

DREAMCATCHER

By Stephen King

Excerpt One: A TIME .com Exclusive

When he heard the whicker of moving brush and the soft snap of a twig — sounds he never questioned were those of an approaching deer — Jonesy thought of something his father said: *You can't make yourself be lucky*. Lindsay Jones was one of life's losers and had said few things worth committing to memory, but that was one, and here was the proof of it again: days after deciding he had finished with deer hunting, here came one, and a big one by the sound — a buck, almost surely, maybe one as big as a man.

That it *was* a man never so much as crossed Jonesy's mind. This was an unincorporated township fifty miles north of Rangely, and the nearest hunters were two hours' walk away. The nearest paved road, the one which eventually took you to Gosselin's Market (BEER BAIT OUT OF STATE LICHS LOTTERY TIX), was at least sixteen miles away.

Well, he thought, *it isn't as if I took a vow, or anything*.

No, he hadn't taken a vow. Next November he might be up here with a Nikon instead of a Garand, but it wasn't next year yet, and the rifle was at hand. He had no intention of looking a gift deer in the mouth.

Jonesy screwed the red stopper into the Thermos of coffee and put it aside. Then he pushed the sleeping-bag off his lower body like a big quilted sock (wincing at the stiffness in his hip as he did it) and grabbed his gun. There was no need to chamber a round, producing that loud, deer-frightening click; old habits died hard, and the gun was ready to fire as soon as he thumbed off the safety. This he did when he was solidly on his feet. The old wild excitement was gone, but there was a residue — his pulse was up and he welcomed the rise. In the wake of his accident, he welcomed all such reactions — it was as if there were two of him now, the one before he had been knocked flat in the street and the warier, older fellow who had awakened in Mass General . . . if you could call that slow, drugged awareness being awake. Sometimes he still heard a voice — whose he didn't know, but not his — calling out *Please stop, I can't stand it, give me a shot, where's Marcy, I want Marcy*. He thought of it as death's voice — death had missed him in the street and had then come to the hospital to finish the job, death masquerading as a man (or perhaps it had been a woman, it was hard to tell) in pain, someone who said Marcy but meant Jonesy.

The idea passed — all of the funny ideas he'd had in the hospital eventually passed — but it left a residue. Caution was the residue. He had no memory of Henry's calling and telling him to watch himself for the next little while (and Henry hadn't reminded him), but since then Jonesy *had* watched himself. He was careful. Because maybe death was out there, and maybe sometimes it called your name.

But the past was the past. He had survived his brush with death, and nothing was dying here this morning but a deer (a buck, he hoped) who had strolled in the wrong direction.

The sound of the rustling brush and snapping twigs was coming toward him from the southwest, which meant he wouldn't have to shoot around the trunk of the maple — good — and put him upwind. Even better. Most of the maple's leaves had fallen, and he had a good, if not perfect, sightline through the interlacing branches. Jonesy raised the Garand, settled the buttplate into the hollow of his shoulder, and prepared to shoot himself a conversation-piece.

What saved McCarthy — at least temporarily — was Jonesy's disenchantment with hunting. What almost got McCarthy killed was a phenomenon George Kilroy, a friend of his father's, had called "eye-fever." Eye-fever, Kilroy claimed, was a form of buck-fever, and was probably the second most common cause of hunting accidents. "First is drink," said George Kilroy . . . and like Jonesy's father, Kilroy knew a bit on that subject, as well. "First is always drink."

Kilroy said that victims of eye-fever were uniformly astounded to discover they had shot a fencepost, or a passing car, or the broad side of a barn, or their own hunting partner (in many cases the partner was a spouse, a sib, or a child). "But I *saw* it," they would protest, and most of them, according to Kilroy, could pass a lie-detector test on the subject. They had seen the deer or the bear or the wolf, or just the grouse flip-flapping through the high autumn grass. They had *seen* it.

What happened, according to Kilroy, was that these hunters were afflicted by an anxiety to make the shot, to get it over with, one way or the other. This anxiety became so strong that the brain persuaded the eye that it saw what was not yet visible, in order to end the tension. This was eye-fever. And although Jonesy was aware of no particular anxiety — his fingers had been perfectly steady as he screwed the red stopper back into the throat of the Thermos — he admitted later to himself that yes, he might have fallen prey to the malady.

For one moment he saw the buck clearly at the end of the tunnel made by the interlocking branches — as clearly as he had seen any of the previous

sixteen deer (six bucks, ten does) he had brought down over the years at Hole in the Wall. He saw its brown head, one eye so dark it was almost the black of jeweler's velvet, even part of its rack.

Shoot now! part of him cried — it was the Jonesy from the other side of the accident, the whole Jonesy. That one had spoken more frequently in the last month or so, as he began to approach some mythical state which people who had never been hit by a car blithely referred to as "total recovery," but he had never spoken as loudly as he did now. This was a command, almost a shout.

And his finger *did* tighten on the trigger. It never put on that last pound of pressure (or perhaps it only would have taken another half, a paltry eight ounces), but it *did* tighten. The voice that stopped him was that second Jonesy, the one who had awakened in Mass General, doped and disoriented and in pain, not sure of anything anymore except that someone wanted something to stop, someone couldn't stand it — not without a shot, anyway — that someone wanted Marcy.

No, not yet — wait, watch, this new cautious Jonesy said, and that was the voice he listened to. He froze in place, most of his weight thrown forward on his good left leg, rifle raised, barrel angled down that interlacing tunnel of light at a cool thirty-five degrees.

The first flakes of snow came skating down out of the white sky just then, and as they did, Jonesy saw a bright vertical line of orange below the deer's head — it was as if the snow had somehow conjured it up. For a moment perception simply gave up and what he was seeing over the barrel of his gun became only an unconnected jumble, like paints swirled all together on an artist's palette. There was no deer and no man, not even any woods, just a puzzling and untidy jumble of black, brown, and orange.

Then there was more orange, and in a shape that made sense: it was a hat, the kind with flaps you could fold down to cover your ears. The out-of-staters bought them at L. L. Bean's for forty-four dollars, each with a little tag inside that said PROUDLY MADE IN THE USA BY UNION LABOR. Or you could pick one up at Gosselin's for seven bucks. The tag in a Gosselin's cap just said MADE IN BANGLADESH.

The hat brought everything into horrible oh-God focus: the brown he had mistaken for a buck's head was the front of a man's wool jacket, the black jeweler's velvet of the buck's eye was a button, and the antlers were only more branches — branches belonging to the very tree in which he was standing. The man was unwise (Jonesy could not quite bring himself to use the word *crazy*) to be wearing a brown coat in the woods, but Jonesy was still at a loss to understand how he himself could have made a mistake of

such potentially horrifying consequence. Because the man was also wearing an orange cap, wasn't he? And a bright orange flagman's vest as well, over the admittedly unwise brown coat. The man was —

— was a pound of finger-pressure from death. Maybe less.

It came home to him in a visceral way then, knocking him clean out of his own body. For a terrible, brilliant moment he never forgot, he was neither Jonesy Number One, the confident pre-accident Jonesy, or Jonesy Number Two, the more tentative survivor who spent so much of his time in a tiresome state of physical discomfort and mental confusion. For that moment he was some other Jonesy, an invisible presence looking at a gunman standing on a platform in a tree. The gunman's hair was short and already graying, his face lined around the mouth, beard-speckled on the cheeks, and haggard. The gunman was on the verge of using his weapon. Snow had begun to dance around his head and light on his untucked brown flannel shirt, and he was on the verge of shooting a man in an orange cap and vest of the very sort he would have been wearing himself if he had elected to go into the woods with the Beaver instead of up into this tree.

He fell back into himself with a thud, exactly as one fell back into one's seat after taking a car over a bad bump at a high speed. To his horror, he realized he was still tracking the man below with the Garand, as if some stubborn alligator deep in his brain refused to let go of the idea that the man in the brown coat was prey. Worse, he couldn't seem to make his finger relax on the rifle's trigger. There was even an awful second or two when he thought he was actually still squeezing, inexorably eating up those last few ounces between him and the greatest mistake of his life. He later came to accept that that at least had been an illusion, something akin to the feeling you get of rolling backward in your stopped car when you glimpse a slowly moving car beside you, out of the corner of your eye.

No, he was just frozen, but that was bad enough, that was hell. *Jonesy, you think too much*, Pete liked to say when he caught Jonesy staring out into the middle distance, no longer tracking the conversation, and what he probably meant was *Jonesy, you imagine too much*, and that was very likely true. Certainly he was imagining too much now as he stood up here in the middle of the tree and the season's first snow, hair leaping up in tufts, finger locked on the Garand's trigger — not tightening still, as he had for a moment feared, but not loosening, either, the man almost below him now, the Garand's gunsight on the top of the orange cap, the man's life on an invisible wire between the Garand's muzzle and that cap, the man maybe thinking about trading his car or cheating on his wife or buying his oldest daughter a pony (Jonesy later had reason to know McCarthy had been thinking about

none of those things, but of course not then, not in the tree with his forefinger a frozen curl around the trigger of his rifle) and not knowing what Jonesy had not known as he stood on the curb in Cambridge with his briefcase in one hand and a copy of the Boston *Phoenix* under his arm, namely that death was in the neighborhood, or perhaps even Death, a hurrying figure like something escaped from an early Ingmar Bergman film, something carrying a concealed implement in the coarse folds of its robe. Scissors, perhaps. Or a scalpel.

And the worst of it was that the man would not die, or at least not at once. He would fall down and lie there screaming, as Jonesy had lain screaming in the street. He couldn't remember screaming, but of course he had; he had been told this and had no reason to disbelieve it. Screamed his fucking head off, most likely. And what if the man in the brown coat and orange accessories started screaming for Marcy? Surely he would not — not *really* — but Jonesy's mind might *report* screams of Marcy. If there was eye-fever — if he could look at a man's brown coat and see it as a deer's head — then there was likely the auditory equivalent, as well. To hear a man screaming and know you were the reason — dear God, no. And still his finger would not loosen.

What broke his paralysis was both simple and unexpected: about ten paces from the base of Jonesy's tree, the man in the brown coat fell down. Jonesy heard the pained, surprised sound he made — *mrof!* was what it sounded like — and his finger released the trigger without his even thinking about it.

The man was down on his hands and knees, his brown-gloved fingers (brown gloves, another mistake, this guy almost could have gone out with a sign reading SHOOT ME taped to his back, Jonesy thought) spread on the ground, which had already begun to whiten. As the man got up again, he began to speak aloud in a fretful, wondering voice. Jonesy didn't realize at first that he was also weeping.

"Oh dear, oh dear," the man said as he worked his way back to a standing position. He swayed on his feet as if drunk. Jonesy knew that men in the woods, men away from their families for a week or a weekend, got up to all sorts of small wickedness — drinking at ten in the morning was one of the most common. But Jonesy didn't think this guy was drunk. No reason; just a vibe.

"Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear." And then, as he began to walk again: "Snow. Now it's snow. Please God, oh God, now it's snow, oh dear."

His first couple of steps were lurching and unsure. Jonesy had about decided that his vibe was incorrect, the guy *was* loaded, and then the fellow's

gait smoothed out and he began to walk a little more evenly. He was scratching at his right cheek.

He passed directly beneath the stand, for a moment he wasn't a man at all but only a round circle of orange cap with brown shoulders to either side of it. His voice drifted up, liquid and full of tears, mostly *Oh dear* with the occasional *Oh God* or *Now it's snow* thrown in for salt.

Jonesy stood where he was, watching as the guy first disappeared directly beneath the stand, then came out on the other side. He pivoted without being aware of it to keep the plodding man in view — nor was he aware that he had lowered his rifle to his side, even pausing long enough to put the safety back on.

Jonesy didn't call out, and he supposed he knew why: simple guilt. He was afraid that the man down there would take one look at him and see the truth in Jonesy's eyes — even through his tears and the thickening snow, the man would see that Jonesy had been up there with his gun pointed, that Jonesy had almost shot him.

Twenty paces beyond the tree, the man stopped and only stood there, his gloved right hand raised to his brow, shielding his eyes from the snow. Jonesy realized he had seen Hole in the Wall. Had probably realized he was on an actual path, too. *Oh dear* and *Oh God* stopped, and the guy began to run toward the sound of the generator, rocking from side to side like a man on the deck of a ship. Jonesy could hear the stranger's short, sharp gasps for breath as he pounded toward the roomy cabin with the lazy curl of smoke rising from the chimney and fading almost at once into the snow.

Jonesy began to work his way down the rungs nailed to the trunk of the maple with his gun slung over his shoulder (the thought that the man might present some sort of danger did not occur to him, not then; he simply didn't want to leave the Garand, which was a fine gun, out in the snow). His hip had stiffened, and by the time he got to the foot of the tree, the man he'd almost shot had made it nearly all the way to the cabin door . . . which was unlocked, of course. No one locked up, not way out here.

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