

Shotgun Wedding

MY HUSBAND IS A CITY BOY—AS MUCH AS A boy from Tulsa, Oklahoma, can be, at least. I tease him about this. Me, I grew up on a farm near Fairview, Oklahoma, where we had only two stoplights, and the closest Walmart was 40 miles away. Until he met me, my husband didn't know what a combine was. He couldn't even tell the difference between an Angus and Braunvieh cow. Imagine.

In our first year of dating, I noticed another difference between us: I live for Christmas. He does not. So I knew that first Christmas as newlyweds out at Nightengale Farms was going to be a good one.

My parents wanted to do something special for all the kids, something that would welcome the newest family member. They got all the girls KitchenAid mixers. And they got the guys shotguns. My husband is fond of guns. He's more accustomed to military-type rifles, and I'm pretty certain he hadn't shot at a pigeon (clay or otherwise) in his entire life. But when my mom asked what I thought of the idea, I said, "That's perfect!"

As is the tradition with us Nightengales, my parents couldn't just give the guys the shotguns. We like giving gifts that are symbolic of the gifts we're giving. Then the receiver of the symbolic gift must guess the real gift. (One year my brother got a piece of cardboard divided in half. One side had nuts and bolts screwed through it and read "Happy Kitty." The other side had only the bolts and read "Poor Kitty." His gift was getting his cat neutered.) So in a perfectly wrapped and immaculately bowed box, my husband discovered a rabbit's foot, feathers from a variety of bird species, and a clay pigeon. He pulled them out, looked around, and said, "Wow. Thanks." For a few minutes, we watched him awkwardly try to show excitement about his gift. Then we explained how our Christmas works. So the guys (two brothers, one brother-in-law, and my husband) started guessing what their gifts could possibly be.

The No. 1 answer was tools. To this day, I'm not sure why they thought a clay pigeon would have something to do with tools. After a couple more guesses, my parents disappeared to a back room and came back with four shiny Benelli 12-gauge shotguns.

But what makes this Christmas memorable wasn't the gift or the reaction to the gift. It's what happened next.

My dad and brothers like to hunt. So my dad decided that, after shooting some clay pigeons in the backyard, he'd take the guys hunting down by the creek. But one can't leave details—like the presence of quail—to chance. So my dad bought 30 quail at \$3.50 apiece. His idea was to sneak down to the creek with the birds, release them, and then take the guys hunting.

There were a couple of problems with this idea, though. One: my dog. He found the quail in their boxes in the garage the night before the big hunt. Able to smell the fowl but not able to reach them, he just barked at them incessantly. Some of the quail were literally scared to death. So that left 27 quail for the hunt.

The second, and most concerning, problem was that the quail were domesticated. My dad soon realized that, upon release, the quail were so confused by their new surroundings and so accustomed to being around humans that the last thing on their bird brains was flying. Instead, they hunkered down. When my husband, brothers, and their guns started walking toward them, the birds didn't budge.

None of us are proud of what happened next. (Then again, we do retell the story often.)

The only way to hunt these birds was to give them a bit of encouragement. So we picked up the birds and gently tossed them into the air. Nine out of 10 birds discovered their wings and took flight.

Then the guys got to test their guns.

We justified our actions in a variety of ways. The birds were going to die in the wild anyway. It's their fault they wouldn't fly. We were giving them every chance at survival that we could. But at the end of the day, as I watched my oldest brother clean the quail in preparation for dinner, I couldn't help but feel guilty. I looked over at my husband with his Sperry loafers and Citizen watch, cleaning his new shotgun with a gleeful smile on his face. Whether city boy or country, there's something primal about guns and the thrill of the hunt. Even if the hunt requires the boy to throw his prey into the air. **D**



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