

A THIN DISGUISE

We all wear disguises. The simple act of dressing is disguising. Clothes are disguises, beards, pitch of voice, what we say, what we keep secret. Costumes declare us, but disguises protect us from exposure. Wearing them, we blend in. Every salesman dressing for a client knows the drill, every young intern pulling
5 on a white lab coat, every recent graduate struggling with an unfamiliar suit and tie.

In two decades as a magazine writer, I practiced disguise, never entirely sure if the practice was a necessity or a perquisite,¹ but thoroughly enjoying it. I wore khaki in East Africa, denim at a New Mexican quarter-horse race, an air of
10 sophistication around preppy cocaine dealers in midtown Chicago. . . . My purpose wasn't deception. My purpose was simply to approach my prey close enough to cast the net.

So I thought I understood disguises when I went out among farmers recently to observe their work. More than most groups, farmers are cautious of outsiders.
15 They're aware that city people consider them common. They have a uniform of their own, distinguishable even at a distance. They know when to wave at a passing pickup truck and when to ignore a stranger driving by. I bought work boots and jeans and flannel shirts. I exchanged my contact lenses for glasses, and wore a hat that advertised hybrid seed corn. I wasn't entirely a fraud. I had spent
20 six adolescent years on a Missouri farm. I could still drive a tractor. I hadn't forgotten how to call hogs.

Tom Bauer, as I will call the farmer who has allowed me to observe his life, encouraged my attempts at camouflage. He had trouble enough explaining why someone was following him around with a notebook. Disguised, I could appear, ;
25 to the casual eye at least, to be a hired man, a census-taker, a cousin down on his luck.

Tom was wary of me at first, but he taught me about farming. I told him stories about traveling the world, and we came to be friends. Though I never drove his combine, I disked his wheat fields and trucked tons of corn and
30 soybeans to the elevator beside the Missouri River where he sold them.

The deer-hunting season, late fall, is a high point in Tom's year. Deer share the 1,000 acres he farms. Once a year, he hunts them to put venison in his freezer, a harvest as honest as his harvests of cattle and hogs, animals men also kill to eat.

Deer season brings Tom together with his brothers. With a crowd of sons,
35 they camp out in an old house trailer Tom has set up on blocks in a grove of trees beside a pond. A propane tank feeds a stove to heat stew. Older brother Cowboy, older brother Dale, Tom and the crowd of sons dine, joke, reminisce, play blackjack for pennies. From warm sleeping bags they disperse in the predawn darkness to the blinds² Tom has built.

¹ perquisite – an incidental benefit attached to employment

² blinds – concealed places for hunters

- 40 Tom invited me to join them. A chance to win a deer and a share of family camaraderie were the most generous gifts he had to give. I borrowed a rifle and acquired further disguises: insulated brown canvas coveralls and rubber boots, a hunting permit, doe scent to cover my tracks. Tom arranged a blind for me beside a deer superhighway in a stretch of woods all my own.
- 45 I sat unmoving for two hours in the cold darkness, watched the moon set and the sky lighten, heard the crashing, like human footsteps, of the deer fanning out to browse, and opened the season firing wildly above a doe's head. Hunting again at dusk that afternoon, I wounded a deer but failed to bring it down. Tom and Cowboy heard my shots and drove over to help; we searched into a stubble field
- 50 until dark. The trail ended, which meant the bleeding stopped. The wound was probably superficial, Tom counseled me to alleviate my guilt.
- That demonstration of incompetence should have cautioned me. It didn't. By then, I believed my own disguise. I thought I was a farmer and had grown up with guns, though I hadn't been near a rifle in 25 years. Outside the trailer in the
- 55 stir of departure the next afternoon—pickup trucks backing and revving—I shucked a round from the magazine of my rifle into the chamber, preparing to unload. Instead of pointing the rifle barrel up into the air as I ought to have done, I held it parallel to the ground. I thought I had control. The hammer slipped under my thumb. The rifle fired. The terrible explosion blew through the woods.
- 60 In horror, I looked where the barrel was pointing—between two pickups. I felt a surge of relief. Then Cowboy jumped from one of the pickups, flailing his arms. He snatched off his cap, bobbed up and down, rubbed the top of his head. I've killed him, I thought. I've shot him in the head and killed him. He just doesn't know it yet.
- 65 Cowboy didn't fall. I laid down the rifle and went to him. Tom came out of the pickup to his brother's side. There wasn't any blood. "You were white as a ghost," Tom told me later. I started to hope I hadn't taken a life, brought grief to a dozen families, ruined my own life as well.
- The bullet, a .30-caliber soft-nosed slug, had drilled into the pickup cab just
- 70 above the rear window, channeled along the steel roof and burst through the windshield. A fragment had torn downward through the sun visor, entered the crown of Cowboy's cap, snipped a few hairs, exited the cap just above the sweatband. The heat of its passage had only startled him. The small lethal shrapnel left no mark.
- 75 "I feel a little closer to my Maker," Cowboy wrote me later. I paid for body work on his pickup and a new windshield. I put away guns forever. The Bauers forgave me. "It was careless," Tom said, generously finding the good in it, "but we'll remember it for years to come and it'll remind us all to be careful." It will fade to a story told in the trailer over stew: the day that city writer hotshot nearly
- 80 killed Cowboy.
- It won't fade for me. My heart pounds whenever I remember it, with horror but also with shame. I never was much of an actor. My farmer friends have worked a lifetime to learn their roles. I thought I could just breeze in and wing it. As a result of that arrogance, I nearly killed a man. I trusted too much to
- 85 disguises. Any man's work is a lifetime of learning. At best, disguises only open the door.