

11/25/01
NOTE:

This is an early draft of "Macular Degeneration"

GREGORY MARTIN

Just after dawn one day in April, I woke startled to the report of a gun. The crack was loud and close. Out my window, I saw Gramps walking slowly back to the shed, his rifle in his hands.

At breakfast, I asked him what he'd done.

"Shot that coyote that'd been hanging around the meadow," he answered between bites of fried eggs and toast. "Seen it down there for weeks, moving in and out of the willows by the river. Connolly's letting his cattle out on the meadow tomorrow."

Jim Connolly was a rancher who lived just outside town and who often ran his cattle on the meadow behind my grandparent's place. Spring is calving season, and tomorrow morning there would be newborns and week-olds out in meadow.

"Did you kill it?" I asked.

"It went down."

It'd been some time since Gramps had fired a gun, a year or more, and in that time, his eyesight, which was already bad, had grown progressively worse. Macular Degeneration, the doctors called it. And Gramps rarely let on how the blindness was progressing, how it affected his daily life. He was a quiet man by nature, a man not comfortable talking about his own weakness.

The shooting in the meadow surprised me. I didn't think Gramps could hit a coyote, even with the rifle's high-powered scope. That spring, for the first time, I'd had to tie his fisherman's knots for him; he couldn't thread a hook's eye. Coming in and out of the shed in mid-day, the abrupt change from light to dark blinded him. Inside the shed, he felt around with his hands for the things he wanted; he knew his tools, knew where he

kept them, knew the familiar shapes of worn handles, and would not wait for his eyes to adjust. Coming out into the sun, he would stand fixed in the yard for minutes, frustrated, unable to gain his bearings.

After breakfast, Gramps and I walked the half-mile down the highway to the store. We were quiet and walked without speaking. It was not that we had nothing to say to each other, but just that we loved the mornings and did not want to spoil them with talk. Above the town, the water tower stood as dark silhouette against the hills behind, warmed yellow by the sun's low angle. Below, the town waited in cold shadow: the abandoned schoolhouse, the few houses and buildings whose lights had already or would soon turn on, the Miner's Club, the store. The highway was empty. In the two-hundred mile stretch of road between Elko and Mountain Home, in the middle of which sat Mountain City, we knew that at this hour perhaps only a few cars were traveling, perhaps not more than ten, and the sense of this magnified the quiet inside us.

Except for a single light above the meat counter, where Mel would be going over the books from the day before, the store was dark. We turned on the switches and waited for the first customer to arrive. Despite wool socks and boots we could feel the chill coming up through the floorboards, and we stamped our feet and kept moving. I swept. Gramps brought ice up from the back to stock the bins of soda bottles. The old heater in the center of the store knocked and clicked and awakened slowly. Gramps coughed and wheezed. I wondered if he should be coming down to the store so early in the day, and after a moment, decided that yes, he should, even if it killed him.

For most of the past winter, Gramps stayed behind at the house while I walked down to the store alone. In November he'd caught pneumonia and it had taken him three

full months to recover. During this time, his doctors had not allowed him even the briefest window of exposure to freezing temperatures. He couldn't walk down to the store, shovel the walk, work in the garage or the shed. He still woke before dawn, and we ate breakfast together: oatmeal or eggs or pancakes or waffles. Out the window of the kitchen door, in the dark blue light, the large circular thermometer hanging on the tree would read -20 or -30 or 2 or 11. I would finish breakfast quickly and go to work.

Mel came up to the front. "So, which one of you two shot at the river this morning?" Mel asked sarcastically. "Was that you Gramps? Had to have been cause I know the kid here's still sawing logs way deep under the blankets when it's that early."

"No cause to shoot the river," Gramps said.

"Gramps shot the town coyote," I told Mel, feigning seriousness. In Mountain City, there are a few people, like Mel and myself, who happen to have some sympathy for coyotes, and when a coyote gets shot near town, we call that coyote "the town coyote," an animal we knew and for whom we felt affection, an animal whose killing was evidence of the great cruelty of many of our fellow citizens.

Mel smiled with amusement, "He did, did he? Gramps, you oughta know better than that. Lot of people around here were fond of that coyote, you know. But I doubt you killed him. That coyote's got more lives than a cat on the Science Diet. He keeps coming back."

"If he'd agree not to take them calves, I'd let him go," Gramps said, playing along a little. "But he won't. You can't keep a coyote under contract. And Connolly's letting his cattle out on the meadow tomorrow."

"Are you sure you got him?" Mel asked. "Sounded to me like I heard a splash after that shot. I don't know about no coyote, but I'm pretty sure you can see that river."

"I got him," Gramps said gruffly.

"I've heard that one before," Mel said, keeping it going. "Son, have I ever told you about Gramps and I out at the Stump Creek cabin?" *me sounds affected - your mistake, not sub*

Mel often called me "Son." He even introduced me to people sometimes as his son, and then, if he caught the error, he would correct himself and say something like, "No. Wait a minute. He's my nephew. It's just that I think of him as a son."

The Stump Creek cabin was an old log cabin in a meadow on the western boundary of the old Tremewan Ranch. Though Gramps lost the ranch in 1930, he continued to use the cabin for nearly forty years. The cabin was now in ruins, its foundation logs rotten and sunken and swallowed by earth; the roof absent, unaccounted; the frame vacant and open to the clouds.

It was the Tremewans who first called the creek which ran through their meadow "Stump Creek." When Gramps was a boy, he and his brother Sid and their father cleared the meadow, and one particularly stubborn tree stump took the three of them and a team of horses two full days to uproot. If you look at a current USGS map of the area, you'll see a thin blue crooked line named "Stump Creek" running down from the Independence Mountains and draining into the North Fork of the Humboldt River.

"Which story about the Stump Creek cabin?" I asked Mel.

"The one about the pack rat."

"No, I don't think I know that one. I know the one about the woodpeckers and the tomato can lids nailed over the holes."

"Yeah," Mel said, "that was somethin' else. We had so many lids on that thing they practically held the place together. Didn't they Gramps?"

"Take away them tomato lids and you got a pile a lumber."

Mel sat up on the counter. "That old cabin sure did draw the animals. One time Gramps and I went up there on a Saturday afternoon to get the place ready for a family picnic the next day. Well, we cleaned her up pretty good, got the grass clipped, ate some dinner, and then settled down to bed. We both had sleeping bags and we're in our bunks and the lantern's out when Gramps hears some scurryin' near the woodpile by the door. I'm about half asleep and don't hear nothin' but then Gramps says, 'Mel, are you in your bed?' and I say, 'Yeah, what for?' and then KABOOM! And I about hit the crossbeam on the roof jumpin' up scared. Gramps had a .410 shotgun with him there beside the bed and he shot the hell out a that woodpile. I mean woodchips were everywhere. I even had some in my bag with me. And I said, 'What the hell d'ya do that for?' and he says, 'We got a packrat. Listen. Let's see if I got the sonofabitch.' And the cabin's quiet for a minute, and then I hear the scurryin' and Gramps says, 'Damn!' and then KABOOM! He blows into the woodpile again."

"Never did get that packrat," Gramps said, grinning.

"No, you didn't. Which is why I thought of him in connection with our coyote." Mel said.

"Well there's a right way and a wrong way to catch rodents, and a shotgun's not the right way," Gramps mused. "I learned that lesson."

"Yeah, you did, a few times." Mel retorted. And then he said to me, "Has Gramps ever told you about the mousetrap he invented when he was a kid?"

“No, I don’t think so.”

“One hell of a contraption,” Mel said. “He’d fill a bucket half-full a water, and then take a roof-shingle and put a staple in the middle so that it’d act as a kind of a hinge, so the shingle would flex. Then he’d fix that staple on the edge of the bucket. So there’d be half the shingle actin’ as a sort of ramp for the mouse to run up, and the other half’d be like a diving board over the water. And he’d tack a piece a bacon rind on the end of the shingle to draw them out. For them mice it’d be just like walkin’ the plank. When the mice would head out on that shingle, unsuspecting, their own weight would do them in and they’d slide down into the drink. The water’d be deep enough so they couldn’t jump out and they’d drown.”

“And it was fully automatic,” Gramps added, full of himself, which was a rare. “Reloads itself and everything. One time between supper and bed I caught seventeen mice in that bucket.”

And then Gramps hesitated a long time before continuing, “Sid and me - we’d stay out at the Stump Creek cabin alot when we was workin’ over there. Buildin’ fence or hayin’ or clearin’ that meadow. Dad might stay a night or two, but me and Sid, we’d sometimes stay a week. We’d just stay out there. Right in the shadow of the Independence.”

“It sure was nice there, wasn’t it Gramps?” Mel asked, knowing the answer.

“Yes it was. I coulda spent a life right there in that spot.”

“If you had all the time in the world, you could’ve.” Mel said, sounding philosophical. “That right there is the thing animals have got on us.”

"What's that now, professor?" I asked Mel, using the tag he was always sticking on me.

"Animals got all the time in the world. *That's* why there so mischevious. They don't have nobody tellin' them to get somethin' done by noon. Or to be someplace and not be late. They can just work at a problem until they get her done. Take the mice we get in the store here. The Macaroni Bandits. They know we got the place sealed up pretty good, but that don't worry them. If it takes them all day to get through the floor and into the macaroni - well that's just fine. They're not punchin' the clock. Or take the cows out in that meadow. The only reason they're hustlin' one muscle is cause Jim's out there hollerin' at them to get a move on and his dog's nippin' at their heels. Otherwise them cows stay pretty calm. You don't see them standin' around worryin' about the stockyards and all the things they got to get done before their number gets called. I'm tellin' you, that's an advantage.

"Animals excel at relaxation. Sure they work at survivin'. But when they got that squared away for the day, they let up some. Not us. We always got to be doin' somethin'. Producing. Time's money and all that. Pretty soon this Basko's gonna start exercising his animal nature, and I won't be wearin' these boots ten hours a day, six days a week. Stick around and watch. Pretty soon this Basko's gonna be home before noon to take a nap. Right Gramps?"

"It's not a bad arrangement," replied Gramps.

"You oughta retire and go to work for the Forest Service," I told Mel. "I hear they're hiring animal psychologists."

"Only if they let me take a nap before noon."

The day passed slowly. Out the front window of the store the air was dry and clear and warm. Sometime in the middle of the afternoon, Jan Connolly came in to pass the time with Lou. Jan was a pleasant, heavy-set woman, and her complexion was ruddy and healthy and a bit chapped and weathered from years of working outside in the wind. She was about forty-five and ~~was~~ a hard-worker, a good hand with cattle. She and her husband Jim ran a couple hundred head with no outside help. They had both been up most of the previous night, and during that time, four calves ^{were} ~~had been~~ born. She and Lou talked over by the jewelry case. Since Ellen Thompson died in the accident with Raymond, Jan had been the closest woman to Lou in Mountain City.

There were several women from the area who regularly came in the store to pass the time with Lou. And, for the most part, they would keep the talk to themselves. With Mel, on the other hand, the conversation was almost always public, open to all comers. It wasn't unusual for there to be seven or eight men gathered around the front counters, with Mel in the center holding court, telling a joke, facilitating the flow of conversation like a talk show host. 'Well, now, Jim, let me ask you this question,' or 'I can see that, yes, but how about this here.' Mel knew how to read people, and he was careful not to offend. He had tact. He could gauge the company gathered and know whether a certain joke would go over or not. Despite his being a short, unathletic Basko, Mel had been the president of his high school senior class, and he'd been elected because people felt good around him; he could make them laugh. There was a public quality to him which was utterly natural and easy.

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Near closing time Lee Chambers came in the store asking if anyone had seen his dog, Fritz. Lee hadn't seen him since early that morning. Lee was Rosella's son, and he was, at nearly sixty, still as hard a drinker as he'd been at twenty. He had a fiery temper to match his bright red hair. He'd recently been fired from his job at the Independence Mine for throwing a hammer at his foreman, breaking two ribs in the man's back. Lee had been raised in Mountain City and had never left. Lee and my mother had been sweethearts for several years after they finished high-school and they had come close to marriage. Mel has told me on many occasions how happy he was when my mother broke it off with Lee and went back to college. Mel loved Lee like a brother but always knew that he'd never make a family man. Lee was a man's man, Mel would say. Lee ended up marrying Shorty Reed, the daughter of the family who ran and still run the town's gas station, and for many years, Shorty ran the Chambers Motel while Lee worked at the mines. I grew up playing in the summers with their son, Kenny. Lee and Shorty divorced about ten years ago, and, after the divorce, Lee moved back in with Rosella. Shorty still runs the motel.

Lee and his dog Fritz were nearly inseparable. Lee took him everywhere. The dog napped on the front of Lee's pick-up as he drove around town, the best hood ornament in Elko County. Fritz could take corners in his sleep.

"No, Lee, I haven't seen him," said Mel.

"I haven't seen him either, Lee." I said. "Sorry. That's not like him to run off."

"No, it's not. I wonder where the hell he's gone," said Lee.

Mel asked Lou and Jan, who were still talking amongst themselves, if either had seen Fritz, and both said they hadn't.

"Well, I hate to suggest it," said Mel, "but a good lookin' dog like that, maybe somebody stopped and picked him up and drove off with him. Fritz sure is friendly enough." And then Mel paused, as if he had thought of something else.

"What's that?" Lee asked Mel. "Think of something?"

"No. No. I was just trying to think if... of anybody who'd want to take that dog. Could be somebody down on the reservation. Could be somebody passing through. Could be anybody. And I wouldn't want to accuse nobody. That wouldn't be right."

Mel looked over at me for a brief moment, a look Lee didn't catch, a look that told me that Mel didn't think anybody had picked up Lee's dog. And then it occurred to me. Fritz was a Malamute, a big dog, bigger than any coyote, and unwary, something Gramps might be able to see. I didn't say anything.

"Yeah, I guess there's no tellin'," Lee said. "God I hope nobody took him."

Mel and I were quiet.

"Okay. Thanks then," Lee said. "I'm gonna keep askin' around. See you folks later." And Lee left.

Mel waited for the door to close behind Lee and then motioned to me with his head and walked back to the kitchen in the back of the store. I followed. Mel sat down at the table. We usually ate lunch at this table, and it was stacked high with old newspapers, bags of unopened and dated potato chips, a loaf of bread, a near empty jar of mayonnaise and a knife. I leaned against the door frame. Mel was looking away, to the shelves of shoe-boxes that covered the wall opposite the table; he looked as if he were searching for some answer among the different brands and sizes of shoes, and his face was troubled.

His shoulders slumped and he looked weary.

"You figurin' what I'm figurin'?" he asked me.

I nodded my head. "Gramps, right? You think that was Fritz he shot this morning?"

"Yes I do. Otherwise that dog would of showed up. Nobody took that dog."

Mel went on, "And what I can't figure is how Gramps could of hit the damn thing. I wouldn't take a bet he could hit an elephant, much less a coyote - or a dog. That old bastard's cagey. You can't tell what he sees or can't see. Maybe it's cause that gun's second nature to him. I don't know." Mel still looked away, searching the wall of shoes.

"He hadn't shot that gun in a long time," I said.

"Yeah, and I think that's part of it." Then Mel's eyes turned expressionlessly on me and there was a shaken quality to his speech. He spoke slowly. "It's an act of will. Shooting that coyote was an act of will, except it wasn't no coyote. Gramps knows he's slippin' and he's fightin' it. All that talk about taking a nap, how good it is, well, he means it and he doesn't. If there's a coyote out in that meadow and Connolly's running his cattle out there tomorrow, Gramps is gonna do something. If he doesn't, well then he might as well hang her up. You think it was easy for him to sit home all winter in that house, cooped up like a caged animal, not goin' outside, not doin' nothin'. Hell no. And now the weather's gettin' nice, and there's a coyote out in that meadow, and he's got to shoot it or try to shoot it or - or he won't know who he is anymore."

Mel opened one of the bags of chips, took a chip and was about to put it in his mouth and then put the chip down.

"What do you think we should do?" I asked.

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"I don't know."

"I know what the right thing to do is," I said.

"Yeah, well that's easy."

For twenty years, Gramps had been the Justice of the Peace of the Mountain City Township. He was known to be a tough judge, but fair, and since his first term in office, his candidacy had never been contested. In his ethics, Gramps' beliefs were simple and uncomplicated. Gramps loved the truth and hated lies, and he believed that being a man meant owning up to your responsibilities.

"If we tell Gramps what he's done, there's no keeping it from Lee," I said.

"Gramps'll be on Lee's front porch apologizing the next minute."

"Yeah, and what good's that gonna do. That dog's dead," Mel said defensively.

"I can see what'll happen. Gramps will be sorry as hell and he'll apologize to Lee, and Lee will be sore as hell but won't show it, not to Gramps, because he's looked up to Gramps for forty years. And Gramps will take it like a man - or he'll act like it anyway, but he'll doubt himself more now than he ever did this winter. And you know what else?"

"What's that."

"People are gonna hear about it, and they're gonna laugh. It'll be funny to them. The old man thinks he's shootin' a coyote and ends up shootin' the neighbor's dog. Makes Gramps out to be a fool. And was what he did foolish? Yeah, maybe. But that don't make him a fool. People are gonna come in here and ask me about it, and they're gonna want to laugh. And I won't think it's funny and I'm gonna have to hide that from them, cause I can't blame them for thinkin' that way. They don't know Gramps like I do. And what if Gramps hears them talkin' or laughin' or even senses people are laughin' at

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him? How's he gonna take that? Not well. He'll just hold all that in. He won't talk about it. Not even to me."

Mel stood up, and everything about his posture now suggested decision, as if he'd been struggling for justification against the rigidity of his father-in-law's system of belief and had now come to an answer. The vacuity in his face was gone.

"I say the hell with right and wrong. I won't take that act of will from him. I won't do that."

"You know that's not what he'd want," I said.

"I know it, but hell, I figure what he'll never know won't hurt him."

"What about Lee?" I asked. "That isn't true for him. He's just going to keep looking. He loved that dog. He won't know whether it's dead or missing."

"Maybe that's something we're gonna have to live with."

For a minute or so neither of us spoke. Mel looked back to the shoes as if for confirmation. He ran his finger along the edge of a shelf, displacing a thin cloud of dust into the air.

"We're going to have to go down there tonight and find that dog," I said, "before Lee wanders down there and finds him first."

"We can't both go," Mel said. "Somebody might see us down there and ask about it - and we're already gonna be lyin' by what we don't say. To Lee and Rosella and Gramps and God knows who else. No need to compound that with what we do say."

"I'll go," I said.

"You sure? And I don't just mean about goin' down there. I mean about the whole thing."

"I'm sure."

At the edge of the meadow beside the river, I found Fritz's body. It was neither warm nor cold. There was little blood; the bullet had passed through the dog's spine. The dry yellow grass was matted flat where the dog had fallen. In the sky above the meadow, streaks of copper were fading into coal and iron, and dark was coming on. I dragged Fritz's limp body down the five-foot bank and dumped it in the Owyhee.