

A Winter's Tale



It looks like hell out there. The isobars on the weather report are vertical, a bubble of pure Antarctic air blasting its way north. No pleasant little snowfall last night, but the real deal. The landscape is stripped bare to its very bones by now, leafless, sere and slumbering, time looking neither forwards nor backwards.

For all that, I consider scouting up a fish, as some of the water around here is still open. Not a bad time for a wet, even though trout are stunned with cold, but it can be done. Eventually I make the call to take the dog and an old gun down to the river, hoping the snow might give us the drop on a ringneck. Here, close to a country town, pheasants are well educated and more than a little crafty.

It isn't to be. After five hours we have seen just one bird, pointed deep under a wilding oak. By mid-winter the acorns have seasoned and seem more palatable to game birds, or maybe they just get hungry enough to ignore the tannin. Either way the long silhouette lifts with a distinctive soft flutter of wings and the gun comes up nicely, but with no spluttering *kok-kok-kok* all hope fades and the gun falls. My hands are numb with cold and even opening the top lever is a dull ache. The hen accelerates, catches the wind and sets her wings for parts unknown. All easy straightaways, I find, are hens.

The walk home from Operation No Pheasant is a long one as a soft rain begins to fall. A few minutes later fists of air start to blast it sideways and a glance south shows blue-black cloud coming at us like a wall. Moving through broom and long grass, I bump a sapling and am showered with freezing water again. Cold, wet and tired, the dog never ceases his constant probing through the blackberry canes, a few still with tattered purple leaves. Occasionally he'll lift his head, scout confusedly for me, then resume his beat with a wagging tail. That's one of the great things about dogs — their zest for life turns the harshest work into a great moment. But there isn't much time left on this, the shortest day of the year, and we make ground quickly into stinging sleet and wind.

Then home at last, empty handed. It happens sometimes but I don't mind. The hunt is the trophy. Time to kick the Red Bands off, and opening the door is like entering another world. Macro popping away in the wood-burner, now a bed of deep coals, the wood split back in the blazing days of summer when it seemed like an unnecessary thing to do.

An hour later the old dog is sleeping nose to tail, content and snoring. His



soft ears are full of blackberry ribs and here and there a few thorns will need to come out. Not right now though; he's worn down but warm and wants to sleep. Fair enough.

There's a casserole slowly ticking away on the stove, a bubble or two here and there, shoulder of fallow just right for the long slow treatment. Some Agrias from the garden too, for a creamy garlic mash. Might even melt a little cheese into that. Needs a red wine, rich and deep, or a malty ale from that little brewery down the road. Funny lot, brewers. Didn't seem to be making much money, but a happy bunch.

There's even a smoky, peat-scented Scotch on the sideboard. A nip will be just the thing later, when the kids have gone to sleep. Turns the lights down low and bank the fire with blue gum, time to savour it properly while rain drums away on the tin roof. All good. No, there's nothing wrong with winter, if you have it in you to love the unloved.

This night will be the longest of the year and the coldest is yet to come, but as the days imperceptibly lengthen, roots will begin to stir and buds will swell. It seems so very far away, but a minor miracle is building as surely as the rising of the sun.

The year has turned upon its hinge. Summer is coming.

