

Duck Hunting with my Brother

Short Story

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Clingman looked out over the algae-covered Miller's Pond and noticed the trail his small rowboat cut through the green overlay. Dawn was beginning to etch its reflection into the dark water and gave it a pinkish haze. The day was too early for the noisy frogs and crickets or even the hateful buzzing flies. The pond had a waiting silence. Clingman let the boat drift until it bumped into a clump of low branch cypress. With a couple of pulls of the paddle, he maneuvered the boat into a concealed area of the thicket. As he grabbed a couple of branches to help lodge the boat, Clingman heard something drop into the water with a thick, hollow, and heavy gulp. "Moccasin," he muttered. As he searched the moss-draped branches for any other surprises, his eye caught a movement in the distant grey sky. He saw a perfect V-formation, and it was flying southward. Clingman grabbed the field glasses hanging from his neck. Even through the cracked left lens, he distinguished the white neck ring and dark green head of the lead male mallard. The ducks were too high and too far a way to hit, but Clingman knew others would follow. Reaching into his shirt pocket, he took out the duck call his daddy had given him almost fourteen years ago, just before he died. The call was cherry with a double reed on the inside. Lifting it to his lips and tilting his head back, Clingman blew as though he were Gabriel calling the chosen.

"Thwaaack! Thwack-thwack!"

"What the hell? What's the matter?" Baily, Clingman's brother, scrambled to quickly sit up while rubbing the sleep from the corners of his eyes. The gun he was holding slid to the floor of

the boat. Baily had suddenly arrived back home from Charleston six days ago and had pretty much kept to himself until Clingman insisted he come along this morning.

Clingman smiled slightly, “Didn’t mean to startle you. The last time I was scared that bad, I was explaining to Jewel Thompson’s husband why I was in his waterbed.”

“I know why you were there,” Baily said, grinning a bit, “but where was Jewel?”

“She had run down to the Snatch and Go for cigarettes. Her husband was supposed to be at a poultry convention in Mancyville, so I was relaxing until she got back” Clingman slapped at a mosquito on his neck. “Unfortunately, there was an outbreak of ptomaine poisoning at the convention due to some bad chicken bologna, and her husband came home early and was feeling mean.

“I guess finding you in his bed was not the remedy he needed.”

“Nope, it won’t. He came through that bedroom door with a rifle in his hand and blood in his eye. I thought I was a goner.”

Baily slapped at the same mosquito. “He had a gun? So, why didn’t he shoot you?”

“Well because I was in a waterbed he was still making payments on. I managed to stay on that bed while I got my clothes on and by the time I was dressed, he was looking a little green due to that bologna acting up. While he was running to the bathroom, I was hauling butt out the back door.”

“Did he ever catch up with you?”

“Nope. I guess he would have if he hadn’t died.”

“Died?”

“Yep. While he was puking, a ceramic statue of Tammy Wynette that Jewel’s mama made them for a wedding present fell off the back of the toilet, hit his head, knocked him out, and he drown in the commode...which only goes to prove one thing.”

“What?”

“It’s true what Tammy says. You should always ‘stand *by your can.*’” Clingman was laughing as he sang the punch line.

Baily grinned, hanging his head. “O.K., you got me.”

Clingman gave another blast on the duck call. The moon was still visible in the soft bluish haze. “Way too early for ducks. Just as well. I wanted to talk to you anyway. Since I’m so busy down at the garage, this seemed the best place.”

Baily stared at his brother. “What do you want to talk about?”

“About why you suddenly quit your job and high-tailed it back to Deacon’s Grove after living in Charleston for eight years. You don’t say much to anyone. I’m glad you’re here, but why? What’s wrong?”

Baily looked at the sky and hoped for ducks, but all he saw was the pale outline of the fading moon. “I...it’s because...”

Clingman leaned forward. “Was it Russ?” Clingman asked so gently and with such concern, Baily’s eyes filled with tears. “Don’t start bawling, Baily.”

Baily wiped his eyes with the back of his shirt sleeve.

“Look, Baily, your life ain’t so much different than my life.” Clingman had always been careful of Baily’s feelings. He had always been non-judgmental and even got into a fight once when he overheard someone refer to Baily as a ‘pansy.’ Clingman tried to lighten to mood without changing the subject. “Well, at least something good is gonna come out of your moving back home. I won’t be getting anymore tacky presents from Charleston.”

Baily relaxed a bit, and they both looked out over the water. The rising sun caused a soft mist to form at the pond’s edge.

Clingman broke the silence. “You can’t run from problems, Baily. You have to face what happened with Russ.”

“I don’t understand why it happened. I don’t know how to deal with it.?”

Clingman gently asked, “You ever thought about seeing a psychiatrist?”

“I’ve been to three. Two of them told me to accept what happened; that it wasn’t my fault.”

“What did the third one say?”

“He wasn’t really a psychiatrist; he was more like a preacher. He told me that I reaped what I sowed, and he suggested I change my life style. No, wait. He said change my life choices.”

“Did he say how you could do that?”

“He had a pamphlet with twelve easy steps that unfortunately were not easy or practical. I don’t know...maybe I should try.”

Clingman leaned on the rim of the boat, his weight on his elbows. He stretched out his legs and crossed his feet and turned his face toward the sun, his eyes shut.

Baily stared at his older brother and admired the no-care haircut and the rugged face. Clingman was never without a date. He also knew Clingman had no conscience when it came to having a little fun. An older, married woman was as good as a younger, single one. Baily also knew his own appearance had caused a few hearts to flutter. He wore his dark hair in a short, neatly parted style. He kept trim and avoided the fashion of tight t-shirts and blue-jeans in favor of button-downs and khakis.

Clingman, without opening his eyes, said, "I know Russ' death has hurt you, but you can't change just because of that. Besides, have you ever even dated a girl?"

"I dated one." Baily was determined to be honest. "Remember that girl Mama made me take out when I was in high-school...April Creech?"

Clingman snapped his head up. "That was ten years ago, and April Creech was the ugliest girl in Deacon's Grove unless you count her sisters, May and June. No wonder you turned out the way you are."

"You think I can change?"

"Well, I suppose, in a way, you're already trying." Clingman was trying to make a point.

"What do you mean?"

"Look at what you are doing right now."

"Sitting in a rowboat on Miller's Pond?"

“We’re not just sitting. We’re duck hunting That’s a big change for you.” Clingman blew the duck call. As he put the duck call back into his shirt pocket, he noticed Baily had shifted his gaze. “Did I say something wrong?”

Baily was nervously stripping leaves off a branch next to the boat. “I’ve never killed anything before. I don’t know if I can...especially ducks. I like ducks. They’re cute.”

“You can’t think of them that way if you plan on shooting them.” A shadow passed over the boat causing Clingman to look up. “Hot damn, ducks!” He grabbed his rifle. “C’mon, Baily. Let’s get some supper.” In one smooth motion, both men aimed and fired. Neither man hit a duck.

“I need to get the sight checked on this gun,” said Clingman. “Why didn’t you hit one? You shoot as good as me.”

“I guess I’m rusty. It’s been a long time.” Baily placed the gun back down on the bottom of the boat. “I’m lonely.”

“Look, Baily, I don’t know what you are going through. My wife did not commit suicide. Russ did. But it’s been almost a year. It’s time to move on with your life, not change your life. I’m not a smart man, but even I know you cannot change who you are.”

“Why? I can try. I am thirty-three, Clingman, and until a year ago, I was settled. Then Russ killed himself after his parents found out. He couldn’t take it anymore; he sat on our sofa and put a gun in his mouth. He put his head inside five trash bags so there would not be a lot of blood to clean up. For the past year, all I do is work, come home, and go to bed alone. That’s not much of a life, so I want a change.”

“Baily, you want *a* change, not *to* change.”

Baily was about to answer him when a thud hit the floor of the boat. It was a four-foot squirming water moccasin that had dropped from a long-hanging branch. “Oh, hell”

Clingman and Baily fell over the side of the boat into the chilly water. Clingman emerged first, spitting water. Feeling a hand on his leg, he pulled Baily up by the nape of the shirt. They stared at each other while dog-paddling. Bobbing up and down in the water, Clingman tried to see inside the boat to determine where the snake was.

Baily was covered with small, round duckweed leaves and some algae slime. Both men started laughing. Clingman said, “Great way to cool off, huh?”

Baily was looking in the boat also and replied, “We have a problem. The snake ain’t in the boat anymore.”

Both men scrambled to get into the boat. Baily made it in with Clingman pushing his butt. Grabbing the oars, Clingman rowed the boat out of the thicket and into the clear area of the pond. Both men stripped out of their wet clothes and spread them over the boat seats to dry. Baily’s stylish underwear next to Clingman’s stark, white boxers. Baily smoothed the water out of his hair while Clingman shook his dry like a dog.

Neither spoke for a moment until Clingman said, “Baily, we’re sitting here buck naked.”

“Who is going to see us, Clingman? We’re a good mile from the bank. It won’t take long for these to dry. It’s warming up a bit”

Clingman looked over the side of the boat, hoping the snake wasn't circling like a shark, and he saw a shiny piece of wood floating. "My duck call." He lifted it from the water and blew it a couple of times. The muffled and soggy calls gradually turned into clear sounds."

"Hey, let me try," said Baily. He gave a couple of honks and was about to say something when they both heard a *thwack-thwack*. "Damn, I did it."

"Ducks..." Clingman whispered and spotted them swimming on the other side of the thicket they had just pushed off from. "Mallards, Baily, look at them." Clingman reached down and slowly lifted the rifle. Just as he started to pull the trigger, he had an idea. "Baily, why don't you shoot?" He held the rifle toward his brother. "Here, use my gun...just for a change."

Baily took the weapon and positioned the stock against his shoulder, clicked off the safety, and aimed. He saw the shimmering and wet emerald of the mallard's head. But he did not pull the trigger. He just sat.

Clingman glanced at Baily to see what the delay was and saw his brother staring at the ducks with tears running down his face. He reached over and took the gun from his brother. He moved over to where Baily sat straddled on the seat, staring at the ducks. Sitting just behind Baily, he wrapped his arms around him and pulled his brother back against him and softly said, "Change don't always mean better. Forget about shooting ducks, Baily. You like ducks. You always have."

The sun rose higher and warmed Miller's Pond while several ducks swam close to where two chilly, buck-naked men sat in a rowboat.

Then they rose and flew off toward the South in a perfect V-formation.