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Killing Time

by James Jay Egan

I sat at the door to the hayloft on the backside of the far barn. My shooting cap was high on my forehead. I sat there with a view high above the ground and looked out on the fields, my back to a bale of hay, my scoped twenty-two across my legs and the old man's expensive field glasses on my crotch. I faced east and the countryside was beautiful in the evening with dark coming on. I looked on the country below the purple evening sky, the yellow greens of grasses, the deep green high corn, and dark thick woods. They had sent me away many times before and I'd seen many places, but I always thought, hell, what if I do get to heaven and it ain't as nice as August in Wisconsin.

Behind the barn we had a fallow field of hay grasses, thick and green in the summer, stretching from Bunny Day's stand of corn on my far left, below me and across to the cattail swamp behind Mrs. Johnson's trailer home on my far right. It was a football field's length ahead of me to the fence line and then Ray Krueger's large stand of corn beyond. That cornfield marched on to the hardwoods on the north-south ridgeline. If you traveled the game trail under the crest of the ridge in a southerly direction you came to the basin of my uncle's farm, with its blue pond, red outbuildings and white farmhouse settled inside the oak woods. Mrs. Johnson told the old man once that a farmstead was always the farmer's self-portrait.

Our small plot here behind the barn had been fallow for some years now. Before I'd come along the old man had his friends butchering the cattle here. Long before me they'd kept dairy cows. When I was a younger kid we had some saddle horses that the old man kept because he liked their smell. After he up and sold the horses we had alfalfa. But there was no reason to keep the haying up, and the pasture went unused and untended, and now there was just the grass field, the smooth brohms and the tall thick patch of canary reed grass in the old

cattle run alongside the impenetrable cattail swamp.

The breeze blew in and out of the loft access. It came in and I smelled the green cooling earth. It went out and there was the smell of the dry empty barn. The loft door had been used long before in bringing hay up for storage, in the time before hay was baled. A pulley with block and tackle lifted large bunches of hay in a sling or twin forks up to the door. Farmhands pulled the hay in, released it and piled it in the loft. Later they forked it down to the livestock through trapdoors for feeding. The block and tackle were gone now to some antique or scrap yard. I smelled the old hay and dry lumber from the barn. The barn continued to decay, but the hay didn't rot. The roof was sound and the barn was dry inside. We had patched the roof for some reason only a few summers ago.

I sat up there like that because the old man had given the green light to shoot the feral cats that had moved in and settled on our yard. They were killing off the old man's rabbits and squirrels on the windrow. He encouraged the squirrels and rabbits in the stand of cedars and spruce so as to harvest a dozen of them in the winter for frying. I sat up there maybe hoping to see a buck coyote, as there was a continuous season on coyotes now and I wanted a coyote to add to my collection of pelts. I'd even take a skunk just for the hell of it. Sometimes to bring in predators I'd dump table scraps or dead blackbirds back on the far fence line between our hayfield and Krueger's corn. There were many predators on the property. I had gone away again and had come back to find the old man bitching about badgers in the field. Badgers were protected. I sure wish they weren't. I guess the old man had tangled up with one on his trapline when he was a kid. I wanted a badger pelt, too. I had muskrats and three coons from the cattail swamp, a mink I had picked up dead on the road between



our drive and Mrs. Johnson's, and an opossum that had gotten into our tool shed. The old man had tanned the three fox I had killed when I was a younger kid and had sold them to the tourism industry in town.

I was sighting down my scope on a crow sitting and cawing on the corner fence post at Day's property when one of them cats came right beneath me outside the window. He was black with a white underside. He was tiptoeing along through the shorter-length grass and white clover around the rusty pump and dry trough. I kept silent as I moved my rifle onto him. He stopped and sniffed, then he sat down on his haunches facing away and licked his front paw and cleaned his ear. He wasn't fifteen yards below me. I looked down my scope and he was so close he almost filled it up. He turned back towards the barn and me. I whistled once. He stopped stone stiff with one paw up but didn't know where the sound had come from. I put my crosshairs on the base of his neck, between the shoulder blades. I shot him. He went down. I looked down at him lying on his side. One back leg kicked a few times and I heard the bubbling of blood in his air passage. I waited a moment. Then I looked down at him through my scope to see if he was twitching or breathing. He wasn't. His eyes were shut in a wince and he was smiling. I let him be and watched the field till it got almost dark. I looked out on the country and wondered whether I could've hit the cat if he was out on the far fence line before Ray Krueger's stand of corn. Once I tried to lay my crosshairs on the bobbed wire. I couldn't keep steady though. The crow had flown off to the ridge.

Finally I left my rifle up there in the access and took the field glasses and went down from the loft. I went between the old barn and the pole-barn, across the barnyard, and through the gate to the front lot. I took a spade from the aluminum shed. The old man had told me that whether I trapped or shot the cats, they had to be buried right away and not made to suffer too much. He was superstitious

about killing cats.

Back of the far barn again I examined that dead cat. I had shot him on the left lobe of the forehead where his scent glands were located, and was disappointed with myself because that wasn't where I had aimed. I couldn't find an exit wound. I touched his eyelid. He had yellow eyes. His fur was fine and soft. I checked his nails, and they were intact but worn, so I figured he was feral and not one of Mrs. Johnson's. He had scars and scabs from ticks. But he wasn't a bloody mess.

So I picked him up by his hind leg and it was still warm in my hand. I buried him in the burning circle good and deep under dirt and ashes. I stuck a tall stick in the ground where his grave was. I hitched another stick near the top with twine to make a cross. I didn't want the old man to go mucking around in the burning circle and unearth a rotting cat.

He was a tomcat with big balls and I thought about all the litters he wouldn't be siring. I thought about how many rabbits and pheasant chicks he wouldn't be killing. The dew was coming on with the darkness and I wiped my hands in the short crabgrass. The grass was dusty with ash.

I went up again and put the shovel in the shed. The old man was watching television on the front porch. I heard him coughing. I took off my boots on the back steps, went in the back door, walked up the stairs to the old man's room and replaced his field glasses on his nightstand. I went back down to the kitchen.

"What's the shooting?" I heard the old man say from out front.

"Killed a tomcat."

"Which one?"

"Black with white."

"That son of a bitch. I know him." Then, "You bury it?"

"You told me to."

There wasn't much in the fridge. I went out back and put my boots on.

I stood in the late evening on the back steps. I





Photo by Amber James

attempted to pick out the scents in the moist cooling air one by one, the cedars and spruce, the grasses, and the summer composting. I bent my head, struck a match and lit a cigarette. I never trusted myself smoking in the barn. I tossed the match into the flower garden overrun with broadleaves. I pulled my cap low on my forehead.

I walked across the yards on the damp, mowed bluegrass. Beyond the far barn I came to the dry trough next to the rusty pump and sat on its edge and smoked. Above me the black muzzle of my rifle stuck out from the loft. I saw it silhouetted in the darkening sky.

The mist was rising over the lush cattail swamp. The fallow field inbetween was smooth and dark, and noisy with crickets. The crickets chirped, but the frogs in the swamp were quiet. The warm air of the day was lifting, and the cool air descended on us. The moon hung over our place.

I smoked to the end, and blew smoke at the moon once. Then I turned to the trough and set the butt in its bottom, watching it. I bent to the short white clover and rubbed my fingers in the dewy leaves to wipe the smell of tobacco from my fingers. Where I had dropped the cat I saw a dark, wet patch of clover.

I stood and walked away from the barns. I stepped into the field, brushing the wet blades of quack grass and crabgrass with the legs of my jeans. I counted ninety-seven paces to the fence, and the tall cornfield rose up to meet me like an army standing stiff under the moon, with the wooded ridge

passing far beyond it.

I bent and passed through the second and third tines of bobbed wire. At the edge of the cornfield I stopped and looked up and down the first row for a break in the corn. I stepped to my left and was onto the soft soil, giving in to the heels of my boots. The corn stood before me, two heads taller than me. I eased through a break between two stalks, their blades touching me like beggars. I ducked into the darkness of the corn, walked the first row thick with blades of corn to a break in the second row, passed between two stalks, then down the second row five steps, and passed between two more stalks. The corn stood thick and lush, never so impenetrable as the cattail swamp was in summer, but dense and receptive to one like me. The loam under my boots felt dry and soft. At a certain point inside standing corn, in the green summer, yellow autumn or gray winter, at a certain point inside a stand of corn everything outside the corn stops existing.

I stopped in a narrow row and looked down it, first one way, then the other, then turned towards the moon, hanging over our farmstead. I saw the moon indifferently suspended behind blades of corn, and cornstalks and spires.

Facing down the row, I bent and sat, slowly first, then heavily, and all the corn was above me now, and even the moon disappeared. Then I lay back on the soil with my eyes closed, crossed my legs, and clasped my hands on my chest, smelling dirt and vegetation, and lay my head back. They were sending me away again in the morning.

I opened my eyes, and the corn around me rose and covered the dark sky. The corn stood seven feet and at the top of each stalk sat a spire. The silk was coming out of the ears. Beyond the corn I picked out stars. One star at a time appeared in the blackness. In my imagination I felt the nearness of the hardwoods, the cattails, our barn and the old man on the front porch. I had a growing superstition about killing cats, too.

