

Kate Arden McMullen

Deep Gap

Me and Barrett are waiting for the coyotes to come. He's laying out now with his legs behind him and his face up against the .33 all serious. I'm setting against a tree since my elbows got tired. It wasn't my dog the coyotes got. It was Barrett's.

Spring come early this year. All the green is coming out way back here, little bits of it where the sun finds the trees. There's crocus outside my house. Last night my girls slept outside on the grass in a pile with all the quilts. They're funny that way.

Today it's cooler. We brought jackets. My wife Larrie used to say this weather's blackberry winter. I said that to my girls this morning. They asked what it meant and I don't really know. If Larrie comes back they can ask her before I can think of what to say to her for leaving us.

So I told my girls we was going to kill the coyotes that got Barrett's dog. Then I swung by Barrett's place. He lives alone way up Deep Gap. You follow the stream for a couple miles. There's a little road and he lives up there. Barrett answered the door with lipstick on like a woman. I ain't kidding.

I said, you ready? I didn't want to be a dick. Them coyotes just got his dog.

He nodded and closed the door, and when he come back out the lipstick was off.

The dog was a good dog. Barrett raised him from nothing, a kicked to shit little thing, the old story. A redheaded bird dog with a real gentle mouth. I seen him run too, one time when me and Barrett went after some birds last season. I missed every shot but Barrett gave me some of his, and that dog ran back and forth all day, bird necks in his mouth.

The coyotes den in a turned over truck bed liner back up in Deep Gap. It makes like a roof over the hole they dug. When we got there, Barrett squatted by the den and shined a light inside. A bunch of babies lay in a little knot at the back of the cool hole. They lay too close for us to get their number. Dog collars sprawled out all around them, pets from all over the county. Barrett clicked his tongue. Got to wait, he said. I want the parents too.

I look at my watch. We've been here for four hours.

Hey Barrett, I say. My back is sore on the tree but I can't think of no other way to sit. You mean you're out to kill the babies?

Barrett don't even look back. Beach, he says, if you fed them girls of yours people's trained animals from when they was little, they'd grow up and feed theirn the same thing.

Everyday my girls ask me when their mama Larrie's coming back. I tell them what I know, which is that I don't. I couldn't go after her because of the girls. Sometimes I think if I saw her I'd kill her.

I say, I wouldn't let someone kill them for it.

Odds are someone would.

The coyotes left the dog gutted in the drive. Barrett got a tarp under him to help move

him. I helped bury him under a big oak beside the little house. I couldn't hardly look at him. I started thinking about my girls, imagining looking into the red leftovers of their stomachs and seeing the white of their spines. I don't know how come I think these terrible things.

While we dug the hole for the dog, I saw Barrett had lipstick smudged on his chin. I couldn't make myself tell him. I can still see it, the way he's laying with his face up against the gun.

I think I'm the only friend Barrett's got. Me and Larrie used to see him at church, but we never talked until after she left. We went out with his dog that one time. I ran into him getting a beer in town and we closed down the place, thundered drunk back up the mountain.

Then he come by asking could I go up to Deep Gap to help get the coyotes that killed his dog. I said I could. Might be I'm the only one he could ask.

The light has changed again without my noticing. It's coming lower through the trees. The den throws a longer shadow.

How long you been in Deep Gap? I ask him.

Barrett clicks his tongue. Long time.

You don't think about moving to town?

Used to think about it.

Not anymore?

Nah. Then he asks how my girls are.

They're growing, I say. They're ladies soon.

I wish I felt right telling my girls about Barrett's lipstick. They'd jump for it. They'd ask what color. It was real red, but a little bit purple. I'd tell them I didn't get a good look but the truth is I did. Sure, I couldn't tell them though. They'd tell the whole world a good secret like that. They'd tell the birds.

What about yourn? I say.

Barrett looks past the barrel the twenty-five yards to the den. Huh?

Your boy.

What about him?

I don't know. How's he doing?

Barrett shrugs.

I pull on my jacket. The day's got cooler. Larrie might be right about them blackberries, but I can't see how she'd know. She don't see a blackberry setting up with her new man. She don't see nothing.

I had to beg Christie to watch the girls so I could go with Barrett to get the coyotes that got his dog. Christie said why don't I take the girls. I never in my life. They're tough girls but I'd never take them to a killing like this one's turning out to be. Babies, I mean Jesus.

I guess I could tell him about the lipstick smudged on his chin, but keeping it to myself feels good. Barrett lives alone way up in Deep Gap and puts lipstick on with no one seeing, and now he's going to kill a tangle of coyote babies with that red purple color all over his chin.

They're doing a controlled burn downwind of us. We start to smell it in the air.

That's that controlled burn, I say. You smell it?

Uh-huh.

Barrett shifts on his elbows. I don't know how he's standing it on this hard ass ground. He's older than me. His son is grown and he don't even know where he is.

Early in the year for a burn, I say.

Yeah.

Barrett was in the army I think. Maybe that's how come he takes everything so serious.

The first big coyote slinks out of the brush and into the den. He looks half a red wolf and half a fox with black down its back and tail. It's got a sharp little face and narrow eyes. We have to be quiet now. I can't ask Barrett if he thinks it's the momma or the daddy. I start moving back onto my elbows, pick up my own rifle, even though I ain't going to shoot. I decided that. He put me in mind of my girls and I won't do it now.

I'm waiting for this whole thing to end so I can ask Barrett about the lipstick. It's going to get me through.

The next one comes with a big rabbit bloody in its mouth. It drops the rabbit at the edge of the truck bed liner and another little snout comes up and drags it under.

Barrett breathes in real sharp and after I don't hear him breathe anymore. He lets off four even shots. Between each, he opens the breach and pulls the bolt, chambers the next round. My eyes are closed. I have a terrible vision of him shooting my girls in their pile of blankets in our front yard. I am beside Barrett while he puts holes in their foreheads. I wonder what they call coyote babies. Pups, I guess.

We wait afterwards in this real awful silence. I remind myself he ain't killed my girls. Since Larrie left I imagine them dead every day. I don't know why.

I follow Barrett when he gets up. He stalks over to the den like a man who knows what he just done, knows I seen him do it, knows it will be between us for all time.

Together we turn over the truck bed liner. Underneath the big coyotes lie dead on top of each other. Now I hear the soft mewing of the still alive babies. I step back. Barrett's lipstick chin is set straight.

They'll die anyway, I say, without their momma and daddy.

Barrett steps down into the den, starts kicking the big coyotes aside.

Aw Jesus, man, I say.

He leans down and picks up the rabbit. Look, he says. See how clean they killed it? They gutted my dog in my own damn yard. That ain't killing to survive. That's killing to kill. You understand, Beach?

He flings the rabbit out of the hole. The pups are down in there in a pile. They're small still with just-opened eyes. Last night my girls slept out on the front yard with a pile of quilts like a nest. Barrett takes the first pup in his hands.

You got something on your face, Barrett, I say.

He don't hear me, or don't say he does.

Barrett, you got something on your face.

He is on his hands and knees now, his face low to the soft earth. In our noses the smell of the winter leaves burning.