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The Hunting Season
by
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Prologue

It is night. It is not late. It is still early enough for pedestrians to feel safe out on the street. Of course, they are not safe if the night is dark and the street has no sidewalk. There are many dangers for pedestrians in these circumstances.

You might be driving home from work. Your mind might still be at your desk or you might be thinking about the home which awaits you. Perhaps this small gap in your life, between home and work, between these two lives of yours, is a place of private refuge. It is the only time of the day you are alone. Your body settles into the curves of the car seat. You relax. You drive loose-limbed, one-handed.

Or maybe you are a stranger. The street is new to you but you are confident. You are following directions others have given you and anyway, you know you have plenty of time to get lost and find your way. You relax. You drive loose-limbed, one-handed. You switch on the radio. Occasionally a phrase, in words or music, invades your wandering thoughts, steering them this way or that.

You might, of course, already be lost, uncomfortably lost. Anxiety has begun to twitch at your scalp, plucking at hairs. Your body has straightened, your shoulders stiffened. You drive with both hands on the wheel, elbows locked. You are alert, watching, waiting for a sign or a landmark. The sign, you anticipate, will tell you where you are and then you will feel your confusion lift, suddenly, like fog.

Or maybe you aren't lost and you aren't going home and you aren't following directions but there is some other

reason why you are driving through this stretch of forest, right now, tonight, on the edge of this town, in this state, at this very moment. Maybe no one knows you are here and maybe only you know why.

The road is unthreatening. It is thickly wooded, with occasional gateways leading to isolated houses. The road is familiar, because you travel here daily or sometimes, or because you have travelled many like it.

Maybe you take the corner a little too wide or drive a little too close to the forest's turfy edge. Or maybe the pedestrian is out too far in the road. Afterwards you will have days, weeks, months, years to examine and re-examine the precise dynamics of the event. But the fact is that you have turned a corner and, instead of the dark road stretching ahead of you, there is a pedestrian. He is in front of your car.

The running man is lit freakishly by your headlights and he appears in them as suddenly and shockingly as a ghost. He is wearing running shorts and running shoes and probably he was already running, running when your engine idled at the downtown traffic lights, running when you felt the city's solidity disintegrate into suburban spaces and shadows, running when you turned into this forest road, and he is still running. But right now he is running to get out of the path of your car.

The headlights seem to trap him and the brief paces he has time to take are strangely towards your fender. In that second you notice, of all things, his elbows. They are working like big pistons to carry his body out of your path. And you see his prominent jawbone, made more prominent because he is gritting his teeth, pointing his jaw in the direction of safety at the side of the road. But he cannot avoid the car and you have no time to avoid him either. Your right leg careens like a mad horse on to the unyielding

brake but you already know it is too late. There is going to be an impact. For a part of a part of a second, it seems to you that this impact, its sheer inevitability, is something which you have been steering towards all your life. For your whole life you have been hurtling decisively but probably unknowingly on a collision course. Now you know. Here is the collision.

You grip the wheel in both hands and brace yourself against your seatback.

The man's body shoots on to the hood of the car, head first, so that his face rushes towards yours for a split second, and in that terrible moment your eyes meet. His are wide with terror. In his you see the knowledge of his imminent death. And you know, too, that you are going to kill this man. He is about to be killed by you. You look at each other in fear and horror.

Maybe your reason for coming to the forest had something to do with this man. Maybe you knew he was going to be here. Maybe you had already decided what was going to happen tonight. Even so, what you feel now is the same fear and horror of the driver who was innocent of all intention. Terror, it's the same for everyone, the guilty and the innocent.

And then the man's head collides with the hood of the car, just in front of the windshield. Behind him you see his legs fly up like some flimsy fabric caught by the wind, a child's kite, say, or washing on a line.

There is a moment which is lyrically gymnastic, when the man seems to be poised on his head on the hood in front of you. All the time you are braking. There is a screaming noise in your ears, the scream of the brakes, the scream of the man, your own screams, the radio; afterwards you will have a lifetime in which to wonder who was making all that noise.

Then, when the car still hasn't stopped but has made a

significant contribution towards stopping, the man's body is flung far ahead of you. You know it must be moving very fast but it seems to fly in slow motion. The feet and legs are still high in the air. They must be held there by a supernatural wind, there can be no other reason for this man to remain feet uppermost as his body travels headlong, head first, in a graceful trajectory towards the earth.

Does the body land at the same moment the car stops? It would be a fitting end to the hideous but curiously balletic syncopation between driver and victim. At any rate, there is silence now, the deepest of silences.

You might get out of the car to examine the man's condition, call the emergency services, and generally play the good citizen. You know that this action and all subsequent exemplary behaviour can never change what happened in the space of a few seconds tonight on this dark road but you could do it anyway.

Or you might not get out of the car. You might instead remain tightly locked in your warm cell. By staying inside the car you minimize any evidence of your involvement in the event and you can minimize it still further by, for example, going to the car wash. A cursory glance at the hood tells you there are no dents immediately visible, at least through the windshield. If there really are no dents and you never take this road again, how is anyone investigating the death to associate you with it? You can drive on now and no one will ever know.

You go to start the engine and realize that it's still running and the radio's still playing. You pull slowly, cautiously, around the body. As you pass you stare down at it, although you do not wind down the window or stop the car to do so. The man lies with his head nestled against his own shoulder in a manner so like a puppet that you are certain

he is dead. You want to look for longer, search for signs of breathing, but now you must hurry.

Shaking, your breath uneven, your thoughts frozen, you drive down forest roads in a wide circle back to the town. You are squeezed through the car wash on a slow-moving belt which you are powerless to control while brushes as mighty as dinosaurs prey on the car's exterior. You could pay through a window without even climbing out of your car but you choose to open the door and cross the asphalt. Your legs, as you walk, feel uncoordinated. You try in vain to remember the precise point in each pace when you should lift the next foot. Are both feet momentarily on the ground at the same time? You have walked for years without thinking about it and now you can't exactly remember how. You stumble twice before you arrive at the cashier's. As you reach for your money you are aware of the tug of each muscle at your ribs. As you look for the right coins your eyes, which have seen too much tonight, seem to bulge, their lenses unfocused, struggling to work in concert. While you wait for your receipt, you allow yourself a glance back at your car's fender. Your heart thuds. The fender shines with water. Its surface is waxy smooth. It is unmarked.

You drive home, taking a circuitous route, nowhere near the forest. You drive into your own garage and the door closes behind you, and you look around at the lumber stored on the rear wall and the hanging electrical cables and the leaf rake and the snow shovel. All inanimate objects, placed here by you, but they seem now as complicitous as old friends. You switch on the overhead light and reach for the power flashlight. The garage's privacy is almost palpable. It is a poor cousin to the rooms in the main house but its dark, cold, silent windowlessness gives it a special status. Because now it shares your secret.

Shielded by its walls, you examine every inch of the car's fender and hood. Unmarked! Unmarked, except by the smallest of blemishes for which any number of explanations is possible, explanations more acceptable than the truth. It is incredible that the event has left no footprint but re-examination confirms your first findings. Both you and the car are unmarked.

The Kill

I

It was spring and the earth was warming up. The hospital authorities were, as usual, slow to respond to this annual event and the heating, in the older wards and offices, had not yet been turned down. Its level was not adjustable by any individual. You could switch your heater off and feel cold or leave it on and feel hot.

'I'm hot,' mouthed Matt's patient when Matt leaned over his bed in the almost dark, almost quiet hospital and asked him how he was doing.

You could hear the roar of some other patient's television. A comedy programme, actors shouting their lines over the audience's laughter. Further away was the clang of metal on metal, a night trolley making its rounds.

Matt explained about the heating.

'We're all hot in this part of the hospital, Mr Zoy,' he said, knowing that it was worse, far worse, for Mr Zoy, who could not take a shower or drink an iced tea unless someone brought him one and then held it while he sipped it, who could not open the fridge door and feel the blast of cool air in his face while he wrapped his fingers around an icily wet can of beer.

'I'm so hot I've been wondering if I'm not dead already,' rasped Mr Zoy and, while Matt debated how to reply to this, added, 'I wish I was. Dead. I want to die now, doctor.'

Matt was silent. He could have just left Mr Zoy's room right then without a word. The old man would have been unable to stop him, to complain. But it was Mr Zoy's

helplessness which kept Matt at this patient's bedside. He could not bear to abuse the power his position, his health, his strength gave him. He had been called in tonight to another patient and now he regretted the impulse which had halted him by Mr Zoy's room on his way out. It was perhaps a month since Mr and Mrs Zoy had sat in Matt's office and asked him, politely, to kill Mr Zoy when the time was right. They had explained in simple, practical language, that the final humiliations of Mr Zoy's illness were something they both wished to avoid.

'You can't ask me to do that,' Matt had said. 'I have to live with myself afterwards.'

'We're not requesting anything wrong. We're simply asking you to abbreviate misery,' said Mrs Zoy, a high school English teacher whose voice was strong and clear. 'If Anthony doesn't want you to do it, if he chooses to wait for death, then he won't ask. But if his pain and distress become unbearable, we hope you'll respond with humanity to his request for help.'

Matt's reply had been non-committal. He had felt discomfited when the Zoys had gone away thanking him, as though they had succeeded in securing his agreement to their plan.

'I'm ready now,' said Mr Zoy as though he, too, had been remembering that conversation in Matt's office.

Matt switched on one of the small lamps at the bed's end and lifted Mr Zoy's notes from their holder.

'I want to die,' repeated Mr Zoy. 'It's time.'

Matt studied the notes. They charted the patient's final decline. Matt guessed the man still had a week of suffering ahead of him.

'Please,' said Mr Zoy. 'While I have a little dignity left.' He had been the principal of a grade school. Matt remem-

bered his own grade school principal, an immensely tall figure who had wandered the asphalt at recess, watching pupils, talking to them, interesting himself in them. He had seemed steeped in children's lives, seasoned by their growth.

Mr Zoy was waiting for Matt to look at him. Matt chose instead to stare around at the darkness of the room beyond the lamplight like a man searching for something. The city glowed orange through the window but he knew that not far away, invisible now, lay the great, dark shapes of the mountains. High in the mountains lived Matt's father. Without even looking at Mr Zoy's face, Matt sensed that the man was regarding him now the way his father sometimes did, with the calm gaze of knowledge, a knowledge acquired over many years, the knowledge of what Matt would do next.

Matt blinked and searched the window's square of sky for stars. He could see none. The universe seemed entirely dark. Of course, Matt knew the stars were there, masked by the earth's bright lights the way the present masks the past. Nearby, the shapes he could discern in the man's room (the TV, the closet, the spindly-legged chairs which lined the far wall in case more than one visitor showed up at once) seemed laughably prosaic.

When he finally turned back to the patient he found that the old man's eyes were still fixed on him. The similarity between Mr Zoy and his father was disconcerting now. How had he failed to notice it before? Maybe because Mr Zoy had lost a lot of weight. His face had become gaunt but you could see his strength, just the way you could see Hirsh's strength from the lines of his face. And Mr Zoy's look had something of Hirsh's dignity, too. He was not pleading or demanding but there was a light in his pupils. The light expressed desire. It was desire to die, but still it was desire.

'Your eyes are bright,' observed Matt quietly.

‘Too bright to die?’ whispered Mr Zoy. ‘Is that it? Is that what you’re saying?’

During his years in African field hospitals, Matt had seen many deaths. Sometimes death lingered, occasionally it even loitered, but it never seemed to visit patients whose eyes shone like Mr Zoy’s. The vulture might circle but when it saw bright eyes, it always flew on.

‘Spare me any more, spare my wife’s suffering. I’ve done what I need to do and said what I need to say. Help me just to slide out of this world gently, gently,’ whispered Mr Zoy with a lilt to his voice which made Matt wonder if he wasn’t quoting a poem or a song.

Matt studied the patient’s chart. He asked, ‘Are you in pain now?’

‘Oh yes,’ sighed Mr Zoy, closing his eyes. And when he briefly reopened them it seemed to Matt that their light had faded a little. He thought about calling Mike Salinski, the patient’s oncologist. Although still a member of the team managing the Zoy case, Matt had, as surgeon, handed over day-to-day control to Salinski. Matt glanced at his watch. Mike Salinski was a good doctor but, as Matt knew from experience, was liable to be drunk after eight in the evening.

‘We’ll increase your pain relief,’ Matt said. He called a nurse and waited with the silent man in the silent room.

‘Would you like me to phone your wife to come?’ asked Matt.

‘No,’ said Mr Zoy.

The patient with the TV must have switched it off. Outside the night trolley was still. Mr Zoy’s breathing was laboured. His eyes were closed. He appeared to be asleep. The hospital’s mechanical hums and whirs seemed briefly to have ceased. Matt felt himself to be entirely alone in the building

with the dying man. When no nurse came he got the key to the dispensary.

On his return, he found the patient's sited line blocked, and it was hard to find a place in his thin arm to inject. His veins were like faint streaks of crayon. Finally Matt inserted the needle into one of them. He pulled back gently on the syringe until the bevel of the needle was darkened by blood. Then he injected 200 milligrams of Zornitol.

Mr Zoy seemed unstartled. He appeared still to be asleep but, when Matt withdrew the needle, he opened his eyes and something like a smile spread across his gaunt, unshaven face.

'Thank you, doctor,' he said sleepily. 'Your humanity triumphed. There was no other doctor I could ask.'

Matt stayed with him a while, watching as sleep engulfed Mr Zoy. He saw the man's cheeks soften. His breath grew even. Matt thought about his father again and he knew that Hirsh never would have done what Matt just did. Hirsh had been a renowned family doctor in the city. Probably patients had pleaded with Hirsh to end their lives but Hirsh would have adhered strictly to his principles, kindly but firmly. He would never have killed a man.

This uncomfortable knowledge drove Matt from Mr Zoy's bedside.

'Goodnight,' he said softly. He turned out the lamp. He did not withdraw the patient's notes from their holder or the pen from his pocket. He closed Mr Zoy's door. His feet sounded loud in the empty corridor.

He rounded a corner and there was a night cleaner, clad in green, his fingers coated in plastic and his face masked. He looked up from his trolley as Matt passed, his eyes searching Matt's face. Disconcerted, Matt nodded to him. The man did not respond but, over his mask and from

behind a big bottle of green fluid, he continued to stare. It seemed to Matt that there was an accusation in the man's dark eyes.

As he drove home he told himself that although he had forgotten to record the injection that night and had not even signed for the Zornitol in the dispensary, he would do so immediately on his return in the morning.

He now tried to think ahead to tomorrow, to the patients he must see and the small administrative backlog he aimed to clear. But his mind kept returning to Mr Zoy's dark room at the hospital as though his thoughts were a balloon bobbing at the end of a string held in the thin but steadfast grip of Mr Zoy.

'Your humanity triumphed,' Matt reminded himself but the words could not still his unease. This sensation increased as the city passed. The shadows between street lamps and around the closed shops in the malls seemed thicker and darker than usual. The automobiles on the used car lots assumed a new shapelessness in the night air.

In his memory, Mr Zoy's room was swathed in a darkness he knew it was impossible to achieve at the hospital in reality. Instead of injecting powerful drugs as gently as he could into the old man's arm, it seemed to Matt that he had been mercilessly punching Mr Zoy's pillow, or even Mr Zoy himself. His hands sat heavily on the wheel. They felt too big, as though he had new fingers or the old ones were impossibly, violently swollen. Even the car seemed to smell different. It smelled of decay, like a damp, leafy forest. This stretch of road was briefly without traffic, a small wrinkle in the city's ceaseless surface of noise and movement. Matt felt himself to be completely alone.

By the time he drew up to his own garage, Matt wanted to turn around and go back to the hospital to check on the

patient. A lower dose of Zornitol would have diffused Mr Zoy's anxieties and assured him a good night's sleep. Why had he foolishly allowed himself to fall prey to Mr Zoy's demands? By studying a drug manual he could work out the correct dosage of antidote to reverse the effects of the Zornitol. Except it might already be too late.

He brushed clumsily against the snow shovel and the leaf rake hanging on the garage wall as he let himself into the house. There was a light on in the kitchen. The rest of the house was dim. He paused, listening to the silence, then crept into the bedroom. Denise was asleep. Her limbs lay neatly, even her hair hung in tidy hanks down the pillow. Night-time's strange monochrome accentuated the lines which defined her cheeks and her chin. She was beautiful, fine as something drawn and perfected with a sharp pencil.

Next to Denise lay Austin. He had started walking about six months ago and then last month he had learned how to climb out of his bed and now, at eighteen months, he had begun to use these two skills most nights to find his way into his parents' room. He slept in disarray. The bedcovers were twisted around his legs and his arms were up on the pillow submissively as though someone in his dream had shouted: Halt, you're under arrest.

Carefully, Matt lifted the small boy and carried him back to his own bed. Austin snuffled and gave the shadow of a cry, then rearranged himself without waking.

'Your humanity triumphed,' said Mr Zoy's rasping whisper inside Matt's head. 'There was no other doctor I could ask.'

Matt felt both tired and unable to sleep. He opened the fridge door and was at once aware of its icy breath on his face. He reached inside without looking and his fingers wrapped themselves around the cold curve of a beer can.

He sat very still at the kitchen table, drinking the beer slowly so the air molecules around him remained as undisturbed as possible.

He closed his eyes and leaned his head on his hands, rubbing his temples a little. When Denise did this for him it felt good but tonight, alone, the movement was not soothing because he knew that tonight a man would die and that he, Matt, was responsible for this death. And at the very moment he acknowledged this to himself, he smelled a damp, woody scent, the combination of growth and decay. He knew the smell with a kind of intimacy, recognizing it from the forest where he had spent his boyhood summers and where his father lived now, up in the mountains. His temples throbbed. He was looking down a long, dark well and here in the well he was a boy again. He knew this because the trees which surrounded him seemed so large, their trunks swollen. He peered between the trunks and he could see, indistinctly, a car. It was a red car. His right leg felt unsteady with the pain of some recent blow and he shifted his weight off it and looked around the other side of the tree trunk. His eyes watering with effort, he was now able to discern the dim shape of a figure inside the car. He waited for the figure to move, or to get out, to call or even, absurdly, to laugh a big, deep, bellowing laugh. But the figure did not move, just as he had known it wouldn't, because the person in the car was dead. There had been a death and it was Matt's fault and now he had a secret which he must keep hidden for ever.

Matt blinked once, twice. His heart was beating hard as though he had been running but he was sitting, not standing, he was a man and not a boy, and here was the kitchen in the house he shared with his wife and son. Its lighting was bright and clinical. He did not close his eyes again until he

was certain that the car would not reappear but even now, distanced by time and geography from the red car, the sense that something immense and irrevocable had happened did not leave him. Mr Zoy. Mr Zoy might be dead by now. He wanted to call the hospital and ask about the patient. He picked up the phone. Then he put it down again.

He slipped into bed beside Denise in a way that barely redistributed the bedcovers. He wished that she was awake so he could talk over what had happened with her. He talked over everything with Denise. And then, as he fell asleep, he was relieved not to have told her. What had happened tonight was the kind of thing you didn't tell anyone except, maybe, if you trusted them enough, another doctor.