

Big Game

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HE HAD BEEN sitting on a wet log with his back against a great smooth boulder and the old single-shot .22 rifle across his lap for some time, looking up through the branches of the high pines, not caring much where the squirrel had gone, or whether he had actually seen a squirrel at all, just sitting quietly, relaxed, with his head thrown back against the boulder, when at the very edge of his eye he caught a movement in the brush, beyond the pines, at the edge of the beech grove about fifty feet away. Something cautioned him against moving so he simply rolled his eyes down and stared intently at the thicket. It was gloomy under the pines, everything still wet from the rain at dawn. The thicket was dark and the leaves heavy on the sticks. Thick brush. His eyes focused on a sudden movement, and before he could make out what it was, his hands tightened around the butt and barrel of his little rifle. That it was a beast he knew without thinking. Then he saw the ear, reddish brown, long, narrow, twitch again under a green leaf, and then suddenly the eye, cir-

led with white, seemed to bulge out, large, brown, staring across the space under the trees toward him. And as he swung the barrel of his rifle slowly over his knees and began to raise it, he realized that the beast was a deer. A wild deer! He jerked the .22 to his shoulder; the great brown animal leaped from the thicket. He fired. It did not falter but made four or five leaping bounds up the slope of the hill into the beech grove, and with one enormous leap disappeared within the close underbrush.

For a moment he sat just as he had when he fired the shot, bolt upright with the rifle at his shoulder. Then he lowered his arms and searched feverishly through his old, tight hunting jacket for his bullets. Standing, he cleared his rifle and inserted another shell, then he ran over to the thicket and looked at the spot where the animal had been hiding. He could see the slender twigs close to the ground bending upward, freed from the beast's pressure on them. He had missed, but that was an accident of his nerves as much as the deer had been

an accident of the place and his rifle, single-shot, .22 calibre, was really an accident of possession, a thing conserved from his youth. He expelled the air from his lungs.

Then he saw the blood. Just a drop, bright, darkly glowing on a leaf at the level of his waist. He caught the petal in his hand and noticed that his fingers were trembling. The drop of blood seemed to be stuck to the petal, but as he bent to look closely it slid imperceptibly to the center of the leaf, fused with a drop of water, and slid down the stem to the ground. A light stain remained on the leaf. He tore it off the bush and placed it carefully in his pocket.

A few feet away from the thicket, on the pine needles, he saw another drop of blood. A wild excitement filled him again. He had hit it! And he thought back quickly to when he had known all about deer, to when he had first been given the rifle, to the magazines and books he had read. Wait, he told himself. Don't press it. It will rest. And I'll find it. Make a kill. His heart thudded violently at the force of his intention.

He went back to the wet log and sat down trying to control his excitement. The dull hum of the summer woods seemed wonderfully significant to him now where minutes before the hollow had seemed shrunken, yardlike, another memory gone bad on sight. He thought of his car and tried to calculate his distance from it. He had walked for two or three hours, say five, six miles. The car was on the turnpike, past Concord. He still knew the woods through here like the back of his hand. But a deer! He had never seen a deer wild. His deer. He thought of the widespread eyes, circled, the long black muzzle. The horns. Where were its antlers? For a moment he was puzzled. Something about the season he couldn't recall. It was late in August and warm under

the pines, even after the rain. He decided that deer didn't grow horns, *antlers* he corrected himself, until it snowed.

He checked his little rifle and holding it high, with his finger close to the trigger, started up the slope toward the beech grove. There was a gout of blood on the straw grass just within the wood. He squeezed his .22 affectionately and looked carefully about through the trees. Then he went on.

Within twenty minutes he came upon the deer, almost walked up to it without seeing it. It was crouched at the base of a shale hill, in a copse of white birch trees, among the berry bushes. He came upon it without startling it. The wet grasses muffled his steps and the animal was hurt, its senses dulled. When it scented him, it lumbered upright and leaped clumsily. He fired without knowing it, so violent was his heart, and heard in wonder the thunk of the bullet as it entered the deer's flesh. The animal fell heavily against a birch tree.

He ran up to it and stood looking down at the beast. Its reddish-brown coat was smooth and beautiful. Its head was delicate and long and lovely. It was dead. He prodded it with his toe uncertainly. It convulsed and his guts twitched in recoil. But he knelt beside it and looked closely. One bullet had entered behind the shoulder, the other, lower down, had pierced the belly. The animal seemed to be as big as him. A hundred fifty pounds at least, he thought. He tried to lift it, then he seized it by its front leg and dragged it out of the bushes. A feeling of responsibility, of possession, had taken hold of him. He conscience seemed enlarged: he must not waste what he had done. He took off his jacket and rummaged through his pockets. His shirt was soaked through with sweat and his hands trembled. But he found his old jackknife, ten years at least lying in the rear game pocket. He opened the large blade.

It was flecked with rust but fairly sharp.

He rolled the deer onto its back and propped stones at its sides to hold it belly-up. Gutting it would eliminate twenty or thirty pounds. Then he could carry it. Flies were buzzing excitedly at the leaking wounds. Bleeding the carcass would lighten it another five or more pounds. He remembered the illustrations in the old hunting magazines. A sweet nauseous smell rose from the carcass. He put his hand on the white belly and was surprised at the warmth of it, the softness. He felt almost embarrassed. Then he saw that the beast was female. He frowned for a moment in disappointment, then pushed the point of his jackknife in above the genitalia. The flesh did not cut easily. He inserted two fingers into the incision gingerly and spread the flesh; the blade traveled roughly across the belly. He cut to the ribs and spread the abdominal walls. The first bullet had torn through the stomach and intestines and had ripped the animal to shreds inside. A mixture of blood, intestinal fluid, excretion, and half-digested food spilled out between the beast's hind legs. He put his hands in under the rib cage and pulled at the viscera, gagging, cutting at it along the spine and at the diaphragm with jerky, hurried strokes. The stink of bile and blood and excrement filled his nose and lungs, but he worked now under the same excitement that had driven him to kill the animal. The flies were maddening, but he kept them away from him by swinging his arms mechanically.

He dragged the viscera away into the bushes when he had hacked it loose, and returned to pull the animal up onto a log to let the blood drain out. His hands and arms were covered with blood and a heavy musk stench. It took him some time to clean himself with grass, and when he had, he felt a sudden exhaustion watering all of his limbs. He thought of his car

three or four, maybe five miles now, away, and although a highway ran within a mile of where he had killed the doe, he thought vaguely that he might have broken some kind of law, all of them probably; and besides it was part of the thing, only just, that he labor for what had started by luck—otherwise what would it be worth? He would make the killing and the carrying of the beast into something accomplished, done, his. He imagined it vividly, finally looked at the sun, got confused trying to figure Daylight Saving Time, decided that it was about ten o'clock, and lay down on the cool moss in the shady birch grove to rest for a while before he would start back with his trophy.

When he woke the sun was past overhead, carrion odor was thick in the moist, heated grove, a pack of bluejays flashed blue and screamed through the white birches. He went quickly to the carcass and was appalled at the swarm of flies covering the gutted animal. It lay against the blowdown with its eyes closed now and a black line of flies crawling over the slits and into its nostrils. Strangely, on its back like that, with a blanket of flies over the gaping wound, and its white legs spread grotesquely, it looked like a misshapen, sleeping pet. Jays swooped down over his shoulders, scolding, and he saw gouges on the carcass where they had torn out chunks of glazed blood and flesh. He was amazed and looked bewildered at the bright chattering birds, at the humming flies. The smell of musk and urine and decaying meat was heavy under the trees. Crows stood on branches nearby holding their wings stiffly, half folded, ready to drop into the grove. He snapped a long switch from a bush and slashed angrily at the flies. They rose in a cloud and settled again and again on the carcass, into the spread and open cavity extending from its chest to its genitals. Blood had glazed solid

in patches and puddles within the animal and the wood was alive with scavengers.

He draped his hunting jacket over his shoulders and maneuvered the beast up onto the log. Then, kneeling and bending, he grasped its legs, stiff as sticks, and struggled upright with the carcass across his shoulders. The flies rose in a cloud and hovered over his head, settled again on the carcass, buzzed his face. The jays swooped down like bright electric sparks, screaming. He had walked some twenty or thirty feet down the rise, out of the birch grove, when he realized that he had left his .22 behind. He paused to shift the great weight on his shoulders and decided that walking back up the rise after the rifle would be just too difficult. His shirt was already soaked through with sweat again. Strings of sour green fluid ran down his arms from the carcass and brought tears to his eyes. He concentrated, ignored the stench and the flies, and started for the old logging road running through the woods somewhere nearby.

Within a half an hour he found it and sat down on a log at the edge of the overgrown path with the beast still in place, glued by its juices now, hot, across his shoulders. His neck and back and arms were covered with a glaze of dried blood and fluid from the beast. Flies crawled and dug unmercifully over both him and the carcass. He was oblivious to them and kept his eyes squeezed to slits, his mouth closed, and blew in short hard gusts through his nose to dislodge them from his lips. The August sun was brassy through the trees.

He started off again, walking doggedly, with his head bent, his arms locked around the deer's legs, his eyes half shut. The sun streamed down hot through the bloated green overhead. Jays followed from tree to tree screaming regularly, piercingly. The flies occupied and filled his mind. He

dared not sit down to rest again, his back was a solid mass of pain, his legs wobbled like pillars of jelly, his lips were cracking, dry, thick, and his tongue felt pickled. After the first hour his burden seemed to fuse itself to him and he thought of it no more. His goal was the car and his legs simply moved him toward it.

He thought as he walked of things as they were and as they ought to be—the red Ford convertible he had bought just out of high school and of how many years now he had worked to pay for it; he thought of his job counting, checking, filing, and of how much of his life his work was taking. There was nothing real anymore, nothing like this. And even now, stumbling, his heart thudded and his blood moved firelike in his arms and loins.

He felt a passionate longing, as he walked, for some of the things he had thought himself without the cunning or the courage to seek before. He smiled grimly, even the winning of his wife had not been the contest he had dreaded—but it had exhausted him anyway, the tentativeness of it all, her, his work, his life itself. The heat of the humming wood seemed to enter him like a passion. The trees were familiar and wild and proud.

Then for a long while he walked without thinking, without feeling much, without seeing. He passed a stream of loud running water, managed to get down on his knees on the bank, but such a weakness came over him he knew that if he put his burden down he would be unable to lift it again, and if he tried to drink with that weight across his shoulders he would sprawl down and never rise again. Never. And what had brought him back here after so many years, so much effort, he'd have to carry in its place. He struggled to his knees again with his mouth cracked open and his tongue protruding. Flies settled on his lips, he did not feel them. Sun and

shade were equally unreal, unbearable. The trees arched and weighted the air with silence. He staggered off down the road enveloped in flies, sweat, and offal. The body heat of the deer lay like a blanket, the wound like gigantic lips against his neck and shoulders.

For a long minute, or an hour, he thought himself again under the hot Carolina sun of his basic training. Army. Dog-face. Dog's life. Gunless soldier. He hadn't even carried a gun except that first time, that one murderous hike, and he had only lasted, what? five, six miles? Blisters as big as eggs. Hottest goddamned place in the world. In the world. Never got out of it. Two years, eleven months. Never got out of there. Truck driver. Seventy-five dollar a month doggie. And that's what the uniform covered. And still it did seem a bargain. There'd always been the chance of action, the hope.

So now he wasn't an entire stupid ass. Half ass, maybe. He chuckled at himself. He'd have his picture in the paper, maybe.

He fell into a drowsy shambling walk and passed right through the abandoned piggery near which he had parked his car that morning. The deer had become, long before, an addition, an enormous mound of super muscle upon his shoulders. In the heat and dampness of its own flesh, and his, it had almost congealed upon him. His arms, locked over its stiff haunches, had lost all feeling, were fused to the legs. There was nothing in his mind but his weariness.

He heard the roar of cars like a waterfall in his ears and looked up dazedly. His legs continued to carry him forward and he almost lost his balance. He stopped, still some hundreds of yards from the highway, and looked stupidly at the speeding cars gleaming through the trees beyond. He looked around at the rail fences

and crumbling pens of the piggery on all sides of him and he realized that he was quite near the car. Flies clung like burrs all over his face and arms and already maggots were crawling at the great lips of the open wound draped across his shoulders. The stench came to him suddenly and reminded him of hunting, long ago, here, with his father, for pheasant, along these piggery fences. He looked dazedly at the abandoned farm and staggered on toward the highway. That was the year his father had stopped going out.

He reached the side of the concrete pavement and started down it alongside the turnpike, ignoring, hardly aware of, the slowing cars and the staring drivers, the blast of the horns, the shouted questions and congratulations. He forgot where he had parked his car, then remembered, then forgot again. His ears were roaring and a dry crust filled his nose and the lids of his eyes.

He looked up when he judged himself to be near his car and saw a man clad in green breeches and a green shirt leaning against it, smoking, watching him curiously. He straightened up painfully and shifted the carcass higher onto his shoulders, realizing that he had been stooped over in a crouch for hours. The flies rose in a whirling mass over his head and settled again. Fluid ran from the cavity in the beast. He saw maggots on his arms for the first time, but ignored it all. The car, the car. He croaked, "Open the door," at the man and stumbled forward.

The leaning man drew on his pipe reflectively and smiled, but he did not move from his comfortable sprawl against the car. Irritated, getting wind, he croaked again, "Hey," and motioned with the stiff shank of the deer. He reached the car.

The leaning man took the pipe from his mouth and ran the mouthpiece through his

grey hair, over his ear. He said, "What you going to do with that?"

Blinking, he stood stupidly before the man.

The man asked, "Eat it?" grinning.

He stood swaying.

"Spoiled, you know."

He gasped, "Out of the way."

The man stayed against the door, arms folded now, pipe clenched between his teeth. "And a doe."

"Gut shot and stalked." He felt like a giant with the thick layers of muscle across his shoulders, the weight.

"Out of season, you know," the man said speculatively.

He knew what it all meant, oh yeah, had known the minute he saw the man, the semi-uniform, the old wise-guy face of them. Oh, he knew. But it didn't make any difference.

The gamewarden went around to the trunk of the car, tried the handle. "Keys?" he called, then he came back and patted the hunter's pockets until he found the key-ring. He stood for a moment looking at the fly-covered mass of decaying flesh, the maggots, the bloody man, shook his head and opened the trunk of the car. "Put it here," he said and made no motion to help.

The hunter leaned forward and fell against the rear bumper. The carcass heaved but did not move from his shoulders. He rose with his head bowed and jerked the deer over his head. It came dripping a thick green scum down his neck, smashing against his head, thudding into the compartment with its legs stuck out like a table. His jacket was sealed into the wound, congealed in blood and maggots. His head swam and he knelt for a long moment against the bumper of the car. The stench reached suddenly up into his nose and like a dry finger down into

his throat. He vomited, and shuddered, and vomited again.

The man in the green whipcord pants and shirt stood away, watching him calmly, moving his pipe around with his mouth. After a while he said, "I'd better drive, the station's close."

The hunter leaned his numb arms on the bumper and looked up, "What station?" He had a moment of confusion imagining that the man would next strip him of his garments.

"Police station. You're just about under arrest."

He understood, so he just leaned, resting. What difference did it make, what difference?

Finally he got in beside the warden, trying to look alert, but he fell asleep immediately.

Although the warden woke him when they reached the neat brick County Offices building, he did not really waken until he found himself walking woodenly beside the older man up the stairs into a paneled room and up to a high desk.

After a while they told him to call whoever he pleased.

He stood for a moment looking at the tall old man and at the young sergeant behind the desk. Then he shook his head, "No. I'm not calling anybody."

"Wife?"

"No."

"Lawyer?"

He shook his head. What the hell did he care for all this. He had done what he had done and that was the end of it. He would take what he got—game or time. Next he'd be seeing his mother, or his wife would be there with her handkerchief, or he'd have to make a speech before they hung him.

Secretly, in his pocket, his stiff fingers found and fumbled the stained green leaf.