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Palshaw

English IV

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Morning Hunt

Upon a lake in a valley, among reeds and duck decoys, a young man and an aged dog sat surreptitiously within the confines of a camouflaged kayak, prepping their gear for a morning hunt. Rowing out to the perfect spot, the paddle lapped softly against the lake’s glassy water while theyoung man inhaled and released frosty breaths of air.

Occasionally, the kayak would scrub up against some of the lake’s growing reeds, and the dog would nestle closer to the floor as the soft purr of the friction massaged its body. Being covered in an insulating vest, the dog often failed to effectively scratch its fur and would subsequently release quiet whimpers indicating discomfort to its owner. The dog itself was male; hair thick, yet soft, and body not yet fully grown. His brown coating was as dark as chocolate, and his nose as wet and pink as chewed bubblegum. The dog’s ears perked at the sound of any movement in the water or overhead sky, while his toned and pronounced leg muscles would contract and release at any indication of life beyond his own or his owner’s beside him. His restless behavior and stiff body language was juxtaposed by his hunting mate’s much more laid back and relaxed composure.

Despite the cold and bitter morning frost, the young man did not shake or shiver. His breathing was slow, his hands steady, and his body was warm from the rowing. He wrapped himself in an old, worn, camouflage Carhartt jacket. His lower torso and legs were insulated by the kayak’s outer wrapping. At each exhale, white chutes of condensed breath would stream from his nose and mouth. His face was young, but aged. His thick black eyebrows and beard scruff contrasted with his dark blueish-green eyes, and his nose was artificial--as if it were broken and set back into place. Stuffed under the man’s lower lip was a wad of tightly packed tobacco, Copenhagen wintergreen, and every now and again the man would violently exude excess amounts harsh tasting, bitterly burning, saliva into the water beneath him. As the flavorful wads of spit sank down into the lake, largemouth bass would eat it up below.

A few minutes of rowing passed, and the man settled his kayak into a spot among a patch of reeds. He dropped anchor and nestled himself deeper into the camouflage jacket that surrounded the vessel. Within the boat were dozens of little plastic baggies of hunting supplies and snacks. The man reached blindly into the kayak’s tenting, rustling his hand around in search of the right baggie. He pulled one out, inspected it, and placed it back inside. And then another. And another. After a few attempts the young man pulled from the confines of the boat a baggie full of cheese curds.

A smile illuminated the man’s face as he carefully snapped open the plastic bag and pulled out a wet, thumb-sized, cheese snack. As the man slipped the curd into his mouth he let out a chuckle as it squeaked against his teeth, startling the dog. For every three or four pieces he ate himself, the man would give one to his dog, and his dog would eat it fast.

The man took a deep breathe after a few minutes of cheese-snacking. He shoved his now empty baggie back into the belly of the kayak and pulled out his shotgun. It was a single barrel pump-action shotgun, smelling sharply of lubricant oil and metal polish, and free from any scuffs or scratches. He placed it to his side and reached into his vest pocket, pulling out a finely crafted wooden tool, an instrument of sorts, and blew into it. Into the frigid air echoed a loud quack, a call that a nearby flock of game heard clearly and came flying to the pond to respond. The man reached into his vest again, feeling this time for his waterfowl shotgun shells, and pulled out three.

He loaded one into the action and two into the magazine below the pump stalk. Beside him, seeing a flock of ducks overhead, the dog’s legs began to quiver, and he whimpered as softly, yet as enthusiastically, as possible. The man’s steady composure didn’t waver at the excitement of seeing the game overhead; he took another deep breath, released the safety, and aimed the gun at the sky. As the ducks flew in circles overhead, the man let out three shots in rapid succession. The dog at his side yelped and jumped, rocking the boat and scaring the feasting bass beneath them. The man watched as two birds dropped from the sky and into the glassy lake, causing two perfectly circular ripples to flee from their plop into the water.

At the sound of a command from his owner, the dog leaped into the water below. His breath immediately hastened, his heart rate jumped, and his legs moved furiously in the water, leading him to the first of the two birds floating in the pond ahead of him. As the pup approached the dead game he gave out loud whimpers from within the cold water, and his tail wagged fast enough to create a wake behind him. Within a minute of the birds hitting the water, the dog had scooped them both into his mouth, and was striding back to the boat with a prideful look in his eyes.

The man watched--his cheeks grew rosy from smiling so wide. The dog swam up to the kayak and released the birds into the young man’s outstretched open hand. After setting the ducks safely within the confines of the boat, he reached over and grabbed the dog by its vest.

With a heave, the man attempted to pull the retriever back onto the boat, but the heavy sponge of an animal didn’t budge. Instead, the man pulled himself and his kayak a hundred and eighty degrees, straight into the water below.

The contents of the boat spilled out, sinking swiftly down toward the lake floor. The man’s bottom half was stuck in the kayak’s camouflage wrapping, his arms were flailing under the freezing water; the dog was yapping up above, scratching at the exposed bottom of the kayak, and looking fervently for his owner.

Within about forty five seconds, the man was upright again, soaking wet, and without the carefully packed contents of his boat. He rowed toward the shore and allowed his dog to stand on flat ground. He pet his dog, and gave a deep sigh.

Beneath the water, a few bass feasted on a can of tobacco, a few cheese curds, and the corpses of two recently shot ducks.