A BOY GOES HUNTING

A FALL DAY, A FATHER AND SON, AND A GUN

BY ALISON MILLER

Photograph courtesy of Brent Burr

Wyatt Burr, then age five, poses with the first buck he shot in Hart County, Georgia, in October 2018.

Wearing the trademark hunter's orange blaze, Wyatt and Brent Burr head into the woods to hunt.

Photograph by Alison Miller

WYATT BURR IS NOT AFRAID OF ANYTHING. NOT BEARS, NOT SNAKES, NOT WILD HOGS, NOT BOBCATS, NOT COYOTES. AND DEFINITELY NOT DEER.

He has a girlfriend named Taylor, and on the weekends, he likes to target shoot with his bolt-action .22. He is six years, four months old. On this late October day, he is going hunting with his dad.

Last deer season, Wyatt killed his first buck. In a photo that his father, Brent, took to memorialize the occasion, Wyatt stands behind the felled stag. Blood leaks from its mouth and from the kill shot high in the center of its body. The bullet missed the heart but went straight through both lungs. Wyatt's doughy hands hang from the sleeves of a camouflage jacket, the excess polyester of an oversized blaze vest tied in a knot at his belly. He smiles an open-mouthed sideways grin, the brim of his cap casting a shadow over long, thick eyelashes. Slung across his back is the weapon that delivered the deadly blow—the .35-caliber Marlin rifle Brent's granddaddy bought for him when he was a boy.

Brent married my good high school friend Shana. When I come back to Hartwell, Georgia, to visit, we sometimes get together at my childhood home. My six-year-old daughter, Avery, locks hands with Wyatt, and they cannonball off the end of the dock into the lake. Two kids, born four months apart, one who thinks "gun" is a bad word and the other who took possession of his first firearm when he was three. It was a Christmas gift.

Last August, I asked Shana if she thought Brent would allow me to write about going hunting with him and Wyatt. Two and a half months later, we're on our way to a forty-acre tract of private forestland in Elbert County, Georgia, twenty miles south of Hartwell.

"Sure enough out in the middle of nowhere," Brent says from the driver's seat of his 2009 F-150. He spits into a sports-drink bottle. A canister of dipping tobacco rests in a dashboard compartment, next to a box of shotgun shells.

Wyatt's strapped into a high-back

booster car seat in the back. A *Clifford* board book, a soft-sided lunchbox, and a couple of camouflage baseball caps rest beside. Inches from his size-3 Nikes, swinging gently in its harness with every bump in the road, is the Marlin.

More than ninety percent of Georgia forest land is privately owned, and many sportsmen, present company included, prefer to hunt on private land. "You don't ever know what kind of jackleg is out there looking at you through a scope," Brent says of public land. "And you gotta think, if they're looking at you through a scope, that means they're pointing a gun at you."

And you never point a gun at someone. As we drive, Brent talks through the sport's holy writ, reciting rules in a measured tone directed at his backseat audience. This is not the first time Wyatt has heard these tenets. And it won't be the last.

Safety's always first. Identify your target, and know what's behind it.

"There might be two deer! Or there might be something you're not 'posed to shoot!" Wyatt bellows.

"That's right," Brent says, like a primary school teacher. "Or some*body*. Or somebody's house. Or somebody's dog."

Wear orange. No deer in the world is orange. Kill with one shot. Anything else is unethical. You can shoot bucks on doe days, but not does on buck days. Never bring your keys. If you drop them in the woods, you'll never find them.

"I know how to spell box," Wyatt deflects. "B -O- X," then yawns like Chewbacca.

In this corner of northeast Georgia, Savannah River tributaries outnumber roads. We're twenty-five minutes into the drive when the asphalt turns to dirt. We plod along, eventually reaching a livestock gate. Brent gets out to unlock it and Wyatt tells me about that buck.

FEW THINGS IN LIFE CAN MOVE HUNTERS LIKE THE TAKING OF A LIFE IN THE QUIET WOODS.

"It was about a five-pounder," he says, calling up the specs in his head. "I think it was a three-pounder."

Brent climbs back in and clarifies. It was three-*pointer*. The deer had stood sixty yards away, its head tucked in the brush, its thick midsection exposed. Brent lined up the shot. Wyatt pulled the trigger.

"He runned around the tree and … " Wyatt snorts, "Dead. Me and my dad was crying. We were so happy."

"Me and you were shaking, weren't we?" Brent beams.

Few things in life can move hunters like the taking of a life in the quiet woods. It's electrifying and overpowering. Your body shakes, your heart beats in your ears, you coil to the sharp knife of emotions. Joy. Fear. Gratitude. Dignity. For father and son, it's a moment as elusive as it is enduring. One they'll attempt to re-create today.

WYATT PULLED THE TRIGGER FOR the first time when he was three, after he got a gun for Christmas.

Ignore the targets, Brent told him. Aim for the berm behind them. Brent held the butt and forend of the .22-caliber lever-action youth rifle to Wyatt's shoulder, and aimed. Wyatt's finger unleashed the blow. They continued that way for two hours—father, son, bound by firearm—shooting through nearly 100 rounds.

Brent pulls up a video he took this summer and passes the phone across the center console of the truck. Wyatt, wearing basketball shorts and an orange T-shirt bearing a wide-mouthed *T. rex*, crouches in a bay at the gun club. He bears most of his weight on his right leg, which is straight, and the rest on his left, bent, knee forward, on a wooden stool. His right elbow rests on the stone partition, thumb wrapped around the grip of his .22, forefinger on the trigger. "This is a clean-your-room challenge," Brent narrates, as he zooms in on the muzzle, and then on the target, 100 yards away.

Wyatt holds position. Five stagnant seconds go by. And he fires. The crack echoes off the red dirt, inseparable from the ping of bullet to steel target. Leaving the gun on its rest, Wyatt bounces up and turns in a single motion, and addresses the camera. "I don't have to clean my room!" he crows, then walks away with earned swagger, shouting, "Yeah, boy!"

He pops the camera with the muffs. "Boo-yah!"

For his father, it's one more calculated step toward making Wyatt an ethical hunter. If you go to the woods to shoot a deer, you owe it the courtesy of efficient death.

When he turns sixteen, Wyatt will have been handling guns for as long as he can remember. He won't have to guess at where to place a deer stand. He'll know how to spot their scrapes—the spots they dig out with their hooves and then pee on, marking their scent. He'll know how to slow his breathing to steady the crosshairs when he has one in his sight.

More importantly, he'll know how to safely handle a gun. Brent's father showed him how to shoot and taught a few basics of firearms safety. "I knew

Photograph by Nicole Craine

Brent Burr shows his son, Wyatt, how to look for signs of animals while squirrel hunting in a wildlife management area near Hartwell, Georgia.

Wyatt protects his ears from the crack of his father's rifle in the still of the forest.

Together, they place targets on paper for shooting practice at a gun club.

'Don't point it at yourself or someone else,'" Brent tells me later. "But I was a stupid kid who had a gun. I never hurt anybody or anything, but I very easily could have. Firearms to me were toys, which isn't the way it should be."

His grandfather gave him his first gun, when Brent was twelve. Four deer seasons would go by before he'd make his first kill. "It was with that," he says, pointing to the Marlin in the backseat.

Pursuits like hunting, in which ability, equipment, conditions, and luck entwine, are always crowned by charms and superstitions. With each object or ritual, we push the needle toward success and put ourselves at the mercy of a powerful unknown.

Brent adheres to one ritual. Though he owns several hunting rifles, on his first day out, he brings just the Marlin. "It's a nod to my granddaddy," he says.

Before dawn today, he crept into the woods alone, surrendering himself to the forceful quiet that hunters know well, a time and a place where there's nothing to do but think.

Instead of a thirty-two year-old dad, he was an uncertain teenager tiptoeing through the woods with a rifle on his back. At first his steps were undetectable on damp leaves. And then he spooked

WHEN WYATT TURNS SIXTEEN, HE WILL HAVE BEEN HANDLING GUNS FOR AS LONG AS HE CAN REMEMBER.

Photograph by Nicole Craine

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something—a deer, maybe, or a hog—and the thing made such a racket that he started to doubt himself. *I shouldn't have even come out here this morning. It's just pointless.*

He climbed the tree stand and let his left leg, the one riddled with tendinitis, dangle, to ease the pain. The sun peeked above the horizon and the wind stirred. *I just want to go home and get back in bed.*

A mosquito buzzed his ear. When he turned to smash it between his hands, he saw a buck, the biggest he'd ever seen in the woods. He brought the Marlin to his shoulder, peered through the scope. Antlers.

His heart thumped in his chest. He emptied his lungs, sank his shoulders, and fired. The deer hit the dirt. Brent felt himself trembling and then cried. "I've hunted my whole life for a deer like that," he says. It was the biggest buck he'd ever taken, a thirteen-point, 190-pound wall hanger.

Six hours later, as we drive, the beast's glorious head, wrapped in two large black trash bags, waits at Brent's home for a trip to the taxidermist.

Shana approves of Wyatt learning to hunt. She appreciates the skills and patience and discipline it imparts. "If anything ever happens to us, he's going to be able to get food for himself," she told me. "And I like the fact he learns gun safety, because a lot of kids don't get that." But she doesn't want that deer head displayed in the living room. It will hang in the spare bedroom, which has morphed into Brent's reloading room, a space flanked by gun safes and shelves of ammo.

The deer's body dangles from a chain at James' Deer Cooler, a walk-in refrigerator set behind a brick ranch house on a country road lined with barbed wire and t-posts. After the blood drains, the butcher will peel meat from bone,

partitioning the flesh into edible cuts. He'll saw through the ribs, then block the animal's midsection and hindquarters, slicing off tendons and tossing meat into the grind pile.

In just five days, Brent will load sixty-four pounds of vacuum-sealed protein into a cooler and haul it home, meals for weeks to come. Cube steak, dredged in egg wash and seasoned flour and fried in a cast iron skillet. Venison chili with cornbread. Ground meat in store-bought spaghetti sauce. When he thinks of it, he'll pull a bag of jerky from the freezer and send a few links to school with Wyatt, for a snack.

"Actually, deer meat's good for you," Wyatt says.

"It's a lot better for you than store-bought," Brent agrees. "You know where this animal grew up at."

"I wonder how they clean the blood off the meat. How long is it going to take to clean that deer, Dad?"

Brent gets out of the truck to unlock another gate. I ask Wyatt why he likes hunting. "Because you don't have to pay all your money on this at a store. And it's good. You can just kill it so you can get your own. And if you just kill it, you don't have to pay for it."

He parrots his father, but with every recapitulation, the words seed awareness. Someday he too will teach these lessons.

We splash through a gully, nearing our destination. Two pairs of eyes peek through the saplings along the edge of the road. "Slick heads," says Brent, referring to the does. "Can't shoot them till next week."

THE CABIN IS A UTILITY SHED WITH bunk beds, a couch, and a portable crib.

Brent's friend allows him to hunt on his land, free of charge. They can stay the night, so long as they pick up after themselves.

We stand on the porch and suit up. Wyatt's khaki pants, holdovers from last year, are snug on his waist and an inch too short. The sleeves of his camouflage shirt are rolled up at his wrists. As he walks, his orange vest slinks off his shoulders.

Brent emerges from the cabin with the Marlin and two folding camp chairs. Wyatt steps up like an eager soldier. "Here, I'll hold your gun, daddy." Brent declines.

On this October day, summer has dissipated, the mineral dry of winter is still weeks away. The air is clear and full of possibility. At this early afternoon hour, the sun is high and bright, the temperature peaking at seventy degrees.

We start toward the woods, our feet crunching dried leaves. When a fallen limb blocks the path, Wyatt takes to it like a wirewalker, balancing nimbly with his arms drawn to a T.

"We'll booger up here," Brent says, pointing to a thicket with a natural clearing in the center. From this roost, we have a 360-degree view. Mature white oak, poplar, cedar, hickory, and pine tower over scrub brush and saplings. The wind doesn't blow. There are no backyard songbirds, no skittering squirrels, no train whistles, no sirens, no highway rumble.

A narrow creek runs on one side, a dry riverbed on the other. It's a living room for the deer, Brent explains, a breather from the thick forest beyond, a place to amble and munch. A place for father and son to root down, to turn invisible, a place to hunt.

Violence lurks here, but never chaos. Like all rituals in sacred places, there are rules, spoken as they were in the truck, and unspoken as they are now, a control that cures over time. Lots and lots of time. Most of it void of gunshots and blood.

"It's so peaceful out here," Brent says, slack in his camp chair. "You hear that? Nothing. That's what I like."

Wyatt, sitting to his left, tears into a

Photograph by Nicole Craine

Rifle shooting practice

small package of cheese crackers. "Quiet like a mouse," he says as he crunches. Brent smiles and palms Wyatt's head. Target shooting comes easy to Wyatt, but silence and patience elude him.

Wyatt suggests scattering some crackers on the ground to attract deer. "We don't bait," Brent says. "It's cheating."

Wyatt's feet dangle from his chair and he swings them, ruffling leaves. "There was a deer," he says, and then grins and giggles.

"You can see why I killed something this morning while Wyatt was in church," Brent says, smiling.

We hear a *tck*, *tck*, *tck*'ing from a treetop. "That's a red-headed woodpecker," Brent whispers.

Wyatt turns to me with confidence. "That's a red-headed woodpecker," he chimes and goes back to airplaning crackers into his mouth.

What men tell boys eventually becomes what men tell themselves, and out here, the transfer happens in an instant. Over and over, Brent breaks the silence with lessons, big and small, from father to son.

"What do deer eat?" I ask Wyatt.

"Corn."

"What else?"

He leans toward Brent and then returns with the answer. Back and forth, back and forth, he goes. "Clover." "Mushrooms." "Pinecones." "Acorns."

Wyatt has moved on to pistachios and playfully bounces a shell off the shotgun.

"Don't hit the gun," Brent says, with calm authority.

"Why?"

"Because a gun's not something you throw stuff at. What I'd tell you? You respect the gun. ... You don't mistreat it. You take care of it, it takes care of you." Pause. "That gun is twenty years old."

At the end of rifle shooting practice, Brent and Wyatt Burr pack up their truck.

Photograph by Nicole Caine

"Twenty years old?"

"Actually it's older than that. I've had it for twenty years."

Wyatt leans toward me. "That gun's older than twenty years," he whispers. "That's how old it is."

"That gun was made in 1990," Brent whispers to Wyatt.

"That gun was made in 1990," Wyatt whispers to me.

Two hours and twenty minutes into our stakeout, Wyatt's boredom has ripened. "We're not gonna get no deer," he whines.

"You can't never tell, buddy," Brent says. "We gotta keep hunting. We gotta keep trying. If you killed something every time you went, that wouldn't be any fun. That's called killing. That's not hunting."

Wyatt reasons with him. "Dad, you already went, you already got the biggest buck."

Per the state of Georgia, Brent is allowed to take one more buck this season. And ten does. We're not going anywhere.

It's starting to cool down, so they might start moving, he says. "When it starts getting dark, that's when we have to be super quiet and keep our eyes peeled. Because we don't know where they're coming from. They might come from behind us. They might come in front of us." He stops. "Now let's stop talking and start hunting."

And finally at this crucial hour, Wyatt takes his dad's advice, sinking deep into his seat, still and silent, just in time.

THE SUN SINKS BELOW THE CANOPY, drying up the pools of sunlight that dapple the forest floor. The hazy glow illuminates a network of spider filament binding the trees around us.

At 5:40, we hear two shots in the distance.

At 6:02, another shot, and then another, and another, a minute apart.

And, then, at last, some action. A raccoon emerges from behind a tree 100 yards away. It moves forward, nose to the ground, scratching for nuts and berries and pouncing on insects in the leaves, unaware of our presence.

"I'm scared," Wyatt whimpers. He's glued to the back of his chair, knees tucked to his chest, hands gripping the arms of the chair. "Daddy—just shoot him," he pleads.

"That's a female," Brent says, his tone reassuring, his words distracting.

"What's a female?"

"A girl."

"Do they eat boys?"

The raccoon moves closer. When she sees us, she arches her back like a cat and tiptoes backward. She stops, drawing her body up on her hind legs and raising her front paws like a prairie dog. Wyatt trembles.

"I'm about to cry," he squeezes his eyes shut, tries to hold it in, but yowls instead. He is not a brave hunter. He's a six-year old boy, alone in the woods, helpless against menace. He slinks to his father's lap, buries his head into the pit of Brent's arm, and weeps. Brent cocoons him.

The raccoon has crept up a tree and stares back at us. Now that the tears are flowing, Wyatt cannot stop them. His lip trembles. His flushed cheeks are wet.

"Look, she's still looking at us. You see her? She's more scared of you than you are of her, buddy."

Wyatt cries.

"You stayed real still. You did good."

"I want to go home now."

"You're bigger than her."

"I'm not as big as you."

"You don't have to be. You got a big heart, that's all that matters."

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