

William Powers

TURN OF SEASON

He was living then in the old house on Huron Street with Kelly and his mother.

The fall of the year.

Bursts of rain. Storms of snow. Freeze and melt. Leaves in the air, leaves on the ground. The earth becoming cold, the woods emptying, the woods becoming silent. Dusk. Scattered noisy migrant waterfowl landed on black waters, gathered, became still, were subdued by night, then raucous their departure in first of day.

Deer season coming.

He found a bait pile, cabbages, apples, rutabagas, lettuce. It was an old farm, falling outbuildings, an abandoned house. He had come out of the woods into the grownover pasture. The house was at the far side of the pasture away from him, the sun low, the woods dark, but the house south facing, sun on it across the pasture. It looked to be as if there were someone yet there. He knew there was not. An empty place falling down. Inside and out.

The bait was near the house, dumped where the lane came in at the side. Deer would come around by way of the woods into the open by the house and find it. There would be a blind. He looked around, saw the brush heap over toward the fallen outhouse. The shot was less than fifty yards.

He crossed the pasture to the house. The door was off. He went in, two rooms down, one up, broken windows, a piece of old stove grate, other scatterings, a round enameled dishpan on a nail by the sink, an arm broken rocker. He stood by the rocker and looked out the window, a shed partly fallen, a garden grown over, the pasture grown up, a once plowed field might have been potatoes, beyond it a pond, a few spruce, a mixed stand of maple and popple, a down slope to a stream. There were blueberries, a woodshed about to fall over. It was too late in the year for the berries, a few only wrinkled on stems missed by bear and raccoon.

He went back to the bait pile. It was sweet with rot, frost and thawing, wasps yet around the apples. He walked over to the blind, nothing more than brush and a log, sit on the log or sit on the ground and lean back against it, wait for the deer, wait for the shot. The brush had been pulled apart, made long not high, room for two behind it, dry limbs and brittle sticks. He sat back against the log. Waited. Before dusk a doe came out of the woods and approached the bait. Behind it came two more, yearling twins. Finally, the buck. They pawed and ate. After they had gotten started the buck pushed ahead of the others, pawing, sorting, and chewing at the pile. The deer did not see him. The hunters would sit where he was. It was a good bait. Heavy as it was, the odor of the pile might even mask the scent of the hunters.

He had seen abandoned farms from the highway, houses with trees around them, sometimes a lilac at one corner, a little piece of yard or fallen barn, but the surrounding fields always plowed and planted, only the house given up, the earth worked as it had been. It was just someone else working it. This was a farm let go. This was a place that had been gone off from, all of it.

He stood, startling the deer. He watched them run, the white of their flags.

There was a mound out by the shed, had been a manure pile. He walked over, kicked at it. He went into the shed, found a halter by a box inside, a piece of rope on it. Maybe somebody had used the box to sit on. Or maybe put an animal on the box, the halter on it, put a goat up on that box, milk it. This was something else that had gone on and been left. The lean-to on the side of the shed was chickens.

He scuffed at a moldering post, the slow fire burning of it and hunters set up outside.

He went back to the lane that came in from the county road. He had come along in the woods the first time parallel to it and not seen it. He looked it over. Tire tracks, some low branches broken, brush run over. They had not been in much, once or twice. The Holiday sold deadfall apples by the plastic bag. He found the bags in the weeds along the lane. They had brought five of those in and gathered up volunteers from around the fence, gotten the cabbage and rutabagas from somewhere, built up their pile. Lettuce. They must have had grocery rot. He

had seen the boxes dumped back by the house, not recognized them at first, just trash, but it was more. They had set up for hunting season, opening day.

He lay in bed that night in his room bare as rooms around him always would be. The rest of that house was a house built inside a house, old and broken boards on the outside but inside, built over from the walls on. Kelly did that. Carpet, ceilings, lights. Shutters. Doors that closed. And doubled. Break one, find another. He saw the farm and how it would look in winter, open fields level rolling in snow and woods around them. The house, its windows. He saw the bait pile and blind. He thought of the truck in the lane.

It was about four miles from town to the farm. He did not go to school the next day. She wrote notes for him because Kelly became angry if he missed, if he brought attention on them. At the farm, some animal other than deer had been at the bait pile, dug it out, messed it around, left a pile of manure, loose, heavy, then a second. Stunk. He guessed a bear. They killed bear at bait piles, too. Deer season two days away. He left the pile. He was in the shed when the deer returned at about four. They were quiet about it. He glimpsed them before he heard them. Then he waited. They were nervous. Did not stay. He did not see the buck. Maybe the bear sign put them off. Maybe something he had done. He found what more there was to find in the shed, two old burlap bags split down the sides and hanging over a stall, some old logging chain, a rough cut six by six, three or four feet long that from its looks had been used to block, prop, and fulcrum, and a long pine pole, prop, lever, roller, rake, and reach-up-and-knock-it-down. The deer were gone. The six by six could chock a wheel, stall the truck. Or it could drop from a limb, smash a windshield. Or the chain could fasten on, pull something apart. He left. Went back to town.

On his way back, he took an old looking dress from a clothesline behind a house. He cut through the mall and bought a piece of cloth. In his room that night, he cut the cloth with the knife that he kept in his gear bag, stitched it into a shape, a sewing kit he had nabbed.

Deer season opened at dawn. The day before he told her that he was going out for the first day. Had been asked. Somebody's deer camp. Would be gone all night. She would have to write a note.

“You don’t fucking hunt,” she said.

“I do this year.”

Took his gear bag, the dress and his sewing rolled up in it. Walked to the mall. The roll of the crowd there around him. Got a plastic tarp. Paid for it. He slept that night not in the old house but his back against a log at the side of the pasture, the tarp under and over. It was his tarp. He would have liked it if it had snowed while he was there, but it did not, and that was good because he could not have managed the tracks.

While it was still light, he had gotten what he wanted out of the shed, done what he wanted with it, gotten it up by the lane and ready where the truck would be. Then he went back to the pasture, ate out of a can, drank soda out of a can. Flattened the cans, buried them. Slept three or four hours. Cold woke him. He got up, tramped around. Made noise. Spread his scent. Urinated beside the bait pile. Made more noise. Scared away any animal that might be coming up to it. Stowed his gear. Went into the house, settled in, waited again. The gear bag he had hidden in what was left of the old falling down loft of the shed, some rotting hay there. That was when he still kept the .22 pistol in it. It was where it could be gotten at. Always was.

He heard the truck up the lane but could not see it. Saw only the headlights shining. Then nothing. They were sitting in the truck. Eating something. Drinking something. Half an hour, an hour. Light. Then two appeared, looked the bait over, crossed to their blind. They carried either .30-30s or 30.06s. They sat at the blind as the first sun came on them, coats pulled tight. Waited. Waited an hour. Then ate out of printed paper wrapping, drank beer, pushed the cans into the brush. Waited. Drank coffee, brandy in it. Waited. Got up and went off to a tree one at a time, urinated, came back. Waited. The one slept head back, snoring some. Then the other.

They woke. Nothing. One left. Walked off toward the stream. Gone awhile. Returned. They had more sandwiches. Ate them. More noisy than the deer feeding. Drank the rest of the brandy coffee. Urinated again. Settled in again.

The afternoon passing. Getting toward dusk. Getting toward feeding. They were chewing jerky. They still had beer. It was getting to be time. They had the rifles across their laps. One of them set up a two legged

x-shaped rest for the rifle. He leaned the barrel into the x. The other had moved out to the side of the pile. He had a heavy branch for a rest. They could get off multiple rounds.

The boy stepped out of the door of the house. He wore the dress he had taken from a clothesline and on his head over his hair a sort of bonnet looking thing. It was what he had sewn for himself. He held the dishpan from beside the sink in his left hand, the piece of broken stove grating in his right. He banged the grating against the dishpan. "Yah," he said. He banged the grating again into the dishpan. "Git. Yah. Git." They swung the rifle barrels. He threw the piece of grating into the brushpile in front of them. "Yah." Twigs snapped and flew. They flinched. "Jesus Christ," one said. "Yah," the boy said and stepped back into the house.

They hesitated. The house was abandoned. The door off. They took up their rifles and went for it. They were hunters now. They stood at each side of the door, then one crouched and leaped in, then the other. Nothing there. Before they entered the boy had ducked out a window across the room, and before he had left, he had given the rocker a hard push. The two men stood in the darkening room. The rocker still moved. They stared at it. Outside, the boy had come around the house as soon as they had gone in. He dropped to his knees and thrust his arm deep into the brushpile, set fire to it with a butane lighter, a piece of tape pulled over the lever to keep it lit. He had knocked off the lighter when he bought the tarp.

When they came out, he was gone. They had not seen him. What they saw was the brushpile burning. The boy in his dress was back up the lane on his way to their truck. He had done all he would with what he had for the house.

One of them kicked at the burning pile. Embers flew. There was smoke. The fire blazed up. They looked further around. Nothing. They were confused. They were a little drunk. They had had their rush at the house. One of them thought about his truck where they left it up the lane. What was going on there? They were tired, a day in the air. There would be no deer at this place on this first of the season. "Shit." The one with the patented rest for the rifle folded it up. He stuck it in his back pocket. He turned back to the house. He raised the rifle, left

elbow well under, right level to the side, the weapon steady. He put four shots in a diamond pattern through the wall, slam, slam, slam, slam, then a fifth centered, slam. The house vibrated hammer-struck with each. The other shot at the last upstairs window. At the second shot the frame fell out. Then they headed back to the truck. The truck looked to be all right. The boy watched them approach it. The one opened the door. The burlap rags from the shed were spread across the seat and thick on the burlap, all the bear manure the boy had been able to gather up as he had found it, seeds, husks, stink, and all.

He watched them. After a while, he watched them leave. Then it was no one. Returning to the house had no interest for him.

By the far side of the pasture was an old autobody. He had looked it over. It said Plymouth. He would learn later that it was a 1934. The front doors were hinged from the back. One was off, lying on the ground. The other was still on. The hinges fastened to a wood frame that ran up inside a metal doorpost. He had never before seen a door hinged from the back. He had never before seen a wood-framed car. After a while, he was back sitting in it. Had his gear bag. He stayed till dark. Walking out after dark would be sometimes breaking trail in powder, sometimes falling in sharp crust edged snow, sometimes walking a hard bright trail, the moon full.

He walked the four miles to town. It was late when he got there. He had put the dress back on the clothesline where he took it. He was dirty. There was mud on his clothes. He had liked putting the dress back, the expression to be on somebody's face.

Kelly was watching him. "You went hunting," Kelly said.

"Yeah."

"Looks more like wrestling." She was amused.

"There was some of both."

"Just don't expect us to eat it," she said.

In the shower he found a long, deep scratch on his left forearm, blood on his shirt. He washed out what he could under the shower, left the shirt dripping over the shower rod.

In the kitchen they were sitting around, some high. He went on to bed. He could lever that autobody down by the stream, somewhere was a pond, set up there. He could always pop them with the .22.