



# IT'S AUTUMN

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Autumn always arrives at night! Hadn't you noticed? The season never changes from summer to autumn at 5:41 p.m. while you're struggling home from work in heavy traffic, nor on a Saturday morning when you're sweating over a cranky mower.

Nope, autumn invariably infiltrates in the silence of a summer night. You wake up and shave and eat and step out the back door and there it is: autumn! Just like that. There's a subtle, different feel to the air. You can't describe it... but you can smell it.

Or you take the dog for a walk before bedtime and get electrified by the sound of the first southbound geese, yelping like distant hounds against the stars. To any hunter, that has to be one of the spine-tinglingest moments of the year, that first awareness of fall.

Better than the first black-gum tree you notice in its throbbing, wine-red foliage. Better even than the smoky afternoons of September and velvet nights lit by a saffron harvest moon. Or the incense aroma of gunsmoke at the local turkey shoot, or the restlessness of the dogs in the pen.

Those things merely confirm the truth which was whispered by that first tinge, the touch, the tingle of oncoming autumn.

For a hunter, it's like coming alive again, after enduring the brassy heats of August like a toad in the mud of a dried-up puddle. Suddenly, it's worthwhile to get out the leaky waders and patch them, to wipe down the gun again, to re-string the decoys, to work the summer's laziness out of the dog, to crank out a couple of hundred shotshell reloads.

All at once, what were chores yesterday have become joyous and newly-important business; hunting seasons are on the way!

Is there a camp, tucked away in the liveoaks or pine savannahs or salt marshes, that needs a new sheet of tin on the roof? A jeep that could use new tires? A 12-gauge with a busted extractor or a rifle that needs a new scope? Now's the time; that first soft promise of autumn is the signal to get busy.

Sure, there's football, and an election coming up, and the boy's Scout campout or the girl's recital, but man, it's autumn and almost Opening Day!

Those early breaths of autumn remind each of us of the measured rhythms of nature and beckon us, each to a different sort of place, for the ageless fall rituals. You may go to the moss-draped woods, he to the palmetto thickets, and I to the cactus-studded brushlands of the border. We follow different trails, hunting different game in different ways amid very dif-

ferent surroundings.

But we are brothers nevertheless, you and I... because we're *hunters*. Responding to the same age-old calls, we know one another without ever having met. Ours is the most ancient brotherhood on earth, one that runs back to the earliest horizons of our kind.

Those hairy gents in the bearskin pants, grasping flint-tipped weapons, must have sensed even more keenly than we do that first annual hint of autumn and paused to rejoice, as we do, in the timeless rolling of the seasons.

What's the first event in your corner of the South? Afternoons in a dove field, painfully getting the rust off your shotgun-swing as whistling mourners dip and dart and challenge you to catch them with a charge?

Perhaps a *soupcou* of early teal, swarming like bumblebees over a sea-marsh blind? A butter-soft October morning on the hardwood ridges with squirrels rustling up a winter's supply of mast?

Or a full moon with coonhounds hawking the news of hot scent in the bullbriers along the creek? Whatever it may be, here's to it; it's almost here, and I wish you good hunting, Brother!

Later, neck-swelled whitetail bucks, and silent-snaky gobblers for a lucky few, the heart-stopping swing of Canadas to the decoys, and sprig arrowing in, elegant with an early sun on their breasts. And Mister Bob White and pointers down and blurring, whirring wings and the half-heard crack of guns! And all the rest... frosty-rose dawns and scalding coffee and good men and woodsmoke and... more!

It's time, friend, almost time; it's autumn!

Time to get out and away from the overstuffed, steam-heated, full-throttle, high-decibel world that nature never made, there in the cities and towns. Time to live apart for a while, a part of the *real* world in which rain is wet and mosquitos bite and the north wind bites even harder, and tired muscles ache and bullets sometimes miss and what you *have* is meaningless compared to what you *are*. Don't blame the indoorsman because he can't understand that it can feel good to feel cold and worn out and disappointed, just because it feels *real*.

And don't bother to explain it to him; he'll think you're mad (and maybe we are) and he can't know there's another whole world out there in the darkness beyond the pavement.

Pity him, but don't preach to him; there's no time, now that it's really autumn!