

In the House of Wilderness

# 1

THESE THREE had survived by charity and deceit for the better part of the winter. Two women and one man, all young and adrift in the turns of the American South. They'd left the wilderness preserve the autumn before, hitchhiked down into Charlotte, and stood around bus stations telling fictions of abandonment to any kindly face. Taking the dollars with self-abasement, saying God's blessings and crushing the money into their rucksacks until they collected enough for food and weed and the means to find a new place to hold them.

In the cold they stood in evening lines at the shelters and moved around the streets through the sunlit hours, bound always to the next alcove, adopting whatever stray dog they could for the day so that they might beg more profitably.

Still, their eyes grew hungry. Their faces took on great depth.

They called themselves Wolf, Winter, and Rain. The names they'd taken when they met and fell in love in the forest, married one another by their own decree before they came back to the cities where they'd learned this new kind of survival and what it exacted.

Things had taken a turn in Knoxville. March held onto the cold and the shelters overfilled. They'd headed east of the river to find abandoned homes near the interstate they might occupy, but there was little to be found that wasn't already claimed. Wolf told Rain

that she could make some money for them if she walked Magnolia Avenue after midnight, and she had and they had all slept for three of the coldest nights of the year in a Holiday Inn, bathing and laughing, and drinking boxes of wine while sleet tapped the windows fogged from the heat of their presence. They made love together and forgot the need of anything other than the comfort of skin and languid days.

It became an unstated routine. Sometimes Rain, sometimes Winter, would go with the men who offered them a means to survive the streets another week or two. Money accrued. Gradually, the season warmed and the banks of the Tennessee River began to green and bloom Easter colors. They moved farther east then, outside the city, strode past the billboards for gas stations and Gatlinburg amusements. When the women asked where they were going, Wolf told them that they were finding the paradise that was intended.

Out past the truck stops the green hills began to rise. On the highway shoulder they learned another world of detail. Castoffs and leavings of rapidly passing traffic. Tires blown like exploded eyes. Busted crates of rotting produce. Roadkill, bloated and flung in comic postures. From this they picked what they could use and resumed their march. Within three days' hard walk there was little more than the inclining mountains before them and the highway at their backs.

And then on the fourth day, when they had walked the sun up into its highest zone, Wolf turned from the roadside and plunged into the woods. The ground was stony and steepened as they cut for the Pigeon River. They stopped and studied the water for signs of a ford, but the current was too strong and they made slow progress as they continued upstream, crossing finally at twilight when they had to make a basic shelter of river cane and cut laurel at the mouth of a dripping cave.

That night there was a close moon and they all stripped and played in the cool shallows. Wolf sang love songs to them, and it was as if the forest had given up its secrets of pleasure, erasing all that had happened to get them here. As they lay beside each

other that night, he asked them what suffering was to compare with this calm.

In the morning Wolf led them up a foot-trod path, unwilling to tell them where he was taking them. Still, they followed, in love with what he had promised.

And then, deep in the heat of the day, the abandoned village appeared, a presence amid overgrown vine and broken boardwalks. A town of clapboard and old brick, the interiors heavy with shadowed heat. Some few had been vandalized but much remained untouched. This was where they would make their new life, he told them. Each woman would tend her own home, which he would visit in turn, and in this they would find the secret heart of contentment.

They lacked seeds for gardens but there was a surplus of forage: blackberries, fiddlehead ferns, poke sallit. This they supplemented by occasionally scouting the interstate shoulder where they would cull the meat of animals freshly struck. At night they divided the shares equally before Wolf divided himself from one of the women's company as he joined the other for the night.

At the first hard rain they learned every ill fit and gap in the rotted ceilings. Water came in and stood in pools. They watched the downpour for any pause, and when they had half an hour or so, they would fetch what scrap from the unused buildings they could find. Much had been picked over. Much had been burned by those who had found this place and squatted here across the derelict years. But sometimes there would be a beam and a reasonable sheet of plywood. They patched their homes together, made them as whole as the materials would allow.

The wet season then gave way to early summer drought. The days were spent by the river or under shade where the small crawling creatures harbored alongside them. The waterline lapped the cut-banks lower each succeeding day. In those weeks they saw copper-heads as they came down from the high terrain to take to the river. Wolf killed three of the snakes and they ate the meat after it had been spitted and turned over blinking campfires.

Evenings were long and humid and thick with mosquitoes. They closed themselves up inside the buildings to escape the worst of the

infestation, but even there the bugs circled and lit, drew welts out of unprotected skin. Their chemical sprays were soon gone and they slathered river mud to salve the inflammation and escape further stings, but this was insufficient.

One afternoon it became too much. Wolf rose without a word and took the hatchet from his rucksack, tossed the scabbard free, and began to pound and chop into the wall until daylight punched through.

"You all get whatever makes smoke," he told them, pointed vaguely at the encroaching summer forest.

The women went out and gathered leaves and green firewood, great armloads of torn grass and the smaller broken elements of the unused buildings, dumped them all in a pile beside where he worked. A lump of fuel that fattened under the weight of its increase. Still, he told his wives to bring more while he continued to hack, to true out the edges of his hole.

By the last minute of daylight he was satisfied with the gap and stacked the materials to burn. He burned the grass first and then the dried wood, pulled the smoke over him with great inward sweeps of his arms. Once the fire steadied and sustained he placed the leaves and the broken and cut greenwood branches in the flames. The fleshy wood boiled sap from the ends and the smoke thickened. The women crawled down on the floor beside him where they could catch modest sips of clean air.

When twilight had gone over to full dark they no longer needed the fire and he let it flutter and die. For the first time in many days they could sit together without clawing blood from new bites. In the dark their voices guided them toward one another.

They talked not of particulars that night. Instead, the veil of darkness allowed them to speak without knowing if the others listened, as though they were addressing different segments of themselves kept secret in daylight but permitted in this strange anonymity. They talked of dreams and what they signified. They talked of the wisdom of communal living. They talked of the zodiac and sex and how the stars were made from the same elements as skin.

Wolf did not know when his wives had fallen asleep, only that they had grown silent. He had spent many nights like this, aware of his guardianship of the two women, a burden he welcomed though a burden still. He rolled a small joint for himself. As it took hold he recalled how far he and the women had come, how much they had accomplished based on their own resources. It had been no easy matter holding them together, but the hardships had wedded them far closer than any tendered document could have. There was a kind of philosophy in that, wasn't there? A recognition of indisputable value measured not by currency but by risk and trust and shared sacrifice.

Sleep descended on his chest and lit there, squat as a cherub. Perhaps the cherub was part of a dream personified, a dance of surprising weight that sunk him into a pit of his own design, ever receding. A phantasm then, a broached inner world. Let that have its own share of time.

He bolted from sleep unable to breathe. Smoke swelled and filled the room. At the edges he glimpsed the distorted flash of stuttering firelight. The beat of a blown heart. The heat was spreading. He tried for a breath to call out for Winter and Rain but the smoke put itself in his throat and his voice was wrung out by the stinging fumes. He tried to stand but he felt his head grow light and he collapsed.

It would go like this then. Fast but no so fast that he couldn't perceive the chaos. Part of him had always expected this final outcome, undone by events beyond his comprehension. He had wanted his wives to understand this and he hoped that they had been given the gift of consciousness when the smoke took them. He wanted them to see that the impossibility of resistance was its own kind of mercy. There was great friendship in the eye of what killed you. His only regret was that he could not hold Rain's hand when it had come for her. That girl that was as much a part of him as his child would have been. To touch her as she died. That would mean everything. That would be the end of all lack.

There was a sense of being lifted, which surprised him. He had expected extinction only, the purity of oblivion. But instead, he felt

his weight ease. Some trick of the brain, he assumed. Even now he wouldn't have pursued the escape hatch of a spiritual life. And yet the sensation continued, not lifting him, he realized, but dragging him, slowly and with great effort. There was pressure as well, sharply felt beneath his arms. His feet knocked across the floorboards and a tunnel of sight appeared to him as he was hauled clear of the burning building and could see the night sky overhead. Each of his wives had hold of him, had survived, had fought to make certain he survived as well. He looked back at where he'd just been. The smoke assumed everything into its greater shape.

His coughs came with sure violence. Breath forced its way in. The women offered him water when he could take it. It was as warm as something from a body, but it was easier to swallow for that. He tried to speak, but his voice was cracked and Rain and Winter told him not to try. In time, he obeyed their counsel, and they all watched the building burn. Their faces glowed by the pretty animal of fire.