

Hunters

by David Ackley

In the fall of the year you had turned fifteen, you woke very early on a Saturday morning, a tracery of frost on the window of your bedroom. Your extended form under the warmth of the quilt your mother had made, the cold of the unheated room a thin layer on your face. You emerged from sleep first of all as this wrapped shape feeling the contrasts of heat and cold. The cold air crisping your nostrils with each breath.

The room was yours now with Harry gone off here and there to find work, or to take up a new job. He worked to pay for his car, a Ford Roadster, so he could travel to find more work. Or maybe just to keep moving.

In the predawn dark, the walls of the room were barely visible. Grey, with a faint seething grainy texture. In the corner, expectant, was the .410/22 overunder, barrels cleaned, stock oiled, breech open. Whether the last hunt had succeeded or not, the promise of a new one splashed you fully awake in a moment. Partridge burst into drumming flight, perfectly silhouetted across an opening of light—; a cock pheasant spread his iridescent tail before taking off. You saw wood duck on a brook, a cottontail frozen beneath a bush: you drew down.

Outside the city's defined edge, a mile or two north from where you lay, began miles of farmland—wooded pastures and fields—thick-brushed woodlots, berried and brambled; bogland and sandy non-descript wastes. In your time, , the cities and towns were little islands of settlement in the patchwork greens and duns of open country. That would be your hunting ground, this sharp fall morning.

Already, with creaks and thumps you could hear Mother and Dad rising across the hall. Every morning, of the originary habits of farm and seagoing, they woke in the dark though the need was sunk back in the Maine of their birth and younger days. Left behind along with

Dad's plumber overalls; now, and for some years, his uniform a serge suit, vest, white shirt and tie, his tool box of wrenches, pliers, screwdrivers, hacksaw and drills and bits put aside for his superintendent's office at the water-works with its manuals and ledgers, city maps, geology and hydraulics texts, and staff of bookkeepers and stenographer. He'd offered to drive you a few miles to the spot you'd picked in the sparse and scrawny hardwoods of South Merrimack north of his destination at the Waterworks.

How discreet and quiet, your parents in their preparation for the day, whom you had never seen but fully dressed, emerging from behind the closed door of the bedroom as if they were always none other than clean and neat, as if they lay abed fully dressed, both pairs of their shoes polished, father's white shirt starched and pressed, he clean shaven, mother in her clean, slightly faded print dress. Their talk and slight sounds of splashing from the wash basin, muted to a kind of rising and falling murmur like the sound of a woodland freshet.

How perfect they seemed, how complete !

"Do you think he's awake? Should I call him?" As they went down the hall to the stairway, the paired footsteps, almost distinguishable.

Fred's chuckle. " Oh yes, he's awake." Knowing how you felt on the day of hunting, as he seemed to know everything that was important, though it had been felt fifty years in the past in another life entirely.

You were up and quickly about, dressing, a splash of water in the face, a combing, then gathering and checking, cartridges for the two barrels, shotgun and twenty-two, Buck knife, heavy in the pocket of your wool pants, rubber boots—

Downstairs in the bright light, a hot bowl of oatmeal, all ready at your place at the table, the kitchen redolent with coffee, which you're finally deemed old enough to drink, such matters as you seem to have been awaiting too long, as if childhood had become something to be endured while what was desirable—hunting alone, drinking coffee, smoking a pipe like Dad hung just beyond reach, though you felt ready enough and had for years.

“Don't gobble, Philly.”

“Kay.” You glanced out the window for signs of light but it's still reassuringly dark: you have time. The melting pulp of oats in your mouth, the brown sugar and milk sweet and hot: tasting better than usual as if the taste was deepened by the feel of the coming hunt as departure meals, good or bad, always live in memory.

Dad's car, a black Buick, carries the two of you north, beyond the last rim of houses encircling the city, lightless squares of white, slipping in and out of the fan of the headlights. In his dry, amused way, he suggests you better not come home without tomorrow's supper. His pipe smoke spins into an open crack of window, out into the crisp still night. You shiver, not from the cold, a kind of alerting of the skin .

The car slows to a stop, the headlights losing themselves in an open track, the netting of tree trunks, shadow adding shadow, until the dark beyond , cupping all .

“Luck, Phil.”

“Thank you, Dad.”

You stand there alone in the dark, letting your eyes adjust, until slowly things take form, the trees begin to stand apart, the dark falls back. First there is a silence, and then the emergence, slow and piecemeal of the sounds of the woods, the breeze and the light crackle of dry leaves, and certain soft stirrings, rustlings on the ground. A distant caw. Slowly too, your senses attune to the place, smells of mossy damp, fungal smells, pine resin. And without thinking it in this attunement of senses and place seems to fit you, that this is where you are as you were meant to be. Not back there, but just here. A feeling that will slip away, but not less true for that.

You step off quietly toward the receding dark, the little gun cradled.

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Later that November of 1930, two rabbit hunters were working the frozen swampy ground where the rougher countryside formed a kind of inlet into the city near the end of Cedar Street. Punching

through underbrush into a small clearing, they came upon a man dressed in the remains of a blue serge suit lying quietly on his back on the crusty ground. He'd been there for some time and the elements and scavengers had not been kind. Nearby were a rusted pocket watch, with a broken lens, the hands paused at twenty past two; and a cheap, dry fountain pen. His shoes were nowhere to be seen and they could see bone peeking through the tattered remnants of one stocking. One of the hunters stayed with him, while the other went off to find a home with a working telephone and call the police.

Increasingly, in these early years of the thirties, strangers—men mostly—had begun to appear in the city, shifting from foot to foot on a streetcorner, with a hand-rolled cigarette dangling from pressed lips; hands between their knees, catching a bit of shut-eye in an alley; hunching away from a passing patrol car to move off the other way. They acquired various names, “floater,” was one used in the newspaper from time to time.

The one found by the rabbit hunters, lacking any signs of identity, was carried off by the cops in a sack lightened considerably by the deprivations of time and weather. They thought it unlikely that he could be traced to where and whom he'd come from. Nor were they likely to expend much effort in the search; there were no signs of foul play, nor anything to indicate why he had chosen this spot to lie down and wait for the end, if that was what had happened.

The missing shoes suggested that he'd been found—and left—at least once before.

Such a person seems to escape all categories. It would be provincial to call him an ‘outsider,’ : he could have been originally local, returning unrecognized to home ground—or to assume he was unmissed, when somewhere out there might be those hoping for his return. And if in Nashua he was called a “floater,” elsewhere he might once have been a pillar of his community, a banker, minister, or principal cast from his place by cupidity or that hope-wrecker, history.

Men went off looking for work, and no doubt some came back, with money and presents, bringing relief and joy. Even in the worst of times, hope must occasionally be rewarded, otherwise it would die out of our souls, a useless evolutionary discard. Hope there is a plenty, as was famously said, just not for us...

