

The Hunt  
by Eric Cecil

They won't get away this time: Bill and I have guns. We're trailing them, stalking the backyards of an old subdivision. The land here is unkempt, is thronged with tall trees, bristling with oppressive vegetation. It's only through small clearings in the overgrowth that I can occasionally spy distant homes, which appear to be deserted.

My pistol is so dangerous that I can't even stand to look at it. It's enough to feel its weight in my hand. Its deadliness worries me. So does the task at hand: I've never shot a gun. I have doubts about my aim and accuracy. As we roam the periphery of a heavily wooded area, skirting the brush of an adjacent meadow, I decide that if I can't find them, or if I can't shoot straight enough to kill them, I'll simply turn the weapon on myself. Instinctively, I know Bill won't let that happen. Or so I think. Bill hasn't said anything about our weapons, the hunt, our prey. Bill hasn't said anything at all.

Neither have I. We're similar in that regard. So similar, in fact, that I briefly become him. First I'm over his shoulder, watching him wave away errant fronds and tall stalks of dried grass. Then I am him: am cleaving through the barbed foliage, easing it aside with the barrel of my gun, closing in on the expanse of a vacant lot.

Bill and I separate again. We cleave in two, much like the parting brush, and approach the edge of the grounds. The air is peppered, humid. It's fragrant and green. Be careful, Bill says. His voice startles me. It opens the possibility of discourse. I begin to ask him about being a man, about cheating on wives, drinking like a cowboy, beating the hell from ornery children. But his eyes, hidden behind the pall of his glasses, are deadlier than our pistols, and he stares me into silence.

He leads me to a great pile of downed trees. I inherit an understanding: this is where they're hiding. We ready our guns. Bill tells me to keep mine drawn on the pile as he circles around, forming a pincer on the opposite side. You'll drive them out, he says. You'll drive them toward me. I don't understand how he expects me to do this. As he wanders away, I squint down the barrel, watching flurries of insects alight and depart from the scored bark of the trees. I see him hulking on the other side, his frowning face distorted by the latticework of branches, blurred by the fog of distance.

When they strike, quite instantaneously, they remain invisible. I don't even notice their gunfire. I only know that they've shot at us, and they've missed.

Missed me. Bill isn't so lucky. I stand over him, staring at his prostrate figure. He's blinking at the sky. I kneel to him and shift my arms under his weight. I can't feel him. But I sense that he's cold. His breath is labored. His glasses are gone, and his eyes, now closing, bead and sliver into the pleats of his brow. Be careful, he says. They're a good shot.

You're not dead yet, I tell him hopefully.

I'm always dead, he says.

You're not, I tell him.

Don't, he says. It hurts. And he laughs just as he did in life.