

The Rancher

The nicotine buzz comes on fast. Coupled with the caffeine of his coffee, the rancher's running as close to a hundred percent as he can manage on only three hours sleep. He has his back against a wide old oak tree to hide the wind coming down off the low mountain. It pulls the blue smoke of his pipe away in a long wavering tail. The air is still below freezing, and the steam of his breath joins the cloud as he exhales through his nose between puffs. With his eyes closed, he opens his mouth ever so slightly to change the pressure on his ears. He strains his hearing against the quiet of the cold morning, listening, waiting, hunting.

It's been a long night and though his body is hardened from a lifetime of work, age has robbed it of some of its speed and dexterity. What he lost in those he gained in endurance and patience. His prey is close now, wounded and dangerous. As the hunt draws to a close, he thinks over the shocking events that set it into motion...

The sun had gone down close to twelve hours ago, a little after six in the evening. This deep into autumn, he usually went to bed a little early as the cold set in quick with the dark. Just like always, at about seven or eight he set a big log on the fire to burn down through the night and keep his small ranch home warm. He'd get up to bank the coals and add a smaller piece of wood when he woke to piss in the dark of the morning.

Not this time though.

About midnight, his guinea fowl started raising hell. This wasn't all that unusual as the dim-witted birds would raise hell if his mule farted too loud. However, when the mule started braying in panic and kicking the heavy timber walls of her stall the rancher came fully awake. He shoved his feet into boots and slung on his long coat. Taking up his lever action .44 and jamming on his hat, he quietly slunk out the back door of his house, making sure not to let it bang against the frame. Not for the first time, he cursed himself for neglecting to get another dog to keep in the barn. His other two were out with the sheep at the opposite end of the property.

Keeping low, like his grandfather had taught him, the rancher crept with the silent rolling grace of a born in the blood predator. Lights and shadows moved in the barn, if there were voices he couldn't hear them over the racket of the birds and startled mule. The cloudless night was blue with starlight and he could easily make out the silhouette of the low barn as he approached. The boards boomed and shivered with another mighty blow from the mule. She weighed over a thousand pounds and he'd personally seen her kill a wolf with a single kick when it tried to hamstring her. As the rancher got close enough to peer into the barn's single window, he heard her scream again and she sounded more angry than scared. He used his sleeve to clear frost and dust from the windowpane then peered in.

He could make out the figures of two men at the stall door, trying to get close enough to halter the mule. Their single battered lantern didn't throw off much light, but he could see her muscles flashing as she thrashed. One of the men made soothing gestures while the other reached for her. She paused and moved closer, as if to sniff his hand. The rancher shifted his weight then pulled back to take aim at the thief, but before he could properly shoulder his weapon, the mule nipped off the man's two middle fingers. She'd seen her opportunity, played calm, and then struck fast like a rattlesnake when he got

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close enough. The dumb bastard didn't even have time to snatch his hand back; he just fell on his ass and gripped his blood covered wrist with his right hand. The rancher's eyes went wide for a second and he could swear he heard her crunching on the fingers, even as the guinea fowl continued to sound the alarm. He spit onto the frozen ground before his bile could rise any higher. Never mind another damn dog, he was going to get another mule.

The injured man started wailing as his partner stumbled back from the animal. She'd taken on a vicious appearance now with blood on her pale muzzle and hot breath shooting out into the cold air. The weak lantern light made her eyes glint and lent her steaming exhalations a menacing quality. Even the rancher was taken aback at the sight. Now he could feel the heat rising in his blood, driving him to action as his grandfather's words whispered to him, "run or fight boy, don't freeze." The uninjured man made the decision for him when he drew an antique pistol, some pawnshop revolver leftover from before the Great War. He raised it to shoot the mule. Quickly, the rancher brought the rifle up and centered the barrel on the man's ear. He didn't want to end a life that wouldn't feed him, and he didn't want to break the window either, but with no time to hesitate he exhaled as he squeezed the trigger.

The uninjured man hadn't even drawn back the hammer of the old gun. His skull just sort of crumpled around the skin in front of his ear, right at the jawbone. Dark fluid and gore splattered the far wall, glass tinkling on the hewn plank floor accompanied the wet slap. The extreme close-range thunder of the rifle shocked lefty out of contemplating his injury. He jumped and ran without looking back, kicking over the lamp in the process. More glass shattered, kerosene spread and ignited. The rancher cursed as he darted around the end of the barn to duck inside, trying save what he could. The mule brayed in terror at the flames, begging him to save her. He kicked the latch board loose from her stall door and swung it wide. She nearly trampled him in her dash to escape and smashed the half open barn door off one of its hinges as she shouldered through. Stripping off his coat, the rancher did his best to beat out the fire, but the fuel had soaked into the raw timber floor almost immediately. Soon the back half of the barn was engulfed in flames. Abandoning his efforts, he did his best to sling haybales out the door then clear out the harnesses and tools from the tack room before the heat drove him out.

The barn was a loss, but that didn't slow him down. He ran to the water trough and broke the ice in it with the butt of his rifle. Grabbing a bucket, he did his level best to sling water onto the coops with the chickens and guinea panicking inside. Thankfully most of the other out buildings stood further away from the blaze. Pausing there in the cold, he watched a significant part of his livelihood burn, along with one of the dumb bastards responsible for the loss. The mule circled back, nuzzled his shoulder, and checked the water bucket for grain. It was only then that he thought to check her over for burns. She was trembling, but unhurt. He put one hand on her shoulder to steady himself while their racing hearts slowed.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been standing there when the familiar sound of his neighbor's flatbed truck roused him. The neighbor had seen the fire like a beacon and had come racing down the gravel road to help. The rancher tried to explain what happened. His neighbor didn't ask questions, he just got to work cleaning up the mess. The old barn burned quickly. In an hour's time they were able to bank it like a campfire. They tied the mule in a shed with a heavy blanket across her back and a fresh bale of hay. She seemed exhausted and grateful as she lowered herself down to the floor. He offered his neighbor breakfast, but the man declined, adding only that he'd be back later in the day to help. The rancher watched him drive away, and then finally headed back inside to brew coffee. It was still below

freezing outside, and with the full moon on the rise, the injured man's blood would be bright on the frosty ground.

Though the memories are only a few hours old, they are a blur. He takes one last puff of the pipe before tapping out the ash into his palm and stowing the burlwood. It's been a long time since he's tracked another man. A broken hip kept him out of the Great War and age out of the one that followed. Neither had prevented him from working as a sheriff's deputy in the Missouri hills. The hip is troubling him in the cold air, but not enough to slow him down; grim determination overrides his discomfort. In the moonlight, tracking the blood trail had been like following a line of rubies. Lefty either wasn't smart enough or was too scared to think about stopping the bleeding. If he had half a brain he'd have known that a block of ice from the creek he crossed would have frozen the stumps of his fingers. As it was, he probably kept fumbling at them, only making the bleeding worse. He must be half delirious from the cold now, his feet and remaining fingers nearly frostbitten. The rancher had followed him down into the valley, across the creek, and up the logging road. Lefty must be one of the drunkards that lives up there and cuts illegal timber in the off season.

With the predawn light now outshining the moon, the rancher can see footprints alongside the blood. Lefty has turned off the logging road to slog through the icy brush trying to find his way back to his campsite. The light was hardly needed at this point, though; the rancher could hear lefty now, thrashing and panting up ahead. The cold would probably kill him if infection and fever didn't, but the rancher is a man that finishes things. He pauses once more to listen before peering around the trunk to search for movement. As he eases around the wide old tree a whip-crack-thunk of noise makes him snatch his head back into cover as a slug blows a chunk from a tree a few feet to his left. The boom of a shotgun echoes out across the valley. Maybe the pipe had been a mistake.

Lefty was upwind and the rancher thought that would have been enough to keep the smell of tobacco smoke from giving away his position. Maybe the poor bastard just happened to look behind him at the right moment. Either way, the growing light is at the rancher's back, and he doesn't want to provide a silhouette target to the desperate and wounded man. There's a light snow starting to drift down off the cloud-shrouded peak ahead. With it comes a chill air that creeps into the rancher's bones.

More death is at hand.

"I'm-a gonna keel yooo!" lefty hollers out. The rancher doesn't respond. He waits and listens. A branch explodes on the same tree a few feet higher, followed by another echoing boom. Either lefty is shaking too badly, or can't aim, or both. Silence settles on the wooded slope again. The rancher can make out lefty's ragged breathing as he curses and struggles with his weapon. There's the telltale metallic clunk of a double barrel shot gun being opened. It sounds like lefty is having trouble reloading with two fingers gone and the rest numb from the cold. The rancher rolls out from his hiding place to take a knee and aim. Lefty sees him and panics, dropping the second shell. He manages to snap the sawed-off barrels closed and fire, but at that distance even with slugs he may as well have been pissing into the wind. The lead buries itself in a log ten feet short of the rancher. Lefty knows he's made his last mistake, but can't come to grips with it. Panting, nearly weeping in desperation, he fumbles the blood-slick weapon trying to break it open and reload. The rancher inhales and takes aim: a slow exhalation, his breath steaming from under the brim of his old wool cowboy hat, a slow trigger squeeze.

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Lefty spins like a top when the old lever gun booms, the heavy caliber bullet catching him on the left side just above the heart.

The rancher's aim had been true, but his target was shaking with fear and cold, wavering side to side. He falls from sight behind some brush with only a spatter of red on the icy undergrowth to mark where he lies.

The rancher says a quiet prayer for the dead, and then one for himself. He doesn't feel satisfaction or joy, only relief that this hunt is over. He stays low and waits, a patch of stillness in the stirring morning air. He wants to make sure lefty didn't have any backup coming down from the camp. He doesn't stand until the first rays of sun creep over the eastern edge of the valley behind him. Taking only a moment to ensure that lefty is well and truly dead, the rancher turns and starts back home. It will do him no good to drag the body down the mountain, and he can't think of a better resting place than this peaceful mountainside anyway.

He has a long day ahead, and chores to get done before the sun sets again.