

## **Shooting a Squirrel**

*M. A. Williams*

He lay on top of a thick clover patch in the middle of his grandfather's field. The field had been used to grow corn, redskin potatoes, radishes, watermelon, turnip greens, collard greens, and mustard greens. Now, it is empty. Grass has sprouted, but the clovers thrive. The soil hasn't been maintained since his grandfather came into his eighties, but the clovers pull nitrogen directly from the air and flourish in the most lifeless dirt. The soil doesn't need to be balanced or fertile for them.

He lay there, and thought that he should do this more because it feels good, and he is good, and he should do things that make him feel good. The clover patches are ignored by most of his family. No one thinks much about them. Tate spends most of his visits to his grandparent's intently searching for the prized rarity of the four leaf clover. The most prized ones are mutants. His father used to tell him that although he did not consider himself to be the superstitious type, he didn't feel hypocritical for carrying a four-leaf clover in his wallet everyday of his life. A four-leaf clover is one mutation among thousands of its normal counterparts. The clovers, as he lay there, are soft to the back of his head. He doesn't mind the insects so much. He can feel them, and their tiny insect legs, crawling over his legs back onto the grass to a destination, he is sure.

Sally Sue is his grandmother's name but she goes by Pinky. Everyone asks why and she is either vague or extravagant in answering if answering at all. It is a game to her, a process that she goes through with new people. It is her way to live with some mystery, or let some flair escape.

"That ain't no Goddamned example of a good Southern woman Tate," his granddaddy exasperates, drunk, while they sit on the back porch at dusk.

He tries to hate that woman desperately, too much history he would say, which by his own account is the same reason he loves her. He does love her—undoubtedly, but in an old and tired sort of way. In his eyes she isn't as unreachable as she is just flat out uncontrollable.

"Her mind is flimsy," he says erratically shaking his finger in Tate's direction.

"And full of air!"

Tate laughs and watches Pinky give his grandfather a look and animatedly scuffle into the house from the porch. He waits for his father to pick him up.

Pinky's clothes are colorful and always wavering—the patterns, the seams—it suits her, but apparently not the father of her children. She's seventy-eight years old, and Tate's grandfather is 83, and they are old together. They never did get married and neither did any of their kids, which didn't stop the occurrence of grandchildren.

Robert is Tate's dad. He is the oldest of his brothers and sisters. He looks weather-worn. His skin is leathery and tan, and looks as if he's been working construction all his life. He doesn't work construction, but he is always outside busy. He works for the Homes of Grace delivering furniture and other household items that people have donated to people in need. He drives the truck primarily. Robert has worked there since being released from the penitentiary seven years ago. The job was supposed to be temporary. It was a primer job, something to

orient him back to a working environment assigned to him by his parole board as a part of early release. His obligation ended after so many thousand hours, but he decided to stay and keep driving the truck for a small wage. Tate goes with him sometimes and enjoys sitting up high in the truck, which is more like a full size U-haul but big enough for him.

Tate can hear the squeaking shocks and springs of his dad's Ford pick-up getting closer. He comes in and Pinky has dinner ready. Calmly, Robert greets Tate and Pinky and they sit at the table. Ten minutes later Tate's grandfather comes in and sits down. They eat.

After finishing dinner they all watch television for a little while. Before long, Robert stands up and Tate collects his things and they drive home.

Robert and Tate live seven miles north of his grandparent's house in a fish camp on the Potocaw River. Their house is on stilts, and is really more of a camp. It is one large room with a kitchen, a TV, a small enclosed latrine, a bed and a couch. A screen door leads to the open back porch which is as wide as the house. There is a lawn table and a couple of plastic chairs, and twenty-five feet below is the river with rigid cypress roots peaking just above the water. There's is in a row of other fish camps and on the other side of the river are houseboats. Behind the little fish camp neighborhood, or the white-trash country club as Pinky labeled it, is 450 acres of woods and swamp. They have only lived there for three months, and had moved from the neighboring town when Tate's mother took a manufacturing job in the northern part of the state. She asked Tate what he wanted to do, and since he had spent a lot of time and felt most at home at his grandparent's anyway, the clean break was easy for her. She told Tate that it was a temporary post, but his father seemed to act as if it were permanent. But Tate likes his new community and his new friends.

Their neighbors are Vern and Sheila Gaston and their son Burt Gaston, who is the same age as Tate. The two became friends quickly and board the school bus together in the morning at the end of the red clay road where their homes are situated. It was mid-Summer when Robert and Tate moved in, and the three months that passed were filled with fishing, shooting bb guns, and intense exploration of the surrounding 450 acres. Burt and Tate keep busy, doing what boys do in the country. Tate follows Burt, envious of his familiarity with the various activities they undertake. He shoots better, swims better, rides his bike harder, hikes longer, catches more fish, and drives a boat all by himself. Burt isn't the only one superior to Tate in these areas, as most of the boys around are just as strong, quick, and experienced as Burt.

Tate and Burt meet in front of their homes as they almost simultaneously walk down the steps leading from their front doors. They walk down the red clay road and board the bus. It's chillier this particular morning, Tate notices. It had been getting cooler over the past month, and he remembers Fall is setting in. Tate and Burt scurry off the bus, one after the other, when they arrive to school. They hurdle around the side of the school building to their group's chosen location of gathering. Everyone is dressed in the usual attire: cowboy or mud boots, camouflage shirt, and jeans. The group is already huddled in its normal fashion as Tate and Burt walk up.

"Well I use a .22 rifle because it's usually clean and you don't destroy the meat. You know, the bullets are small," one of them exclaims, rationalizing his caliber choice.

Another group member contributes.

“I went squirrel hunting with my 20 gauge shotgun last weekend. You want to talk about a mess. I couldn’t even eat it, it was so mangled. That gun sure did tear the hell out of it though. Its head only hung by skin and most of its body was gone.”

Then the next person in line speaks, and the next, as if a ritual is being conducted, all sharing their best or most recent hunting stories. Tate is nervous at first. Hunting is one of the things he isn’t very familiar with. He had never hunted anything except four leaf clovers in the patches around his grandparent’s. The group turns to hear Burt’s story and they do, in all its extravagant detail. He gives a seemingly rehearsed speech about some twenty-seven point buck. Tate had only known Burt for three months, and this business about hunting is new. Burt’s experience with this—his familiarity with this particular act—threatens Tate. He is next in succession. Burt finishes his story, and hails in a kind of victory laugh with the rest of the group and looks at Tate.

“What about you, Tate? Has it been since last year that you’ve been hunting? What did you kill last year?” Burt asks him innocently and excitedly.

He is hesitant to answer immediately. He’s unsure what would be acceptable or convincing. He remembers the first story—the squirrel being shot to bits—and a squirrel seems like a safe choice to him.

“Last year I only ever went squirrel hunting, I never did get any chance to kill a buck. But I killed plenty of squirrels.”

Burt nods his head and the rest of the group follows as if they are all affirming Tate’s explanation, as if they deeply understand the regret of not getting to kill a buck and settling for squirrels. The bell rings and everyone trickles in the building to class. Burt and Tate walk to class together.

“Do you like eating squirrel?” Burt asks Tate.

“Yea I do. I hunt them don’t I,” he answers assuredly.

“We’re going squirrel hunting after school today then. We’ll just go a half mile or so into the woods and see if we can get us a couple. This is the time of year to do it,” Burt says. Tate puts up no argument.

“Ok, as soon as we get home.”

The bus ride after school is mirthful and at the same time distressing for Tate. He and Burt sit there, with their backpacks in their laps shaking up and down as the bus travels over the old disintegrating country road. Their stop is the last one. They have a 40 minute ride, which puts them home at 3:40, leaving only a small amount of daylight.

“As soon as we get home, we’ll each run up to the house, get ready quick, grab our pellet guns and go,” Burt says with fiery assertion.

Tate moves right along with this.

“Ok, I’ll be ready quick,” he answers even though he really doesn’t know anything specific about getting ready to go hunting, and he assumes there is a particular process.

Its 3:40 and both of them hurry off the bus and dart up the wooden stairs drastically swinging the screen doors on each of their houses open and by the force of their own weight falling passed the door inside. Tate thinks as rapidly as he can about what he should do to get ready and how he should dress. He takes his pair of army pants from his Halloween costume the last year and puts them on. His granddaddy gave him a camouflage t-shirt, he remembers, and finds it. He wears his boots and grabs his dad's pellet gun. He feels something is missing. His father isn't home from work yet, so no tips are available, and he certainly couldn't ask Burt. He remembers he still has the green and black face paint that his mom decorated him with the last Halloween. He finds it and applies it all over his face. Walking down the stairs he notices Burt is already outside and is postured as if he'd been waiting. He also notices that Burt is wearing the same clothes he was in all day, and only put on a hat and some boots. Burt is laughing.

"Damn. Are you done Rambo?" He says to Tate.

"I'll be less obvious than you," Tate says back to him.

"After all that trouble, I hope so," Burt says still finding it humorous, but he isn't spiteful about it, just entertained.

They walk down the red clay road, both wielding their weapons and preparing their state of mind. They pass the boat stalls on their right and a little further down the bait shop convenience store floating on pontoons and Styrofoam in line next to the other house boats. Fishermen can pull up to it for a quick supply stop, and Tate always buys candy from there. The fish camp is old and dirty.

They veer off to the trail entrance on the left side of the road. Its beginning is at the edge of the 450 acres, and Burt claims it is the easiest trail to find your way back on.

"Here we go," Burt says. "From this point on, we have to be in complete silence, or they'll hear us coming."

Tate nods his head in agreement and they proceed. They walk down the trail for a while, constantly peeking up into the branches. Tate is excited with anticipation and feels as though he is on the hunt, but he is also terrified. Burt stops and points to the left at the top of some trees. They go off the trail. The trees are not as thick in this area, the trunks are all massive and spaced out on the ground but their spreads create a roof for the entire wilderness. The boys stand adjacent to each other bracing themselves and their elevated guns against tree trunks spread ten feet apart. Tate holds his weapon steady using a convenient knot on the tree to rest the barrel on. It's pointed up, towards the spastically moving and disorienting group of squirrels. He looks over to Burt, and notices his eye locked through the sights of his weapon pointed at the little animals. So far, there has been no opportunity for a clean shot. So, they wait.

Tate looks at the ground by his feet and then in front of him, and then all around and notices the clover patches that seem to cover much of the dirt. Then he notices that half the trees around him and Burt are dead. He thinks about surrendering his hunter's stance and looking through the millions of clovers.

"Shoot it, it's yours Tate!" Burt whispers fervently.

Tate snaps out of his gaze and quickly remembers why he is there. He tightens his stance and his body and his grip on the gun. The squirrel is sitting on a leafless branch, with no

obstruction. And it's big. He aims for its neck unsure of where the pellet would really go in all the excitement and confusion, and takes his shot. He looks up nervously and sees that he missed the squirrel. It's running down the branch, making an escape.

"Damn," he says as if thoroughly disappointed in himself. He looks over to Burt who is still in position following the same squirrel down the limb and he fires nipping it. Tate watches as it is forced from the tree, falling and breaking the beams of the setting sun that creep between the branches all the way to the ground. It falls on its back and lets out a high-pitched squeak on impact. Tate and Burt run up to it. It's still alive and belly-up kicking its hind legs so fast wondering why the ground isn't there. "It looks like its back broke in the fall," Burt says. "It's your kill Tate, this is your hunt. I was only helping a little, but I won't even tell anyone as long as you finish it."

He looks at Burt and sees his intensity. He knows there is no backing down at this point. He looks down to the struggling squirrel. It is laying on top a thick bed of clovers in the middle of a patch that has millions. It is a glorious sort of death bed. Tate raises his gun and puts it to the neck of the squirrel and fires through it. The feeling right after is unfamiliar—he isn't happy or proud, but he feels different.

"That's a big one," Burt says in approval.

"Well, it's a little past five, and I have to be home for supper so I guess this is all for today, we can come again tomorrow though, if you want."

Tate looks up from the dead squirrel at Burt.

"Sure," he says. "I should be able to."

The boys walk home as the sun continues to decline and the crickets and frogs grow louder. They walk back down the red clay road to their homes and Burt goes inside for dinner. Tate carries the squirrel by its tail and slowly walks up the steps to his door. He walks in and Robert is sitting on the couch watching one of the four channels they have. He lifts the squirrel up to display it to his father. Robert looks at him, surprised.

"I was wondering where you'd been. So, you went squirrel hunting? Did Burt go too? I figured it wouldn't be too long before you went and did something like that."

Robert gets off the couch energetically, as if he'd been waiting for Tate to bring home dinner.

"Well son, go ahead and bring it to the back deck and I'll be there in a second."

Tate is apprehensive and can't stop thinking about the squirrel's kicking feet and its soft white belly on top of all those clovers facing him.

"I suppose you do want me to show you how to skin it and gut it, so you can finish the process, right?" Robert asks him.

"Yes, I want to finish."

He carries the squirrel to the back deck and his father comes out quickly with newspaper and spreads it across the table. Tate puts the squirrel on top. His father cuts off the tail and pulls the bone out of it. He gives it to Tate.

“You should keep that,” he tells him.

“It’s your first squirrel. After it dries out, put it with all them clovers you keep. It’s like those, you know. It’ll always mean something to you.”

Tate listens and thinks that he will keep the tail, perhaps forever. Robert begins to slowly peel the skin away giving his son precise instructions.

“I remember when your granddaddy showed me this,” he says while making an incision down the underside of its torso. Tate pays strict attention to his father’s hands. The movements seem precise, but Tate knows he won’t remember how to do this. Robert takes the squirrel’s butchered body and holds it over the rail of the back deck and dumps the entrails in the river below. The Brims come up pecking at all the guts. He finishes and in the end two meaty hind legs were all that remained.

“Ok,” Robert says.

“It’s ready to be cooked. Do you want to eat it?” he asks Tate.

“I guess I should,” Tate answers.

“In that case we’ll have to go to your grandparent’s. I don’t know how to cook it really,” Robert confesses to Tate, “But your grandma does.”

His dad makes a call to his granddaddy to let him know they are coming.

“Let’s get this in a Ziploc and head on over,” Robert says to Tate.

They arrive to his granddaddy’s house. Pinky seems as though she’s been waiting right behind the door for them when they walk in. She gasps and throws her hands in the air animating herself.

“My little Tate, oh my little Tate! You’re turning into a real live country boy, Heaven help you.”

She hugs him and takes his hand leading him into the kitchen. His father follows behind them. Tate sits on a bar stool in front of the kitchen counter as his grandmother puts her greased iron skillet on a burner. She whips around as if dancing to a song and moves toward Tate.

“And how would you like it cooked, sir?” Pinky asks him in an unfamiliar accent.

“I don’t know,” he says.

“I’ve never eaten squirrel.”

“In that case,” Pinky says,

“I’ll have to make you my specialty, squirrel fricassee. It’s fried and smothered in gravy, you’ll like it.”

She whips back around and starts heating oil in the skillet and dusting the squirrel’s hind quarters with seasoning and flour. She looks at Tate’s father standing there and then back to her hands and the meat.

“It’s been three months now, Robert. Have you heard from her yet?”

“No. Not yet,” He says and takes the stool next to his son. Tate knows the ensuing conversation and takes it as his cue to go elsewhere while his grandma works on the fricassee.

He walks to the back porch. His granddaddy sits nursing a sweaty cup of whiskey and smoking his pipe tobacco that smells so sweet. Tate sits in the rocking chair next to him.

“Where’ve you been today?” His Granddaddy asks.

“Your Daddy told me you shot your first squirrel. Are you happy?”

“I guess,” Tate says.

“Did you at least enjoy being out there?” his granddaddy asks.

“Yea, I guess I did.”

“I remember when your father shot his first squirrel. When I cleaned it he was kind of disgusted with the whole thing,” his granddaddy says chuckling.

“I never did hunt because I enjoyed the kill. It was always more about an excuse for me and the boys to get lost in exploration and half-dangers,” he says as if it’s his dearest memory.

“What’s harder,” his granddaddy asks him,  
“Hunting for those four leaf clovers or hunting for squirrel?”

Tate thinks about the question.

“Clovers are harder to hunt for, I suppose.”

“Why is that?” his grandfather asks.

“I guess cause hunting for clovers takes more time and you hardly ever find what you’re looking for. With hunting squirrel, you find one; any one, point the gun, shoot, and kill. It doesn’t matter which one just as long as the shot is clear.”

His granddaddy is silent for a moment. He takes a couple more sips of whiskey and a couple drags off the pipe. Tate looks into the wilderness of his grandfather’s farm, and smells the beginnings of his dinner.

“When you’re hunting for four leaf clovers,” his granddaddy says to him, “you’re more like the prey. You present yourself with all your vulnerabilities and ultimately the clover finds you.”

He sips his whiskey again.

Tate shakes his head as if to suggest he understands precisely what his grandpa means. They sit quietly together, listening to the crickets until supper.

Pinky calls him to feast. He leaves his grandfather who's still sipping his whiskey on the porch. His father sits on the couch watching their satellite television, and Tate sits back on the bar stool at the counter as his grandma reveals her masterpiece. It is a large steaming pile of food. She pours the meat and gravy over white rice and places it in front of him.

“Enjoy darling. This is *your* meal.”

She goes to the sink and begins to scrub the burnt flour off the skillet. Tate sits alone and tears into the mess. He doesn't like the taste or texture of the squirrel meat, but he enjoys his meal and thinks about the story he'll have to tell the next day at school.