

## River Rats

He steps down from the pickup truck, smiles broadly and extends his hand. “Nice to meet you. I really ‘preciate the invite.” He’s built like a roast beef – dense and muscular – and, although he’s stocky, there’s fluidity to his movements, not cat-like exactly, but those of a predator nonetheless. Frank, a close friend and colleague, has brought his younger brother, Jimmy, who I’ve never met, for a weekend of bowhunting at our farm in the hills of western Maryland.

“This,” Frank says, tilting his chin toward his brother, “is Jimmy, the quintessential fucking river rat.” Frank has a Ph.D. in neuropharmacology and is one of the world’s leading experts on brain injury but he’s also a rough-edged, somewhat uncouth, South Jersey Italian, so the juxtaposition of “quintessential” and “fucking” is not surprising in the least.

After Frank and Jimmy have deposited their gear in the mudroom of the farmhouse and grabbed a couple of cold beers from the fridge, we pile into my rusty Nissan pickup to check the deer stands still strapped to trees from last season. Deer stands are ladders with elevated platforms used by some hunters because deer didn’t evolve to look up for predators. Frank gets in the cab with me while Jimmy climbs into the truck bed and deposits himself on the pile of residual mulch and tree bark from summer gardening projects. A smallish brown Labrador retriever vaults into the back of the truck and sits in his lap. Jimmy is taking care of Duchess for his nephew, Frankie, Frank’s eldest son, an Army officer just finishing his third tour in theatre (the “conflicts” in the Middle East). As we grind up and down the old logging roads in first and second gear, we talk through the sliding window between the cab and the truck bed and continue our discussion as we walk through the woods searching for the tree stands we know damn well we marked last year.

When we finally find them and finish checking the retaining straps, we pick up shotguns from the house and spend the rest of the afternoon working the Lab through the briars and brush in the hollow along the creek, hoping to put up a few grouse. The grouse, though, are at the bottom of their natural 10-year population cycle and very scarce. Although the dog works the creek bottom earnestly and energetically – happy simply to be in the woods – we find no birds. At dusk, we head back to the house, get the fire started in the wood stove, check the dog for ticks and open a bottle of scotch for Jimmy and me while I start supper. Frank drinks Crown Royal and tonic. Without lime.

With night outside and whiskey inside, the talk turns to family as it often does. Although I know the family somewhat through Frank, I ask Jimmy about his background. “Eye-talian through and through,” he says. “I was the middle of nine kids but our oldest sister fucking drank herself to death so now there’s just eight of us.” He looks at Frank, older by more than a decade, but Frank just nods and stares into his drink. “I don’t know why she did it but it really fucked up the whole family for a while. We all felt really stupid and guilty for letting it happen but I don’t know what we could’ve done about it.”

Neither Frank nor I say anything and Jimmy continues.

“My dad and me, we was real close. I was his favorite. I don’t know why. He didn’t fish or hunt and he was just a tailor but he supported all us kids and I didn’t really do shit but he said I never bothered nobody or asked for nuthin’ and he liked that. When he got old and

stopped working, I used to pick him up and take him to the racetrack and buy him beer. We got to be pretty good friends. It was hard for me when he died but it was harder for Mommy 'cause she never did anything but cook for him and us kids and wash clothes and shit. Now I live with her and I tell her not to cook for me or wash my clothes but she does it anyway 'cause that's all she knows."

Jimmy speaks warmly and at length of his siblings, nieces and nephews, about hunting and fishing with them, weddings, christenings, graduations. But we don't talk about where Frank's sons are right now – one in Iraq and one in Afghanistan. Frank has two sons and a daughter. All three attended the prestigious US military academies – one West Point, one the Air Force Academy and one the Naval Academy. He is immensely proud of his kids. We're all proud of them. But, with the prestige of attending these elite institutions, comes the risk of deployment to what is, after all, their purpose – war. We can and do debate and discuss the merits and foibles of recent engagements. But only when all three are on US soil. When they're in harm's way, those discussions cease by unspoken agreement. We only want them back. Where they belong.

Frank and Jimmy are from Paulsboro, New Jersey, a small town which, in New Jersey, is properly called a borough. Paulsboro is a grimy, industrial place, situated along the banks of the Delaware River that separates New Jersey from Pennsylvania. It's working class and dominated by a large oil refinery with a per capita income about half that of Philadelphia on the other side of the river. Railroad tracks run through the middle of the town. "The blacks live on one side and we live on the other," says Jimmy. "We always got along pretty good at school and sports and stuff; it's just the way it was."

The air, he says, smells like diesel exhaust and the river smells like shit. Situated as it is between the river to the west and open land to the east, Paulsboro and the surrounding towns have access to an unusually (for New Jersey) rich and diverse natural environment. Jimmy and Frank grew up fishing on the river and nearby Delaware Bay, hunting ducks and geese in the marshes, chasing rabbits and pheasants on the neighboring farms and hunting deer in the nearby woods that the locals call pine barrens. Amid the tattered industrial sprawl of south Jersey, they lived a kind of Huck Finn existence. River rats.

Frank moved on. Jimmy stayed. Their affection for each other was clearly not diminished by the paths they followed. Their easy back and forth, the way they finish each others' sentences and the gentle verbal jabs speak to an unembarrassed warmth and love that reminds me of my relationship with my own brother. During a discussion about the relative merits and ethics of hunting from deer stands, Jimmy says to Frank, "Don't make no fucking difference. You're too damn fat and your knees are too messed up to be climbing ladders anyhow. That's what you get for havin' a desk job." He's right, Frank is overweight and out of shape and sometime soon will need to have both his knees replaced. Although said in jest, there's an undercurrent of concern that we share. With diabetes and heart disease prevalent in the family, Frank needs to lose weight and, as Jimmy puts it, get off his ass more often.

Frank takes the comment in stride. Glancing at me, he says "See what kind of crap I have to put up with from my ignorant little brother?" The thrust and parry over career choice and lifestyle is repeated throughout the weekend. The gruff but good-natured exchanges are often accompanied by physical contact – a soft punch to the arm or squeeze at the back of the neck, a

gentle elbow jab. For 16 years, Jimmy worked as a bartender at night so he could hunt and fish during the day, picking up odd construction jobs to make ends meet. One year, with construction jobs hard to come by, he spent the winter sleeping in the back of his Ford F250 pickup rather than spend money on rent that would cut into the funds he preferred to allocate toward boats and guns and gear.

Jimmy hunted or fished almost every day until his father died. At 45, the only sibling without a family and with no debts or commitments or obligations, he decided to buy their mother's house so he could be certain that both she and he would always have a place to live. He started a concrete business – driveways, carports, foundations – to pay the mortgage but tells me that it's not too bad because, in the concrete business, winters, when he mostly hunts, are slow.

We finish a supper of ziti and meatballs with homemade tomato sauce, a cold baguette and simple salad. Neither Frank nor Jimmy drink wine. Jimmy passes on the salad, too, saying that he gets his greens by eating the rabbits that eat the lettuce. It's an old line and we all know it. With the bottle of scotch drained and alarm clocks set for 5am, we head to bed. Frankie's Lab sleeps on Jimmy's bed in the guest room.

An hour before dawn, we drain mugs of coffee, pile into the Nissan and head up toward the second ridge where we will spread out to each hunt our chosen location. I'm feeling a little sluggish from the effects of the scotch and say so. Jimmy volunteers that, when he drinks scotch late in the evening and gets up early, he's still a little drunk which is much better than a hangover. Frank hunts from a tree stand but Jimmy doesn't. "It ain't fair," he says. I smile in agreement and look at Frank, who flips me the bird.

Around noon, having had nothing to eat since the previous night, we each make our own way back to the house for lunch. Frank has brought thin-sliced venison steaks and provolone for what they call chip steaks. Jimmy has brought fresh Italian rolls. While Frank fries meat and onions, I pull out a jar of my wife's green tomato chutney which Jimmy has never heard of and insists on calling relish. By the time the sandwiches are ready, he's consumed nearly a pint of it dipped straight from the jar with potato chips. Over the course of the weekend, he manages to go through a quart of chutney – relish – spooning it onto baked potatoes, eggs, steak and, until Frank and I intervene, threatening to put it on ice cream. Unless he's in the woods, Jimmy eats continuously. Chutney, chip steak sandwiches, cheese, pepperoni, potato chips, apples, nuts, candy bars, Frank's granola bars, all washed down with Coke or beer.

Food is a constant topic of conversation. Mommy's braised beef pot roast, my osso bucco, somebody's fried oysters, grilled rockfish, smoked venison, Tuscan rabbit stew, bluefish salad, grilled eggplant, curried goat, crab cakes, steamed clams, roasted baby lamb, squirrel. Which bread, which salad, which beer, which sauce works best with what. We don't just eat food, we live food. Even more than guns and trucks and dogs and fish and game, it's our universal language. When the days start getting short in the fall, Frank and I begin to plan our hunting weekends. Some hunters talk about tactics and ballistics. We don't. We talk menu.

We talk our way through 100,000 calories apiece then stare at a platter of organic, free-range steak as if we're too sated to even think about sticking a fork in it. But we do. And an apple crisp and coffee and just a touch more scotch. Jimmy stirs the milk and sugar into his coffee with his steak knife then licks it clean. That night, we adjust the alarm clocks to 6am.

In the morning, I make the coffee too strong. Frank complains but Jimmy, who has recently discovered “expresso” explains that it’s “nothing but Italian crank” and drinks three cups. Possibly overly-caffeinated, he tires of waiting for us and takes off up the hill toward the first ridge at a trot, telling us that he’s going to hunt over a scrape made by a rutting buck on the edge of the high meadow.

Our second day of hunting coincides with youth hunting day, when kids under 16 are accompanied by unarmed adults. With more people in the surrounding woods and an occasional rifle shot from the adjacent state forest, the deer are moving and we all see deer that morning but none close enough for a shot.

We meet at the house again for lunch and, stimulated by at least seeing deer, talk about hunting. None of us is a trophy hunter. We don’t spend thousands of dollars to travel to exotic places to shoot things with big horns. We hunt close to home, we hunt for the simple joy of it, because it’s part of who we are – and for meat. Later in the day, we talk about the youth hunting program and agree that introducing kids to hunting is great but that the abuse of the system by adults who use it as an excuse to take an extra deer isn’t. Last year, the biggest buck taken in western Maryland was recorded as having been shot by a 6 year-old kid. It wasn’t. Jimmy sums up the consensus: “If my girlfriend gets knocked up and I bring her with me, do we get to hunt on youth day?”

Later that afternoon, Jimmy takes a shot at a doe. He’s almost certain that he missed but we spend hours on hands and knees – until past dark that evening and until nearly noon the next day – looking for blood on dried leaves in case he’s wrong but we never find any sign.

After lunch, they pack up and get ready to leave. The weekend was, Jimmy says, “Really great. Just like it’s s’posed to be.”

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From: Larry Glass  
Sent: Thursday, February 02, 2012 10:54 AM  
To: [last name deleted] Frank C Dr CIV USA MEDCOM WRAIR  
Subject: rabbit

Frank, I fixed rabbit stew last night for my parents and other family. It was incredible. I used a little bacon, onion, garlic, tomatoes, carrots, celery and herbs and cooked it for about 2 ½ hours until it was falling off the bone. We served it on polenta. Everyone loved it. Thanks again.

L

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From: [last name deleted] Frank C Dr CIV USA MEDCOM WRAIR  
Sent: Thursday, February 02, 2012 12:48 PM  
To: lglass@neurenpharma.com  
Subject: RE: rabbit (UNCLASSIFIED)

I should be able to get more before the season ends, hopefully this Saturday.

I also have some venison chipped steak for you!

Frank

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From: Larry Glass [mailto:lglass@neurenpharma.com]  
Sent: Thursday, February 02, 2012 5:22 PM  
To: [last name deleted] Frank C Dr CIV USA MEDCOM WRAIR  
Subject: RE: rabbit (UNCLASSIFIED)

Whatever you get, we'll eat. Some chip steak would be great too.  
Jordan's dying to try it. Thanks.

L

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From: [last name deleted] Frank C Dr CIV USA MEDCOM WRAIR  
Sent: Thursday, February 02, 2012 5:25 PM  
To: lglass@neurenpharma.com  
Subject: RE: rabbit (UNCLASSIFIED)

No problem. I cut chip steak on Sunday for Jimmy but he said he has plenty and to give it to you -- his new buddy. So one day next week I'll bring it in, but first let me see if we get anymore rabbits this weekend!