

The
World

From a Stump

“Sit long enough in one place, and the whole world will pass by,” said a Chinese philosopher. But who could sit that long? Who would want to?

By Will Weaver

Most of us have gone places, such as a grandparent’s house or a cabin on a lake, where time moves differently. We do a lot of sitting around. At first we might wonder if our watch or cell phone clock has stopped working. We might have a sinking feeling of being stuck there forever. But gradually, something inside our brain slows down too. We start to notice things: how schools of minnows under the dock zig and zag together; how a fallen oak leaf looks like a hand with stubby fingers.

This is that kind of story. It’s about being stuck in one place for a whole day when I was 14, a day when hardly anything happened. But I wouldn’t have missed that day for the world.

It was the opening morning of deer season. My father and I stepped out of the house into black dark. No stars. He paused

Illustrations by
Steve Johnson and Lou Fancher



to puff out a breath, like a smoker exhaling, into the chilly November air. “South breeze,” he said, “perfect for your stand.”

I couldn’t wait to get going. I had gotten my first deer last year, when I was 13, but this season was different. I had earned the right to hunt by myself. Well, not entirely by myself. But at least I wouldn’t have to sit on a stand with my father, who would be just down the trail and over a hill.

We rode in the pickup a mile beyond our farm to my grandfather’s big woods. My father extinguished the headlights well before we stopped. Getting out of the truck, I eased shut my door with a muffled click. I carefully uncased my rifle, then shouldered my canvas Duluth pack, which contained lunch for all day.

“Ready?” my father whispered.

I quickly nodded, then followed his blaze-orange shape down the trail.

After 15 minutes, he halted at a fork in the logging trail. He turned to face me. “Well, here we are,” he whispered.

“OK! See you!” I replied. I was in a hurry to get to my stand.

His teeth gleamed white; he was smiling. “Remember: sunup to sundown. If you can last the whole day on your stand, you’ll see a nice buck.”

I nodded impatiently.

“Think you can stick it out that long?”

he asked. There was faint teasing—and also a challenge in his voice.

“Sure,” I said, annoyed.

He put a finger to his lips. “OK. I won’t come for you unless I hear you shoot—and I don’t expect to see you either.”

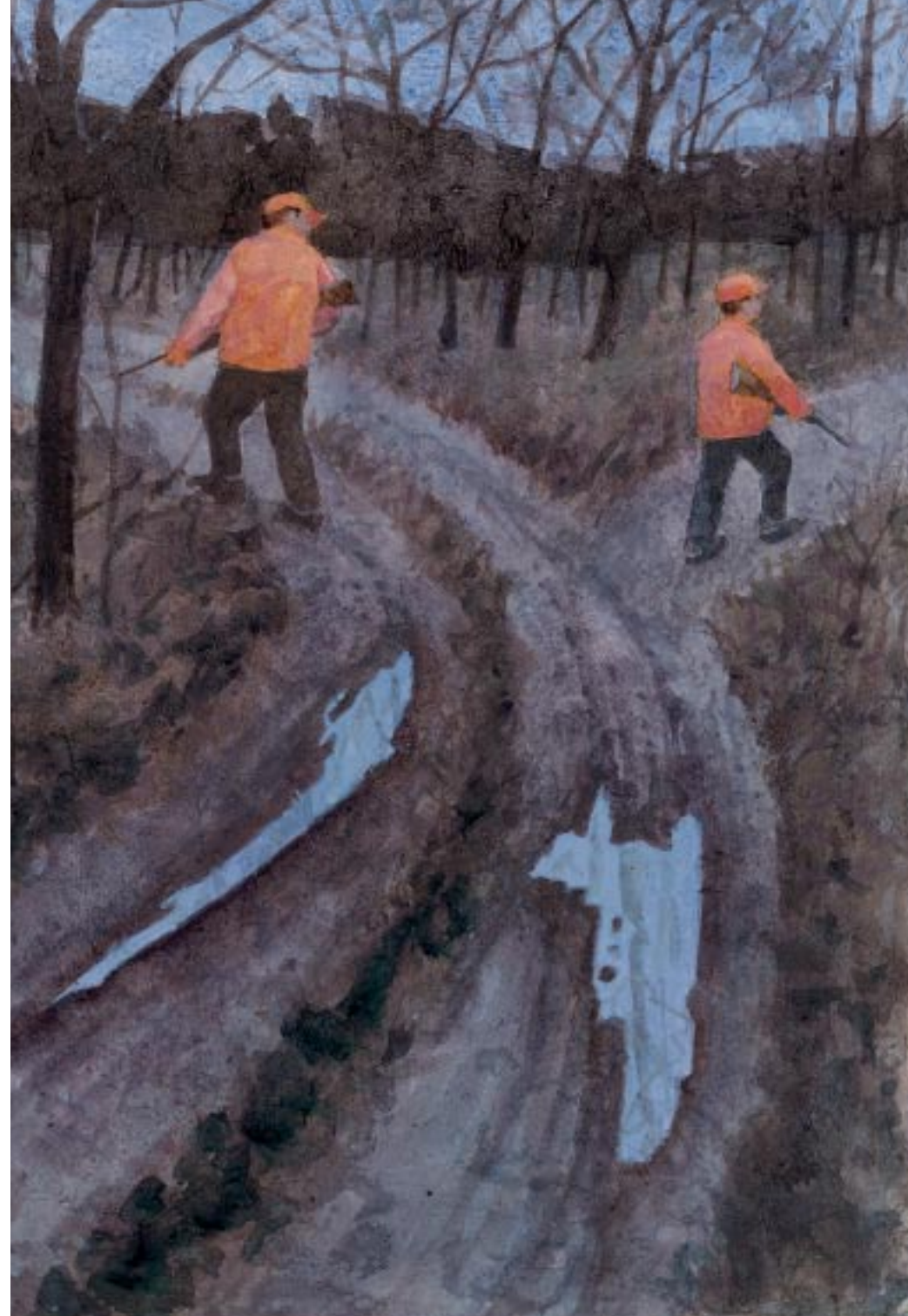
I quickly headed down the path. In my mind, I was already a mighty hunter. In summer, pesky ground squirrels, the kind that left dangerous holes in my father’s cow pasture, disappeared when I showed up with my little .22 rifle. In October, ruffed grouse, or partridge, were fair game behind our farm on the trails among aspen trees. Carrying a sandwich and my stubby 20-gauge shotgun, I ranged for miles across farm fields, around sloughs, and down logging trails. I was always on the move, always alert. Nothing escaped my eyes—especially deer sign.

My goal this season was to bag a giant buck. I had a great spot—30 yards from a deer trail, muddy and torn up with use. The “stand” was a ground blind, a tree stump actually, with a half-circle of brush in front to keep me hidden from any passing deer.

Quickly I put down my seat cushion and placed my Duluth pack within reach. Checking the safety on my rifle, I turned to face the blue-black woods.

6 a.m. Not legal shooting time for another half hour. I sat rock still, as did the forest

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critters: They knew a stranger was in their midst. As long minutes passed, my heartbeat slowed, and the forest gradually came alive. A squirrel's feet skittered on oak bark. An invisible flock of diver ducks arrowed overhead, wings whistling. A partridge thrummed down from his night roost; the *thwappity-thwap* of his wings marked the path of his invisible glide through small poplars and brush.

6:20 a.m. Blue darkness drained away. I could now see the deer trail, a darker ribbon through the woods. I shifted my boots—and beneath them a twig snapped. A deer crashed away behind me! My heartbeat raced to high speed. The deer had either been there all along—bedded down and listening to me—or else it had been coming along the trail. I couldn't believe my bad luck. In the distance, too far away to be my father's rifle, gunshots boomed here and there.

By the time I got over feeling sorry for myself, the woods began to open its curtains. Rusty-brown color seeped into the oak leaves. The grayness lifted—which meant that best half-hour for hunting was over. Disappointed, I leaned back on my stump.

At 9 a.m. I was shivering cold and had to stand up. The woods were brighter now, and quiet. Even the squirrels had

stopped chattering and chasing each other. I drank a cup of hot cocoa.

Every hunter knows that a sure way to call in a target is to eat lunch or take a pee. At 10 a.m. I tried both tricks, but neither worked.

After a snack, my short night of sleep caught up with me. Leaning back against a heavy limb, I blinked and blinked to stay awake. Once, my head slumped. The trail tilted and the oak trees tipped sideways; I shook my head to clear it. Then I let my eyes droop shut for just a second. When

I opened them, there was drool on my chin. Several minutes had passed. My heartbeat raced again—but luckily there was no monster buck waving his white tail at me.

By noon I was restless. I considered walking up trail to check for fresh tracks—maybe a buck had passed during my nap—but I fought off the urge. I considered making up some excuse to check on my father. Instead, I occupied myself by doing housekeeping on my ground blind. I made sure that there were no twigs anywhere near my boots. I rearranged its branches just right. This took all of 10 minutes.

At 1 p.m. I stood up to stretch. My seat cushion fell off the stump, which gave me something new to do: count the tree

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rings. As wide as a kitchen chair, the big pine stump had 83 rings, one for each year. The rings expanded outward, like a galaxy, like a universe. Ring number 12 had a dent—some old injury to the tree—perhaps a buck's scrape when the tree was small. I sat down again and refocused my eyes on the trail.

By 3 p.m. I was stir-crazy. What would it hurt if I got up and did some walking, some sneak hunting? Maybe I could push a deer past my father's stand. How about a quick trek back to the truck to check out the field? Any place had to be better than here. But a promise was a promise. I stood up and did toe-raises until my calves hurt.

A few minutes after 4 p.m., something happened. The light was suddenly flatter, duller. The air felt heavier and still. A chickadee pecked and fluttered behind me, landing on my cap for a moment before moving on. The woods were waking up.

A partridge fluttered somewhere close. Squirrels scampered limb to limb. The trees stood straighter, more erect. As the fading light flattened to grays and blues, my hearing expanded. I heard the faintest sounds of a mouse in the grass. What I couldn't see or hear, I felt.

At about 4:30 p.m. (I didn't dare look down at my watch for fear that I'd miss something), I turned my head slowly to the left. A deer materialized, as I knew it would! A small doe nibbled her way along, bobbing her head, twitching her tail. She was too small to take on the first day of the season. And anyway, I wanted to wait for

a monster buck. But I was thrilled. It was enough to have been looking in the right direction—to have been ready.

Light faded, pushed up the tree trunks and into the graying sky, as darkness gathered at ground level. For a few short minutes—the tipping point between light and dark at day's end—anything felt possible.

The big buck never came. Shooting light was gone. I unloaded my rifle, secured the clip. Only a couple minutes later, my father appeared, a blob of orange moving slowly forward in the grayness. I stood to meet him and waved like a kid, though I no longer felt like one.

SO THAT'S MY STORY of a day in the woods when nothing really happened. Maybe you had to be there—which gives me an idea: What if you tried it? What if you found a favorite spot in the woods, or by a lake or pond, and you stayed there the whole day? You don't have to be a hunter. You could choose your season—even winter if you could stay warm. The key part of my challenge is this: no friends, no cell phone, no text messaging, no iPod, no music—just you and your thoughts, for the whole day, sunrise to sunset. Could you do it? **V**

Attention Young Naturalists! If you spend a day outdoors by yourself, send us an email at young.naturalists@dnr.state.mn.us and tell us about your adventure. We'll publish all the stories on a special section of our Web site. Good luck!