

THE SWIMMING POOL

I grew up in a home that was filled with guns. My father was a hunter all his life, and for some fifteen years in his younger days was a professional big game hunter in Africa, India and IndoChina. The house fairly bulged with shotguns and rifles, and a smaller number of handguns.

The main repository was a large gun case built into his den - a room whose four walls were covered with the antlered heads of African trophies, and the floor carpeted with skins of big cats. As a young boy, I was riveted by the row of guns in that case, trying to understand what each was for... how each had earned its place in that magical lineup... which had brought down which heads hanging on the walls.

My father was very tolerant of his sons (there were three of us) getting comfortable with these weapons. He encouraged us to learn to shoot as soon as we were big and strong enough to handle the guns safely. He took us hunting as soon as we could keep up with him. And he allowed us to take a gun out on the farm by ourselves when we hit the magical age of twelve.

All guns, that is, but one. His huge Mauser elephant rifle was the forbidden fruit. Perhaps because it was too big a gun for any of us to shoot comfortably, but probably because there was no possible reason for us to shoot it - there being few elephants on our Maryland farm - this particular gun was off-limits. We well understood the prohibition.

Which is why I was astounded, one fine summer morning, to find my oldest brother John on the side porch of the house with the elephant gun and a handful of enormous cartridges. I was perhaps ten at the time, and he was a ripe and mature sixteen. Neither of our parents was at home. I danced around him shrieking juvenile reminders of the grand prohibition: "What are you doing with that gun? You know you're not allowed to shoot that gun! Put that gun back in the guncase or I'll tell on you!"

“Shut Up!” barked John, all but giving me the back of his hand to quiet my tirade. “And watch this. This will be something else!” About forty yards away the swimming pool glimmered in the morning sun. “I’m going to bounce a bullet off the surface of the water,” John said. “It’ll ricochet down into the woods beyond. Watch,” he commanded.

I watched with horror and a kind of grisly fascination as he slipped one of the six inch long cartridges into the chamber, closed the bolt, and took careful aim at the swimming pool. The gun went off with a mighty roar - the loudest shot I had ever heard - we instantly saw a fierce splash in the pool - and we waited for the whining sound of the ricocheting bullet thwacking into the oak woods beyond. But we heard no ricochet. This was strange. We walked to the pool to investigate.

And there we discovered, to our horror, virtually the entire far end of the concrete pool blasted to smithereens. It had not been a terribly big swimming pool, but it was a grievously wounded one now. Indeed, the wound looked mortal as the water seeped out the horrifyingly large, gaping, devastated area into the dry soil beyond.

This was a catastrophe far, far beyond our capacity for reckoning. In our wildest nightmares we could never, ever have imagined such a thing. But looking back upon it, John’s instantaneous reaction was an utterly predictable boy’s response: Somehow, this had to be covered up! We had to get this thing fixed before my father came home. He was working in Washington in those days... this was a Wednesday... he would be back late Friday afternoon... there was little chance of our mother discovering what had happened... we had just forty-eight hours to cover up any trace of this awful deed.

So John set right to work, with the full assistance of his conspiratorial brothers. First priority... drain the pool. Get the water level low enough so we could remove the debris and start repairs. This was not easily done. The pool was an old one and did not have any sophisticated plumbing for draining or filling. It could only be done by siphoning the remaining water out with garden hoses. We scavenged every corner of the farm for hoses:

the hog pens, the cattle and horse troughs, the chicken house, the dog kennels, my mother's flower garden. And then the exhausting and unpleasant process of sucking on old, dirty hoses. We eventually had about ten siphons draining the water out. But how slowly the level went down!

Meantime, we needed Sakrete. Lots and lots of Sakrete. Off to the country hardware store - the Southern States Cooperative in Cockeyville - in the old farm truck. John had some money - he always had money, it seemed to me - and we eventually made our way home with about ten heavy sacks of the stuff. The water was barely low enough to start repairs, but there was no time to waste.

Mix, mix, mix! We did another scavenge of the farm's resources and came up with every bucket and trowel we could find. We called in additional boypower: the farmer's sons and a neighboring friend who could be trusted to keep silent, and we all sat on the ground mixing pails of concrete.

And then, slap, slap, slap! as we did our best to make the stuff stick to the damaged end wall. Of course, we had made it too runny and as fast as we slapped it up it oozed back down into the depths of the pool. Never mind - we had plenty - slap up some more. Sisyphus would have admired us. After failure upon failure, we finally achieved a consistency that would more or less stay in place. It was dusk. Now, it had to dry and set up overnight.

By dawn's early light it was still damp, soft and mushy to the touch but it was more or less in place. And now, paint. Paint, paint, paint! Do your best to match the faded blue color of the pool. Try not to dislodge still-molten concrete as you covered it with paint. Pray that it would congeal and dry into a mass of about the right color. Maybe the paint would help hold it in place.

Now, it was noon on Thursday and time was running short. It simply had to dry and take form so we could start the painfully slow process of refilling the pool. The pool was a far reach from the nearest spigot, and water was in short supply, being pumped by hydraulic ram from a nearby stream into an old water tower behind the barn, and thence up to the house. At best,

we could get two hoses going, but only a pitiful trickle came through. But by late afternoon we could wait no longer. We would just have to take our chances and start the refill...

By Friday morning the water covered about half the damaged area and it seemed to be holding... but the pool was still a good three feet low. Keep the water flowing until the last possible minute. Start cleaning up the mess we had made, and leave the hoses going until 4:00: my father was generally home from Washington by 5:00. Oh, how slowly the level rose. In the house, there were loud complaints about low water pressure in the kitchen and bathrooms. By 4:30 the pool was only about a foot low, but it was midsummer and no one was likely to notice. We were done. We had made it! With a sigh of relief we put away the hoses and retreated to the house.

And, right on schedule, at 5:00 we saw my father's car coming up the long driveway. It was his invariable custom, after having been away from home for a week in Washington, to get out of his car and walk around the place before coming up to the house. He just wanted to check things out and see how his home had made it through his weeklong absence. And the next thing we boys knew, he came running into the house calling our mother. "Peg, Peg! The God damndest thing just happened! I was walking around the swimming pool and the whole end of the thing just slid down into the water!!" Three boys looked up in straight-faced amazement: how could such a thing possibly be?

And no one told. Ever. My father went to his grave many years later without ever hearing the amazing saga of our heroic labors. He just wrote the mystery off to the age of the pool and the general cussedness of inanimate objects.

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Read by J V Aug, Jr. at the Literary Club of Cincinnati September 28 2009