

GRIZZLY

Quietly humming under his breath, ease began seeping into Martin's muscles. Beneath him, the warm forest floor accepting his prone body like a familiar lover, laying to rest the physical and emotional weight of past days. A light breeze stirred a lingering aroma of dry pine, holding the fragrance like a revolving door, a flickering wisp between the departure of summer and arrival of autumn. Watching the setting sun causing shadows to stretch away, he knew the thin altitude would soon absorb day's warmth into the evening air. Filling his lungs and savoring the moment, a smile crept to his lips, he thought, "what a great day." His ebbing frustration displaced by a sense of control. Nature was smiling, encouraging his song, and beckoning tranquility from all around to join him in this moment.

At ease in the mountains, all of his immediate needs within reach. Without looking, he could access a tidy cache containing sustenance, communications, optics, and other equipment. He had more, of course, easily retrieved but stashed away in a pack concealed by the tree line. Surveying the valley below him, embracing the peace of the small clearing he had selected, everything was falling into place and coming into focus. As he knew it would.

Martin felt content again, as he had before the shattering of his peace by the acceleration of a distant engine. Before this untimely intrusion, his thick beard concealed a soft smile having discovered a few faint tracks and fresh scat. Drawn along by subtle clues, he eventually discovered a grizzly sow and her cub leisurely fishing for fat summer trout along the creek. The same sparkling ribbon that now lay along the valley floor below him, polluted by men.

"If you go down to the woods today . . ."

Infuriated by the clamorous engine, Martin had subdued his rage, permitting his curiosity to seek an explanation. Resolving to restore tranquility to the valley, Martin easily found the suspected offender.

Partially pulled into the trees, neither hidden nor conspicuous, Martin found a sleek, black SUV. It was trophy of abundance and confidence, a taunting portent for the days ahead. A jocular lot, the occupants left an obvious trail; as indifferent about being heard as they were of Martin's sanctuary, they trampled underbrush, and slashed low hanging branches. Within an hour, Martin was sliding behind them as quietly as their shadows.

Following the men for days, he understood their intentions; recognizing their lightweight tents and specialized equipment, made of composite materials, as announcing something other than expensive tastes. Intuitively, Martin knew the men were threatening more than the tranquility.

" . . . you're in for a big surprise . . ." he softly sang.

Men he judged by their actions. Watching as they littered their paths with the capricious killing of small game. Destruction callously discarded spoiling in the autumn sun. Scattered carcasses of hare or grouse, even squirrels that had been trapped or shot, the trout fished from the creek left languishing in the soft dirt perishing in the sun. These were the first

victims; the larger animals would become vulnerable in the process, seeking effortless feeding sites. Discoveries of piles of molasses and grains mixed with food scraps, intended as bait, confirmed Martin's suspicions that the grizzlies were in peril.

Despite the men's ruinous wake, their campsite was immaculate. Martin watched the morning ritual as the men quietly rose and set about grooming their campsite, purging all traces. Yet, each day, they would jettison carnage along the stream or in clearings. Leaving wide corridors of putrid death, a vile shadow descending upon the valley like frat boys in a brothel.

“ . . . If you go down to the woods today. . .

Death and ruin fell like shadows, blighting the men's wake, and casting darkness upon Martin's soul. The men were baiting nature, taunting for a reaction; outwardly gratuitous, tempting confrontation with Martin's bears; acting with impunity knowing that without witnesses, accountability slips its tether.

Cautiously, concealing his presence, Martin reticently kicked the discarded game into the creek, leaving nothing to attract larger carnivores. Meticulously obscuring his tracks to remain unnoticed; anything could have dragged it away, even a large bird could have taken the corpses away. Days wore on for Martin, frustration, and injustice anodizing his resolve, bringing him to this moment.

As Martin continued floating between his memories of recent days and the present, he drew his thoughts parallel to visions of justice, justice for the vulnerable, for his bears. Concern and an overriding sense of justice refocusing Martin's concentration to save his bears.

During the short pause between the stanzas of his song, there was a moment of stillness between his inhale and exhale. His breath becoming tidal, ebbing and flowing, creating a dynamic range of energy with a moment of pause. *The turn* surfers called it. The turn was the moment in which order would be restored. Absorbing the world around him, the orchestra of insects and birds, the slight rustling of leaves under the breeze and the babbled conversation of a distant group of men mixing with the gurgling of the shallow mountain stream built to a crescendo and then forced out of Martin's consideration. No longer listening, Martin could see the action of the men, easily visible, seven hundred twenty meters away. Martin filed his lens and inhaled.

“ . . . I've come out in a disguise. . .

Fortunes change in tranquility; today was no different. In that pause, the ebb of Martin's relaxation ceased, the rage, suppressed for days, once coiled into tension, now slowly releasing. Imaging that he could touch their faces, softly pointing his index finger and then drawing towards himself, passing through the resistance of the rifle's trigger.

Immediately, the rifle balked, spitting a whiff of smoke and kicking a minor protest, its sharp retort commanding the valley into silence. Indifferently, Martin tolerated the rifle's insolence as though it was nothing more than the chronic grievance of a friend. A familiar complaint uttered among best friends, perhaps of weather or politics, part of an ongoing banter, predictable, and incapable of change. Within that instant, the man fell out of Martin's scope, and judgment left him writhing on the ground.

Examining the group as the hush rippled through the gorge; traces of the fading echo disappearing; signs of birds and insects disappeared. Even the wind held her breath. The scope of his rifle revealed confusion infecting the men, their heads spinning, and arms waving. Swiftly examining the surrounding hillsides and their injured companion, their incomprehensible conversation pitching to staccato bursts full of conflict and alarm.

Pushing his rifled forward on the folding bipod, and reaching for the spent casing and then his binoculars, Martin surveyed the scene. Holding the warm brass cartridge close to his nostril, Martin indulged in the aroma of his plan. Holding the perfume in his lungs, Martin slowly closing his eyes to savor his success, then slowly exhaling his attention returned to the scene below.

The fallen man slowly being swallowed by red, while his companions began kneeling to assist their injured cohort. Then sweeping their rifles over the terrain examining the surrounding hillsides, looking as though they were trying banish Martin with brooms.

Re-inspecting the adjacent high ground, Martin confirmed that he had secured his safety, he returned his attention to the men.

Watching the blood's liberation, Martin adjusted his scope, compensating for his bullet having struck high and left. Good enough, death would arrive before dawn; asphyxiating or exsanguination, but greater efficiency was required for the fallen man's companions.

Resuming his breathing, Martin selected the second target. The victim was leaning over the dying man, filling Martin's scope with the curvature of his back. The rifle begrudgingly responding to the slow pressure of Martin's finger with its usual objection, delivering violence into the waist of the crouching man. A scream filled the valley. Martin smiled, satisfied with his adjustments, watching the man collapse. The extent of the damage concealed by a heavy sweater. Immobilized, like his friend, death would soon collect him as well; any significant damage around the pelvis, spine, and internal organs would prove fatal in the mountains.

The men were examining the slope from where Martin's shots had originated. Confusion had yielded to action, but fear continued casting a shadow over the valley floor, infecting the group with urgency. Martin imagined that as professionals the men knew they were in danger but also that they needed to stay their nerves, so their search would yield his location.

Martin was patient in his planning, testing slight lines, looking up from the creek; he knew the men could see any number of small clearings. Martin relied upon this as his plans took shape. Each clearing offered similar vantage points over the stream and all within a few meters of each other. Keeping his movements sparse would preserve his cover. Confident remaining unseen, Martin returned to looking through his scope, resuming his song.

Slowly reaching for his satellite phone, Martin pressed PGM button twice. Still watching, the two uninjured men were attempting to conceal themselves behind their writhing companions, recruiting the only assistance that their friends could offer.

One man began pointing towards a clearing, initiating fire. Gunfire steadily erupted from the creek side, while Martin, still humming, continued studying his targets.

Pressing PGM again, causing another remote reflector to emulate the sun's glint against the glass of a scope: misdirection remaining his best camouflage. Based on the range separating them; Martin calculated an error by the men of one degree purchased a safety margin exceeding twelve meters, one degree—barely a twitch. Predictably, the men continued firing towards Martin's diversion.

Ranging and releasing four quick shots, Martin silenced the other rifles. Within the quiet pause, Martin assessed the remaining movement through his scope. The men were still alive, but only for now. Now the stream was louder than the men, more alive, and with a future holding tomorrow; the men may see the night's stars but they wouldn't see another dawn.

“. . . It's lovely out in the woods today . . .”

Rising slowly to his feet, Martin surveyed his resting spot, collecting his spent brass and other belongings. Nodding slowly, the only remaining sign of his presence was the flattened grasses that would spring back with the morning dew. Maintaining his surveillance of the men, he walked to the edge of the clearing. Recovering his pack from the safety of the trees, and then proceeding to another vantage point. Fifty meters became one hundred and again he was sitting, peering through his binoculars at the dying men, as the sounds of the forest tentatively resumed. They were moving to different degrees as the ground around them became darker and wet. Checking his watch again, mentally calculating that exsanguination should soon be causing shock and unconsciousness. Their injuries would soon become fatal.

Hefting his pack, Martin deliberately made his way to the valley floor and stopped a hundred meters from the bleeding corpses by the stream. Setting his possessions down on a large rock, and covering them with his jacket, he approached the dying men. Writhing like the trout they had abandoned in the previous days, one of them studied Martin with bulging eyes.

“H. . .help me.” The man whispered.

Martin shook his head, “I don't think so. I'm not trained for that sort of thing.”

“The bears . . . they'll come.”

“Maybe, I'd be concerned about the cougars. They're quicker. I haven't seen any, but then it's in their nature to not be noticed .”

Martin studied the man, examining his dusty face, the dirt sticking to the sweat and blood on his skin, the man's frantic eyes searching for something in Martin's resolve.

“Please . . .”

“Isn't this called irony?”

The man breathing laboriously, “Huh? I just need—”

“You were here for the bears, not the wolves or cougars though, right? Can I guess? Gallbladders for medicines, teeth and claws for charms. Paws for trophies. Just a paycheck probably, and now you're afraid of them finding you?”

Still, the look of confusion and incomprehension persisted on the man's face, "But. . . We need. . . I need—"

"What? Help? Soon you won't need for anything. Maybe forgiveness. I don't give that neither." Martin looked at the men, knowing that they wouldn't survive the night. Knowing suffering would only be displaced by death. His work was done, he could resume his song, switching from humming to singing "The Teddy Bear's Picnic".

"If you go out in the woods today . . .

. . . You'd better not go alone. . .

. . . It's lovely out in the woods today. . .

. . . But safer to stay at home."

Sitting with his back against a large rock, watching the dying men in the wet dirt, floundering like the trout, they had condemned; Martin chewed pieces of dried fruit. Shrugging he attached a small keyboard to his phone, he began typing:

Ranger 265 status check
Bear 74 and cub 103 secure
Immediate threats neutralized
Bio removal required
Advise to action self-disposal
Awaiting extraction orders
Ping transmission for location
Over

Eating more dried fruit and drinking small sips of water, Martin continued watching as the movement of the men becoming intermittent, the crimson pool continuing its extension along the creek. The birds tentatively commenced chattering again and the wind felt cooler as the sun having seen enough for the day, had retired.

" . . . If you go down to the woods today. . .

An electronic chime prompted him to pick up his phone again, the screen flashed text:

Affirmative Ranger 265
Ping verified
Secure location and extract west of location to point 3-4
Evac at 0815 21-9-15
Disposal unit inbound to location

Over

Martin returned the casing to his pocket and typed:

Affirmative

Proceeding as directed

Switching to # 08

Over

Consulting his GPS, Martin's extraction point was seven kilometers away. With over twelve hours to meet the helicopter, it would be an easy walk. He would find shelter along the way and savor a few hours of sleep for the first time since his path crossed the men behind him.

He was content; he would see his bears again, even if not today. It was a great end to the day.

Author's Note:

Poaching is a global problem, attracting both a multitude of definitions as well as responses. This short story is inspired by stories of wildlife loss, the Neko Case song 'Red Tide', the efforts of organizations such as ['International Anti-Poaching Foundation'](#) the ['Black Mambas.'](#)

The remaining rhinos (four white rhinos remain in Europe as of 2015), majestic lions (like Cecil), and the amazing bears of North America should not become souvenirs or ingredients, but remain part of their ecosystems.

When we travel through this world we have choices available to us, be kind to the life on our planet. Leave no trace. Be critical about your animal encounters, don't feed the bears, and if you're able to feed or hug an animal outside of it's natural environment, it's likely that the animal is being poorly cared for. Exceptions exist of course, and I applaud the many zoos and sanctuaries that work to rehabilitate and release animals.

Thanks to all those who support wildlife and habitat programs, the difference is in our hands to make.

Photography credit to Gerhard and Theresa Malan: Kragga Kamma Game Park, Eastern Cape, South Africa.

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