

THE WOLF SKIN

BY ALLEN MORRIS JONES

Hamstetlers came into this country in 1892. Three Kansas brothers on dog-sized, Galiceño ponies, pushing a herd of longhorns north across the Yellowstone. Twelve days out from Miles City, they hit the Missouri and called it good enough. Scratching at bedbugs, bathing off the stove, they lived on what they could shoot, wore what they could sew. Faces scarred by smallpox, teeth going to abscess, each life was a brief, violent burst from dark to dark.

Two of the brothers died early and painfully (burst appendix, gangrene) while the third mail-ordered himself a bride from Minneapolis. Herself, a red-haired Irish orphan sentenced now to 50-odd years listening to the wind tug at the latch string; her nights alive with rustlings and snores, with small creatures scratching inside the chinking.

Each generation of Hamstetlers threw out another round of rust-headed boys, another crop of kids to repeat the same annular pattern. Early summer branding, shouting over cows calling for calves. Fall gathering, whistling, swinging coils of horsehair rope, cursing. They fixed what was broke in the winter and calved in the spring, wet to the shoulders, briefly warm in the wash of fluid. Kicked, butted, bruised, they built plank houses, raised trusses, dug wells, strung wire. Four generations, and among the words they never spoke? Love, sorry, thank you.

Because here's the thing: There weren't no other options.

A century and more later, we've got cell phones, satellite TV, internet. Saltcedar and knapweed. Each fall, an endless supply of road hunters up from Billings and Bismarck. Orange vests, beer cans in the ditch. Speedboats on the lake, walleye fishermen with rods bristling bow and stern. UPS deliveries. You can mail-order caviar straight from Russia should you ever get an itch for fish eggs. Bills cycling through the mail and Jehovah's Witnesses grinning big at the door. Defeat manifests as scorn and surrender presents as cynicism and, waiting to shake hands if you let it, the kind of crazy that comes from counting up all the ways the world has left you behind.

The Third Shot

At 32, Troy Hamstetler had a handle on things. He was doing okay. He was. Red-haired and pale-skinned, a soft roll over his rodeo buckle, neighbors called him the responsible one. Happy enough in his life so as to not make waves, not to be an imposition. And indeed, winter nights, as he watched his wife breastfeed their child, as he sat and listened to pine pop in the stove, the patter of snow against the window, he would often think, *Yes. Thank you. This*, and no more. *This*.

His younger brother came home from the service in December which should have been further cause for celebration. Boden made it through alive, arms and legs intact, a skull unscarred by roadside explosion. But he'd stepped off the plane taciturn, cloud-browed. Limping. Half drunk at 1:30 in the afternoon. A cheap tattoo coming out of his collar, and the knuckles of his right hand stitched with scars. He'd left home stocky as a badger, happiest under an open truck hood, muttering Motley Crue lyrics behind effortful grunts of his wrench. "Girls, girls ... *girrrls*." And he'd returned thinner, clinch-jawed, prone to smart-ass retort, to cutting scorn and sarcasm.

Ranch brothers sort themselves out early on. Five minutes off the teat, they know their divisions of labor. Older brother Troy was always the one with a feel for livestock. Could read cattle like stoplights. Kept an interest in breeding programs and knew how to preg test, sew up a prolapsed uterus. But Boden had been the gear head, the grease monkey. One of those mathematical kind of minds. He'd come out from the shop wiping his hands, stand listening. "That's your alternator knocking, that's all that is." Eight years between them, they lived in that uneasy netherworld between guardian and compatriot, censor and conspirator.

Things began going bad the third week in March. The brothers were feeding square bales up in their North Fork pasture. The sun was still 20 minutes from rising, and the whole world a cold, peaceful kind of blue. Half an inch of snow overnight. You kept thinking winter had to quit, it never quit.

Troy drove hunched, squinting through an iced-up windshield, mentally balancing their dwindling stack of hay against the storms still ahead. If it kept snowing like this, they were going to be buying bales. And this time of year, alfalfa was pushing \$250 a ton. Those prices, it wouldn't take long to bankrupt an operation.

Topping out into the pasture, he tucked the palm of his hand into his cuff and scraped hard at a gristle of condensation. He thought, *That's one big-ass coyote*. He braked hard, already reaching back for his rifle. The wheels locked in the snow, sliding the truck askew.

Above him in the truck bed, ready to toss out bales, Boden fell against the roof, thumping an elbow. Troy expected him to cuss, bang a fist. But Boden had seen it too. They were ranch kids trained from birth. You never passed up a coyote.

One hundred yards out, it had its head down, digging into the snow, pulling, jerking with the urgency of its hunger.

Troy stepped from the truck with his old man's .30-06. Iron sights, bluing worn off the barrel. The old man never threw nothing away if it still even half-ass worked. Hamstetler levered one into the chamber

and took a rest off the open door. Squinted down the barrel.

The coyote raised its head, fixing on him, pinning him with a sharp gaze. A blood-stained muzzle, heavy head, sleepy judgment in dark eyes. A neck ruff thick as rolled carpet. Twice too big to be a coyote. Hell, three times. It studied Hamstetler with calm gravity.

Damn, and unlikely as it seemed ... damn if that wasn't a wolf. Troy wished immediately for his Remington 7 MM. Give him a rifle he knew he could drive nails. But this old beater of Dad's? Anybody's guess.

It had a light trigger for one thing, and Troy was only just *thinking* about firing when the rifle jumped in his hands. The wolf whirled, biting at its front leg. Then it recovered, and stretched out into half a dozen limping lunges, aiming toward the nearest stand of jack pine.

Troy straightened and shot again, offhand now. And just dumb luck, he hit the wolf in the back, breaking it down in the hips. He liked it that Boden was here to see this.

Cocky now, moving too fast, Troy missed his third shot. Mud erupted in the snow, splashing at the wolf's feet. Even with only one good leg, the wolf was still somehow dragging itself along. Another few seconds, it'd be in the timber.

Troy took his time. Held his breath. *Squeezed* the trigger. Aimed for the shoulder but hit the neck. Amen and thank you Lord, it fell all in a piece, entirely quiet now for the first time in its life. One hundred yards and a neck shot. If his brother decided to give out a compliment, Troy would just play it cool. Shrug and say thanks.

He breathed hard, wiped at his dripping nose.

Above him in the truck bed, Boden said, "You saw how you missed that third shot, right?"

Numero Two

"Look at them paws." Troy stood over the wolf, rifle cradled in his elbow.

Boden squatted to take up the left leg. The leg came easy, newly jointed below the shoulder. He brushed the snow from the gray pads, held the paw up to his own spread hand. "*Goddamn*."

Troy winced at the Lord's name in vain. "I'm guessing this'll make the papers."

"Good thing you didn't miss." Boden stood, nudging the carcass with his toe. "You'd a never heard the end of it."

"Where you suppose he come from?"

Boden hooked out his chew. Spat. "Up from Yellowstone, down from Canada. Take your pick." He found his can and pinched up a fresh one. "My bet's on Yellowstone."

The sun crested the horizon in a cold haze. From here, they had a view of the Musselshell. Those Angus mother cows, the black dots in the snow, those were their cows. The family corporation. To the west, nothing but the Breaks and the Missouri until you hit Winifred. Another hundred miles. To the south, a straight, windblown shot to Winnett. To the north, if you didn't count Calgary, nothing between them and the north pole.

Troy bent to the wolf, grabbing a front ankle, a handful of loose neck skin. "Get them hind legs there."

Swinging him into the bed, Boden grunted, "Hundred pounds?"

"Hundred and 20, maybe." Troy scooped up snow, scrubbing blood off his hands.

"Glad there weren't no collar on him. Them Yellowstone wolves, I read an article, they still got collars on about half of 'em."

"Let's get these bales fed out then we'll go over, see what he was eating on."

"I can tell you already what he was eating on."

Troy idled the trunk along, staring in the rearview as Boden cut bales open, kicked them out in flakes. The cows stood bunched at the far end of the pasture, lowing hard. Troy twisted his head out the window. "See how they're still smelling that wolf?"

Afterwards, he parked above what was left of a mother cow. Hips half-eaten out, white bone showing through the black scraps of skin, long white strands of hair clinging to the damp hide. The blunt black nose eaten back to bone. Consider the barrel-girth of her belly. Another week, they'd have had her calf.

Boden jumped out of the bed. Troy rolled down his window. "What's that ear tag say?" Boden squatted, turning the tag over in his fingers. "D29." "She's the one threw out that scarface bull Dad's so proud of." "I think we got another one." Boden studied the ground, the confusion of prints in the muddy snow. "Eh?" "Another wolf." "You sure?" Boden squinted up at his brother's skepticism. Nine times out of 10, this would have been the start of a fight between them. Boden being criticized. Instead, he pointed. "Here's a big front paw. Likely the one we shot. And here's his hind paw, about half as big. Then see here, here's one in between. Numero two." "So now we got wolves on our place." Boden spat between his toes. "We got wolves, yeah."

Phsst, Gone

Troy Hamstetler was always going to be the cowboy. Somewhere there's a black-and-white snapshot of him about yea-high, lassoing a sawhorse. At eight, their mom was buying him spurs, hats, vests. "Look here what a Casey Tibbs. Okay, just stand ... okay, cheese." Maybe he'd wanted to be a ranch vet, but nobody'd ever asked. By the time he was 15, the old man had gone back to his first two loves: horse trading and whores. Late at night, here's Mother smoking endless cigarettes, pleading into the phone. If this operation were to run at all, slack needed to be took up. Anyway hell, he was always and ever just gonna be a rancher. He bitter-pilled the disappointment and got a GED, called it good.

Mother died of a pretty little butterfly blot across her lung X-ray. Same thing that's taking the old man. Boden was 10 years old, Troy 18. The older brother finished the raising of the younger. A little boy wedged in between Troy and the saddle horn. "See, now what you got to watch out for, see how that steer's tail is all twisted up, how he's all caked with shit? He's got him a good case of scours going, that's what that is." The boy wide-eyed, nodding. "Scours. Yup. Ski-hours." Electricity always a touch and go proposition, half the time the boy did his math problems by oil lamp, fat pencil fisted in his hand, tongue between his teeth, Hamstetler saying, "Carry the five, there."

What happens to a kid, you raise him 50 miles from a gallon of milk? Troy turned quiet, suspicious of words, but Boden went off in the other direction, starved for conversation. Ten years old, he'd greet everybody with the enthusiasm of a castaway waving down a boat. "Is that one of those old Internationals you're driving? What kind of mileage you get on that thing? I heard the four-wheel-drive goes out at about 20,000 miles. Did your four-wheel-drive go out on you?"

These days Boden wielded reticence like a chess piece. Thumping his forefinger against that Cope can, the natural set of his face was a scowl. Troy resisted an urge toward parenting. Wanted to offer redemption but would have settled for a civil conversation.

An hour later, pulling into the ranch yard, Boden said, "Maybe we ought to let that other one go."

"That other one what?"

"That other wolf."

"Yeah, right." Troy glanced at his brother. "You serious?"

"Seems like a neat thing, is all. Wolves on the place. I wouldn't

mind hearing one howl."

"That's a fine idea." Troy put it into park. "Start up a welfare program for every mountain lion, coyote, wolf, whatever wants to take a bite out of our cows. Yeah, *great* idea." His feelings were a little hurt, to be honest. That moment of camaraderie? Phhsst, gone. Troy thrummed his fingers on the steering wheel. "Used to be, nobody could call a coyote like my brother Boden. Used to be, you'd have just jumped at a chance to go wolf hunting."

"Well. Forget about it."

"You'd be running for your rifle right now."

"Just leave it." Boden opened his door. "I'll find Dad. He'll want to see this."

A Pragmatic Woman

In Boden's absence, Angie had rearranged his toolshed. Wrenches pegboarded by size, metric and regular. Engine parts stacked in a greasy cardboard box. A pile of bloody sawdust under the pulleys shoveled out and swept clean. Before he'd even met her, she was already scolding him. The little brother and his sloppy ways.

Boden sat on a wobbly stool, spitting snooze into an empty Bud bottle, considering the wolf stretched out now between sawhorses, its weight bowing at the plywood. The tail hung to the floor, dripping a watery red. Boden hit his skinning knife a few licks with the porcelain, tested it on his arm.

Behind him, the old man said, "Last wolf in this country was 1923. Never thought I'd live to see the day they come back."

"Yeah, well. You almost didn't."

He coughed. "Blah blah blah. I still got some time. Still got some graves to dance on."

Growing up, they'd see their father on weekends and Christmas and that was about it. A stern man, you always had to be careful with your *yessirs* and *nosirs*. Building fence, he'd tighten gates until he was the only one could ever open them. Eighteen thousand acres in Garfield County gave him the right to pronounce. His whole life he'd had nothing but scorn for folks that didn't know how to cut a nut or lay down a brand. He was a *strong* man, by definition and limitation.

But you can't smoke two packs a day for 40 years and hope to get away with it. Most of the old man's mornings were now spent re-reading old Louis L'Amours. His afternoons, sipping lukewarm black coffee in Troy's kitchen. Nostrils red and chapped where the oxygen tank plugged in, feet clumsy in synthetic blue boots.

Boden grabbed a fistful of the wolf's stomach hair and pulled the skin up, making a quick little cut. Then he inverted the knife and ran it along inside the skin, easy as an unzipping. He peeled skin back with long sweeps of his blade. "Look at that fat. He's been eating good, eh?"

"Be careful about fleshing him out too close there. That hair's gonna slip."

"I know what I'm doing, thanks."

"You making a rug out of him?"

"Might. Why don't you make yourself useful, come over here and hold up a leg."

"You got it handled."

Angie came out a few minutes later, six-month-old Hammy on her hip. The baby in an overlarge Scotchman's cap half-covering his eyes. He fussed, pushing at it with a fat fist. Angie bounced him. "Hush now."

Boden cut into an ankle, popping it loose. "Hey, Ange. No church?"

She rested her chin on the baby's hat. "Woke up with a headache. I told him I said, you want to go on into town and sing hymns with those golden girls of yours, you feel free. I'm not stopping you. What are you two up to out here?" The baby chewed on a fist, staring wide-eyed at Boden. "Now that's one big old coyote. You shoot it?"

"Your hubby did. And it ain't no coyote."

"What is it then?"

"Wolf."

"Wolf? Get out. Really? Like a Discovery Channel wolf?"

"Yup." Boden made a cut up the left leg, sternum to ankle. The meat bruised black, jellied from the bullet. "He didn't say nothing about it?"

“He said he was going into church. That was about it.” She straightened the baby’s hat.

“I’m never figuring that guy out.”

“Yeah, well. He says the same thing about you.”

The old man sat watching them with avidity. He never missed a trick.

Out in the yard, the snow had tapered off. Wind blew ribbons of snow past the half open metal door.

“Big, eh. Look there at them paws.”

“Can’t believe you shot a wolf.”

“He did. Hundred yards on a *dead* run. You should have seen him. He was real happy about it.”

“Maybe you’re the one should have married him.”

Angie had been another surprise. Coming off the plane ... god-damn, who’s this filly? A button nose and the long, white fingers of a piano player. His brother’s wife. She met his eyes and didn’t look away. Brave, this girl. Pragmatic, too. One of the things he’d always liked in a woman. The brisk way she wiped the baby’s bottom. No flinching or theatrics. The crisp crack of an egg on the corner of a counter. What he *didn’t* care for was her sarcasm; her patronizing. She talked to him like she’d seen things, like she had privileged information. Like they were all rubes out here.

Boden went after another front leg, skinning it to the ankle. He twisted the forepaw, digging the point of his knife into the joint, cutting tendons, twisting the foot free. The white knob of ankle, glistening. “I was just telling Dad here, I’m thinking about hitting the road for a while. I got a buddy he works security down at the Bellagio. Said he could get me a job.” He kept his voice even. Like talking to a skittish colt.

“Vegas?” Angie bounced the baby.

“Yeah. For a while.”

“Las Vegas, Nevada.”

“Hell,” he said, bending over his wolf. “I’m probably leaving just in time. First wolf in the Breaks? As soon as word gets out, we’re going to have Greenpeace in here, Earthfirst!, PETA, all them folks standing all around in a big circle singing Indigo Girls songs.”

Angie looked past him to the old man. Then back. “You’d pick up and go. Just like that.”

“Nothing holding me here.” He looked at her pointedly.

“How can you *say* that?” Her eyes never left him. “I mean, seriously. After all ... how can you *say* that?”

He worked toward the neck, into the vertebrae. “I’m thinking I should boil this skull up. Give it to the baby. What do you think, would you like a wolf skull for your bedroom there, Hammy?”

The wolf lay mostly skinned, loose pelt draped across one of the sawhorses, the carcass bare and diminished, red meat drying to black.

She pressed her lips into the baby’s hat, whispered loud, “Sonofabitch.”

Boden said, “Dad, you think you could leave us alone a few minutes?”

“Hell, no,” the old man wheezed. “I ain’t had this much fun since that wild horse auction down in Miles.”

Boden said to Angie, “Let me finish this up. We can have us a talk.”

Angie’s chin trembled. “I don’t ...”

“What?”

“Nothing. Just, ahh, shit.” She clutched the baby closer, already turning toward the door. “I was warned about you people.”

After she left, the old man cleared his throat. “I always knew you was the one most like me.”

Strength and Patience

Troy Hamstetler woke that night to his son’s fierce and insistent sobbing. One-thirty in the morning. He said to his wife’s shoulder, “My turn?” She lay unresponsive.

He found the baby waving his fists, sneezing in between sobs, rubbing at a frozen little mustache of yellow snot.

Wasn’t fair, was it? Being born into a world that had snot and sneezes in it.



GROWING UP, THEY’D SEE THEIR FATHER ON WEEKENDS AND

Christmas and that was about it. A stern man, you always had to be careful with your yessirs and nosirs. Building fence, he’d tighten gates until he was the only one could ever open them. Eighteen thousand acres in Garfield County gave him the right to pronounce. His whole life he’d had nothing but scorn for folks that didn’t know how to cut a nut or lay down a brand. He was a *strong* man, by definition and limitation.

The boy came into Troy’s arms willingly enough, but then squirmed, sobbing harder. A bitch of a thing, Troy supposed. Getting rescued by the one parent that didn’t have no tits.

He bounced the boy up and down along the hall. His habitual walk with the baby. Past the framed portraits of forbearers dead and gone. An audience of tired stoics. “Sssh, ssh, it’s gonna be okay, everything’s all right.” Numero uno lie.

He was on the kitchen-end of his circuit when he heard Boden start up his truck. A rebuilt 454, no mistaking that slow-stuttering snore. Troy stood in the dark kitchen, watching Boden pull up to the toolshed. A truck door opened and closed, and a minute later Boden emerged from the shed swinging a black knot of garbage bag. Troy would later know this to be the wolf skin, but for now he was at a loss. The truck swung around in the yard, headlights briefly blinding him. Two in the morning, the bars in Jordan would be closed. Where was Boden going? Among the long list of mysteries that had come to constitute his brother, here was another to add to list.

Troy watched as the taillights flared, then exited to the right out of the yard. Toward Sand Springs. Not Jordan, then; but maybe Billings? Maybe he was keeping a chippy? Maybe he had a dope dealer.

The baby fell asleep against Troy’s shoulder, feverish mouth working at a pacifier. Troy laid him gently back in the crib, mumbling a brief prayer for health, happiness and another three hours of sleep.

Slipping into bed again, he said, “Ange? You awake?” She was, but pretending otherwise. He could tell from her breathing.

He lay beside her, praying now for strength and patience. Strength and patience. Lord, *please*.

Dr. Phil

It helps, in the story of your life, if you have a villain. Hard to admit, but a guy can get attached to his resentments.

In the months after Boden left the ranch, after his brother cut his

ties and burned his bridges, Troy found himself sole conductor of his father's decline. Here he was with a ranch to run, a wife who flinched each time he went to touch her, and now an old man who needed to go to Miles City twice a week for blood work and chemo. Who else was there to do it but Troy Hamstetler? Nobody, that's who.

The cancer had run through the old man until you could see the glow of skull at the temples, his ears and nose like something you'd pin to a potato. Every word was querulous, needy. "You mind sitting and talking for a while? You're always running around somewhere else. Don't you want to sit?" The shoe was on the other foot, father-son-wise, and Troy wasn't sure he cared for it.

Troy kept a pocket notebook on the dashboard. In the long, rutted miles between the ranch and Sand Springs, he scribbled bouncing, illegible reminders. Said, "Don't let me forget, I need to call Sam Fleisher about that canola seed."

Staring out the window, heavy-knuckled hands on the handle of his cane, the old man said, "Pretty country, ain't it."

"Yeah." Troy fiddled with the radio. Found an AM French station floating out of Canada. Turned it off again. "Pretty as a postcard."

"Just think if you were coming out here from New York, Boston, a hundred miles of cement. Chinese, Mexicans, jibber-jabbering all over the place. Think what a relief this'd all be. No, this is god's country all right. I guess I'll miss it."

It was a gray autumn afternoon. Low clay mesas and rolling hills, coulees scalloped by runoff and glacial retreat. A crumpled stack of square bales on the horizon. Roadside, a Farmall going to rust.

"You reckon Boden knows what kind of shape I'm in?" He shot Troy a sly, unreadable glance.

"Word's probably gotten to him somewheres. He's just being a spoiled little shit, that's all."

"That's your own brother you're talking about there."

"I pray nightly for tolerance and forgiveness."

"That something they teach you to say in that church of yours?"

"You should come in with me sometime. Wouldn't hurt you none."

The old man snorted. "Last time I was in a church, I said 'I do' to your mother. Look how that turned out."

They drove for a time in silence. An antelope dead in the ditch, swollen at the stomach, legs cocked. A golden eagle feeding, half-inflating its wings.

"He ever talk to you about overseas?"

"Not word one. You?"

The old man felt nervously for his shirt pocket, reaching for an absent pack of cigarettes. "I always figured, hell, something's important enough to say out loud, probably best not to say it at all. Boden took after me in that regard."

"That ain't necessarily a good thing."

"One thing I'll say about that boy, he was never mad at me like you was mad at me."

This caught Troy's attention. "Whoever said I was mad at you?"

"You never seen what it was like, trying to live with that mother of yours?"

"I don't want to talk about her. How many times I told you."

The old man fiddled with his cane. "So how's things between you and your wife?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Curious is all."

"Things are fine."

The old man shot him that sly look again. "Well, praise the lord for that."

After a time, Troy added, "She says I don't want nothing. What do you want, she says. That's the latest. Like being easy-going is some sort of crime." This was a rare admission of vulnerability, an uncomfortable moment of exposure. He glanced nervously at his father.

The old man grinned wolfishly, teeth too big in his mouth. "There ain't no figuring a woman. Don't even try. Get it when you can, then leave it. That's what I say."

"Yeah, I know, Dad." The Gospel According to the Old Man.

A few hours later, a nurse with a hypodermic rattled a curtain around. "We'll just be a second here." Later still, reading a magazine beside his father, Hamstetler heard the old man mumble, "We were proud of you." Doped to the gills, he slurred his words.

"What's that? What'd you just say?"

But the old eyes had gone unfixated, staring past Hamstetler to the television, to Dr. Phil.

Had he actually said *proud*? Or maybe it had been *loud*. "TV's sure loud." It could have been that.

Not that it mattered. At this point, how could it matter?

A Good Turnout

The morning of his father's funeral, the plan was for him and Angie to drive into Jordan in separate trucks. Troy had to go in early to see about the reception, make sure the doors were unlocked in the community center. Angie said she'd meet him there.

"You sure?"

She was kneeling by their little boy, fitting him with a tie. He fussed and squirmed, his hair a shellacked helmet tight to his head. "Hush now. Quit acting like this is a noose. This ain't no noose." To Troy, she said, "I need me some *me* time, okay. Is that a crime?"

"You do what you want." His father was dead.

Troy found half the town already gathering at the cemetery. Trickling down from their cars to the graveside service. Old women hunched heavy on the arms of their old men. Each face known to him by name, lineage, acreage. A community united in the shared conspiracy of getting by and making do.

His father's casket sat on a brass rack above the open grave. Beside it, a pile of dirt had been covered with a sheet of synthetic grass, a vibrant green mound in the midst of the unlaundered landscape. He found himself offended by it, by the effort to sanitize the funeral, make it look like something *polite*.

He stood alone at the front of the crowd. Not a bad turnout. Handbills flapped palely in their hands. He kept looking past the gray heads to the highway. Where was she?

They were predicting partly cloudy, but a few miles off to the north a graceful curtain of rain swept toward them. A few hard drops pattered on the waxed coffin. The pastor glanced at the sky, tie coming loose from its tuck. "We'll just skip on ahead now to the liturgy."

Afterwards, Hamstetler stood at a buffet table, eating tiny meatballs on toothpicks. He hadn't had lunch. He kept having to set down his paper plate to shake hands.

"Real sorry, son."

"Thanks, Peg."

"Where's that pretty wife of yours?"

"Baby was sick this morning." The lie came easily. Garfield County gossips had enough work to do without him adding to the load.

"That stomach flu that's been going around?"

"Must be."

"Well, let us know if Jack and me can help."

"We will, thank you."

Howard Messenger approached, a man Hamstetler respected. Kept a clean ranch, well run. Took care of his weeds. "A blessing he didn't linger longer than he did, I suppose."

"Thank you, Howard. Yeah, it was. A blessing."

Howard hitched up his pants and studied the room. People were already starting to leave. "About half expected your brother to be here."

"Oh?"

"Franny ran into him in Billings the other day."

"Boden?"

"At that Wal-Mart out toward Laurel."

“Well.”

“You ain’t heard from him?”

Troy shook his head. “How are you guys getting on? You ever buy that bull from Larry Cornwell you were talking about?” He chewed a rubbery meatball.

It’s Never That Easy

Troy Hamstetler, newly the oldest of his family line, picked up a six-pack after the funeral. Splurged on imported. He cracked the first one on his way past the airport. Raised the bottle to the half dozen Cessnas sitting tethered to the tarmac. Wouldn’t take much at all, he could leave this whole place behind. Turn west and keep going. Spokane, Seattle, maybe Portland. Pull a Boden and just, phhsst, be gone. It could be that easy.

But that was just a frivolous kind of thinking. With that ranch to run? Nobody to take up the slack? Who are you kidding, Hamstetler?

The cemetery was just past the airport. He pulled off to the shoulder for a last look. It was an effort to remember his father young, strong. A greater effort to remember him as being kind, generous.

They’d brought in an end loader to finish the job, but the cab sat now empty, perched above the open grave. Damn if that’s not how the whole world works these days. Start a job then leave it halfass done.

Oh, Angie.

The Wolf Skin

Kicking off his boots in the mudroom, he called out ahead. “Angie?”

No answer. But in the kitchen, he found his wolf skin. Folded neatly on the table. Boden had made a rug out of it, complete with red velvet trim and a taxidermied head. The eyes stared at Hamstetler as he approached, mouth half-open in what was meant to be a snarl. A pink fiberglass tongue and plastic teeth. Boden wasn’t much of a taxidermist, turned out. This thing was a cruel and skewed parody of the calm creature Troy had seen down the barrel of his rifle. Nevertheless, Troy found himself touched. His brother had put some work into this. “Boden?”

Troy unfolded the skin, struck again by the wolf’s size. Holding the front paws above his head the tail dragged the ground. He half expected to see a note fall loose. But no. There was no note, no explanation.

“Angie?” He folded the skin back onto the table and walked toward the bedroom. “Boden?”

He found her side of the closet empty. Nothing but a threadbare old pink t-shirt forgotten in one corner. Metal hangers rang soft notes under his fingers.

So that was that.

Didn’t he always know it would end this way? Some part of him knew it. Those early days when she still sang to herself while she did the dishes. When she’d wanted the sex as hard as he did. Even while he’d kissed her in the hospital, their minutes-old son between them, some part of him knew that he didn’t deserve this happiness, none of it. It was a gift that would need to be given back.

Troy Hamstetler rotated through his house. The mudroom with its cast-off rubber overshoes, its collection of dank cowboy boots peeling at the toe. In Boden’s bedroom, a spavined old sleeper couch smelling of cigarettes and wet dog and, underneath it all, maybe a whiff of Angie’s bath soap.

Boden and Angie. Angie and Boden. Hamstetler, the fool. It made sense now, all of it. Boden’s absence. His wife’s cold distance. Which began, yeah, the same night Boden had left. Even that wolf skin. Was it an apology? A fare-thee-well? Maybe a trade, wife for wolf. The happiness hadn’t been given back; it had been taken. He hit Boden’s wall with his fist, splitting a knuckle and sending out a puff of plaster. He yelled out a list of words he’d forbidden himself for years. It felt false, though, theatrical; and he soon went quiet.

Later that night, Troy stood alone out in his yard, tilting up the last swallow of his beer, weaving slightly. Past the round corral, the Mus-



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part of him knew it. Those early days when she still sang to herself while she did the dishes. When she’d wanted the sex as hard as he did. Even while he’d kissed her in the hospital, their minutes-old son between them, some part of him knew that he didn’t deserve this happiness, none of it. It was a gift that would need to be given back.

selshell rustled in its banks. There was another wolf out there somewhere. Out in that dark landscape. It should have worried him, of course. But it didn’t. It hadn’t. Indeed, over these last few months the idea had come to hold increasing appeal. A wolf on his ranch.

He felt on the edge of some revelation, but felt as well, and without contradiction, that the revelation would never come. Maybe it had something to do with the mindless hurts we inflict on those closest to us – the insults and selfish gestures that snap back at us like broken rubber bands. Friendships fail, marriages dissolve and always without our full knowledge or understanding. It happens to everyone, of course, which is the essence of the tragedy. And while most of us don’t die from them, these small wounds, in aggregate they constitute the devastation of our lives. The cuts dry to scars, the blisters thicken to calluses, until finally this accumulated weight, the heavy carapace of regrets, recriminations, unspoken rebuttals, this is what drives us to the ground. The inability to understand each other and be understood.

He wanted to hold his son in his arms one more time, walk him up and down the hall, show him his great grandparents, point out the wolf skin draped across the back of the couch. Tell him how he’d missed the third shot but got him on the fourth. “And there’s another one out there,” he’d say to the boy. “At least one more.”

To the south, past the dim glow of the yard light, the road split. He could just make out the familiar ghost of sagebrush growing in the fork. Right to Billings, left to Jordan. He could leave. He *could*.

But he won’t. Maybe it’s enough to simply be aware of the possibility. His brother knows where to find him. His wife has his number. And Troy Hamstetler? He’s got his pride. Nobody can say he doesn’t have his goddamn pride. Pride and a wolf skin.

Out here in the Breaks, forgotten by mapmakers and ignored by historians, this is the kind of country where shame manifests as scorn and fear presents as surrender. Where brothers betray brothers and wives steal their own sons. And waiting to shake hands if you let it? The dismay that comes from realizing you’re not the man you once believed yourself to be. And maybe you never were. <HDI>