

"wilderness" bradley watker

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I hobbled as fast as I could across the moor. I didn't look back and I didn't look down - the former because I didn't want to know just how close it was, the latter because I didn't want to see the blood spurting from my foot. It was chasing me. I didn't turn round, but with each limped and painful step I knew it was right behind me, ready to pounce and end any futile hope of survival. It was so near, at my shoulder, on top of me, right through my brain. I could feel its breath pushing against my neck, salivating in hunger. Why didn't it just finish me off?

Maybe it wanted me to turn, maybe the moment I looked it would be there. Its red eyes shining into mine, its wide mouth ready to make an aperture of my throat. The temptation to turn was immense. If I turned it would be over, I wouldn't have to run - hobble, limp, stagger - anymore. I heard it growl, ready to pounce. My arms flailed, my mangled foot slipped in a coating of my own blood - but still, I ran, still, I refused to look back. I kept thinking of survival, thinking there'd be a future, thinking I'd live - and it was with that thin slice of hope that my legs disappeared from under me.

I screamed, but it was a sound of surprise rather than pain - and it was lost in a terrible scream from across the moor. Who was that? Was it Mark? Was it Pete? We'd run together, separated - thinking it couldn't hunt down all three of us across these moors. But was that right? It was a long way to run and we had no idea how swift it was. I closed my eyes and listened. It was Mark. It was Mark screaming into the night. It was Mark being torn apart. I opened my eyes, slowly, and looked behind me. There was nothing. There were no red eyes, there were no bloodied teeth. Yet I could hear its breath so close, smell its disgusting raw hunger. But it wasn't there, Mark's cries told me

that. It had followed Mark - the fattest one - meat on the carcass for a good feast. But I could still hear its breath, trapped in my mind, telling me it was near, that despite Mark's cries it was still hunting me.

I steadied myself and looked around. I'd tumbled into a crimson ditch, a jagged hole covered in blood. Every inch of grass, every patch of mud was smeared red. I blinked a couple of times and gagged as the stench beat its way through my nostrils - and then, under the moonlight, I saw them. There were a dozen rabbit carcasses in the hole with me, each of them dissected and eviscerated by teeth. This is where it was before the bar, this is where it started before it came to us for the main course. I pulled myself up, scared I'd vomit. Mark's cries had stopped.

Mark had been stopped. It was silent again, so I couldn't retch. If I threw up it would know where I was, it would find me easy. I crawled from the ditch, away from the blood and the smell. I lay on the grass, keeping my face pressed down, hoping the aroma of night time freshness would remove all others. I was tempted to just stay there, but the pain in my heel was too much. I had a knife in my shack, a good sharp blade. I could cut out the wound, remove the infection. The shack wasn't far. I knew this land, knew how to navigate these moors - I just prayed I could move fast enough it wouldn't catch me.

I stood up, putting my weight on my right foot, only gingerly using my left. I took my bearings. Mark's cries had come from the east. What was it doing now? Was it feasting? Was it burrowing its nose into Mark's blubber? Or was it going to use the darkness to hunt down me and Pete as well?

It had started in the bar - what? Half an hour earlier? A lifetime ago? 'The Bar At The End Of The World' we called it. There had been three of us in, and Paul the bar-keep. No matter who else was there, the three of us - and Paul the bar-keep - were always there. We were single men, away from civilisation, glad - in the absence of any other human companionship - to have a kind of family to go to of an evening. It wasn't exclusive, we never made anyone feel an outsider. When others came in from the moors they were welcomed, they were old friends. Even strangers received a cheery greeting. We'd had lost English motorists, Scotsmen in kilts, even once a Japanese coach party. We always treated strangers kindly, we always wanted the stranger to leave as a friend. We weren't a bar which looked shifty and suspicious at every unknown who walked in. We smiled, we cheered, we brought another round.

The stranger who walked in that night was different. He looked cold, distant, unfriendly. He looked like a man who wouldn't appreciate smiles or cheers or any warm welcome. He was huge, the size and shape of a bear - near seven foot of him. He lowered his head through the doorway and then straightened, standing dead still, staring at us on our bar-stools. Pete - the friendliest, youngest and lithest - tended to pounce forward and shake the hand of whoever came in, he didn't with this guy. This man just stood and glared at us, like he was ready to growl if we came near.

We were in the wild, we ourselves were part of the wild - but he looked like he was born of it. His hair was greasy and matted to his simian shaped skull, his beard was torn and tangled, his skin was red and lined from exposure.

His long jacket was the brown of every kind of dirt, his trousers were stained and short on his bruised calves, his torn shirt was only buttoned once - showing off a scarred and lined torso.

It was Paul who spoke. Paul was the custodian and was never scared of confronting the unruly elements - his shotgun was never far from reach below the bar.

" Can I help you?" he asked.

The man did nothing, just continued to stare with passive venom.

" Can I help you?" said Paul.

The man moved. He turned his head, slowly, towards the bar-keep.

" Whisky." said the man, his voice as dark as earth.

" You got money for that?" asked Paul.

It was never usually a problem. Once or twice we'd had a tramp stray out that far and we'd brought them drinks - tramps have stories too. No one seemed willing to volunteer this time.

The man took three strides, three strides which seemed to dent and echo against the floor. He grabbed a bar stool and swooped it under him. It was amazing those rickety old stools could take such a weight.

" Whisky." said the man.

" You got money for that?" said Paul.

They stared at each other. Paul kept his hand beneath the bar, clutching the gun. There was music on the jukebox, an old pop hit of the nineteen-seventies, but even though it played it was like silence had come and crushed it.

The man brought his hand up, a brutal weapon of a fist - huge, scarred, and red. He opened it, dropping a dozen coins down onto the bar. He smiled at Paul or gave what passed for a smile on that face.

Paul let go of the gun and pulled out a clean glass.

"What kind?" he asked.

"Whisky."

Paul shrugged and reached for a bottle - the cheapest - and poured out a measure.

The whiskey made itself at home at the bottom of the glass, but the man just stared at it in disapproval.

"Whisky," he said.

Paul poured another measure.

Again the man stared at it with disgust strained across his wrinkled, bruised face.

"Whisky."

Paul shrugged again and poured it so the glass was brimming with brown liquid.

Helicopters! I could suddenly hear choppers. They were up there, more than one - patrolling the night-sky. I dropped to the grass and looked up, but couldn't see them despite the moonlight. How did they know about it? Who had called them? It took a long time to get a helicopter out here - helicopters were city. They must have been hunting this thing awhile, must have tracked it down here. But what were they going to do now? It was an animal, it had natural senses - they didn't know this moor, they didn't know where things were. It was ridiculous, what were city men in helicopters going to do against a beast like that?

I lay still. They were on my side. The police, the army, the protection authorities - whoever they were - we all wanted the same thing, we wanted it gone. But I knew they wouldn't be as careful as I would. They'd come to the moors before looking for things, other animals roaming these parts. They'd found them, they'd got them - and so what if a local got in the way of their sharpened bullets? It was collateral damage, it didn't matter. After all, we were too far away from the cities and the towns and the newspapers and the television cameras for anyone to care what actually happened. We were too far away for the death of a few yokel innocents to matter. But we knew. We knew it was as just as dangerous encountering a city man sent with a gun as it was encountering a beast.

I got up slowly. What would I look like to them? A man limping in darkness across the moor, smeared with dirt and remains - how was I going to appear to them?

I tried to figure out where they were - the sound of propellers said they were close, but I could also hear that breathing. I shuddered. I had to keep moving, I had to get safe. My shack, with heavy bolts on the doors and windows, was still a mile away. There was nowhere else though. Nowhere between where I stood and my shack. Nowhere in that direction between the bar and my shack. It was all so desolate. I had to get home - I could lock myself in, I had weapons, I'd be able to treat my ankle and give myself a chance of a tomorrow. I just had to get off the moor. I didn't want to die out there from either sharpened teeth or sharpened bullets.

The man had just stared at that glass of whisky. Rain fell, records changed on the jukebox and still the man watched that glass with slow contemplation. All human sound had died. Before the man walked in Pete was regaling us with a childhood story we'd all heard three hundred times, Mark nevertheless could not stop sniggering at it - now there was only silence. We stared at the man - anxious of what he was going to do, scared of what he was going to do. Paul's hand was below the bar, tight on the gun. Maybe the man would just drink and leave. Maybe he'd drink and start a conversation. Maybe.

His hand reached quick for the glass. One moment it was lying still in his lap, the next it was dropping the brown liquid down his throat. He took it in one gulp, then slammed the glass back to the bar and stared at it disappointed. He seemed to wonder if that was it. Paul reached his free hand to the bottle,

to offer a refill, when the man jerked himself over the glass. He hunched his body over as if about to vomit the contents back in, his head so close he could have snapped the rim with his teeth. But he didn't. Instead he unfurled his tongue, pushing it into the empty glass so it curled at the bottom and piled up on itself.

The tongue was long, dark, thick - it had two black veins running and pulsing up the back. He pushed it into the glass and filled it. The receptacle crammed full with purple flesh spilling over the top. Then he made a slurping sound, like his tongue was a paper-straw reaching for the last drop of liquid. He slid it out, but stayed hunched forward and unfurled it again, wrapping his tongue around the base of the glass. He lifted it from the bar, tilting his head back and shaking whatever atoms of whisky might be left into his wide eager mouth. He dropped the glass back to the bar carelessly, so it landed on its side and rolled. The man grunted as it came to a stop right at the edge.

I wasn't far now, but still far from safe. The helicopters had moved away, but there were men on the moors. I could hear them communicating, I could hear the static of their walkie-talkies. They were armed and scared in the moonlight, and it didn't matter what they saw - man, sheep, deer, great big beast - they'd all get the same treatment. I kept moving, conscious of them, conscious of the salivating breath, conscious that one wrong turn and I'd be exposed for all in the moonlight. I rounded a ridge, and there - close enough to see - was my shack. I felt so much relief I nearly wept, but then I heard them on the bank right above me. I hit bank-side and listened, they were

chatting about vectors and shut downs and containing the area. All the time the beast was getting nearer.

It was so dark out there - even with the moon - that it could have pounced from five feet and surprised me. Even with armed city men so close, it would still have time to tear out my throat before taking them too. They were above me so I couldn't move, but I could hear the beast and knew I had to move. The sound of its hunger was louder when I stopped. It seemed like it could attack from all sides, like I could be ripped apart by more than one of them. It was everywhere. What were those idiots doing? Why were they advertising themselves? I held my breath and listened to them and listened to it, and figured I was in for a bloody death.

Then there were screams. From across the moor came dreadful cries, that even through the wind I recognised as Pete. I lurched forward from the bank, but then reality knocked me back again. Even if I knew where to run it would be too late. The screams swirled in the wind, they echoed, so it seemed that each death throe was repeated again and again across the moors. The men primed their weapons, but what were they going to fire at? It could be miles off, it could be bursting up from just over the next hillock. Finally there was movement, orders were given, the men raced away. I could still hear the breathing, rattling between my ears even with the screams. I could hear the helicopters swooping back. The men had gone, the helicopters weren't near enough yet and it was as close as it had ever been. If I looked to my left I could make out the brickwork of my shack. I moved hastily towards it.

With the empty glass in front of him, the man closed his eyes and became still. Why hadn't Paul shot him then? Why didn't he just blast him one? What had gone through Paul's mind to make him wait?

But then the opportunity was gone, his eyes opened and he spoke.

" I get so lonely," he said. " I get so very, very lonely." His voice was quiet, a growled monotone. " I know the kind of life I lead isn't meant to have company, but still I am lonely. I think it's an odd thing for me to have become lonely - I wasn't born lonely, I didn't grow up lonely, there was nothing in my life that suggested loneliness. But now I am alone. I don't miss the people I knew, I don't miss the people who loved me - some of them I can't even remember - but I do miss the sensation of somebody else, I do miss there being another.

I talk to myself a lot, I talk to myself and try to make sense of it, because after all - who else is there to talk to? Sure, there are people like you. There's the welcome of strangers when I can get it. But you're not my friends, you're not even my friends for the hours I spend here. You're just people I meet. You don't like me and you don't trust me - and I'll be honest with you, you have no reason to do either. You know what I am, or you have a good idea what I am. You know what I have to do, you know what will happen next. And later on when I'm alone I might regret it, but for now..."

And there it was - an angry mass of hair, claws and teeth. It went for Mark first - the most meat - but Mark was strong and pushed it back. It was only for a second, knocking it off balance, but enough for the three of us to get

passed. We scrambled, had almost reached the outside, when it clamped me in a hungry vice. I looked to my foot and saw its horrible mutated face, growling and supping at my flesh. I screamed and it was answered by a gunshot. Paul put both barrels into its back. It roared and let go of my heel, and I hobbled out as fast as I could. There was another shot, and then a scream from Paul.

I reached my shack, fumbling in the darkness as I tried to open the door. I had to be quicker - my blood was in the air, surely I was going to be next. It was so near, its breath seemed to bruise the back of my neck. Finally, the door opened. I slammed it behind me, bolted it, pushed the furniture to block the windows. Outside were choppers, men running - but they weren't going to get near it. It was coming for me, stalking me.

I opened the table drawer and pulled out my revolver, then went to my bookshelves and cracked open a little box. It was a present, given to me as a keepsake, a lucky charm, in case I ever needed it. A silver bullet. I looked to the door and with shaking fingers slipped it into the chamber. The full moon shone on me despite the furniture. I could hear growling, panting, a nearby and desperate salivating. But then I heard a chopper, I heard men. It receded, cowering, taking a tactical retreat. The sound of breathing softened in my head. I took a gulp of relief and vomited on the floor. The vomit was blood red.

I sat down, shaking with tears. I reached to the drawer and pulled out a carving knife, bringing it to my heel. But it was no good. The wound was deeper than I'd realised, the teeth had sunk in further than I thought,

meeting below my flesh. There was no way I could just cut it out, the infection was in me, rampant in my blood.

I put the gun to my temple. Why not? Anyone who passed as my friend had already died that night. But then the moonlight touched me and I realised just how powerful I felt. I could hear the breathing again, friendlier now though. There was a new smell in the night air - warm, welcoming. The beast was just the other side of the door, I could sense it. I could smell it, it could smell me. I put the gun down and smiled. I guessed neither of us would be lonely for a little while.