Hunting Fever

Eileen Mericle*
JOHN PARKINS groped in the darkness for his wife's hand. "Are you asleep, honey?"

"Uh huh." Shirley mumbled and rolled over.

"Uh, I wondered if you had done any thinking about the vacation?" He hesitated. "I mean have you . . . ." He tried to think of the right words.

"Oh, John, I thought we'd been all through that!" Shirley was awake now. "I figured it all out, honey. It won't cost much more to go to New York than it will to go hunting. You do want to take me, don't you?"

"Yes, if you really want to go." John sighed and lay back, staring into the blackness and waiting for her to continue.

"Did I tell you, I got an answer from Aunt Russie today. She said that Hank wouldn't be a bit of trouble and we could stay with her as long as we like." Shirley droned on about all the free art exhibits that were scheduled for the City next month and about Greenwich Village until John, who had his own idea of how inexpensive it was, fell asleep.

"Now, doesn't that sound like fun? John . . . ?" Shirley could barely see his profile in the shadows. Gently she put
her head down on his pillow. She lay that way for a long
time — watching the shadows creep along the ceiling whenever a car went down their street. She watched until she thought of Fay, their new neighbor, and John's reaction to her at the party last week. Then the tears came and all the shadows blurred together.

The next day was Friday. John woke before the alarm went off — a bad sign. He remembered to push the button in as he shuffled toward the bathroom.

He took time out from shaving to pull two gray hairs from his temple but, just as he finished, he saw two more and resigned himself to looking distinguished at thirty-two. Shirley was a year older than he and as he brushed his hair he wondered if she had any gray she'd been keeping secret. "But, with that brilliant red color it wouldn't show for years anyway," he reasoned. He tossed the twin military brushes back in his shaving bag and dressed. "The gray wouldn't show in Greg Ferguson's hair either," he thought, "not with that dishwater color. And Fay's hair would probably fall out from all that peroxide before it showed any signs of gray." He chuckled, thinking how Fay would look as a female Yul Brynner.

He glanced in on Hank.

"We still going to New York, Dad?" The freckled face peered at him questioningly.

"Yeah, I guess so." He passed on into the kitchen, made himself a piece of toast and sat down with the Manchester Guardian. He read the caption under the banner, "The World's Greatest Small Town Daily — Circulation 6,402." He scanned the headlines. "Ventura County Deer Season Opens August 15th" Quickly he leafed through the rest of the paper. He noticed that Bleeker Brothers were still running their sale ad on Coleman lanterns. He glanced at his watch, dropped the paper and left for work.

"Hi, Greg; been waiting long?" John pulled away from the curb with his passenger.

"No, Fay threw me outa the house just before you came. Beats me what she's doin up this early, guess she's got a date with the milkman." He stooped to retie his shoelace.

"That cruddy sign! Cinderella Homes — Live in a Castle." John mimicked the orange letters on the giant bill-
board as he waited for the signal to change. “One of these nights I'm going to sneak out here and burn it to the ground!” He flushed. “It's an eyesore to the development. Besides, they sold the last house four or five months ago. How much did you go in hock for your dream house, Greg, sixteen thousand or eighteen five?” The light changed. “God, everyone driving by gets a capsule of our life. It destroys individuality.” He gestured with one hand. “A total stranger knows we've got genuine lathe and plaster, optional built-ins and colored bathroom fixtures!”

Greg Ferguson pushed in the cigarette lighter. “Sounds to me like you're still going to New York in two weeks.”

John cooled down. “Yeah, it sure looks that way. I don't know what gets into women. Shirley's always been so eager to go camping before. She was looking forward to it last winter as much as Hank and I were.” He refused the cigarette Greg offered him. “It's not just the trip. Shirley's changed in other ways too. She snaps at Hank for hardly any reason. She's even begun wearing clothes I thought she'd given to the Salvation Army years ago.” John scratched his head. “You like hunting, Greg?”

“Hunting? Oh, sure. I've got a 30:06 that's a beaut, but if you want my opinion it's no damn fun if you can't kill anything. Last October, in Michigan, me and a couple of fellas took some time off from work — sick you know.” He nudged John in the ribs. “Well, one of the guys had this lodge, see. It belonged to his uncle or something. Anyway, we each got us a girl and some booze, loaded the guns and ammo in the car and off we went.” Greg paused briefly to light another cigarette. “Well, we had one hell of a night. We got pretty loaded and the other two fellas kept ogling Fay . . . uh . . . oh well, what the hell, so it was Fay I took.

John coughed and turned the car radio on.

“Well, like I was sayin’ . . .”

The radio only caused Greg to talk louder.

“The next morning, or I should say afternoon, we went out. Those hills were crawlin' with deer. I shot a couple of 'em down by a lake around sunset.” He laughed. “You know what? I'll be damned if they both didn't stagger off into the forest before I could finish 'em. Guess my hand was still
too shaky from the night before." He poked John in the ribs again, but seeing the expression on his face, made a vain attempt to set things straight. "Oh, don't get me wrong. I would have gone after 'em but, like I said, it was getting close to sunset and besides, I had a splitting headache . . ."

John stared silently ahead.

"Hey, it's 7:30. Hal Walker Sports is on. Mind if I listen?" He turned the knob even as he spoke.

Shirley might have slept through Hank’s hammering had it not been coupled with the incessant ringing of the phone. She staggered out of bed and shrugged on her bathrobe as she went.

"'H'lo?"

"Shirley? This is mother. Are you sick?" The voice at the other end of the line sounded far away.

"No, mother, I'm just waking up; excuse me. Hank, stop that hammering! Hello, you still there?"

"Yes, dear. I just called to see if you had changed your mind about going to the City for your vacation. Have you?"

"Oh, Mom. I don't know. At first I wanted to go so much and John says it's all right but . . . he doesn't really want to take me. He doesn't love me anymore . . ." Shirley sighed.

"Now, honey . . . Is it all right if I come over for a while?"

"Oh, would you, Mom? O.K. Yes, anytime." Shirley replaced the receiver.

"I'm hungry, Mom." A voice came out of the near bedroom. Shirley went to the kitchen, took bacon and eggs from the refrigerator and automatically started preparing them.

"Um, I smell breakfast!" Hank came bounding in, red hair flopping. "Do you need some help . . . eating it, that is?" He grinned, looking like a jack-o-lantern, with two front teeth missing. "Say, Mom, Dad says we're still going to New York. Uh . . . I was wondering . . . well, Jimmy Ahrens asked his folks and they said it was all right with them if it was O.K. with you."

Shirley looked up, surprised. "What's all right?"

"Well, they're going hunting and they said I could go along and they're leaving the day after we are, but that's all right 'cause I could stay with them that night. How about
it, Mom?” Hank finished eagerly.

“Why, Hank, I didn’t know you were so much against going with us. I thought you might enjoy doing something different for a change.”

“Aww, I haven’t got anything against it, but . . . gee whiz, Mom, museums and zoos aren’t near as good as fishing and hunting.”

They finished their breakfast in silence.

Shirley was elbow-deep in dishes when she glanced out the kitchen window and spied the enemy approaching. Fay Ferguson slithered across the grass like a diamondback rattler — beautiful, graceful, and deadly. The substitute summer mailman became her first conquest of the day as they stopped together for a minute on the sidewalk. The morning sun played in the soft platinum hair and outlined the gently curving hips in Hawaiian bermudas. Shirley raised a soapy hand in a vain attempt to somehow adjust the old college sweatshirt and push back the unruly hair.

The young mailman left reluctantly. Shirley had a vision of the poor bewitched boy leaving mail at all the wrong houses for the rest of the day. An ironic smile played across her mouth. The only way she could ever achieve the same results would be to chloroform her victim.

Fay knocked. Shirley stood motionless, but before she could come to a decision, Hank bounded to the door and ushered Fay in.

Shirley feigned surprise. “Hi, Fay. Come on in, I’m out here in the kitchen.”

“Gee, you sure do smell good, Mrs. Ferguson!” Hank followed Fay into the kitchen.

“Why thank you, Hank!” Fay gushed, and leaned down to plant a ruby kiss on the boy’s forehead. Hank staggered out of the room, leaving the two women alone.

“How about some coffee?” Shirley tried to sound enthusiastic.

“Love some.” The rich southern voice rolled out like a wave. “Gregie didn’t make any before he left for work. No, no cream!” Fay raised a hand in mock horror. “Can y’all imagin, I’m up to a hunern-n-leven!”

Shirley remembered when she had weighed a hundred and eleven. She had been a sophomore in college and about
the same age as Fay. No, Fay was twenty-two. She just looked eighteen. And I look fifty. Shirley stared ahead. She wished Fay would get to whatever it was she had come over for. What had John called her at the party last week? Oh yes, “blonde dynamite” he had said incautiously, “She just explodes everywhere.”

Fay sipped her coffee noisily. “Bet you cain’t guess who our new mailman is,” and then, without waiting, “He’s the son of John R. Moore—you know—Moore Products Incorporated. Isn’t it jes too thrilling fo wuds! His daddy thought it would be good fo him to get out and get some exercise, sorta see how the otha half lives.”

“Well, well.” Shirley was genuinely amused. “You’re so lucky, Fay, he seems quite attracted to you.”

“Isn’t it the truth! I’ve had him in f’coffee and he said he’s nevah met anyone like me befoh. Do you really think he means it?”

She can’t be serious, Shirley thought. “Well, I’m sure he means it, Fay. John was just saying the other day that he’d never met anyone quite like you either.”

“Is that a fact?” Fay seemed pleased. “Well, what I’m wonderin is . . . well, you promise you won’t tell Gregie?”

Shirley crossed her heart.

“Well, he wants me to run off with him. He’s got one of those Cessna planes an he says we can be in Mexico in an hour an . . .”

Shirley interrupted. “But, Fay, he can’t be more than eighteen!”

“He’s nineteen, but he’ll be twenty soon, and besides, he’s an only child an you know what that means.”

“No, I’m not quite sure I do?” Shirley was just on the point of becoming abrupt when a knock at the door saved her the trouble.

“Oh, mother! It’s so nice to see you. No, you’re not interrupting anything. Fay was just going.” She ushered her mother into the kitchen and introduced them.

“Yes, Ah wuz jest leavin but Ah’m so glad to meet y’all. Cum oveah jes any ole time. Ah’m right across the street.” Fay wiggled out.

“Well, I declare. I can certainly see why you sounded so concerned on the phone, Shirley.” Mrs. Hennessey removed
her little blue hat and the imitation violets bobbed up and down. "Don't they have a city ordinance against women like that running loose around here, or maybe a leash law?"

Shirley laughed. "Can I get you some coffee, Mom?"

"No, but I'll take a glass of water." With that she bounced off the bar stool and grabbed a glass off the drainboard. "Shirley, you look terrible!"

"Thanks."

"What haven't you done to yourself lately?" Mrs. Hennessey looked inquiringly up at her daughter.

"Mom, sometimes I forget what a half-pint you are. Do you still claim you're going to grow that last half inch and become five feet tall?"

"Shirley, you're avoiding me. Has this Fay got something to do with your proposed trip?"

Shirley hedged. "Why, Mom, you know I've always wanted to go to New York."

"Yes, I know." Mrs. Hennessey bolted her water like a veteran. "I also know John just bought you a fine new house and Hank's going to need some tuition money one of these days and both of them want to go hunting. How come the revolt?"

"Oh, Mom. You always stick up for them whenever we have any squabbles." Shirley pouted.

"I ride you just the same as your grandmother Baker rode me, Shirley. Besides, you shouldn't punish John for a little harmless ogling." Mrs. Hennessey replenished her water supply. "Remember, when the man wins, so does the woman. But when the woman alone wins . . ."

Shirley buried her face in a dishtowel. "How . . . how did you know about John?" she blubbered.

"He's a man, isn't he?"

"But, if I back down now how will I ever know if John really loves me enough to take me to New York." Shirley raised her head and looked beseechingly at her mother.

"Well, yes. How would you know?" Mrs. Hennessey chose this moment to be sympathetic. She kissed her daughter, gave her a good squeeze and then, glancing at her watch declared, "Goodness! 11 o'clock. I've got to run." She picked up her hat and started to go. "Oh, I nearly forgot. I brought you a present, something to wear on vacation." She laid the
box she had been holding on the kitchen table. “I’ll call you tonight. Think about it.” Then she was gone.

Shirley did think about it. She was hanging out her wash when she spotted Tubby, their cat, stalking something. Hank saw him too. Both of them stood motionless, watching the age-old drama—the hunter and the hunted. Presently the bird flew away and Tubby settled back to wash himself lazily in the sun.

“Mom, how come Tubby chases birds? He’s not really hungry, is he?”

“No, Hank, he’s not hungry. It’s just his instinct. Tubby couldn’t catch a bird if his life depended on it anymore. He’s out of training.” She laughed, thinking of Tubby’s dependence on them, but it gave her an uneasy feeling. Wasn’t John’s instinct something like Tubby’s?

Shirley went back in the house and started checking her wardrobe. She wondered if she could get by just charging a couple of dresses and a sweater at Grayson’s. She went through John’s closet. He could use a new suit, but instead he had bought Jim Weston’s used rifle last spring. She saw it back in the corner and recalled the many nights he had spent cleaning it.

She slammed the closet door shut and dragged the vacuum to the center of the room. The cleaner bumped into the table and her scrapbook fell to the floor. As she stooped to pick it up she saw that it had fallen open to the photo account of their vacation in 1952. What a year that had been! Shirley smiled, remembering. She looked approvingly down at the pictures. Suddenly she set the book down and ran to the bathroom to get her cosmetics and a mirror. About fifteen minutes later she compared the girl in the glass with the one in the photo and nodded approvingly. Shirley recalled how she had bragged to her neighbors about her “great white hunter” with each gift of venison.

She shut the book, finished her cleaning and sat down to read the paper. They were having a heat wave in New York. She threw the paper in the trash and went out to the garage.

About an hour later she started dinner.

She saw the familiar blue Chevy from the kitchen window and reached for the lipstick tube on the sill.

“Hi, honey. I made the reservations today.” John’s
voice came from the hall. "I thought as long as we were going to New York we wouldn't want to stay with Aunt . . ." His voice trailed away.

Shirley came into the living room and smiled at the expression on John's face as he stood before the pile of camping gear. He started to say something but the phone rang. Before she could get to it John had hold of her. He was kissing her neck and ears. "Silly." She smiled delightedly.

"Hello?" She balanced the receiver with one hand because John still held her.

"Hello, honey. This is Mom. Did you open the present I brought you?"

"The present? Oh, the present! I forgot all about it." Shirley motioned John to go and get the box in the kitchen. "But, Mom, I don't think I'll be using it. You see . . . hello? . . . hello? She hung up." Shirley walked over to where John was opening the package.

"Well, whaddya know!"

Shirley peered around him. Inside the box were three beautiful plaid sport shirts—just right for camping. One was size eight, one size thirty, and one size forty-two.

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**Dance**

*by Judy Pollen*

My heart is a wind-harp
hung on a silver chain
But it should sing in a cypress tree
and dance on a thread of rain.