Almost Friends

Sometimes "almost" is as good as it will ever be.

by Daniel Isermann

The majority of Harold's spread qualified as alpine by central Wisconsin standards, a prominent slope largely populated with mature oaks—and it made for one hell of a sled ride if you could find a clear path of descent. At the base of this tilt, Harold's eclectic array of horseflesh frolicked in overgrazed pasture: a knock-kneed pony of questionable lineage and a pair of docile Percherons that had not felt the pull of traces in more than a decade. I knew Harold had once been employed on the excavation side of interment, before his burgeoning career in animal husbandry. Judging from the prodigious output of the draft horses, he was still pretty handy with a shovel.

A WALK IN THE WOODS, BY WALTER MATIA

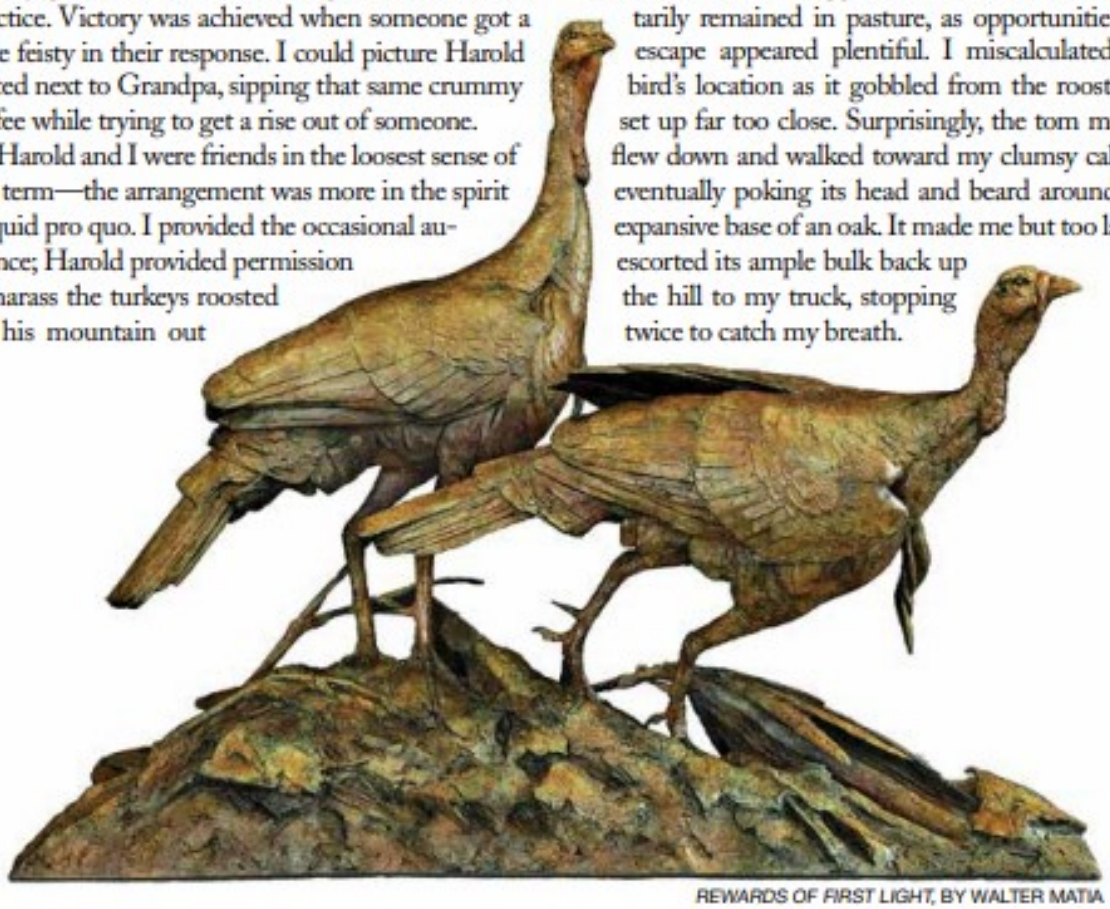
Harold was considerably less cordial than his ponies. He'd been tagged by the local citizenry as a curmudgeon, a designation he readily embraced. I can confirm that the former digger of graves was a mite gruff and slow to warm, but a captive audience was an opportunity he could not resist. An initial bout of hemming and hawing rapidly segued into a vibrant oratory traversing any number of topics. Mostly important stuff, like places where a young fella like me might find straight lumber or a crooked mechanic. Wasn't really a conversation, for I rarely uttered a word. My visits in all seasons were lengthy, often ending when my wife called a second or third time, inquiring as to my whereabouts.

I was drawn to Harold in part because he reminded me of my late grandfather and several of his crustier cronies who often played ornery for the sheer sport of it. They met for coffee on a semiregular basis, patronizing a series of diners that were destined for bankruptcy and where the no-smoking section was enveloped in a bluish haze. They'd argue about politics and cuss the price of corn and soybeans. Fellow patrons were frequently subjected to a steady dose of subtle yet strategic heckling. Most folks gave as well as they got, and several of the regulars had a lot of practice. Victory was achieved when someone got a little feisty in their response. I could picture Harold seated next to Grandpa, sipping that same crummy coffee while trying to get a rise out of someone.

Harold and I were friends in the loosest sense of the term—the arrangement was more in the spirit of quid pro quo. I provided the occasional audience; Harold provided permission to harass the turkeys roosted on his mountain out back. There were definitive constraints on this agreement. A nephew hailing from the outskirts of Milwaukee feigned a passing interest in those very same turkeys, and my ventures were strictly relegated to the last two weeks of the season. Harold did not mince words regarding his nephew, but family was family. His opinion of me remained equally questionable. Eventually, I learned that Harold raised broilers for sale. When I asked about purchasing a few chickens for the smoker, Harold flatly stated that he transacted business only with people he liked. End of conversation. No smirk, no smile.

Hunting Harold's hill was a humbling affair that burned both lungs and calves. Always seemed those pesky birds had the angle, which was usually uphill. And if I was up top, the birds were down low, until I completed my descent. The next gobble always came from somewhere upslope.

The first bird I killed at Harold's was a victim of serendipity, not skill. A lone tom had roosted on the edge of the alfalfa that flourished outside the ramshackle fence confining the horses. The condition of the fence suggested Harold's herd voluntarily remained in pasture, as opportunities for escape appeared plentiful. I miscalculated the bird's location as it gobbled from the roost and set up far too close. Surprisingly, the tom merely flew down and walked toward my clumsy calling, eventually poking its head and beard around the expansive base of an oak. It made me but too late. I escorted its ample bulk back up the hill to my truck, stopping twice to catch my breath.



REWARDS OF FIRST LIGHT, BY WALTER MATIA

Things did not go well the following year on multiple fronts. I encountered just one tom on my trips to the hill, and on the morning I thought things were finally in hand, the bird flanked me, inexplicably traveling a steep side gully that dumped him off well out of gun range. The tom found a sunny spot in the woods and went on full parade, spitting and drumming for a full half hour while I called, and then didn't, and then called some more. It used the same gully for its retreat. I revisited the scene in the final few days of the season, choosing various points of ambush in the gully that were all perfect, if only a bird were available.

Far more devastating than my ham-fisted tactics was the sudden passing of Harold's wife, whom he had adored. No gruff exterior when she was in the room, often briefly, for it seemed she was involved with every potluck dinner and bingo night that took place in and around the nearby village. She also spent countless hours tending a legendary garden that occupied a significant portion of what would have been a front yard. I was told Harold had found her there, slumped over among the broccoli and carrots, a reminder to us all that no heart is too big to fail. I learned of her passing well after services were held and kept my distance.

One afternoon I screwed up the courage to rap on Harold's door. The dogs greeted me with the same wild abandon, but Harold was a different man, gaunt and jowly. He cracked a smile and produced an ice-cold can of orange soda for his guest. He spoke to me over his shoulder, intently focused on the monitor that accompanied his archaic computer. I recognized that a certain spark was gone. Being cantankerous required effort, and Harold no longer had the energy for being ornery. But there was hope. He had discovered the internet and had reinvented himself as an online peddler of rural antiquities. I knew his inventory was quite extensive, for I'd seen the vast collections of veritable junk that filled his several barns and outbuildings. Heck, he was brokering deals for rusty signs and old milk cans as we conversed, hunting and pecking his responses to prospective clients. Apparently, his circle of likable folks had expanded to include folks from Milwaukee, Madison, and beyond. And it seemed that this nephew wasn't so bad after all; Harold said he'd been coming up on weekends to cut firewood or muck out the stables.

I wanted to say some heartfelt things to Harold about his recent travails, but the timing always seemed wrong. And then he came out with it. "You know my wife passed away in August," he said, a bit choked up. I offered my clumsy condolences and then sat quiet, sipping the pop. He ran ahead of the pain and proceeded to tell several humorous stories about various mishaps he and his wife had in raising their two daughters. Harold knew I had two daughters of my own and could appreciate his experiences.

My wife's second call ended our exchange, but I returned the following Saturday, girls in tow, to visit the horses. As we were leaving, Harold said I better make sure to get out after those turkeys when the time was right. I briefly contemplated to ask again about an exchange of cash for chickens but decided not to press my luck. I sort of was thinking that maybe Harold and I were almost friends and it seemed he might need one.

I'd kill just one more bird on Harold's hill. My last spring there was remarkably slow, and I wondered if the big-city nephew was a little savvier in the turkey woods than I had imagined. With just days left in the season, I heard a tom belting out gobbles from the high side of Harold's place, and I knew I needed to be in a certain side gully. Ten

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