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My father and I sit in the dirt on the hill looking over the river. The earthy scent of sagebrush is intoxicating. His heeler mutt, Lucy, sits tall and proud beside him, completely still with her large coyote ears standing straight and an expression of unflinching focus in her deep brown eyes. His rifle lies between us, and we nurse our cans of PBR. It's the golden hour of evening, the sky brilliantly streaked with lavender and light orange. In this lighting, the bark of the willow trees below are painted a pale pink. The gently rippling water provides an uncanny, but inherently altered reflection of the world. If I focus my eyes on the earth, I can see the subtle movement of bugs, and if I'm lucky, I might catch sight of a horny toad. I've got a talent for spotting them and even dubbed myself the horny toad whisperer back when I was in junior high.

My father wears a beat-up cowboy hat and wire-rimmed glasses. A thin, faded yellow and blue friendship bracelet I made when I was in elementary school is still threaded through the eyelets of his hat. It's the straw one. In the winter, he wears his father's old felt one, but once the ratio of mud to snow shifts to mud being in the majority, he switches to the straw. He is quiet and still, but his eyes trace the landscape. My dad has always been most at home outside of the confines of civil society. When he was eighteen, he won homecoming king, but having not even realized he'd been nominated, he skipped the dance to go fishing with his grandpa. He's got binoculars pressed to his face, but hands them to me when he spots a moose and her calf half concealed in the willows. He guides my vision, telling me how to orient myself using various landmarks—"Can you find that big thistle by the old fence post? Go left from there"—until I can see them too. The rifle isn't for them—we're waiting for beavers—so we just watch them meander through the weeds, unaware of our presence.

Everyone tells me I look and sound like my mom, and in most ways that's true. We have the same sky-blue eyes and freckled noses. I'm often mistaken for her on the phone due to our similar voices. But my hands

are from my dad. I have his broad palms, short nail beds, and crooked ring finger. He used to write too, but he's a private and excessively humble man, so he just laughs and shakes his head whenever I ask about it. I remember him reading my mother a bit of prose once while we were camping, though. A western, I think, or maybe western adjacent.

I don't know when he quit writing, but he never stopped telling stories. I grew up on wild tales of pirates, bank robbers, highwaymen, and international spies. From a young age, he instilled in me an appreciation for adventure and independence. He was the one who taught me to question the histories fed to me in school. Outlaws were folk heroes in the stories he told me. They were Robin Hood figures who stood up to the fat cats from the East on behalf of the poor country folk stuck under the bank's heel. He taught me to be critical of the government, but he also taught me not to listen to the ramblings and conspiracy theories popular in our neck of the woods. I was encouraged to stand up to The Man, but he made sure I had an actual understanding of who The Man is (hint: it's not Jewish people or immigrants or the ever-elusive and vague scapegoat of "city-slick libs").

Which isn't to say all his stories were serious life lessons. Once, he volunteered to read to my second-grade class, and on his way into town, he spotted a porcupine in the field. Running over to it, he threw his cowboy hat down on its back and quickly snatched it back up. After walking into my classroom with a hat full of quills, our reading hour became a totally improvised story about how his horse had bucked him off headfirst into a porcupine. We all believed him because he's the kind of guy you want to believe even when you know he's telling a tall tale. His kind, hazel eyes and shy, crooked smile are too genuine to be a con.

Plus, he's got the scars to back up his stories. He's a lifelong adventurer who spent his youth guiding wealthy thrill seekers on treacherous trips through the most remote corners of Alaska. Even now, he goes on several extreme mountain climbing expeditions (or death marches, as I call them) a year. He's trekked all through the notorious Wind River Range, occasionally eating dog food or gophers when he and his buddies find themselves in sticky situations. That sort of lifestyle leaves its mark over time. As a child, when he told me the scars on his chin and the back of his head were from wrestling a shark, I didn't question it.

While we wait for the beavers to appear, he tells me about his grandpa from whom he inherited the rifle. It's a 1967 Canadian Centennial

Winchester model 94, chambered in 30-30, which means it's older than both of us. His grandpa—the same one he skipped homecoming to fish with—had used it for exactly the same purpose as us.

"You know, in the spring when money was tight, he used to go out looking for any sheep that'd died in the winter and skin them. I guess he'd get around $15, $16 for their skin, but can you imagine the smell of those carcasses as they finally thawed?"

"He was tough," I say. In actuality, I only have a few genuine memories of this man, my father's namesake, but I've heard so many stories, I feel like I know him.

"Toughest guy I ever knew," my dad agrees. We clink our beer cans together and simultaneously take a sip.

Ever since our family came from Europe only a few generations ago, we've been trappers, miners, and cowboys. This is something we take a quiet pride in. Perhaps even more so now that my father is officially the last to carry out this tradition. He's also fallen out of time a bit. When he dresses up, he wears the silk scarves popular among the old timers even though they're no longer in fashion with people his age and younger. He has no use for the rodeos or violent displays of masculinity that seem to define the modern-day cowboy. He's disgusted when he sees the pride with which they beat up their horses. Instead, he mostly hangs out with the *vaqueros* who find their way to Wyoming from Mexico. Those guys, he says, understand that livestock are still living creatures and as such, require kindness.

Finally, as the sun begins to slip over the horizon, a beaver appears, swimming around a bend in the river. Wordlessly, my father lifts the rifle, and I plug my ears. A shot rings out, startling a group of geese in one of the nearby fields. Lucy flinches and then lets out a low sound that is neither a bark nor a howl, but which we refer to as her "talking" because she does it often and in a way that seems conversational. Cherry red blood spreads through the current as the beaver's body twitches and convulses.

"It was a headshot," he tells me. "He's dead. It's just nerves."

I nod. I know this, but when he first took me deer hunting at ten years old, I was caught off guard and disturbed by the phenomenon. Now he always takes care to remind me they aren't suffering. If he hadn't gotten a clean shot, it would be a different story. He would be racing down the hill to put the poor creature out of its misery.

As it is, we take our time descending the slope to retrieve the body. It's steep enough that we have to walk sideways with the edges of our boots sending loose soil cascading down. Downing his beer, he hands me the can so he can carry the body back to the truck. He never lets me carry them, but I'm not complaining.

Lucy follows along dutifully. She's small for a heeler mutt, so her dad was probably some kind of Jack Russell or something, although the rancher we got her from insisted he'd been a Border Collie. She's white with large brown patches on her side and on her head, and she's long and skinny, standing at less than a knee high. Her ears are bigger than her head. Lucy's devotion to my father is so great that as a puppy, she used to run away to find him where he works as a mechanic and operator at a sulfur terminal after going there with him once when he got called out in the middle of the night. Sometimes she'd be missing for days before finally showing up exhausted and starving at the remote facility. These days he just lets her come to work with him. She's got her own employee ID and everything.

"I hope that shot didn't disturb Mongo too much," I jest, referencing the giant crawdad we imagine lives beneath the surface of the river. I think my dad originally made him up to deter me from jumping in the water without supervision, but the myth took on a life of its own over the years.

"I don't know Squirrelly, maybe if we annoy him enough, he'll help out with the beavers," he replies using the nickname he gave me as a child due to my early passion for tree climbing.

The mosquitos are descending upon us with urgency now. He walks ahead of me, and I swipe them off his shoulders as they land. Lucy stays right at his heel, trotting along with her head held high and talking to us quietly as if she's contributing to the conversation. Which she is in her own way. It wouldn't be the same without her input.

On our way out, we check our traps laid out along the riverbed. They're the same contraptions my great-grandpa used when he was trapping professionally. They're rusted plenty, but they do the job as well as any modern beaver trap could, I suppose. Right now, they're empty, but in the morning they won't be. Really, those traps alone would take care of the job for us, but we enjoy drinking beer by the river in the evening, and beaver hunting gives us an excuse to do so.

"Really is a shame how goddamn many of these things there are this year," my dad says gesturing at the corpse he carries.

"What're we at now?" I ask. "Is this guy number 28?"

"Twenty-nine," he replies. "I took care of one this morning on my way to work."

I make a low whistling sound. Our record in a year is 32, and it's only May. My dad doesn't like killing them any more than I do. They're smart animals and harmless if there aren't too many, but the river is becoming so overpopulated that we can't keep up with the damage they cause. Besides that, all signs indicate we're moving into another drought cycle, and they're gumming up the irrigation system. We haven't got a choice if we want to put up a decent harvest.

By the time we make it to the old Ford pickup, the bugs are swarming. We curse ourselves for having left the windows of the cab open, trying desperately to crank them up manually. Lucy tries to claim the passenger seat, as if by jumping in before me, she can secure her usual spot next to my dad. She yelps and growls a little when I push her out of the way, but my dad scolds her. She talks back to him defiantly before putting her ears back and compromising by sitting on my lap. He puts some Corb Lund on the radio, and we discuss a horror podcast we're both listening to separately. He's managed to get a few episodes ahead of me and is threatening spoilers. I know he wouldn't tell me anything even if I wanted him to, but still I play along.

"I swear to God if you ruin…"

"They all die, kid. Every last one of them."

"Well, yeah, that's a given." I roll my eyes and grin at him. He's grinning back. I can see on his front incisors where they had to glue the teeth back on after he'd chipped them in some sort of accident involving a donkey back when he was in Alaska. When I knocked my own front teeth out a few years ago (albeit in an altogether more embarrassing fashion), I told him it was 'cause I wanted to match.

We drive on a two-track dirt road away from the river. It's a bumpy route, and the passenger side seat belt is broken, so I press my palm to the roof and hold onto Lucy's sinewy little body in an attempt at keeping us from being jostled too much. My father rotates his right arm like he's trying to loosen up the joint. His jacket hides the way his clavicle extends from his body at an unnatural angle. The last time he dislocated his shoulder, he'd permanently disfigured it. It happened while we were pushing cattle when I was about 14. I remember hearing him shout, "Whoa, son!" as his horse, Charlie, spooked at something I couldn't see. Charlie's a large, sorrel American Quarter Horse who is heavily mus-

cled and the fastest of all our ponies. Unfortunately, he's also naturally skittish, and although he's a giant sweetheart, he doesn't know his own power. Charlie reared, and they both disappeared behind the tall, thick sagebrush. I immediately tapped my spurs against my own horse's sides and galloped over. My father was already in shock by the time I got to him, laughing off his injury and insisting he was fine regardless of how clearly he was not fine. It had happened plenty of times before, he argued. It was no big deal.

I think he resents his body for aging. He resents that he can't walk off his injuries like he used to. Just last fall, he was kicked in the leg by a steer, and what he initially assumed would result in a bit of stiffness for a week or so ended up being a months long recovery. His calf muscle has never lost the deep gash, and the skin there is pale pink and shiny. He swears if he'd gotten the same injury 20 years earlier, he would've been fine. Maybe that's true, but he says it in a way that makes it obvious that he sees this as a personal failing. His body can't quite keep up with him the way it used to, and it's rocking his sense of self.

This isn't necessarily a bad thing though. My dad uses the experience of aging as inspiration to live just as spontaneously and adventurously as he always has. Often, he reminds me to be thankful for my youth while I've got it, so I can be as regret free later in life as he is. Once, while drinking together and playing darts in the garage, he suggested we go climb one of the larger hills nearby.

"Um, it's midnight," I argued, "and we're both buzzed?"

"So what? You're 21 goddamn years old Squirrel. You can jump that far." So we went and climbed the hill. There doesn't necessarily need to be a reason to do something with him, so long as what you're doing makes you feel alive

I was in middle school and beginning to find my footing as a storyteller when I began retelling his old tales back to him. Eventually, we began making new ones up together. Over dinner, we would animatedly inform my mother of the backstory we'd created for the cave we found back in the desert which seems to be man made. (We figure it was an old miner driven mad after years spent beneath the earth. He saw that that particular cliff seemed to get struck by lightning an awful lot, so he started obsessively digging for precious metals, not realizing that he was instead digging his own tomb. If you venture far enough into it, you can still hear the echo of his pickaxe against stone.) My mother began refer-

ring to these tirades as The Squirrel and Pappy Show, and now if conversation lags, she'll ask, "does The Squirrel and Pappy Show have any new material?" which we always do since much of it is made up on the spot.

We drive until we find a decent gulch to toss the beaver in. It's far enough from the house that we don't have to worry about the dogs getting into it. It actively pains him to senselessly waste the body, but the pelt is worthless this time of year, and we aren't quite hick enough to eat beaver when we've got a freezer full of wild game and homegrown beef. ("I tried it once when I was your age, thought I'd be a genuine mountain man. Greasiest meat I've ever seen.") Technically, we could harvest the castor glands, but all you get is about an ounce of gland per beaver, and a pound of it only goes for $50 or so. We'd decided the effort involved in harvesting and storing them wasn't worth the payout.

Instead, we've been joking that we're paying tithing to the sasquatch or mothman or any of the other creatures we imagine living among the brush. As long as we provide adequate sacrifices, they'll let our humble bit of property be. By now, it's dark except for our headlights casting long shadows across the landscape, and we get a thrill out of spooking ourselves. These sorts of imagined scenarios make up a substantial portion of our conversations. We feed off each other's ideas. He makes something up about a gigantic, snake-like mammal almost resembling a badger that stalks its prey silently through the brush, and I add that it lives in an undiscovered cave network entered through common badger holes. From this detail, he states that this monster only hunts during the new moon because light blinds it. Together, we build a library of folklore.

On the way home, my dad turns down the radio so we can listen to the coyotes cry. We yip back at them and pretend we are communicating with something stranger and more ancient than a common coyote. Lucy throws her head back and howls with us, low and lonesome sounding. He points to a distant ridge and asks what I'd do if we saw a Dark Watcher standing right there.