

The Homestead

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Johann and his son-in-law Ander yawned and rubbed sleep from their eyes as the old screen door clapped behind them. The November moon cast shadows on the sidewalk as they walked along the path to the old garage by the alley. They could smell the chimney smoke that hung in the cool, still air above bare, hibernating birch trees. Johann dug a set of keys out of his coat pocket. He fingered through them and unlocked the door of the truck. They sat for a moment and rubbed their hands together as the engine came to life. Johann pushed in the clutch, wiggled the tall shift lever into reverse and backed out into the alley.

The stars shone hard and bright above the tall pines as the truck turned onto the highway, ground into fourth gear and headed north out of Bemidji. Ander felt a rush of excitement as he unscrewed an old thermos and poured hot coffee into the red plastic lid and handed it to Johann.

“Thanks. Nice and hot.”

“Nothing better”, said Ander.

The two men sat in silence for several minutes as the pickup whirled along the asphalt, their faces softly lit by the glow from the light of the old dashboard.

“Sure hope we get our limit today.”

“I’m sure we will.”

“Tell me again about the old Pierce Arrow, will ya?”

“It was a long time ago. I was in high school.”

“You just stumbled across it, right?”

“Yup. A couple of us were out hunting. Not far from town. Up near Turtle River.

Someone had pushed it into the woods and left it. I’ve looked for it off and on over the years but no luck.”

“Do you think someone found it?”

“It’s possible. Too bad, though, if no one did. By now I’m sure there isn’t much left worth salvaging.”

Ander took a sip of coffee. “Would be fun to look for it one more time.”

Johann nodded his head and smiled.

An hour later the headlights swept off the highway onto a narrow dirt road. The old truck bounced along the ruts for about a mile until a tangle of brush, bright red sumac and fallen trees blocked the way. A small herd of whitetail deer were feeding in a long meadow that ran off in a narrow band to the west of the road. At the sound of the truck they stood erect, their ears cupped.

Johann switched off the motor and cranked down the window. Clumps of frost-covered brown grass lined the road. The morning air was heavy with the woody smell of decaying leaves. The amber light of the late autumn dawn swelled slowly through the pines and thinning branches of maples, birch, aspen and oaks.

“You know”, Johan said, “I don’t really care if we go home empty-handed. This sunrise was worth the trip. Don’t you think?”

“You bet”, Ander replied.

They sat quietly finishing the last of the coffee.

“Did I ever tell you about my first fall in Minnesota?”

“I don’t think so.” said Johann.

“I lived with my grandparents in South Minneapolis. It was the fall I started college. I would take long walks along the Mississippi under the autumn leaves. I really felt like I belonged here, like I’d come home.”

“Well, I’ve lived here all my life. Can’t imagine being anywhere else. It’s a good place.”

Just then the honking of Canada geese came down through the high, clean air. The two men climbed out of the truck and stood watching until the last of the powerful sojourners winged their way out of sight. In the nearby woods they heard the sound of a Beaver cutting Willow bark or maybe Aspen. During the summer, the pond created by his dam gave refuge to Moose and ducks and muskrats.

Reaching into the wooden bed of the truck they slid shotguns out of their cases and carefully loaded each gun with three shells. They held the bills of their caps with one hand and their guns tightly against their bodies with the other as they struggled through the thick underbrush. Gray prickly ash tugged and scratched at their clothing. After a few minutes they met the road on the far side of the fallen trees.

The sun was fully over the horizon now bringing to life vivid patches of fall color; fading reds, golds, oranges and yellows. They walked slowly along the old forest road. In some places the forest floor under the pines was flat and loamy. But mostly, where the fall trees were all turning, the ground was covered by thick underbrush.

“This is good shooting country”, said Johann. “Lots of good cover and plenty of food for game. And these old forest roads make it easy to get back, way back into the deep woods.. There are some old growth pines in these woods but they’re quite a hike after the road ends. Mostly white pines and a few reds.”

“Can we go there sometime?”

“Sure. We’ll do that.”

Suddenly, a covey of Grouse exploded from the brush. Their wings beat loudly as they flew fast and low through the trees in all directions. Singling one out Johann dropped to a knee watching until it glided gently to a landing. Crouching, he stepped very lightly through the dense undergrowth.

Johann turned to Ander and held his finger to his lips. “Shhh. Move quietly.”

They followed for a long time as the bird moved furtively along the ground blending in and out of the landscape. Finally, sensing his moment, Johann switched off the safety, took aim for a clean head shot and squeezed the trigger. The Grouse tumbled over in the thick leaves. The blast rumbled through the woods then died away. After a quick search Ander picked up the limp bird and handed it to Johann.

He made sure it was dead then stuffed it into the large pocket in the back of his jacket.

Johann took off his cap and wiped his forehead on his sleeve.

“That was a lot of work for one bird”, he said, smiling broadly.

“Sure was. But it’s a nice one.”

“You bet. Let’s head back to the road.”

Dry twigs and leaves snapped and crunched under their feet as they pushed aside the thick branches, retracing their steps. They had gone a short distance when a dark shape caught Johann’s eye. It was like a shadow at first and far away. They moved closer to get a better look. As they emerged from the trees and brush onto the edge of a small willow slough an old log barn came into view. It sat very near the water surrounded by a stand of white birch. A huge Maple tree covered in a mantle of orange and red leaves grew out of the roof which was sagging in on itself.

“This homestead is old”, said Ander, “really old. Did you know it was here?”

“No. And I’ve been coming up here since I was in high school. Missed it somehow. Let’s take a closer look.”

They followed a fresh deer trail through the dry grass that circled the edge of the slough. The trail curved away from the water then followed along a low wall of roughly stacked field stones to within just a few yards of the old barn. A rusty breaking plow sat against the end of the wall. Its curved oak handles barely visible among the dead weeds and a scattering of purple Asters.. Beyond the barn, up a lightly wooded sloping hill, the weeds that had grown tall and lush and green at the height of summer now stood as dry sentinels around a log farmhouse. The walls were bleached gray with age. Broken, bleary windows stared blankly from either side of a closed door. At the sound of their approach a bright red cardinal flew from a tangled mass of dried vines covering the roof.

They climbed three steps up to the porch and Johann pushed on the old door. He pushed harder with his shoulder and the rusted hinges reluctantly gave way. The interior was airless and dark. He stepped back onto the porch and leaned his shotgun against the wall. He motioned to Ander to follow. Stepping inside they saw the pieces of a small pine table and two spindle back chairs piled beneath a window on the wall opposite the door. The barely visible remnants of decayed curtains hung in tatters in front of each window. Everything was covered in a thick layer of dust. A wide, narrow beam of sunlight sliced through a broken pane and across the room to a mottled stone fireplace topped by a log mantle. Across the front was carved the name Hovland and beneath it, Romans 8:28 and the year 1864. Ander ran his fingers over the carved letters.

“Well, we can be pretty sure they were Norwegian with a name like Hovland”, observed Johann

“And probably Lutherans.”

“Yup. Lots of Norwegian Lutheran settlers came here.”

“Eighteen sixty-four. What do you suppose their life was like?”, asked Ander.

“They were brave, hearty folks. That’s for sure. They probably came in an Ox cart or maybe a covered wagon. The Homestead Act was passed here in 1862. That gave one hundred and sixty acres to anyone willing to live on the land and work it. So, they were probably taking advantage of the opportunity.”

They went back outside and sat down on the top step of the old porch. Off to the left the stone wall ran along the edge of the trees. Splintered shingles, glints of broken glass and the remnants of farm implements were scattered among the birch and Aspen trees around the barn. Two Mallards were gliding quietly in the still water of the slough. Soon, they would be among the last to join the winter migration.

“Winter must have been especially hard on them. It’s hard enough now,” said Ander.

“Winter can strike a bitter blow. I recall one year back during the war. It was early in the fall. There was a tremendous blizzard. It left the farmers in a sorry mess. A lot of corn stood in the fields, sunflowers too. The deer were feeding in them and cut down the farmer’s yields. The snow stayed after that and most people, in town too, weren’t ready for winter. Many of the old pioneers never survived winters like that one. But the worst winter here in Minnesota was the Children’s Blizzard of 1888. The storm hit with little or no warning. The weather had been unseasonably warm up to that day. The record keeping wasn’t too good but as far as anyone can tell between 250-500 children died in that blizzard, both in the towns and in the countryside. It hit right after the children had been sent home from school.”

Ander looked up at the big white clouds being pushed along on the morning breeze but he wasn’t thinking about the fall at that moment, or hunting. Instead, he was conscious of the feelings aroused by what must have happened in this place and by the story of the children who died in the blizzard of 1888. The shadows of the clouds moved over the fall woods, covering everything in momentary grey. The air turned cool.

“That verse from the Bible. Do you know it?”, asked Johann, sensing the young man’s mood.

“What? Oh yes. Sorry. ‘All things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purposes.’ That must have meant a lot to those immigrants and it’s not hard to see why.”

“We all need to believe that there is a greater purpose at work in life, especially when things are tough. Is that what you mean?”

“Life can really get to you, you know?”

“Yes, I know. And they knew real hardships”, said Johann, ‘that’s for sure. Makes me thankful for the good life we have. I’m glad we found this place, Ander. I think we should give thanks for the Hovlands. They left something for us here, and for everyone who comes upon their old homestead; Romans 8:28. Let’s pray it will mean as much to us as it certainly did to them.”

Ander looked down at the folded hands in his lap and nodded. Over their heads the first winter Finches were darting through the restless wind.

“You see over there beyond the slough? That large stand of Aspens is probably the ground they cleared for planting. All the trees around it are pine and birch. Once the farm was abandoned, the Aspens saw their chance. A few birch wandered in for good measure. Aspen are punky at the core and the saplings feed on the stumps. Once they have been cut the saplings shoot up by the hundredfold. The moose and deer like them and the snowshoe hare, too. But there are always enough left to replace the trees that fell.”

He thought for a moment then continued. “Aspens always reminds me of Halvor Nystad. It was in the fall of forty-one. I was chopping some dry wood with him in a hollow on his farm near Bunkersheer Creek. Do you know Bunkersheer Creek? It’s a good place to pick blueberries. Anyway, the hollow was full of Aspen. A huge buck walked out of his willow slough. The biggest buck I ever saw. He stopped and stared at us for the longest time, then ambled on. He looked so proud and unafraid. It’s as if he was thinking, ‘What are you doing here?’”

That winter Halvor came to the door giggling like a kid. He dragged my father and I out to his pickup. The buck had shed its antlers and he came across the pair. One was in an open field and the other down by the slough. Those antlers are mounted on the wall of his son’s living room. Halvor was so proud of those antlers.”

“Did you ever see that buck again?”

“No. Halvor saw it, though. Once during hunting season he had a chance to shoot the old fellow. It passed right beneath his tree stand. But he wouldn’t. There was no way he would shoot that buck. Halvor just sat there in awe. He estimated it must have weighed well over 200 pounds. It was really something.”

They sat quietly for a long time, listening to the wind move through the bare, sleepy trees.

“Autumn is such a lovely time”, Ander said thoughtfully. “The birds and Monarch butterflies are passing to the south but they’re in no special hurry. They know there is time enough..”

“You won’t find the beaver, badger, skunk or moles heading south,” Johann chuckled, his bright eyes twinkling. They like Minnesota too much”, he said laughing. He took off his cap and ran his fingers through his curly, graying hair. “They’ll find a warm refuge and wait for Spring.”

“Just like us?”

Johann turned and looked Ander in the eye, smiling. He put a hand on the young man’s shoulder. “You betcha. Just like us. Well, the morning is getting on and we have Grouse to hunt.” He put on his cap and took a deep breath of the crisp air. “This is the season I like best”, said Johann as he surveyed the landscape, “There can be dreary, dismal days. And then there are days like this one. Fall is the best. Don’t you think?”

Ander looked at him admiringly. “Yes, Johann. Fall is the best.”

