

Last Man In

Spiking white in the pines, sun blares the cab of the truck, the stretched aqua of Will Burner's eyes as he spies a pickup passing through the gate to Buck Creek woods.

OK?

"Hotdang, Donnie, we got 'em this time!" He spits out his toothpick and his lower lip hangs in his long sallow face.

sp. OK?

"Sondabitching coonhunters!"

Tall and tense, with a heart face cut from his daddy's,

Donnie tugs at the rifle on the rack behind their heads.

"Ank!" Will says and grabs hold of the young man's wrist.

I'm puzzled by this expression. What does it mean?

"Ain't necessary." His eyes stay on the dark stocky man leaning from the pickup, stopped just inside the gate. On the back, blue-tick and black and tan hounds moil among four boys of assorted sizes with the same smoked features as the man. All watching the new white Ford as it rolls in behind them with the dust.

hyphens

Will sticks his head out the window and the sun glances off his scalp like new tin. "What you fellas up to?"

The man plants one boot on the baked dirt as if he might drive off dragging it. "Me and the boys is looking for coon signs."

"Well," says Will, "I been seeing your tracks and I says to Donnie, 'Who you reckon'd be running coondogs back in here?'"

He gazes up with eyes to match the September sky. The man stares off down the two-path road into the woods. Not ten feet apart, but leaving yet some distance for civil discussion by not locking looks.

"Ain't no secret," says the man, "I been hunting here going on two winters now." One short-muscled arm is braced on the steering wheel, the other rests on the sprung door. The dogs and boys shift on the back, sober-eyed and poised to be run off.

"Oh," says Will with a sliding smile, "that would've been back before I come by this place."

"Yours now, huh?"

Will nods and sinks into a deep study. "You new around here, ain't you?"

"Fargo--live just off the Okefenoke_^ Swamp." e/

"Hum, don't say." Will fishes another toothpick from his blue shirt pocket and picks his perfect capped teeth in earnest. "What's your name?"

The man still ignores Will's eyes, now lit on him like summer butterflies, and the question. "So you the one bought Buck Creek, huh?"

"What the deed says."

"Gate was open."

"Open cause people around Withers knows their place."

The man drums out a rhythm on the steering wheel with his stained fingers, figuring.

"Woods dry like this, can't tell where a fire might break out," Will says. "How come I have to keep folks out of here."

"I ain't set no fire yet."

"Well, you know how it goes--somebody might throw down a cigarette."

"Don't smoke."

"Let me put it to you like this," says Will, not smiling now and preaching with his toothpick. "Ain't no coonhunters welcome on my place. Don't like dogs running off my deer."

"Coondogs ain't gone be after no deer." The man eyes Will with his bear head tilted.

"Fact is, you ain't welcome, so you best be moving on before I have to move you on." Will holds his toothpick shy of his lips.

"Mister, you better look out who you messing with," says the biggest boy, on back of the truck. He has a round head on a slim column neck and black hair to his shoulders.

Will studies the boy and his brothers--stained dark, as if they've taken on the colors of the Swamp. "Your girl there's got a smart mouth."

"Listen, mister, we ain't here looking for no fight," says the man, "but if nothing else won't do you...."

Will swivels his head inside with muld~~ish~~ deliberation--a man layered with conflicting images of his worth. "Shag ass over there, Donnie, and show this fella how to turn that piece-of-a-truck around."

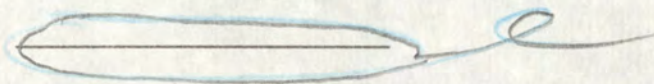
Donnie swings out with long arms dangling and dodges the bed of the other truck, all eyes on him, and snatches the man's arm off the door, and at the same time his mouth seems to switch on to foul and blowing: "Who the hell you think you are, man, messing with us?" The man doesn't budge but braces both boots on the ground. Donnie's face glows like the bones are burning as he grasps the man's shirt front, jerking and cursing like a tempermental boy being given some slack. Finally, the man seems to come unstuck and pitches forward, grappling at Donnie's shoulders with a red-eyed leer, and waltzes him to the ditch, collapsing astride and wallowing him in the crazed mud. As he rears back to punch Donnie in the face, he hears a rifle breech, the boys holler, and turns to see Will's aqua eyes beholding him from a polished gun stock.

OK? "Now, coonhunter, you better high^htail it on out of here, you and your sooners." Will smiles good now, an unnatural smile as though to show his teeth. "And take your girls with you."

The man stays straddled the boy, pinning his jerking arms, and seems torn between punching him and getting shot or leaving while he can.

run on (At last, he trudges to his pickup, gets in and backs through the ditch, with boys and dogs shuffling like a load of shoats.

Will rests the rifle on the window, eyeballing Donnie. "I'm gone make a man out of you if I have to shoot you to do it."



With the sun at his back, that evening, Will again whips his pickup around the curve at Buck Creek, slowing to check for tracks in the grooved sand. "Just logging trucks," he says to Donnie. "Reckon them coonhunters got the message."

Donnie stares out the other window where his arm is propped. "They might've."

"Like I say, you gotta stand up for your rights. People like that'll walk all over you." Will watches Donnie for effect: iced blue eyes sunken from ~~of~~ the blunt jut of his brow, his sharp heart face; limby body, tight and electric, ready to pounce; skin so fair it's almost transparent, blood-red or wrung-white, depending on what's up. He is white now, white as milk.

Will turns onto the ramp at the red metal gate, stops and snatches the ring of keys from the ignition, searching for the one to open the gate he'd locked that morning.

He has keys to other gates on other property, land he's wrested from neighbors through foreclosures on loans and general misfortunes--one of his favorite targets is widows terrified of growing property taxes. He'll take them to the doctor, rock on their porches, woo them and win them and take their land and go. Unless they're good prospects for willing his money back in

italics?
a couple of years. More than once he's served as pallbearer at some widow-woman's funeral while her family stared on, too mad to mourn. He has keys to old homeplaces, hundred-acre farms, which all joined would make up a fair-sized estate. Buck Creek marks his first land binge: 2,000 acres connected, at \$1,500 an acre, borrowed against the land itself, to be paid back over a period of ten years. Timber's worth that. But he feels like a giant coming before an army of giants and wonders if he should have been content with owning small plots. He's always enjoyed the scattering of disconnected timber and farm land he's come by in Echols County: looks like he owns more than he does and gives him more leeway after surveying to scoot over the land lines. Artist at his craft, Will can act poor, generating envy through humility--or at least confusion--or he can put on the dog.

He fingers keys that fit nothing now--gates to land he's lost himself when farming failed and he failed to make the payments--and keys to tractors and trucks junked at the tacked-together shop behind his house for bullous vine trellises.

Rearing back, he watches Donnie fumble the key in the padlock and feels almost bad for the way he shamed him this morning after the coon hunter got him down. But the boy needs to toughen up, not just blow up--life ain't no basketball game with rules to go by. And even playing basketball, with rules to go by, Donnie had spent more time on the bench than on the floor because he was headstrong. Will yells out the window, "Shake the lock!"

*repetition
OK?*

Donnie shakes the lock and the looped chain rattles against the metal posts and the hasp snaps free.

As the gate swings wide, Will drives through and stops again and swigs from the pint of Jack Daniels sleeved with a papersack between his knees. Watching in the rearview mirror for Donnie to relock it. Got girls on his mind, thinks Will, and laughs low in his elongated belly. Will can well understand that and approves, though more than once he's had to break up Donnie's courting--no judgment about girls out to trap him--though he's almost given up women himself. And not because of Nell his wife's harping either; the feeling just isn't there anymore. He yells out the window, "We got cows waiting on us at the Watson place."

Doesn't follow

Will keeps the family name of homeplaces he's accumulated, out of habit and meanness--reminds the stripped landowners of what they've lost, what he's gained.

Donnie lopes to the truck and swings in and slams the door twice.

Layers of smokehaze settle in the orangy dusk over the pines; aftermath of some wildfire tamed in the infinite forests of the flatwoods. Virgin pines interspersed with ancient cat-faced turpentine timber, diagonal streaks like cat whiskers on glazed amber faces of sun-drawn resin. Occasional patches of scruboaks, cleared of underbrush by wild hogs rooting for acorns. Century-old beargrass with teal bayonets and dead blooms on stalks like overgrown asparagus. Palmettoes, gallberries, tytys and myrtles--ever green as the long-leaf

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one word

pinus growing from the rot of needles and leaves and a cover of crisp russet straw.

hyphen

"We gone clearcut this timber?" Donnie asks.

"Ain't shore yet," says Will and hits the ruts hard as though to toughen them both. He will clearcut the prime timber plots, but he resents Donnie saying we instead of you when the boy has just graduated from high school and is yet to work out his first acre. At Donnie's age, Will was married and already owned the farm where they still live. But he's glad to know what's going on in Donnie's head, that something is going on. About as close as the boy's come to talking back to Will since he turned fifteen and had asked to drive the truck and Will said, 'Whose truck?' and Donnie said, 'Our truck; ain't I helped work it out?' Will had knocked him sidwinding across the waxed floor of Nell's living room. As much as Will wants the boy to stand up to him now, he'd knock him down again if he got smart.

hyphen

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Coming up on the forks to the east section of the property, Will notices the truck pulling to the right and leaning. "How's that tire look on that side?"

Donnie pokes his keen face out the window. "Front looks

caps ok."

"We got two of 'em over there, you know."

Donnie turns his crewed blonde head. "A little low, the back tire is."

"Well, I be damned!" Will brakes the truck. "Might as well put on that spare. Think you can handle it?"

"Yessir." Donnie gets out and clangs around the bed of the pickup and rolls the spare with a whump to the dirt.

While he jacks the truck and swaps tires, Will stares over the warm airy woods, trying to decide which logging man he trusts enough to cut the timber. He knows several, but none he trusts not to do unto him what he would do unto them.

A doe tips out of the woods on the road ahead and stands, wrenching her tapered neck to watch them; from that distance, about the size of a jack rabbit. Will considers taking the Browning and laying her low. Deer season or not, he'd like a fresh mess of venison. But he's afraid he'll jangle Donnie so that he'll never get the tire changed. Takes everything to heart. Someday, when business slows and Will has the time, he's going to talk to Donnie about that night on Billy's Island in the Okefenokee Swamp when that bunch of men took turns with a dead doe. Himself included. Will had done it only because he was drunk and probably wouldn't have sober, and Donnie, thirteen then, had bawled like a baby when his turn came and then vomited.

Reminds Will of what an old fella name of Fuller Sedrick once told him when he was growing up in Withers. Sedrick used to sit around the commissary--rich man can do that--and lecture Will and a couple of other young fellows on everything from weather to war. What was it he'd said exactly? Will can't quite recall. Something about a man vomiting at his vilest point, a man having to do that, to get his craw full of evil and vomit it up before he can settle down to a life of good. Actually, now that Will thinks about it, Fuller Sedrick was the

reason he'd worked so hard to be somebody, to own land--the old man had owned half the county, did what he had to, crooked or straight, to come by it. Power in owning land.

Will wonders if that business with the deer was what messed Donnie up, what made him dim-witted and weak and kept him from being industrious. When the time is right, Will will tell Donnie that humping a doe isn't all that different from a young man getting his face painted with the blood of his first kill. A new kind of initiation, and a man's got to keep up with the times.

The doe on the road ahead springs off into the pines.

seen on
Donnie bounces the flat tire into the back of the truck, then comes around and gets in, brushing his hands on the knees of his jeans.

"Your ma's gone have a fit," says Will, eyeing Donnie's grease-streaked knees.

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Will, waxy bright and beaming after a drink, starts the truck again and turns at the forks, where the setting sun tunnels in a fiery blaze up the two-path road. Before he gets to the next fork, the truck pulls and leans to the left and then right and all four tires flop and whump like a team of horses galloping.

"Roofing tacks!" Will says. "That goddamned sondabitch has strung roofing tacks on the road."

Having hiked out of the woods and two miles along the dirt road to Withers, Will doesn't even stop for supper. He knows the coon hunter and his boys will be hunting Buck Creek before he gets back. Mad and a little drunk, he takes the old Ford pickup he'd driven before he bought the new one with this year's tobacco money and strikes out again for the woods.

He feels duped and suckered and can't wait to track the coon hunter down. He hates coon hunters anyway because they're generally shiftless, and he hates coon dogs because they chase the deer over the next property line where someone else will get the bounty. Will never hunts for trophies but for meat and has gone so far as to set up his own cold storage in one of several old-but-kept outbuildings behind his concrete[^] block cottage. Meat often going to waste, like vegetables Nell puts up each summer in the two deep freezers, and he has to haul it all off to the county dumpsters to make room for more.

He refuses to take it to the quarters, south of the tracks, for the simple reason that every nigger he knows draws Welfare, paid for with his tax money. Won't work for Will, huh uh. When he asks, they laugh and amble off--"You so mean, Mr. Will, ain't nobody wanting to work for you"--to sell their R.C. bottles at Will's store, or to the post office to get their checks. Not a bit above selling Will their food[^] stamps though, for which, if the government caught him, they'd have his head for making a profit. Damned the government! Damned the niggers!

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Slinging curves along the road, heading back to Buck Creek, he sees the moon rising full and lemony over the bushy-topped pines. His hands, though sweaty, feel frozen to the steering wheel.

Donnie sits forward with his keen face strutted. "They ain't going back in the same way," he says, "that's for shore."

"You don't say!" Will snorts and upends the bottle. "We ain't getting my new truck out that way neither."

"How are we gone get it out?"

"You come up with something, schoolboy, you're so smart." Addled, Will has momentarily forgotten that Donnie is out of school and, remembering, thinks if he's going to keep using that line, he'd better put the boy in college. He doesn't mean it; he knows Donnie couldn't make it--barely made it through high school--and besides, Will thinks of college as a place for sissies.

He glances at the gate to the main entrance as they pass, headlights swinging across the red enamel bars he'd been so proud of--he can't think of a single nother person who has a single red gate. His trademark, like the yellow bands on Sedrick's trees that marked his landlines. Will feels doubly duped: a gate he can't use now! Roofing tacks! He'll have to move the gate to the east entrance of the property and fence off the south entrance to Buck Creek. Hungry and tired and close to drunk, he tries to sooth his frazzled nerves with the fact that one entrance means less to guard, less aggravation, but he's going to have that coon hunter's hide regardless and has no idea how to get his new pickup out of the woods. None.

9

A deer lopes across the road with it's white tail flagging. "I ain't studying no deer right now," says Will, watching Donnie look off as if he hadn't noticed. "You better toughen up, boy," he says. "Forget that other business."

He's never mentioned the doe episode in the Okefenokee before and feels glad and vindicated for the opportunity and believes in his heart that all he has to do is make mention and it's done, like covering tracks with tracks, in Donnie's mind.

"Ok," Will says and laughs, "we got 'em now. See them tracks, that's theirs."

Tracks on top of tracks, a layering of animal and automobile and man tracks, whipstitching the sandy trenches. There's been no rain for four or five weeks, no obliteration, save the tracks of the last man in.

Donnie sits back and breathes shallow^{ly} as Will turns onto the overgrown buggy path through the woods, crushed dog fennels and cat-claw briars, with the moon spreading a silver glaze over the bent reeds and parted myrtle bushes that spell unwanted company.

"Might want to get that rifle ready, huh?" says Donnie.

And though Will has just thought the same, he's miffed at the boy's apparent cowardice and decides then and there to bring some good out of this humiliation and inconvenience and expense, to teach Donnie how to handle squatters. If he doesn't do it now, when he dies Donnie'll let them take over. And it comes to him suddenly that he will die, as Sedrick died, and Donnie will own all he's hoodwinked from fools, and he can feel Donnie's

youth, his glassy-eyed freshness, rising up as his own lies down. He almost hates his only son through whose body, as Fuller Sedrick would say, Will's going to live a few more years. The vastness of his puny ongoing through his heirs lashes like fire at his heart.

He can hear the coon dogs yawping over the woods and stops to listen, to get a bead on their direction. When he starts the truck again, turning off the headlights and idling along the moonlit stretch, he follows the sounds till he can see the red reflectors of the old vari-painted pickup, like deer eyes. He stops.

"We fixing to walk up on 'em, boy," he hisses. "Ease out and don't slam the door."

They creep along the path to the other pickup, empty except for a couple of baying blue-ticks in the slat wood box on back. Crickets and katydids pick up in ringing between the close and distant yawps. A spattering of lightning bugs, like sparks from a campfire.

"Shh," says Will, "let's wait here and surprise 'em."

Mosquitoes whine around their heads while they squat in front of the truck and gnaw on blades of grass, finally hearing the man and the boys whooping the dogs out of the woods. Then headlights crisscross the road, nearing the truck.

"Soon as they get loaded up," hisses Will, "you dodge around and grab the old man."

Timing off as usual, Donnie starts to stand and Will snatches him back by his bony shoulder. "Stay low, what ails you?"

Now that the coon hunters are getting nearer, Will feels eager--this is it, the turning point for Donnie, manhood, and his daddy will be there to back him up. Will could have used that a few times himself, but his own daddy was dead by the time he was Donnie's age. By the time he was Donnie's age, and married, and chipping boxes in the turpentine woods...he can think of dozens of comparisons. Keeping low he waits, feeling Donnie breathing clipped beside him, and smells fear on the boy's breath like wet cement or eggs--he doesn't know which. But he's smelled it before on himself, in the mine fields during the Korean War, and with other better reasons than the boy will ever have in this good day and age.

As the boys and dogs load onto the back and the front door on the driver's side opens, Will has to shove Donnie out. Damnit!

Voices rise above the dogs' yawping, a quiver on the mild night air, the truck shakes, the man returns curses for Donnie's curses, scuffling with him toward the ditch off the driver's side. Will ducks around the truck and sees the man dance Donnie to a tree and pin him while the boys scamp_^ from the back, the older one with long hair hieing a tire tool. Will shoots out and slams the boy on the nape with the butt of his hand, grabs the iron rod and stomps across the ditch and threads it between the locked heads of the twosome. With a force born of hate,

Will cranks on the coon hunter's neck. "Now lay into him, boy," Will says thickly.

Donnie with deep-socketed eyes lumbers forward and pummels the man in the face and then the chest, gritting out curses Will's never heard, and even talks to the man between shortened breaths--words that burn into the dark. "I'm sick and tired of you...you acting like I ain't nothing...you bastard, you low-down, double-crossing sonofabitch...always out to shame me...you mulafucking, good for nothing..." He hikes a foot to kick, and Will says, "Ank, none of that!" and Donnie eyes his daddy's face behind the man's face and socks wild at a face, any face. Will dodges, laughs. The man clings to the tire tool, backstepping Will to the ditch, and matches grunts with each shout and echoed shout from the other boys.

"Sock him, boy," hollers Will. "Sock him in that old gut."

Donnie punches as he would a life-long enemy, with that much feeling, while the man's knees jerk and his feet jitter and then as he goes slack and leans into Will, staggering under the weight and watching behind where the boy with long hair lies broken like a rifle.

When the man no longer snorts or strains, Will drops him in the ditch like a sack of cow feed, turning the older boy with his brogan, unfolding and blinking up. "Now y'all better get your old man and go home," says Will. "And tell him next time he strows roofing tacks on my property, he's a dead man."

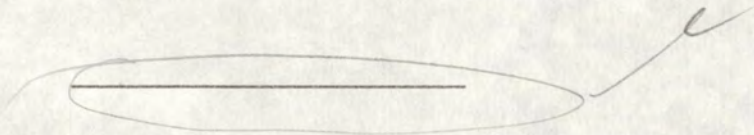
Donnie's racked breathing is the air over the woods, the arc of darkness.

a bit
too
much
(obvious)?

trans-
pose

sp?

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e



By the next morning, Will is appeased and sure that the problem with the coon hunters is over. And he's even come up with a way to get his new truck out of Buck Creek.

L-1 With four new tires from Vadosta, 25 miles away, by eleven o'clock he is once again in the woods, with Donnie on foot scouting ahead for roofing tacks along the back road to the spot where the truck is parked, flat on its rims, with dewy dust drabbing the glittery white paint. Takes two hours to travel less than a mile. No tacks so far from that direction and Will makes up his mind to leave the main entrance salted and move the gate to the other end of the property, so that anybody coming in without his say-so can suffer the consequences. He feels almost glad with the fact of the tacks on his property, the episode over, and Donnie's knuckles bruised as proof of his manhood, his taking hold.

When they get to the house with both trucks, and he starts Donnie turning newground for next spring's watermelon patch, he drives across the road in furls of dust to the mail box with his name on it--Will Burner--which never fails to thrill him. *close up*

He pulls down on the metal loop of the door, and just as he starts to poke his hand inside for the letters, he hears a dry rattle that makes his skin shrink. Sitting straight and stiff, he places his arm inside the truck and stares into the slots of mail and can see the linked diamond patterns of a rattler coiled near the back. P

He doesn't know the man's name yet, the coon hunter's, but he knows he'll track him down, maybe kill him. And suddenly he feels the cold frothing of fear in his gut and is amazed and even awed by the coon hunter's courage and creativity. But he cannot let such offenses slide. Actually, with neighbors' houses in front, behind and beside--that snooty old lady, Versie, is out raking her yards--he can't get rid of the snake either, supposing he knew how, without all of Wither's knowing he's been duped. He's told Donnie never to mention the roofing tacks but now here is a diamondback rattler in his mailbox for all the world to see. And he could have been bitten. The seriousness of the whole matter sweeps over him like news of war. ✓

He reaches slowly out, again hearing the dry rattle of the snake, even seeing its slit cat eyes in the pitted reared head, and closes the door of the box. ✓

He'll have to get rid of it before the mailman comes tomorrow, but he has no idea how. (Miss Versie looks up and waves and he waves back.) The coon hunter must have put it in after the mailman came at noon; it is two now, which means the scoundrel could still be somewhere close by.

Beyond rage, to a madness kin to cold, a madness that makes his teeth feel sharp, though he smiles, he turns the truck in the road and stops by the house and sets down on the horn, and when Nell, his dumpy wife with bushy brown hair, comes to the door, he yells, "No mail," and has to shout it twice and almost wishes he'd let her go after the mail to punish her for being hard of hearing. He's surrounded by fools.

Will slues the truck around the plow-etched curve of the field, bordered by scruboaks and rusty spikes and discs of ditched farm implements, to the creeping blue tractor in the wooded corner, recently cleared. Behind the tractor, a turnplow churns the gray speckled newground, nicking unearthed black stobs and fat litard stumps. Billowing dust in its wake. Will blows the truck horn again, and Donnie jerks his bony head and hops off the tractor.

"Load up," Will yells, "we're going hunting."

Dust is cankered on Donnie's face with sweat, and his eyes look bluer in the gray coating. A slight sass to the eyes that never quite ripens. "Let me cut off the tractor," he says and trots bogging across the furrows to the machine and comes back through the scattering dust.

All afternoon, they ride over dirt roads in eastern Echols County, searching for the coon hunter and his boys. Will doesn't tell Donnie about the snake, but he now knows how to get it out of the box before the mailman comes and starts a stink.

As the sun rides low in the cloudless sky, and no sign of the pieced-together pickup, Will becomes less mad and more afraid, leary not so much of meeting the coon hunter, but of what they'll do next. If the man knows where Will lives, he might burn the house or turn the cows on the road. Or set fire to the woods. Trying not to show alarm, he turns north out of Tarver and hits the dirt road toward Haylow.

cap "Ok," he says and fortifies himself with a long draught of Jack Daniels, "we gone make a run by Buck Creek and then go home." He tells himself that the coon hunter wouldn't have the nerve to go back there after all he's done. Only a fool would, and a fellow with that much imagination is no fool. But Will can think ahead of that kind of thinking, how the coon hunter is thinking ahead, and will do the unexpected--Will's done as much himself.

Hitting the Withers road out of Haylow--both old turpentine towns, practically shutdown since Sedrick's wife died and his daughter sold out to the big paper companies--Will tries to measure when he's getting too much to drink by the cottony clogging of his head, the tilt of trees before his eyes, and screws the lid on the fifth of whiskey. He's all but forgotten Donnie, wrung-white and silent on the other side, and now calculating his impending stupor, thinks he'd better stay alert in case the boy needs him.

Several times, Will's got too much and Donnie's had to drive him home from the beer joint on the Florida line, babying him till he turned him over to Nell. A fate worse than being left on the road to perish: her hell-hacking while he perches

on the edge of a chair with his belly hanging between his knees, jolly drunk and fur-tongued, food waiting on the table. A good woman, Nell, a good cook.

Turning off the highway to the dirt road that leads to Buck Creek, Will locates the lop-treaded tire tracks of the old pickup. "Well I be a sondabitch!" he says. "Better get the rifle down this time."

He ducks as Donnie fumbles it off the rack and loads it between his legs.

hyphens This time Will doesn't try to slip up on them, just takes the ruts with the truck bucking to where the other is parked, spying ahead in the road a couple of the smaller boys straggling with the black₁ and tan₁ hounds. And then on the left, among a patch of scraggly tytys and spindly pines, the head of the older boy with long hair, and the man striding out to the right ditch with his dense fearless face lifted like a bear that knows he's bigger and meaner than anything around.

? Will drives into the ditch, cutting in front of the other truck, and brakes a few yards farther up where the man stands waiting with one wallowed-top boot on a stump. "Ok, Donnie, *cap* he's yours," says Will. "Don't kill him, just put him in the truck."

Donnie jumps out, swinging the rifle on the man, who stands glary-eyed with his arms crossed. Looks like blackberries have been smeared on his knotty face. "If you gone pull a gun on a man, boy," says the coon hunter, "you better be ready to use it."

"Get over here," says Donnie in a shaky voice, red face shining through the mask of dust, and motions with the rifle.

"In the truck! In the truck!" yells Will.

The two boys ahead shy and hit the woods, joined by the third one, materializing out of a cypress slew. The older boy with long hair weaves among stands of scrub bay trees, hidden by the reedy trunks and chalked-selvage leaves, then shows again over the thinning of gallberries, and pops like a puppet along the ditch behind the other truck.

The man hooks his thumbs in his jeans pockets and stomps out of the ditch and toward Will's truck, favoring Will over the boy, though his black eyes tear in their stained sockets to the barrel of the semi-automatic aimed at his heart. "Better tell your boy to put that thing down," he says.

"In the truck! In the truck!" Will bellows in monotone.

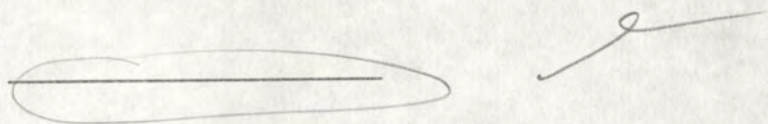
"Hey!" yells the coon hunter to the boys, "y'all come on."

"Not them," hollers Will and slaps the door outside. "They gone wait here till their daddy gets back with that rattlesnake he put in my mailbox." Will laughs and spies the three dark boys jouncing in fan clusters of palmettoes. A blue-tic hound switches out of the woods with its tail scutting and noses across the road, turning with the creek in the dusky ferns.

"My daddy ain't going nowheres," comes a voice from behind.

As Will tries to locate the speaker by way of the rearview mirror, he hears the Browning go off and sees the coon hunter go down in an undulating heap and Donnie re-hoist the rifle to his shoulder and fire once, twice, wild over the coon hunter to the woods where boys and dogs flush like quail and drop.

"No, no, no," reverberates inside the truck like more shots and stops with the shots outside, the final one a shotgun blast that levels Donnie below window view, and all that remains is the mirrored image of the older boy with a shotgun resting on the roof of the other truck.



Two days later, with the long-haired boy in jail, waiting bail, Will sits drinking whiskey in his truck at the new entrance to Buck Creek. Eyes like blown turquoise, he scoots low with his head back so he can tilt his face to the bottle without moving from his spot. Numb from the neck down and trying for a numbness of the brain. He swigs again from the bottle and hears, feels a gurgled cry in his throat, and tries to erase Donnie's staring dusty face from his mind. Not the closed calm waxy face in the casket. The funeral everybody came to that evening and said what a sweet boy.

Myrtle bushes hug the truck on each side, and Will can smell the green, can hear the buzz of mosquitoes and locusts, nothingness. Can hear the stifled cry lodged in his throat that comes up finally when he spies a deer on the path ahead and vomits.