

That Time I Shot A Girl

The brushy overgrown fields behind our house were prime pheasant habitat in the 1970s. The opening day of hunting season found West Somerset Road lined with pickup trucks, and the fields dotted with hunters in blaze orange.

It wasn't safe for me to wander out back on opening day, but I could watch the hunters by climbing a tree at the edge of our side yard. I clambered high up into the slender treetop and discovered that I could rock the tree back and forth in wide sweeping arcs.

I was having great fun swinging away at the top of the tree, oblivious to how ridiculous I must have looked—until I heard a pheasant hunter shout to his pals:

“Hey! Look at that kid!”

As the sound of guffaws spread across the fields I quickly scrambled down the tree and found a more discreet place to spy on the hunters.

I took to the hunting fields myself when I became the proud owner of a Daisy “Golden Eagle” BB gun. My chief prey were soup cans and pop bottles. We had a burning barrel in those days, and when it was my turn to haul bags of trash out to the barrel I pawed through them first in quest of glass jars and bottles. Aerosol cans were even better. Bottles shattered nicely, but a punctured aerosol can would burst into hissing flames and fly around wildly like a rocket.

One afternoon I took the Golden Eagle out into the fields for a long ramble, and ended up over at the Haunted House on Hess Road. There weren't any window panes left intact to shoot at in the old house, so I crept around to the back of the tumbled-down barn.

Something of interest in the pile of ruined timbers caught my eye. I leaned the Golden Eagle against the stone foundation wall for a moment and started to climb up for a closer look. But as I hauled myself up I dislodged one of the heavy stones, and to my dismay it crashed down on top of my gun. The plastic stock was splintered, and the barrel was now bent at a ninety-degree angle.

Filled with disappointment I started for home. I didn't want to be seen walking down the road with a broken gun, so I followed the creek out to West Somerset Road, then snuck beneath the bridges to the railroad and walked the tracks. But I was not going to escape undetected. As I tried to creep quietly behind Leroy's house a young boy playing in the yard spotted me. He pointed at the gun in my hand.

“You going hunting?”

Sheepishly I held up my poor Golden Eagle with its ludicrous L-shaped barrel.

“It's broken,” I said.

The boy's eyes opened wide and he burst into gales of delighted laughter. That busted BB gun was the funniest thing he'd ever seen. When I looked back after a few minutes he was still grinning and staring after me. I made his day.

At home my parents sighed and bought me a new Daisy BB gun, a classic "Red Ryder" this time. It didn't have a compass in the stock, but at least the stock was real wood this time. The old Golden Eagle wasn't discarded. I bent the barrel back into a more-or-less straight line, and discovered that it still worked—sort of. Any BB fired from it emerged with a feeble "*pffff*" and fell to the ground about three feet away. It was good for a laugh, if not much more.

The Red Ryder was a fine gun and it inspired my ambitions. I grew bored with plinking at jelly jars and the occasional unlucky sparrow, and yearned to go after bigger game.

Crows were plentiful and I decided to try my luck with them. My father had a vinyl record of crow calls and a portable battery-operated record player. I hauled these and my Red Ryder out back to a cabbage field on the Platt farm. Along the edge of the field stood a tall stack of cabbage boxes. I climbed into the top one, set up my record player, turned it on and scanned the skies. The scratchy recording of cawing crows didn't sound very convincing out there in the open—but it worked.

Within a few minutes a handful of crows appeared over the treetops of the woods across the field. They circled above the trees, calling to each other, then perched in the top branches. One or two would soar out over the field for a bit of reconnoitering; but they were suspicious and never came close enough for me to even try a shot.

So I went back to smaller and easier targets. The Red Ryder accompanied me on many a successful hunt out among the farm ponds and hedgerows—including one infamous day when I and an unnamed accomplice journeyed to an undisclosed location and, succumbing to our basest killer instincts, committed that cold-blooded outrage known as the Great Leopard Frog Massacre.

That harrowing tale must remain untold; but there is another dark chapter from my boyhood which I feel compelled to relate—if only to free myself of a burden of guilt that I've carried for the past forty-something years. I speak, of course, of the time I shot a girl.

Eric was a school friend who lived on the Lake Road. I didn't see him very often outside school, but we did hang around now and then. On the day in question I bicycled down with my Red Ryder for an afternoon of exploring the orchards behind his house. We made our way to the crest of a hill, at the foot of which was a swath of tall thickly-growing reeds surrounded by grasses and wildflowers.

Eric's sister and a couple of friends were hidden among those reeds, playing and picking flowers. We could hear their girlish chatter but couldn't see them clearly. Nevertheless, being boys who knew their duty, we hunkered down behind a couple of old apple boxes to spy on them.

After a few moments I had one of those utterly daft impulses which punctuated my boyhood. Without pausing to give the matter any rational thought whatsoever, I raised my BB gun, pointed it in the

general direction of the reeds, and loosed off a shot.

An instant later a cry of pain rose up from the reeds.

“Ow! Ow! Owww!”

A freezing wave of horror swept through me. I hit someone!

The other girls piped up.

“What’s wrong? What’s the matter?”

“A bee stung me! Ow! I got stung by a bee! Ow! Ow!”

Stricken to the core, I crouched lower behind the boxes and peered through the slats. I still couldn’t see much, just an occasional glimpse of blonde hair bobbing around in the reeds. Then the three girls emerged into the open and began running uphill towards the house, the injured one crying piteously.

Eric and I kept well out of sight until the girls vanished behind us, then turned solemn faces to each other. We pondered briefly what would happen if this deed was found out. I knew my mother would instantly ground me for life; that was a given. And my father would certainly take my gun away, also for life. As to what the girl’s father would do—several possible scenarios flashed before my eyes, all of them frightful.

We decided our best bet would be to plead total ignorance of the whole affair. We saw nothing. We knew nothing. We weren’t even here. BB guns? Girls? Never heard of them.

We swore each other to total secrecy, then split up and went our separate ways—Eric to slip home and pretend he had spent the afternoon upstairs in his room, I to retrieve my bike and make my escape. I gave the house a wide berth and pedaled frantically up Hess Road. Every time a car came up behind me I peered over my shoulder, quaking with fear, certain the girl’s father was hot on my trail and breathing flames of fury.

I made it safely home and sat long in my room, sunk deep in the misery of remorse and shame. I shot a girl! Was this a worse crime than slugging a girl? It must be. Even the most chivalrous gentleman can be excused for occasionally hauling off and giving one of the fair sex a much-needed clout upside the head. But to deliberately aim and fire a deadly weapon . . . well, maybe that wasn’t exactly what I did, but the principle was the same. There was no escaping it. I was the lowest form of louse. I shot a girl.

But over the next few hours, as I brooded over the incident, doubts began to creep in. Did I really hit her? The girls were a long way down that hill, hidden behind heavy reeds. It would have been a remarkable shot, even for the legendary Red Ryder. I hadn’t even aimed the thing.

Maybe she really was stung by a bee. It was a warm sunny day and she was playing in a patch of wildflowers. There must have been plenty of bees buzzing around. Maybe the whole thing was just a

freakish coincidence. Maybe I didn't really shoot a girl.

Those were a lot of maybes, but I never found answers to them. The episode was never mentioned again. Eric kept his vow of silence, and I certainly never breathed a word to anyone. Eventually, as the years passed, the whole affair faded into the dim recesses of memory. Only now, more than four decades later, do I feel the time is finally right to make my confession.

I will add that I learned my lesson, too. From that day forward my conduct when handling weapons of any kind was exemplary. No more joking around with guns or anything. Safety First was my motto. Well . . . except maybe for that one time when I was standing next to our swimming pool with my archery bow; and I shot an arrow straight up into the sky just to see what would happen—and wouldn't you know the cursed thing came whistling down and . . . but that's another story for another time.