

A Couple Hunters

by Aaron Endelman

“When shooting geese there’s really only one rule. Bring enough bullets to knock a couple of the damned birds out of the sky.”

Reese laughed loudly as he said this, but, after a second, broke into a hacking cough that shook down his chin in little waves. Wisps of his breath appeared in the icy air as he gasped for breath.

Laura, sitting on a small boulder a few yards back, didn’t respond immediately. She was used to the sound. He’d always had a bad cough. Since he was a kid, he claimed.

Laura knew where he hid his cigarettes.

“You okay? You look red,” she said, noticing him only out of the sides of her eyes as she stared at her iPhone. Reese brought up a snarl from the back of his throat and spit a wad out onto the ground.

“It’s just the cold,” he said, “You going to come over here or stay on your phone all day?” He cleared his throat again and pointed to the place he’d just spat.

The two stood at the back end of a field of dead grass, yellow and flat for a few miles. In the distance maple trees formed a dense wooden curtain. The forest continued back until it came to a lake. It was here that the geese stopped for a drink before they continued their migration. Reese considered it the perfect spot. Calm and quiet. He’d spread a dozen decoy birds on the ground around where he and Laura were. His shotgun leaned barrel up against one of the large decoy birds, as if the two had died in a predatory grip.

“It doesn’t seem like I’m missing much,” Laura replied, “those birds have been at that lake for the past hour.”

“Yeah, but once they get flying it goes quick, so you gotta be ready,” Reese walked over to grab his gun, “So come now, let’s get you ready.”

Laura sighed loudly and jammed her phone into her back pocket, “There’s no fucking service here anyways”. She got up off the rock and stretched her body, skinny arms up towards the grey winter sky.

“I don’t see why we had to come so far out,” she complained further, walking to Reese, “...we’re in the middle of nowhere and it looks like it’s going to snow.”

Reese was loading bullets into the magazine as Laura walked up to him, arms crossed. He didn’t look up as she walked up.

“That’s why this is the best time,” he put the magazine back in and checked the rest of its length, “The birds will have to keep on before the snow- so we shoot a couple and leave before it starts coming down.”

Laura said nothing. She watched as he worked his hands along the shotgun, and looked down the muzzle.

“This is a pump action shotgun,” he said holding it towards her, “...easiest gun you could use as a starter.”

It looked angry to Laura, with a long neck and a toothy smile. She thought it suited him. A thinner brother, or the son he’d always wanted. Reese liked to stuff most of the game he shot. When he’d first moved in to their house three years back, Reese had placed one of his prized shots, a forty-five inch mounted moose head, in the living room opposite the TV. Laura had begged her mom to get him to take it down, but her mom rarely stood up to Reese.

Sometimes Laura would come downstairs late at night and catch him asleep in his blue recliner, facing the moose head, as the TV played late Comedy Central. Usually he'd gone through a few beers.

Laura hesitated grabbing the shotgun, not sure where to put her hands.

"The safety is on. Take it. It won't hurt you," he jabbed the gun against her, "Can't say the same for the geese though." Once again he laughed deeply.

She grabbed the gun from him. It wasn't very heavy, but the heavier front made her have to lean back to aim it up towards the sky.

Reese was now showing and telling her the different parts of the gun. Laura could barely understand what he was talking about. 'Hold the stock, look down the ribs to the bead, lock the shot, pump it and pull the trigger. Oh, make sure the safety is off'. None of it meant anything to her. She drifted apart from herself into the looming soft grey clouds that spoke of coming snow. They hung wide across the flat plain, confessing their depression to the people below.

"So you get it then?" Reese interrupted.

Laura didn't.

"Sure," she said, "But I'm not going to be able to hold the gun and aim, it's too heavy." To emphasize her point she put the gun barrel down to the ground and leaned against it like a cane.

"Don't do that," Reese grabbed the shotgun back, "You'll take the shot after I hit one down, which shouldn't take too long"

"We shoot laying down," he continued, "... the trick is to be among the decoys and blow the geese call, be unseen."

She imagined Reese laying down on the ground, stomach down, with the gun pressed against himself, taking aim. And the geese. Taking off, flying up across the forest, sandwiched between the heaven and earth. Following the sun instinctually. Dumb to the walrus hiding amongst their friends on the ground. The walrus and his friend with the toothy grin. Such poor, innocent geese, she thought.

Reese was staring off into the forest, as if he could will the birds to him like some mythic God of animals.

A low breeze picked up, bringing tears to Laura and rustling the ragged branches of the trees off in the distance. Reese sniffled. Off in the distance a howl broke calm. Long and mournful, it gave Laura goosebumps separate from the ones the cold had given her.

“Did you hear that,” she told Reese.

“Just a wolf,” Reese said unfazed, “they’ve been wandering farther out this way since the city started expanding.”

“What if it attacks us...”

“Laura, we have a shotgun,” Reese pumped it once for emphasis, “There’s a reason we’re at the top of the food pyramid.”

Laura wasn’t sure he was right on that. She was about to say something to it, but Reese let out a shout.

“The geese!” He pointed up just over the tops of the trees, “There they are!”

“The wolf must’ve scared them,” she said.

Reese wasn't paying attention. He had run over to his camouflage bag and grabbed the geese caller and a blanket to lay over them. He hustled back to her and threw her the caller.

"Remember, blow low and quiet, then faster as they come closer."

It was exciting, she had to give Reese that.

The geese flew as slow moving pinpoints across the sky, which looked as though it was darkening. Even as Laura thought this she felt the soft, wet sting of a snowflake hit her cheek. She was going to tell Reese, but he was looking down the sights.

"Come on, come on," Reese was saying to himself as the birds flew.

Laura felt slightly dizzy blowing the call. It gave out the sound of a tissue being blown, but the sound stretched and dipped and soaked out across the field, leaving a warm echo.

It was working, they had arced their route and were heading towards the decoy birds. Laura began blowing the call a bit faster, speeding up with her pulse. She could make out their wings now, waving black flags against a cloudless sky.

"I've got one in my sight," Reese stage whispered, "Once I shoot it they'll go and search for cover, that's when you get in your shot."

Her lungs ached, she'd been blowing for a minute straight now. She needed to work out more, she thought.

The gun shot rang out. It cracked against the silence like a whip, then left nothing.

She could see the geese swimming slowly over the field. One near the front of the formation stopped and dropped from its place above. It fell gracefully, like a

professional diver or a paratrooper on their hundredth jump. It seemed suspended, still on a string, until disappeared over the rise of the horizon.

“Got it!” Reese congratulated himself, “First shot!”

The geese had kept forward for a few yards, but now realized their peril and panicked. They criss-crossed aimlessly in the air. Real calls broke out, mournful and pleading. She was sure they were cursing her and Reese. Him and his hell-spawn. She felt heavy. All the adrenaline had rushed out of her and she felt dizzy.

“Quick, grab the gun and get down. We can still get another one.”

She was glad for the ground against her, but Reese had shoved the shotgun against her and hovered eagerly above her. His voice was too loud.

“Pump the barrel! What are you waiting for! Look down the bead!”

She didn’t know what he was talking about. He continued to shout at her. The sky was shedding off tiny white feathers that clung to the ground.

His hands were moving hers, pumping the length of the cold gun back and forth. He was too close and his hands dug against hers. His face loomed in her vision, open mouthed and flabby chin. He was staring off into the sky, using her as his puppet.

“Come on! Aim it Laura, damnit! They’re getting out of range!”

It was true, the geese were disappearing across the sides of the field, away from their false friends, still cursing.

She carelessly lined the one closest along the length of the gun. Looking the goose down the gun was making her dizzy. It blurred then focused, coming closer then farther along the sights. She couldn’t pull the trigger.

Reese loomed nearer, right over her face. His breath stank and was too warm and alien. His fingers were now wrapped in hers, squeezing and teasing. He looked down at her and locked eyes.

“Aim and shoot the fucking gun!” he shouted right at her, the words blowing her face into itself. He started coughing again. His chin flapped right above her. Spit came down on her face. She closed her eyes, grossed out and panicking. Reese wheezed worse than before. This time from the black pit deep in his lungs. His hands were coming up to his mouth, but were laced in hers. The gun jerked up.

The crack sounded again, deafening the field. Laura had her eyes closed, but felt the gun rip out of her hands as it recoiled and hit something hard. Reese had stopped coughing.

When she opened her eyes it was to the listless sky raining their soft white down. It was quiet and calm, like before. The geese were all hidden back in safety.

“You okay?” she asked, surprised at Reese’s sudden silence.

She spun her head, dead grass tickling her cheek, and saw the bottoms of his feet behind her head.

“Reese, are you okay?”

She pulled herself up, regaining balance.

He laid flat out on the ground, like another plump rock. His eyes were closed and he seemed to be sleeping. The gun laid against his thigh, also silent. It was too quiet.

“Oh shit.”

“Oh shit,” Laura said again bending over him body and shaking him.



His body shook, but Reese did not wake. She pressed her ear against his chest but couldn't hear through the layers of clothing on fat. Laura unzipped his jacket and was relieved to see his chest moving, tiny hills buoyed on the water.

She pulled out her phone, but there was no service.

The snow was still coming down lightly, but she was worried it would pick up. She looked back at the big man laying there. She knew what she was feeling was a cold panic. Her head felt clear, but it didn't feel as though she was breathing. Her consciousness was drifting somewhere at the back of her head. Out the back hole and floating like a balloon off into the distance. She tried to push Reese, but he was too heavy, an immovable 230 pounds.

Without even realizing what she was doing she put the blanket over Reese, grabbed his keys, left the cellphone and began walking towards the trees where the birds had flown from. She thought of the goose that lied there cold and getting colder.

She began running ahead, but after a few minutes was winded once again and had to slow to a breathy jog. The ground crunched underneath her feet, tangled knots of brown-yellow bramble. Snow was beginning to appear as a thin film on it. She turned back to Reese, he was an unrecognizable lump among the decoy birds. Ahead of her the forest loomed dark and forlorn. What about the gun, she thought. She'd left it in her daze.

She stopped. She had no idea what time it was and the snow was only supposed to get worse. He had her cell-phone. When she got back to town someone could trace it to him. She looked back to the forest.

She hadn't been paying attention when Reese and her had come out earlier in the day. She'd had to carry a couple decoy birds and had spent the entire walk dwelling on how much of an asshole Reese was. The spot he had parked was past the lake. She knew the birds had come from the lake. So she headed that way. It was the only plan she could think of.

The trees crowded in close and high. Much taller and ruder than they had seemed in the morning. She couldn't make out which way the lake was and there were no tracks from the morning. The snow was falling harder now, the grey deepening.

Laura wandered forward further until she came to a tree she remembered. It rose a few feet higher than the other trees in its' own air. It commanded the trees around it to back away. The thick branches stood like a Y, split down the middle with a large space. They'd walked into it from an angle in line with the left side of the Y, so she took off back down that direction.

The snow was now obscuring her vision, falling in little torrents through the trees. She couldn't make out anything in the distance, but kept going forward. She was tired, numb.

A howl broke out again. It sounded more savage to Laura, angry. Closer. She began to run again, fueled on by another setting panic. The trees came at her like tall thin fingers, trying to ensnare her body. She held her arms up and barreled blindly through the snow. And then she was there, at the lake. A small trail came to the lake from one side, only visible from the trees parting by its edge. The snow was obscuring the actual gravel they walked on earlier.

Laura was exhausted. She fell down on her knees and just gasped, letting the scene surround her.

It seemed unfair. The timeless water, only freezing and thawing, nothing to worry about. It relaxed, undisturbed, in its ignorance of her problems. The waters' ignorance of its own problems. Snow fell into the water, but no ripples were made. Laura wondered if the water moved when the geese swam, or even then did it sit unfeeling. The sad lake, numb after all its years of solitude. If she told it of death would it shed her some of its own droplets. Big whole tears of the beautiful nymphs that swam below the icy Northern waters. Heartless creatures who only followed their selfish lusts.

She thought of the goose that Reese had shot. Some martyr for the rest of its flock. Did the rest of the gaggle wonder, why not me? Had they already regrouped and forged a new rotation, a new goose filling the last ones spot, the same way Reese had only been trying to fill her fathers spot.

Was it her fault?

Her eyes hurt as they cried. She wiped them off, afraid they would freeze.

When she got up she felt better. Her stomach wasn't eating itself and her mind was back behind her eyes. It took her another 15 minutes to get to the car from the lake and she was completely numb and exhausted by then. Luckily, Reese drove a truck and was able to get going in the settled snow. The flakes were coming down big and plenty now, more than a half foot off the ground. Laura had to drive slow the whole way back to town, afraid she'd lose the road. By the time she got back, what was left of the grey light was dimming. Reese hadn't called anyone yet with her phone. Her mother was wide eyed and her words were mostly static.

"I hope he's alright," she'd said, eyes red.

"Me too," Laura said back.

"You think so?" her mom said again.

"I hope so," Laura responded back.

They were only talking for the words. The police were unable to get a search going because of the snow. The dogs wouldn't get a scent, they said. Helicopters could run once the snow stopped, but it'd be little use without light.

Everyone waited for a call the night through, but it never came. In the morning, a huge crowd of volunteers, more people than Reese had ever probably known in his life, came out and helped look.

They found her cell phone right off, mostly intact, but either with a dead battery or broken from the cold. It was a few feet from the lake, nowhere near where she'd left Reese. The decoy birds were found frozen under a couple inches of snow. The camouflage blanket was even accounted for. A few howls were heard during the search, nobody said anything of them, but everyone was thinking the same thing. A couple wolves had been reported looming around the outskirts of town a couple months back, but they'd disappeared. Some of the searchers even found what seemed to be tracks of a couple large paws. But of Reese Marshall, there was nothing. And of the goose that had fallen, like a couple bricks, just yards away from the woods, nothing was found.

Laura knew she'd never see either of them again.

"You think he's out there?" her mom asked throughout the search, eyes still red.

"I hope so," Laura kept replying, looking off to the woods, thinking of that still cold lake where all the greedy nymphs saved their tears and the water remained unfeeling.