

THE PLACE TO BE

1. A River really does run through it

The Ochlockonee is an ordinary southern river, smooth or moiling depending on the season, brown with dirty water like that out of the petcock from the main tank in a mud wrestling contest, not because rivers have a bad conscience or anything like that as the source of its color might suggest, but for the usual reason that the source of a thing often determines its character. It was particularly true in this case because this one begins in the fertile farm country near a small settlement southeast of Albany in southern Georgia where the soil is rich and generous to a fault with its alluvial wealth. The ample rains in the region most of the year are constantly in the process of transferring this wealth by run off and erosion to enrich its neighbors to the south for seventy-five miles or so to the Florida border where within twenty miles, it empties its contents into Lake Talquin before eventually finding its way to the Gulf of Mexico at Alligator Point. Before it gets to the lake where the unintended donations of its northern neighbors settles out to leave the lake though dark in color, reasonably clear compared to the turgid effluvium leading into it, the Ochlockonee makes fairly frequent sharp turns here and there. One such turn ten miles or so into the Florida interior has carved a high bank on the west side of the river with a beautiful view of the surrounding countryside for any who happen to know or discover it and pause to enjoy it. The property along side the river for miles at that point was owned by a family of Florida tobacco farmers by the name of Stillworth and the property suitable only for growing timber,

hunting and fishing, was affectionately known by the Stillworth's and their friends as "Cane Swamp". If there was ever an inappropriate name for a large piece of ground this was it. This country was no swamp since where it paralleled the river for miles, it was high ground covered in pine, live oak, bay, sweet gum and many other varieties of southern hard and soft woods and if any cane ever was grown there, wild or tame, the discovery had escaped the notice of any person who ever visited the place. But names are names and as with the power of inertia in life generally, the shape of things may change but memory and custom will generally always stay the same.

Harrison Stillworth had been in the tobacco related business since the turn of the century when the shade leaf tobacco business descended upon the area like an indiscriminating divine cloud spilling its blessings to saints and sinners alike. Since the end of the Civil War and until the economic blessings began, nothing much of economic consequence had been happening. He also operated a hardware and farm fertilizer and supply business acquired from one of the local families who started it in 1929 in partnership with some of the other tobacco farmers in the area who were mainstay customers of Stillworth's. Harrison, who now devoted most of his time to tobacco farming, leaving the supply business to the boys, had saved his considerable profits over the years and invested some of it wisely in the one commodity that there will never be any more of it made, namely land, such as the Cane Swamp property. It was an investment for Harrison all right but to him it was more important as a place for him and his friends

to run their deer hounds and hunt wild turkeys and occasionally a wild hog.

2. The Mission

One of the partners in Stillworth's was Ben Collins who was also a tobacco farmer and a close friend to Harrison Stillworth and his sons who ran the business. Ben and Sally Collins had a family of four children, two boys and two girls, whether by his design or just the result of the natural order of things, were being made and shaped in his image at least for the two boys. But as image making goes, one of them took no interest in the shaping. The oldest son, Ben Jr., managed by legerdemain and cunning, or maybe just by good luck to escape the shaping altogether. Although Ben had made a good run at it until Ben Jr. reached about age sixteen hauling the boy around with him in his farm truck and investing a large amount of time in training him in the ways of becoming a hunter and fisherman and hopefully someday a farmer like himself, the grand design had failed. Ben Sr. loved these things more than life and had a philosophy that whatever he loved, anybody who was important to him must love as well or they were of no particular consequence to him and that certainly included his two sons. Ben Jr., however, had an interest in life that was different from his father's. He thought deeply about things, wondered why things happened the way they did or where they came from in the first place and believed that truth was more important

than conduct as the prevailing wisdom saw it, especially conduct that glorified the taking of innocent animal life and calling it sport that his father and his friends made such a fuss about. It was no sport to him and he didn't understand what the competitive and bragging people engaging in "sport" contributed to truth anyway. But that is another story for another time. But suffice it to say for current purposes, young Ben had convinced his father that he was called by God, even at this young age, to preach the truth of the Gospel to the world for his life time calling and since Ben Collins Sr. was a God fearing man by appearances anyway, being the grandson of a locally famous and pioneering Methodist preacher in the area, far be it for him to stand in the way of God's business. What Ben, Sr. actually thought about such things, no one ever knew because he never discussed any subject he could not control and this certainly was one of those. This meant that he would stop trying to turn young Ben into another Ben Collins, Sr., which for Ben Jr. was a tremendous relief for sure and turn his image shaping efforts to the even younger son Ronald Collins. This was, as he saw it, his last chance to reproduce himself. The two girls, Eleanor and Elizabeth were a different concern, for to him girls were only useful as wives and mothers and before long that would be somebody else's concern not his. If they learned the basics of homemaking and got an education in the process of their rearing, even college if they had the brains for it, which for some reason for Ben who never went past the eighth grade himself thought important, what they did with their free time was fine by him if they stayed out of trouble and his way. He left all that part to Sally anyway.

Ronald Collins, or Ronny as the family and friends called him, took to the image shaping of Ben Sr. on the receiving end enthusiastically even if he had not a clue what was really going on. All he knew was that he loved everything about it, the hunting, the fishing, the running of the hounds and most of all the attention. If there was ever a son made in the image of his father by desire or vocation, Ronny was him. Whether Ben Sr. was deliberately trying to develop his younger son into the image of himself and whether Ronny was intentionally complying was not important because they both were getting their hearts desire. “Want to go fishing this Saturday, Ronny?”, his father would say. And, “Yeah, you bet Daddy and you remember that time we found that bed off the gold point last summer, I’ll bet that would be the place to try, what’d you think?” or something like that was a typical response. Ronny loved to hunt anything that ran, flew or glided within range of his twenty-gauge Winchester, Model 12 pump shotgun his father had given him to use on his tenth birth day. He loved to hunt with the hounds for deer, raccoon and even fox that were hunted not to kill but to hear the dogs run and voice their “music” for all in range to hear. Ronny could recognize the sound of each of the July hounds in the pack as well as his father and they would alternatively brag or curse the winners or losers in a race. While Ben Sr. had literally forced Ben Jr. against his will to do such things, Ronny eagerly went along even off to middle Georgia on week long fox hunts or field trials. The Collins pack of July hounds hauled up there somewhere close to Americus, Georgia, in the back of a pickup truck, were thrown into a common pack for a hunting and bragging rights. It never occurred to Ronny why Ben Jr. suddenly stopped going along and of course neither Ben Jr.

nor anyone else ever expressed anything in the hearing of Ben Sr. that went against his will. He was also smart enough to never make any confessions to his younger brother that he might use against him just in case it ever got back to his father. Ronny thrived on the attention he got for following in his father's footsteps and besides, he actually loved it too.

When someone has a passion for an activity, it usually means they are good at it and the praise they receive reinforces the desire for more of it. It matters not for the young whether the passion is for hunting and fishing as it was for young Ronald Collins or whether the passion is for the love of knowledge and the discovery of truth about it as it was with his older brother, the principle and the effect are the same. The boys literally went separate ways in the pursuit of their loves and saw less and less of each other, which was fine by both. Ronny especially liked to hunt wild turkeys, being trained by his father to not only call the wily birds into shooting range of his 20 gauge with a turkey caller made from the wing bone of a wild turkey but to make the caller itself, known as a "yelper". He had even made some innovations on the mouthpiece of the yelper which his father's friends had even imitated on their own callers, much to the pride of his father and himself. His father had taken him on many hunts for the bird and taught him to sit quietly, make the right sound with the yelper and more importantly, the right frequency of the imitation call and how and when to make the shot. But he had not yet made it to the exalted status of a "Turkey Hunter", someone known to have taken one of the wily birds by direct calling. A wild turkey has the eye sight of an eagle and the patience of Job so hunting the birds and waiting for them to make the mistake of coming

too close to the hunter usually took all afternoon if it succeeded at all. Most hunters never got a shot except by accident and the skill and perseverance to actually call up a gobbler for a killing shot was something truly worth bragging about.

3. A Time to Shine

On the fall after his tenth birthday, the skill and patience he had been taught at turkey hunting by his father's side paid off when one Saturday afternoon on a deer stand at Cane Swamp, he had as he had often done after the dogs had run the deer out of sound range, taken out his yelper and practiced his calling skills. It had never happened before when he was alone like this but this time as he yelped the call of a female turkey into the waiting and surrounding woods on his deer stand with a buckshot load in his 20 gauge pump action shotgun, he heard the unmistakable answer of a wild turkey to his call. The law at the time was that only the male of the species, the gobbler, was legal game and for

young male wild turkeys the similarity of appearance to the older hens is so close, that it is really hard to distinguish a legal from an illegal quarry. The wild turkey gobbler grows a beard about as big around as a small cigar that protrudes from his chest as much as ten to twelve inches if he is fortunate enough to make it to maturity without getting shot. The older gobbler is easy to spot due to this but the young tom turkey shows no visible beard for several years. So many questions ran through his head at this point: Should I change the load to number twos or at least number four shot, a buckshot load would tear up the bird? How to do it quietly? Should I yelp again to the turkey's answer? Will it be a gobbler or just a hen? How can I tell? How close to let him come before shooting? Will I always be this nervous? The words of his father ran through his brain about what to do in a situation like this and calm settled over him that was beyond his eleven years of age and certainly his experience. He slowly withdrew the buckshot shell from the chamber of the gun far enough to remove it with his fingers and carefully inserted a number two shot shell in the magazine. He then ever so quietly inserted it back in the firing position and eased the safety off the trigger. He had been seated on the edge of a fire break where he could see in both directions. Although it was November and most of the deciduous trees had lost their leaves by then, the Florida river country had an abundance of evergreen crepe myrtle and other plants such as the wild palmetto that grew along the break to hide him from view looking east in the direction he had last heard the turkey answer.

“Yelp yelp yelp, putt!” he softly and seductively in his best wild turkey imitation broadcast his location to the

waiting bird and then for the surprise of his life, the turkey actually answered again, closer this time and within a few minutes stepped out in the firebreak looking for him. Ronny watched the bird now in easy gun range with amazement and in terrible fear that the turkey could see him. *Wouldn't any fool bird be able to see him, I'm not even hiding*, he thought. His father had always told him to watch the bird's eyes and when he went behind a tree or some brush and not able to see you, and only then make your move, carefully and slowly. "Time is your friend", his father always said. "Most important though Ronny, take aim before you shoot and keep you eyes open even as you fire, that way you can be ready for the second shot if necessary. The buck shot will do just fine for a wing shot. Believe me Son, if you miss the first one, that turkey will be airborne before you can say "Jack Flat", he remembered those sayings as if Ben Sr. were here right now whispering instructions into his ear. The most important thing, he remembered is "Don't miss and don't disappoint me Ronny, I'm counting on you to get this right", his father had often said about shooting or anything else he was being trained to do as he painfully remembered it just right now. He looked the young turkey over carefully before firing. It was a gobbler he thought, tall, stately and heavier in the neck than the average hen. The head was beginning to show that bluish grey color that young gobbler's get about their second year and he was pretty sure he could see the beginnings of a beard about to protrude from his beautiful neck. It was a gobbler all right, he was pretty sure of it as he aligned the sight bead of the 20 gauge on the base of the neck as he had been taught and slowly squeezed the trigger so as to be surprised when the shell fired as all good marksmen have learned to do so that the barrel is not jerked

by anticipation, off the target. The turkey collapsed in a violent death struggle as Ronny pumped the spent shell from the barrel and rammed home the next shell just in case the bird was somehow able to recover and flee. He couldn't because death and the end of a young turkey life had simultaneously arrived along with the beginning of a new birth for Ronny. He had just been born into the elite world of the successful wild turkey hunter. None of his friends and most of his elders had ever done a thing like this. There would be many more of these experiences as he got older and more skilled in his craft but none were as sweet as the first one. He reached the dieing bird and the exhilaration of the victory of his first kill overwhelmed him. The worst thing was there was nobody around to see this glorious moment. But a good case of bragging buried carefully in a cloak of humility would just have to suffice.

The next week, the local paper showed a picture of Ronny Collins with the gobbler in one hand and the trusty twenty gauge held over the shoulder with the other. It was the talk of the town that year. However in that little place there wasn't much news to talk about and the young son of a local prominent farmer shooting his first wild turkey at age ten was news worthy in that small town and that was sure.

4. A Chance to Prove He Could

By the next year and after following his father around the farm the previous summer and working as a field hand himself doing all the jobs in making a tobacco crop and

especially after his coup with the turkey, Ronny began to feel like he belonged. He also never missed the Saturday deer hunt during the fall hunting season. For a few years because he was so young even then, he had stood on a deer stand with his father or helped him cast the hounds. This was the part Ronny loved the best. Often they would follow the dogs into the big woods after picking up a buck track and the deer would occasionally double back on the hounds trying to escape and present the hound handlers a shot, or so the theory went. Of course by this age, it never had panned out for Ronny either on a moving stand like this or a stationary one and he had about decided he would never get a shot. What could life be like for a dedicated hunter like him to never succeed at this game everyone loved to play? Never was a long time when you were only eleven.

However, in spite of his lack of luck in the killing department, he was developing fast into a woodsman mature for his age having the ability to tell the difference between the track of a buck from a doe and how recently it had been made. That was important because each day of the hunt began the same with the regular buck crossings checked for a fresh track, one made the night before. That way there was a reasonable chance that the hounds could follow that particular deer's track and actually jump him to run into the range of a lucky hunter. On this intelligence, the hunt would be planned with the fifteen or twenty hunters taking stands assigned by Ben Sr. usually, although in consultation with the other senior hunters. But whoever decided the placement, the plan was to cordon off an area the buck was likely to follow when jumped so that a kill could be made. The deer when killed would be butchered and the meat shared

equitably. With a plentiful deer population in the area the men hunted weekly through out the season, there was venison a plenty for the freezers of everyone who identified with the Collins and Stillworth hunting party. The men in the party were all farmers and land owners so among them were about 15,000 acres of land to pick from for each Saturday's hunt.

One balmy fall Saturday afternoon that year when a reduced number of hunters was on hand and had selected Cane Swamp to make a drive, Ronny had been given a choice stand assignment of his very own, one of his very first such chances for a solo stand. He had stood with his father many times hearing the hounds bellowing in the distance and even coming tantalizingly close from time to time before veering off in the direction of some other hunter or no one. With hunting, as with many other things in life generally, the fun of it is mostly in the expectation. When the dreamed of event finally arrives, it happens so fast its over before you know it and you rarely get to savor the moment. But expecting the deer to come bounding out of the big woods any minute, or the largemouth bass to strike the lure just as it's pulled through a particularly desirable spot could consume a morning or an eternity for the eager young hunter or fisherman like Ronny. There were never any complaints of boredom.

He heard the dogs heading his way as he had done so many other times and told himself not to get his hopes up. *He will turn away like always. The turn to the east is the closest way to get to the river, never through here. They gave me this stand because they don't really believe I can pull it*

*off. But if he comes, what if I miss? Daddy would never let me live that one down. I have to be perfect in this don't I? I have to be just like him and he never misses, does he? His mind raced over and over all the bad things that could happen until he almost missed seeing that blurred shape of a deer headed opposite him intending to cross the wide river road his stand was on. He was running low and at full speed, his pretty respectable rack laid back against his neck to escape the brush he had to penetrate to enter and cross the road. No time for planning; point and shoot the little faithful gun that had never failed him was natural almost automatic in the reaction. Bam! Went the little gun and bam! The second shell fired so fast he almost couldn't remember pumping the action. The deer showed no visible reaction, nothing like the death throws the young turkey had fallen into immediately after that one glorious shot which now seemed so long ago. This was different and before he could think twice, the buck was gone, vanished into the big woods on the south side of the east-west river road. Damn! He thought, *Could I have missed? He was plenty close but never even flinched. Ill never live this down. Damn that 20 gauge, not enough gun to stop a big buck. Boy that was some rack. What do I do now?**

The sound of the gunshot was heard all across the south end of the Cane Swamp east-west road where the standers had tried to box in the big buck jumped somewhere up north as Ben Sr. had cast the hounds on a fresh track. And speaking of hounds, the din they were making as they barreled down toward where he stood was beginning to be deafening. There was no mistaking it, his buck was their buck and everybody in on the hunt that afternoon could hear

it and knew it. There was no chance now that the old guy had simply heard the hounds after another unlucky devil and slipped out to escape. The acid test would be whether the dogs stopped when they got to him. Within minutes and before Ronny could run over to where the big buck crossed the road in the desperate hope of finding some evidence, hell, any evidence that he hadn't missed, a figure came running and shouting in his direction from the camp house down by the river. It was Derek Stillworth 18 year old grandson of old man Harrison Stillworth the patriarch of the Stillworth clan who was the next stander about 300 yards down the road, gun in hand flashing back and forth like a Drum Major leading the high school band on a Fourth of July Parade. He was all staff and leg pumping and closing in at breakneck speed. Derek pulled up short as he met Ronny right about where the old buck had last been seen. The deer was an old buck by now as tale telling tended to go, growing each time exponentially if not believably, even though there had hardly been time for any of that as yet. But give it time and whether positive or negative, the principle was the same and inevitable.

“Did you get him Ronny?” Derek breathlessly asked as he examined the ground for the running deer's track as he approached. “By God, I--- ho-o-o--pe--- so Derek, had a go-o-od be-e-ad on him and somehow-o-w--w got off two shots before he clear—clear--ed the road space” Ronny said almost as breathlessly if not from running but from the excitement. At eleven he didn't know much about the way the body worked but know it or not the adrenaline was pumping through his veins in monumental proportions. He could have stopped a yearling mule with a plow line if he had known his

strength at that moment but he had and knew neither; just wonder, imagination, fear, speculation and stuttering was about all he could manage. Derek, without as much emotional investment at stake, was the cooler head, as he followed the well spaced spread toed track of a running large buck deer with his practiced eye and noticed that the track had become jagged for a step or two right about where Ronny said he had made his shot. This was the first evidence that the little gun's buck load had found its mark. Other hunters began to arrive about then and Derek having followed the trail into the edge of the forest looking for other tell tale signs of a hit, turned toward the older men coming up about then and shouted, "Hold the dogs, I've found blood."

This indeed was a good sign and the standard practice was to catch the dogs before they pushed the hopefully dieing deer too fast and too far and away from the reach of the hunters. The better practice was to put a slower trail hound on the job after giving the deer a chance to die in peace but not wait too long so that the red hot trail grew even slightly cold. After all the Ochlockonee was less than two miles away and if the wounded deer made it to water, he would be lost. That would be the worst possible result for Ronny, he may not have missed and that much was a relief so far, but if the deer got away what was the difference? It was a loss all the same of the worst kind. His job had been to uphold the honor of the Collins/Stillworth Hunting Club by stopping every buck the camp dogs had the privilege to run by any stander and he had been given the responsibility and was terribly afraid that he had failed the bloody stains on the ground notwithstanding. Things began to grow worse by

the minute when his father and the author of the cast that brought the buck by him had arrived on the scene.

Ben Sr. immediately took charge as he did in every situation in which he had a stake. In this one he had several, the least of which was not the fact that his son who he had trained to hunt and shoot had let, from all accounts, a very big deer possibly get away. The fact that he had decided from age ten for the boy to use his old 20 gauge pump Winchester, rather than buy him a 12 gauge with more killing power was undoubtedly percolating in his brain somewhere along with how to try and find the deer that was wounded if not already dead out there somewhere. “Boy, what happened here, you let him get by you did you?” Ben said as though accusing his young son of committing a terrible crime of some sort. At least that was how it sounded to Ronny if no one else. “He was a big one all right”, Ronny said changing the subject slightly. *That “boy” reference to me is a very bad sign! He usually reserves that for the farm hands or others he thinks less kindly of. Damn, why could you not have just pointed the little gun more carefully the way he taught you to, you dunce!* But Ben was having none of that shifting away from his accusation, because he wanted to know what had happened but he saw he had frightened the boy somewhat. “Tell me Son, from the start, what happened before your shot?” *That’s a little better, at least I’m no longer in the “boy” category.* “Well, you see Daddy, I heard the dogs coming and like you taught me, I kept my eye open well ahead of the sound of the pack and the deer came flying down that glade over yonder and I spotted the rack first, crashing through the crepe myrtle thickets over there and then that sleek grey body flattened out in a dead run, none of

that leaping stuff you see does and yearlings do trying to get a better view. Hell, he didn't need to see he just needed to run and he was doing that right fine I might say. Didn't have much time to think, threw a bead on him and fired. Nothing happened except he seemed to run even faster if that was possible and somehow I pumped the spent shell out, another one in, pointed it, I think, and fired again. But he kept running and the rest is right there as you see it, the blood, the dogs, Derek coming and the rest of you, that's what happened Daddy, I swear!" he poured out his thoughts, feelings, yes even his guts in a veritable torrent of facts but mostly emotion. Derek laughed a little but in deference to his friend's predicament, managed to confine it to a little smirk at the corners of his mouth. *His old man is really pissed, I'm thinking. Here it is the heir apparent to the hunting kingdom at least has about let the biggest buck of the season get away and with his gun too! I'm glad as hell its not me in this fix.* Derek thought to himself. "It's pretty good blood Ronny, what do ya say Mr. Ben, should we put that blue tick on the trail about now before it gets any colder?" Derek asked, coming to the rescue, so to speak, of his younger friend. Ben Sr. paused from his minute examination of the tracks and the blood, mulling over in his mind all the while his disappointment in the fact his son had let him down in this. "Yeah, sure Derek, good thinking, get old Blue out of the box of my truck and you boys follow the trail and see how far the buck got."

The trail was not cold and the blood was obvious and in copious quantities. There was a dead deer up a head of them they all thought but it was getting late in the day and the river was in fact closer than two miles by now. The old

deer had been a tough one it seemed and just as the last light was fading into night, Derek and Ronny found unmistakable evidence that the wounded deer had indeed made it to the river. It was too late to go further now. They would search by boat tomorrow but it was finally settling in to Ronny, Derek and the others as they rejoined the other hunters back at the road crossing stand that this big buck would live on in the legend of the great hunts that like the fish that got away, got bigger each time with the telling. Unfortunately for Ronald G. Collins, that progression would never help him and the wound like of the deer was similarly growing within him, worse by the minute. The black dog would be his companion for now and maybe forever. How could he live this one down? He the turkey hunting prodigy of local fame and the talk of his Father's hunting and farming friends would have to be hidden away now like some disappointing and embarrassing, dark and terrible family secret. Nothing more would be said, openly at least, at home or elsewhere but it didn't have to be for Ronny, since it hung over him like a dark cloud of dread and regret. He just couldn't get away from or shake it like a summer cold that just won't ever go away or leave you alone. And worse yet, in two weeks was Thanksgiving and the time for the annual camp out of the men and boys of the Stillworth, Collins, Brewer and Wellington families that were partners in Stillworths. A time he had always looked forward to like he used to in the weeks leading up to Christmas morning but not this year. He dreaded the thought of facing it but somehow couldn't stay away either. It was too much a part of what had been life to him. He might feel like dieing but life did have to go on and he would get through it somehow.

5. The Home front

Ronny stumbled around things at home as though he belonged but in his mind he wished he could be somewhere else. Ben Sr. had been compassionate in a sense by not voicing his extreme disappointment that the young son he had trained had let him down, he was not openly sympathetic to Ronny's plight in the slightest. It was actually much worse in the mind of Ronny than his Dad for even though Ronny had failed to perform at the level his father had expected, he still loved his son and would not condemn him for a simple mistake in the execution of a skill in which he had been taught. But one of the failings of Ben Sr. was that

he could not express emotion very well or appreciate it coming from others. Just as he kept deeper things to himself if he was any way unsure about it, he could not express the support and comfort that his young son needed in this time of emotional crisis or even fully comprehend that he was in one. The truth was that there wasn't much room in the life and world of Ben Collins except for him and those who did things exactly as he wanted them done.

“You haven't touched your food Ronny”, his Mother said the next night at supper sensing that her younger Son was troubled about something, “Is anything wrong, you feeling all right?” “No mother, I'm just not hungry”, Ronny said avoiding her fixed gaze by concentrating on the untouched food plate in front of him. Ben Sr. seemed not to notice as he continued with his meal oblivious or indifferent to the signs his wife had picked up on. Ben Jr., Elizabeth and Eleanor certainly noticed and giggled but observing the mood of their father as dangerous territory to intrude upon and reading the tea leaves quickly, kept their silence. Sally Collins, noticing her husband's indifference if not coldness, leaned over next to Ronny and whispered in his ear, “It's the deer thing isn't it Son?” Ronny lifted his eyes from the plate of untouched food and realizing that his mother was about to go into her mother hen routine and was not ready for that especially in front of his father and his siblings, quickly pulled himself back from the abyss of his depression and affected a sudden cheerfulness to escape a destination that was even worse. He ignored his Mother's insightful question and shifted gears to bring up the upcoming Thanksgiving event at the river which was a big event for the family, all of them would be around for the long holiday weekend, and

even managed to make it sound that he was actually looking forward to it this year. No bigger lie could have been uttered right about then because to go down to camp out in the yard of the bunk house at the bend in the Ochlockonee at Cane Swamp with his Father, his cronies and their sons and talk about hunting and guy things a week or two after the disaster of his mishandled shot of the big buck just up the road from the camp site was about the worst experience he could imagine right about now. But explaining the obvious to his Mother about why he was depressed in front of his Father was an even worse disaster in his mind. He had seen that scene flash in front of his consciousness, the overdone sympathy from her, the laughter of his brother and sisters and worst of all the condemnation by his Father that was inevitable and that picture was just too much for him. So on the fly without even a rehearsal, he had launched a rather elaborate charade describing what he expected to do that year on the camp, complete with a created on the spot plan of where and how he intended to hunt the early morning of the big day and did it with such enthusiasm if not a feigned excitement that would have made the high school drama coach proud if there actually had been such a person at the small school the Collins kids attended.

6. The Minefield

Having survived the minor crisis of embarrassment at breakfast it was off to school where danger awaited the step of the unwary in the cruelest of environments known to the animal called man, the sixth grade homeroom. The bus from Jamieson had no one his age on it anyway so he was

relatively safe on the trip into town. He lingered there as long as he dared before hurriedly making his way into the wide hallway opposite the Principal's office, turning left and then right into Miss Blackburn's room and into his seat at the back just ahead of the starting bell that to him this morning sounded like the clangor announcing round one of a prize fight to the death. He saw the all knowing looks of the other boys all right even though the teacher, Miss Blackburn, held a whip hand over the behavior, especially the idle talk as she called it for which exactly none was permitted, in the little realm that was her sixth grade class. The word was out among the guys in the class if not everyone at school that the great white hunter of turkey hunting fame had missed his first big chance with a deer. The teacher started the day as she always did by calling the roll as if she couldn't with her practiced eye know instinctively who was or was not there that Monday morning. "Sarah Whiting?" "Present, Ma'am." "Gloria Bunning?" "Here, Miss Blackburn". Then the boys on the back row were next, "William Arrington?" "Deer, I mean here, Ma'am!" Bill sitting next to Ronny said a little too forcefully for a slip of the tongue with a snicker running through the room like a stiff breeze making whitecaps on Orchard Pond from a sudden summer squall. Miss Blackburn, perceptive as she was but out of the loop so to speak on the weekend deer hunting story, only raised an inquisitive eye brow with that look she gave when she was suspicious enough for an indictment but not quite ready to go to trial for a conviction. "Ronald Collins?", Miss Blackburn said always using the formal names of the children for this important ritual each morning. "Yes Ma'am, I'm here, I guess" Ronny said meekly hoping to avoid any further attention if that was possible. She continued her well worn

pattern and before long they were into it in full with English grammar, mathematics, history, the Bible, of course which she as a good Baptist could never pass up the opportunity to work on the salvation of their little souls as well as their little minds and the other subjects in that tried and true method of education practiced in the deep south in those days.

The first recess was of course the dreaded time as all nine of the other boys in the class were certain to corner Ronny in some inconvenient space where he could not fight them all or run from any and have to face the music of his weekend calamity. “Well great white hunter, how was the deer hunt this weekend, old boy?” Buck Craven the guy, not the deer naturally, asked innocently and sarcastically as if he was the only person in North America who had not heard the news. “Thanks a lot hot shot, at least I proved I can call up and kill a turkey, what have you ever done?” Ronny fired back leaning up into Buck’s face, knowing full well that Buck Craven didn’t know one end of a shotgun from another or wasn’t much interested anyway but was keen on slipping the knife blade into his “friend’s” ribs and twisting it a bit. The other boys closed in for the sport or the kill whichever came first. “Yeah, but you let the big one get away, when it counted I hear”, his erstwhile friend Bobby Gentry joined in and the other boys guffawed in an inharmonious staccato chorus of ridicule that was becoming increasingly unbearable for Ronny in the state of mind he was in.

Seeing he was unable to avoid the confrontation and having no real excuse his failure anyway, Ronny had two choices, fight or flight. Being a slender lad of eleven at a soaking wet 95 pounds and outnumbered to boot, he decided

that evasion was the better choice for one given to using his brain rather than his brawn. “I tell you what guys; you are enjoying my predicament a little too much for my taste and I can’t change what happened Saturday anyhow, so I’ll make a commitment to you. The Thanksgiving campout for my family is coming up in two weeks and if I don’t pull off some hunting feat equal or better than what you’re all saying I failed to do on Saturday, I’ll hang up my shotgun and turn my full attention to the books from now on. If you think I’ve been tough competition up till now. You will be sorry then, that is if you give a damn about grades around here. You just wait and see!” Ronny said emphatically, parted the crowd of boys like Moses into the Red Sea and walked away from the trap they all thought they had him hemmed into. It worked too, for some of the boys were very much aware of how competitive Ronny already was in the pursuit of academic standing in the class even for sixth graders. Even though this was a small farming community most of the families, including the Collins family had their sights set on a future college education for their children and drilled the subject of grade accomplishments daily into their young heads. The ones that mattered anyway were set back in their tracks for the smarter boys were the natural leaders in the group and they understood what a concentrated student like Ronny Collins would do to them. “I think he means it “, Jerry Singleton, the closest boy in class standing to Ronny said. “No matter to me”, James Moore said, a boy who didn’t care one whit about grades and would probably drop out of school anyway by the time he met the truancy proof age of sixteen. The others, seeing that the sport was over, and interested in talking about other things, let the subject drop

and Ronny's diversion for escape of the trap had apparently worked.

He made it somehow through the rest of the day, the next and the next and before long; the incident was behind him if not forgotten. He had not forgotten the challenge he had taken on with his friends and the usual talk he engaged in about the upcoming Thanksgiving event was a forbidden subject to him. He was quiet at home and quiet now at school about it which left him plenty of time to brood and worry and no place to express the excitement he wasn't feeling anyway. So he faced each day as it came in a kind of somnambulistic trance that was noticeable to everyone but apparently beyond anyone's ability to do anything about it. His Mother had made that initial attempt to protect him but once she discovered what the problem was and that it affected his father and Ronny directly, she had learned from experience to leave well enough alone. The Wednesday afternoon of the great week finally arrived with excitement of anticipation for most of the family and dread for Ronny. Sally was busy planning the contributions Lizzy made to the Thanksgiving feat with her pumpkin pies the talk of the county anyway and the star desert feature at the feast. Every year Ronny had been driven down to the river camp by his father who joined the others for the overnight campout, but this year, Ronny was in for a surprise when he learned from his Father that he would not be spending the night at the river as usual and that Ronny would be delivered to Stillworths to catch a ride with the Stillworth boys and their dads. This was fine by Ronny for he was still not fully accepted at home as he saw it although it was really hard to tell with Ben Sr. who wasn't very personal anyway even with

his heir apparent in training. It was a slow time of year on the farm but Ben Sr. made his daily rounds regardless and spent little time around home except at meal time and night.

7. A Time for Men

That Wednesday afternoon after returning by bus from school, Ronny quickly packed his hunting clothes and a change for the family time that usually took place after his early Thanksgiving morning hunt, which for him was the only reason for going and waited by the carport for his Father to drive by to take him into town. He hadn't long to wait before his Father's truck made the turn into the big semi circle driveway lined by long leaf pines and pulled under the carport where Ronny waited with gun and gear. "Hop in", his Father said and he did without saying a word and the truck which had practically not stopped running, resumed its way around the back driveway and out front onto the main highway toward town. Ben made some attempts at innocent conversation but unless he was ready to broach the sore subject of his disappointment and his Son's guilt, which he wasn't ready for yet, it left little for either to say. The trip for the three miles into town was mercifully brief and with some chit chat about the weather that is always safe for people uncomfortable with each other's company, they were quickly there. Ronny hopped out of the truck as soon as it came to a stop in front of Stillworths, grabbed his gear from the back and joined the other boys loading the trucks with food, equipment and provisions for the caravan down to Camp Swamp and abandoned his Father who was engaged in some

business or the other with the other men. Ben finished that quickly, waived to Ronny who acknowledged the greeting with a nod of his head and drove away. Ronny in relief joined the others and Ben in relief headed back home.

The camp house at the river was not much of a place to look at or talk about. It was what might pass in poorer areas of the county for a make do wood frame house with a fireplace for heat and the luxury of an indoor sink and a single seat toilet. The shingle roof was sufficient to keep out the rain most of the year but the insides of the house appeared as though it had never been finished for regular living. There was no insulation in the walls and the place was one big room with bunk beds around two sides and an open area with a few basic wooden chairs for seating. It looked like somebody forgot to put up the interior walls or just never got around to it. It didn't matter much how the place looked anyway because the Stillworth family didn't care much for appearances. It might have been built in an earlier era with the idea somebody would live there but that idea never came into reality. It was set far enough back from the high bank of the river just in case there was one of those hundred year floods people talked about and never lived to see but close enough to serve as a backdrop for the camp site where the Stillworth clan and their friends would congregate from time to time when they were in the mood for roughing it and an unexpected rain forced the campers inside.

Harrison Stillworth had sent Mack the lot man down ahead of the caravan of hunters and campers to get set up for the annual event. Mack Douglas was getting up in years and had inherited, so to speak, Harrison Stillworth or more

accurately the other way around, when Harrison had purchased the old Martin Place. Roland Martin, tobacco farmer and lawyer of regional fame had lived at the place for a long time before finding his way to that heavenly bar up in the sky. His son Aaron who had taken over his law practice and legally inherited the place, preferred city life to the farm, so when Harrison made a reasonable offer, Aaron took it. Mack, as the only one around the place who knew where the haines and collars for the mules were kept and how to keep the rest of the stock and teams healthy, had nowhere else to go really, so had managed to hang around long enough after the transaction closed that Harrison took it for granted he came with the place, which by all rights, he did. In the old days that would have been a foregone legal conclusion as well even though Mack was born well after the Civil War and formal emancipation, there was a real choice for him in the matter. But Mack was happy with the arrangement and had no where else to go to anyway so he just stayed. To the casual observer, he was a fixture on the Martin Place and soon to be the same fore the Stillworths and proud of it.

Mack was one of those resourceful and resilient men of the place who never seemed to age. He was lean but not gaunt and strong beyond appearances. From the time of his youth the stories were legendary about his strength and endurance. There was that story about an old male goat that had a bad habit of dueling with the fence posts around the farm just to work off his excess energy if not due to a purely cantankerous nature until one day he got his horns hung up in some tangled barbed wire around one of the corner line fence posts deep on the back side of the farm and disappeared for a few days. Mack as a young man at the

time was roaming around that part of the woods, hunting probably and spied the goat hung up in that wire and exhausted. He would have been dead in a few days. Mack decided to try to free the goat himself. Somehow or other and it was never clear as Mack told it exactly how he did it, but the goat got free and somebody had to go back there the next day and reset that post that had been pulled clear out of the ground. Of course as story telling and legend making goes, that post was buried deeper and deeper even though if the truth were known it was like most of them in the wet bottoms where this one was located; it was rotted off just below the ground and easy to push over if you knew how to do it. The goat, like most beasts, wouldn't know to push and pull so as to work the thing loose or break it off like even a dull witted farm hand could have figured out, but would only pull himself into exhaustion with no success. Mack's exploits grew with the telling and retelling from just somehow releasing the goat, to pulling the post out with his bare hands because he didn't have a tool with him to cut the barbed wire. He even got credit for persuading by a process no other human has ever devised for persuading the old goat to give up his post butting habit by some smart trick or other but that was just talk.

Then there was the story of the mule that got stuck in a ditch and Mack pulled it out with a plow line and a make shift pulley around a nearby tree by a process that an engineer would envy and on and on the stories went. As he got older, the idea that Mack Douglas could do anything even at his age requiring super human strength or being just plain smarter than the average field or lot hand to make up with brain power what his muscles could no longer do, just

refused to die even though your head was telling you it was no longer possible, at least the physical part. Mack was plenty smart all right but probably not near as clever as the stories made out. And of course, as the old saying goes, whenever truth and legend conflict, legend wins every time. And none of this talk meant anything to Mack who placed himself at the position of insignificance on that totem pole and he would have none of that legend talk around him as far as he could control things or he would just walk away. So most of it was just talk among the other hands, usually the younger ones who needed somebody to look up to, admire and brag about. It helped their own self esteem to be loosely associated with the stories if only by the bare thread of being of the same race. For some moderns, if not all, whether black or white, the same principle applies like diehard football fans who think somehow it's actually them out there throwing blocks, catching passes and making touchdowns when their team succeeds, but never committing a fowl, slipping down or fumbling like those idiots of their own team when they don't.

It was not that Mack had found and kept the secret of a secret spring of eternal life hidden somewhere back in the woods as some would laughingly or even half seriously say, but he did bear his aging well. A life of hard physical labor and few if any vices that usually bring about human dissipation had left him in his late 70's strong of back and still relatively quick of mind. There was also the obvious wisdom the man demonstrated that could not be denied. He was loved by the Stillworth family and many of their friends who visited the place and was loving and devoted to them as well. One of his many useful skills was running the food

preparation end of a hunting camp, staying up all night to tend the fire and stir the black kettle full of squirrel pileau and best of all, make the best river coffee up or down the Ochlockonee. The annual camp out for the Stillworth clan of men and boys and a short early morning deer drive before the families arrived for dinner on the grounds just wouldn't be the same without Mack Douglas.

The Caravan of cars and trucks hauling the men, boys and gear rolled into the open area out behind the bunk house and was quickly unloaded. The men and boys alike had done this many times before and getting everything into place and on to the business of sitting by a roaring fire and telling tall tales with frequent nips just short of intoxication from well disguised liquor containers to oil the tongues of their story telling was the order of the night. Darkness comes fairly early in late November and the cool temperature that year inspired a rip roaring campfire. The campers gathered and took up their places with the eagerness of a crowd of college football fans descending on a ticket outlet for limited ticket allotments for a Bowl game.

“What’s the plan for in the morning guys?” Derek Stillworth asked the crowd in general munching seriously on some fried sausage, scrambled eggs and biscuits Mack and the field kitchen crew had whipped up. “I expect we’ll make a short drive out on the east-west river road, with Mr. Ben Collins not here to set it up, that seems the best plan to me boys” Edgar Wellington said and asked, “Did Matt Crowley send his pack of hounds in with you Stillworths?”. Matt Crowley was not a partner in the Stillworth enterprise and not invited to the annual camp but he was one of the regular

hunters who contributed his pack of dogs every Saturday during the hunting season and sometimes loaned his hounds out as a favor to the others who would attend the camp. Harrison Stillworth nodded his head and pointed in the general direction of the dog pens where the occasional howling of hounds could be heard if you listened carefully that the Crowley dogs were on hand as he took a swig from his burlap wrapped bottle to wash down his sausage and eggs. "I'd love to cast the hounds, Dad, if that's all right, and you can place the standers, like you do when Mr. Ben does when he's here." "Fine, Son, we'll get it done at first light tomorrow. Everybody up at 5:00AM on my signal, Mack'll have breakfast and river coffee and its off to the races. The hunt will be short though because the folks will be rolling in around eleven or so, now let's get on with the real reason we come here boys, a little sip and saga I always say", Harrison said as he pulled out his flask.

The rest of the evening was a time for guys to drink, tell jokes, stories and confide with each other about their most serious indiscretions, if they had any, which most did not. This was the kind of stuff that never made its way into business and social talk and certainly not on Sunday morning at the various churches represented here. But in spite of that, the younger men like Derrick loved this time even though they knew most of the stories were exaggerated or just plain made up. The drinking was real enough but consistent with the double standard they all lived under. One of the younger Wellington men had somewhat of a reputation with the girls however far away from the truth his accounts often were but as the whiskey flowed, the difference between truth and fiction was no longer important as they all laughed at each

joke and nodded knowingly with each exaggerated account. There were awkward moments however as the favorite hunting tales were told over and over and it was impossible for the recent story of Ronny letting his big buck get away to be avoided. “Hey Ronny, that true you really missed that big buck and that blood on the ground story was just made up?” one of the wiseacres said insensitively, laughing outrageously, letting him know it was intended as a tease. However well meaning, the teasing by the men and other boys was painful and reinforced his depressed state of mind that caused him to come to the camp in the first place hopefully as an escape from the unmerciful ragging he was getting at school and the embarrassment he felt everywhere else. Now it seemed there was just nowhere to run. He sat silent through the teasing episode and breathed a sigh of relief as the men moved on to more fertile territory such as the endless jokes, usually about sex, that got more raucous and explicit as the men took turns playing the can you top this game. The fire roared, the whiskey flowed and one by one the men lost interest in the jokes and stories and dozed and then dropped off into a comfortable sleep, mostly where they lay under a blanket or bedroll or some with some awareness time left, made their way back to the bunkhouse.

But Ronny Collins could not sleep and he was far too young to be drinking whiskey, the stuff that had played the sandman to everybody else, so he sat by the declining fire and brooded over his problem. It was a dark night and the gloom outside the circle of light made by the campfire matched the mood of his heart tonight. *I can't get away from this thing! Will I ever live it down? Maybe I'll get lucky tomorrow or soon and pull off some spectacular feat that will*

wipe this stain from my honor. I can see it now. On a stand deep in the woods, the dogs running a big buck my way, he's dodging and flat out running at top speed. I hear him coming. There he is, my what a big rack, bam goes my shotgun and down he goes dead in a heap. No blood on the grass this time, no trail hound to make a desperate chase to the river's edge, no more shame, just glory! Why can't it ever be that way? Maybe tomorrow?

8. Someone who really cares

Ronny didn't notice that he was about to have company in front of the fire as old Mack came over to put some more logs on the fire and sat down beside him. "Mind if I join you, Mr. Ronny, I'm all cleaned up from supper and everything's ready for tomorrow and I ain't sleepy yet neither, if's it's all right with you?" Mack said in the time honored way that employees addressed the young white men in that day even though the absurdity of a 70 year old man addressing an eleven year old boy as "Mr." and using his first name that way never occurred to him or anybody else. He had to use the formal address to show respect for a white man however young, especially one whose father was so well connected to his boss, Harrison Stillworth. This was 1951 and in the south back then, the civil rights of black Americans had not yet been given any attention. That would come in future years and a painful adjustment it would be but at this age, the residue of the attitudes that existed in the south before the Civil War had not really been eradicated by the otherwise finality of that conflict. Fatality was more how southerners looked at that cataclysm but it never even occurred to them that the black people who worked for them and lived on their property in a total state of subservience were really any different from the old days.

"Sure Mack", Ronny said, himself following the ritual a young white boy used in addressing even an older and highly respected black man like Mack Douglas, and the incongruity of the older man Mack using a formal address to a mere boy and the boy using the familiar first name of the elder man never even occurred to either of them. That was just the way things were in that place and time. "I couldn't sleep like the others and the fire is nice, don't you think?"

Ronny said. “Me neither Sir”, Mack said and he used a stick lying near the fire to stoke the coals to keep it burning. “I suppose you going to take a stand in the mornin, Mr. Ronny?” “Yeah, Ill go but to tell you the truth Mack, I just as soon skip it” “Why’s that Sir, I thought you was always ready for hunting ain’t that so?” Mack said, politely avoiding the stuff the teasing had just been addressing and he was full aware of the story about the young boy missing his big chance just up the road from this very spot. But Ronny knew that Mack was fully aware of his problem but would never bring it up. The privilege of teasing the young folks just did not extend to black men, not in the presence of white men that is. Somehow though, he felt like talking about it and he had always considered Mack someone you could trust. He had never actually gone to Mack with a personal problem before but he knew Mack Douglas from the many times he had accompanied his father to the Stillworth farm for hunting and fishing and had come to know enough about the man to respect his character.

“Well Mack, you’ve heard about my bad luck this season, no one else has missed it and I can’t imagine you have either?” “Yes Sir, I knowed about it and how you been takin a beating over losing that deer and that’s the truth, young Sir!” Mack said emphatically and with a tone of sympathy without getting too syrupy over it, leaving it to his young friend to decide whether he wanted to discuss the matter any further. “I can’t seem to shake it Mack, at home, at school which is the worst, and now even here, my favorite time of the year at the Thanksgiving camp at Cane Swamp and even the men we hunt with are piling on with this stuff. I’ll never live this down Mack, as long as I live, unless I can

redeem myself somehow but that would take a great stroke of luck and that's not likely to happen anytime soon", he said. "You never know about that, Mr. Ronny, could be tomorrow, you cain't ever tell bout such things but that ain't nearly so important as true redemption", Mack enigmatically said. Ronny looked at the old man with a question on his face and asked, "True redemption Mack, what on earth are you talking about?" "You missed the most important lesson you could have learned from that miss", Mack said. "Well, I didn't really miss him Mack, there was blood on the ground but what lesson did I miss?" Ronny asked, truly confused by now but intrigued by the older man's point, whatever it was. "Most men live their entire lives without learning what you have missed so far too, young Sir, but it ain't too late to learn it even now", Mack said, and continued, "You see Sir, missing killing that deer was just a mistake, a lack of skill, or happenstance or all three, but missing the truth about it for you, young Sir, that was missing the chance for redemption!" Mack explained, with emphasis. "I still don't get it Mack, I thought redemption was when you made up for some mistake, like getting another shot another time and proving you are not a failure and regaining respect so that the pressure on you is off", Ronny said. "No Sir, you is wrong there young Sir. Mistakes is like breakfast, there is always another one coming, a chance to do it again. Redemption is when you learn from it so it don't happen again", Mack explained. "But if you can always make another mistake like missing another deer or having another breakfast, how do you get redeemed that way by a lesson learned from another mistake, I still don't get it Mack?" Ronny answered, seriously seeking the truth this time. "The lesson I'm talking bout Mr. Ronny is that when you fail at something, you take

responsibility for it even when it hurts. It's like when you give your word on something and times have changed and its no longer easy or worth it to you to do it but you said you would and a gentleman always does what he say no matter how much it hurts. The good book say a good man "swear by his own hurts and never change" and that means when you fail or make a mistake or times have changed from what you said, its all the same thing Mr. Ronny. You missed that deer and he got away. There's no shame in that even if you had missed him outright. You got to take your responsibility, no matter what anybody says. You didn't intend to miss and that deer was trying his best to get away too. Shame is only for wrong when you know it should have been right and even then the Good Lord loves you back from them kind if you ask Him but there ain't no shame in making mistakes or nobody on this earth could hold up his head, you see?" "Maybe, Mack, but I felt so bad and still do when somebody like tonight brings it up even in good natured teasing. "That was whiskey talking tonight Mr. Ronny, but you got to learn that what somebody else think of you don't make you what you is unless you let them. You do what you are and not the other way round. You ain't what you do unless you let other folks determine who you is. Only the Good Lord and you know who you truly are and half the time you don't even know, cause you let them other folks try and make you into what you do and not what you are. You think on it, and you'll figure it out, my young friend. Now its bed time Sir and five-thirty is going to come early in the morning and I got to make my coffee before that. So good night to you, Sir." Mack finished his lecture, rose and disappeared into the night outside the ring of light gradually shrinking as the dieing fire was consumed by the darkness. Ronny pulled his

sleeping bag up over his shoulders, said a few words to the Good Lord above and committed to himself and God to think about what the old gentlemen had said. Pretty soon he was asleep.

9. Rise and Shine

The fire was roaring by five thirty the next morning because Mack and his crew had been up since four to heat the five gallon lard can filled with jug water brought with the other supplies to boiling and make the other preparations for breakfast. The coffee grounds were dumped into the water without filters as usual and by five-thirty when the crew made the rounds to wake the gentlemen to get ready for breakfast, the grounds had settled to the bottom where they would not make it to the pot filled with the brew poured off the top and served to the men and boys on awakening. The sounds of a hunting camp were always the same with the yawning, the good morning, my God its cold and other such banter filling the sound waves. It was the best time really except for the men with a hangover who had not learned to pace themselves in drinking the night before. The rest of the conversations centered around the upcoming short morning hunt and for a full days drive, more time was taken to have the men jockey for positions on the favored stands, there was little time for this today. Most if not all were more interested in going through the motions and to have an excuse to

postpone the ritual of the Thanksgiving dinner crowd that would begin to show up around eleven. It was not that they didn't love to spend time with their families but they needed a few hours to become socially presentable after a night with the boys.

All the choice assignments for deer stands were finished in a hurry as Harrison Stillworth as the senior man on the scene today just placed the men as he saw fit by a system that was impossible to discern. Everyone was content it appeared so the pecking order or the fairness system was working as it was supposed to work. The last man out in the system what ever it was, was Ronny Collins, who presented an interesting problem for Harrison. Harrison was well aware of Ronny's need to make amends by a chance to bag another buck and how whatever he did would become known to his partner Ben Collins later that morning, who usually handled these delicate political matters, as it were, so he thought long and hard about how to make the assignment. As he dithered, Ronny thought about it for a few seconds and uncharacteristically for someone his age, jumped into the breach. "Say, Mr. Stillworth, you placed the men on every regular stand for this drive, so why don't I go cross country and take up a stand below the line just in case he gets through the others. I know this country pretty well and there's a game trail I know about that just might hem him in if he gets through, which I doubt. It's a long shot but that suits me fine if it's all right with the others?" Ronny pleaded his case ambivalently hoping he could avoid another disaster on the one hand just in case a buck happened to run past his stand, however unlikely that was but realizing on the other that he was missing his next best chance for

redemption, no matter how slim the chance. Harrison needed no time for reflection and made the assignment, relieved that the young boy had solved his problem for him. In Ronny's wildest and most fertile youthful imagination he never expected what was about to occur. Neither did anyone else.

10. Miracles of miracles and what to do about them?

Ronny rode out west from the campsite with one of the hunters taking a stand about midway out the east-west river road and signaled to the driver to stop when he saw the spot he was looking for. There was a pretty good stream that dissected that section of land and was crossed by an old wood bridge that was passable if not entirely safe. Since the deer never ran right along side a stream this was not one of the regular preferred stands, the last hunter was back up the road a ways behind him. Ronny grabbed his gun from the rack behind the seat that all southern hunters had in their pickup trucks in those days, waived goodbye to the driver and headed south into the interior of the big woods. He was all alone now and that suited him just fine. He followed the

trail along side the stream for a ways and took a turn eastward when he struck the game trail that meandered up the fall line of a slightly rising ridge and followed it southwest when it turned back in that direction. After walking for thirty minutes or so, he reached the spot he was looking for. It was a clearing in the big woods on a rise of ground that deer liked to feed on since it was safe from hunters riding by being a half mile or so away from the main or any other road and gave plenty of visibility for the deer to pick up any other danger signals that might appear. The trail was evident as it circumambulated the ridge and Ronny found a spot he had seen once or twice before when he discovered this place, a clump of saw palmetto growing on the crest of the ridge making perfect cover and settled in for the morning hunt.

Derek had taken Matt Crowley's hounds up north on the main north-south river road, backed his truck into a firebreak that roughly paralleled the east-west road the standers were on and turned them loose in an area that the big whitetails liked to bed down for the day. He cast them south hoping to flush one of the male deer in the region and drive him south to the other hunters. This was no time or place to scout for buck tracks to increase the odds of jumping a buck as the hunters usually did because this was a short hunt anyway. To make such matters worse, the firebreaks had been plowed the previous summer and only a Daniel Boone, Kit Carson or Davey Crockett could have sorted out a buck track from all the does in the region due to the collection of fall leaves that have covered up the plowed ground and there was obviously no hunter of their skills in

the group and certainly not the novice hound caster, Derek Stillworth.

From where Ronny was hidden he could hear the hounds opening up on a deer trail way up north and before long they were jumped and running. The deer made a wide circling sweep to the northwest before turning south again, somehow avoiding Derek on the run by, and made a beeline for the nearest escape route he knew to the Ochlockonee River and safety. Unfortunately for the deer, this route was well known by the hunters and the animals had a bad habit of running on the same paths of ground in finding it which made the taking of certain spots for stands not as much of a gamble it seemed to be. The only questions for the hunters and the deer's fate were which one and which gender. As good hunting luck would have it, the second question was answered with a big YES! Even though no hunter knew it yet and the first question was about to be answered by the sound of a twenty gauge shotgun just like Ronny though not his. Bam, Bam and after a short space of time, milliseconds really, a third Bam! Could be heard by Ronny from the unmistakable position not far to the east on the east-west road where he had left it to come to this place. *Well, so much for cutting off a big buck by my bold decision to take up a stand down in the big woods, sounds like they got him. Who was on that stand? Sounded like a twenty gauge like mine and three shots too, pump or automatic, I'm thinking? Who had a gun like that? Must be Mr. Wellington's boy Bernie, he never shot a deer before either, just like I was early this season. Hope like Hell he made the kill; wouldn't want anybody to go through what I did. But his Dad is more*

pleasant about things than Daddy. Oh well, can't do anything about it anyway.

He was just in the process of standing up to stretch his legs and head on back to the road when he heard, no saw something out of the corner of his eye to his right. It was a grey shadow almost gliding at breakneck speed low to the ground and in range for a shot before his even youthful mind could react. It was another big buck or was it the same one missed by Bernie or wounded, no matter anyhow, he had to act and quickly or the shot would be gone. He raised his little gun turning to the right leaning forward down the little slope to throw a bead on the deer and by a process that only terribly bad luck can explain, his foot tangled in a root hidden under the leaves where he had risen from in the palmetto thicket and he fell and fired in one confused and awkward motion, clearly a clean miss this time. The deer swerved away from the sound of the shot back to his left which put him on a more direct line to make his escape to the river. Everyone up country heard Ronny's shot and the previous shots by Bernie.

Following the usual pattern, Derek followed the dogs to make sure they weren't doubling back on him before jumping back in his truck to get closer to all the action. By the time of the shooting, he had regained the east-west river road where it turns west at the camp and he had been waiting there to listen to the race. This put him in a position to hear all the shooting and being familiar with the terrain and knew who was where that morning, had figured it all out. Bernie Wellington had shot the deer on the east-west river road and either missed or wounded him and Ronny had finished him

off or worse yet missed again on his harebrained cut off scheme. It didn't seem so bad a decision now especially if his trail hound would turn up deep in the woods at the feet of Ronny Collins having just cut the throat of the wounded deer and standing there ready for manhood, even though very early for that but redeemed once and for all. *Terrific!* He thought *If it only turns out that way.*

Ronny recovered from his spill just in time to see the deer leaving the clearing headed for the river, obviously not affected at all by Ronny's shot. This was worse than before and about to get worse yet because the entire crowd of people who meant anything to him would be gathered at the camp to greet and jeer his return. Whatever was left of his self respect had just tripped and fallen down that little slope. It was a wonder he didn't shoot himself in the foot in the process. *What to do now, that is the question? Can't face this shame, not again, not now but what? Just leave and think of something, anything, anywhere but here!* He picked himself up, brushed off the dirt from the fall and headed back generally east cross country. Anywhere except where people were was the only plan he had at the moment. After he left the little clearing, not bothering to even look for blood, he ejected the spent round from his shotgun and by habit rammed another round into its place and carefully placed the empty shell casing inside his hunting jacket. He wandered cross country with no particular plan in mind and before long was lost. He knew the main river road was generally east and he would cross it eventually so he kept that heading and slowly and quietly just walked.

He had been traveling this way for forty-five minutes or so when he began to hear one of Matt Crowley's trail hounds pick up the scent of the deer back on the road. That must mean Bernie made a hit after all. He dismissed it from his mind because the similarity and memory were just too painful to contemplate. He kept walking and thinking. The trail hound's voice got stronger and Ronny could tell he was headed right to where he had been so there was no doubt it was the same deer. The sound of the dog continued southeast for a time proving to Ronny what he knew for a certainty that no kill had somehow been made by him. He kept walking. Before long the hound hushed and the unmistakable sound of the cow horn from one of the hunters following the trail could be heard wafting over the big woods signaling the deer had been found. *Well at least Bernie Wellington won't have to endure what I did*, He thought and kept walking.

Then one of those totally unexpected things happened. He heard a rustling in the brush ahead of him and saw several turkeys flying away beyond the distance and possibility of a shot due to the reaction time for a totally unexpected thing when it happens. It just takes too long for the image to register on the optic nerve, making a chemical reaction, turn into an electrical signal to find the right cluster of neurons that form conscious awareness and images on the brain and connect by a reverse process to allow the muscles to move in the complicated pattern necessary to lift a gun, aim and fire with any chance of success. Only a highly skilled quarterback spotting a distant receiver who suddenly became open can loft a football on a perfect spiral that would intercept with a moving target for a completion has similar

reaction times and coordination. Unfortunately Ronny as a reaction shooter in Cane Swamp was no Doak Walker on the football field. But then in the most unexpected of even unexpected things that can happen in a circumstance, happened. The old Gobbler, caught unawares completely by the flushing of the flock, did an ungobbler like thing, reverted to some long forgotten instinct taught as a young jake turkey and had squatted for safety. It was a bad choice as it turned out because he eventually had to flee since fight is not in the wild turkey repertoire against hunters and the delayed reaction gave Ronny just enough time in recovering from his own surprise to bring up his gun and spray buckshot through the myrtle thicket ahead of him as the gobbler flew and drop him shortly after taking flight. Ronny would not ordinarily have had a buckshot load in his gun about now but for the recent wild shot and his shame at falling and missing the deer. He could not believe his good fortune as he ran over to the old bird with a ten inch beard in his death throws. There was no wise old mentor of the Indian variety familiar with the spirits of animals and a young hunter's relationship to them as all the Indians in this area having long departed by a trail of tears over a hundred years ago but had there been such a person, he would have said, "Thank you Grandfather for the sacrifice of your life for the lesson to be learned by this young one today."

Ronny threw the big turkey over his shoulder holding the weight by leverage with the turkey's legs and continued east, his spirits lifted by this incredible turn of events. Maybe he could escape the shame after all. He walked eastward toward some imprecise intersection with the main river road south of the camp with a new spring in his step.

He would still have some explaining to do about missing the deer now downed by his young friend but in the confusion with the kill being made by Bernie Wellington in his own moment of triumph, he might just possibly escape the further shame of having missed again with this accomplishment to his credit. As he approached the road, he could see it ahead through the forest in a blazing twin ruts of white ribbon of river sand from some ancient flood of the area and knew he had to turn north to return to the camp for his triumphant reentry, as it were, into the realm of honor.

Then something else unexpected happened. He looked up the road and saw a flock of turkeys, possibly the same ones he had spooked earlier, running down the road from him helter skelter. Without thinking or even considering whether they were jakes or jennies, none were old turkeys, dropped his dead gobbler, swung his little twenty gauge gun off his other shoulder and fired a shot at one of the running birds. To his amazement, one of them fell dead. When he arrived at the spot of the dead bird, he found also to his amazement that the second turkey was a young gobbler. He stopped for a minute, looking back from where he had shot and mentally noted a shot of about sixty steps, an real accomplishment for any hunter. Here he was, Ronny Collins , age eleven, just barely surviving the shame of letting his first big deer get away and clumsily falling and missing the shot of the second, reprieved or redeemed as it were, by bagging not one but two wild turkey gobblers in the very same morning. It doesn't get any better than this he was thinking.

Beaming with the pride of redemption, Ronny sauntered into camp with the old gobbler over his shoulder and the other, the smaller one, in his hunting coat about the time the families were arriving for the annual Thanksgiving dinner on the grounds. His arrival was, needless to say, quite a hit. Praise literally oozed from the group like blackberry juice from a press through a flour sack covering at jam making time. His head was spinning as he tried to balance the pride of accomplishment, which was considerable, with the humility of a gentleman having always been taught never to blow your own horn but let somebody else blow it for you and just smile. He was doing all this very nicely until the horns of approaching trucks of the hunters began arriving with their own pride of accomplishment to show off. Sitting in the lead truck and beaming like a miner's headlamp was young Bernie Wellington, the proud slayer of his first buck deer. The truck with Bernie, Derek Stillworth and the dead deer pulled into the parking area right where Ronny was being praised by all the newly arrived families. If there was ever a rising to the point of resolution, this was it.

Once the stories had all been told, reality began to set into the situation. Derek Stillworth, certainly a serious ally of young eleven year old Ronny Collins, was also quite puzzled by his inability to find Ronny at the point in the big woods where he was certain that final shot had been fired. That was a mystery that in his mind had to be solved. He listened to the repeated accounts of the two turkeys, remembered his own impressions of the fourth shot and could not get it out of his head the incongruity of it all. "Ronny that was some quick shooting you did with those turkeys but something puzzles me. Weren't you down in the

big woods on a stand about where we found that dead deer? I could swear I heard a fourth shot from down your way. And Billy dug the buckshot out of that deer and they were twenty gauge buckshot, number double ought, he says, isn't that what you always use Ronny?" Derek asked inquisitively, seriously trying to unravel the mystery without yet accusing Ronny of anything and not suspicious of him either at that point. Both hunters had used twenty gauge guns and the same loads. "It was the same shot Derek, the same gauge; no one will ever know for sure, let's leave it as Bernie's deer and not take away the boy's moment. You may have been mistaken about that fourth shot. Hell, Ronny has the bragging rights on turkey hunters for the century after today, let's leave it where it sits, O.K.?", his father Darrell Stillworth said and a general nodding of agreement could be seen among the hunters gathered nearby.

Ronny had mixed feelings on what was developing in front of him. One side of him was relieved that a consensus was developing that would clear him from even having to explain his clumsy missed shot but something was wrong and he couldn't put his finger on it. Then he saw old Mack Douglas coming up to the back of the crowd in his proper place in white gathering, toward the back, listening, taking it all in but saying nothing. He didn't have to for Ronny could not get the thoughts out of his head from their heart to heart conversation the night before. *What was it he said? Something about it hurts and the good book said what? "He swears to his own hurt and never changes". That was it! You take responsibility he said, even when it hurts and something about you do what you are, not that you are what you do. He also said that only God and I know who I am*

and what others think of me, whether good or bad, false or true doesn't make me what I am. Damn! This is where the old rubber meets the road isn't it. If it's not true now, then it never will be! “Wait!”, Ronny said as loudly as he could and looked squarely at old Mack just to let him know that what he was about to say was a tribute to him. It was like he was about to say, watch me old man and see if this is who I am or what I do. The crowd hushed from the bold one word that was pregnant with announcement like a bell ringing on a church steeple or a capital building on Memorial Day. You stopped what you were doing and thinking and listened.

“My family and friends”, Ronny began, like he was a politician about to give a speech at election time though for an eleven year old, that was an absurd analogy. “I have a confession to make. You all know I have been struggling with letting the biggest buck deer seen in these parts get away just two weeks ago and today I got another chance to redeem myself. Nobody wanted to give me a stand with a real chance at a shot after I let the big one get away, so I took a back up stand deep in the woods giving everybody else the first crack at him. Well, Bernie here got such a chance and killed the deer. I had heard the three shots and thought it was over. Then out of the corner of my eye I spotted what later turned out to be Bernie's deer flying through my deep woods stand like a shot from a cannon. He was wounded like mine and ran right smack dab over me deep in the big woods. I had just started to get up before this and when I saw this deer flying by to my right, I swung that way, drew a bead and before I could squeeze off a shot, I tripped over a root, fired a meaningless shot into the air and fell in a pile. My confession is that I ran away not being willing to take the

heat of missing twice. I also confess it was tempting to let the cover up last and it would have worked too. Everybody wanted to let this be Bernie's deer. But I couldn't let my clumsiness ruin his day. I know what it's like when the talk starts to hurt. I couldn't let that happen. Let's face it, as a hunter, I'm not much with a shot at a running deer and that's been proven." There was an awkward silence as the shock of the confession settled over the crowd. Old Mack said nothing and was satisfied to see that his young protégé had learned his lesson well. The rest was up to the white folks.

After a moment, Ben Collins walked up from the edge of the crowd where he had been standing silent. He looked at his young Son and opened his arms in a gesture of acceptance which Ronny quickly ran into and for young Ronald Collins, this was better than the best of all Thanksgivings and Christmases combined. For Ronny, what the others said didn't matter at this point or ever. This was redemption in the best sense of the word, for he had proved who he really was and he was free at last. This truly was the place to be.

The End