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about 1040 words

*(Note: Any similarity to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.)*

### **THE HUNTING ACCIDENT**

By Paul Lambrecht

So my friend Webb had come home to Vermont to see his grandmother who was most likely counting her final raindrops on the windowpane. She was covered in tattered quilts on the first floor, laid out on a mattress, an old gas lamp on the table providing the sole illumination. She had been a proud frontier woman, tough as piss. Today, at the age of ninety-eight, her mind had gone, anticipating the final mounting of her spirit. I had come along for the ride, and I was jittery, because up here in the rarified Vermont air, every man, woman, and child had this very day, been set loose into the trees with cheap rifles and visions of venison.

I sat in the car parked in front of the old woman's house while Webb held her hand inside and whispered his goodbyes into her vacant eyes. Every minute or so, I heard the distant register of a shotgun blast. Must be a lot of deer out there, I thought to myself. Blast Blast!

Webb finally came out with a wan paisley smile. He got in the car and started it up. "You know, it was fine almost until the end, when she took my hand and tried to break my thumb. She said she wanted to spit on me."

"Tough old bird," I said.

"Yeah," he said, though obviously pained beyond his thumb. "She's still got some fight left."

Webb's grandmother had moved into this old farmhouse in a string of hills outside Fair Haven back in '46 when it was budding arcades and cow pastures. Even then the house was a hundred years old and some parts fifty years on top of that. Here, lost in the fog of a thousand months, she had derived meandering solace from studying her Bible and playing concertos on an old Aerosonic piano. Webb and I drove down the road named after her late husband, misty ourselves, he in the eyes and me in some inner center of affect...

I was ready for a beer, so we stopped at a roadside bar and ordered cheap draughts. Many of the other patrons

wore bright orange hats and vests. For perhaps the dozenth time that day, they drank the health of Bambi and his tasty mother. The mood was murderous, yet their eyes glistened, their black beards bristled, and their ruddy faces slapped you on the back shaking off the sharp pains you felt thinking about coming into this cycle of life and death, as it were on a red carpet, and then after a meal which wasn't particularly filling, getting kicked out through the service entrance.

Tomorrow would be the second day of deer season. Perhaps they'd be too hungover to shoot. Perhaps there would be snow. Webb looked sad, and I was still sober despite my best efforts. We were both bushed so once we reached his mother's house, we turned in without fanfare. The next morning, heading back to Boston, Webb wanted to stop again at the farm to check his grandmother's condition. Amazingly, the old cuss was up and around, though obviously demented, pacing in her ratty robe.

Out of a sense of shame, I excused myself, leaving her to Webb and the nurse who were frantically trying to coax her back into bed. I took a tour of the grounds, examining the ancient barn, the moss-grown silo foundation, and the old rock walls. I followed one of these under some felled

trees, and before I knew it, I must have been a half-mile out in the woods.

With a tingly feeling rising up my spine and the sounds of crunching branches in my ears, I realized I was not alone.

"Good thing you're wearing that bright yellow hat," said a hunter, descending a nearby ridge. He approached analyzing me. "You shouldn't be out here," he concluded.

"I believe this land is posted," I replied, daring the situation laden with explosive potential.

The gun was between us, glinting and humorless as the man who bore it, as if that were the prime directive for someone holding a rifle and making contact with a fellow woods stalker.

And then I almost shit myself. The thunderous detonation of a shotgun reverberated in my ears. It was close! The hunter sunk to his knee, and called out, "Charlie?" No response. Was this maniac having a Vietnam flashback? He ran in the direction of the blast. Out of my mind, I followed. In five minutes, we had emerged from the trees in view of the farmhouse. The hunter slowed. There was a huge commotion in front of the house.

The hunter said, "The shot came from here but I don't see Charlie."

I couldn't tell you how long it took me to reach the house because I was running on numb legs and the sky was roaring so loud. There, next to his car, slumped against the tire, holding his stomach where blood oozed through his shirt, was my friend Webb. His eyes were scared, almost betrayed.

I could hear the distant sounds of sirens and the occasional gunshot as I knelt beside him. Inside the house, I saw the shadow of the nurse emerging from the doorway holding a shotgun. I looked at Webb, dying, and I whispered a prayer to God for us, but she didn't shoot me. She was holding out the gun.

"Here. Take it. I finally got it away from her. I have to give her a sedative. Holy Christ. I hope the paramedics can save him."

"Where are you going?" I shouted.

But she was already back in the house, shaking and sobbing like a child. The paramedics and police arrived moments later.

They found me holding Webb's shoulder in my hand and crying, as he gurgled on his blood. The police officer on the scene, spotting the shotgun next to my leg, and my bright yellow hat, looked at me, nodding his head up and down, eyes glistening. Somehow he looked familiar.

"Hunting accident?" he asked.

THE END