

MUSINGS

The Thirty-Year Shot

E. J. Felker



Summer isn't over yet, but the first cool hint of autumn rolled through here this morning. As I stood on the porch watching the deer in our yard, I found myself feeling a little nostalgic. I've watched many generations of whitetail deer being raised on our property and in the neighboring pines. I watch them lose their spots, gain their legs and grow to leap the paddock fence with effortless grace.

But more often, I think about my father and how much he would have loved it here. He was an avid hunter and outdoorsman, and fall was his favorite time of year too. He loved the outdoors year-round but was – as I am – happiest in crisp cool air with colored leaves under his feet. He seemed to laugh more loudly and more easily during hunting season. When he and his friends came back from a weekend trip, my mother would sometimes let me stay up

late to be with them in the driveway. They would laugh and tell stories as they admired their quarry in the bed of a pickup.

I grew up around guns as my father collected his fair share. Of all the guns in our house, his deer rifle was my favorite. It wasn't the biggest, or the shiniest or the most powerful, but the Winchester Model 94 that hung above our fireplace – the only gun my mother permitted to be displayed beyond the confines of the basement – truly stirred my imagination. To me it was the Wild West, straight out of the movies.

Hanging over the mantel, it is a blend of walnut and worn blued steel, beautifully proportioned. But when in action, it becomes a thing of wonder. The mechanism of the lever is astonishing. Complex and yet remarkably simple – eject the spent shell, feed the next round and

repeat.

But I never had an opportunity to go deer hunting with him, and in the countless times we went shooting together, I never saw him shoot with that Winchester. When he died of cancer at age 42, we had to sell most of his collection. A few special guns, though, went to close friends. The Model 94 was sent to a dear cousin of his who had long admired it.

A few years ago, when that cousin passed away, his wife tracked me down. Her husband, she said, had wanted me to have it. I immediately arranged for its transport from Wisconsin to Virginia. Now it stays in a safe in my basement. This gun, which to me is a mechanical marvel, an object of art and an heirloom, is the only gun I have of my father's.

It is often said that during the last century, the Winchester Model 94 has taken more North American whitetail than any other gun. This autumn, I want my father's Winchester to take one more. The gun is nearly 70 years old, but I know for a fact it shoots far straighter than I can.

My hunting experience is limited, and has consisted only of preserve birds. Deer hunting is an entirely new game for me. To be honest, I am more than a little uneasy about it. My friend and neighbor is a big deer hunter and he said he would set me up in a prime spot, at the best time, and if I get a deer, he'll gut it for me. But, he warned, he'll only gut the first one. For me, one will be enough. Because it is not about the deer; it is about the Winchester and my father. I try to imagine what it would be like if my father were with me for the hunt.



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He'd bring a cooler of beer and some inexpensive cigars for after the hunt. We'd clean the guns and lean on the tailgate, telling stories about all that had happened.

So in the coming weeks I'll be sighting in the rifle to a hundred yards. I'm five years older than my father ever got to be, so it'd be a nice gift for him if I at least tried. And if I fail, well, I did spend enough time watching him and his buddies in the driveway to know this: As much as he enjoyed a beer raised in congratulations, I think he probably appreciated even more a beer raised in friendly ribbing over a story of the one that got away.

E. J. Felker is a fly fisherman, bird hunter and horse racing aficionado who lives with his wife and two bird dogs on the Potomac River in Virginia. His photos have been featured in numerous publications, including *Virginia Sportsman*. He can be reached at ed@mayfly-design.com.