# WHAT WANTS TO BE SHOT

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Even now, no one knows what it was like for Thomas J. Jefferson and Flip. J. Jones to be best friends. No one knows what it was like for them that summer, though each day, Hayworth watched their long involved preference for each other. They tried to attract the attention of the songbirds in the ash trees, and they used outdated slurs such as "bulldagger." They used outdated slurs when they stubbed their toes, or when they couldn't get the attention of the songbirds in the ash trees. They hadn't killed anything. They wore matching red trunks, and nothing else. They had turned brown all over their bodies (this was from never going inside) and their legs were impossibly long. Hayworth was Thomas J. Jefferson's girl-cousin, five years younger, and she loved those two young men as if she herself wasn't even real.

They all three of them believed in feats of strength, and so they left the city, and for two days they walked through the long low spindly woods. First, they came through rows of thin white tree trunks, and then they came through leaves like light coins, and finally they came to a four way intersection, arid and still. Here, there were four empty storefronts facing each other, and nothing going on, not even a cat going on, only some raccoons back in the alley, raccoons with dexterous black gloves, like they all have. Each storefront had a stoop, and each stoop was baked hot in the afternoon sun the day they came to the intersection. They all noticed how quiet it was, as quiet as if they'd drawn the place with a crayon as they came along. So they decided to stay there all summer, and the summer was hot. Thomas J. Jefferson and Flip J. Jones had a pair of .22 rifles between them.

"What are we going to shoot with those rifles?" asked Hayworth. She had looped embroidery floss through the holes in her ears, three strands, orange, mandarin orange, and blood orange. Hayworth had occasionally asked for privacy, but when she got it, it was only a coincidence.

"We'll shoot bottles, and we'll throw my old boots up across the telephone wire, and we'll shoot at them, and we'll shoot anything that bothers us," said Thomas J.

"We don't want a thing to bother us," said Flip J. "You can share my ammunition box, Hayworth."

"You'd better not shoot any of that raccoon family," said Hayworth.

"We'll shoot anything that bothers us," repeated Flip J. He was kind, and he showed his large teeth like blocks of ice, and Hayworth loved him.

Hayworth stepped up onto the stoop behind her so that she was eye level with Flip J. Behind her, the Green River Soda marquee was empty, and the screen door hung open, and they didn't know what could be inside.

"It'll stay much quieter here if you don't go galloping around shooting those raccoons for no reason," said Hayworth.

"See, this is what I mean, goddammit, Hayworth," said Thomas J. "We let you come through the woods with us, we let you drink rum and water with us, and by the way, you've given me no reason to regret that. I like having you here, and Flip J. likes having you here."

"I like you a lot, Hayworth," said Flip J.

"But goddammit," said Thomas J, "if you don't sometimes act just like a seventeen year old girl."

"Thomas J, all I'm saying is that we could stay here the whole summer, and there would never be any need to shoot a raccoon," said Hayworth.

"Is that a rule you're making?" asked Thomas J. He cut his eyes down away from her. He practiced proper gun safety.

"I'm not afraid to make it a rule, if you want it like that," said Hayworth.

"What's the rule?" asked Flip J.

No one knows what it's like for two boys to best friends, but we know a few things, gleaned over the years. We know, for example, that when Flip J. Jones and Thomas J. Jefferson were teenagers, they rode out together one night on a pair of junked bikes, through the city that they came from. Thomas J. pulled ahead, and Flip J. fell behind, though he pushed hard to keep up. We know that Flip J's wheel skidded out. He went over the handlebars, and crunched his head right against the asphalt. It slid, it shaved like a bar of soap. Thomas J. circled

back, and when he lifted Flip J. it was bad, it was a stranger he found. Thomas J. taught Flip J. to walk again, and Flip J. learned it good-naturedly and well. Flip J. was rangey and true, and if he didn't like you, you knew it was no use thinking you were any good. Hayworth wanted Flip J. to touch her, and he had never touched her. Yet her cousin, Thomas J. had never protected her from anything.

"The rule is that you can shoot what wants to be shot," said Hayworth.

Thomas J. knelt, took aim at the storefront window across the street, and crack, and the window was a spider's web. Flip J. said, "'Atta kid," and meant no harm.

"What about that?" Thomas J. asked.

"That window wanted to be shot," said Hayworth.

"'Atta kid," Flip J. said again. Hayworth took her turn next. What wanted to be shot was a dented folding chair set up at the end of the block. She handed the rifle to Flip J. What wanted to be shot was the upstairs window of the empty five and dime. What wanted to be shot were the red roof tiles above the Green River Soda marquee, the rubble of the ex-sidewalk, the beer cans stabbed onto the chain link fence, the lid of each trash can, an unplugged ice machine, and the knothole of the ash tree that stood on the southwest corner all alone.

At dusk, they had gone through Flip J's box of ammunition, and they sat down together to take a rest, Flip J. and Thomas J. on the top step, Hayworth hanging around on the railing. Thomas J. and Flip J. only approved of the liquor that, like burnt sugar, lashed you and was good to take with water. They had some of it now, and they shared it with Hayworth.

"Hayworth would like to marry you someday, Flip J," said Thomas J. Flip J. grinned in his sheepish way. He took a grey dove's feather from the bottom step and twirled it between his fingers.

"But I'm too old for her," said Flip J.

"She doesn't care about that," said Thomas J. "You'd better look out."

"Is that true, Hayworth, what your cousin's always saying?" asked Flip J, keeping his eyes on the feather.

"Maybe it is. There wouldn't be any shame in it," said Hayworth. One of the raccoon family, now that the noise and smoke was over, trotted out into the dim intersection. The three of them watched it. Its back was a steep round hump,

small and industrious, the moon stood in the sky, and Thomas J. and Flip J. rose at the same time, and crack, crack, and the raccoon flipped over with no noise, and was still. Dark liquid splashed briefly from it, and went to mud in the dust.

"I told you not to do it, I told you not to!" said Hayworth.

"You told me what, you stupid kid thought you could make up rules at me out here?" asked Thomas J.

"I asked you not to, that's all," said Hayworth.

"You're lucky you're even here," said Thomas J.

"What about you, Flip J? You know that raccoon didn't want to get shot," Hayworth turned to him.

"It's no big deal, Hayworth," said Flip J, smiling and looking at the ground.

"Now what are you going to do?" asked Hayworth.

"What do you mean?" asked Thomas J.

"What are you going to do with it?" asked Hayworth.

"We'll leave it there as a warning to other raccoons," said Thomas J.

"Raccoons are our blood enemies," said Flip J, affably scratching the back of his head.

"You're just going to leave it there?" asked Hayworth.

"We'll leave it there for a little while, and we'll see if a bigger animal, a scavenger, comes along and eats it," said Thomas J.

"Sure. It's no big deal," said Flip J. Blinking, he turned his kind face towards Hayworth.

"I asked you not to, that's all," said Hayworth. The rum turned in her stomach.

"I'm tired of this. Let's have a race," said Thomas J, to clear the air. "What should we race to, Hayworth?"

"Shut up, Thomas," said Hayworth.

"Come on, Hayworth, let's race," said Flip J. His sausage lips peeled back uncertainly. He scratched the back of his head again. He looked between the two of them.

"You choose the course, Hayworth," said Thomas J.

"I told you I want you to shut up, please," said Hayworth. They waited for her. She said, "We'll race a mile back through the woods until we get to the white boulder. Then we'll race back."

"Shortcuts?" asked Thomas J.

"Alright," said Hayworth.

"First one back to the dead raccoon wins," said Thomas J. He went off running, his red trunks flashing between the pale ash trees. Hayworth and Flip J. took after him, keeping to the path. Hayworth thought of Geronimo, but Flip J. wanted to talk.

"Hayworth," he loped alongside her, taking one stride for every two of hers, "do you believe that people could run as fast as horses?"

"Yes, I believe that," said Hayworth, loving him. "Why did you kill that raccoon?"

"It was sneaking around too much, and anyway what makes you think it was my bullet, and not Thomas J's?"

"You shot that raccoon, Flip J," said Hayworth, "and now you're just going to let it lie there."

"Raccoons die all the time," said Flip J, "but I don't want you to feel bad. Do you think Thomas J. protects you enough?"

"No. He believes I can stand up for myself."

"He lets you drink rum and water with us on the stoop," Flip J. observed.

"What is it like for you and Thomas J. to be best friends?" asked Hayworth.

"I love Thomas J." said Flip J, "Beyond that, it's like you might think." They ran on awhile.

"Do you think you're too old for me, Flip J?" asked Hayworth.

"Too old for what, Hayworth?"

"Don't be stupid, Flip J."

But Flip J. was not stupid. He had no guile. They ran on in silence, because they believed in feats of strength, and they wanted to beat Thomas J, and they wanted to beat each other. When they arrived at the white rock, Thomas J. had already marked it with a bit of charcoal, and was gone back through the trees. He must have taken the short cut because they hadn't met him on the path.

Hayworth swung herself up onto the rock, with silver threaded through it. She pulled at the embroidery floss in her ears. “Well?” she asked. She leaned down towards Flip J. His teeth were sticky and gleaming through the dark.

No one knows what it’s like for two boys to best friends. We will always wonder what they talk about on long journeys when it’s just the two of them, but we will never know because no one knows. It’s a secret. We have to go by pieces. We know, for example, that it’s nice to have a pal in your corner, and sometimes you don’t even have to talk about it. Sometimes, if you get in a fight, you can just go off into the woods together and box it out. You don’t have to talk about it, you just box it out, back in the thin ash woods, back by the raccoon hide-out, where the raccoons wash their stolen food in pools of water, those bandits, those aristocrats.

Flip J. put his head up, and Hayworth leaned down, and they kissed like two animals. They tasted each other, the tar-like liquor they’d been drinking, and the taste of running fast through the woods so your lungs open up. Then Hayworth jumped down from the rock and ran back through the woods, and she left Flip J. behind.

When she came back to the dead raccoon, Thomas J. sat on the stoop, breathing.

“Where’s Flip J?” he asked, “Third place to a seventeen year old girl. Too bad.”

“He let me win,” said Hayworth. She knelt by the raccoon. It looked like it was leaping. Hayworth put her hand into its dull fur. It was still a bit warmer than the air around it. Its black paws were splayed. The bullet had gone in at the shoulder, and the shoulder was torn.

“You’re not still upset about that raccoon, are you?” asked Thomas J.

“I’m going to skin it,” said Hayworth.

“You don’t know how to skin a raccoon.”

“Lend me your knife.”

Thomas J. came forward unsteadily from all the rum. He gave Hayworth his long knife, which was dull from him practicing throwing it, and it thunking into rotten wood.

Hayworth hefted the raccoon by its tail, but it was heavier than she'd expected, so she sank it back down into the intersection. Its head fell back, its mouth came open, and its teeth were a snarl of needles, useless. Hayworth turned the raccoon on its back. It was a boy raccoon. What Thomas J. had said was true. She didn't know how to skin it. She had never even considered skinning anything in the city that they came from.

Hayworth began between the hind legs with the knife. The blade punctured through the fur and skin easily, slishing inside, but when she turned the blade to pull it upwards towards the chin, she had to use all her strength, she had to use the knife like a saw, and the flesh and fur became ragged. Hayworth opened the raccoon. The stomach slid out onto the ground, a gummy pink sack, dragging a soft heap of intestines. The liver was blue. The kidneys, one after the other, Hayworth held in her hand. Each part was perfect, intact, a neat slick collection, tucked away.

She began to relish the searching knife, the gooey ordered work of it, she cut all the way up to the neck. Hayworth filled her hands with the fur, deep, filthy, and soft, with the layer of long hair skimming over the top, coarse and black tipped. At first the pelt peeled easily back, falling in a heavy fluid fold, but working the skin away from the leg bones stopped her. She had to scrape and scrape with the knife, but still the legs held steadily to their scraps of fur. Hayworth began to feel the night's heat. It started to stink a bit. Hair caked the dull knife.

Thomas J. sat on the storefront steps and sipped rum and water, watching and then not watching Hayworth's progress.

"I don't care about this," he told her. "I don't want to know anything about this. I think we should leave it alone."

"Do we have any salt?" she asked him.

"Salt?"

"I think I should pack the pelt in salt to cure it. Look in the five and dime and see if there's salt."

"I don't want to go in that five and dime all alone without a light," said Thomas J. "Where's Flip J, anyway?"

"I'd have expected him back by now," said Hayworth, looking into the woods.

"I don't like to go around in the dark alone," said Thomas J. "I wish Flip J. would come back."

But Flip J. had left the path to cut through the ash wood, and he caught his foot on a root, and he fell down and hit his head, and he had a long dream, and when he woke up, the moon shone through the trees just like milky daytime. Flip J. turned his head and came nose to nose with a doe's skull, its empty eyes wide with sympathy. He drew himself up to one elbow until he could see that he lay in a dark valley full of tumbling brown leaves. He wasn't lying on any actual ground, just on those shifting leaves, and bumping up underneath the heaps of leaves were skulls, deer skulls, piles of them. They emerged from beneath the valley as if washed to shore. The spindly wood was silent, and it let go a prickly sweet smell that ran all through Flip J. He put his head back down and looked up through the trees at the bright sky. He thought of kissing Hayworth, of how soft-hearted and smart-alecky she was. That's what we think he thought of. That's what we would have been thinking if we had been Flip J, but he was inscrutable and content.

Hayworth left the raccoon and came to sit with Thomas J.

"Wasn't he right behind you?" asked Thomas J, looking hard at her.

"If he's not back soon, we'll go find him," said Hayworth. She put her sticky hand on Thomas J's shoulder.

They waited in the dark on the stoop. A scavenger, a dark animal came sniffing into the intersection towards the raccoon carcass. It was another raccoon. It snuffled and nibbled at the dead raccoon.

"We'll wait for one more minute, and then we'll go look for him," said Hayworth.

"I don't like going around in the dark without him, that's all," said Thomas J.

They waited and waited for Flip J, who'd had a vision. When he came wandering back, blinking into the intersection, they held him and petted him, they clapped him on the back.