I’ve never stopped missing my brother Jeff.

I’m all right; and then I pick up the rake he mended so perfectly for me where the handle went into the bow; or I come across where he’d scratched the threshing count on the barn door, with one of those clumsy fives of his in it; or it’s time for someone to make the first move for bed; or some winter dusk when the sun’s drawing water down beyond the frozen marshes — do you know that time of day? It’s as if your heart slips into low gear.

(I’m glad Jeff can’t hear me. But I don’t know, maybe he wouldn’t think it sounded soft. Just because he never said anything like that himself — you can’t go by that.)

I always feel like telling something about him then. I don’t know, if I can tell something to show people what he was really like it seems to help.

The wild goose flew over this evening. The sky was full of grey clouds. It looked as if it was worried about something. I
could tell about Jeff and the wild goose. I never have.

It really started the afternoon before. We went hunting about four o’clock. I was fourteen and he was sixteen.

You’d never know we were brothers. You could tell exactly how he was going to look as a man, and I looked like a child that couldn’t make up his mind what shape his face would take on later. He could lift me and my load (though he’d never once glance my way if I tackled anything beyond my strength—trying to lead a steer that was tough in the neck, or putting a cordwood butt on top of the pile, or anything). But I always seemed the older, somehow. He always seemed to—well, look up to me or something, it didn’t matter how often I was mean to him.

I could draw the sprawling back field on a piece of paper and figure out the quickest way to mow it, by algebra; but when I took the machine out on the field itself I wouldn’t know where to begin. Jeff could take one look at the field and know exactly where to make the first swath. That was the difference between us.

And I had a quick temper, and Jeff never lost his temper except when someone was mad at me.

I never saw him mad at me himself but that one day. The day was so still and the sun was so bright the leaves seemed to be breathing out kind of a yellow light before they fell to the ground. I always think there’s something sort of lonesome about that, don’t you?

I’m no kind of a hunter. You wouldn’t think I was a country boy at all.

But Jeff was. He was a wonderful shot; and the minute he stepped into the woods there was a sort of brightness and a hush in his face together, I can’t describe it. It wasn’t that he liked the killing part. He seemed to have a funny kind of love and respect for whatever he hunted that I didn’t have at all. If I don’t see any game the first quarter mile I get to feel like I’m just walking around on a fool’s errand, dragging a heavy gun along. But Jeff’s spell never slacked off for a second.

You’d have to live in the country to know what hunting meant to anyone like Jeff. And to know how he rated with
the grown-up men; here’s just this kid, see, and he knows right where to find the game, no matter how scarce it is, and to bring it home.

Anyway, we’d hardly gone any distance at all — we were just rounding that bend in the log road where there’s the bit of open swamp and then what’s left of the old back orchard, before the woods start — when Jeff halted suddenly and grabbed my arm.

“What’s the matter?” I said.

I guess I spoke louder than ordinary, because I was startled. I hadn’t thought of having to be cautious so soon.

Jeff’s gun went up, but he didn’t have time for even a chance shot. There was a flash of the big buck’s flag. He’d been standing under the farthest apple tree. Then in a single motion, like the ripple in a rope when you hold one end in your hand and whap the other against the ground, he disappeared into the thicket.

Deer will sometimes stand and watch you for minutes, still as stone. Stilller than thunder weather. Stilller than holding your breath. So still you can’t believe it. They’re cocked for running, but you get the feeling they weren’t there before you saw them. Your eyes seem to have plucked them right out of the air. Their feet don’t seem to quite rest on the ground.

But the second you speak, they’re off. The human voice is like a trigger.

It would have been a sure shot for Jeff. There wasn’t a twig between them. It would have been the biggest buck anyone had brought home that year. Even I felt that funny sag in the day that you get when game’s been within your reach except for carelessness and now there’s nothing. You just keep staring at the empty spot, as if you should have known that was the one place a deer would be.

Jeff turned to me. His eyes were so hot in his head I almost crouched.

“For God’s sake,” he said, “don’t you know enough to keep your tongue still when you’re huntin’?”

It was like a slap in the face.
The minute Jeff heard what he’d said the anger went out of him. But you’d have to live in the country to know what a funny feeling it left between us. For one hunter to tell another he’d spoiled a shot. It was as if you’d reminded someone to take off his cap inside the house.

I didn’t say a word. Only in my mind. I seemed to hear my mind shouting, "You just wait. You’ll see. I’ll never . . . never . . . " Never what, I didn’t know—but just that never, never again . . .

Jeff rumbled with a laugh, trying to put the whole thing behind us, as a joke.

"Well," he said, offhand like, "that one certainly moved fast didn’t he? But we’ll circle around. Maybe we’ll ketch him in the choppin’, what?"

I didn’t say a word. I just broke down my gun and took out the cartridge, then and there. I put the cartridge into my windbreaker pocket and turned toward home.

"Ain’t you comin’?" Jeff said.

"What d’ya think?" I said.

I glanced behind me when he’d gone on. I don’t know, it always strikes me there’s something sort of lonesome about seeing anyone walk away back-to. I almost changed my mind and ran and caught up with him.

But I didn’t. I don’t know why I could never smooth things over with Jeff right away when I knew he was sorry. I wanted to then, but I couldn’t. I had to hang on to the hurt and keep it fresh. I hated what I was doing, but there it was.

It was pitch dark when Jeff got home that night, but he didn’t have any deer.

I sort of kept him away from me all the next day. I hated myself for cutting off all his clumsy feelers to make up. ("What was the algebra question you showed the teacher how to do when you was only ten?") It always kind of gets me, seeing through what anyone is trying to do like that, when they don’t know you can. But I couldn’t help it.

(Once Jeff picked up about fifty bags of cider apples nights after school. The day he took them into town and sold them he bought every single one of us a present. I followed him to
the barn that evening when he went to tend the horse. He didn’t hear me coming. He was searching under the wagon seat and shaking out all the straw around the horse. He didn’t want to tell me what he was looking for, but I made him. He’d lost a five dollar bill out of the money the man at the cider mill had given him. But he’d kept the loss to himself, not to spoil our presents. That’s what he was like.)

It was just about dusk when Jeff rushed into the shop the day after I’d spoiled his shot at the deer. He almost never got so excited he forgot himself, like I did. But he was that way then.

“Git your gun, Kenny, quick,” he said. “There’s a flock o’ geese lit on the marsh.”

It would be hard to explain why that gave even me such a peculiar thrill. Wild geese had something — well, sort of mystic — about them.

When the geese flew south in the fall, high in the sky, people would run outdoors and watch them out of sight. And when they turned back to the house again they’d have kind of a funny feeling. The geese seemed to be about the most—distant, sort of—thing in the world. In every way. You couldn’t picture them on the ground, like a normal bird. Years and years ago Steve Hammond had brought one down, and it was still the first thing anyone told about him to a stranger. People said, “He shot a wild goose once,” in the same tone they’d say of some famous person they’d seen, “I was close enough to touch him.”

I was almost as excited as Jeff. But I kept rounding up my armful, pretending the geese didn’t matter much to me one way or the other.

“Never mind the wood,” Jeff said. He raced into the house for his gun.

I piled up a full load before I went into the house and dropped it into the box. It must have almost killed him to wait for me. But he did.

“Come on. Come on,” he urged, as we started down across the field. “And put in a ball cartridge. We’ll never git near enough fer shot to carry.”
I could see myself hitting that small a target with a ball cartridge! But I did as he said.

When we got to the railroad cut, we crawled on our bellies, so we could use the embankment the rails ran along as a blind. We peeked over it, and there they were.

They were almost the length of the marsh away, way down in that mucky spot where the men cut sods for the dike, but their great white breasts looked big as pennants. They had their long black necks stretched up absolutely straight and still, like charmed cobras. They must have seen us coming down across the field.

Jeff rested the barrel of his gun on a rail. I did the same with mine. But mine was shaking so it made a clatter and I raised it higher.

"I'll count five," Jeff whispered. "Then both fire at once."

I nodded and he began to count.

"One. Two. Three ..."

I fired.

Jeff's shot came a split second afterward. He gave me a quick inquisitive glance, but he didn't say a word about me firing before the count was up.

He threw out his empty shell and loaded again. But the geese had already lifted, as if all at once some spring in the ground had shot them into the air. They veered out over the river.

All but one, that is. Its white breast was against the ground and we didn't see it in the blur of wings until its own wings gave one last flutter.

"We got one!" Jeff shouted. "Well, I'll be damned. We got one!"

He bounded down across the marsh. I came behind, walking.

When I got there he was stroking the goose's soft down almost tenderly. It was only a dead bird to me now, but to him it seemed like some sort of mystery made flesh and shape. There was hardly a mark on it. The bullet had gone through his neck, fair as a die.

Then Jeff made a funny face. He handed the goose to me. He was sort of grinning.
"Here," he said. "Carry her. She's yours. That was some shot, mister."

"Mine?" I said.

"Sure." He looked half sheepish. "I'm a hell of a hunter, I am. I had two ball cartridges in this here pocket, see, and two shot in this one." He put his hand into the first pocket and held out two ball cartridges in his palm. "I guess I got rattled and put the shot in my gun instidd o' the ball. You know how far shot'd carry. It was you that got him, no doubt about that."

I carried the goose home.

It didn't mean much to me, but he didn't know that. He could only go by what it would have meant to him, if he'd been the one to carry it home. I knew what he was thinking. This would wipe out what I'd done yesterday. And the men wouldn't look at me now the way they looked at a bookworm but the way they looked at a hunter.

I'm glad that for once I had the decency to pretend I was as excited and proud as he'd thought I'd be. I'm glad I didn't say a word—not then—to let him know I saw through the trick.

For I knew it was a trick. I knew I hadn't shot the goose. While he was counting I'd felt that awful passion to wreck things which always got into me when I was still smarting over something. I had fired before he did, on purpose. Way over their heads, to scare them.

The day Jeff went away we sort of stuck around close to each other, but we couldn't seem to find anything to say.

I went out to the road to wait for the bus with him. Jeff had on his good clothes. They never looked right on him. When I dressed up I looked different, but Jeff never did. I don't know why, but every time I saw Jeff in his good clothes I felt sort of—well, like defending him or something.

The bus seemed to take a long time coming. He was going away in the army. He'd be with guys who were twice as much like him as I was, but just the same I knew he'd rather be with me than with them. I don't know, buses are such darned lonesome things, somehow.

When the bus was due, and I knew we only had left what
few minutes it might be late, I tried to think of something light to say, the way you're supposed to.

The only thing that came into my mind was that day with the goose. It was a funny thing to bring up all of a sudden. But now we were a couple of years older I thought I could make something out of it to amuse him. Besides, when someone's going away you have the feeling that you ought to get everything straight between you. You hardly ever can, but you get that feeling.

"You shot the goose that day," I said, "didn't you?"

He nodded.

I'd never have opened my fool mouth if I'd known what was going to happen then. I'd felt sort of still and bad, but I hadn't felt like crying. How was I to know that the minute I mentioned that day the whole thing would come back so darn plain? I'd have died rather than have Jeff see my face break up like that.

But on the other hand, I don't care how soft it sounds, I'm sort of glad I did, now. He didn't look embarrassed, to see me cry. He looked so darned surprised—and then all at once he looked happier than I believe I ever saw him.

That was Jeff. He'll never come back. I don't even know which Korean hill it was—the telegram didn't say. But when I tell anything about him like this I seem to feel that somewhere he's sort of, I don't know, half-smiling—like he used to when we had some secret between us we'd never even discussed. I feel that if I could just make him absolutely clear to everyone he wouldn't really be dead at all. Tonight when the geese flew over I wished I knew how to write a book about him.

The geese didn't light this time. They never have since that day. I don't know, I always think there's something lonesome about wild geese.

But I feel better now. Do you know how it is?