

## A Bear Hunt, William Faulkner

## A Bear Hunt

RATLIFF IS TELLING this. He is a sewing-machine agent; time was when he traveled about our county in a light, strong buckboard drawn by a sturdy, wiry, mismatched team of horses; now he uses a model T Ford, which also carries his demonstrator machine in a tin box on the rear, shaped like a dog kennel and painted to resemble a house.

Ratliff may be seen anywhere without surprise — the only man present at the bazaars and sewing bees of farmers' wives; moving among both men and women at all-day singings at country churches, and singing, too, in a pleasant barytone.

He was even at this bear hunt of which he speaks, at the annual hunting camp of Major de Spain in the river bottom twenty miles from town, even though there was no one there to whom he might possibly have sold a machine, since Mrs. de Spain doubtless already owned one, unless she had given it to one of her married daughters, and the other man — the man called Lucius Provine — with whom he became involved, to the violent detriment of his face and other members, could not have bought one for his wife even if he would, without Ratliff sold it to him on indefinite credit.

Provine is also a native of the county. But he is forty now and most of his teeth are gone, and it is years now since he and his dead brother and another dead and forgotten contemporary named Jack Bonds were known as the Provine gang and terrorized our quiet town after the unimaginative fashion of wild youth by letting off pistols on the square late Saturday nights or galloping their horses down scurrying and screaming lanes of churchgoing ladies on Sunday morning.

Younger citizens of the town do not know him at all save as a tall, apparently strong and healthy man who loafs in a brooding, saturnine fashion wherever he will be allowed, never exactly accepted by any group, and who makes no effort whatever to support his wife and three children.

There are other men among us now whose families are in want; men who, perhaps, would not work anyway, but who now, since the last few years, cannot find work. These all attain and hold to a certain respectability by acting as agents for the manufacturers of minor articles like soap and men's toilet accessories and kitchen objects, being seen constantly about the square and the streets carrying small black sample cases.

One day, to our surprise, Provine also appeared with such a case, though within less than a week the town officers discovered that it contained whisky in pint bottles. Major de Spain extricated him somehow, as it was Major de Spain who supported his family by eking out the money which Mrs. Provine earned by sewing and such — perhaps as a Roman gesture of salute and farewell to the bright figure which Provine had been before time whipped him.

For there are older men who remember the Butch — he has even lost somewhere in his shabby past the lusty dare-deviltry of the nickname — Provine of twenty years ago; that youth without humor, yet with some driving, inarticulate zest for breathing which has long since

burned out of him, who performed in a fine frenzy, which was, perhaps, mostly alcohol, certain outrageous and spontaneous deeds, one of which was the Negro-picnic business. The picnic was at a Negro church a few miles from town.

In the midst of it, the two Provines and Jack Bonds, returning from a dance in the country, rode up with drawn pistols and freshly lit cigars; and taking the Negro men one by one, held the burning cigar ends to the popular celluloid collars of the day, leaving each victim's neck ringed with an abrupt and faint and painless ring of carbon. This is he of whom Ratliff is talking.

But there is one thing more which must be told here in order to set the stage for Ratliff. Five miles farther down the river from Major de Spain's camp, and in an even wilder part of the river's jungle of cane and gum and pin oak, there is an Indian mound. Aboriginal, it rises profoundly and darkly enigmatic, the only elevation of any kind in the wild, flat jungle of river bottom.

Even to some of us — children though we were, yet we were descended of literate, town-bred people — it possessed inferences of secret and violent blood, of savage and sudden destruction, as though the yells and hatchets which we associated with Indians through the hidden and secret dime novels which we passed among ourselves were but trivial and momentary manifestations of what dark power still dwelled or lurked there, sinister, a little sardonic, like a dark and nameless beast lightly and lazily slumbering with bloody jaws — this, perhaps, due to the fact that a remnant of a once powerful clan of the Chickasaw tribe still lived beside it under Government protection. They now had American names and they lived as the sparse white people who surrounded them in turn lived.

Yet we never saw them, since they never came to town, having their own settlement and store. When we grew older we realized that they were no wilder or more illiterate than the white people, and that probably their greatest deviation from the norm — and this, in our country, no especial deviation — was the fact that they were a little better than suspect to manufacture moonshine whisky back in the swamps.

Yet to us, as children, they were a little fabulous, their swamphidden lives inextricable from the life of the dark mound, which some of us had never seen, yet of which we had all heard, as though they had been set by the dark powers to be guardians of it.

As I said, some of us had never seen the mound, yet all of us had heard of it, talked of it as boys will. It was as much a part of our lives and background as the land itself, as the lost Civil War and Sherman's march, or that there were Negroes among us living in economic competition who bore our family names; only more immediate, more potential and alive.

When I was fifteen, a companion and I, on a dare, went into the mound one day just at sunset. We saw some of those Indians for the first time; we got directions from them and reached the top of the mound just as the sun set. We had camping equipment with us, but we made no fire. We didn't even make down our beds.

We just sat side by side on that mound until it became light enough to find our way back to the road. We didn't talk. When we looked at each other in the gray dawn, our faces were gray, too, quiet, very grave. When we reached town again, we didn't talk either. We just parted and

went home and went to bed. That's what we thought, felt, about the mound. We were children, it is true, yet we were descendants of people who read books and who were — or should have been — beyond superstition and impervious to mindless fear.

Now Ratliff tells about Lucius Provine and his hiccup.

When I got back to town, the first fellow I met says, "What happened to your face, Ratliff? Was De Spain using you in place of his bear hounds?" "No, boys," I says. "Hit was a cattymount."

"What was you trying to do to hit, Ratliff?" a fellow says.

"Boys," I says, "be dog if I know."

And that was the truth. Hit was a good while after they had done hauled Luke Provine offen me that I found that out. Because I never knowed who Old Man Ash was, no more than Luke did. I just knowed that he was Major's nigger, a-helping around camp.

All I knowed, when the whole thing started, was what I thought I was aiming to do — to maybe help Luke sho enough, or maybe at the outside to just have a little fun with him without hurting him, or even maybe to do Major a little favor by getting Luke outen camp for a while. And then hyer hit is about midnight and that durn fellow comes swurging outen the woods wild as a skeered deer, and runs in where they are setting at the poker game, and I says, "Well, you ought to be satisfied. You done run clean out from under them."

And he stopped dead still and give me a kind of glare of wild astonishment; he didn't even know that they had quit; and then he swurged all over me like a barn falling down.

Hit sho stopped that poker game. Hit taken three or four of them to drag him offen me, with Major turned in his chair with a set of threes in his hand, a-hammering on the table and hollering cusses. Only a right smart of the helping they done was stepping on my face and hands and feet. Hit was like a fahr — the fellows with the water hose done the most part of the damage.

"What the tarnation hell does this mean?" Major hollers, with three or four fellows holding Luke, and him crying like a baby.

"He set them on me!" Luke says. "He was the one sent me up there, and I'm a-going to kill him!"

"Set who on you?" Major says.

"Them Indians!" Luke says, crying. Then he tried to get at me again, flinging them fellows holding his arms around like they was rag dolls, until Major pure cussed him quiet. He's a man yet. Don't let hit fool you none because he claims he ain't strong enough to work. Maybe hit's because he ain't never wore his strength down toting around one of them little black satchels full of pink galluses and shaving soap. Then Major asked me what hit was all about, and I told him how I had just been trying to help Luke get shed of them hiccups.

Be dog if I didn't feel right sorry for him. I happened to be passing out that way, and so I just thought I would drop in on them and see what luck they was having, and I druv up about sundown, and the first fellow I see was Luke. I wasn't surprised, since this here would be the biggest present gathering of men in the county, let alone the free eating and whisky, so I says, "Well, this is a surprise." And he says:

"Hic-uh! Hic-ow! Hic-oh! Hic — oh, God!" He had done already had them since nine o'clock the night before; he had been teching the jug ever' time Major offered him one and ever' time he could get to hit when Old Man Ash wasn't looking; and two days before Major had killed a bear, and I reckon Luke had already et more possum-rich bear pork — let alone the venison they had, with maybe a few coons and squirls throwed in for seasoning — than he could have hauled off in a waggin. So here he was, going three times to the minute, like one of these here clock bombs; only hit was bear meat and whisky instead of dynamite, and so he couldn't explode and put himself outen his misery.

They told me how he had done already kept ever'body awake most of the night before, and how Major got up mad anyway, and went off with his gun and Ash to handle them two bear hounds, and Luke following — outen pure misery, I reckon, since he hadn't slept no more than nobody else — walking along behind Major, saying, "Hic-ah! Hic-ow! Hic-oh! Hic — oh, Lord!" until Major turns on him and says:

"Get to hell over yonder with them shotgun fellows on the deer stands. How do you expect me to walk up on a bear or even hear the dogs when they strike? I might as well be riding a motorcycle."

So Luke went on back to where the deer standers was along the log-line levee. I reckon he never so much went away as he kind of died away in the distance like that ere motorcycle Major mentioned. He never tried to be quiet. I reckon he knowed hit wouldn't be no use. He never tried to keep to the open, neither. I reckon he thought that any fool would know from his sound that he wasn't no deer. No. I reckon he was so mizzable by then that he hoped somebody would shoot him.

But nobody never, and he come to the first stand, where Uncle Ike McCaslin was, and set down on a log behind Uncle Ike with his elbows

on his knees and his face in his hands, going, "Hic-uh! Hic-uh! Hic-uh!" until Uncle Ike turns and says:

"Confound you, boy; get away from here. Do you reckon any varmint in the world is going to walk up to a hay baler? Go drink some water."

"I done already done that," Luke says, without moving. "I been drinking water since nine o'clock last night. I done already drunk so much water that if I was to fall down I would gush like a artesian well."

"Well, go away anyhow," Uncle Ike says. "Get away from here."

So Luke gets up and kind of staggers away again, kind of dying away again like he was run by one of these hyer one-cylinder gasoline engines, only a durn sight more often and regular. He went on down the levee to where the next stand was, and they druv him way from there, and he went on toward the next one. I reckon he was still hoping that somebody would take pity on him and shoot him, because now he kind of seemed to give up. Now, when he come to the "oh, God" part of hit, they said you could hyear him clean back to camp.

They said he would echo back from the canebrake across the river like one of these hyer loud-speakers down in a well. They said that even the dogs on the trail quit baying, and so they all come up and made him come back to camp. That's where he was when I come in. And Old Man Ash was there, too, where him and Major had done come in so Major could take a nap, and neither me nor Luke noticing him except as just another nigger around.

That was hit. Neither one of us knowed or even thought about him. I be dog if hit don't look like sometimes that when a fellow sets out to play a joke, hit ain't another fellow he's playing that joke on; hit's a kind of

big power laying still somewhere in the dark that he sets out to prank with without knowing hit, and hit all depends on whether that ere power is in the notion to take a joke or not, whether or not hit blows up right in his face like this one did in mine.

Because I says, "You done had them since nine o'clock yesterday? That's nigh twenty-four hours. Seems like to me you'd 'a' done something to try to stop them." And him looking at me like he couldn't make up his mind whether to jump up and bite my head off or just to try and bite hisn off, saying "Hic-uh! Hic-uh!" slow and regular. Then he says,

"I don't want to get shed of them. I like them. But if you had them, I would get shed of them for you. You want to know how?"

"How?" I says.

"I'd just tear your head off. Then you wouldn't have nothing to hiccup with. They wouldn't worry you then. I'd be glad to do hit for you."

"Sho now," I says, looking at him setting there on the kitchen steps — hit was after supper, but he hadn't et none, being as his throat had done turned into a one-way street on him, you might say — going "Hic-uh! Hic-oh! Hic-uh!" because I reckon Major had done told him what would happen to him if he taken to hollering again. I never meant no harm.

Besides, they had done already told me how he had kept everybody awake all night the night before and had done skeered all the game outen that part of the bottom, and besides, the walk might help him to pass his own time. So I says, "I believe I know how you might get shed of them. But, of course, if you don't want to get shed of them—"

And he says, "I just wish somebody would tell me how. I'd pay ten dollars just to set here for one minute without saying 'hic'—" Well, that set him off sho enough. Hit was like up to that time his insides had been satisfied with going "hic-uh" steady, but quiet, but now, when he reminded himself, hit was like he had done opened a cut-out, because right away he begun hollering, "Hic — oh, God!" like when them fellows on the deer stands had made him come back to camp, and I heard Major's feet coming bup-bup-bup across the floor. Even his feet sounded mad, and I says quick,

"Sh-h-h-h! You don't want to get Major mad again, now."

So he quieted some, setting there on the kitchen steps, with Old Man Ash and the other niggers moving around inside the kitchen, and he says, "I will try anything you can sujest. I done tried ever'thing I knowed and ever'thing anybody else told me to.

I done held my breath and drunk water until I feel just like one of these hyer big automobile tahrs they use to advertise with, and I hung by my knees offen that limb yonder for fifteen minutes and drunk a pint bottle full of water upside down, and somebody said to swallow a buckshot and I done that. And still I got them. What do you know that I can do?"

"Well," I says, "I don't know what you would do. But if hit was me that had them, I'd go up to the mound and get old John Basket to cure me."

Then he set right still, and then he turned slow and looked at me; I be dog if for a minute he didn't even hiccup. "John Basket?" he says.

"Sho," I says. "Them Indians knows all sorts of dodges that white doctors ain't hyeard about yet. He'd be glad to do that much for a

white man, too, them pore aboriginees would, because the white folks have been so good to them — not only letting them keep that ere hump of dirt that don't nobody want noways, but letting them use names like ourn and selling them flour and sugar and farm tools at not no more than a fair profit above what they would cost a white man. I hyear tell how pretty soon they are even going to start letting them come to town once a week. Old Basket would be glad to cure them hiccups for you."

"John Basket," he says; "them Indians," he says, hiccuping slow and quiet and steady. Then he says right sudden, "I be dog if I will!" Then I be dog if hit didn't sound like he was crying. He jumped up and stood there cussing, sounding like he was crying. "Hit ain't a man hyer has got any mercy on me, white or black. Hyer I done suffered and suffered more than twenty-four hours without food or sleep, and not a sonabitch of them has any mercy or pity on me!"

"Well, I was trying to," I says. "Hit ain't me that's got them. I just thought, seeing as how you had done seemed to got to the place where couldn't no white man help you. But hit ain't no law making you go up there and get shed of them." So I made like I was going away.

I went back around the corner of the kitchen and watched him set down on the steps again, going "Hic-uh! Hic-uh!" slow and quiet again; and then I seen, through the kitchen window, Old Man Ash standing just inside the kitchen door, right still, with his head bent like he was listening.

But still I never suspected nothing. Not even did I suspect nothing when, after a while, I watched Luke get up again, sudden but quiet, and stand for a minute looking at the window where the poker game and

the folks was, and then look off into the dark towards the road that went down the bottom.

Then he went into the house, quiet, and come out a minute later with a lighted lantrun and a shotgun. I don't know whose gun hit was and I don't reckon he did, nor cared neither. He just come out kind of quiet and determined, and went on down the road.

I could see the lantrun, but I could hyear him a long time after the lantrun had done disappeared. I had come back around the kitchen then and I was listening to him dying away down the bottom, when old Ash says behind me:

"He gwine up dar?"

"Up where?" I says.

"Up to de mound," he says.

"Why, I be dog if I know," I says. "The last time I talked to him he never sounded like he was fixing to go nowhere. Maybe he just decided to take a walk. Hit might do him some good; make him sleep tonight and help him get up a appetite for breakfast maybe. What do you think?"

But Ash never said nothing. He just went on back into the kitchen. And still I never suspected nothing. How could I? I hadn't never even seen Jefferson in them days. I hadn't never even seen a pair of shoes, let alone two stores in a row or a arc light.

So I went on in where the poker game was, and I says, "Well, gentlemen, I reckon we might get some sleep tonight." And I told them what had happened, because more than like he would stay up there

until daylight rather than walk them five miles back in the dark, because maybe them Indians wouldn't mind a little thing like a fellow with hiccups, like white folks would. And I be dog if Major didn't rear up about hit.

"Dammit, Ratliff," he says, "you ought not to done that."

"Why, I just sujested hit to him, Major, for a joke," I says. "I just told him about how old Basket was a kind of doctor. I never expected him to take hit serious. Maybe he ain't even going up there. Maybe's he's just went out after a coon."

But most of them felt about hit like I did. "Let him go," Mr. Fraser says. "I hope he walks around all night. Damn if I slept a wink for him all night long. . . . Deal the cards, Uncle Ike."

"Can't stop him now, noways," Uncle Ike says, dealing the cards. "And maybe John Basket can do something for his hiccups. Durn young fool, eating and drinking himself to where he can't talk nor swallow neither. He set behind me on a log this morning, sounding just like a hay baler. I thought once I'd have to shoot him to get rid of him. . . . Queen bets a quarter, gentlemen."

So I set there watching them, thinking now and then about that durn fellow with his shotgun and his lantrun stumbling and blundering along through the woods, walking five miles in the dark to get shed of his hiccups, with the varmints all watching him and wondering just what kind of a hunt this was and just what kind of a two-leg varmint hit was that made a noise like that, and about them Indians up at the mound when he would come walking in, and I would have to laugh until Major says, "What in hell are you mumbling and giggling at?"

"Nothing," I says. "I was just thinking about a fellow I know."

"And damn if you hadn't ought to be out there with him," Major says. Then he decided hit was about drink time and he begun to holler for Ash. Finally I went to the door and hollered for Ash towards the kitchen, but hit was another one of the niggers that answered. When he come in with the demijohn and fixings, Major looks up and says "Where's Ash?"

"He done gone," the nigger says.

"Gone?" Major says. "Gone where?"

"He say he gwine up to'ds de mound," the nigger says. And still I never knowed, never suspected. I just thought to myself, "That old nigger has turned powerful tender-hearted all of a sudden, being skeered for Luke Provine to walk around by himself in the dark. Or maybe Ash likes to listen to them hiccups," I thought to myself.

"Up to the mound?" Major says. "By dad, if he comes back here full of John Basket's bust-skull whisky I'll skin him alive."

"He ain't say what he gwine fer," the nigger says. "All he tell me when he left, he gwine up to'ds de mound and he be back by daylight."

"He better be," Major says. "He better be sober too."

So we set there and they went on playing and me watching them like a durn fool, not suspecting nothing, just thinking how hit was a shame that that durned old nigger would have to come in and spoil Luke's trip, and hit come along towards eleven o'clock and they begun to talk

about going to bed, being as they was all going out on stand tomorrow, when we hyeard the sound.

Hit sounded like a drove of wild horses coming up that road, and we hadn't no more than turned towards the door, a-asking one another what in tarnation hit could be, with Major just saying, "What in the name of—" when hit come across the porch like a harrycane and down the hall, and the door busted open and there Luke was.

He never had no gun and lantrun then, and his clothes was nigh tore clean offen him, and his face looked wild as ere a man in the Jackson asylum. But the main thing I noticed was that he wasn't hiccuping now. And this time, too, he was nigh crying.

"They was fixing to kill me!" he says. "They was going to burn me to death! They had done tried me and tied me onto the pile of wood, and one of them was coming with the fahr when I managed to bust loose and run!"

"Who was?" Major says. "What in the tarnation hell are you talking about?"

"Them Indians!" Luke says. "They was fixing to—"

"What?" Major hollers. "Damn to blue blazes, what?"

And that was where I had to put my foot in hit. He hadn't never seen me until then. "At least they cured your hiccups," I says.

Hit was then that he stopped right still. He hadn't never even seen me, but he seen me now. He stopped right still and looked at me with that

ere wild face that looked like hit had just escaped from Jackson and had ought to be took back there quick.

"What?" he says.

"Anyway, you done run out from under them hiccups," I says.

Well, sir, he stood there for a full minute. His eyes had done gone blank, and he stood there with his head cocked a little, listening to his own insides. I reckon hit was the first time he had took time to find out that they was gone. He stood there right still for a full minute while that ere kind of shocked astonishment come onto his face.

Then he jumped on me. I was still setting in my chair, and I be dog if for a minute I didn't think the roof had done fell in.

Well, they got him offen me at last and got him quieted down, and then they washed me off and give me a drink, and I felt better. But even with that drink I never felt so good but what I felt hit was my duty to my honor to call him outen the back yard, as the fellow says. No, sir. I know when I done made a mistake and guessed wrong; Major de Spain wasn't the only man that caught a bear on that hunt; no, sir.

I be dog, if it had been daylight, I'd a hitched up my Ford and taken out of there. But hit was midnight, and besides, that nigger, Ash, was on my mind then. I had just begun to suspect that hit was more to this business than met the nekkid eye. And hit wasn't no good time then to go back to the kitchen then and ask him about hit, because Luke was using the kitchen.

Major had give him a drink, too, and he was back there, making up for them two days he hadn't et, talking a right smart about what he aimed to do to such and such a sonabitch that would try to play his durn jokes on him, not mentioning no names; but mostly laying himself in a new set of hiccups, though I ain't going back to see.

So I waited until daylight, until I hyeard the niggers stirring around in the kitchen; then I went back there. And there was old Ash, looking like he always did, oiling Major's boots and setting them behind the stove and then taking up Major's rifle and beginning to load the magazine. He just looked once at my face when I come in, and went on shoving ca'tridges into the gun.

"So you went up to the mound last night," I says. He looked up at me again, quick, and then down again. But he never said nothing, looking like a durned old frizzle-headed ape. "You must know some of them folks up there," I says.

"I knows some of um," he says, shoving ca'tridges into the gun.

"You know old John Basket?" I says.

"I knows some of um," he says, not looking at me.

"Did you see him last night?" I says. He never said nothing at all. So then I changed my tone, like a fellow has to do to get anything outen a nigger. "Look here," I says. "Look at me." He looked at me. "Just what did you do up there last night?"

"Who, me?" he says.

"Come on," I says. "Hit's all over now. Mr. Provine has done got over his hiccups and we done both forgot about anything that might have happened when he got back last night. You never went up there just for fun last night. Or maybe hit was something you told them up there, told old man Basket. Was that hit?"

He had done quit looking at me, but he never stopped shoving ca'tridges into that gun. He looked quick to both sides. "Come on," I says. "Do you want to tell me what happened up there, or do you want me to mention to Mr. Provine that you was mixed up in hit some way?" He never stopped loading the rifle and he never looked at me, but I be dog if I couldn't almost see his mind working. "Come on," I says. "Just what was you doing up there last night?"

Then he told me. I reckon he knowed hit wasn't no use to try to hide hit then; that if I never told Luke, I could still tell Major. "I jest dodged him and got dar first en told um he was a new revenue agent coming up dar tonight, but dat he warn't much en dat all dey had to do was to give um a good skeer en likely he would go away. En dey did en he did."

"Well!" I says. "Well! I always thought I was pretty good at joking folks," I says, "but I take a back seat for you. What happened?" I says. "Did you see hit?"

"Never much happened," he says. "Dey jest went down de road a piece en atter a while hyer he come a-hickin' en a-blumpin' up de road wid de lant'un en de gun. They took de lant'un en de gun away frum him en took him up pon topper de mound en talked de Injun language at him fer a while. Den dey piled up some wood en fixed him on hit so he could git loose in a minute, en den one of dem come up de hill wid de fire, en he done de rest."

"Well!" I says. "Well, I'll be eternally durned!" And then all on a sudden hit struck me. I had done turned and was going out when hit struck me, and I stopped and I says, "There's one more thing I want to know. Why did you do hit?"

Now he set there on the wood box, rubbing the gun with his hand, not looking at me again. "I wuz jest helping you kyo him of dem hiccups."

"Come on," I says. "That wasn't your reason. What was hit? Remember, I got a right smart I can tell Mr. Provine and Major both now. I don't know what Major will do, but I know what Mr. Provine will do if I was to tell him."

And he set there, rubbing that ere rifle with his hand. He was kind of looking down, like he was thinking. Not like he was trying to decide whether to tell me or not, but like he was remembering something from a long time back. And that's exactly what he was doing, because he says:

"I ain't skeered for him to know. One time dey was a picnic. Hit was a long time back, nigh twenty years ago. He was a young man den, en in de middle of de picnic, him en he brother en nudder white man — I fergit he name — dey rid up wid dey pistols out en cotch us niggers one at a time en burned our collars off. Hit was him dat burnt mine."

"And you waited all this time and went to all this trouble, just to get even with him?" I says.

"Hit warn't dat," he says, rubbing the rifle with his hand. "Hit wuz de collar. Back in dem days a top nigger hand made two dollars a week. I

paid fo' bits fer dat collar. Hit wuz blue, wid a red picture of de race betwixt de Natchez en de Robert E. Lee running around hit.

He burnt hit up. I makes ten dollars a week now. En I jest wish I knowed where I could buy another collar like dat un fer half of hit. I wish I did."

The End