

## This Year's Hunt

They argued over who was going to go in whose truck again this year. like last year. and the year before. Every October on this particular Friday they'd stand in front of Smithy's house and bicker.

"No way", Brian said to Ike, "you take Archie this year." He started unbuttoning his red plaid hunting jacket. "As soon as we pull onto the 401, he falls asleep and snores so fuckin' loud you can't even hear the radio." He walked around to open the back of his GM, threw his jacket inside, and stared at Ike.

Ike had pulled in behind Brian and was sitting sideways in the driver's seat with the door open. He didn't seem to respond one way or the other to Brian. Brian could be a real asshole sometimes.

Chuck, crouched down on the other side of Brian's truck, checking the air pressure of the tires, grinned. He and Brian grew up together--they knew each other better than most brothers. "When did you start listening to the radio again, Bri?" he called over.

"Chuck you shut up", Brian warned.

"What's this? You don't listen to the radio anymore?" Peter took the bait. He was leaning against the front of Ike's truck, dressed in a sweatshirt, jeans, and running shoes. He was an accountant, and could've been fat and out of shape, but he got hooked on running five years ago. He was a lean man now, almost stringy. He had run three marathons since he turned thirty-five.

"Not since he's been DJ", Chuck explained.

"You're a DJ? Since when?"

Brian ignored the question, having reached for his duffle bag and begun busily rooting through it.

"Two months ago", again Chuck volunteered the information, moving around to the driver's side.

"So you're not in programming anymore?" Ike asked. Ike was a man who looked like he belonged in the bush. He was solid, with curly hair and a bushy beard that had become silver.

Brian pretended dismay as he stood up wearing a CHUM baseball cap. "You mean none of you guys have heard me on the air?"

"Nope." Ike shook his head and Peter shrugged.

"What station did you say you were on?" Archie leaned out from Ike's truck, to look straight at Brian with his bright white cap. Archie, who was fat and out of shape--he was a truck driver, Ike's brother-in-law--hadn't moved since he and Ike pulled in, except to open a can of beer from out of the back of the truck and start drinking it.

"CHUM", Brian answered before he realized it was a tease.

"CHUM? *I* don't listen to CHUM--do *you* listen to CHUM?"

"Never. Do you?"

Chuck grinned as he stood up and then walked around to return the tire gauge to the glove compartment of Brian's truck.

"CHUM? You gotta be kidding. Who'd wanna listen to CHUM?" They all burst out laughing.

"That's it. You can all ride with Ike! No one's coming in my truck!" Brian

slammed the back of his truck shut, thrust out his chest like a peacock, then burst into laughter himself.

Just then Smithy finally came out of his front door, carrying a cooler and a box of food. "So who's going with who?" he asked, as he came down his steps to the trucks.

Peter groaned.

"Look, I don't care", Ike spoke up and swung around, getting ready to drive.

"Archie can come with me."

Smithy put the stuff he was carrying into Ike's open truck and then closed the door.

"And in the interests of size and space, why don't you go with them," Chuck asked Peter, "and Smithy and me'll go with Brian."

"Fine with me", Peter said. He walked over to Archie's side then changed his mind. Anticipating him, Ike swung down to let him in his side.

"Chuck, you *did* put the beer in the back, didn't you?" Brian asked.

"Yeah, it's there."

Smithy climbed into the front of Brian's truck and Chuck got in behind him. Ike and Brian then confirmed the tradition with each other, "the Petrocan on Eleven?", climbed into their drivers' seats, and started their trucks.

They were headed to Brian's cabin, tucked in the bush sort of between two little towns and Algonquin Park. It was in what was now called 'the near north'. The drive wasn't all that long--usually three, three and a half, four hours at the most. But sitting three in front could be tight and the stop was always a welcome chance to stretch. Besides, 'gasoline alley' on the outskirts of Orillia had the cheapest gas in all of Ontario.

They backed out of Smithy's driveway, and headed up toward Eglinton. From there they caught the Allan Expressway to the 401.

Sure enough, as soon as they hit the 401, Archie dozed off.

"How can he be a truck driver?" Peter asked Ike. "Doesn't he fall asleep at the wheel?"

"I guess not," Ike answered. "Actually I think he's got a fifteen year record of no accidents."

"Amazing."

Though he was a high school shop teacher in the city now, Ike did in fact grow up in the bush. He was a basic kind of guy--strong, and with lots of opinions, but not a whole lot of words. He reached down to loosen the laces on his boots a bit, then settled in for the drive.

Peter might've liked a bit of conversation but he didn't mind its absence either. He wasn't one of those runners who plugged into a headset--his mind could amuse itself for hours at a stretch. He tried to get comfortable against Archie's mass to give a bit of room to Ike.

When they stopped at the Petrocan, it was clear that the ambience in Brian's truck was a bit different. Brian had already gassed up and the three of them were standing by his truck telling jokes.

Smithy held out his right hand. "Why can't you masturbate with this hand?" he asked.

Chuck and Brian both shook their heads. "I don't know--why?" Chuck asked.

"Cuz it's *mine*!" Smithy shouted, pulling his hand back possessively.

He danced around then laughing, and with his lanky body he looked like a hysterical Donald Sutherland in a M.A.S.H. out-take.

"How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb?" he asked.

"I don't know, how many?", Peter had joined them, while Ike filled up his truck and Archie went in to buy something to eat.

"One--but the light bulb has to really *want* to change." Smithy was beside himself by this time laughing at his own jokes. The others were laughing too--partly at Smithy and partly at his jokes. Not for the first time, Brian wondered just how good a psychologist Smithy really was. He had been what's called an 'industrial psychologist' for about twelve years, mostly measuring mental health in the workplace, sort of on a contractual freelance basis. But he'd mentioned he was thinking about applying for some position with the Ministry of Health.

"I got another one--listen--what do you call a crazy person who gets lost in the snow?"

Even before anyone could say 'I don't know' Smithy blurted out loudly enough for everyone at the station to hear, "a frosted flake!" Brian and Chuck stuffed him back into their truck, and Peter rejoined Ike and Archie who were by now ready to carry on.

In another hour and a half they reached Sundridge, which was sort of halfway between Huntsville and North Bay. They turned off the highway at Union Road, then drove out of town along what was informally called Forest Lake Road. They drove past the dump onto a dirt road, past the township office, past the house with two horses and a goat. At the lane to Forest Lake Lodge, they turned right and followed an old logging road away from the lake. A couple miles later they came to Brian's cabin.

It was around ten o'clock by this time and there was no moon, so they stumbled around in the dark for a bit until Brian unlocked the cabin door and lit a few kerosene lamps. The cabin really *was* a cabin--nothing fancy, nothing very finished. Brian had built it himself several years ago for probably no more than ten thousand.

There was no need to decide who would do what--everyone did what they always did. Ike got the water jugs from inside the cabin and made his way to the spring nearby, while Brian got a fire going in the woodstove. Smithy found a flashlight and headed off to the outhouse. The others brought in all their stuff from the trucks. Chuck put the food and beer into the fridge outside--without hydro it acted more like a thermos than a fridge, but at least it kept the food from the animals. When Ike returned, he filled a kettle with water and set it on the woodstove. Peter and Archie did whatever else needed to be done.

Tired, and knowing they'd be getting up at five for the hunt the next morning, they settled in fairly quickly. Since it was Brian's place, he took the main bed in the only bedroom. They tossed for the spare bed--Peter got it this year. Ike claimed the couch. Chuck got the pull-out cot from the closet, and Smithy and Archie cleared the floor in front of the woodstove.

"Five o'clock?" Peter checked, and getting nods all round, he set his wrist alarm-stopwatch.

After a few minutes, the kerosene lamps were put out and everything was dark and still and quiet. Ike was reminded of his childhood. Then of the seven years he had to go before early retirement--he intended to move back up north and stay there. It wasn't that he disliked teaching--it's just that the city was--well--the city, and he had too much to lose by switching Boards now. If he could've maybe fifteen years ago gotten a job up at

the high school in Mattawa or even North Bay, he would've. But fifteen years ago only Toronto was hiring.

Archie snored. A few of the others groaned and Peter called out, "who's beside Archie?"

"I am". Smithy said.

"Well give him a good swift kick, will ya?"

Smithy nudged Archie and he stopped. Silence again.

"Why did the chicken cross to the other side of the road?" Everyone groaned.

"He doesn't know, but he's in analysis to find out." Smithy laughed infectiously.

"Smithy?"

"Yes. Brian?"

"Go the fuck to sleep."

"Yes, Brian."

At five o'clock, Peter's watch began to beep and the men began to wake up, get up, and wash up, in various stages. Brian lit the lamps and put a couple more logs into the stove to take out the October chill--his wood pile was behind the cabin on the way from the outhouse. Someone had put a huge pot of water on the stove a few hours before so there was hot water for washing. Smithy filled a kettle and put it on to boil for coffee. Chuck got some mugs out of the cupboard and found a jar of coffee in one of the boxes of food Peter had brought in from the fridge.

"I brought some of those little juice cartons if anyone wants it instead of coffee", Peter offered, rummaging in the food box.

"How 'bout in addition to?" Chuck reached out his hand to accept one.

Most had by now gathered around the woodstove, sitting on various chairs and the single couch that filled 'the living room'.

"Well look at this!" Chuck whistled. He was staring at Archie, who had just appeared in the bedroom doorway all decked out in what was clearly a brand new outfit: grey-green camouflage pants, matching t-shirt, jacket, and hat, and heavy boots.

He grinned, "Well you guys all take this hunt thing so seriously, thought I'd give it a try." He turned sideways to get through the doorway, then, to great cheering and whistling, he sashayed to a pose in front of the woodstove. Ike was surprised to see Archie like this. Maybe he was still half asleep.

The others were not quite so dressed up for the occasion. Peter had changed his jeans for sweatpants, Brian and Chuck wore the standard fare, straight out of Sportsman magazine. Smithy--well--it looked like Smithy's wife dressed him. out of the Simpson's catalogue. And Ike--as always Ike had on that well-worn brown jacket that looked like he grew up in it. probably did. It was warm. It was waterproof. And it was full of pockets.

"All right", Brian said, "let's get down to business." He got the deck of cards from a cupboard in the kitchen. Same deck as every year. They gathered around and cleared the upended chunk of log that was an 'end table'. He shuffled and then dealt. Five, six, Jack, three, ten, queen.

"Ike--you're it", Brian pointed to the queen. They all cheered.

"All right!" Chuck slapped him on the back. "This year's hunt is gonna be goooood!" He finished his coffee, grabbed his green checked jacket and went outside.

"Way to go, Ike", Archie heaved himself up and headed outside.

"Yeah, this is gonna be great!" Smithy, like the others, was excited about the challenge.

Ike had never been hunter before. Every year it was someone else. This year it was him. He smiled--couldn't conceal his delight.

Once they had all gathered outside, Ike looked at his watch. "Everyone got five-forty-two? Okay I'll start at six. Hunt's over at nine."

"Ooh--an extra three minutes this year--thank you, Ike", Peter checked his watch.

"Everyone back at nine-thirty?" Ike asked. They all grunted assent.

"Everyone got their number?" They nodded. They were ready.

"Okay", Ike said, then couldn't resist adding with a glint, "see you all later". He went back into the cabin and the others took off.

He sat on a chair, both hands around his coffee mug, thinking about what he was about to do. No one had ever gotten five before. He could. He would this year.

Six o'clock. He put a six-pack into his beaten-up knapsack and headed out. He decided to follow the path that headed north first. It was a brisk day, cooler than other years. But it would be clear--the dew was drying and soon the forest would be bright. He remembered the year it was raining. What a mess! What was the catch that year, two? He remembered Chuck, Brian, and Peter had really gotten into it. They had piled into Brian's truck after breakfast, completely covered with mud and oozing with every step, and drove back over to the lodge on Forest Lake to ask if they could use their showers. The owners took one look at them and told them to go jump in the lake. And so they did.

All three of them. In the middle of October. Turkeys.

After about half an hour of travelling, Ike heard a noise. He stopped. Nothing. He started walking again. There on his left. Steps? Yes, definitely steps. He looked-- saw nothing. He took off his knapsack, carefully laid it down on the ground, then left the path. All of a sudden someone made a run for it maybe twenty or thirty yards ahead of him. He shouted out, "I got you!"

"Oh yeah?" Chuck's voice. "What's my number?", he taunted.

"Just a minute and I'll tell you!" Ike took a few more steps and heard a rustle in response ahead of him. He picked up a few rocks and tossed them to his right. The rustle moved to the left. He started toward it on a diagonal this time. ever so slowly. stepping ever so carefully. He threw a few more rocks to his right. The rustle moved closer. But damn it he couldn't see a thing, the bush was so thick here. He walked further on. not a sound.

Chuck was crouched in the undergrowth, on his hands and knees staring out to the right. Ike was good. He couldn't hear his steps anymore but he knew he was coming. He felt him. He stared, but couldn't see anything but trees and brush. It was so quiet.

"Forty-nine."

Chuck swung around to see Ike grinning directly at him. He looked at the pinny he was wearing, like the ones they used in high school playing basketball in phys-ed class--as if he couldn't believe that the number sewn on the frayed cotton square was forty-nine. He looked back to the right, pointing, and then when he realized what Ike had done he cried out, "Why you old bugger!"

He scrambled up as if to make a run for it. Useless, since Ike knew his number,

but at least he could keep his pinny. But Ike was expecting it. He lunged for him and soon the two were hollering on the ground, laughing, as Ike wrestled his pinny off him. Chuck kneeled, stripped of his number, now dangling from Ike's belt loop.

"Shit", he said, then got up and started to head back down the path toward the cabin. It was only six-thirty. Ike grinned and went back to the path to get his knapsack, then headed a bit further north up the path. He felt the swing of number forty-nine against his thigh and smiled again. The day was warming up just a touch. After ten or fifteen minutes he came to the creek. He followed it east for a bit till it met with the other path. He looked around, nothing. The soft earth by the creek had no footprints. The creek itself was clear, the bed undisturbed. He heard the occasional bird--he started off down the path. The forest was so beautiful like this. silent. and full. When he came to the fork, he took the left on impulse. After another fifteen minutes, another fork. Geez, he wouldn't have time to follow them all. Left again on a hunch. He walked quickly but carefully. Listening, looking, trying even to smell--but nothing. Nothing. He kept going, intending to take the next left too because it circled back to the main path. Still looking, noticing everything.

All of a sudden, he stopped, shot his pointing finger upward, and bellowed, "Smithy!" He looked up to see Smithy almost fall out of the tree. "Fourteen!"

Smithy recovered his footing and scrambled down, not unlike an adolescent ape. Ike was waiting at the bottom, his hand outstretched, grinning.

"How the hell--". Smithy muttered as he took off his number.

Ike pointed to the bark on the tree about three feet up--it was scraped and there was a small black scuff mark.

"That's no deer", he said smugly, still grinning.

"Well you clever son of a bitch", he handed him his number for this year's hunt, number fourteen.

They walked together back to the main path. There Smithy headed down toward the cabin, Ike decided to go back up towards the creek. It was close to seven-thirty. It was about half an hour to the bend. Well, might as well. Who knows what might be found on the way.

He got to the bend in twenty-five minutes. He looked around, trying to decide. Yes. Here would do it. He took the six-pack out of his knapsack, walked a bit off the path at the peak of the bend, and tossed it half under some bushes. Then he went back a bit to climb a dense but tall tree he'd noticed just around the bend. Perfect, he said to himself as he perched rather comfortably with a good view of the six-pack, but out of sight of the path to it.

He waited ten minutes. Twenty minutes. He looked at his watch. Damn. Eight-fifteen. He'd *have* to be coming down soon.

At eight-seventeen, he heard him. Slow cautious steps. He waited. The steps got closer, then slower--he saw it. Brian came into view. This was too easy, Ike chuckled to himself. But he couldn't make out his number yet. Brian looked around, puzzled. He looked at the trail behind him, then peered once more into the bush on his left, on his right. He stepped closer, to the six-pack, to Ike. He bent down to the six-pack. Just as soon as he had one in his hand, he heard Ike's voice, "That Bud's for you..."

Instantly he realized what had happened. "Fuck!" he cried out and threw the can to the ground.

"That wasn't fair!" he looked around to locate the still singing voice. "This was a trap! I was baited!" he cried with indignation. Ike was taking his time climbing down the tree, still singing.

"You old buzzard!" Brian was still cursing. He couldn't believe he got suckered in like that. Ike walked out of the bush, and across the path, to where Brian was stamping and slapping a tree here and there. Ike picked up the can Brian had tossed and opened it. It sprayed all over Brian, like a mad dog being hosed down. Ike then held it out to him and with his other hand waited for the pinny. They traded. Brian took a few slugs from the can and started laughing. "This was a good one, ol' boy." He took a few more gulps then said, "What I can't figure is how did you know to bait me *here*?"

Ike grinned. "Smithy needed someone to boost him into the tree. He's long, but he's not that long." Brian shook his head in wonderment.

Ike looked at his watch. Eight-thirty. Only half an hour left. And he'd gotten only three. Time to head back, or the three he got wouldn't even count. He left Brian with the beer and started at a trot back down to the cabin. He passed no one, nothing on the way. Not one tell-tale crow flying overhead even. Damn. Where could they be? Archie and Peter, they were the two that were left--where would they go?

He stood outside the cabin. The sun was shining brightly now. What could he do in two minutes? Well even so, he wasn't about to quit yet. He knew these guys. They'd all been buddies for years. In fact, the five of them helped Brian build this cabin. He knew everything about them. What they drank, what they ate, their sorespots, their good points, their hobbies, their habits--aha. He walked over to the truck. I don't believe it, he thought, but it's worth a try. He opened the passenger door. And the noise startled

Archie from his doze.

"Twenty-two", Ike said as he looked at his watch and walked to the cabin. Archie rubbed his eyes and started to move his cramped legs.

Ike walked into the cabin. Smithy and Chuck were sitting on the couch in front of the woodstove, eyes on their watches. It was nine o'clock sharp.

"Two?" Chuck asked.

"Three", Brian corrected as he appeared in the doorway and raised his can of beer to Ike.

"No, four", Ike said as Archie lumbered in and half sleep-blind put his pinny into Ike's outstretched hand.

"Coffee", Archie mumbled, squinting at their cups.

"Where was he?" Brian asked.

"In the truck", Ike answered.

"No", Smithy said in disbelief.

"Yeah."

"He was in the truck all this time?" Chuck asked.

"Sleeping like a babe."

"Coffee", Archie was rattling in the kitchen for the jar of coffee.

"You guys didn't give me any coffee this morning", he whined.

"Archie, it *is* morning", Smithy answered.

Archie paused. "Then when was before?"

"So where's Peter?" Brian asked.

"Yeah, anyone seen Peter?" Smithy echoed.

"Nope. He split. Took off up the north path--haven't seen him since", Chuck answered.

"Well, he's still got time. Fifteen minutes yet", Brian answered.

"Yeah, but if he doesn't make it, Ike here will be the first to get five!" Smithy slapped him on the back.

"So--who's making breakfast?" Archie had gotten himself a cup of coffee and had made his way into a chair, an old upholstered green thing with broken springs.

"Yeah, breakfast!" Smithy got up and headed out to the fridge. Brian got a couple fry pans from where they were hanging on nails on the wall. He rinsed them out while Chuck scrounged for bowls and various utensils. Ike looked at his watch and opened the door to look out. nothing.

"So what's it like being a DJ?" Smithy asked Brian while he chopped up a bunch of stuff.

"Yeah, what station did you say you worked for?" Archie had come a bit to life.

"Geez, why don't you talk to Chuck about his job instead?"

"Chuck, you got a job? I thought you were still on unemployment", Smithy turned from cracking eggs.

"I am--Brian's just getting me back for telling you about his new 'career'."

"Any luck looking yet?" Archie asked from his chair.

"No, not really", Chuck answered. He stood by Brian and looked over Smithy's shoulder. "Did he put enough salt in?"

"I don't think he's put any salt in yet."

"Smithy, you are going to put salt in this time, aren't you?"

It began to look like a 'three stooges' scene. Smithy pointed to one bowl. "That one gets salt. Here." He handed them the salt shaker. "This one's mine", he hugged the other bowl to his chest.

"It's nine-twenty-six", Archie spoke up. Ike was still hovering by the door, opening it every now and then.

"I bet he doesn't make it", Brian said.

"You got it", Chuck replied, "twenty bucks."

"Twenty and a case of two-four", Brian upped the wager.

"You're on."

"Are you guys putting any cheese in that stuff?" Archie called out.

"No", Smithy called back, "just salt".

"Salt's good", Archie approved.

Smithy put the pans on the stove and covered them. He looked at his watch.

"Nine-twenty-nine and counting".

They all got on their feet and gathered in the center of the room, patting Ike on the back, counting down in unison.

"Ten--nine--eight--seven--"

Suddenly the door opened. Peter hung on the frame. panting. sweating. and staring at his watch.

"Nine-twenty-nine-fifty-four, right? I made it?" He looked up at the others.

"Where the hell have you been?" Brian asked.

Peter staggered in and collapsed on the couch. He smiled wanly, "out".

Chuck then thought of it. "I bet he went to the ridge."

"You went to the ridge?" Smithy asked, wide-eyed.

Peter nodded, heaving a little less now.

"But that's almost ten miles away", Brian said.

"Then straight up and straight down", Peter gasped.

"You went to the *top* of the ridge?" Smithy asked. "And back? In three hours?"

"Ike, you're a clever bastard. I know that", Peter said then, out of breath but clearly. "I figured the only way to beat you--was to outrun you."

"You got *that* right", the others muttered and nodded.

"Say isn't the ridge out of bounds?" Brian mentioned casually.

"Yeah--didn't we decide that we could go only as far as the bottom?" Chuck supported him.

"What? We didn't decide that; When did we say that?" Peter staggered to his feet, appalled. His pulse started to race again. "No one told *me*" he pleaded to Ike.

Ike hesitated for just a moment, then said "No, they're just playing with you--you made it", he reached out to shake his hand, "fair and square."

"So, let's get on with the show, shall we?" Archie heaved himself out of the chair.

Ike complied, unfastening the four pinnies from his belt loop. Brian, Chuck, Smithy, Archie, and Peter cheered and whistled then, as he spiked the bunch of four into the wall next to the other clumps of twos, threes, and one other four. He pulled out his jack-knife and carved his name and the year underneath.

They raised their beer or coffee or whatever in a toast to this year's hunt. Then sat down to eat breakfast.

"Next year", Brian announced, "I'm gonna bring a pair of stilts, with moose legs

tied onto them."

"Yeah? And next year *I'm* gonna run to the ridge and back", Archie said, expecting the laughter he got as he reached for another helping.

"Next year", Smithy offered, "I'm going to wear my shoes backwards."

"That's great, Smithy", Chuck said to him, "then your feet will match your head."

More laughter, and another toast.