

THE SWIM

by Timothy J. Muise

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I was a very fortunate child growing up. My family did not have very much money but we did have a closeness that many family units lack. I had two older sisters and an older brother who adored me and treated me with love and kindness. They were 10, 11, and 13 years my senior and they really enjoyed teaching their little brother life lessons and life enjoyments. It was a blessed upbringing.

My brother Bobby took me everywhere he could. Baseball games (he was one of the finest baseball/softball players to come out of our area), the beach, out on his boat lobstering and fishing, as well as up into the woods hunting. Bobby raised hunting dogs and one of his passions was to hunt pheasants. He took me with him before I was old enough to actually carry a gun and I learned to enjoy the hunt immensely. I could hardly wait until the day I could tote my own 12 gauge. That day came and Bobby and I enjoyed dozens of successful pheasant hunts together.

As my interest in hunting increased I ventured into duck hunting. Ducks are far less appetizing than pheasants, and I did not want to kill them for nothing, but fortunately I found a guy who wanted the ducks and not only ate them but used the feathers for fishing lures and flies. This gave Bobby and I a reason to shoot plenty of ducks and boy did we! We purchased a bunch of decoys, a couple of duck calls, and a pair each of really good hip boots. We tried this creek and that river, this marsh and that pond, and found some of the best places to shoot ducks on Cape Ann. We even hunted Brace's Cove over on Eastern Point much to the chagrin of the well to do folk that live out there.

One very cold Saturday Bobby picks me up at our parent's house, I must have been about 13 or 14 years old, and we head over to Concord

Street in West Gloucester where the marsh winds out to the Essex River. We park his old Datsun B-210 hatchback, put on our hip boots, load a bunch of #4 duck loads into our pockets and grab our 12 gauge shotguns for a long stroll out into the marsh. Bobby has a nice Remington 1100 semiautomatic shotgun and I have a Mossberg 500 pump. These two formidable firearms tilt the odds in our favor but the ducks still have their lightning quick speed and great vision on their side, but I would still not want to change places with them.

It is a long walk out to the Essex River basin and we cross some fairly wide marsh creeks with foot and a half deep mud. It makes for tricky footing and you always make sure you don't have a round in the chamber of your gun as you don't get a second chance with a shotgun at close range. We work up a sweat making our way out to the river but when we get there we are rewarded with a fine day of shooting. We use up almost all our shells (I always keep one or two as you don't want to be caught with a useless gun) and make our way back to the car with about a dozen black ducks in our hunting bag. When we get to the first creek the water is right up to the tops of our hip boots when we cross. We have to hold the guns up high and slosh through the mud and water without falling in. Not an easy task but it is late December and the water is real cold, in fact the creek has ice ridges along its edges.

After we make it across that first creek we are out in the open marsh and you can now notice that the afternoon wind has picked up. It chills us right through our Carhart coats and long thermal underwear. No doubt it is cold out. We approach the next creek, which is a bit wider than the last one, and it is filled with water! The tide has rushed in

and the water in this creek is way over the height of our hip boots: in the middle it is probably over our heads! Bobby and I look at each other with that "Oh crap!" look and I am hoping he has some kind of profound plan for how we are going to defuse this situation. Both of us know this marsh well and there is no way around this major creek. The only way back to the car is across this creek. This ain't good. Bobby says we can wait here until the tide goes out but that would be about a six hour wait and it is damn cold, or we can try to swim it. This statement makes my brain swim a bit and I have rapid fire thoughts of what this means and how I wish there was another option. I agree that we can make a swim for it and neither Bobby nor I were too enthusiastic.

Bobby tells me we will have to take our boots off as they would fill with water. We do this and toss them to the other side of the creek one by one. We do the same with the shotguns trying to land them in the deeper sections of grass on the other side. We then tie our coats around our waists tightly so we will have more free range of motion to swim with. Bobby thinks I should go first so he can be behind me to help me if I need it. I agree with his concept but am still a bit leary of going in first. I get my mind right and decide I am going to make it a running dive so I can cover a lot of creek in one fell swoop. Bobby agrees. This is the plan and we put it into execution.

I take a 15 foot head start toward the creek and launch my body toward the middle of the frigid creek. Everyone in our family are good swimmers, so that is not a worry, but this ain't no dip in the waves at good Harbor Beach in August. When I hit the water the freezing cold propels the air from my lungs, quite a shocking feeling, but I am wind-

milling my arms as fast as I can and reach the other side very quickly. I smash the ice ridge around the edge of the creek with my bare fists and shoot out of the water and onto the shore like a rocket. I don't even know how I did it but I am standing there and Bobby is next to me looking like two drowned ducks.

The bitter wind immediately starts to effect us. We try to put our boots on but it is impossible with our wet socks. We make the decision to run for the car in our soaking stocking feet. I am frozen as I jog and my toes are so cold that it feels as if the grass is cutting them. I look down to see if I am bleeding but I am not. This hundred and fifty yard dash to the car was one of the most trying events of my life up until that point. It gave me a whole new respect for the cold and the frailty of the human body against the power of mother nature. This journey seems to go on forever and my mind races with thoughts of madness and I truly felt as if I may not make it, that I might drop and die of the cold, but the human spirit is more powerful than the trappings of the mind and the small blue B-210 gets closer and closer.

Relief like that I felt when we reached the car is God given. Bobby fingers were trembling so much he could barely use the key to open the door. We toss our gear in the hatchback haphazardly and turn the car on seeking to get heat as fast as possible. I am shivering like mad and would like to jump into a furnace: cold literally to the bone! We start to drive down Concord Street, shaking and shivering, looking like two drowned ducks, when Bobby says, "I Don't think you should tell Ma about this one.", as he knew she would kill him for getting me into this mess. He was not only my brother but my hero and anything we did together was

never a mess. I would not tell my mother this story until I was in my twenties. She laughed then but still had that "look" that confirmed she would not have been pleased if I had told her at the time it happened.

We drove to Bobby's apartment on Bass Avenue and ran up the stairs. He turned on the shower and we got in together wearing our BVD's. The hot water burned my still freezing toes at first but soon we were both no longer shaking and we began to warm up. We changed and sat in front of the space heater drinking hot chocolate and laughing about what we just went through. This brought us closer. The Muise brothers were tough and many great adventures were ahead.

Bobby is gone now and I am in prison. These memories have been my strongest tool in surviving this 20 year tour of the circles of hell. I miss my brother more than you can know but I will keep his memory alive for as long as I live. My poor life choices brought me to prison but the lessons I learned with Bobby, my father, my mother and my sisters afforded me the ability to change my life in here. I will get a shot at living a good life again and those lessons will be my guide. That winter swim was a tool for survival and it will benefit me when this winter of the soul is over.

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