing a training dummy across the backyard. Every now and then I'll load a shotgun with blanks and take him for practice by the lake,

if I can find the time. These are just puppy adventures, though. Ted doesn't know any differently. He doesn't yet know about the hunt. He doesn't know about its insanity and elation and exhaustion. He doesn't know about the obsession.

Mag knows, though. She knows of cackling roosters and flushing woodcock. Of mind-bending chases along thorny and hidden corridors. She knows the things I know, and much more. She knows what happens down on the ground when a big rooster runs along under the cover of the saw grass. She sees what happens when crisscrossing air currents betray a fat woodcock. She knows a shot—not necessarily a good shot—is likely to follow. She knows where a field mouse has passed and where deer have bedded down for the night. She smells in color and hears in frequencies of which I can only dream. She is my nose, my ears, my eyes, and a big piece of my heart. I've seen her dreaming of the hunt and I wonder if her dreams are as vivid as mine. I've watched her twitching legs and flexing muscles and endless sniffing, suspecting *her* dreams may be even better. I wonder if she smells the rich scent of the wild birds in her dreams. I imagine she does.

Every time a shotgun comes out of the safe, she hops up on the couch next to me to inspect it, looking from it to me, waiting for a sign that this might be the day when the dreadful wait is over. She cocks her head and listens intently each time the word "bird" comes up in a phone conversation. She watches me closely to make sure I don't put on the "real" hunting clothes without her noticing. Not the Training Clothes, but the Hunting Clothes. She knows the difference and, like me, she waits. I know it's only sixteen more days, but as far as Maggie is concerned it may be a lifetime away. Or maybe she does know it's right around the corner.

Maybe she can smell it.

August 21—Confirmation

A week later in the Adirondacks with Howard, my father-in-law, I'm on my favorite kind of fishing trip—the kind that's thrown together at the last minute. A phone call, a quick packing job and a hasty lashing of the canoe to the truck, a poorly planned stop by the supermarket for necessities like sardines, hotdogs, and beer, and we are on the way. After a few rainy hours on the road, we are in the wilderness. With no campsites available at the state parks, we situate our tent in the woods on a bank high above West Canada Creek.

The small opening in the tall yellow birches overlooks a sportsman's dream. Surveying the wide creek below and the twin round mountains in the distance (Howard has a good name for them), we decide that a finer view could not be bought for ten bucks a night at some overcrowded state-run campsite. We swear if the bears don't get us tonight, we'll come back to this very same spot next spring.

Spending the entire day casting worms at the native brookies, we take a good many from the opaque, tea-colored pools—backwaters that may be a foot deep, or perhaps sixty. Our only indication of what's going on below the surface of the creek is when the gaudy orange and red bobbers gently dance on the quiet water, signaling the presence of yet another brook trout. The memories of days I've spent in the lower reaches of this creek in the spring, casting fancy flies to finicky brown trout, have nothing over the simple bobber rigs and globs of worms and the gloriously colorful wild brookies. Stealth and snobbery need not apply here. Simplicity already has the job.

This first night in the mountains—not too far from home, but a world away—we roast some brookies over the fire and toast the creek with a beer. Later on, after dousing the lantern and

smothering the campfire, we gaze up into the night sky. The moon is nearly full, yet the depth of the stars is dizzying. For a moment, with my head thrown back in the lawn chair, I swear I'm looking down instead of up. Sitting like that for a few hours, we talk about everything and nothing. We point out satellites to each other and wonder what this or that star is. The conversation waxes and wanes. Thoughts, clean and simple, fill in the large areas the words leave empty.

After a particularly long stretch of silence, Howard turns to me, saying simply, "It's right around the corner, you know."

To an outsider the statement might seem detached, senseless, its meaning as oblique as the murky bottom of the West Canada. I know what he's talking about, though, realizing what he's been thinking in the silent moments. They're the same things I've been thinking about. I'm looking forward to the first of September and goose season and the odd squirrel hunt, now only a week away. Howard, however, who hunts only deer, is seeing all the way into November. His time. Still three months away, yes, but for impractical people like him and me, right around the corner. It's not far away at all.

I nod, looking back up to the sky. Howard's simple statement hangs in the cooling air, requiring no follow-up. He knows I know what he meant. Closing my eyes, I feel the cool breeze, carried across the big creek from the north, and sense a hint of autumn in its breath. A pair of coyotes wail from the twin hills that are now barely visible against the moonlit sky. It's a long time before I sleep, and when I do, I dream many dreams. Though I won't remember what they were about, I know the dreams are not of August.

September 1—Prelude

It's dawn of the first day of hunting season. My wife, Greta, and I are deep in squirrel territory—or at least as deep as you can

get in a forty-acre wood lot. Cornfields, yet uncut, reach to the woods on the west and south sides. The timber, loaded with oak and beech and peppered with hickory and walnut, has always provided a bounty of fat bushytails.

Earlier, just at daylight, we walked along the edge of the vast cornfield, suddenly hearing a loud rustling in the stalks to our left. We froze, wondering if a pheasant or an unsuspecting squirrel was making the commotion. I started to say something to Greta and she shushed me just as a big white-tailed doe quietly emerged from the corn. Only thirty yards away, the doe moved casually across the opening before spotting us and stopping. It stood there for a moment, curious, but not scared enough to stop chewing its mouthful of corn. Giving us a quick head bob, it calmly crossed to the thorn apple thicket on our right. Greta and I passed a silent look that simply said, "Nice way to start the morning."

But now, with my back against a big beech, it's all I can do to sit still. I glance over at Greta, who's still patiently watching the treetops. I close my eyes to block out the bugs and doze off for a few minutes, lulled to sleep by the low thrumming of farm machinery off in the distance. When I awake, there's a chickadee on the branch in front of me, not two feet from my face. It cocks its head at me like a dog before flying off into the warm morning. Scratching the back of my neck, I feel a new crop of welts there. Maybe the chickadee was coming to feast on the bugs that were feasting on me.

After an hour or so, the humidity in the woods becomes unbearable. We get up just to feel the breeze across our faces as we slowly move through the woods. After walking half the length of the wood lot, we're greeted by a familiar sound. Somewhere above us in a giant beech a squirrel is cutting nuts, shaking the leaf-covered limbs sixty feet up. We hear the *chomp chomp* as its teeth cut through the sinewy stems holding the nuts. Hearing beechnuts hitting the ground, we approach the great tree. The

squirrel grows silent. Sitting down, we wait for twenty minutes, but it never comes down. Greta walks off through the woods as I sit down by the beech tree, hoping the squirrel might see her going and come back out for me.

A moment later I nearly jump out of my skin when the twenty-two cracks twice behind me. Quickly walking into the beech saplings, I search for my wife. She's standing under a twenty-foot beech, searching the ground.

"So?" I ask.

"So, is this rifle sighted in or not?" she asks, holding the old Marlin out to me.

"Um, I never shot it. It's one my dad passed along to us last year."

"It's off," she declares flatly, still searching the ground for a squirrel that we never find.

I offer her my .410.

"No thanks, maybe it's just me." I can tell by her voice she doesn't really think so. I wish she'd take the shotgun, but I think she'd like to remind me what a good shot she is. I wisely stifle a giggle as we head back into the more open woods. If she catches me laughing, only one of us might come out of the woods at noon.

Around noon, we're in the corner of the woods we haven't touched yet. It's one little finger of oaks sticking into the cornfield and it's always been a good spot on a slow day. Sitting for only a moment, I spot a squirrel running in the small trees on the edge of the corn. I point it out to Greta, who has her back to it. When it becomes clear the squirrel doesn't intend to come any closer, we move in, stepping gingerly but quickly in the moldy carpet of leaves. Greta takes the lead.

Standing where we last saw the squirrel, we wait no longer than a minute before we surprise it coming out of the corn. Spotting us at the same time, it races to the top of the only decent-sized oak around. It pauses high up on the tree trunk to check us

out and I hear the safety of the Marlin slide off. I watch the motionless squirrel while my wife takes aim.

Once again she misses and the squirrel zips to the other side of the tree. "Here," she says, handing me the rifle with one hand and abruptly relieving me of my shotgun with the other. This time I can't stifle a snicker. "I'll go around."

It takes a long minute to break through the old vines that have choked the saplings on the edge of the field. Finally stumbling into the corn, I immediately spot the squirrel. It's now ten feet higher in the young oak. I whistle and wave my arms, trying to scare it back to Greta's side so she can shoot. It won't budge.

After a moment, Greta yells, "If you have a shot, shoot!"

I take careful aim with the old relic, placing the buckhorn sights squarely across the back of the squirrel's head. I steadily squeeze the trigger, watching a piece of bark fly off the tree at the sound of the shot. The squirrel scampers back to the other side, untouched. The .410 roars and the previously lucky squirrel tumbles to earth.

Back inside the woods my wife is holding the squirrel at arm's length by its toe, waiting for me to put it in my game bag. She smiles and says, "Now let's get out of here—it's too hot for this. And by the way," she adds, "I told you that gun was off."

By evening, a rainstorm has come and gone, draining the sky of some of its humidity. With the kids still happy at Grandma's house, we hike to the ponds, looking for geese. Although goose season started today, this is really just a scouting mission. I have traded the lithe .410 for my heavy old Winchester 12-gauge pump and a box of steel number ones. The first pond—a brush-choked mess—is our secret hole for wood ducks. With a few hours of daylight remaining, we decide to check it out. The cooler air has slowed the mosquitoes down, but the wall of brush between us

and the pond proves nearly impenetrable. Finally reaching the pond, we've made so much noise breaking branches it's no surprise when there aren't any ducks sitting on it. We hastily head toward the other pond out in the middle of the open field.

My heart sinks as we cross the old railroad bed and start into the field. The other pond is a tragedy, a casualty of the visionless farmer who owns it. The thin rows of trees once lining the edge have been pushed in with an excavator. All that remains are piles of discarded hardwood. It's not even cut for firewood. I wonder if the pound-foolish farmer has any idea how many thousands of dollars in hardwood are lying there rotting so he can have a few more bushels of corn next year.

Damn.

The trees used to form a nearly full circle around the pond. The small area that had no trees was a funnel through which the geese and ducks would take off and land. Now, with all of the edge cover lost, I can't imagine a duck or goose ever wanting to land here again. Somehow even the water, once teeming with bass and bluegills, looks ruined. A sickly bluish-gray, it smells like death. At the far side, the old spillway has been bulldozed in, and the ditch that used to feed the pond has been diverted. The pond has effectively been choked of its life. To think someone actually planned this makes me want to retch. Thinking of the flocks of geese and ducks that used to sit here, and the herons that fished the banks, I can almost see the dimples on the surface the bass and bluegills would make on nights like this.

Tonight, the surface is untouched by life.

I saw the machinery out here this summer but had no idea the carnage was on such a grand scale. This is where the tree huggers and so-called conservationists should be staging their demonstrations, but no one is going to report this. Nothing dramatic here. Just an entire ecosystem ruined. Gone. Destroyed.

Not front page news by any means. No one will be up in arms. No attention whatsoever will be paid. Nobody to mourn for the dead pond. It's nothing but a cesspool now.

Greta and I search for a secluded spot to sit among the upturned root piles and butchered trunks. Last week, I noticed one of the nearby cornfields was cut. I was hoping the geese would be flying back and forth between the pond and the cut field. Even if they ignore the pond, maybe the geese will still come to the field. My hope springs eternal.

We flush a fat young rooster pheasant on the bank of the murky pond as we step around the emaciated carcass of a snapping turtle. Shouldering the Winchester, I lead the bird, taking an imaginary shot. But my heart's not in it.

Sitting on the edge of the pond, we face west into the sunset. The sky's colors are dazzling. I love the mountains, but there is nothing like a flatland sunset. The beauty of the sky and the quiet conversation with my wife bring the first evening of the season to a tranquil close. In the last moments of blood-red daylight, a dozen wood ducks fly over, passing thirty or forty yards from our hideout. Briefly setting their wings over the stained water, they think better of it. Picking up speed, they fly to the other pond—the brush-choked one.

There is a sadness in the beating of their wings.



