

My Own Gun

by John Riley

Dale's mom had broad shoulders. She was tall too and strong from growing up on a farm and had red hair she'd kept dyed brown when she was younger. She didn't bother with it anymore. "What's the use," she said, and my mom said, "There's no use at all," and fired up a cigarette with her silver Zippo.

My dad had been gone so long I couldn't remember his face. Dale's dad lived in town but he came by sometime. He never left any money behind and Dale's mom claimed she was going to take him to court, but never got around to it. "I don't have a thing to wear to the lawyer's office," she said. "Not a dress to my name." They were sitting at the picnic table behind my house, smoking out of my mom's pack of Camels.

Dale's mom left before it got too dark. She had to walk across the field to her trailer and her eyes weren't as good as they used to be. We watched her disappear into the field. "Sometimes she seems pretty stupid," I said to my mom.

"That's because of the pills the doctor gives her." She ground out her cigarette on the picnic table. "That woman has no sense about men. I'm trying to teach her better but she won't listen. People already think she's a slut."

"What's a slut?"

"A woman who'll stick her legs up in the air for pretty much anybody."

She sat at the other end of the table. It was too dark to see her face but I could feel her eyes pressing against me. Sometimes when she stared like that I couldn't tell if she liked me. "Get in the house and take a bath," she said. "You stink."

After that I couldn't stop thinking about Dale's mom. When I thought the coast was clear I'd stare at the V where her legs joined her body. Sometimes I thought I saw something under her jeans. A bulge, not much of one, but enough to keep me thinking. I wanted to

touch her there, but couldn't find a way to do it that would seem like an accident.

One night Dale's mom had too many beers and fell back against me when one of the concrete blocks we used for porch steps shifted. Her hair smelled like cigarettes and was a little crinkly from hair spray. "Whoa," I yelled, and pretended I was about to tip over. I slid my hand down her back and pressed it against her ass but couldn't figure out a way to move it around to the front. But even that got me so excited I went upstairs to my little attic room and rolled around on the bed.

For the next couple of weeks I hung around Dale as much as I could, hoping I'd get a chance with his mom. He was a year older and bigger than me and liked to make sure I didn't forget it. His hair was red like his mom's but you could hardly tell. She'd got some hair clippers with Green Stamps and at least once a week would yell, "You get over here and sit down and hold still."

Dale loved to shoot at things with his .22. We'd tromp around the woods until he stuck his arm out to the side. I'd hold still while he shot at a bird or rabbit or maybe a cat. He was a pretty good shot and would've been even better if he'd worn his glasses. What he wanted more than anything was a 30/30. "That's what you need to take down something big," he said. "Like a buck or a bear." I didn't care much about guns but I whistled under my breath when he showed me pictures of them in one of the old *Field and Streams* his dad left behind.

One day Dale shot a cardinal off the top of a water oak. Before he shot it the cardinal was shiny as new money. Then, just like that, it was falling through the branches. This was the first time Dale had shot something that small from a good distance away. "Hot, damn!" he yelled. "I sure mangled that fucker." He dug through the dead leaves and limbs under the bushy tree until he said, "There you are," and picked up the bird.

We headed out of the woods and back across the field toward his trailer. He carried the bird by its tail feathers. "What you going to do with it?" I asked.

“Take it inside.” Then he held it up before his face and started swinging it from side to side saying, “Tick, tock, tick, tock.”

Dale’s trailer was brown and white and sat out behind where his grandpa had lived. We were almost there when the door opened and Gene Tysinger stepped out. Gene was a no account who told everyone even if you weren't interested that a real man didn't work a public job. “I'm meant to be a farmer,” he'd say. “And dammit that's all I'm going to be.” It didn't bother him that there were no more farms to work. That they'd all been turned into trailer parks or left untended.

When I stopped walking Dale stopped staring at the dead bird. Gene wasn't wearing a shirt. His back was covered with a tattoo of a dog standing on his back legs holding a cat by the neck with the words “Pussy Hound” written beneath in big, swirly letters. He'd had it for a long time and liked to show it off. It was easier to tell what it was before he got fat. Dale's mom leaned out the door and kissed Gene until he pushed her away. She hadn't bothered to button her shirt and her tits hung out. I saw her red, lumpy nipples.

Dale gulped real loud and then said, “Bitch” so low I barely heard him. Wind hissed through his nose. He slung the cardinal toward them. It flew a few feet and fluttered to the ground. I looked away from his face and that's when I saw that his fingers gripping the .22 had turned white.

I turned around and headed home. I didn't look back but I kept my ears open. I knew sometimes people get shot for what they see and what they think. The space between my shoulder blades itched. It was a big empty field.

