

## Where the Wilderness Meets the Wild

The story was called *Blue Wolf Ridge*. It was a favorite of my father's, as he was a storyteller (and that's about *all* he was). Unlike his other stories, he never told me it until I was older, of that I can be sure. I remember the afternoon we sat underneath a high ledge in the Wichita Mountains, chased there by a sky-burner lightning storm, and as he watched me stand at the edge of the overhang, without so much as saying my name, he began the story in that casual growl of his.

“It was raining twice as hard as this when a little boy was heard crying over the pounding rain. There wasn't thunder like now, but the rain, well, Indians claimed that the spirit of the sky was angry during that year and was determined to punish the lands with rain until they overflowed and cried with water like the clouds themselves. Of course you can see how remarkable it was that something actually heard that boy. A lone wolf, a female whose mate had been killed by a bear and knew the sound of loneliness herself, heard the child's cries. She found the boy shivering under a lone mulberry tree. As broad as those leaves are, they weren't enough to keep the boy dry. All of a sudden, he fell quiet as the wolf approached. Softly, she nuzzled him and the two warmed each other through the storm.

“The boy rarely left his new mother's side after that day. He grew up smart and quick, learning the ways of the wilderness. Years passed and by and by he hunted on his own though always sure to find his way back to his mother. Until one day, while trotting easy over the amber plains, he found that wolf dead among the high grasses twisting in the cold breeze of an early fall.”

My father took out his pipe looking at it, then stood up from his seat against the rock wall to look out from our shelter.

“Think we should get a move on?” he asked. The storm had finally quit.

“I would’ve pushed through the storm if the horses could’ve beared it. Or if you could’ve beared it for that matter.”

“Yeah. Alright then,” he said as he untied his horse. I mounted mine, anxious to get moving. Although I never had much mind for his storytelling, curiosity got at me as we started back for home.

“That story, Blue Wolf Ridge, is that how it ends?”

He looked at me, his chest and head bobbing with the horse.

“Ends? Well now, I reckon I stopped it a bit early didn’t I?” He looked out west before starting again, as though he was searching for the rest of the story inside his head.

“Like I told, he found the wolf dead. What from- I never did hear a version that mentioned. But when he saw that mother wolf who raised him lying there, and this is where the story differs, the drifters and the storytellers like to say that the man’s spirit stopped his heart from beating at that moment, and his body dropped lifeless overtop the wolf’s that he dearly loved. So now the two spirits protect the woodlands and prairies they had always roamed through. Side along side,” my father pulled out his pipe again at this point and cleaned it with the frayed bottom of his cloth shirt.

“The other version, as I heard from an old Indian who was not right since fighting in the Civil War, went like this: Well the man, he loved the wolf so much, he picked it up and took it to a rocky overlook. Above him the evening sky turned a deep ocean blue, just waiting to turn black. And everything beneath it shone with its color. I suppose that’s where the story gets its name. But there on the cliff he petted it once, running his hand the length of its body. Then he

ate and tore at the fur and raw flesh of the wolf; I guess something inside him wouldn't let another animal peck at the wolf's body.

“When he was done, night had swept over the cliffs joined by storm clouds the color of death which stopped the moon from shining. Naked, he sat down next to the picked bones and waited until a powerful rain burst from the skies with fearful noise that turned streams into rivers. And over it all every beast below the cliffs could hear a terrible cry of something in pain, so they quaked in fear and cold, wishing for the storm to pass. The next day, after the mist and rains vanished from the land, the vultures were the first in the new sky, as scavengers normally are. But on the overlook their keen eyes saw nothing. No man. No bones. Just a small puddle of water left there by the storm.”

I grabbed the reigns of my horse, tugging at her a bit to stop. My father turned his horse to mine and said looking up to the sky, “I never liked that version, though I can't say why. The Indian who told it to me lost both eyes in the war I recollect. One fighting for the Confederates and the other fighting for the Union side. Mysterious and more than a bit crazy he was.”

I kept staring at the ground with something like a fire burning inside me. A little fearful that the story made sense to me, or more like I had known it since the day I was a gleam in my daddy's eye and a few drinks of whiskey in my mother's stomach.

“Let's keep moving. I'd like to be home so I can rest under my own roof.”

It was sundown by the time I was done caring for the horses; they were fed and locked in the stall for the night. The trip into Lawton hadn't been quick or simple, and more than the animals were tired. I had spent the day trying for some loans for land. I didn't want a home, just a sprawl of fields to live off. I'd sleep unprotected and cold if need be. About that I was earnest.

But the weather had been bad, investments hadn't produced like they should I was told, so the banks weren't loaning money to a kid all by his lonesome. My father meanwhile sold his handiwork in the town square. It was enough money to survive on, not that I much cared. He stayed in the graying wood walls of his cabin, whereas I stuck to the fields. He lived with the one picture of my mother who died in childbirth and left me to raise myself these seventeen years.

Walking back to my father's two room home a rain started again, a good feeling on my neck and face. Inside, my father was sitting in his usual spot by the lone window where still a bit of dusk was crawling through. He was just starting a new shape to whittle; the wooden block he was using was no bigger than hatchet handle. That was his work. He didn't do a lick of anything else no more, just talked and chipped out bears or geese until daylight failed. The man wouldn't even help me with the horses or the small field I fed us with in the summer. He couldn't explain it, but said the horses only ever liked me, and that I knew how to work the fields as a boy better than he ever learned. I'd stopped asking for help before I knew how to ask for it.

"The horses alright?" he asked.

"Same as always."

"Doesn't feel like summer out there tonight, does it?"

"Chillier by a bit. That's all."

"Could you see the moon out?"

"Through the clouds. She was a full one."

“Gotta be careful peeking at the full moon. I’ve heard my share of strange happenings under its light,” he put down his knife and block. “Sit down if you like.”

Always with his stories.

“No, I’d just as rather turn in soon. You were wanting to hunt with me in the morning. Is that right?”

“Right,” he looked outside to the night sky. There was still the softest of rains coming down. It had been one dry summer after another, though now at the end of August, the skies had let a bit of rain go.

“It's a shy rain tonight," he said as I took off my boots.

"Yeah," I chewed on his language for a second. "What are you getting at?"

"I keep thinking it will, but it's not wanting to open up and gush," he turned to look at me standing by the doorway.

“Too cold a night for it to.”

“Isn’t that always the way,” he said sighing and turned back to the window.

“Yeah. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Goodnight son.”

It was still night to the animals when I awoke. An owl in the high parts of the trees hooted to nobody. But I got ready mine and my father’s rifle, then walked outside to check the sky for rain. By this time my father was awake and sitting where he was accustomed to. I could see him through the window. Too dark to whittle and without food for breakfast, he sat watching

me as I came back inside. We'd run out of meat earlier in the week but my father forgot to buy any when we were in town. I planned on getting my own, but my father wouldn't do nothing about it otherwise, so I had to light a fire under him to hunt.

"I'm hungry for some bacon. I wish I remembered to get some," my father said sounding awfully sorry for himself.

"I stopped in the butcher's yesterday. It was costly."

"I wish you would've reminded me."

"The prices were too high."

"Still...you do anything else in town?"

"Aw, just, just this and that."

"This and that? Well I could've used some help selling."

"I don't think I'm made to be a salesman. I don't know how to lie."

"Maybe that's true. At least you know how to hunt."

I nodded my head. Dogs knew better how to act with compliments than me. "I just want a buck in my sights today," I said more to myself than him. "That's all I want."

"I wouldn't mind a buck neither," he said. No, he wouldn't mind; he had never shot an animal. He was better at making them than killing them. I'd seen him miss every chance he had. Sometimes I swore he tried to miss on purpose.

"Damn it a buck would be nice," he repeated. "I'm starving for meat."

Doing no good standing there listening to my father, I grabbed my rifle, pouch, and bullets and made for the spot in the woods. It was a walk of about a half mile. The very southern piece of our land was a grassy clear that deer loved to rest and eat by with a wire fence

running along the property line. I was sure more deer than men had looked on that land, so it was as good a spot as I'd ever found.

When I got out to the clear, the sun was still hiding below the horizon. Sitting among the brush, I was buzzing with excitement in that calm, still manner hunters have to have. Like pressing down a spring and waiting for it to jump. It had been a month since I was last hunting, though I told my father I'd gone out every morning. Actually, I had just been walking and watching the woods, thinking about leaving home after I harvested the last of our summer crop. I hadn't gotten the loan for land around Lawton, but I'd find a place that did have land cheap to buy. It was a devil-may-care plan, but I had to get moving. It wasn't that I lived in that house too long, it was that I lived there at all.

I sat cross-legged with my rifle in my lap, sure to keep my head low but always moving. Ever since I got my first doe, I'd known to keep aware. I didn't need any stories about spirits or birds to teach me to keep alert.

The sun was rising above the saplings when I caught first sight of a deer. Springing about the bushes it caught my eye quick. With my rifle at the ready, I raised and watched the doe wander through the forest. It had started sweeping from my left side towards the patch I guarded. She was young, too young to be alone. Wandering about like this, she was sure to be killed by something, but not me. I enjoyed working for my kills. Not really a matter of honor or nothing, just about fun. This one was too easy to touch; let the men like my father shoot at it. Anyway, my gun followed her so as to practice my aim.

My second sighting of the morning was something pretty to shoot at. It was a buck with no rack, maybe on its own for one of its first seasons. He was only out about a hundred yards but walking among trees. If I moved I would've scared him, and I had no good shot until he

came out in the clear. Very carefully I raised my gun and right leg, so the rifle lay level upon it. His steps were cautious coming to the clearing, like he knew it was a graveyard where I'd killed many others before him. On the edge of the grass he stopped, put his head down to sniff, and raised it again, holding still. I didn't want to miss, so I waited for him to come further out. Just before he put his head down to walk on closer to me, the explosion of shooting spooked me. The deer's front legs gave way, and he tumbled onto his side. From where I was I thought I saw the deer breathing a bit, maybe playing possum. Sometimes if you only wound a deer, it'll lie down on you until you come close and let your guard down. Then it'll bolt with a surge of life. I had a few outsmart me like that before.

On my right I could make out my father jumping over fallen branches and through the prickles. He was riled up like I'd never seen. But on my other side came a larger man with a red and black hunting vest. He moved something like a bear, walking slowly with stiff arms. I waited for him to pass by my spot until I sat up and followed at a distance.

"How do you like that shot?" he called out to my father who was standing over the dead deer. "Can't wait to show that one to my brother. I was sitting all the way on the other side of the field here," he gestured, coming closer to the deer.

My father said something quietly to the hunter as they both stood at the buck. I couldn't see the man's face because I was coming from behind. My father didn't look at me either as he started talking louder about shooting on our property without permission. As far as I could tell, the hunter didn't pay much mind, turning every minute and spitting tobacco on the ground.

"Its horseshit! I shot it. You ain't got no right to use our land anyway."

"You don't own the deer."

"What's on our land is ours."

“What I shot is mine,” he spit again.

“I shot it. And on my land,” my father kept arguing.

“I’m taking my buck, one way or the other,” the hunter threatened. I was standing right behind him now, but he didn’t hear it.

“You got nerve talking like that on my land. I should shoot you for trespassing,” my father raised his gun.

“You think I never stared a barrel down?”

“I think it’ll be the last barrel you ever see,” he pulled the bolt back, but moved too slow. The stranger whipped his rifle up, fired, and sent a bullet into my father’s chest. It was a small spray of red, and I knew he was gone. In a flash of awareness, the hunter felt me behind him and turned around with big eyes in shock. He couldn’t figure which to do: say something or aim his gun, not that it mattered.

I didn't even need to eye up the rifle. In a way I'd been eyeing that kill all my life. I just wrenched the gun up to my hip and pulled a shot that went clear through the man's neck and into the trees towards the sky. He stumbled, his hands pressed to the split in his throat where I could see from the river of blood that the bullet's tip would take his life. Never had I shot anything at such close a range, or seen the blitz of a bullet that showed itself above his red-soaked collar. Clear above the scattering of leaves came the man's gurgling attempts from drowning in his own blood. But it wasn't *his* blood he drowned in, knowing my father laid close by, face in the dirt. I stood still- not realizing I'd thrown my rifle behind me- watching the hunter with his arms and legs swimming-like in the leaves, moving as much as he could with the last of his blood. When he was done dying, I thought I saw the steam rising from where the wound in his neck was.

Quiet around the clearing where three animals lay dead, I first went to my father. There was an opening in his chest and his face was white. All I could think was he must have died happy, killing his first buck. I waited to feel something else- like sad or upset- but couldn't figure out how to. Instead, I took his whittling knife from his belt and put it in my own pocket. He wouldn't have no use for it. Next, seeing the rifle underneath my father and remembering the first kill I had with that gun, I felt the desire to take one more shot. Not at something in particular, just to fire a stray bullet with nowhere to go but up and out until it ran out of life. I nudged my father at the waist with my right boot to move the rifle from underneath him. I pulled the butt towards me; the muzzle dragged through a sticky slop of blood. It felt light and powerful in my hands. Holding it firm against my right shoulder, I looked across the woods for nothing, just looking. Thick stumps and branches passed across the end of the rifle. I sighted over the forest, lost behind the gun. Crows hovered above the bony fingertips of the treetops, calling about me to their murder, knowing I held the gun not to harm. So I watched them weave in the trees, stop to rest and call out and fly again. Then, a deep rumble of rifle fire boomed deeper in the woods behind me- where more deer probably were- chasing the crows away. Ready, I aimed straight into the copper sun-rising sky and pulled on the trigger. The hollow clink of it sounded and the bolt popped, but nothing fired. Checking my father's gun, I found it empty. He never had a shot. I lowered the rifle, and placed the useless thing at his bloody side.

I stepped to the freshest kill and hung over the stranger, rocking up and down on the toes of my boots. Wide, staring white eyes that man had. He'd seen the world and he'd seen death and his eyes showed every bit of both. I peered closer at the specks of red showing on his scaly face; it wasn't much different than a buck.

After awhile, I stood back up with my hands on my hips, still leering at him. I couldn't look at them bodies or the gun anymore. I walked some paces away from the scene and sat at the base of a stump that was nicer than any chair I'd sat in. Before my eyes things were settling back to usual: the high clouds still cast rolling shadows on the mountains in the distance, the leaves rustled and waved together, the squirrels stopped hiding and daringly jumped from branch to branch.

But far away I sensed a red dot ambling on towards me from my left. He called out someone's name, coming closer all the time. My breathing slowed. My eyes became still and rested only on the man. He leaned heavy to each side with every step, his stomach sticking out. He held a rifle like the man I had shot. And as he came into the clearing he caught sight of the three dead bodies.

"What the hell?" he stared over the hunter that shot my father, looking at the mess of death. There was a look of fear I could see as his mouth hung open. He stepped around the deer and my father real careful until he made a complete circle of them. His stomach was bubbling with short breaths. Finally he looked up and saw me hunching against the stump like I had been, and his eyes grew.

"Hey," he called.

I didn't have nothing to say.

"What are you doing out here boy?"

"You hear me? What are you doing out here?" he started coming close -just yards away- gripping his gun with both hands. "You out here hunting? You ain't got a gun I see."

I was going to let him come real close.

“You see what happened? You better tell me. Was that you who killed my brother?”

His voice got angry, and I was sure he knew. But hunters like the thrill of hunting; he wasn't going to shoot without me giving him reasons, honest-to-god proof, and a fight. He stopped just a rifle length away from me. There was a nervous sweat coming down from under his hat that he wiped away with his shoulder. Just before he raised his rifle, I struck. Jumping full into the man from a squat, he fell backward and his gun flew from his hands. Never once did I look back, but followed the line of beaten wire fence separating the grassy field I was in from the forest. A few long strides later, I found a clearing like a trail in the dense woods the fence was guarding. Behind me I heard a gunshot, but nothing could shoot what couldn't be seen so I skipped the fence and hurried down a waterlogged trail into the thicker patches of the forest.

Rabbits scurried away from me in fear. More crows flapped overhead, roused by the shooting. Then suddenly, more black wings came speeding with me. I hadn't heard it, but reckoned he fired again. Soon as I found a deer path jutting off the trail I sideways jumped onto it such that my heels stayed dry and clean, never close to pounding the ground. The shoot of trail then disappeared into regular wilderness as the beasts and I preferred it, leading me to guess I was safe thanks to the dark woods between me and my chaser. I knelt and wiped the sweat away from my glaring eyes. My matted hair dripped drops down my front and onto the stems of stripped branches, where they rolled across the plant and down to the dirt- the place where it all goes anyway. The sun had risen nearly to the treetops, and it was then I realized I had picked up where that old, blue ridge story ended. I was the man and I had the wolf inside me.