

Death In The Long Fingers

By Steve Sorensen

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Like all brothers, they lived with tension between them. They were raised in the same household, and with only two years separating them they shared many of the same boyhood experiences. Dan was the older of the two, and like the biblical Jacob, mild-mannered and gentle-hearted. Steve, on the other hand, was more like a spiritual kin to Esau.

Dan developed several hobbies and interests during his teenage and early adult years – more than most people could handle with proficiency. Tropical fish, electronics, photography, ham radio, gardening. He was well-read and self-taught in all of them and in each one he achieved a high level of mastery. But the one thing Dan was never inclined toward was hunting.

Even though his father gave him the guidance he needed, the shooting sports never captured Dan's interest like gentler pursuits did.

It's not that Dan objected to hunting. He simply chose to play his role in the living part of life, rather than the dying part. Even when he needed to catch a pesky mouse in the house, he shunned the conventional mousetrap with its traumatizing deathblow, preferring to capture it in a Hav-A-Heart trap. And he would release the mouse away from human habitation.

Among Steve's interests, none matched the appeal of hunting. He was too young to go along when their father tried to introduce Dan to deer hunting, and he remembers the bitter ache of jealousy. At 9 years of age he watched as Dan went hunting with their father, and he could hardly wait for the day when he would shoulder the rifle and bring down the family's supply of meat. To Steve, hunting was a calling and the open woods held an invitation he needed to answer.

The brothers grew up and in later years Dan's keenest interest was gardening. Every growing thing captivated him, from molds and ferns to the greatest of trees. His lawn and landscaping were masterpieces. His greenhouse and garden were his passions



and he, along with his two devoted little dachshunds, vigorously defended the garden from every pest – especially marauding woodchucks.

The brothers were fortunate that each could appreciate what the other found satisfaction in, and it kept them friends. Dan lived across the road from Steve, and often waved as Steve drove off to the local hayfields to launch a few 50-grain missiles at distant woodchucks. It was an accomplishment, if only to appreciate for himself, when his .22-250 would dispatch a carefully crafted handload to meet its rodent target more than three football fields away.

After returning from a woodchuck hunt one evening, Steve walked over to Dan's house to brag about the shots he had made, and the great distances his bullet could leap with superb accuracy. But Dan's usual polite enjoyment of Steve's stories was missing. He was unimpressed, and uncharacteristically contentious.

"I don't care how far you can shoot them. My question is, how close can you kill them?"

Steve was surprised at the question. His purpose was to cause woodchuck casualties through a game of skilled marksmanship. I'm a sniper! What point is there in taking

the easy shots?"

"Easy shots? I'm not talking about anything easy, and I'm certainly not talking about shooting them," Dan growled. "I'm asking you if you've ever killed one of those ravaging varmints up close and personal!"

"Well," Steve paused for a long time, not sure whether he was going to brag or confess. "There was the time I killed one by clobbering it on the head with a logging chain. His den was in the long weeds on the riverbank so I sneaked up the bank and forced him to try a run for it to my left. My aim was perfect, and the big hook on the end of that chain planted instant death squarely on the top of his head."

Knowing Dan would not approve of such barbarism, Steve quickly added a detail in hopes that Dan would see it as a justifiable chuck-icide. "Of course, I'm not really proud of that. I was just a kid working at a summer job for the city parks department. You know, you can't have a woodchuck plundering the flower garden in a city park."

"That's nothing, Steve! You can bludgeon all the groundhogs that you want with a chain. Have you ever killed one with these weapons?" He threw off his gardening gloves and held up his bare hands.

Unable to determine where this provocation was headed, Steve tried to change the subject. "Hey, where are your dogs?"

Dan hesitated before he finally unburdened himself. "They're mad at me," he confessed. Then Dan began to recount the stressful events of that afternoon. He had come home from work early that day. When he let his two wiener dogs out, they didn't take long to ambush one of the vegetarian varmints committed to consuming his garden. The diminutive attack dogs created an earsplitting racket more disconcerting than a pack of fat ladies warming up at the opera.

First, they cornered the ground-

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(Continued)

hog in a hole it had excavated under a railroad tie Dan used as a landscaping timber. One dog held it at bay while the other dug a hole from the backside of the tie. Chased from there, the groundhog ran into Dan's equipment shed. On their way to the shed, Dan tried to separate the groundhog hounds from the groundhog, but controlling both dogs at the same time was hopeless. After their quarry sought refuge behind the shovels, rakes, pails, tomato cages, hoses, stakes, and all the assorted stuff he was someday going to use, Dan began removing everything from the shed. When all its cover had been taken away, the groundhog ran toward the house and dove under the deck. The 10-pound dogs were relentless. After brawling there for 15 minutes, they cornered it behind the steps. That's when Dan had the bright idea to flush it out with a hose.

When he turned on the water, the woodchuck retreated farther back under the steps to defend a small depression in the dirt. As that hole filled up with water,

the groundhog knew that he had just two options: drown, or make a desperate run into the open yard. He chose life, and charged out from under the deck with both dogs in hot pursuit, a black and brown blur of mud and flesh and fur tumbling into the open yard.

Suddenly the younger dog began to cry as though she had been skewered by a hot poker. From 30 feet away, Dan was sure the adversary had sunk its long, sharp incisors into the little dog's throat. He dropped the hose, dashed to the poor dog's defense, grabbed the vicious rodent by its neck... and discovered that its teeth were just stuck in the dog's collar. The woodchuck wasn't biting the dog at all!

The woodchuck was exhausted. The dogs yapped at Dan, begging him to let it go so they could continue their assault. High on adrenaline, he knew that if he released it the dogs would soon kill it at the risk of injury to themselves or the garden invader would turn and put its

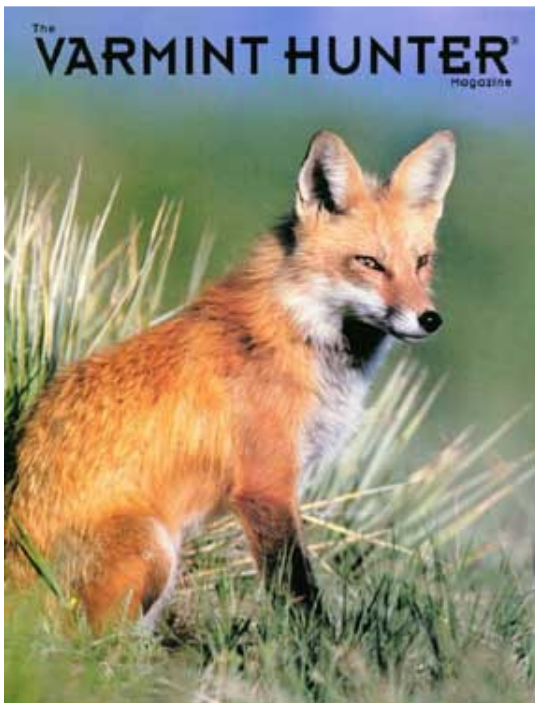
chisel-like teeth into his long, usually gentle, fingers. His only choice was to hold that wet, muddy, exhausted critter by the neck and squeeze. In a few minutes, the rogue groundhog became limp.

The combat was over. Robbed of the thrill of victory, the sulking little groundhog dogs dragged their wearied little wiener bodies over to the house to rest. As Dan examined his dogs for injuries and comforted them after their ordeal, they ignored him. They had invested almost an hour in the fight, and he had seized their prize. No comfort was wanted; no apology was accepted. Their pain was the bitter ache of jealousy, for their master had taken the job that they were designed to do.

As Steve listened to the story, he thought back to Dan's first hunting trip, so many years ago. "Poor dogs," he said. "I know exactly how they feel."



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