The Snipe Hunt

Tim Sherrill
I was thrilled when my brother Steve told me we were going snipe hunting that night. For years I had heard the men on the bench in front of my parent's fish camp speak of snipe hunting and then burst out laughing. They were commercial fishermen and smelled of cut bait and catfish, but still they commanded a boy's respect. I always laughed with them, but only so I wouldn't seem ignorant.

Chandler came to pick us up just before dark. At nine years old, I was easily impressed by big people, but he was big enough to impress adults. He always said that chocolate pie and milk would make me stout. He put away his fair share of it. I had no reason to doubt him, having once seen him lift the front end of a small tractor. He was about thirty and had the uncanny ability to laugh and say "Shit!" at the same time. He said "Shit!" quite a lot.

Steve hopped in the truck as soon as Chandler drove up. "Come on, and bring the Tree Dog," he shouted. "And go find a burlap sack."

I got the Tree Dog and put him in the truck with us. We once had a name for the beagle, before he went blind with cataracts. He had a good sense of direction, having returned home several times after being dumped off at someone else's house. His habit of running into trees and falling into ditches earned him his new title, the Tree Dog. Chandler swore that he was a natural born snipe hound.

I was on my best behavior as we drove from the fish camp. Best behavior around Chandler wasn't the ordinary best behavior. I could hear disgusting jokes, spit, and forget to wipe my nose. The only thing I couldn't do was whine. If I whined, Chandler would set me out of the truck, no matter where we were. I didn't whine.
The field Chandler selected was about half a mile from our trailer, behind a bootlegger’s house. It was overgrown with small trees, monstrous bushes, and innumerable briar patches. An old graveyard at the north end of the field didn’t do much for the atmosphere of the place.

“Do you know how to hunt snipe?” Chandler asked.

“Well, not really. I’m not even sure what a snipe is.”

Chandler turned to my brother. “Shit, I knew he couldn’t do anything. I don’t know why I let you talk me into bringing him. He couldn’t even be the bag man.”

“Sure I can,” I said. I shifted into a pathetic whine and begged, “Come on, let me.”

Chandler just stood there looking at me, as if he were deciding the fate of all mankind. “Okay, just stand in that ditch over there, with your back to the drainage pipes. We’ll drive the snipes along the ditch and you bag ‘em up. And don’t fall asleep!”

Sleep was the last thing on my mind as I stood there alone in the ditch in pitch darkness. The first thing on my mind was the list of creatures, real or otherwise, that would possibly have a reason for mauling a young boy.

I was in the ditch for what seemed an eternity. I expected to see the sun rise just any minute. The massive drainage pipes behind me stood ready to pour out all manner of horrors, as did the graveyard. I just stood there in the dark holding my burlap sack, knees knocking, waiting for a herd of snipes to come charging down the ditch. Chandler never did tell me what a snipe looked like.

I began to experience the crushing loneliness that only a nine-year-old can feel. I wondered what tragedy had caused Steve and Chandler to abandon me. I also wondered how Mom and Dad were taking my disappearance, if they were heartbroken or if they were already shopping for another kid. I wondered what would happen to my room.

A muffled sound to my left brought me back to reality. Something was out there. That something was also moving toward me. In seconds, my vision of a snipe grew from a small fury creature to an enormous, hate-filled predator, lusting for the taste of my blood. Since my knees had long since turned to Jello and my feet to cement, my only alternative to being eaten was to bag the snipe. As the sound moved closer to the edge of the ditch, I held the bag open and began to remember the lyrics to “Amazing Grace.” The creature hesitated at the rim of the ditch and tumbled end over end into my bag. It was the Tree Dog.

Steve and Chandler were laughing when they drove up. They laughed even harder when they saw me standing in the ditch holding my bag, with the Tree Dog at my side.

“Why’d ya leave me out here all night for,” I shouted. I was relieved to see them, but also mad.

Lights and Shadows 17
"It's only been thirty minutes. I'll bet you were scared to death, weren't you?" Steve said.

"No, I ain't scared. But I am telling Dad when I get home."

"Stop whining, kid," said Chandler. "It was just a joke. Get in the truck."

When we got to the trailer, I stormed in to tell on Steve. I expected Mom and Dad to sweep me up in their arms with tears of relief. Instead, Dad looked up from his paper with a stupid grin on his face. "Get any snipes?" my other brother asked, sporting the same stupid grin. I was crushed.

Several days later, I was sitting on the bench with the commercial fishermen when the subject of hunting came up. Eventually they worked their way around to snipe hunting. The men were all smiles, probably remembering when they left some frightened kid standing in a dark field for a few hours. This time when they laughed, I laughed, not because I was trying to fit in, but at the thought of my eight-year-old cousin standing alone in a dark field. I was definitely going to show him how to snipe hunt.