"They just cut down the tree you were sitting against when you shot your turkey," he said. "I watched it fall."

He had driven to town to get our mail and returned via the back road, which loops over the hill and through the woods, to our house.

"Jump in the car," he said. "You've got to go see this."

So I did.

Some months back, I had found surveyor’s tape tied to borderline trees between our ground and the neighbor’s. I wondered what was going on. I hoped the land wasn’t being sold or partitioned, as I enjoy hiking and hunting there. Nothing seemed to happen on that property, so I nearly forgot about the orange ribbons. Now I had the answer: it had been marked for a timber cut.

We slowed the car while going past where the “turkey tree” had been. I didn’t feel as nostalgic for it as I thought I would. Almost all the trees had been cut and the place looked too different. The big oaks, black cherries and maples had been trucked away or were waiting for the log carrier to pick them up on its next load. Cut stumps, huge tree tops and tire-marked muddy lanes where heavy lumbering machines had run replaced the scene I had known scant days before.

Was I sad? A little. I was sad as you regret any big change in your life; even if you know what follows next will be as good as what you had before. I felt a limited sort of sad, because I’d seen forest alteration like this before. After a timber cut, I knew what would come next.

Young trees.
And that made me smile.

Ruffed Grouse are one species that benefits from a timber cut and the growth of young trees.
There is a role for forest preservation. I’ve been to preserved forests, ones that are set aside never to be cut, and their value is unmistakable. Here in Pennsylvania we don’t have many and none is of large extent. I’ve been many times to Cook Forest and walked the Forest Cathedral trails, as well as to Heart’s Content. It’s fun to take kids and let them climb atop the trunks of gargantuan pines and hemlocks, felled by natural causes. Or to get them to lean way back to try to see the top of these forest monarchs, or for us all to join hands and try to reach around them.

I’ve spent time in larger forest preserves, especially New York’s Adirondack Park, where large acreages have been set aside as “Forever Wild,” so-designated in the state constitution. I know the history, how the preserve was established in response to massive, uncontrolled clear-cutting that took place a century and more ago. I know how concerns about denuded soils, despoiled watersheds and doubts that there would ever be a future forest gave rise to the national conservation movement. And I’m thankful.

But that was then and this is now. When I stay in forest preserves, where the trees are old growth that has never been timbered or are “new” old growth because their last cutting occurred so long ago, I find that I don’t want such woods everywhere. I like knowing there is some forestland that is preserved in perpetuity, but I also like a working forest.

A working forest is lively. From what I’ve seen, a forest that is well managed and has occasional timber harvests is more full of life and has more varied life living in it. Forests where the trees are nearly all of one type and of the same age, especially old age, host only animals that use that type of habitat. In my experience, wildlife isn’t as numerous there, in kind or number. Even a forest of oak, with the trees all sturdy giants producing a heavy mast crop, has limited use to wildlife. Sure the oaks dump lots of acorns in autumn, but what do acres and acres of mature trees provide in other seasons? Squirrels and deer need to eat the rest of the year. Pillar-like trunks don’t give a bear or grouse much of a place to hide. Rabbits and woodcock don’t visit.

I prefer variety. I like my forests mixed, with old trees, yes, but also with plenty of young trees. I suppose this is because I’m a hunter. That’s why the cutting of the tree I was sitting against when I shot the young gobbler didn’t make me too unhappy. True, the woods had been prettier a few days before. But it was with a hunter’s eye that I surveyed what was there now.

The stumps? Why come spring they’d wear a crown of fresh sprouts, each topped with a budding leaf. The deer and rabbits would nibble the new growth, but they wouldn’t get it all, and their pruning would thin the sprouts and make the survivors stronger. The same would happen with the tree seedlings, which would burst out of acorns and cherry...
pits and winged maple seeds. With the big trees gone, their sun-blocking, leafy branches removed, the young trees would drink strongly of the light and the nutrients waiting in the soil below.

In time the saplings would grow closely together, give literal meaning to the word “thicket.” Berry briars would tangle among them and bear fruit for wildlife. Hawthorns, crabapples, bush and tree dogwoods, witch hazel, choke cherry, I might see any or all of these timber-cut colonizers spring up in the next few years. Perhaps the future forest will include basswood and ash, tupelo and birch, hickory and aspen and some pines. I wondered what other trees whose seeds had been blown in by the wind or carried in some animal’s gullet might take root there.

What new and different life the regrowing woods will hold! The old forest had its woodpeckers and chickadees, but the youthful woods will host more cardinals and towhees, yellow warblers and indigo buntings, rose-breasted grosbeaks and other brush-loving birds. More foxes and weasels will hunt there, and more raccoons and skunks come snuffing through. I know deer and grouse will thrive in the new thicket. Maybe a bear will pause to bend down a patch of pokeweed for its tasty fruit. Wild turkeys will amble through to nip low-level shoots and buds, and maybe snatch up grasshoppers in open spots.

I could see all this in my mind, even as I watched logs being swung by big machine arms onto the truck to be hauled away. Periodic renewal is good for many forests, and not just because this makes them a better place to hunt.

As much as I appreciate grown-up woods, they’re like grown-up humans. In some ways we are better than when we were kids, but in some ways we’re not. We become static. Like mature trees, we mainly grow around our girth, and each year we just wave in the wind and wait for season to turn to season. Day after day, life is mostly the same. A young person and a young tree have a freshness and excitement that only something recently come into being can have. They embody a future of uncertainty, and also of immense promise. □

Taking advantage of the Mentored Youth Hunting Program, MITCH KAUFFMAN, Millerstown, got this 10-point with a crossbow in Perry County.