



Dawgwash Farm

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by Millard F. Johnson

The last time I hunted deer was more than 40 years ago. I was 25 years old, just out of the service and a freshman in college. Now, a lifetime away, I—a retired grandfather—am going hunting once more. I never expected to hunt again, but I have this feeling that I am being called to do it.

This time I am hunting in the forest of Dawgwash Farm, the 100-acre, retirement hobby farm that my wife, Jane, and I have been building for the last five years. A 15-minute walk out my backdoor takes me to the spot I have chosen. I will be there well before first light.

It is chilly and dark, but even in the November starlight Clarabelle Donkey sees me and welcomes me with a braying that surely alerts every deer in Morgan County. If her call has not set every creature on alert, the honking and quacking of the farmyard geese and ducks surely has.

I walk the farm road into the forest. It winds down along the garden, black behind its deer fence, beside the pasture and in front of the dam that makes the farm pond behind the house. As I pass the pasture, Laurie and Iris, our milk goats, push their noses through the mesh asking for grain. "Not yet, girls," I whisper. "I'll be back."

A few minutes trudging through the dried oak and poplar leaves, and I settled into my spot. I have come this way many times on foot and in my ATV. Before this morning, the only sign of game I have seen (besides deer tracks) was a spotted box turtle.

Now, hunkered down with the chill and the deepening silence, the forest that seemed so barren in days past comes alive. First the birds. Not the cardinals, finches, titmouse and woodpeckers that come to the feeder outside the kitchen window, but the birds of the forest. Then the squirrels appear as if materialized by some invisible magician.

Now the sun lightens the sky and brings with it the sound of the wild geese on the neighbor's lake over the hill. I sit still as the birds and squirrels play and as the sun climbs into the barren treetops. Now it's full morning with no hint of deer.

It's time for me to head back to morning chores. I begin to think I am mistaken in my feeling that I was called to come here, but just as I am about to rise, I am greeted with something haunting and magical: High above, so high they can barely be seen, are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Sandhill cranes in V-formations, heading south, spreading below them their mournful calls.

I marvel at their passing and think: What a sad thing it is that so many people pass all their lives without having heard the calls of the Sandhill cranes or seeing their migrating pattern across the sky.

At home, Beau, our Springer Spaniel, after whom Dawgwash Farm was named, greets me. Beau is resentful that he was not invited to go along into the forest, but he dances about, eager to go with me about my chores.

Clarabelle gets her grain and hay, as do the goats and Shetland sheep that will give us lambs and wool in the spring. I feed the chickens, geese and ducks. I give a slice of apple to the horses as amends for being late. The goats have been bred and dried up for the winter, so there is no milking to be done.

Down the county road, I pick up the paper. Beau and I go home to enjoy the crossword and coffee before the fire. I keep thinking of the migrating cranes and hearing their migration calls.

I am acutely aware that most of my contemporaries face a retirement far different from my life on Dawgwash Farm. I love lambs and goat kisses, fresh eggs and warm, fresh goat cheese, but mostly I am grateful for having the important responsibilities of caring for the land, the animals and this forest.

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