

Franklin, Tom. Poachers about 12. 11. 1999, 1999

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introduction hunting years

Standing on a trestle in south Alabama, I look down into the coffee-brown water of the Blowout, a fishing hole I loved as a boy. It's late December, cold. A stiff wind rakes the water, swirls dead leaves and nods the tall brown cattails along the bank. Farther back in the woods it's very still, cypress trees and knees, thick vines, an abandoned beaver's lodge. Buzzards float overhead, black smudges against the gray clouds. Once, on this trestle, armed with only fishing rods, my brother Jeff and I heard a panther scream. It's a sound I've never forgotten, like a madwoman's shriek. After that, we brought guns when we came to fish. But today I'm unarmed, and the only noise is the groan and hiss of bulldozers and trucks on a new-cut logging road a quarter-mile away.

I left the south four years ago, when I was thirty, to go to graduate school in Fayetteville, Arkansas, where among transplanted Yankees and westerners I realized how lucky I was to have been raised here in these southern woods among poachers and storytellers. I know, of course, that most people consider Arkansas the south, but it's not *my* south. My south—the one I haven't been able to get out of my blood or my imagination, the south where these stories take place—is lower Alabama, lush and green and full of death, the wooded counties between the Alabama and Tombigbee Rivers.

Yesterday at five A.M. I left Fayetteville and drove seven hundred miles south to my parents' new house in Mobile, and this morning I woke early and drove two more hours, past the grit factory and the chemical plants where I worked in my twenties, to Dickinson, the community where we lived until I was eighteen. It's a tiny place, one store (now closed) and a post office in the same building, a kudzu-netted graveyard, railroad tracks. I've been finishing a novella that takes place in these woods—in the story, a man is killed right beneath where I'm standing—and I'm here looking for details of the landscape, for things I might've forgotten.

To get to the Blowout, I picked through a half-mile of pine trees that twelve years ago had been one of my family's cornfields. I hardly recognized the place. I walked another half-mile along the new logging road, then climbed onto the railroad track, deep woods on both sides, tall patchwork walls of briar and tree, brown thrashers hopping along unseen like something pacing me. My father and aunts and uncles used to own this land. It was ours. When my grandfather died, he divided almost six hundred acres among his five children. He expected them to keep it in the family, but one by one they sold it for logging or to hunting clubs. Today none of it is ours.

I'm about to leave when I notice that fifty yards down the track something big is disentangling itself from the trees. For a moment I reexperience the shock I used to feel whenever I saw a deer, but this is only a hunter. I see that he's spotted me, is climbing onto the tracks and coming this way. Because I lived in these parts for eighteen years, I expect to know him, and for a moment I feel foolish: What am I doing here at the Blowout, during hunting season, without a gun?

It's a familiar sensation, this snag of guilt, because when I was growing up, a boy who didn't hunt was branded as a pussy. For some reason, I never wanted to kill things, but I wasn't bold enough to say so. Instead, I did the expected: went to church on Sundays and on Wednesday nights, said "Yes ma'am" and "No sir" to my elders. And I hunted.

Though I hated (and still hate) to get up early, I rose at four A.M. Though I hated the cold, I made my way through the icy woods, climbing into one of our family's deer stands or sitting at the base of a thick live oak to still hunt, which simply means waiting for a buck to walk by so you can shoot him. And because I came to hunting for the wrong reasons, and because I worried that my father, brother and uncles might see through my ruse, I became the most zealous hunter of us all.

I was the one who woke first in the mornings and shook Jeff awake. The first in the truck. The first to the railroad track, where we climbed the rocky hill and crept toward the Blowout, our splitting-up point. On those mornings, the stars still out, it would be too dark to see our breath, the cross ties creaking beneath our boots, and I would walk the quietest, holding my double-barrel sixteen-gauge shotgun against my chest, my bare thumb on the safety and my left trigger finger on the first of its two triggers. When we got to the Blowout, I'd go left, without a word, and Jeff right. I'd creep down the loose rocks, every sound amplified in the still morning, and I'd step quietly over the frozen puddles below and into the dark trees.

In the woods, the stars disappeared overhead as if swiped away, and I inched forward with my hand before my face to feel for briars, my eyes watering from the cold. When I got far enough, I found a tree to sit beneath, shivering and miserable, thinking

of the stories I wanted to write and hoping for something to shoot. Because at sixteen, I'd never killed a deer, which meant I was technically still a pussy.

Of course there were a lot of real hunters in my family, including my father. Though he no longer hunted, Gerald Franklin commanded the respect of the most seasoned woodsman because as a young man he'd been a legendary killer of turkeys (and we all knew that turkey hunters consider themselves the only serious sportsmen, disdaining deer or any other game the way fly fishermen look down on bait fishermen). Dad never bragged about the toms he'd shot, but we heard everything from our uncles. According to them, my father had been the wildest of us all, getting up earlier and staying in the woods later than any man in the county.

There's a story he tells where he woke on a spring Sunday to go hunting—he never used a clock, relying instead on his “built-in” alarm. Excited because he knew which tree a gobbler had roosted in the evening before, he dressed in the dark so he wouldn't wake my mother, pregnant with me. When he got to the woods it was still pitch black, so he settled down to wait for daylight. An hour passed, and no sign of light. Instead of going back home, though, he laid his gun aside, lit a cigarette and continued to wait for a dawn that wouldn't arrive for three more hours. Later, laughing, he told my uncles he'd gotten to the woods around one A.M.

But at some point, before I started first grade, he quit hunting. I always figured it was because he'd found religion. I grew up going to the Baptist church every Sunday with a father who was a deacon, not a hunter. Ours was a godly household—to this day

I've never heard Dad curse—and we said grace at every meal (even if we ate out) and prayed as a family each night, holding hands. After church on Sunday mornings, Dad sat in our living room and read his Bible, wearing his tie all day, then loaded us in the big white Chrysler to head back to church in the evening.

If we passed the three Wiggins brothers, dressed in old clothes and carrying hand-cut fishing poles, Dad shook his head and gave us all a minisermon on the perils of fishing on the Lord's day. Though neither he nor anyone else has ever confirmed it, I've always thought that by not hunting he was paying a kind of self-imposed penance for the Saturday nights in his youth he'd spent in pool halls, and for the Sundays he'd skipped church to chase turkeys.

Sometimes, in my own hunting years, huddled against a sweet gum, waiting for noon or dusk to give me permission to leave the woods, I'd imagine my father as a younger man, slipping through the trees, still wearing his blue mechanic's shirt with his name stitched across the chest, grease from his garage under his fingernails, carrying in his callused hands the same sixteen-gauge shotgun he would later give me. He was heading toward where he'd heard a gobbler that morning before work.

When he got to the spot, he knelt and, cradling the shotgun, removed from the pocket of his old army jacket the little box turkey caller he would give my brother years later. It was wooden and hollow like a tiny guitar box. You drew a peg over its green surface as gently as you could, the way you'd peel an apple without breaking the skin. If you knew what you were doing, it made a quiet, perfect hen's cluck, something a man could barely hear, but a sound that would snap a gobbler's head around half a mile away. After Dad had clucked a time or two, he waited, and when he heard the distant answer—that mysterious lovely cry, half a

rooster's crow and half the whinny of a horse—he worked his jaw like a man shifting his chewing tobacco, and from under his tongue he moved his “yepper” to the roof of his mouth.

Year after year, in our stockings for Christmas, he'd been giving Jeff and me our own yeppers, tiny plastic turkey callers the size of a big man's thumbnail, and he would try to teach us to “yep” the way turkeys do. Jeff caught on quickly, but it made me gag.

It was this kind of gift that let me know my father wanted me to hunt, though he never pressed, and let me know he was bothered by the fact that, until I was fifteen years old, I played with dolls. Not girls' dolls, but “action figures.” The original G.I. Joe with his fuzzy crew cut and a scar on his chin, Johnny West with his painted-on clothes, Big Jim with his patented karate chop: I had them all. I loved playing with them, and because Jeff was two years younger than I was, he did whatever I did. But while he would wrench off G.I. Joe's head and hands to examine how the doll was put together, I would imagine that my G.I. Joe was Tarzan of the Apes. One of my sister's Barbie dolls, stripped to a skimpy jungle bikini, became Jane. A foot-tall Chewbacca was Kerchak, an ape. In the lush green summer afternoons, Jeff and I built African villages out of sticks and vines. We dug a wide trench across our backyard and with the garden hose made a muddy brown river filled with rubber snakes and plastic crocodiles.

When the Wiggins brothers pedaled up on their rusty bicycles—they were stringy, sun-yellowed boys who smelled like sweat and fish and never wore shirts or shoes in summer, who lived a mile away down a dirt road in the woods—Jeff and I would toss our dolls into the bushes and pretend to be cleaning up a mess in the backyard.

“Wanna go fishin'?” Kent Wiggins would ask, stuffing his

lower lip with Skoal. His father worked for the lumber mill, and Kent would get a job there when he turned eighteen. I envied them the ease with which they accepted and handled their lives, the way they spit between their teeth, flicked a rod, fired a rifle.

Jeff and I always went wherever they asked us to go—I was afraid of being laughed at and being called a mama's boy for saying no, and Jeff enjoyed the fishing. And sitting on the trestle over the Blowout, watching the Wigginses and my little brother pull in catfish after catfish, I'd long for my G.I. Joe, and hate the longing.

Once, when I was newly fifteen in Kmart with ten birthday dollars to spend, Dad came up beside me.

“You could buy a hunting knife,” he whispered.

“Gerald . . .” my mother warned.

He let go of my shoulders, put his hands in his pockets.

“He wants to get a new outfit for his G.I. Joe,” Mom said to Dad.

I'd never felt more like a pussy.

So the hell with it, I thought, and headed for the tall line of fishing rods I could see beyond the toy aisle. Dad fell into step beside me. He let me shave the bristly hairs off his wrist in search of the sharpest knife while Mom stood with her arms folded near the stink bait, glaring into space. At the checkout counter, I watched Dad add another five to my ten dollars for the Old Timer Sharpfinger I'd picked. When we left the store, he had his arm around me.

As Dad drove us home, I asked him if he wished I didn't play with G.I. Joes. Mom sat far across the long seat, looking out her window. At my question, her head jerked toward Dad, who

stopped whistling. He glanced at her before catching my eye in the rearview mirror.

“No,” he said. “I’m real proud of you, son. I’m glad you’ve got . . . imagination.”

When Jeff killed his first buck, a spike, I was there.

Despite being younger, Jeff has always been a much better shot than I am. I’d gotten Dad’s sixteen-gauge at Christmas, but Jeff had unwrapped a Marlin thirty-thirty lever-action rifle. The fact that I was eighteen and still using a shotgun didn’t go unnoticed—the boy with the weakest aim always gets the scattergun because its spray of buckshot gives more chances for a hit than a single bullet. Never mind that my sixteen-gauge was an antique that had belonged to my grandfather, a rare Foxboro crafted of blued Sterlingworth steel, a side-by-side model that broke open behind the walnut stock. The shells slid in and the breech closed with a muffled snap, a sound more like cloth than metal. It’s a gun I can take apart—barrel, forearm, stock—and reassemble in thirty seconds. A gun worth over two thousand dollars. Yet in the woods, I was ashamed of it.

The high school closed on opening day of deer season, and on that first morning in 1980, Jeff and I sat in opposite tree stands—small seats built overlooking a wide field where deer came to graze—and from mine I watched my brother sight me with the scope of his rifle. I sat rigid, silent, ready for a deer, while a hundred yards away, Jeff waved at me. Gave me the finger. He pissed from off his stand, *twice*. He yawned. Slept. But as one hour became two, I stayed stock-still—I didn’t have Jeff’s instinct for knowing when to be ready, for being relaxed until it was time to raise your gun and aim. My limbs began to tingle, the blood

slowing in my veins like a creek icing up. I didn’t blink for so long that the woods blurred, and I began to feel that I was part of them, the trees and the leaves taking on a buzzing resonance and losing their sharp edges, the buzzing increasing like a hornet loose inside my head, and for an instant I hung there, the center of something, seeing from my ears, hearing from my eyes, the world around me a tangible glow of brindle noise. Then I blinked.

And from across the field came Jeff’s gunshot.

From then on, I insisted on sitting in Jeff’s lucky stand. A year later, early in the 1981 season, the sixteen-gauge in my lap, I was there, waiting. Tense. It was dusk, and I was losing hope again. I’d been hunting like a fanatic—once or twice a day. I’d stopped taking books with me. I’d seen deer and even missed a doe, the fabled buck fever claiming me with violent seizures, my gun barrel shaking, teeth clacking.

Now, on the lucky stand, I didn’t see the deer when it walked into the field. You seldom do: they just appear. And if it’s a buck, like this one, you notice the antlers first, the sleekest, sharpest things in the world, not bone but blood vessels dried and hard as stone. On the stand, I lifted the jittering shotgun, slowly, thumbing the safety, the buck less than twenty yards from where I sat trembling.

I aimed, blood roaring in my ears, and fired, not feeling the kick.

The buck raised his head, still chewing. His antlers seemed to unwind as he looked around, wondering where that blast had come from. At some point, I remembered that I had another barrel, and I began pulling the trigger again, before finally realizing that I had to pull the *second* trigger. When I fired, the deer

buckled and recovered, then vanished, replaced by the noise of something tearing through the dead leaves behind me, a painful sound hacking down the gully.

From across the field, Jeff's voice: "Kill anything?"

I descended the ladder, my hands shaking. At the bottom, I struggled to break open the gun, and shells from my pocket fell to the ground. I reloaded, and, nearly crying, slid to the bottom of the gully.

The deer—thank God—was there. Still alive, but down. His side caving in and out and a hind leg quivering. Approaching him, I counted his points—six, seven, eight—an eight-point! What I was supposed to do now, what Dad and my uncles had drilled into me, was to cautiously approach the buck, draw my knife and cut his throat, watch him bleed to death. But in my excitement, I forgot this. Instead, I moved to within three feet of the deer's flagging side and flipped the sixteen-gauge's safety off. I put a finger on each of the shotgun's triggers, and, holding the gun at my hip, pulled them at the same time.

That night, my entire family admired the deer lying in the back of Dad's pickup, its black eyes turning foggy. It's traditional to rub blood on a boy's face when he kills his first deer, but Dad had a lesson to teach. I'd gut-shot the buck so badly that a lot of meat had been ruined. The hole I'd blown in his side was big enough to put my head in, and Dad came up behind me and did exactly that. When he pulled me out by my neck, I was almost sick, but I managed to hold it, like a man. That was when everyone gathered around me, my uncles and Jeff clapping my back, Mom and my aunts hugging me, trying not to get blood on their blouses.

When I tell this story, I end by saying that nothing except Beth Ann accepting my marriage proposal on a warm wine-and-cheese

afternoon in Paris has surpassed the feeling I had that night. As Dad guided me through cleaning the deer, peeling down its skin, trimming away the small white pockets of fat, my eight-year-old cousin approached us. When the boy saw the buck's bloody, empty body cavity, he tumbled away, gagging. Dad rolled his eyes at me. Then we began to quarter the red meat, my face and neck still bloody, my hair stiff with gore.

Near the close of the same season, I sat on a wooded hill in a plot of land on which my father, when he sold it, had been wise enough to retain the mineral and hunting rights. It was only two months after I'd killed my eight-point, but now things were different because Jeff had bragged about the buck at school. Whenever I told the story, I always made myself seem foolish by giving the deer both barrels at such close range. People seemed to like that. I was discovering the power of self-depreciation and didn't mind being laughed at as long as everyone knew I'd killed the deer. And they did: Coach Horn had led me to his office behind the gym and shown me the antlers on his walls. For the first time in my life, I wasn't a pussy. No. Sitting on the hillside that evening, I was a man who'd enjoyed his first taste of blood and who wanted more.

It was a mild January day, the leaves crisp, stirred by the wind to an almost constant rustle. Suddenly, an even bigger eight-point buck had materialized at the bottom of the ravine, stealing among the live oaks. First I saw his rack of antlers as he nosed along the ground, eating acorns. Then his shoulders. His flat tail. The color of dead leaves, he blended so well into the hillside that I only saw him when he moved. My heart began to rattle, and, as if he heard it, the buck raised his head and looked right at me. He lifted his

nose and snorted, his nostrils gleaming. For a moment he seemed to vanish, to have never been there, but before I could panic I saw him again as he took a step away from me.

Somehow, I did everything right—aimed when he put his head down, squeezed instead of jerked the trigger—and *still* damn near missed. My buckshot pellets sprayed the deer across his neck, face and antlers, chipping them, bringing bloody beads across his cheeks, putting out one eye and—we saw this later—injuring his spine so that he only had use of his front legs, the back two paralyzed. I stood and watched him drag himself through the leaves, trying to get away, pawing and stumbling down the gully-side.

From the next hollow over, Jeff called, “Kill anything?”

I half fell to the bottom of the ravine. The deer lay still, just a slight rippling of his big leathery sides, blood glistening on his black nose. While I circled him, gun ready, he watched me, his head up, turning to keep me in sight. One eye was red and bleeding, but the other remained bright and clear. From over the hill, I heard Jeff crashing through the leaves. I knew he’d heard my shot—my single shot—and I didn’t want him to hear another.

Why didn’t I cut the deer’s throat? There was no shame in that, and it was the safest way to avoid the buck’s deadly antlers. But instead I did something that shocks me to this day. I dropped the sixteen-gauge and drew my Sharpfinger. I approached the deer, watching him follow me with his good eye. Carefully, the way you’d reach to pin a snake with your foot, I stuck out my leg and put my boot on the buck’s neck, forcing his head down. I knelt on top of him, straddled his back. Now I heard his ragged breathing, felt his heat on my thighs. I took one thick tine of his antlers in my right hand and turned his good eye away so he couldn’t see. He didn’t resist. I raised the knife and began to stab

him in the shoulder where I knew his heart was. The buck barely moved beneath me, and the blade cut cleanly, as if I were sticking soft dirt. I stabbed him twelve times, in what I thought a buckshot pattern would be. Then I laid my hand on the deer’s hot shoulder, over the wounds I’d made, and felt that his heart had stopped.

By the time Jeff came running down the hill, I’d begun my first solo act of field dressing. It was—and still is—the biggest buck anyone in my family had killed, weighing over 220, seventy pounds more than I weighed at the time.

Later, as we hoisted the deer up beneath our skinning tree, Dad noticed the holes in the buck’s side. He nodded to Jeff and me. “Now boys,” he said, “*that* was a good shot.” With my knife, I made a series of cuts along the deer’s hind legs, and Jeff and Dad helped me peel down the buck’s fur—a noise like Velcro makes—to reveal the nearly purple carcass beneath.

Night had fallen, and with a flashlight Dad looked at the deer’s side. He bent, examining it more closely, working his finger into one of the knife slits. Then he stared me down.

“Son,” he said, “is that what I think it is?”

I didn’t answer.

He reached for the deer’s head and lifted it by the giant, chipped, eight-point rack, a set of antlers so big I could step into it like pants. He grabbed me by the small of my back and jammed me into my dead deer. He brought the antlers against my stomach and pushed the points in so hard they hurt.

“Do you know what ‘eviscerate’ means?” he asked me.

Now, at the Blowout, the hunter approaches me on the trestle. I expect it’s one of the Wiggins brothers, and here I am again, as gunless and guilty and foolish as if I’m holding a doll. But as the

man draws closer, a scoped rifle in the crook of his arm, I see from his expensive camouflage, fluorescent orange hat and face paint that he's not from around here. The men who live in these parts hunt in work clothes, old boots and faded camo jackets passed down from their fathers or grandfathers. They would never wear face paint or an orange hat. When I hunted I used to carry such a cap in my pocket in case I ran into a game warden, but most of the hunters I grew up admiring simply never ran into game wardens. These men raise their own coon and squirrel dogs. Their rifles have taped stocks. Although they often kill out of season or at night, they usually eat what they kill. I admire them, and so I feel a flicker of distaste for this outsider.

"Hello," I say to the fellow, probably a lawyer from Mobile. "Kill anything?"

"Get out of here," he says.

I cock my head. "I'm sorry?"

"You heard me. This is private property. You're trespassing on our hunting club." He swings his gun barrel toward the woods on the right, as if pointing to his buddies lurking in the shadows, their faces green and black, twigs in their hair, expensive rifles aimed at my head.

I spit through my teeth. I don't tell him that this used to be my family's land, that I've dragged deer over this very track, spent hours on this goddamn trestle. Instead I say, "The railroad's not private property."

"The hell it's not," he says. And raises the rifle, aims at me.

We stand facing one another. It will be dark soon, and from the left side of the track comes the distant snarl of a logger's power saw. I try to see myself through the hunter's eyes: my ragged jeans, my leather jacket and hiking boots. To him I probably look like a hippie, like the last thing you'd expect to find out here.

Meanwhile, the hunter is edgy, glancing behind him in the woods. "I'm not gonna tell you again," he says.

The saw rattles to a stop, then revs up again.

"You hear that?" I ask. "That'll ruin your hunting more than I will."

I know I should leave, but instead I sit on the cold rail and look away from the hunter, at the woods. I recall a story my father told me. He was turkey hunting down here early on a Sunday morning. Creeping along, he heard a wavering voice, and it spooked him. He followed it through the trees until, in the distance, he saw an old black preacher standing on a stump, practicing his sermon. He had a giant white Bible in one hand and a red handkerchief for face-mopping in the other. Despite the forty-degree weather, his shirtsleeves were rolled up. Dad stopped and listened to the man's tremulous voice, knowing that every turkey for miles was gone, that his hunting was spoiled. He might as well have gone home. When I asked him if he was angry he said no, just spooked.

I turn and look at the hunter's camouflaged face. "You ever hunt turkeys?"

"Go to hell," he says, and walks away. He doesn't look back, just heads into the woods. When he's gone I stand up and close my coat. Take a last long look at the Blowout, then make my way carefully down the side of the tracks. I duck under the darkening magnolia branches on the other side and start back toward the logging road.

I know, as I walk, that I'm not the fancy-rifled lawyer in face paint and new camouflage, yet neither am I the dedicated native hunter I pretended to be all those years. Now when I return here, to Dickinson, it's as a kind of stranger—after all, I've left, gotten educated, lost some of my drawl. I even married a Yankee. And

coming back like this to hunt for details for my stories feels a bit like poaching on land that used to be mine. But I've never lost the need to tell of my Alabama, to reveal it, lush and green and full of death. So I return, knowing what I've learned. I come back, where life is slow dying, and I poach for stories. I poach because I want to recover the paths while there's still time, before the last logging trucks rumble through and the old, dark ways are at last forever hewn.

g r i t

Chugging and clanging among the dark pine trees north of Mobile, Alabama, the Black Beauty Minerals plant was a rickety green hull of storage tanks, chutes and conveyor belts. Glen, the manager, felt like the captain of a ragtag spaceship that had crash-landed, a prison barge full of poachers and thieves, smugglers and assassins.

The owners, Ernie and Dwight, lived far away, in Detroit, and when the Black Beauty lost its biggest client—Ingalls Shipbuilding—to government budget cuts, they ordered Glen to lay off his two-man night shift. One of the workers was a long-haired turd Glen enjoyed letting go, a punk who would've likely failed his next drug test. But the other man, Roy Jones, did some book-making on the side, and Glen had been in a betting slump lately. So when Roy, who'd had a great year as a bookie, crunched over the gritty black yard to the office, Glen owed him over four thousand dollars.

Roy, a fat black man, strode in without knocking and wedged himself into the chair across from Glen's desk, probably expecting more stalling of the debt.

Glen cleared his throat. "I've got some bad news, Roy—"

"Chill, baby," Roy said. He removed his hard hat, which left its imprint in his hair. "I know I'm fixing to get laid off, and I