

# SHENANDOAH

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## JUST ME, ON A FINE-LOOKING HORSE

Cold weather had dipped into Mississippi that week and on Saturday morning there was a hard frost. In the early half-light I sat on the kitchen counter, looking into the carport. My father's pickup was gone. Out over the pecan trees the sky was low and white with cold and in our gravel drive Daddy Jack's pickup sat with its windshield frosted over. I brought my bare legs up under my flannel shirt and hugged them to myself. I was the only one awake in the house, and down my spine there went a tremor of happiness at being so cozy and alone and free. Not that it was really my choice, though, not yet.

For as long as I could remember, my father's rule had been that I could not go deer hunting with him and Daddy Jack until I was thirteen. Because it was just too dadgum dangerous for a young boy, he said. So I was on the kitchen counter that morning, rather than out in the woods with them, because I was only twelve and nine months. He was like that, my father. A believer in the long haul, and in the difficulty of surviving it.

Even as a boy, I understood that my father's faith lay in the small self-disciplines. His very daydreams, it seemed, never left the realm of good Christian sense. He had made us privy to one of these daydreams once, in a loose moment, when he said that if he could go back and be anybody else in history, he'd be a Texas Ranger in the Old West. He did not elaborate, and I suppose none of us thought we needed him to, or even thought it much of a revelation. Because, fact was, my father already looked and acted like one of those old Texas Rangers. He was a slim, broad-shouldered six-three-and-a-quarter, and he had cold gray eyes and a sandy moustache that he let grow full as a boot brush. He had a deep, jug-note voice, and used it sparingly. But when he did use it he spoke for order and honesty and a somber, Old Testament justice, and I never saw him surrender them to anybody or any situation. In the Old West, good people would have been glad to see him coming.

Of course, they would have been glad to see my Daddy Jack, too, but for different reasons. Certainly not because he was any deputy of the stone tablet. For Christmas that year he had — in a fairly obvious ploy — gone ahead and given me the Red Wing hunting boots he had always promised to supply for my first hunt. They were solid leather and insulated. When I opened the box they made the whole den smell like a shoe store. And when I held the boots up to show my father, my father said, "Red Wings," said he hoped I didn't outgrow them before next year. Daddy Jack just grinned at me from across the room and commiserated, "That scannel is tough, ain't he, bud?"

Daddy Jack and I knew for certain then that he and my father were going to finish out one more season without me. It'd be about their twentieth. Though Daddy Jack was actually my mother's father, he had been the one to take my father to the deer woods for the first time, back when my father was a gangly tight end at Tupelo High School and had started showing up at my mother's house, somewhat at a loss in those days to say exactly where his own father was. I think he was over in Oklahoma somewhere, or maybe Texas.

The kitchen counter I was sitting on that cold Saturday morning was in the house where we now lived, just outside of Vicksburg. As he had for several years, Daddy Jack was staying a week or so with us, and my father was taking him to this hunting club up in the delta, about an hour from the house, where he had a family membership. They left our house in the dark each morning, and they didn't come in until around noon, when my mother had lunch ready for them. I spent those mornings in the house, watching the blacktop through the leafless trees, waiting for them to come in from out there. But each afternoon so far, they had come in with an empty truck bed, so that for me everything worth knowing about and doing remained out there in the woods.

"You ain't ever been deer huntin'?" the school bus driver's son had asked me on the ride home one afternoon. He was in my grade and had feathery blond hair and charred teeth and I liked him. But he had said this loudly, and my face got hot with shame, and I didn't say anything. "Son, it's my favorite," he said. Then he

said, "You seen a deer before, hadn't you?" My father and Daddy Jack had each killed one the year before, and though I didn't exactly remember seeing them, I was sure I had. And I was sure I had seen the ones that stood in the dark alongside the Natchez Trace, when my father said they were there. I had seen a million in magazine pictures. I told him of course I had.

THEY WERE GONE a long time that Saturday. Their lunch sat on the stove in covered pans. I went again and again to the kitchen counter. But not until the day had dragged into mid-afternoon did I finally hear my father's pickup turn onto our gravel drive. When I got to the kitchen, they had driven around the end of the house, and in the window over the sink I saw the truck trundling slowly over the uneven ground in the backyard. They were heading for the cinderblock workshed that sat on the edge of the ravine out back. In the rear glass their heads rocked with the motion of the truck. My father's right arm rested across the seatback around Daddy Jack's shoulders. And above the tailgate, I saw an improbable number of tines, sticking up bone-colored in the January sunlight.

By the time I got a coat on and my stiff new Red Wings laced up, my father and Daddy Jack were standing in the kitchen at the stove. My mother was fixing their plates. I could smell the cold in their unzipped coats, could see it had pinked their faces. My father saw that I was bundled up. He said let's eat some lunch first and then we'd go out there. He liked for us all to sit down at the table together.

After lunch I walked with them out to the workshed where the truck was parked on the needles under our big pine tree. I stood out of their way, with my hands deep in my coat pockets, and studied the two deer that lay in the bed of the truck. Their heads rested on the lowered tailgate. Both heads had enormous racks that weighted them over to one side, and made them look like they were thinking. They had whiskers, long black ones that seemed misplaced along their muzzles like a dog's whiskers. Their tongues were pasted with dirt and leaf bits and were so long that at first I did not realize that's what they were, tongues.

I stepped up to the tailgate, pulling my hand from its warm pocket, and rubbed my fingertips on one of the deer. The hair was soft and cold. With my palm I pressed gently against the deer's

shoulder, and it felt solid, heavier than I expected. I then leaned over the deer, reached out and took up one of its legs. I held it just above the hoof. It was hard and wet and gritty. I was stretched across the deer's neck, with both my feet off the ground behind me, when my father walked up to the tailgate.

"What are you tryin' to do?"

"Nothin'," I said, and squirmed my way back to the ground. "Just lookin'."

"Well let me get in here," he said, and I did, and he grabbed one rack's outside tines like a set of handlebars and hauled on the inert body. It slid like a sack of sand off the tailgate and flopped down onto the pine needles. He started dragging it toward where a bright yellow rope hung doubled from up in the pine tree.

Daddy Jack then emerged from the workshed, in one hand a naked knife and in the other a whetstone. He came slowly across the grass with his head down. He kept his lips licked wet and pursed as if he were whistling, but he was not whistling. A long day was hard on Daddy Jack. He smoked cigarettes and he was not healthy. Standing on the pine needles he hitched the legs of his coveralls, lowered himself onto one knee. He set the whetstone on his raised thigh, steadied it with his thumb and foreknuckle. When he sliced the blade on it, it made a dry *tick, scrape*. *Tick, scrape*. His knife hand was trembling and he kept the fingers of his other hand tucked away. *Tick, scrape*. His tongue showed at the corner of his mouth.

My father had left the deer where the ends of the hanging rope were heaped on the ground and was now taking off his coat over at the truck. He folded the coat and left it on the seat of the truck, and walking back to the deer he rolled up the cuffs of his shirt. His eyes were set on the deer and the rope, and his face had no expression. He did not look the least bit cold.

The sound of the knife stopped. With both hands Daddy Jack pushed down hard on his raised thigh, grunted, stood. He grinned at me, his eyes dull green and happy, and ran his hand up the back of my neck and into my hair.

"Goan be like his daddy, ain't he, Charlie Boy?"

My father was squatted over the deer's hind legs, with his back to us, working with the rope. His voice was playful. "I don't know about that," he said, and kept working. "It show ain't easy."

Daddy Jack thought this was funny. His laugh was wet and had a cough in it. His hand was still in my hair, and when he finished laughing he brought his face close to mine, lowered his voice.

"Son, don't listen to him. You goan be ever bit the deer hunter he is."

"Yessir," I said, playing along, "I know."

Daddy Jack winked at me and said, "You better believe it," and he walked over with the knife to help my father.

I stood looking after him. I had said, "I know," just to play along, but now I tried to imagine myself such a hunter. My father had that morning killed the two biggest bucks out of a foursome that walked up on him, and he had done it with a bolt-action rifle. Daddy Jack said that when they stopped to have a picture made at the store up the road from our house one man said he did not believe it. I tried to imagine how my father felt inside, how it felt to be the one who had actually done it. I remembered how on that hot night during summer baseball the aluminum bat pinged quick in my hands and everybody started running and all around me people were yelling and the game was over, how afterwards in the parking lot mothers and fathers asked me questions and laughed and smiled and in the darkness across the parking lot people were talking over the tops of their cars and I heard them say my name. This memory now floated me on a cloud of glorious possibility, and I thought how it really was possible for me to kill a deer next year, a deer as big as one of these, and some man up at the store would say how it was damn beginner's luck, a thirteen-year-old killing a deer that big, and I thought about how this time next year it was possible to have already done it, to already be that person. My mind was a bouncing bullet.

My father and Daddy Jack had hauled the deer into the air. It hung upside down and they stood before its belly, my father about to start the knife up high. I had wanted badly to see how this was done, had wanted to allude to the process with authority before the bus-driver's son. But I was too worked up now.

I made sure that my father and Daddy Jack were not looking at me, and I started back across the yard toward the house. I wanted to run, but I made myself walk, until I got in the back door.

In my room, with the door closed, I shucked my coat and took my pellet rifle from the closet. Its stock was made of real wood, and it had a scope on it that my father had given me. It looked and

felt like a real rifle, only smaller. I stood it against my chest of drawers while I cleared the school papers and football helmet off the top, then I set the rifle up there, and climbed the drawer knobs. And when I had gotten seated atop the chest, I took the rifle across my lap, and closed my eyes, and breathed the warm breath of life back through the muzzles of those two deer, and then opening my eyes, I hunted them. Again and again.

WE WERE CHURCH people. My father did not take Daddy Jack hunting on Sundays. So the next morning I woke to full daylight in my room and voices down the hallway. I curled in the covers, stared at my closed door. The floor out in the hallway was creaking and popping with people up walking around. My room had begun to smell of cooked breakfast. I lay still, watching my door, mesmerized by the sheer imminence of seeing the doorknob turn and either my mother or my father leaning in to tell me to come eat so that I could get dressed for church. And then I began to remember the day before, the two deer, my father's sleeves rolled up in the cold. I thought about the picture of him with his deer that had been taken at the store up the road. He said the man at the store had tacked it up with the other pictures while he and Daddy Jack were still there. And just like that, my heart got set on seeing that picture.

But I would not be allowed to go to the store on a Sunday. And school was starting back tomorrow.

My father was always quick with that Bible verse that says not to forsake the gathering of your people. Whatever it meant originally, in my family it meant you did not miss church. Unless, maybe, you were sick. And the reason you stayed home then was to keep from giving your germs to your people. I had gotten to stay home alone once or twice before when I was sick. Lying there now in the covers, I thought about the way my stomach felt. I thought it hurt a little.

I heard my sister's door open across the hall, my mother's voice telling her to wake up and come on to breakfast.

I thought hard about my stomach.

It hurt.

My doorknob finally began to turn, and the door opened. My mother was wearing a white terry cloth robe and her black, wet hair was combed back on her head. She saw that I was already

awake, and gave me a smiley good morning. Then, very cheerfully, she said to get on up, breakfast was on the table.

I think she poured on the cheer because somehow she had read in my face what was coming, and her initial tactic in such matters was always to see if she could pretend them away.

She was leaving, smiling.

I said, "Mom?"

She peeped back in.

"I don't feel very good."

"What's wrong?"

"My stomach."

She said, "Well get on up and you'll probably feel better."

I hated it when she'd say something like that.

I said, "I've been awake a long time, and it hasn't gotten any better."

"Well you need to try and get ready."

"I don't know if I can."

"Well you need to try, you don't need to miss church."

I considered not saying what I said next. But I said it.

"Is Daddy Jack goin'?"

There was a slight, defensive lilt in her voice when she said, "Yes."

Someone else was coming down the hall.

"Come get you a biscuit and some bacon and see if that doesn't make you feel better," she said, and tried to leave again, to close the door, but the door then opened wider, and Daddy Jack was standing in the doorway beside her. He wasn't much taller than she was.

"Hey, bud," he said, and he slipped past her into the room. He was wearing a gray sport coat with buttons on it that looked like freshly minted doubloons. The cuffs nearly covered his thumbs. He had polished his zippered, navy Sunday boots, and had on one of my father's ties. I saw at a glance he thought he looked like a million dollars. He crossed the room and sat down on the edge of my bed, smelling clean and bitter, like new-sawn wood. He ran his hand over the bedspread until he found my foot and then my big toe and he toggled it and said, "What's wrong with you, man?"

"I don't feel good."

"Aw, heck. You goan make it?"

"I don't know."

He nodded to himself. He said, "You need Daddy Jack to stay home with you this mornin'?"

My mother was still standing in the doorway.

I said, "I might."

He said, "Well then, Daddy Jack'll stay here with you, son. You don't worry about that."

He looked over at my mother in the door. I did, too. She was looking blankly back at us.

He said, "I can stay here with him, Little. Y'all go on."

And that's what happened.

It would be easy to get to the store now because Daddy Jack liked to take long morning naps on our den carpet, and of course he let me do pretty much whatever I wanted anyway. But when I was lying in my bed alone again, waiting for the others to leave the house, the feeling in my stomach turned to sadness. I wished Daddy Jack was going with them. I suspected that he and my grandmother didn't go to church up in Tupelo much at all. And I was forever afraid Daddy Jack might die soon. Several times I had heard my father say, matter-of-factly, "Jack ain't goan be with us much longer, he keeps on smokin' those cigarettes." And whenever I begged him to quit smoking, all Daddy Jack would do was nod apologetically and say he probably would here directly. I had often cried about it. I cried about him dying, and I cried about what might happen to him then. Once I asked him if he was scared to die. He smiled at me and said, "No, son. But I'm sure goan miss y'all."

"OOO BABY, GET in here," said the woman behind the counter. "What do you mean, out ridin' that bicycle and it this cold."

The glass door sucked to behind me, setting an unseen cowbell to rattling through the empty store. My eyes were watery from the cold head wind that had cuffed my face and ears. I smiled politely at the woman, but did not linger before her at the counter. Instead, I turned down the first narrow aisle and made for the wall of drink coolers that glowed and hummed at the back of the store.

But I had seen the pictures. They were tacked up on a long cork board above the counter, and there were two rows of them that ran the length of the board. I had not expected there to be so many. It was probably going to take me a while to pick out the one of my father, and that woman was going to be up there with me, and would ask me stuff. I was halfway down the aisle when she called after me.

"How come a strappin' young man like you's not out in the woods this mornin'?"

I kept walking, called back to her, "No, ma'am."

I listened to the brief confusion this caused her.

Finally she said, "Well, I believe me and you about the only ones with any sense, keepin' inside."

I had reached the coolers and stood looking up at the racks of drinks.

"Yes, ma'am," I said. I thought how she had said that trying to be nice, but what she had said wasn't true, and I could hear in her voice that she didn't really think it was true, and so she had only made it all worse.

A newspaper then crackled loudly. I listened, looked back over my shoulder.

She was sitting on a tall stool behind an open paper. She had her feet up on the dowels and her thighs were bouncing, like maybe she was anxious to talk some more.

I gently opened the cooler door, took down a Coke, eased the door to.

She was still behind the newspaper. I started back up the aisle quietly.

When I reached the counter, I was right up under her newspaper, undetected, and for the moment I felt free enough not to hurry. I ran a glance over the countertop. Beside the register there was a dirty glass ashtray, and above it, taped to the register, a yellowed index card. In blue handwriting the card said, *Need a penny take one, got a penny leave one.* The ashtray was empty.

I looked up at the cork board. Thumbtacked there above the pictures was another old index card. In the same blue handwriting it said, *The Big'ns.* I had seen this one before, back in the summer, when my father and I had stopped in to get some crickets, when instead of deer there had been pictures of people

holding up bass and catfish and one picture I remembered in particular of an elderly black woman standing on a mud bank, trying to hold up a stringerful of ditch fish.

As it happened, I didn't have to look long for my father's picture. It was the last one on the end nearest me. There he sat on the lowered tailgate of his truck with his two deer. In the backdrop I could see the glass door of the store and the register and the counter where I now stood. I had asked my father why he stopped by here to have his picture made, since we hardly ever came in here, and he said, "It's just where everybody goes, Will."

I started at the crash of the newspaper. The woman had crushed the middle together between her hands and now leaned to one side to look down at me. She was smiling.

"You up there?"

Her eyebrows were arched high, as if it really might be so.

"Hm? Oh. No, ma'am," I said.

Her eyes were fixed on mine and she would not look away. I had to look back up at the pictures.

"Well, why not?" she teased.

I thought how she was trying to be nice.

"My daddy is," I said, and motioned upward. "He's the one with two."

"Naw, really?" she said. "The one that come by yesterday?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I wasn't here when he come in," she said, "but my husband showed me that pitcher. Said it didn't do 'em justice."

I tried to think about the picture I was looking at.

She said, "Ain't that thing somethin'."

"Yes, ma'am."

The store was quiet. The coolers were whirring.

"Yeah," she said, "I'm just supposed to work afternoons but, Lord, when deer season gets goin' I'm in here ever' mornin' and evenin' so my husband can go t' deer woods." She laughed. "Don't hardly see him till he's wantin' to eat somethin'."

I didn't know whether to laugh or whether to look at her. I just smiled and kept staring up and waited for her to say something else. But she was quiet, and after a moment I said, "Oh," and put the Coke bottle on the counter. She said, "Forty-eight cents, honey," and I pulled a damp, wadded dollar from the bottom of

my pocket, unwadded it and handed it to her with it still limp and wrinkled. "Out of a dollar," she said, and the register drawer kicked out. While she made the change, I looked out the glass door and at the cowbell hung on it and then at the heavy sweat on the glass running down in beads, and I thought how this must be the water from her breath collected on the glass since she had been in here by herself all morning and now I was in here with her, breathing her breath and adding mine to it, and I felt sick, and the whirring of the coolers and the quivering of the florescent light made me sicker, and I craved bursting through that glass door out into the cold, clean, open air.

She put two quarters and two pennies in my palm and said to be careful out on the road with that bicycle, and I told her, "Yes, ma'am, thank you," and started to leave. But before I reached the door I stopped. I turned and went back to the counter, and without looking at her, dropped the two pennies in the ashtray. It was the first time I had ever done that.

BACK HOME, BEHIND the workshed, I started down into the ravine. The ground was steep and thick with dead kudzu, so I sidled down carefully, using the outsoles of my Red Wings to jab through the vines and find the frozen earth, thinking: see, already I was getting good use out of them. I carried my pellet gun in what I imagined to be high hunterly fashion, right hand on the neck of the stock, barrel cradled in the crook of my left arm. When I reached the bottom of the ravine, the workshed was no longer visible behind me, only the high, viney bank and the sprawl of treetops against the white sky. I looked around me in the ravine, at some of my favorite trees, all silent and unstimulating. It seemed a colder air was sunk here.

I slid my gun up into some low pine branches, then blew warmth into my fists, stamped some feeling into my feet, and climbed up into the tree. With my gun in one hand, I worked my way up through several branches and finally sat down straddle of a large one. I rested my back against the trunk and caught my breath. My blue jeans were bunched in the crotch and this pulled the legs up short, exposing my newly fuzzed shins just above each boot and crumpled sock. The air stung my skin there, and I could feel the cold working its way up into my thighs. It frightened me

a little, but I shaped words with my lips: *Too bad*. I filled that wooded ravine with quick, nervous deer, and I practiced absolute stillness. I practiced holding my breath while aiming, practiced the kick and report of a rifle shot. And I went at it hard, like working, or fighting, until I heard in the distance our car turn onto the gravel. I could just make it to my room and get the door closed before they entered the house.

I GOT A REAL rifle for my birthday the following spring. It was my father's gift to me, a stubby, short-snouted gun, but when I drew it from the fleece-lined scabbard it had real heft, and the strong, untoy-like scent of oil and metal. It shot a .44-magnum bullet, a relatively slow and heavy punch, my father explained, not easily deflected by brush and limbs. There'd be no scope this year, he said, I'd have to get good with it. So several times that summer, we rode out in the long hum of late afternoon to the country, where in some abandoned gravel pits we propped up paper plates, and taking turns across the hood of the truck, we shot rifles, my father and I, until dark.

That summer, too, my father went in with two men from our church — a white-haired man named Mr. Dixon, whose sons were in college already, and a small, quiet man, Mr. Bradley, who didn't have any sons — and they bought a six-hundred-acre tract of woods and grass fields over in the eastern part of the state. It was deep in deer country and already had a two-room camphouse on it. My father said it was a place where he and I and Daddy Jack could camp and hunt together whenever we wanted, and that probably we'd get to be over there a lot of the time by ourselves, just the three of us.

My father never cared to talk a subject up too much, especially a happy one, so for the rest of that summer and then into the fall I was repeatedly surprised at how much we got to talk about the camp, at the unfamiliar patience my father had for all my eager questions. At times he even asked me questions, small, pleasant ones, such as whether I was still excited, and did I have a good pair of gloves. It crossed my mind that maybe he was changing. Maybe he was always going to be this way now. But it didn't last. He went back to the old way in November, when in the week after Opening Day, Daddy Jack went into the hospital.

I visited Daddy Jack twice up at the hospital in Tupelo, and while I was there he laughed a good bit and we talked about school and girls and deer season. I did not think he looked or acted much different than he always had. But the pale blue gown he wore and the way there were other people standing around the bed, listening to what we were saying, made our conversation seem unnaturally important in a way I did not like.

Daddy Jack got to go home from the hospital that time. But it didn't end up mattering much, because he was already back in there a month later, when with school having finally let out, we made our first long drive over to the new deer camp. I rode in the truck with my father that day, thinking how he had been right, thinking how, in fact, he seemed always right about the important things. And on that first morning in camp, when I woke to the sputtering light of a Coleman lantern and Mr. Dixon's voice, morning-hoarse and unreverberant in the little camphouse — *The big'ns are walkin', men, the big'ns are walkin'* — I sat up in my bunk and thought how everything was perfect, and how Daddy Jack could have been there with us, if he had just made himself stop smoking cigarettes.

That first day at deer camp everything was so fine I walked around afraid that God might have some secret and edifying reason to take it from me, and so I hoarded every detail — the scuff and clomp of my cheap new boots on the bare plank floors, the smells of coffee and guns and cold wooden rooms, the smoke of the campfire in my clothes, the damp pine needles under steaming plates of food out on the picnic table. And then the discovery, late that first afternoon, how when you are alone deep in the woods and you pull out a simple, soft, baloney sandwich, that sandwich can transform the wilderness around you, can tether it, so that for a few moments all of that wilderness seems to spread silently outward from that little sandwich, until you finish it, and sit again in unoriented wilderness. I was so entranced by this phenomenon that I did a thing I can't defend. I took the napkin the sandwich had been wrapped in, smoothed the wrinkles from it, then rolled it down small and tight, and sat awhile, pretending to smoke.

IT WAS ON the second morning at camp that Mr. Dixon and his boys slept in, while my father and I and Mr. Bradley walked out

under the moon, in a morning that looked no different than night. Somewhere in the frosted field in front of the cabin Mr. Bradley left us, and my father and I continued toward the wall of blackness that was the far treeline. We crossed the field silently, but for the sound of our boots whipping through the weeds, and when we reached the treeline my father held up and whispered, "You don't have one in the chamber, do you?" I whispered back, "No, sir," and followed him into the trees.

It was much darker there. I could tell the trees canopied overhead but there seemed to be no trunks in our path, still only the deep weeds. I guessed we were following one of the old logging roads, but could not be certain, so in the darkness I stared hard after my father and stayed close in behind him. We walked a long time that way, and when I got winded, I stifled the sound in my sticky mouth, mastering myself to be as quiet as he was.

At last we left the weeds and started up a wooded hillside, our strides crackling in the leaves. We walked among straight black tree trunks, steadily gaining higher ground. Ahead of us, up on the ridge, the sky was beginning to whiten, silhouetting the dark arms of the trees. When we reached the top of the ridge we walked its crest. The woods were turning gray now and I could see that the land fell away from us on both sides. After a while I began to think about how we might have been on a logging road earlier, but now we were no where near a road. The trunks of the trees around us were just wild and solitary trunks, deep in the woods.

My father finally stopped at the base of a large tree. It had short lengths of two-by-four nailed into it for a ladder. I could hear his breathing when he turned to me. In a crisp whisper he told me that he would come back to get me, and he told me not to get down out of that tree until he came back, no matter what.

I climbed the lumber rungs up the trunk of the tree and slid out onto a small wooden platform where there was an over-turned five-gallon bucket. I sat down on the bucket, and with the rifle across my lap, pulled back its smooth metal action and released it, chambering a bullet. I ran a gloved fingertip over the safety button. And when I looked down from the stand, my father was not in the woods below me, but I could hear him faintly, descending the far side of the ridge. I listened closely, until there was only the sound of the wind overhead, moving softly in the treetops.



I rested my head back against the knobby bark of the tree and thought about my feet. They were already cold. I flexed and curled my toes in the end of my boots, but that made them hurt worse, and so finally I just let them go. I sat still in the gathering light, while my feet stung and ached, and finally went numb.

Sitting through cold, slow hours on hunts the day before, I had learned to relinquish my fingers and my feet and withdraw into the warmest part of myself. I had learned to wait on the subtlest changes in the land around me, moving only my eyes and my mind, watching and listening for whatever might be barely there. By now I knew that any stir of the ground leaves would be only a squirrel, and yet I would always turn slowly, slowly toward the sound, and in that long moment of turning, see in my mind, as clearly as I had ever seen anything, the magnificent deer I would find there, and then did not find. And at times, in the same way, I saw this senior cheerleader from the high school named Jenny Grisham, a beautiful, brassy, gum-chewing girl who rode my bus in the afternoons and had no idea who I was, saw her reclined alone at the base of a nearby tree, brushing out her honey-colored hair, cutting her senior-year eyes at me with a look precocious and naughty. *Come down here, Will*, she said, and a heat came into my throat. And I saw, too, the Confederate cavalryman that had once sat his mount atop this very ridge, his horse restive, side-stepping, making the bridle jingle, the saddle creak. The rider sat slumped and sad-eyed, his filthy hands crossed on the pommel of his saddle. Shyly, I called down to him, told him about our camphouse and the food. And then — I saw my deer.

Down the hill to my right, it had emerged like a dim ghost from a thicket. Peering down through the woods, I could barely make him out against the dull-colored brush, but I could see that it was a buck, and that it was beginning to work its way up the hill toward me. I watched him come on, in his magnificence, stopping still every few feet, head high, listening, before he would lower his muzzle to the ground, and move on. Even when I saw him take his steps, I could not hear them. But when he got halfway up the hill to me I did begin to hear him, not rustling leaves or snapping twigs, but making eerily human sounds, sucking up and crunching on the acorns he was finding. It sounded to me like a man chewing ice. I slid my right hand into place, laid my finger on the

trigger. And a memory flashed, of Daddy Jack carefully raising his leathery hands, holding in them an invisible rifle: *When he moves, you move; when he freezes — you freeze.*

Raising my rifle slowly, by heartbeats, I wondered when the deer was likely to freeze. It never did.

On the first shot the deer stumbled and backpedaled and lost its legs, then went scrabbling and sliding rump first down the hill as though forced down a chute, and into the branches of a fallen tree. I couldn't see him well there. Could see only patches of gray flickering among the branches. I aimed into that gray, and sent another clapping explosion running through the woods.

And when the echo died, all was still again, until I heard hooves stamping in the dry leaves. I saw more gray flickering. So I raised my rifle and shot again, and without lowering the rifle I shot twice more, because the movement in the branches would not stop.

That emptied my gun. I snapped its safety back on, returned it to my lap. A spent brass rolled quietly across the plywood at my feet, and off the platform.

I watched and listened down the hill, and after a while I decided I was no longer seeing any movement down there. But then sometimes I thought I could still hear it from among the branches. Or maybe further down now, in the thicket. This went on for several minutes. I was confused. Wounded deer ran off. Mine was moving all around down there, and yet not running off. I knew my father would be there in another minute or so though, and he'd holler out, "Whatcha shootin' at?" and then he'd come up and sort everything out and explain it to me.

Only, my father was not there in another minute.

Or in twenty minutes.

I no longer heard anything from down the hill. I no longer even looked down there. I was watching in the other direction, where my father had dropped off the ridge in the pre-dawn light. I had begun to get angry. I finally let myself say out loud, "Where is he? Why won't he come on?"

An hour passed.

My gun now lay on the wooden platform at my feet. I had already cried and stopped and cried again, already despaired of all my anger and then taken it back up, and so was even angrier.

I sniffed, and smeared away the drip at the end of my nose, making the track of a snail on my wool glove.

And finally the thought occurred to me. A thought that at first made me whisper, "Nuhn-uhn, *bullshit*," and I shook my head to make it go away.

"It was a damn deer," I said. "I saw it."

But in another moment I was asking myself how many points it had. And I couldn't say. Couldn't say even how wide or tall I thought the rack had been. I felt my anger begin to leave me. It started to trickle, then seep from my chest because my chest suddenly had a hole in it, and when the anger was gone, it left me empty and spinning.

*He had come back around in front of the kid to call him in and had his orange off for some reason and the kid shot him. Just got too excited, I guess, like a kid that age'll get.*

I looked up from my lap, down onto the woods below. A cold wind licked at my neck. My scalp was hot and prickling.

*That poor man beatin' his fist in the dirt and fightin' for his air, couldn't even call out, and his own son up there on the hill just shootin' away.*

My whole head and face were burning. I told God I was sorry about cussing and would he please help me anyway, then looked out toward where I was praying for my father to appear. Waited. Looked back down the hill where I'd shot.

Everything was still.

*Reckon how long the kid just sat there in the tree after that, waitin', and done shot the only somebody comin' for him?*

I stood up off the bucket. My hips were stiff and I couldn't feel my feet. Facing out across the ridge, I cleared my throat and ran a coat sleeve across each watery eye. I tried to make my voice sound deep and undisturbed.

"Dad."

But my voice went nowhere, merely made me very aware that I was standing on a platform up in a tree.

"Daddy?" I called.

And it felt worse than useless.

So I looked up through the treetops, at where the sun sat in the sky. I chose a treetop that from my perspective lay in the arc the sun would travel across the sky, and told myself that when the

sun reached that treetop I would get down from the tree and see whatever there was to see at the bottom of the hill. I was still standing, marking the progress of the full morning sun, when my father topped the ridge.

"THAT WAS YOU doin' all that shootin'?"

"Yessir."

When he walked up to the base of the tree, I was standing there to meet him, shifting my weight from one numb foot to the other. He was smiling. I was smiling, too.

"Did you hit him?"

"Yessir."

"Where is he?"

I hesitated. "I'm not sure."

"He take off?"

"Well, nossir, I think he just stayed down there."

My father looked down the hill, like he didn't understand, then back at me, like he still didn't understand.

"Why'd you shoot so many times?"

"He wasn't dead."

"But you didn't know where he was."

"I didn't know where he was, but I knew he wasn't dead."

His tone sharpened. "Is the deer dead now, son?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"OK," he said, turning up his palms to show me he was at a complete loss, "then why'd you *quit* shootin'?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I ran out of bullets," I said. "Mine only holds five."

My father dropped his hands. And much to my relief, a thin smile returned beneath that heavy moustache.

He sent me back up in the stand to direct him down the hill to the right spot. We hollered back and forth, and I was getting embarrassed because I could not remember how it was and could not get him to the right spot, and finally he just quit hollering back and walked into the thicket, and I lost sight of him. I could hear him down there walking around. And then he hollered back for me to come on down, he had found him.

When I got down there, my father was squatted over the deer where it lay on its side in the leaves. I could tell the deer was dead,

and it did have a rack, a small one that looked like sticks with the bark stripped off. "Look here," my father said. He was fingering a tiny, dark dent in the deer's hair. I had hit him in the spine, he said, and it had broken his back end down. All the racket I'd heard was probably just him dragging himself around on his front legs for a while. My father glanced over the length of the deer again, then up at me, grinning, and said it looked like I'd only hit him the one time. I shrugged one shoulder, grinned back. Then he stood up, and we walked around the deer, and I saw where the bullet had come out and the deer had bled heavily, the blood puddling in the cups of the dried leaves.

"It seemed like a long time before you came," I said.

We were standing there looking at the deer together. My father did not answer right away.

"Well, let's see," he said at last, "you started shootin' at just after eight o'clock and it's now" — he peeled back his coat cuff — "almost a quarter of ten. So, that was about an hour and a half ago."

I could feel him looking at me now.

"How come you waited so long?"

He kept studying me. And then, miraculously, he said:

"Why, did you think you shot me?"

I said, "What do you mean?"

"I mean, did you think you shot me?"

I looked up at him. He was standing there, waiting on an answer, like a man having gone up on some stranger's porch and knocked at the screen door. And only later, though exactly when I cannot say, would I recognize the look on his face in that moment, as that of hope.

"No, sir."

"Well, what was wrong then?"

"Nothing. It just seemed like a long time."

AT THE FUNERAL home that winter, I would not go up to Daddy Jack's casket and look at him. I sat on a sofa, just inside the entrance to the parlor, and did not look down at the far end. My mother came and sat beside me, and said I ought to come see Daddy Jack one more time. I shook my head. She sat with me a little longer and then she smoothed the back of my head and got

up and went away. My father walked over. He said, "Come on, Will. Let's go see Daddy Jack." And I got up and followed him.

Standing with him at the casket, I lifted my eyes and looked on the man sleeping there. I stared at him. It was easier than I thought it'd be, like looking at a statue. And I tried to feel all my fears for him, and all my sorrow, and I would have cried willingly, if only it had come. But it would be awhile yet. And then in my sleep.

I left my father at the casket by himself and went back to the sofa in the parlor. And from there I watched him. He stood with his hands in the pockets of his suit pants, staring over in the casket. He had his head laid to one side, like a man will do when he's trying to read a sign that has fallen on the ground. And for a long time he did not move, but stood there like that, tall and still and oblivious of himself. He might have been standing in the freezing cold in his shirtsleeves.

Finally some other people I didn't know went up to the casket, and my father came back across the parlor and sat down with me on the sofa. He said he was tired. I said I was hungry. We watched the people who were up there with Daddy Jack now. My sister came over and stood wearily between my father's knees, her little hands braced out against them as against two close-set pillars. And I guess it was one of those times I just wanted to hear my father talk.

"Daddy?"

"What."

"How come you'd be an old-timey Texas Ranger?"

We were still watching the casket, and I heard him give a very soft *hm* of amusement at the question.

"I guess I wouldn't mind ridin' through all that big, open country, by myself, like some of them got to do," he said. He seemed to keep thinking on it, and after another moment, he said, "Just me, up on some fine-looking horse."

And sitting beside him there on the sofa, I wanted him to ask me did I ever think of stuff like that, did I know what he meant. Because this time I was going to say, "Yes, sir." But he was through talking. After a while, he laid his arm across the back of the sofa, around my shoulders.