

## A Moonlight Hunt

fiction by *Steve Ramirez*

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The skeeters were buzzin' that night but Jimmy and me didn't care a bit on account of us being used to such things on a moonlight hunt. We was crossin' an open wet area tryin' to get to a line of trees that looked all purple and black on account of the moonlight. The water was black, too, but at least it was warm when we was sloshin' through it. Jimmy and me was tryin' to keep it real quiet so as not to let them know we was comin'. Jimmy was always my best partner for a moonlight hunt.

While we was walkin' I was thinkin' of the times that Jimmy and me had been huntin' before, like the time on Fish-eatin' Creek on the north side of the everglades when we was huntin' coons. I could hear the dogs yelpin' in the moonlight and I could smell the sour rotten smell of the Glades. The skeeters were buzzin' that night, too.

Then there was the other time when we was huntin' for turkey in the slash pines and palmettos. I was walkin' in Jimmy's footsteps on account of it bein' dark and we was bein' careful not to step on a snake. There was cottonmouths in the glades and diamondbacks in the palmettos. I'd be just as dead from one snake as the other so I trusted Jimmy to go first.

We slipped into the piney woods under a new moon. The stars was still out and the woods was so dark that I had to put my hand out in front of me so I could feel the trees as I went. Jimmy knew where we was headed cause he'd seen the gobbler roostin' in the big slash pine the night before. We slipped in real quiet, just like now, except there was no water round our feet and no skeeters buzzin'.

Jimmy had me set up next to a big pine. I rested my shotgun on my knees and waited to hear 'em gobble. Soon enough it started to get first light. The birds started makin' noise and then Jimmy let out a hoot like he was an ole owl and the big gobbler answered back like it was lightin'. Jimmy started callin' to him real soft with little yelps and purrs and that ole tom kept thunderin' back at us as he came closer each time.

It seemed to take forever and I was just startin' to think about the pain in my arms from holdin' that shotgun when the gobbler came struttin' round a palmetto bush. That turned out to be a good moonlight hunt cause I squeezed the trigger and aimed for his head just like Jimmy learned me to do. That's why I'm a good shot now cause Jimmy's the best teacher. Well that ole tom fell at the shot and Jimmy ran over and stepped on his neck so he wouldn't get back up. Jimmy said he was real proud of me.

Jimmy was always my best friend. We swore a blood oath one time just like the Indians in the western movies. I was about 10 years old then, and we swore a blood oath that we'd never part as fiends, never ever no matter what. Now here we was all grown up as men and we was still sloshin' cross a wet field along the river on a moonlight hunt.

I was thinkin' how good it felt bein' out there with Jimmy just about the time it all happened. I heard the poppin' sound in the palm trees that was all purple and black and then I saw the bullet hit Jimmy's head and a piece of his insides came out and hit me in the face and all over my flack jacket. Then I saw Jimmy fall into the water like he was doin' a belly flop in a pool. I ran to Jimmy and rolled him over in the mud, and I was screamin' for him to get up. I was gettin' real scared cause I'd never been on a moonlight hunt without Jimmy, and I kept on yellin' at him to come back, but he didn't have the same face as before, and I knew he wasn't comin' back.

That was about the time that the bullets hit me, and I could see the place in the purple and black palm trees where the insurgents were shootin' from. The bullets felt like someone punched me real hard, and I felt all sick inside, and I could feel myself layin' down on top of Jimmy. I was still yellin' for Jimmy to come back, and I could hear the gunfire all around me and feel the cold of the water on my legs and arms. Then I stopped yellin' for Jimmy cause I couldn't anymore. The moonlight was getting further away, and it kept getting colder, and I couldn't hear the gunfire as much as it seemed far away now, too. Then I heard Jimmy calling to me, and I could see him in the moonlight again. He was telling me that everything was O.K. Jimmy kept calling for me, and I was going toward him when I started to feel warm again. It was like before except that the mosquitoes were not buzzing anymore, and Jimmy was there, and I was not afraid anymore. Jimmy was always my best friend.

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