



# A HUNT WITH POPPA

Better late than never, the author gets the outing she's always wanted—and much more

By Natalie Krebs

If we don't find any squirrels, we'll go shoot them off the bird feeder," said my grandpa as we walked into the woods, flashing me a wicked grin. Poppa wore a work shirt under denim overalls so bright they must've just come off the shelf at Tractor Supply. He held a shotgun in the crook of his arm. It was only the first week of the season, but this hunt was long overdue.

We eased down the two-track that bisects my uncle's woods. I carried a Savage .22, a choice Poppa thought foolish. The proper gun was an Italian-made 20-gauge, specifically the Charles Daly Field III he carried. It was a pretty little over/under that he'd rescued from a yard sale the year I was born.

He lowered himself onto a dead oak and settled it across his 85-year-old knees. I joined him. Soon my thoughts began to wander, as all hunters' thoughts do when it's time to wait.

\*\*\*

A joke (or maybe it wasn't a joke at all) about popping yard squirrels wasn't the sort of thing Clarence Krebs indulged in when I was little. Poppa had always

been stern, a German Catholic engineer with eight kids, then 18 grandkids, but no time for nonsense. I spent my early years avoiding him, or saying little when that didn't work.

Then Poppa retired, which cheered him up considerably. But the process was like a beech letting its leaves drop—it took a while. Once, I told him I wanted to be an architect; he made it clear I didn't want to do that. Architects, he said, dreamed up problems that engineers had to fix. I just nodded. Later, when he heard I wanted to be a writer, he didn't say anything at all.

\*\*\*

A rustle drew my attention. I whispered, then remembered Poppa probably wouldn't hear if I fired three distress shots into the air. I tapped his shoulder and we argued over who would shoot. I won by setting my rifle aside. The squirrel twitched, and Poppa pulled the trigger.

To meet me here, he drove over the Ohio River, across a bridge he'd helped create. Poppa often spends weekends looking

PHOTOGRAPH BY  
JIM GOLDEN

## Prized Keepsakes

A collection passed down to the author.

\*\*\*

The leaves exploded, and the squirrel scabbled around the trunk uninjured. Poppa's face clouded. I had guilted him into this outing, our first squirrel hunt together. He'd taken some of his grandsons squirrel hunting when they came of age, but none of them took to hunting. His granddaughter did, but he never asked me to go. So when I was almost 25, I demanded a squirrel hunt with my grandpa. In the end, he killed one, and I never took a shot. It was perfect.

A few years later, Poppa called me to his workbench, where a gun case lay. Inside was that pretty little over/under. On the trigger guard was a tag in the same hand as the hunting licenses, a slight wobble to it now. It read, THIS 20 GAUGE, FIXED CHOKE, IS FOR NATALIE. —POPPA

Later I learned that he'd intended to leave me the shotgun in his will. He'd labeled it and locked it up until that unhappy day. Instead, my dad persuaded him to get some joy out of the transfer and give it to me himself. So he did. With each gift, he passed along his memories to someone hungry for them before they didn't mean anything to him or to anyone else.

Lately when I see him, usually with a glass of Wild Turkey in hand and hearing aids turned up, he starts off saying, "Aw, you're not still hunting all the time, are you? Running all over? It's not right. You don't want to do that job forever."

It's part jest, part genuine disapproval. These days, I don't nod. Instead, I tell him, with a wicked grin on my face, that if he disapproves so much, he shouldn't have given me his shotgun.

