

Ramblings

By Michael Altizer



It really wasn't her fault. After all, it was *I* who first wanted her. She was well-shaped and winsome, if somewhat aloof – irresistibly proportioned, discreetly trimmed in gold, light and delicate and easy to hold, with a perfectly shaped set of barrels the likes of which every good gunner dreams. And when she came to my cheek, she pressed against it with all the charm and seduction her Italian heritage had promised.

But alas, we just didn't fit.

And so on that last morning I took her down and cleaned her and gently laid her back into her soft wool-lined case and knew that she and I were finished.

The problem was, I had been counting on her for my last day afield at Rio Piedra Plantation, and the only other 20 gauge I had was the old single-shot Dad had given

*It sometimes takes
a new little vixen flirting
with your feelings to
make you appreciate what
you've had all along.*

me when I was 7. She, too, was Italian, a little Beretta that had been part of a multi-gun trade he'd pulled off in autumn of '57.

I still remember him and Verlin getting home with the trove – rifles, shotguns, a pistol or two and some odds and ends that I now can't remember. And as our fathers carried the guns inside and spread them across the living room floor, David and I simply stood there in awe, for never had we seen so many guns in one place.

With each of us having just turned 7, we'd been tagging along with our

*There came a day when the old Beretta
he'd had since childhood outshined the
fancy new side-by-side.*

dads for as long as we could remember. But up until now, we'd only seen four guns in our entire lives, the two pairs of rifles and shotguns that Dad and Verlin each owned.

Finally, unable to contain our curiosity, one of us had to ask, "What'cha gonna do with all them guns?"

"Well, I guess I'm gonna sell 'em," Dad said, with a mischievous twinkle in his eye as he glanced over at Verlin.

And then he did it.

He knelt down and picked up that little single-shot Beretta, broke it open and angled it so we could all clearly see that it wasn't loaded, held it out to me and said, "But this one's yours."

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There are times in a young man's life when you suddenly can't breathe; the adrenaline is scorching your scalp and you find it increasingly difficult to maintain your equilibrium. I tried to be cool. But to this day I really don't think anyone who was there bought it.

I took the little gun in hands that until then had never trembled, carefully keeping it pointed in a safe direction while Dad and Verlin went about cleaning and organizing the others, Dad's eyes constantly yet discreetly drifting in my direction. And when Verlin and David finally left that evening, he sat down with me and the little shotgun and we talked long into the night.

A few weeks later and with Dad at my side, my first squirrel fell in Brewster Hollow, and by the time I was 10, the little twenty had contributed many more squirrels and rabbits to our table. When I was 12, I was allowed to take it out alone. Throughout high school, the gun rode wrapped in an old blanket in the back of my Oldsmobile, and the teachers and principal didn't seem to mind. It was a more innocent time.

My first woodcock came courtesy of the little Beretta from Kenner's Woods where the flights came through each fall. It was my Brittany's first woodcock as well. She pointed it along an old honeysuckle fencerow, held it until I flushed it and dropped it, and then to my great surprise she retrieved it, having not yet heard that 8-month-old Brittans aren't supposed to like the taste of woodcock.

By the time her career was complete, we had long-since graduated to side-by-sides, and the little single-shot, while still a treasure, rarely saw a hunter's sky.

Thirteen autumns later, with Betsy gone, I gave up bird hunting, for it was too tender a thing to go without her. But eventually my work led me to the classic quail plantations of southern Georgia, hunting the finest birds in the finest habitat with the finest dogs, finest friends and finest shotguns a reborn bird hunter could desire.

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Rio Piedra Plantation lies along the Flint River in southwest Georgia, and there is no more perfect place on earth for a bird hunter to ply his passion. Bill and Annie Atchison, owners of Rio Piedra, had invited me down for the last hunt of the season, and as I was packing up the Purdey and the A. Hill and, of course, the new little Italian vixen that had just come into my life, the thought occurred: *Why not take the old Beretta?* So still wrapped in its tattered blanket, I slipped it into the car with the other guns and was off to a quail hunter's paradise.

The first two days I alternated between the Purdey and the Hill. And the birds flew magnificently, exploding from Rio Piedra's classic cover and deftly tearing through the longleaves and live oaks, skirting the Spanish moss, and more often than I should have any right to expect, falling from the air in a cloud of feathers.

We spent our evenings in the most exquisite surroundings imaginable with fine food and drink and even finer friends. And by the time we headed out for our last morning, I had already cleaned and packed away the Purdey and the Hill, determined on this final day to put the new little Italian double into play. But as Bill was sliding her into the gun rack on the hunting vehicle, I suddenly had an errant thought: *I'm dedicating this day to the new 20 gauge . . . why not take the Beretta along as well?*

And so I ducked back into the lodge, unwrapped my old squirrel gun from its threadbare blanket and carried it out to the Jeep.

It seemed so right, and for a moment I could see my Dad's sly grin 51 years earlier. Now the two guns rode together like bookends as we made our way deep into the most marvelous quail habitat this side of a Brett Smith watercolor. When we stopped and loosed the dogs, I took the fancy new double and followed Bill and Annie into the sedge.

The first point came in the still morning air, and seven birds blew out on my side. A quick left, a quick right,

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and all seven birds kept flying, with not so much as a feather disturbed. But that was okay; the gun was still new to me, and I trusted that eventually we'd make friends.

Three singles and five coveys later, I still had nothing to show and I was beginning to feel as though the little wench was toying with me. By the time we swung back to the vehicle, the dogs were looking at me funny.

Our second swing was no better. The shots were challenging, but I knew I should at least have hit *something*. And as we headed for the lodge at midday, my mind began wandering back to that first woodcock so many years earlier.

With lunch a pleasant memory we returned to the field, where Bill selected two new dogs, a beautifully matched brace of setters. But this time, I too made a new selection, cradling the old Beretta in the crook of my arm, where it felt so familiar.

The first point came where the golden sedge transitioned into thicker, darker cover. A single thundered high into the sun and I still don't remember firing, only the brilliant cloud of feathers floating backlit and keen against the deep shadows beyond. And so it continued.

The quail fell for me that afternoon like they had seldom fallen before. Some tore out barely above eye level through the live oaks and pines, and some soared like rockets into the clear Georgia sky. But bird after bird they tumbled one at a time into the sedge and wiregrass and thick matted cover.

Finally, as the sun scribed its amber arc and settled warm into the trees, Bill and Annie and I made our way back to the Jeep and the lodge and a dinner fit for princes and queens. And late that night when everyone else had drifted away, I sat alone beneath the stars outside by the patio fireplace and cleaned the old gun, then wrapped it in its frayed and faded blanket, looked to the heavens, and silently thanked the man from whose loving hands it had come. 🐾