

## An azalea morning

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### By JOHN L. SLOAN

There was a huge gap between the smell of azaleas in Lower Alabama and the crisp, cool air of the rising thermals as the sun warmed the mountains. Six years. A six years filled with heat, sand, cold, and wind...always the wind. And often, excessively often, the sound of gunfire and mortars and choppers and bombs.

And screams.

That was over now. For him it was over and the only gunfire came from his 12 pump as the bead settled on the red, white and blue head of a love-struck gobbler, fooled by the hunter's slate call.

That morning, six years ago, he had tried to walk down a harem of elk under the control of a herd bull that might easily score in the upper 300's. It was a futile walk but a nice day for one. The mountains, bare and ragged, spotted here and there with clumps of dark timber were strong with the smell of softwoods and elk musk. The mountains were quiet, punctuated now and then by the scream of an eagle or the three-note bugle of an elk.

The swamp on this azalea morning was strong with a turpentine smell, honeysuckle, and azaleas. He loved azaleas. He loved the spring, the damp, dewy mornings with the promise of a hot afternoon and maybe some bass fishing. He loved the only sound being the hum of insects and gobble of a big tom.

He had treated himself to this vacation at the sumptuous southern hunting lodge; He had picked this place because of the solid gold reputation and the name, Azalea Lodge. He had not been disappointed.

As with all hunters there, he had to hunt with a guide due to unfamiliarity with boundary lines and where other hunters might be hunting. However, he was allowed to do his own calling and pick the setups. The guide, a wonderful old black gentleman, moved through the woods with the stealth of a ghost and spoke only when necessary. He smiled his approval when he saw the slate call and the old, cedar box.

Unseen by the hunter, he smiled when he saw how the hunter moved and kept control of his gun muzzle, eyes constantly searching through the near dawn, dark.

They paused at the edge of a large food plot. The hunter owled loudly and well. Nothing answered. He pulled the compact, two-dollar air horn from the pocket of his hunting vest and blew a long blast. Before he could finish, a gobbler sounded not far away, along the west edge of the field. The hunter looked at Joe. Joe nodded, "He be on us, Mistuh."

They circled the end of the field and went a short way down the other side, following an old and often down, barbed wire fence. The hunter looked around in the coming light and nodded. He pointed to a huge magnolia tree and Joe nodded. They were between the gobbler and the field. Both began cutting small branches and quickly formed two screens for their blinds, Joe a few yards behind the hunter. They settled in.

Light began to seep in around the corners and the field became more visible. From time to time, the hunter clucked and gave soft, tree yelps. Always the tom answered. The hunter compared this with his last hunt. He had struggled up the side of a steep slab trying to get ahead of the elk. He could coax plenty of bugles from the bull but could not slow him down. As the sun finally got around the peaks of the Canadian Rockies, he knew the elk had won. It did not really matter. At least he tried to tell himself that. He would elk hunt again this fall, maybe New Mexico or a DIY in Idaho. He had an army buddy there that would help him out.

He heard the bird fly down. He glanced at Joe, nodded, and received a nod in return. A shotgun boomed in the distance, the first shot of opening day. "Mr. Jawn done made meat." whispered Joe with a wink. Mr. Jawn was an outdoor writer and friend of the lodge owner who although he professed to be down there just fishing, did not seem too hard to convince he should hunt this morning. He had kept them all laughing at breakfast, saying he had to kill early and quit wasting time so he could get on with his fishing.

The hunter scratched in some leaves and scratched out a string of six or eight yelps. The tom doubled gobbled and seemed closer. Joe snapped a twig and when the hunter looked at him, pointed at his mouth as if to say, "Should I purr, some?" The hunter nodded. They mixed purrs and yelps and the gobbler boomed back, coming for sure.

They could both hear the bird drumming and strutting. A log truck rumbled over a cattle guard out on the hard road. The bird gobbled at the sound. Then his head periscoped over a slight edge in the land. The bead on the shotgun settled without requiring an inch of adjustment. Joe purred and the gobbler took the two needed steps.

"Mr. Man," said Joe, "Eff you got a cama, I'll take yo pitcher heah wid dat putty boid."

"No, I want to get a picture back at the lodge in front of the azaleas."

"Sho and ain dem zaleas sumptin this yeah. Dat be a good pitcher."

Back at the lodge, they ran into Jawn, already showered, dressed, and ready to go fishing. As promised, he had killed early. He consented to pose for a picture on the lodge steps before heading for the lake.

The hunter knelt, still in his hunting clothes and smoothed the feathers on the turkey gobbler, admiring the colors of the feathers and the deep smell of the azaleas. Mr. Joe took the picture.

It had been a long six years from the high Canadian Rockies to the lowlands and pines of the South. It was a beautiful azalea morning, all things considered.

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