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by

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THE LAST TRIP

Scene 1. Saturday, somewhere in Arkansas

The old man rubbed his eyes and gazed sleepily out the car window. Outside, the flat Arkansas landscape sped past. A flock of starlings swirled down and up and down again to rest in a rice field like a gambler shuffling cards. The sun <sup>backlit</sup> bit back reluctant clouds suffusing a glow over the scene enclosing it in uniform bronze shroud. He turned to the younger man who was driving and said, "I must have drifted off to sleep. How far are we from Stuttgart now?"

"Oh, about 20 miles, I guess, Dad. Are you getting hungry?"

"Well, I will be ready to eat all right. It's been a long time since breakfast. Even at home and eating my own cooking, I hate to miss a meal. There's a pretty good restaurant there in Stuttgart on the left going out of town - Fin and Feather, I believe it's called and we can stop there for lunch."

"Well, you know the road pretty well as many times as you have been through here. "

The old man took a deep breath and thought, "Well, we're finally off on the trip. I have been trying for five years to get the boy--well, middle aged man now--to go with me down to Texas and go deer hunting on the ranch. That Jim has been entirely too busy at the

office and he needs to get away and relax some. I did use the conference with that lawyer about the taxes as an excuse, but I don't think he trusts my driving either and now we are finally going on the deer hunt together. I hope he can get a deer even if I can't. Why it is just like old times taking him hunting again. His mind drifted back to the past when they were both 40 years younger. The first 410 shotgun. Shooting frogs with a .22 rifle. Squirrel hunting in Overby's Bottom. Bass fishing at Johnson Creek. And their last big fishing trip to Lake Cumberland right after the college graduation. Gosh, it had been five years since they had even been squirrel hunting together. But now, Texas. Texas. That first trip was a memorable one. He was only 15 back in 1910. His father had just bought the ranch next to the cousin's land. The father had remarried that year and he and Aunt Rennie, the old-maid aunt, had been shipped off to visit the cousins, mostly to get them out of the house. Quite a trip on the railroad, it was. Smoke and cinders. Starched linen tablecloths and napkins in the diner. The smell of coffee. The sound of All Aboard! The conductor with his blue vested suit and Masonic emblem dangling on the watch chain. The porter's shiny black face beaded with sweat. The rock and lurch of the train as it careened down the tracks. His father had told him ahead of time if he needed help to just tell the conductor. My father is a Mason, too. The ranch certainly had been impressive, not at all like he had imagined. No long-horn cattle or cowboys or sagebrush. Just bushy scrub trees along the lazy river. Not good for much of anything except hunting and grazing rights to sell to the rancher next door and now the land was still the same and the lazy river the same. Aunt Rennie and

father had long since died. The cousins had died and their children had moved on. And this might be a last trip for him as well. The chevy purred along, bumped across a railroad track, made a wide sweeping turn, and leveled off on another five mile straight stretch. The younger man looked sideways at his companion and thought, "Well, the old boy looks pretty fit for 80, a little shaky and thin, but that's same spirit, snow on the roof but fire in the furnace. Oh, I am so glad we could go together. He couldn't have made it by himself this time and he really enjoys the land. I really haven't been able to spend the time with him I would like to, just too much work. The children have all their activities with school, Scouts, ball games, and camp. The business is so demanding and there is always something to take care of, but I know this means a lot to him and the land keeps him interested. Since Mom died, he really doesn't get out with people and mix the way he should and he picked the route, Highway 79, because he knows all the motels, restaurants, and filling stations along the entire thousand miles. The interstate would be quicker but he doesn't like the heavy traffic. I just hope he can kill a deer and take some venison back home to give to his friends. Well, we should reach Louisiana by nightfall and be in South Texas by Sunday ready for hunting on Monday, Tuesday, or Wednesday or as long as it took. Old Arch, the rancher next door, knew the land well and the deer paths and would go with him.

Scene 2. Tuesday, Texas

"Well, boy, you don't begrudge me a beer. Do you?"

"No, dad, not at all," the younger man said.

The oldster tipped back his head and guzzled another draught before

wiping off his chin. He leaned back, breathed a sigh and began, "I don't know when I have had such an enjoyable day. Just think of it. Both of we Meckles men getting us a deer. What a day! It sure didn't start out that way. Boy, was it cold this morning. Old Arch got mighty cold, too, and I sure was glad when he came back to the blind and suggested we go sit in the truck. You remember that herd of 12 to 15 we saw on the way in, out there in the pasture? They went over in that thicket when they heard the truck coming and I never did see them coming again. I didn't see the other two, the fawn and doe, that headed down by the river that Arch saw, either."

"Yes, I know what you mean. Arch stationed me off the road behind a big oak tree. I didn't see anything or hear anything either except for the shot one of the hunters made down by the slew. Arch said he got a real nice 8 point buck."

"You know, Jim, I got that doe right through the heart. She was over in that little stand of woods when I first saw her through the grass. I didn't think she was going to move, but finally she stepped in the clearing. It must have been about 65 yards away or so. I raised that Carbine right up, sighted in on the heart, and pulled the trigger. When I squeezed the trigger, it seemed like a harpoon jumping right from my shoulder into her chest. She dropped right in her tracks. It was a good shot even if I do say so. Right through the heart."

"Yea, I heard you shoot from where I was about 500 hundred yards away, but I didn't see anything on the move and figured you must have got one. You sure did get it field dressed in a hurry."

"Well, Arch did it. He is mighty good with a sheaf knife. Hey, that was a nice shot you made. About two hundred yards, wasn't it?"

"Well, I would say 160 or 170 was closer. It wasn't a good clean kill like yours. I hated to hit a leg and have to shoot again but in the high grass, it was hard to figure out especially without a scope."

"Well, yours is a little smaller and should be a little more tender. That one of mine is one of the biggest ones I have shot yet. Must be around a hundred and ten pounds, field dressed."

"Yea, I thought we would never find that food locker. When will they finish cutting up and freezing it? Day after tomorrow? Well, we can get some dry ice and then we can keep it in the grocery up in Dallas when we spend the night there. We need to take some venison back to Tom and Martha and Mrs. Thurmond. Why don't you take back some of mine, too? "

"No, thanks, Dad. Barbara isn't too wild about venison."

"Well, you know, Jim. This has been some trip. My only regret is that young Jimmy couldn't have come out with us. You think maybe we could get him out of school a week next year to come down hunting with us?"

### Scene 3. Sunday, Arkansas

It was one of those rare fall days, full of sunshine and blue skies. Overhead, a high flying jet stretched a contrail like a spider spinning her net behind her. The Chevy purred along at a steady 55 occasionally buffeted by a blast of air when a big 18 wheeler roared around and faded into the distance, sight and sound. The younger man stirred, sat up, squinted and said, "I must have dozed off. How are you doing?"

"Fine. There really hasn't been much traffic either way.

Everybody must be in church this morning. I still don't like these interstates with all those big trucks. Say, have you noticed how many of these tenant shacks are empty now? There seems to be a lot of heavy harvesting equipment around though. I guess that the machinery is replacing man here. You know, I have really seen a lot of changes in my lifetime. The car, radio, airplane, TV. I remember that first car well. Stanley, Jack, and I were playing in the front yard when Elmer Steele rattled by in a Ford he bought down at Paducah. A real horseless carriage. We couldn't believe it. Say, Jim, you know Stanley really looked bad. His memory is really failing. Those heart attacks must have affected his memory. I am so glad you suggested that we go by Texas and see him. I gave him some venison and told Estelle how to cook it. We ought to plan to go by Dallas next fall when we go there, too. I just hope he will still be there."

Scene 4. The next April, Kentucky

"Jimmy, I don't know if we should have tried to come to the house today or not, right after the funeral. We need to pick up Dad's guns and take them home with us. Some people might have read the newspaper account and try to break in with the house empty. Here is his gun cabinet. See the long squirrel rifle? That belonged to your great-great grandfather. He brought it over Cumberland Gap with him in 1845 and fed the folks with it that first winter. The 12 gauge next to it has the Damascus steel barrel. It belonged to your great grandfather. He killed a lot of small game with it. Well, my goodness, there is my old 410. I lost track of it long ago. And there is Dad's 30-30. He killed 8 or 10 deer with it. Here, take it. It's yours now. What's

that letter there? Oh, from the Texas Wildlife Commission. It's post-marked just last week. Let's see.

Dear Mr. Meckles

Thank you for your letter enquiring about the 1977-78 deer hunting season in Texas. Open dates will be from November 10 to December 20. You will be allowed three deer--one buck and two doe. The out of state deer tag will be \$50 this year. We hope you will be able to come hunting with your son and grandson as mentioned in your letter. Enclosed please find our printed brochure which lists all the 1978 hunting days.

Sincerely yours,

Thomas A. Barton, Commissioner