

# MY FRIEND *John*

You don't necessarily have to be related to someone to have a *Relationship of a Lifetime.*

I didn't know either of my grandfathers. One of them passed away a year before I was born, and the other died a year later. But sometimes, people's lives cross and lifelong friendships form. I was blessed with such a relationship that began many years ago, and it turned out to be what I would imagine as grandfatherly.

It all started when I was working at a downtown hardware store. I was fresh out of high school, working full-time and not going to college. I wasn't close to either of my parents, living on my own in a rebellious sort of way, like a lot of other people that age. My job consisted mostly of stocking shelves, assembling everything from grills to tricycles, delivering appliances and doing whatever odd jobs needed to be done. In a corner of the hardware store was a sporting goods department run by Bill Crites. At the end of the day I would hang out there, filtering through the various lures, tackle and rods.

Bill had some flies in large, clear plastic boxes on the glass counter. The boxes needed restocking, so I asked him if I could tie some flies in trade for merchandise. Bill agreed, and over time I got the boxes restocked. Meanwhile, I was spending more and more time in sporting goods and started meeting some of Bill's clientele.

One day a friend of Bill's, an older gentleman named John Collins, came into the store looking for naval jelly. I had never heard of the stuff, much less knew if we had it. (Turned out naval jelly is a brownish orange gelatinous substance that's used to remove rust.) Bill told me what aisle, how far down the aisle and what shelf it was on, so I went exactly where he directed, found it and brought it back to them. John cracked a joke about how the stuff was used to remove lint from your belly button. Bill and John burst out laughing. I was introduced not only to John Collins but also to his witty humor and cackling laugh. Bill told him I was a new employee and pointed out the flies.

After that day, I waited on John every time he came into the store. One day he called me and offered a trade. He offered me some barred lemon wood duck feathers in exchange for some small deer-hair panfish poppers. To fly-tiers these feathers are like gold. They're commonly used for wings on dry flies because of their coloration, and they have natural oils that help them to repel water. I could not pass this up. I tied the flies, and we made the trade. He later took them on a float trip on the South Fork of the New River and fly-fished for rock bass and smallmouth bass. John reported to me that he had very good luck.

The following fall, he brought me some deer tails, which are commonly used for tying flies. Anything from tails on dry flies to bucktail streamers, bucktail jigs and the world famous Clouser minnow can be made with deer tails, or bucktails as they're often called. After he brought the tails, I commented that I didn't know the first thing about deer hunting but would be interested in giving it a try. He didn't say anything at first. But about an hour after he left, he called and offered to take me on some game lands and show me what to look for. We chose a date, and we went.

John explained that white-tailed deer are ridge runners and showed me where to look for trails and various signs. We picked out trees that would be good for a climbing tree stand, and he shared stories about how buck deer act as they slowly walk into range. Not many people would have called some kid out of the blue and offered their time and years of experience. Later, John would go with me to various lands that I had access to and help determine the best stand sites. Most people seriously guard their deer hunting secrets, but I would ask John, and he would share as much as he could. Also, I would help him do tree stand maintenance, and he would always say, "The winter is the best time to do any kind of tree stand repairs and cutting trails."





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During deer season, John and I talked every night and compared notes. It seemed like every day of the season he was seeing deer, but I wasn't seeing anything. Oftentimes, he would call me to help drag a deer that he harvested. Then one day he and I both harvested four-pointers. I got my deer in the morning; he got his that evening, and I helped him drag it out.

When I started deer hunting, I didn't have a rifle or clothes. So I borrowed a rifle from my dad. Eventually, Dad, my brother Jason and I started hunting together. The times spent together scouting and target practicing, and the wonderful memories made, helped heal a once-strained relationship. This progress was sparked by John's encouragement with deer hunting.

My first introduction to floating and fishing a river from a canoe came on the Catawba River above Lake James. John loved canoeing. He called me at home one Friday night in mid-April and asked if I would be interested in fishing for some white bass the next day. I could not pass up such an opportunity. The next day he stopped at my house, and I followed him up to the take-out place, then we proceeded to the put-in place. That day he put me in the front of the canoe and told me to start fishing while he was in the stern paddling and steering. We ended up catching white bass, walleye and even a rainbow trout. But catching a fish wasn't required to have a good time because I so enjoyed his company.

We also floated and fished Johns River. I would toss a popping bug to the bank for bass and panfish. John would sit in the stern and throw a gold Rapala or

orange Beetlespin. I remember a nice smallmouth that snatched a popping bug one day while we were floating Johns River. When I set the hook, it really just made the fish mad. The fish jumped three times, and after the third jump, it made off with my fly. I looked at John. I didn't have to say a word. He replied, "I guess you know . . . when they take your lure, they have it mounted and put on their wall." It seemed like he always knew what to say when we missed a fish or a deer.

We even squirrel hunted out of the canoe. I had never really thought of squirrel hunting that way. But if the bottoms surrounding the river have cornfields, then using a canoe can be an excellent way to pursue the animals.

The only time I actually fished and hunted during the same trip was a day he took me down Johns River. When I wasn't holding a shotgun, I was casting a gold Rapala. We caught fish, harvested a few squirrels and had a wonderful time.

In later years we went fishing in my bass boat. Finally, John didn't have to paddle to keep me in position—we just let the trolling motor do the work. In the early spring we would fish for white bass and smallmouth. In the summer we fished popping bugs for bluegills. John loved to eat fish, and I always wanted to help him catch a mess.

John had a wonderful sense of humor and was an excellent storyteller. He would tell me stories of his time as a bear biologist for the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, in the Air Force and as a student at N.C. State University. One of the things I noticed was that we could sit and talk about anything. There were times he would visit my house or I would visit him, and we could sit, laugh, talk and just plain hang out, which was cool.

Many times while telling his stories, John would get to laughing, which would make me start laughing too. All of his stories had a purpose. One of the funniest times we shared was when I tried chewing tobacco. John took me and my brother Jason to the Dixie Deer Classic, where we got some free samples of chewing tobacco. I didn't chew tobacco (and still don't), but on the way back home I started smelling the stuff. He suggested, "Why don't you put a big clump of tobacco in? See how you like it, but don't swallow the juice." I grabbed a big pinch and put it in my mouth. Within seconds my head began to spin and my stomach started to roll. I spit the mess out. John laughed at me so hard his face turned beet red and he could hardly talk.

This past fall, I purchased a trail camera. It was fun and interesting to see what animals roamed the areas we were hunting. Once a week I'd check the camera, download the photos and call John to share with him what we had. We got photos of deer, turkeys, foxes, raccoons and even a black bear. Being a retired

bear biologist, John loved the bear photos. I told him that if he got a camera, we could use my computer to look at the photos. So he did, and he got some nice pictures of animals too.

One Saturday morning he came over to download some photos. He brought my daughter, Maddie, a small chocolate candy bar and a book titled "The Three Little Pigs." My little girl was elated at the gifts. After looking at the photos on the computer, we took some pictures of John and me. I had never had a photo of him and me together; it was just something that I had the urge to do. We also snapped photos of John holding Maddie, and he was tickled to have a picture with her.

One morning several days later, my brother called me with very disturbing news: John had drowned the day before in a canoeing accident. He was floating Johns River while squirrel hunting with a friend when the accident occurred. My world seemed to stop. John had been at my house just a few days before looking at the deer photos. In a couple of weeks, we were going to hunt and compare notes every night. I had floated many trips with him in a canoe and had probably done the very same float when we hunted squirrels. I didn't know what to think.

How ironic it was that he died in a canoe accident on a river where he fished, hunted the bottoms for deer and worked trapping ducks. He loved Johns River as if it had been named after him. Knowing

John, and his passion for life and the outdoors, I don't think he would have had it any other way. At the service prior to his funeral, there wasn't an empty seat. Numerous people spoke of John's gentleness, kindness and unmistakable laugh. He knew people all over the state and no doubt would be missed.

I didn't know whether I would even hunt that fall. But I remembered that a few weeks earlier, when we were looking at photos of two exceptional bucks, he had told me, "Son, you better be in that stand waiting on one of those dudes come that first Monday of rifle season." Knowing John as I did, I thought he would have wanted me to hunt, so I did. I spent a lot of time on my stand thinking about him. There were places in the woods where I could see us trimming limbs for shooting lanes.

John loved family, friends, wildlife and life. He was one of the happiest people I have ever met, and he loved to share his laughter and humor. If you were having a bad day, a talk with him made it seem not so bad. I don't know why he took such an interest in me. Maybe it had a lot to do with how good-natured he was. Whatever the reason he chose to take me under his wing, he was a wonderful person to fill the grandfather role for me. I am just grateful that our lives intersected one day in that hardware store. ♦

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