

A Sin of Omission

The echo of an unrevealed hunting accident haunts a quail hunter's memory long after the sound of the shot.

Written by Jim Wilson
Illustrated by Joe Mahler

I never told anybody, not until now, but it was my fault my dad shot our bird dog. It was an accident, but it was still my fault. I didn't realize at the time I was to blame, that my sin of omission had brought Jo close to death one warm December afternoon at the edge of a cornfield in Granville County while I was off at college in Chapel Hill.

From the first moment I remember watching my dad reach into the game bag of his hunting coat and remove, one by one, half a dozen plump little bobwhites, I knew I would be a quail man. The realization was sudden and visceral, striking like true love or 190-proof liquor. This would be who I was. My dad handed me each bird, and I stroked their feathers. Each made good weight in my hand. He smiled when I pulled a bird to my nose and smelled it, inhaled that aroma of winter woods and earth and broom straw and decay, a fragrant essence hinting of wildness and cold and secluded dark places. What dog wouldn't relish putting his nose down into that gravy?





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Later, I walked in my dad's steps to the back of our yard, where the grass gave out and dark woods began, and watched as he gutted and plucked the birds. His fingers, sticky with blood and clotted with feathers, moved quickly over each one. My dad explained that the birds with the white throat patch and eye stripes were males, and that the females had buff-colored patches and stripes. When he removed their entrails, he held up heart, liver, gizzard and intestines like some pagan priest and named them before tossing them into the woods. He opened the crop of each bird and showed me the seeds inside: milo, soybeans, beggar lice and some unidentifiable weeds. Their crops were full; they had eaten well that day. We would eat well the next day.

From such beginnings—a rustic tableau once common between fathers and sons in the South—was born a lifelong obsession with bobwhite quail. It is a love that surpasses my comprehension. I don't try to understand it any longer; I simply accept that thoughts and images of quail hunting evoke something instinctive for me, something

neither rational nor irrational. I suspect I am not alone in this sentiment.

Love and Death

I love those birds, yet I kill them and eat them. How can you kill a thing you love? It is a mystery as old as human hunting, an ancient primal question. Of prehistoric hunters anthropologist Wade Davis says, "Every day, you had to kill the thing you loved most, the animals upon which your life was dependent. It was the first mystery—and I would argue the basis of religion, which was an attempt to explain what happens after you die."

If you love quail, then you must love bird dogs. Pointers, setters and spaniels are the *sine qua non*—the "without which not"—of quail hunting. You can quail hunt without a dog, but it is a miserable, unsatisfying shade of a thing that's not worth the effort. It's like kissing a picture of your girlfriend instead of her lips.

My dad had brought Jo home a couple of years before I began quail hunting. She was a tiny,

delicate-looking black-and-white pointer-setter mix who, knowing my dad's frugal nature, was probably the runt of the litter, the dog least likely to succeed, a pup nobody wanted. I was happy to have her. My dad let me name her, and I chose Josie because of my fascination with a character in a book I was reading. (Actually, I was enamored of this fictional farm girl with brown hair and dreamed of bringing home to her a coat full of bobwhites. What she might ever do with them I never considered. The gesture, the moment of relinquishing something of value to another, was what mattered.)

Against the odds, including my dad's admitted shortcomings as a bird dog trainer, Jo became the best dog I've ever hunted over. She was birdy from the beginning and loved to hunt bobwhites, probably more than I did. In the field, she was quick but thorough, working best after being given free rein to disappear for about 15 minutes and scrub off some repressed energy. She was not a woman who would lie to you. If Jo said there were no birds in that strip of partridge peas, there were no birds in that strip of partridge peas. And if my dad or I called out, "Hunt up, Jo. Hunt up," because we thought she had been too hasty in her assessment of a birdy-looking spot, she would turn to the offender with a look of sad bemusement that seemed to say, "I'll do it, but it ain't going to make any birds come flying out of there."

By late afternoon, the end of her tail would be bloody from beating against brush and briars. I reckoned it her badge of honor, just as the scratched and bleeding backs of my hands were my badge of bird-hunting authenticity.

Often I hunted alone with Jo. I like hunting with others, but going alone also is good. Sometimes it's the best way. When I was 16, Jo and I were hunting, walking down the railroad track, our shortcut from a cornfield to a milo field. She was 50 yards down the track, and I was walking slowly, my shotgun held over my forearm and pointing toward the ground. Suddenly, I heard a bang and gravel scattered 6 inches from my right foot. I responded with every cuss word I knew at the time. I've since added considerably to my vocabulary.

Frantically, I looked at my boot to make sure blood wasn't flowing, but I was all right. I figured I must have absentmindedly slipped the safety and touched the trigger for the right-hand barrel. *I can't tell anybody about this*, I thought, *because I might not be allowed to hunt*. That was the important thing, the preservation of my hunting days. And so I immediately plotted a strategy of silence. I was unhurt, and no one would know what had happened.

Out of Mind

For several weeks the incident lingered in my thoughts whenever I picked up my shotgun, an

aged Charles Daly 12-gauge featherweight, a gun that, if you weren't careful, would smack you harder than your mama when you misbehaved in church. Gradually, like so much that comprises our days, the incident faded from memory, and I no longer fretted over the fact that I had nearly—literally—shot myself in the foot.

Another quail season passed, another Thanksgiving and Christmas spent pursuing bobwhites with my dad and Jo. The three of us, and sometimes a neighbor or my brother, Sam, hunted hard into the winter, through January and February until near darkness on the very last day of the season. I loved the cold hunting, the rough, frozen fields, the dying sun glinting on broom straw and the slicing wind on my cheeks that sent snot running unchecked from my nose. Then came college, and our quail-hunting triumvirate was now but two on most days. I thought often of the birds and Jo and my dad as late autumn arrived and I struggled to accustom myself to living inside city limits for the first time in my life. I thought myself to sleep in those days by retracing our hunts, trampling from one covert to another in a piece of poor country where I longed to be. It rained without stop over most of Thanksgiving break, and the red fields turned to mire under dark, gray skies, and we did not hunt. Christmas, I thought, would be different.



My dad quit quail hunting after Jo died. I never asked why, but I think I understand now. I, however, was only 20 years old and eager to find a new dog, anxious to resume the hunt.



In early December, my dad and Jo hunted one of our favorite fields, the big one near the lake that often had corn or wheat planted in it, the one with the low area in the middle that most times had a few inches of standing water and occasionally contained a mallard or two. My dad killed one quail with a single shot on the covey rise, and Jo retrieved the bird. As she approached within a few feet, bob-white in mouth, my dad, the side-by-side angled across his left arm, reached to take the bird. The gun fired, hitting Jo in the top of her neck and slamming back the gun's top lever, splitting the web of flesh between my dad's thumb and index finger.

Jo lay bleeding on the ground, her legs pawing the air as though she were running. My dad took off his hunting coat, wrapped it about her and carried her to the car and on to the veterinarian's office, where Jo was medicated, stitched and cared for. She slept on a hastily fashioned bed of old blankets on the back porch throughout her recovery, which eventually was all but complete. She was the lone dog my dad ever allowed in the house. Only a small scar remained where her coat did not grow back as it should have. She showed no disinclination to hunt, no fear of shotgun blasts. She was a bird dog; that was her life, and she would not be denied her nature or her pleasure.

It was a couple of weeks after the accident, with Jo still lying on the blankets and watching me with her dark brown eyes as I'd walk past, when my dad asked if I wanted to ride along to the gunsmith shop. "I want to make sure there's nothing wrong with that side-by-side," he said. "I know the safety was on; I can't figure out why it went off like that." After hearing the story of what had happened to Jo, the gunsmith began taking apart the shotgun. He held up a piece and said, "I'm sure you've got a weak trigger spring. I'm surprised it hasn't been a problem before."

Fault and Blame

That's when I knew: It was my fault. I should have figured something was wrong with the gun. I could have prevented the whole thing if I'd only confessed to nearly shooting myself in the foot. Again I remained silent. I felt too guilty, and so I added that to the secret list of things that I would not talk about. I would think about it, take it out and hold it up as an example of my many failures, but I wouldn't speak of it.

Jo lived to 13 years of age before she simply failed to wake one morning, the best way of all for a dog, or a man, to go. My dad wasn't so lucky. After surgery for a spot on one of his lungs, within nine months his doctors found that the cancer had spread to his brain. Even though he died within six weeks of his diagnosis, his was not an easy death. As the summer lengthened, my father lost the ability to

speak and then to move. I could only watch as he became less and less of the man I had known, a shade of what he used to be when I was young and he schooled me in the pastimes of country boys, of hunting, fishing and baseball. As he lingered, I sat in his room and watched him slip toward death and cursed his dissolute and disinterested angels for failing to keep him safe. There was nothing I could do. I felt I should rest my hand on his or touch his gaunt, whiskered face, but I didn't. We are not a demonstrative family; we keep ourselves to ourselves. It is our way. He died alone in early morning darkness on a July day when the sun came up white and the air was dry and hot at first light.

In the days following his death, the most natural and comforting thought was of the three of us hunting. Jo holds point at the end of a brown field flanked on three sides by a catbrier and honeysuckle thicket. My dad approaches from the right, I from the left, and as we close, the covey erupts from the field stubble. We begin to mount our guns. I freeze the image while we remain in motion, as though holding that unfinished act gives them life everlasting. John Keats learned that 200 years ago after admiring a scene on a Grecian urn. I figured it out while picturing a Southern factory worker and a cheap bird dog hunting red clay North Carolina fields. That is the image of us I keep, the one I cherish.

My dad quit quail hunting after Jo died. I never asked why, but I think I understand now. I, however, was only 20 years old and eager to find a new dog, anxious to resume the hunt. And hunt I did, although despite having a number of bird dogs, I never found one as good as Jo. Even today when I am quail hunting, I always picture Jo, her tail held high and bloody, her jowls quivering with the scent of quail on the ground.

I have a friend who says there is no always, and I myself am cautious of the word. It's an easy word, one often uttered without thought and empty of the forever it promises. But I know she is wrong. I believe in always; I always have. Always is a rare thing. You don't often have it within your grasp. You do, however, know it when you find it, and you'd best hold hard to it. Jo was an always kind of dog.

Decades after I failed to tell my dad of my accident, I still sometimes think of my negligence, usually on nights when I'm feeling I haven't measured up in some way to some self-imposed standard, when the ghosts of regret hover by my side and hiss aloud my failures in the darkness. I could have prevented harm to a man and a dog—my dad, my dog. I let them down, and they never knew. I'd like to apologize now, but there's no one left who would give a damn. ♦

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