

PHEASANT MEMORIES

WATCHING DADDY CLEAN
BIRDS WAS BETTER
THAN A BEDTIME STORY

BY MARY ELLEN MCGINTY COLLINS

Some daughters remember playing catch with their dads. I do. Some recall fathers teaching them to ride a bike or sitting in the big recliner, reading them the funnies. I have those memories, too. But my most vivid and cherished recollections are of sitting on the cellar steps, watching Daddy clean the birds.

Hunting was my father's passion. Nothing quite rivaled the excited anticipation in our house during the early mornings of small-game season, as he and Uncle Gene moved around the kitchen, bulky in their heavy boots and red plaid jackets. My younger siblings and I liked to be up in time to say good-bye to the hunters while they shared a quick cup of coffee before heading into the frosty air. They would be gone all day, and when the afternoon had stretched into twilight, each of us strained to be the first to hear the sound of tires crunching on the alley.

During the unloading of dogs and guns from the car, we crowded onto the cellar landing, Mom admonishing us about holding the back door open.

"We don't have to heat all of Edge-wood Avenue," she would say.

"Did you get any, Daddy? Did you get anything?" we kids would ask.

"I got two, Uncle Gene got one," Dad would say with a smile.

"He got two! Daddy got two pheasants, Mom!"

We knew the birds would eventually land on our Sunday dinner plates with mashed potatoes, applesauce and a vegetable, but for us, the best part of the whole hunting process wasn't the meal; it was watching Daddy clean the birds.

Mom wisely used this as an incentive to get us to take our baths and get ready for bed. The faster we were in and out of the tub, the sooner we could



begin one of our favorite rituals. We wiggled impatiently as she insisted on towel-drying our hair before letting us head to the drafty basement. Wearing jackets over our pajamas, Carol, Kevin, Susan and I jockeyed for the best spot on the chilly, gray steps.

Dad sat on the Schmidt's beer case, facing us at the bottom of the steps, newspapers spread out in front of him. We were so mesmerized by the process of dismembering our soon-to-be dinner, I'm surprised none of us became taxidermists—or forensic pathologists.

We were intrigued by those tough little curved feet. Fascinated by the glassy eyes, and the ringneck's namesake white collar. We identified the heart, and laughed at the goopiness of the intestines. Our favorite part was the removal of the gizzard, which dad carefully opened to show us what the bird had been eating—usually just seeds, but sometimes purple elderberries.

We argued over who would get to take the much-coveted, long and spiky pheasant feathers to school for show and tell. When I was the lucky one, I

remember that none of my classmates were quite as enthralled with my treasures as I was. I just figured they didn't know enough to be impressed. My enthusiasm remained undimmed as I made a point of correcting those classmates who were unfamiliar with the lexicon of hunting: "He didn't catch the birds. He shot them."

Our evening tradition with Dad would end when the shiny pink bird bodies went into a bowl of vinegar on the kitchen counter. Throughout a childhood that featured pheasant for dinner as often as it did meat loaf, I never imagined that some of the food on our table was considered a fancy dish in elegant restaurants.

As an adult who's never had the urge to track game or shoot a gun, I opt out of discussions about hunting. I just shake my head and smile and say, "I grew up with a dad who hunted."

Then I tune out the conversation, lost in memories of quality time in a drafty basement, watching Daddy clean the birds. It was better than a bedtime story.