

Beagles

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Dad and I met Durwood at a T-intersection to the north of Pantego. We pulled off the road and parked our Accord. Durwood rumbled up in his F-250. It was white and had camo seats and you basically had to run and jump up into it to get in.

We needed four-wheel drive for where we were going. We turned off the road and onto a bumpy dirt path that ran far across a field to a grove of trees. If you were in an airplane, high above this land, it would look like a green and brown patched quilt; only the squares would be elongated and irregular. And if you came down lower, you would see patches of woods and barn complexes and roads that ran all over the place but really didn't go anywhere. Except the dirt road we were on, it went somewhere, but only because we were going to do something fun.

We bumped along and listened to Durwood talk about everything you could think of. Sports, hunting, fishing, the government, singing, drinking, drinking and singing, his job, farming, driving, women, hunting again, the weather, and then where he went to elementary school.

Dad liked him. They worked in similar professions and this was Durwood's hunting camp we were using to rabbit hunt.

When we got to the grove of trees on the far side of the field from our T-intersection, there was already a truck parked there. One of the trucks had rows of cages in the back. These were for the beagles.

My dad had told me about how the dogs spot and jump the rabbit and then chase it and lead it to the hunters. Man and dog working together and having fun while doing it, that's what we were here for.

When we got out of the truck the dogs were already out in the trees. I could see a few sniffing around to my right.

We unloaded our shotguns from the truck and walked over to where a man was standing, looking into the trees with his gun hung over the cradle of his arm. Durwood introduced him to us as George, the man who owned the dogs. We didn't even have time to start any kind of conversation because the dogs, who had been almost completely silent, started baying.

"Let's get walking down this way," George walked towards the direction he pointed.

"I'm going to go down this side," Durwood said.

We began to walk down a grass alley that was cut through the trees. There was a creek covered in thick brush that separated the alley into two paths. Durwood walked down the opposite side from us. He could go from talking up a storm right in your face to just walking off by himself.

We walked only a little ways down the path when the baying really picked up to our right. One howl sounded different than the rest. It was long and low. But then it became short and fast, each howl coming quickly after the previous one.

"That's Pretty Boy, he's got one," George said.

From the sound, I pictured one beagle chasing a terrified rabbit around in circles among the trees.

“Why’s he called Pretty Boy?” I asked George.

“Cause he ain’t nothing but a Pretty Boy,” He said without smiling. “I know you know a lot of people who are like him. You’ll agree when you see him. He thinks he’s something.

“He’s the last one in the hunt and the first to leave. And he’ll point a rabbit but he won’t ever jump him. He’ll let another dog do it and then take the credit.”

George was a big man. And he seemed tough, like the kind of man that enjoys sitting beside a freezing pond waiting for ducks or training a retriever to dive into that pond and get ducks after he shot them with four-shot.

Two or three other dogs had joined in the short, fast baying now. It sounded like they were closer to us.

“That’s Linda, Moose, and Lucy now,” George said. “They’re coming this way.”

The howls were sad sounding. But somehow they still sounded excited, as if the dogs couldn’t wait for us to come see this amazingly sad thing they found.

A couple dogs ran across the alley in front of us. They jumped the creek to where Durwood was.

Two little beagles came out of the trees right next to us, sniffing. One stopped and peed on a tree and the other came over and began biting the shoelaces on my boots. They didn’t really seem interested in the hunt.

“I got three puppies I’m trying out today. Seeing if I like one of them to buy,” George said. These two didn’t seem like keepers to me.

There was more short howling to our left now, where some of the dogs had run to. A beagle came out from our right sniffing around.

This was Linda, George said. She had cancer and there was a round tumor hanging down from her stomach. This made her look like a well endowed male from behind. So much so that when she leapt over the creek to where Durwood was walking I heard him say “Damn, look at the balls on this one” to himself.

“The rabbit must have already crossed the creek. Listen for the dogs, the rabbit will come back here,” George said.

“How do you know he’ll come back?” my dad asked.

“The rabbit always wants to come back to where he was. So we’ll just wait for him to come back our way. He’ll always try to get back to his home.

“Listen for Moose.” There was no way for me to hear the difference between Moose’s howling and the other dogs but I just nodded. George explained how Moose was the leader and the best dog he had.

“I can always depend on him,” George said. “Him and Linda. Linda’s the best female, but she won’t be around much longer so I got to let her run while she can.” He sounded genuinely sad when he said this. It was the exact opposite from when he was talking about Pretty Boy.

While he was saying this, the last four dogs came across the path in front of us going towards where the rabbit supposedly was to our left. One was the third puppy, who joined the

other two in attempting to chew our boots and/or rolling around in the brush near the creek and tackling each other.

Another was Lucy, George told us. She was very skinny but seemed happy to be running through a forest. “No matter what I feed her, I can’t keep meat on her bones.”

The third was Sissy. George called her “Sissy-Bitch”, but in kind of a weird affectionate way. He said “She won’t spot any rabbits, not ever.” She had run by quickly but I noticed she had a very white faded face. She was old but she used to be dependable, George explained. And now she ran with the pack because it made her happy and it kept the pack calm.

The fourth came lumbering along in the back of this pack. She was clearly overweight. Her belly twisted and flopped back and forth as she ran towards the creek. She made the jump over it, but barely, and kept on after the other dogs.

George just shook his head. “That’s Monica, she’s fatter than anything.”

I knelt down and rubbed the belly of one of the beagle puppies who was chewing on a stick at my feet. The other dogs still sounded really far off. But soon, I noticed they had turned around. Their voices were coming closer.

“Moose is right there with him,” George observed. “Now, the rabbit is in front of the dogs, so you got to be ready to shoot something that’s well in front of their voices.”

The dogs were talking back and forth to each other and to George. George wasn’t talking back though; he was just letting them hunt.

My dad asked George what he did for a living. I kept on listening and didn’t really pay attention to what they were saying. I imagined what it would be like if I could understand the dogs baying:

“He’s over here, hurry, hurry!”

“Where, Where?”

“Over here, Linda!”

“Guys wait up!”

“Lucy go back and help Monica”

“I smell him he’s running this way!”

“I got him, watch me catch him!”

“Shut up Pretty Boy.”

“Come on he’s heading back to George.”

“Let’s go!”

They were probably saying something like that.

“There he is!” George’s yell brought me out from my imagination. I turned in time to see a little gray blur sprint into the tree line. He had jumped the creek and skirted across the green pathway without us even being able to react. The dogs’ voices still seemed pretty far away.

“Durwood, did you see him?” George asked across the creek.

“Huh?”

“Never mind.”

I was glad he went by too quick to shoot. I got to see him, but didn't have to shoot him.

Pretty soon, a beagle bounded over the creek after him. It was Moose. He had a big collar on that allowed George to give him a little shock if the group ran too far away. It was just a way for the owner to communicate with the dogs when they got out of earshot.

"Get after him, Moose." The dog reacted before George even finished the sentence. He dove into the trees and began sprinting and sniffing everything.

Next over the creek came Linda and Lucy, running and sniffing just as hard a Moose.

"Get 'em up in there, Get 'em up in there!" George yelled. It startled me because it was right in my ear but it seemed to encourage the dogs. The puppies around us got up and ran in circles for a second. Two of them just sat back down but one actually went into the woods after Lucy and Linda. He gave a little bay and then started smelling. His instincts were telling him to howl and hunt.

Next came Pretty Boy. I knew it was him because he landed with his back leg still up and turned his head towards us and stood completely still. It was as if he was saying "Did you see how I did that?" He was like a gymnast landing a flip or something, throwing his hands in the air and smiling in an extremely prissy way.

George just looked at him. Pretty Boy pranced into the tree line, his nose up in the air. Once he was in the trees, Sissy came across the creek smelling hard.

"Good work, Sissy," George said. She moved slower than the other dogs but went into the trees with the same enthusiasm.

Last came Monica. She was panting. She barely made it across the creek and then sat in the middle of the path wheezing with her tongue hanging out. George ignored her.

"Heya! Heya! Heya!" He yelled into the trees. "Heya! Heya! Heya!"

I thought he might be saying "Here" in a very weird way but it also sounded like he was saying "Hell! Hell! Hell!" I'm not sure what it was supposed to be. It got the dogs working though, minus Monica.

It seemed like they had lost the rabbit. George said he had probably made it back to his hole. He said that because of the wet weather recently, a lot of the rabbits would be "holed up" today.

He proved to be right. We hunted the rest of the day and never saw another rabbit. We walked all through the grove of pine, the dogs smelling all around us, and nothing else happened. Sometimes Pretty Boy would howl but they would never chase anything. Moose or Linda never jumped anything else and Monica seemed ready to pass out.

After walking for about an hour we circled back to the trucks. Pretty Boy was already there, asleep and curled up under the tailgate of George's truck. Moose and Linda and Sissy sat down next to one of the tires and looked at George, waiting to be told what to do next. Lucy jumped up into the bed and sat next to her cage and the puppies went and lay down near Pretty Boy. Monica lumbered up last and just fell flat on the ground.

George apologized for us not shooting anything. We told him it didn't matter, that it was fun anyways. This was the truth.

“Kennel up!” George said, turning around to his dogs and truck. Moose, Sissy, and Linda jumped into the trucks. George picked up Monica and then the three puppies. Pretty Boy just laid there.

Dad and I thanked George again. We left with Durwood and went back to our car. He started talking again, this time about some state senator he knew. He changed the subject after a minute to something else but I stopped paying attention.

Durwood dropped us off back at our car and we thanked him for taking us. Dad and I discussed the dogs our whole drive back to our house. We laughed about all the dogs and their personalities. George had said, “You probably know a lot of people like him,” when talking about Pretty Boy. I know that is true. I know a lot of people like Monica or Moose, Linda or Lucy, all the dogs. Maybe that’s why we work so well together, because there’s something relatable between man and his best friend

Dad probably summed it up best: “It’s just like a gang of human friends, only they’re running around a forest chasing rabbits.”