

PHILIPP MEYER

The Wolf

One of the clients, a doctor, had been handling his rifle that afternoon and it had gone off and he didn't know why. The shot cut a groove along my neck. It was hot. That's what I remember about that feeling.

Then everyone was staring at me like what was I going to do, and I had my skinning knife out and the doctor was against the wall.

We pushed around until he knew I had him. Both his elbows were up to his face and the knife was right on his ribs. Then the heat went out of me.

"If I'm gonna live," I said.

He went and got his kit.

"Is it deep?"

"No. Not very."

My arms were shaking and I put my hands in my pockets.

His touch was so light I barely felt it. There was a stain on his shirt where I'd pricked him with the knife, and I thought he might hurt me with the stitching, but it was gentle, the way his fingers moved across my neck.

I sat with my eyes closed and him working on me and the sun drying the sweat on my shirt. I felt warmer and there was something about him kneeling next to me, not minding our heads almost touching. My breathing slowed down and I started feeling calm about everything. When it was done he wanted to go home.

My boss wouldn't let him. The ranch wasn't doing well and the clients had paid for the entire week and my boss didn't want to give the Doctor any of his money back. They haggled and finally the Doctor said if it was okay with me, he'd stay on and finish his trip.

"I don't mind," I told him.

That night I was fixing dinner. My boss ate with the clients, and I ate by myself in the kitchen because I was the one running back and forth with the food. That usually didn't bother me. But I could hear them talking in the dining room of the lodge.

"Good hunt today," said my boss.

“Well, I’m glad all I shot was a prairie goat,” said the other client. He was a friend of the Doctor’s. He was a big man, fat, and I’d carried his pack for most of the day. Then he’d shot an antelope while it was up on a ledge and he couldn’t climb up to get it. Luckily it was a small one. I got it down myself.

Fatty continued: “That was some stunt that boy pulled with that knife.”

“We’re all sorry about that,” said my boss. “It was confusing circumstances.”

“I’d have tanned him good,” Fatty said.

“If it’d been you on the other end of that barrel, you might feel different.”

“I dunno,” said Fatty.

“You ever been shot at?”

“It’s my fault,” said the Doctor. “Don’t blame the kid.”

“I knew he wouldn’t use the knife,” Fatty said. “It’s just the idea of it.”

“I wasn’t sure,” said the Doctor. “I thought I’d killed him, and in his last breath he was gonna do the same to me.”

“Nah,” said Fatty. “I could tell.”

“It would have been justified,” said the Doctor. “Regardless.”

“The difference is yours was an accident.”

“They were both accidents in their way,” said my boss.

“Maybe we could work out a little something extra for all that trouble,” said Fatty. “Like a break on the taxidermy.”

“Frank,” said the Doctor.

“The kid put a knife to you,” said Fatty. “We paid a lot of money for this.”

“We’ll work something out,” said my boss.

Later, when I was doing the dishes, my boss came in.

“That fat one’s a real winner,” I said. “I carried his fuckin’ pack all day.”

“None of this would have happened if you didn’t do that with the knife. Now they’re askin’ for money back.”

“I caught a .270 in the neck,” I said. “And now I have to listen to that fat fuck talk.”

He lifted the bandage and looked.

“In a week there won’t even be a mark.”

I should have cracked him in the face right then. But I didn't. He was an old man and he didn't have any friends or anyone else to take care of him. He was sixty-eight and his wife was dead. She'd gotten cancer and they'd treated her wrong and she'd had a hemorrhage, and he'd used the settlement money to buy the ranch and turn it into a hunting preserve. There were pictures of her in every room. She'd been dead five years.

He was a short man with thick arms and his skin was wrinkled and loose like his insides had dried out, like he'd spent his entire life killing things. He hadn't, though. He'd been half-owner of a truck stop in Arizona until his wife died, and now there were days when he'd never change out of his underpants, just drink coffee and sit around the house, staring out the windows like he was surprised to see where he was. Those days I'd get the chores done early and head into the valley because I didn't want to be stuck in the house with him. I'd go into the backcountry and shoot or fish my dinner and sling up a hammock. After two or three days my boss would snap out of it. I'd always bring him fresh brookies from the river, like a get-well present or something, but he'd eat them without saying anything.

As for the hunting, that wasn't the right word. The next day the Doctor and his friend wanted pheasant, so after I finished the dishes I went out into the valley to hide the birds in the brush. I loaded up the four wheeler with crates on the back. I'd find a spot, reach into the crate, take a bird by its neck and spin it around like a bag of laundry. That made it dizzy. Then I'd tuck its head under its wing and put it to sleep. It gave me a sick feeling every time, but it was better than working for the timber companies.

My boss said the birds never knew what hit them. But I knew exactly what they felt like. They woke up dizzy and stunned and afraid of things they couldn't understand. Then someone shot them.

Two years before that, I'd turned sixteen and quit school to get on a logging crew with my uncle. After a while, the company went under and we all got laid off. My uncle disappeared. A rafter found him in the Snake River. I went through my uncle's things and found seven grand and a note telling me to leave Montana forever, but I was so goddamn angry there was no way I was leaving. It cost a thousand to have him cremated, and he still owed on his truck, and

pretty soon the money was gone. I'd been lucky finding the ranch. There wasn't work to be found anywhere in the state.

The morning after the Doctor shot me, I let The Wolf into his room to wake him up. He stunk like sweat and whiskey but The Wolf licked his face and jumped on his bed anyway. The Wolf was my dog.

He grabbed her by the head and wrestled with her and scratched her ears.

"What is she," he said.

"Half Malamute," I said, "half setter." Really, she was all Malamute. But I had to lie about it, given that she was our bird dog.

"All I see is Malamute," said the Doctor. "But she's a good-looking dog."

"White Fang," he said to her, and shook the scruff of her neck. She put her head on his chest.

"What are these marks on her face," he said.

"She went after a bear. Then she changed her mind."

"Who the hell stitched her like that?"

"I did."

"If you could only see what he did to you, sweetheart," he said to her.

"There wasn't anyone else to do it."

Then he said: "Look, I'm only kidding. You should have seen the ones I used to do."

"You did good on mine," I said.

"It took practice," he said. "What happened to the bear?"

"I dunno."

"I've seen you shoot," he said. "I bet that bear lived about ten seconds."

I didn't say anything.

"Well?" he said.

What I remembered about that day was looking down at The Wolf from up in my tree, and how she looked at me when she realized it was her against the bear alone. The thought of it made me sick to my stomach.

"I was in a tree," I finally told him. "The branches were blocking my barrel."

He got a look on his face.

"Oh," he said.

“I was younger, then.”

“It was probably a big one, wasn’t it?”

After that I couldn’t look at him. I went and fixed everyone breakfast, but I couldn’t eat any of it.

The ranch was at one end of a steep narrow valley where the bases of two mountain ranges ran into each other, draining into a small river. Pine forests grew dense up the lower slopes of the mountains, but the center of the valley was a floodplain and mostly treeless. In summer it was thick with grass and wildflower, and the elk and antelope came down to graze and made a good show, but mostly stayed out of rifle range. Grizzlies summered in the willow thickets by the river, and you had to be careful where you got water. As for the mountains, the upper slopes were mostly snowfield, even in summer.

I took us along the edge of the valley, through the brush near the forest edge where I’d laid the first birds. The Wolf spooked a bird and Fatty hit it with his first shot.

The pheasant went down and the clients were both yelling about it. The bird was still flapping on the ground. I went over to the bird and told it I was sorry. Then I broke its neck.

Fatty heard the sound and something happened to his face. He hadn’t looked when I’d dressed his antelope out, either.

“Nice shooting,” I said, but Fatty didn’t look like he was feeling good about anything.

Right then another bird woke up and headed for the denser trees. Fatty and the Doctor emptied their guns at it, even though it was a hundred yards away.

“That was too far,” the Doctor admitted.

“Thirty-five yards,” I said. “That’s as far as you can kill them with birdshot.”

“Worth trying,” Fatty said. “That one was huge.”

We skirted the foothills at the edges of the forest. I kept up a good pace. The night before, me being angry and it being dark, I’d put the birds further out than I’d meant to.

“Can’t we walk by the stream where it’s flatter,” said Fatty.

“The birds like the cover here,” I said, which was true.

“It’s the same over there,” he said, “and easier walking.”

"It's all willow," I said. "Grizzly day beds."

"We've got these," he said. He tapped his shotgun.

"It's against the law," I said. "Plus you couldn't kill one with bird-shot unless you got the barrel down its throat."

"Who'll know out here," said Fatty. "The bear police?"

"These guns won't kill them," said the Doctor. "That's what the kid is saying."

"I hate these hills," said Fatty. "When I can see it's flat over there."

Another bird woke up and Fatty and the Doctor were on it quick. They both hit it several times. I retrieved the bird and it was shot to pieces. They wanted a picture and I took it, both of them holding the disintegrating bird, its head mostly off and one of its eyes dangling.

Fatty couldn't stop staring at it and his face was white, so I took it from him and put it in my bag.

He puked into the bushes a short time later.

"Too much whiskey," he said.

"Sure," I said.

But he looked at my face and saw I knew the truth.

"What would you know," he said. "You're just a goddamn kid."

He hadn't brought his canteen so I had to give him mine to wash his mouth. He drank and gave it back, and the neck of the bottle was covered with his puke.

I looked at him because I thought he might actually be sick or light-headed, to hand someone back a dirty canteen like that. He wasn't, though. He was smiling at me.

Okay, I thought. Okay, Fatty. I took us up into the trees. The Wolf caught the scent of something, a marmot or rabbit, and went further up the side of the mountain. I didn't call her back.

"Must be birds up there," I said to Fatty. But I knew it was the wrong thing to do.

It was a dense stand and dark as sundown. Our boots sank into the needles and humus, and there were downed trees everywhere and the sound of brittle limbs. We climbed around ancient rockslides, boulders piled like train wrecks made of stone. You couldn't see more than fifty feet.

We kept a hard pace climbing and Fatty fell behind and the Doctor and I came into a small clearing. I smelled something rotting and saw a dead elk, and my heart grabbed and I looked around for what killed it. Then we got closer and saw everything was already eaten but the bones and sinew, carcass folded into a neat pile. There were piles of bear scat everywhere but they were old.

The Doctor said: "Wolves?"

"Grizzly," I said. "See how the big bones are cracked? Also they're not scattered like wolves pull them."

"Why wouldn't a bear pull them," he said.

"They don't have to. No one's taking food from a grizzly."

"Is this safe?" he said, after we'd been standing and looking around a minute.

"We're fine. This thing is a month old."

"Could I get the rack, then?"

"Go ahead."

He went to work cutting.

"Do you see that ledge up there," I said. "Where it looks like the mountain levels off?"

"Sure," he said.

"That's a hanging meadow," I said. "It goes back two miles and it's full of elk. You can't see it from anywhere. There's a glacier way above it and it melts down into a lake, and the lake is so deep it's full of cutthroat."

"Huh," he said.

"I've never told anyone else about it," I said. "It makes all this look like nothing and my boss doesn't even know it's there. You'll see maybe fifty elk, a dozen bighorn."

"Huh," he said again.

"Come back," I said. "You don't have to tell my boss. I'll take a few days off and take you up there."

"I dunno," he said. "I'm pretty booked up these days. Could I borrow that knife again?"

I gave him the knife, but there was a hollow feeling in my chest and something rising in my throat. I walked to the other side of the clearing, where he couldn't see my face.

Fatty caught up to us a minute later and he'd torn his new pants on something, and when he saw the elk rack he stared at it and didn't say anything.

"It's dumb luck," I said. "I haven't seen one that nice in a year."

"This is all bullshit," he said.

Fatty turned around and disappeared back down the hill. The Wolf was nowhere to be seen. I whistled and after a while I saw her coming full-speed down the side of the mountain, through the trees, clearing three-foot logs without slowing down. The Doctor grabbed for his gun.

"It's just the dog," I told him.

He shook his head and went back to cutting the rotten hide away from the elk head.

"It makes you wonder," he said, "when you see a dumb animal moving like that. You wonder how we ever survived this long."

"Speaking of," I said.

"Go on and let me find him," he said. "He gets like this."

"Not a great idea to start wandering," I said.

"I can see that," he said. "But I know him when he's like this and it's better."

"Okay." I followed The Wolf down the hill.

We'd been at the bottom a few minutes when the Doctor showed up. He had a raspberry on his cheek.

"I fell," he said. "But I didn't break the rack." He waved the elk skull triumphantly. It was covered with a thin layer of stinking dark flesh and there was a fly on it.

"We better wait up," he said. "Frank's having a little trouble."

I walked back up the drainage and found Fatty sitting down.

"Twisted my ankle," he said.

"You want me to splint it," I said.

"If you hadn't led us up these fucking woods."

"Following the dog."

"You need to control your dog."

"The dog knows the birds."

He smirked.

"I know how these ranches work," he said.

I just looked at him.

"I said I know how they work."

"Why did you come here, then? If you know so much."

We were back in the valley. Fatty was really limping. He'd loosened his boot to let his ankle swell and I knew I'd fucked up. I offered to leave the dog with them.

"I'll come back in the four-wheeler," I said. "We'll get a couple more birds and then you won't have to hump it back."

He didn't look at me.

"I've got some codeine," I said. "Do you want it?"

The Doctor made a sign like I should stop talking. We headed back toward the ranch. Two birds flushed from the same bush and took off low across the ground.

Fatty fired and dropped one of the birds, but the other got away. Then something big was moving around in the bushes, and Fatty looked at it and fired his gun twice.

It took me a few seconds to realize what it was.

The Wolf gave a little whimper. I dropped my shotgun and ran toward her. Fatty was smirking and the Doctor was just staring at him.

The Wolf was breathing hard and there was blood all over. I knelt next to her and put my head on top of hers and stroked down her back. She didn't move and I stroked her more and then I felt hard things, pellets under the skin, right near the surface. I pushed the hair aside to feel better and she woke up a little and nipped at me, and that's when I knew she wouldn't die. She must have seen Fatty and turned away from him, because the only deep pellets were in her hindquarters where it was all muscle. The rest had just skimmed up her flanks and back.

Fatty was nowhere to be seen. The Doctor was sitting on a rock, nervously bouncing his gun. Then Fatty's head came up out of the bushes. He had his gun slung and he was carrying his bird.

I went over to him and he saw the skinning knife in my hand. He backed away and tripped and fell. I stood over him and put one foot on his shotgun.

"You shot my dog."

He looked at my foot on his gun.

"It was an accident," he said.

"I saw you."

I lifted my foot off his shotgun. I nudged it next to his hand and waited.

"Go ahead," I said. "Pick your move."

He didn't touch it.

"I don't know how you even look at yourself," I told him.

"This cost me five grand," he said. "I saved vacation for a year."

"Well, now you've ruined it. You shot the bird dog."

The Doctor came up behind me.

"Just wait," he said. "Put the knife away and let's settle down."

The Doctor went on about how it was all an accident like he was the only one who'd seen it. He was nervous and waving his shotgun around at all of us. I snatched it out of his hand.

He looked surprised and backed away with his hands up.

"You have to watch your muzzle direction," I said. "That's how you got me last time, in the neck."

I took the shells out of the gun and offered it back to him. Then I heard Fatty.

"Put his gun down," he said.

I turned around.

He was pointing his shotgun at me, leaning into it like he was braced for the recoil. His finger was on the trigger and I could see right into the barrel. Then I couldn't feel anything and I thought I might be wetting my pants. How I could do that in front of a man like Fatty, I didn't know.

"This would be easy," Fatty said.

"Stop it, Frank," the Doctor said to him.

"Get out of here," the Doctor said to me. "We'll find our way back without you."

The barrel was nodding with Fatty's breathing. I walked backwards away from him.

Then I was thirty paces out, probably out of killing range, and I turned away from them and walked faster, then ran. The Wolf limped after me. I thought about exactly where my carbine was, in the corner of my room next to the door. It was a .450 Marlin and it would knock both shoulders out of a moose.

I got back to the ranch and told my boss what happened and got my carbine. He looked at The Wolf and shook his head.

"Goddamn assholes," he said.

Then we saw the men coming in.

"Stow that goddamn rifle," he said. "It's over."

"I don't wanna leave them alone with you," I said.

“I need to talk to them alone. Go to your bunk and put the rifle away.”

“I’ll keep an eye on you.”

I went inside the house and opened the window and put the .450 across the sill.

I saw Fatty and the Doctor. The Doctor had all three guns over his shoulder. My Marlin was empty but I flipped the covers off the scope and put the crosshairs right on Fatty’s chest. Through the scope I saw that his jacket was soaked with sweat. I prayed he would look over and see me.

But instead the Doctor handed all the guns over to my boss. As soon as my boss had the guns my legs went soft and I sat down hard on the floor. I’d only been a trigger squeeze away from being meat. The only reason I wasn’t was that Fatty had decided to let me live.

The boss came and found me and told me I could take the rest of the week off, paid. He was extending Fatty’s and the Doctor’s trip two extra days.

“Are you kidding me,” I said.

“Well, they say you didn’t exactly behave admirable either. But they’re makin’ nice, and they’re even giving you a five hundred dollar tip, despite getting only three birds.”

“They got a dog and a guide.” My voice was breaking. “You go out with them, they’ll get you too.”

“It was all an accident, buddy.”

“It wasn’t.”

He shook his head.

“They’ll be gone in a few days. It’ll be like they were never here.”

“Kick them out,” I said. “Just send them home now.”

“Guys like that are who keeps us open,” he said.

“I can fuckin’ sue ’em. That’s attempted murder what they did.”

“Don’t talk like that.”

“It’s the truth. It’s the goddamn truth, and you know it.”

I could see he knew it, and that Fatty and the Doctor knew it too, knew that pointing a shotgun at someone was an action that had consequences, even in Montana. And I could see that they’d given him a lot of money to come to some kind of agreement. Five grand probably, if he was offering me five hundred.

“Sometimes you gotta take your lumps.”

“This ain’t takin’ lumps,” I said, “it’s letting some fat rich fuck stick it right in your ass.”

He shook his head.

“Stop it, boy.”

“All those days you sit around the house in your shorts,” I said, “while I bust my ass. And now this is how you act.”

He looked at me for a long time.

“You know what,” he finally said. “I thought I was doing some good in the world, hiring an ignorant peckerwood orphan. But I can see where it’s got me.”

“You’re just a sad old prick,” I said.

“I’m taking these boys out for dinner. When I come back I expect your room to be emptied out and you and your dog to be gone.”

“What does that mean?”

“You’re fired,” he said.

Then he walked away.

As far as the crying, it started up and I couldn’t stop it. But I was angry more than anything.

I got my stuff together and watched my boss and those fucks leave for town. As they drove away, Fatty was staring at me out the back window and looking all nervous, but then my boss must have told him it was okay, and the fat bastard smiled at me real wide and turned back around.

That was when I realized I’d made a mistake, not shooting him in the yard.

After my truck was loaded, I walked straight to the basement of the lodge, where the propane tanks were, knocked the valves open and felt my hand get cold from all the gas coming out. The smell filled the house. One spark and there’d be nothing left but charred timbers.

After that I went to the coops, opened all the doors and fired the carbine in the air to get them moving. There must have been a hundred birds. I watched them all disappear down the valley.

I started the truck and The Wolf was in the passenger seat. I pulled a little down the driveway, then stopped to check the map and figure out where I was going. I glanced back at the lodge, which was going to blow any minute. *This is way too close*, I thought, but then decided I didn’t care.

I didn't know where I was going. There wasn't any work in Missoula, or anywhere else. I had enough to live on for a month or two, but eventually I'd be just where I started.

Right then is when it all started making sense. I saw how my uncle ended up standing on those rocks, looking out over the river. He'd left his keys and wallet in the truck, fixed his driver's license on his arm with duct tape.

The carbine was in my hand and the safety was off. I didn't remember picking it up. I thought about my boss and the pictures he had everywhere of his fat-necked dead wife. They were in every room, even the bathroom, short and chunky with her hair gray and frizzed out on one side. He'd told me once, when we were drunk, that he kept the pictures like that because he'd never be able to stick a gun in his mouth, not if she were in the room watching him. I ran my fingers softly along the checkering on the stock, across the action, with the metal so warm from the sun, and I knew why those days passed when my boss didn't leave the house.

Inside the lodge, the gas was so strong I couldn't breathe. By the time I got to the cellar I was out of air. I felt my knees sag and I closed the valves on the tanks, and it seemed like I should lie down and rest a minute. Instead I knocked out all the basement windows with a broom.

When I opened my eyes I was outside.

The Wolf was barking somewhere, hoarse as if she'd been going a long time. I was facing down the valley. The sun was nearly gone and the clouds were pouring down over the mountains.

My boss was kneeling next to me. He was cradling my head and brushing the hair out of my face.

"No hard feelings," he was saying. "No hard feelings."