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Adventure Writing

Chris and Tommy

It’s a cold Vermont day, 5 degrees Fahrenheit, and before heading out, Chris looks us over to make sure we are all dressed warm. “You guys ready? Great, I just gotta stop by the bakery… I can’t drive through Middlebury without stoppin’ in.”

Even though Chris lives in Rutland, he is a regular at a few places in Middlebury. You can tell where he frequents by the trail of feather earrings he leaves. It’s almost like being in a club: Chris’s feather club. It’s a point of conversation and connection between complete strangers. “Oh! You have them too?! You must be a friend of Chris’s.” The earrings are hand made by Chris with the feathers of birds his dogs retrieve. Every pair he gifts, he is sure to tell you, “that one Scootchie got. First one of the season!” or, “that was Tommy-boy. Came off a big ol’ rooster.” Each earing has its own personality, its own life. He doesn’t sell any of them.

While I had heard about Chris for months from a friend, I had not yet met him and quite honestly, didn’t know much about him. All I knew was that he was *the guy who took pictures of dogs with beers in their mouths*. I shrugged it off. Maybe I could teach Lupa to do that some day. It wasn’t until this friend’s going away party at the local brewery that I met Chris. He walked into the brewery with two boxes bearing the most beautiful feather earrings, gave one to my friend and told her to give the other to whomever she wanted. Thus my initiation into the club.

We are on our way to Peaceable Hill, a game preserve in rural Vermont. We drive through the winding country roads in Chris’ giant, navy blue, Toyota Tundra. Chris and a friend of mine are sitting in the front, talking about the hunt to come. Hope it ain’t too cold fer the birds. It’s gonna be a bitch to set em’ though, that’s fer sure. I’m sitting in the back with Tommy, who is beside himself with excitement. Alternating sitting on top of me and propping himself between the two front seats to look through the windshield, Tommy is ready. Chris swings his right arm back, placing it on the shoulder of the passenger seat, to keep Tommy from inching forward more.

Tommy is a young dog, two years old. You can tell by his exuberant energy. At this age, he doesn’t understand the meaning of pace. From the moment the hunt starts to the last bird, its balls to the walls—all or all. He is 35 pounds of raw energy. Tommy is Chris’s first Spaniel. Before him, it’s always been Retrievers. “I’m definitely learnin’ as I go, it’s a different game fer sure.” Because of his seemingly uncontrolled energy, when you first start working with Tommy, it’s sometimes hard to tell if he is working or just plain excited.

“Barney, Henry, Scootch… and Tommy. Yup, he’s my forth” lists Chris, eyes half squinted as he looks backwards in dog years. Chris is patient; you have to be if you want to train a dog. Dogs don’t connect the dots like humans, they don’t understand the source of impatience. Chris speaks in a repetitive manner, not in a forgetful way, but to demonstrate the importance of things; also a favorable trait in dealing with dogs. Dogs’ memory strengths reside in their nose, not in their cognitive capabilities. Chris is smaller in stature, has a well groomed, graying goatee, and small oval glasses that darken with the sun. He displays contagious enthusiasm, the kind I would imagine Tommy to have in a few years. It’s amazing how dogs and their humans end up looking alike.

We arrive at the preserve. It’s windy and cold, but that doesn’t faze anyone. We are all excited to get out, but not as much as Tommy. “Hup! Hup, Tommy!” Chris yells, a command to sit the dog. Tommy can barely contain himself. He walks in a squatted position, wriggling, butt and tail shaking uncontrollably. Relax, buddy, relax, Chris coos. *Relax* isn’t part of Tommy’s vocabulary.

The communication between Chris and his dogs is a sight to see. While some words are used, most of the conversation occurs through hand gestures, whistles, and eye contact. Tommy sweeps the field, back and forth, sniffing likely grass patches for birds. *First they wanna hide, then they wanna run, the last thing they wanna do is fly.* If Tommy finds one, a few quick pounces on the spot are sure to send it flying, a process called flushing. If he strays too far, possibly flushing birds before the hunters are ready, five short blows on the whistle calls Tommy back. If a patch to the right is skipped, two short blows and a right hand extended gesturing the spot, sends him there. Chris is careful to avoid over instructing so as not to interfere, and constantly tells Tommy (and those he is guiding) that he trusts the nose. They’re a great team, Chris as the strategizer and Tommy as the field worker; an extension of perceptions and senses.

January in Vermont is not bird hunting season. For climatic and biological reasons, hunting in the wilderness is prohibited. There are, however, privately owned establishments—game preserves—scattered about. Unless you hunt, nothing about these spaces is obvious; they camouflage into the scenery much like pheasant under brush. Many who frequent are out-of-staters who come up for *a weekend with the boys*. Most who come have been there before. The birds are raised for sport and are placed in the fields by doghandlers. In fact, preserve hunts are much like a scavenger hunt, but for adults. There’s a set handler and dog fee and a minimum four birds per hunter. As much as possible, it is a simulation of wild hunts. It’s not my favorite gig, feels a bit canned, but it’s a chance to get the dogs out, work’em on birds, Chris says. Even so, the outings expose all to the bitter cold and force a certain level of intuition and instinct; if you don’t succumb to that primal nature, you’re sure to find yourself hours later empty-handed and frozen footed.

The hunt begins as we watch Tommy quarter the field. It’s a high energy but low stress hunt. We chat as we walk along. “That’s the difference ‘tween Spaniels and Pointers,” explains Chris, “Spaniels quarter. See how Tommy goes back an’ forth across the field, like that, nose to the ground? He’s tryin’ to flush em’ for us. Pointers, point em’ out, an’ the handlers flush em’ out.” Because of this, with every hunt there’s an acclimation period. Even though most of his clients have hunted with dogs before, “the beginnin’ of the hunt is always learnin’ time. It’s faster with Spaniels, and hunters need to get ready for it. You gotta keep up with him, or you’ll lose the birds!”

Chris’ enthusiasm for the outdoors is contagious. “It’s about time in the field, not numbers got”. Whether bird hunting, mushroom foraging, or fly fishing, Chris emphasizes the importance of having fun regardless of “success”. Success, to Chris, is measured by how long you were able to be outside, romping around in the woods with good people and his dogs. “if nothing’ else, we got good exercise.” That’s the reward. If it were only about what we can bring home, we are bound to be disappointed. If, however, the focus is just on being outside, than every step is a success. Everything else is a bonus.

Suddenly, Tommy flushes a bird, three separate gunshots sound and all seemingly miss, but Tommy chases after the bird regardless, disappearing over the hill. Five whistle blows, no Tommy. Calls, no Tommy. “Did any of ya’ waffle it?” Five whistle blows again, nothing. “He’ll be back soon, musta’ reflushed it.” Two minutes and four uneasy hunters shuffling later, Tommy comes running back, bird in mouth. “That a-boy Tommy! What a hero! Did ya’ see that? Did ya’ see that long retrieve?!” The debate is settled; dog knows what he’s doing.

“So, when I guide fly fishin’, I got the same guys already… basically, I have to tie their knots, their older guys and their vision’s goin’. The knots are key with light tippits. The knots are probably the one thing that’s the most key when you’re usin’ light tack.” Chris’ delicate and detailed skills in tying flies explain the earrings. “Because, you’re talking big fish. The whole thing is to try and get a 20 incher on a size 20 fly. Big coo in the fly fishin’ world. Doesn’t happen much…” Chris is an outdoorsman by blood, soul, and profession. He makes his livelihood by taking people out to hunt with his dogs or flyfishing in the good, secret spots. “It’s all mother nature. If the bugs hatch, if the weather’s right, if the wind lies down…” He depends, day to day, on environmental conditions. He relies on sensory acuteness and intuition. Noticing sounds, tracks, animal behavior patterns are all subconsciously ingrained within Chris. That’s what makes someone good at what they do, to be able to supply something that others don’t have. Even so, it’s not a one-way show. “I gotta have the right clients, in order to do the thing that I wanna do, what they wanna… But if you get beginners, well,” Chris chortles “they think they should be hallin’ in fish just cuz they’re payin’ ya.” In everything that he does, Chris creates relationships with foundation.

Most of Chris’s clients are well off, and out of state. They hear about Chris from a friend, or a friend of a friend. Word of mouth brings them together, and thus, the relationship founded upon trust. No matter how well clients know the drill, they all look to Chris as the professional, the boss, and to Tommy as the key player, the MVP. The true respect Chris’s clients have for him stems from his mentality toward the hunt. It’s about the dogs. To watch them, to facilitate, to allow them to do what they are bred to do. His passion for the dogs motivates his work ethic in the field, fueling thorough and mindful practices so as to allow the dogs to perform to the best of their ability. Chris doesn’t charge for his time. Similar to his philosophies on the outdoors, Chris doesn’t go out to bring something of monetary value home. “You set a precedent, expectations that if ya’ don’t attain, yer outing becomes unfulfilling. I don’t want that”. His clients see that about him, and generously repay him in their own way.

“I’m sniffin’ but there ain’t no birds, boss” says Chris, personifying Tommy as he sweeps back and forth through the brush. Several hours later the cold has caught up with us, and the birds are nowhere to be found. “You guys all right to call it? At least head to the shack an’ warm up a bit?” There’s a small shack on the property where guests check in, guides hang out, and dogs wait their turn. The walls are covered with memorabilia: photos of dogs, antlers, photos of people with dogs, feathers, photos of dogs holding things. There’s a wood stove encircled by chairs. On the wall behind the wood stove hang a dozen or so brainteasers, all beautifully sculpted out of iron. We sit, boots off, feet perched near the stove. Chris hands us each a Heady Topper, “The Hero beer”.

*SssstCrack,* another beer opened, music to my ear. Voices are getting louder in the shack, stories looser. Chris turns to me, “beer’s loosenin’ them up, huh? Toppers goin’ to their heads.” We laugh. The hunters’ cooler is filled with PBRs but before they can crack them, Chris hands out the craft beer; a highly hopped, highly alcoholic IPA. They had never heard of it and were at first reluctant, preferring their usual. Much like the first shot with Tommy, the first sips are the learning period.

After being outside all day, Chris generally ends with a good beer; a moment to wind down, a trophy at the end of a good day. Stretching after a work out or meditating after yoga, is a routine of consciously taking a moment to allow the body and mind to synthesize the excitement of the day. It’s a powerful practice that grounds the experience within the self. Beer can do the same. Providing a moment for the party to sit still together and talk about the day, sharing a good ale is a unifying experience, and loosens everyone up together. For Chris, the hoppier and dtronger, the better. Mindlessly chain drinking tastless beers is not the point. Mindfully drinking one or two character-filled beers, is. And stories come out.

As much as it is about being outside with nature, hunting is about spending time with others, swapping stories and creating them together. Since our first encounter, every time I hang out with Chris, Tommy, and Scootch, I learn something new, see something in a new light, or get in touch with a lost side. It’s hard to explain just through words, as much of the experience is guided by wordless energies: dogs and beer. At each outing, we head deep into the mountains and forests of Vermont. We religiously end with delicious ale, in tribute to our day’s adventure. And, without fault, meet new people along the way recounting stories of our adventures and sharing the pleasures of our prize.

*At its simplest, dogs are the most reliable partners in crime. Whatever your adventure, your dog will be down. Unconfined by words, dogs act on instinct and action. Those in close contact must communicate and respond as such. Dogs help us get in touch with a certain type of awareness that we may otherwise loose touch with. Different from dogs, who accompany us on adventures, awaits our arrival, ready to accompany our wind down and help us synthesis the day’s stories. A mindful relationship with both dogs and beer can bring great clarity.*