

Good Morning, Jack

By Paul Ladner

Each of us evolves as a hunter in our own, unique way. The desire to hunt comes naturally enough when you love the outdoors and believe that the hunter is a humble hero, a provider, a cunning and clever pursuer of game and a capable woodsman. Aspiring to be that hunter will lead you naturally enough to the woods and guide your evolution into an ever more experienced outdoor person. The process and not the outcome alone being the goal. Having the opportunity to put those urges into practice cannot be taken for granted in the twenty first century.

Jack gave me permission to hunt his farm and a friend lent me a shotgun. I was probably 28 years old and a recent transplant from the city of Chicago. Shortly I shot my first deer. It was a yearling doe, but the success was enthralling. I could not have been more proud. I was going to be fed with meat made by nature and taken in the hunt.

This morning the chain clanged on the stock gate as it was unfastened in the cold and still predawn darkness. The gate was swung open and the truck driven through. The gate was again fastened as it is proper to leave gates as you find them. A short drive across the corral and the ceremony was repeated followed by a drive along a fenced in lane and then I enter the pasture. It is a large pasture by Midwest standards, several hundred acres of rolling, cow path crossed, wide open. A forgotten prairie haunted now by polled Herefords rather than bison and elk. There are a few old trees and some brushy cover in the deepest parts of the draws, but most is neatly maintained by the grazing cattle. Crossing the half mile or so to my destination in the dark is a rehearsed, slow rolling trace. Avoiding the deepest cow paths, dead falls and a mucky sleep in the bottom brings the gravel strewn creek crossing into view.

My first trip across the pasture was as a passenger in Jack's truck. I memorized his course learning to avoid the obstacles along the way.

Driving across the creek still stirs a childish fascination. Forging a water course like a pioneer in a wagon rather than whirring over on a bridge. Drainages, waterways and divides no longer define the landscape as they once did. Wetting the truck tires in the gentle stream sheds a bit of civilization and roughly marks the halfway point to the far side of the pasture. More twists and turns following the contour of the land and I manage the climb back out of the drainage and I arrive at a slight dip in the long flat area Jack called his landing strip.

Jack and I hunted together in the gun season for a number of years and enjoyed our tailgate lunch and strategy sessions. I would bring fresh baked bread and some candy and he would bring lunch meat and water bottles. We were gun season hunters and the brief experience never allowed us to learn very much. Neither of us really had any clue what we were doing and somehow that made the process that much more fun, the adventures and mis-adventures being part of our hunting lore.

The truck is parked in the little dip to conceal its location. I pop open the back. My gear is all stacked in the order I removed it after the last hunt. I put on the needed layers for the day's weather. Safety strap, check. Binoculars, check. Fanny pack, check. Climbing stand, check. All that is left to remember are the bow, arrows, arm guard and shooting glove. Most importantly the bow and arrows without which I am only nature watching. It is six weeks into the season and the routine is now just that.

This is the weekend before gun season. Jack (never taking up the bow) and I have a tradition of meeting late morning to set a ladder stand for him to hunt next weekend and then share lunch in town. We continued to set a ladder stand for a couple of years after he committed to ground hunting for safety reasons just in case he felt up to it. He never did. Some traditions die hard.

Leaving the truck behind I march across 150 yards of cow patch and climb the gate into the south end of the property. 80 acres of whitetail heaven. There are a couple small plowed fields that turn up arrowheads on occasion and a short stretch of Cedar Creek. Most of the acres are timber acres. They are populated by hickory mostly, but also plenty of cherry, elm, osage, hackberry and oak with an understory of brushy thorn covered thicket making cover for rabbits as big as deer. Cattle are usually let in for a brief period after the harvest is complete, but not this year. The undergrowth is unmolested and the only trails belong to the deer.

Jack has helped me track and recover a buck on more than one occasion before we set his stand. Somehow our appointed day to meet has brought me good luck over the years.

I know where I am going this morning as I had tossed and turned a couple times last night contemplating my odds. I have hunted the property for over twenty years, shooting my very first deer with that borrowed shotgun at the very north end, three quarters of a mile from where I am now and my first bow kill close to where I will be today. I'm still a novice deer hunter, but I have put in the time. Time with a bow in hand. Time waiting for deer to close the distance rather than reaching out and touching them with a lead slug. Time becoming a hunter. I have hunted this tree before and find it with the single reflective tack I put in it years ago.

Good morning, Jack. Thanks for allowing me the space to roam and pretend for a while to be the hero, provider, cunning and clever pursuer of game, pathfinder and capable woodsman.

I climb the tree and settle in to enjoy the pre-dawn pageantry. The twinkling stars, the brightening of the eastern sky, the rustle of a rabbit hurrying to its daytime hide and the chirp of the first bird. As shooting light arrives, I stand and prepare for an opportunity. Although I see several deer this morning there is one fine young buck that decides to wander by my tree at seven yards. Totally unaware, he passes broadside and the arrow is released. The shot is perfect and a mad dash ensues. He circles around my tree and heads back the way he came but succumbs within sight and seconds.

Jack never arrives. No tree stand will be set today and no ground blind will be deployed. No lunch date nor strategy sessions. Jack passed away last winter heart broken at losing his bride the year before.

Recovery of the deer is bittersweet. Maybe it always is, but today on my usual day to be with Jack and him not here I can't help but be a bit sad, but at the same time glad. Sad to miss my friend, but glad to have known him.

Jack's spirit was with me today and always will be in the hunting traditions we shared.

