

ICE AND THE BOY

Sometimes forward steps in life don't happen until the foundation breaks.

*By
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The rusting chrome frame of the dog barrier squeaked and rattled as they moved through the Bollinger county Missouri countryside. Ted sat in the back seat of the K-5 Blazer behind his father and grandfather. He was finally being included, having waited the requisite eleven years and cleaned what seemed like thousands of quail from his father's hunts. He was now twelve and, in his own mind, a vested member of the crew. The dogs were his responsibility and had been so since he was six. Each was his personal friend and what had begun as an awesome responsibility with daily challenges to small fingers and fears of forgetfulness, was now the foundation of his rightful place among the men. He knew their habits and expressions and could tell one from the other just by their breath, which now alternatively fogged the rear glass.

His father turned off the asphalt onto the county road that would take them to the farm. The turn caused an instinctive and defensive lift of the chrome thermos lids from which the men drank their steaming coffee. Ted scanned the field and thickets along the road for a sign of anything that he might point out to be considered by the older and wiser hunters in front of him. They always seemed to see things first. The hawks on the power



lines, the frost, the level and color of the rivers and creeks they crossed. Ted scanned every detail and tested it for significance against the history of conversations upon which he intently eavesdropped.

The large creek-gravel road crunched as the Blazer came to a halt at the aluminum gate and Ted sprung to his duty of removing the lock and clearing the way. As he jumped from the vehicle the late January air gave him an instant chill and seemed to freeze the inside of his nose. He carried the large ring of keys in his gloved hand and worked the lock and removed the chain and lifted the gate. This gate was large and bent and not so expertly installed such that he had to lift it and carry it most the way. He fought to not show difficulty with a task that the men could execute with one arm and their natural height.

Upon returning the keys and nonchalantly climbing around his grandfather and back into the rear seat, Ted gave the dogs one more quick look as the four wheel drive clunked into gear and drove them along the edge of a massive swath of bottom land. His

father stopped the vehicle and the men stepped out, donned their tattered shell vests and removed the shotguns from their cases. The smell of gun oil and leather wisped briefly about in the cold morning air as Ted reached for his shotgun. His was smaller and lighter, but he had learned to use it safely and effectively. He was not yet allowed to carry it loaded. This was a fact that he resented as he could only imagine his chance at a single quail or a trip-wire covey flush flying past and him with nothing but the surge of his heart to send their way. He had decided against complaining though; whiners were left at home. After all, he was here with them, the men and the dogs, on this cold morning.

Ted cranked down the manual glass on the rear of the Blazer, dropped the tailgate and the two dogs piled out. Dottie was the female black and white pointer and Buck was a block headed, tri-color male English setter. Ted considered Buck “his” dog. He was the first dog who had entered his family’s kennel as a puppy under his watch. Dottie was off down a hedgerow and Buck gave Ted a quick glance before he turned and sprinted to catch up. Ted watched their tails crack in the cold air as they ran the edge of the overgrown hedgerow and turned to quarter the long, cut field of what had a few months before been Milo.

Ted filed in between his father and grandfather. His father, a left-hander, was on the right and his grandfather was on the left. Ted struggled to keep up with their long paces and attempted to look at the ground for signs of coveys or anything else. He hoped to find and recognize a roost and thus alert the men that they should be aware and perhaps suggest

he should load his shotgun. Ted continued at what seemed to be a jog across the long field that sloped sideways down through a line of hardwood trees to a large creek and then sharply up on the far side to a steep hill. Hurricane Creek, they called it, for its violent tendencies during periods of heavy rain. The steep slope on one side forced the water in this valley down and through the creek and it oftentimes exceeded its banks. Ted could hear the water but could not see it. Across the bottomland there was a light dusting of snow, and ice covered the standing water in the tire tracks and in the low spots of the small diversion terraces that kept most of this field from eroding into the creek.

The hunt continued for about an hour as they walked along the valley, still in the bottomland edged by the creek. The dogs, out in front, approached a hedgerow that ran along an old wire fence that cut the field in half and ended somewhere in the trees along the creek. Instantly, as if stopped by an imaginary leash, Buck violently reversed directions and locked into a point. Dottie, the pointer, already trembling with the scent of quail stopped short and honored his point. Ted’s heart jumped into his throat and his pace quickened. They had all seen it together. Ted, already with shotgun shells in hand adjusted his direction so as to stay between the men.

As Ted approached the dogs he could see Buck motionless save for his pulsing nostrils and the primal look in his eyes that was drunk on the scent carried by the moist morning air. Ted’s eyes shifted to the men anticipating the order to load his shotgun, but at just that moment the covey burst in the air exploding in all directions. His father,

lighting fast, dropped one just as it cleared the hedge and he swung to fire twice and drop another that had banked to the right. His grandfather mechanically raised his shotgun in manner that looked like someone throwing a sack of flour. Time seemed to slow down as he saw his grandfather choose one bird, fire once, and lower his weapon. The bird folded and fell. Ted, momentarily frustrated, felt the discipline of his training kick in and he focused the exact locations of where the birds had dropped. He grandfather had taught him that, insisting that Ted concentrate singly on the image of where the bird fell noting speed, direction, manner of flight and carefully taking in any landmark that might aid in finding the spot again. There were three; two were easy marks, but the third, his father's second bird, was much more difficult. It had built up speed and distance before his father had dropped it, somewhat less convincingly than the first. Dottie managed the retrieve on his grandfather's bird and Buck quickly fetched his father's first bird and turned to the direction of the second. Ted looked at his father with the shells in his hand and they shared a look through which passed sympathy for the suddenness of the flush and permission to load his shotgun and find the other bird that had dropped in the direction of covey flight. No words were spoken.

Ted followed Buck down toward the creek never taking his eyes off the bare hickory tree with the slightly glowing den hole next to which he had marked the end of the downed bird's flight path. Ted, now in front of the men, took over and called to Buck who turned in his direction. Ted repeated the soothing "hunt dead" command that slowed the dogs from their frenetic hunting pace to a

more methodical search of the immediate area. Ted's eyes shifted constantly between the land hickory tree and Buck, and he could feel his pulse pounding in his ears. Buck was close now and should be on top of the bird. Buck twice passed the spot where Ted thought the bird should lay and each time he felt himself tighten his jaw trying to help Buck find the bird before the men caught up. On the third pass, Buck turned and shoved his muzzle underneath a snow-dusted tangle of vines. He backed out with the bird in his mouth and with head high brought it straight to Ted. The men were still catching up when Ted turned to raise the bird in the air and show them that he had the situation well in hand.

As he turned to put the quail in his inherited and loose fitting game vest, Buck locked on point again. Ted turned to look and touched the safety on the shotgun to verify its location and moved towards Buck. Ted approached softly repeating "whoa" and "easy" to Buck. While his conscious knew this was his moment to show the men he knew how to work a dog and shotgun, his subconscious took over and his movements seemed to be choreographed and directed by the dozens of times he had watched the men approach a dog on point and the hundreds of times he had replayed it in his mind. Buck was solid but nervous as Ted approached and looked down in front of and then back at the dog. A single cock quail thundered from the underbrush. Ted fixed his eyes on the dark brown and white stripe on the bird's head. He released the safety and fired, but the bird changed direction and did not fall but continued out across the wide snow and ice-covered creek. He fired his second shot in

desperation. Seemingly out of range, Ted reached out with this shot grasping more for his fleeting moment than the quail. The bird fell.

Buck charged down the steep bank and across the wide ice-covered creek. The big male Setter slid a moment and seemed to consider his footing and then continued across the ice and struggled up the far bank. He went straight to the bird, took it in his mouth and began back down the hill to the creek. He was moving fluidly in the way an animal moves at the height of its instinct as he jumped down from the far bank on the ice and snow of the creek. He seemed to collect himself and began to push off his hind legs as the surface beneath him turned from white to clear and then to the sap colored brown of the swirling creek water.

Buck sunk instantly to his eyes and then surfaced with the quail still in his mouth. He groped without hands for the edge of the ice and then began to tilt backward against the uneven traction and the current. The ice broke under his forepaws and he sunk and surfaced and reached out again. Ted saw a look of desperation in the dog's eyes. It was something he had never seen before. Ted turned to the men who were still closing on where he stood next to the creek, but they could not see what was happening in the swirling water below the creek bank. He looked not to ask, or seek guidance, but to check their location. He pulled back the receiver on his old Browning 20 gauge, locked the receiver in place, and laid the shotgun atop the mud and snow. The last thought he had was getting in trouble with the men for being unsafe with a shotgun. He left

the receiver open to show there was no doubt about his intent.

Ted bounded down the creek bank and onto the ice. Without reservation, the force in his skull had taken over his body and his eyes locked on the dog even as his third step broke through the ice and he sunk down into the brown water. He felt himself sink to just above his armpits and he pushed off of the gravel bottom with both feet. The frigid water choked out an involuntary primal moan, the sound one might make if he were suddenly snatched into the sky. He focused on the dog and began to swing toward him as best he could in clothes and boots, crushing ice with his arms and kicking with his feet and pushing off when he sunk to the bottom. The dog began to swim towards him but as they reached one another their momentum broke free a larger slab that created a whirling effect on the edge of the ice. Ted felt his boots slip in the gravel, but he managed to get one arm above the ice as his torso slipped underneath it. This time the dog saved him, as when his feet had broken free, he grabbed the dog's leather collar. Although he almost sunk the dog, he pushed against edge of the ice in his right armpit and pulled on the dog with his left. The dog's buoyancy helped him regain his balance and Ted managed to gain some traction on his toes in the loose creek gravel beneath him.

He turned away from the ice and reached behind to Buck and wrapped his right arm underneath the dog's flailing hind legs and at the same moment reached across the dog's near foreleg and under the elbow of the far leg. With this hold, he managed to pull Buck to him with the dog's body across his chest and the dogs head against his face. Ted

felt the warmth of the dog's inner ear and pulled him closer. Buck tilted his head slightly as if to acknowledge that he understood that Ted had him and Ted turned again to make his way back to the bank. The pair began to bob and sink and bash up against the ice that crumbled under their pressure and the flow of the water they put over the top. Ted attempted to bound forward by pushing against the gravel bottom. Just as he began to feel what seemed to be all his clothes tightening around his lungs, he found solid rock under the water and was able to walk with the dog. Still not moving but with the bird in his mouth, Buck leaned his head against Ted's face. Ted reached the bank, which was nearly vertical where the water was just over waist deep. He walked Buck to the base of a tree with exposed roots and lifted and pushed him up and out of the water. Buck scrambled and climbed the bank. Ted grabbed onto the roots and looked for a place to climb out. Then he saw the men.

They were standing upstream and above him on the high creek bank. The expressions on their faces were both blank and shocked and washed with disbelief. They did not, and had not, said a word. If they had, he had not heard it. Ted looked into their eyes and then returned to getting himself out of the water. They were standing in front of him when he crawled the last few feet up the steep bank and got to his feet. They stood there in silence looking at him; still in disbelief but in a way that one looks at something that suddenly and permanently changed from the way it had always been. Ted looked at them both, shaking water from his arms and only said, "He is my dog. I went to get him."

Without waiting for a reply, Ted turned away and walked back upstream to find his shotgun. He found it, right where he had left it. He lifted the Browning and brushed off the bits of snow and mud that had stuck to the barrel and stock. He looked at the open receiver. The last shell was lying there in the breach. Instinctively, he reached in to remove shell but as the ice soaked fingers of his Jersey glove touched it, he paused and touched the release that loaded the shell into the chamber. He stood there for a long moment looking at the loaded gun and listening to the water drip from his clothes onto his boots and onto the mud and snow around him. He shivered, straightened up and joined the men.