



*I've been riding the past hundred miles* with a guy who's too drunk to drive. The first thing he told me when he picked me up on the side of the road was that he went by the name Wolfman and didn't answer to anything else. It was just one of those things, he said, and I told him that was good enough for me, provided he let me have one of those beers sitting in the cooler in the back seat.

He asked me when I first got in why I was standing on the road in the first place. I told him I ran away from home even though I look in my early thirties. He seemed to accept the answer anyway.

We've been quiet, mostly, content with listening to a wild church channel whose announcer is attempting to compare homosexuals teaching in public schools to weapons of mass destruction that may or may not still be hidden away in Iraq. The car itself smells like stale beer and old fast food. There are different colored crumbs in both drink holders and on the gear shift, along with an assortment of stains that mainly resemble the color of either ketchup or mustard.

After we pass the last exit to a town claiming to have one of Al Capone's Midwestern hideouts, the Wolfman turns down the stereo a little bit. 'You remember a couple months ago?' he asks.

'Sure,' I say. How else to answer such a vague question, after all?

Wolfman shakes his head a little bit, causing his long dark hair to drop over his shoulders. It's begun to horseshoe around his forehead, but to hide that fact he had long ago picked out the biggest, thickest glasses he could possibly find. They do well to make his large nose seem somewhat regular on his face. 'The shooting, I mean. The one with the Asian who shot those three hunters. It happened right in those woods coming up on your right.'

'What happened?'

Wolfman takes a heavy slug from his bottle and savors the taste with bared teeth before answering. 'Dunno, really. He was trespassing, they tried to get him out, he shot 'em.'

I look out the side window. Beyond the road is about fifty acres of corn crops and beyond that a thick forest. At the edge of the trees, I can make out a small looking post, an elevated club house some people use to hunt deer. For some

reason, I play out the event in my mind and set it in the dead of night, putting myself under the bare canopy of naked, twisting limbs, standing on a carpet of soggy wet leaves. One of my friends is already dead, and I take refuge under a fallen log, listening to the Asian man's footsteps on the wet ground. I hear my other hunting pal whimpering off in the distance, then a loud crack of thunder that sends my ears ringing. Then silence. I see the Asian man creep closer to my hiding place. He doesn't spot me under the cover of night, even though his beady eyes skim right over my body. The shooting probably would have happened in daylight, and in daylight, he would have surely spotted me.

'What's his story?'

'Racism,' Wolfman says. 'He says they were threatening him. Self defense, and all that great bullshit. But the thing is he was carrying an assault rifle, not a standard hunting rifle. They're gonna nail him no matter what because of that, don't you think?'

I reach back for another bottle of beer and twist off the top with my arm. 'It's bullshit that he could even buy one in the first place.'

'You mean assault rifles?' he asks. 'Or guns in general?'

I realize I've let the beer loosen my tongue. I heard once it's best not to mix beer with politics and religion, something I've made a point of taking to heart. But I'm curious where it'll go, so I answer him honestly. 'Guns in general, I guess.'

Wolfman takes his eyes off the road to stare at me. Behind his patches of black facial hair, he's got an incredulous look on his face, as if I had just hailed Satan in front of a priest. 'Are you seriously saying people shouldn't have the right to protect themselves?'

'You don't need a gun to protect yourself,' I say. 'That's why we pay to put police on the street.'

'Listen.' The Wolfman sets down his beer on the dash, balancing it between a little rubber air freshener and a miniature Taco Bell dog. When he starts talking again, his free hand flies around all over the place, like he's swatting away gnats. 'If I'm walking down the street and someone pulls a gun on me, I'm going to pull a fucking gun on him and I'm going to do everything I can to defend myself.'

'He'd shoot you before you could draw a gun.'

'Listen.' Wolfman grabs his beer and takes a quick sip. He puts it back down so he has a free hand again. 'I have a right to protect myself. You know in places where you're allowed to carry a concealed weapon, crime's always lower? You know why? Because no would-be criminal in his right mind would fuck with someone who might be packing heat.'

I set my empty bottle in the pile at my feet. 'I'd have to check those facts to be sure, but it sounds like bullshit.'

'It's not.'

We're quiet for awhile. On the radio, the evangelist's voice has begun to fade in and out as the road gradually descends into an open, unfarmed valley. In fall, for just one week, I bet the trees off in the distance look like they're on fire. Even in the darkness, under the infrequent spotlights on the bare frontage road, I can spot three different arbor species, all with their own unique leafing cycle and their own unique colors and shades. To have a sketchpad during that week, it would take a watercolor pallet the size of a dinner table to do the colors justice.

The evangelist's voice cuts out for a moment, replaced by a husky rapper whose lyrics suggest he's desperate for a joint. The evangelist's voice returns as we dip into a small valley, overpowering the rap station for a brief moment, long enough to explain the dangers of teaching children safe sex rather than abstinence, because anything less than abstinence before marriage will force us all to burn in hell for eternity. His voice fades again, replaced by the same rapper who explains between the twang of a heavy bass line how important it is for him to eat a pussy every night.

'Could you end someone's life, though?' I finally ask.

'If it came down to me or him?' Wolfman nods. 'You're goddamn right I'll do everything in my power to protect my life. If I had to end someone else's life to do that, then so be it.'

'But what if he wasn't such a bad guy?' I ask. 'What if he pulled a knife on you and it was the first time he'd ever done it, and the only reason he was doing it was because he was a little short on his rent? Or maybe he's addicted to something, and it's got a hold of him and he can't control his actions anymore?'

'How the hell should I know his life's story? Is it my responsibility to ask about his situation before I shoot him?'

I ponder the questions, letting the top of the beer bottle rest against my lower lip. I leave it there while I talk. 'What if the guy wasn't really going to do anything to you in the first place?'

Wolfman shrugs. 'How should I know that?'

'You don't,' I say. 'That's the point. You have no idea. For all you know, you could be ending the life of some guy who was just trying to get a little extra money for his family. When all you had to do, really, was pull out a little thing of pepper spray and get him in the eyes and he would have run off crying like a little sissy.'

'The pepper spray could miss. Look.' He finishes the rest of his beer and reaches around his seat for a new one from the cooler. 'It's my constitutional right to be able to carry a weapon, and you know why? Because our founding fathers knew it was every man for himself. The law can't be everywhere all the time.'

'It was different back then!' I take a sip to wet my throat and cool the fire in my chest. 'Completely different.'

'How so.'

'Well,' I say, 'for one thing, there were fucking savage Indians all over the fucking place. And here I'm using the racial epithet for dramatic purposes.'

Wolfman laughs. 'And you think things are any different now? Just because we've got fancy technology and safer houses? You honestly live in that thick of a bubble? I'm not talking Indians, per se, but savages. There are still savages out there. They come in every color, every creed, and every size.'

I'm silent a moment, thinking. I take another sip of my beer. We pass the last exit for Grand Junction and the preacher's voice begins to fade away into the soft static and rap music returns. 'What if it was all a mistake?' I finally ask. 'What if they misspelled 'bare' and put the 'e' in the wrong place and their original intent was to make sure all Americans would always have the right to wear sleeveless shirts?'

Wolfman laughs and takes another long swig of his beer. 'Then what's all that bullshit about the militia?'

I snap my fingers. 'Yes. That's right. The militia. The point of that amendment was to give Americans the right to form their own militias in case they needed to defend their country or their land. And for that, the founding fathers had to let them carry weapons. But we don't need a militia anymore because we have an army. And police. And Homeland Security.'

'Homeland Security,' Wolfman says with a grunt. 'All those fuckers do is sit around and decide what color M&M we're supposed to eat for the day. Fucking ... Ozzy Osbourne could do that for us.'

'Well, the police then. And the Army.'

Wolfman takes another sip of his beer, and I take pleasure in the fact that he doesn't have an immediate answer. 'You're a real dipshit,' he finally says. 'I can't believe, out of all the hitchhikers, I managed to pick up the only one guaranteed to piss me off.'

I focus on the road ahead of us, imagining myself behind the steering wheel. The yellow lines dividing the two lanes blur together before curving into the ditch dividing the highway from the adjacent corn crop. 'I just, I don't know. I couldn't kill someone.'

'Even if they were going to kill you?'

I shake my head without hesitation. 'I still don't think I could do it. I couldn't end another life. I couldn't live with myself after that.'

Wolfman takes another long sip of his beer. He sets it on the dash so he has a free hand to scratch at his thin beard. 'Maybe that's not such a bad thing. But you're gonna die young, kid. What do you do?'

'Nothing right now,' I say. 'I'm just hitchhiking to the city.'

'No,' he says, shaking his head. 'I mean what is it you want to do?'

My tongue is too loose for me to come up with some plausible lie. 'I want to draw.'

'Draw what?' he asks.

'Anything,' I say. 'Everything. I draw, and sometimes I paint.'

'And so when you get to the city and you find a place and you start painting your masterpiece, and you're walking down the street one day to get some more paint and some guy comes up and it's you or him, you'd rather die than save yourself?'

I think about it. 'Yeah.'

'Even if you're painting a masterpiece that might make you famous one day?'

I tip back my beer, hiding my mouth behind the lip. 'I severely doubt anything I create is ever going to become a masterpiece.'

Wolfman shakes his head again. 'Unbelievable. You're a one in a million, I think.'

I nod and look down at my feet. There are at least seven empty bottles around my shoes. I don't remember how many were already there when he picked me up, but just seeing them all there seems to wake up my bladder. 'I have to piss.'

Wolfman nods, but doesn't make any move to pull over. 'Do me a favor and hand me that flamingo behind my seat.'

I reach around his seat, tossing aside an old sweatshirt and retrieving the pink lawn ornament tucked under the cooler. The beak's been sawed off. So has the tail.

Wolfman takes it from me before I can finish my investigation. 'Now grab me a fresh beer.'

I grab another beer from the cooler.

'Open it for me.'

Over the radio, the rap station has won its battle with the evangelist.

'Pour it in the flamingo's ass.'

I pour the beer slowly into the opening under the tail feathers. Wolfman holds onto the neck, keeping the lawn ornament upside-down so no beer trickles out of the sawed-off beak. When I'm finished, Wolfman wraps his mouth around the bird's head and tips it back. I keep one hand on the steering wheel while he sucks down the beer in one long gulp.

'What the hell do you call that?' I ask.

Wolfman finishes, wipes his mouth with his hand and tosses the lawn ornament onto the back seat before returning his free hand to the steering wheel. 'It's a flabongo.'

'What?'

'A flabongo. A flamingo beer bong. Get it?'

I nod.

'Works just as good with coffee,' he says, exhaling a quiet burp. He blows it toward the windshield, and I'm thankful for missing the smell. 'So long as it's not too hot.'

'It's an amazing invention.' I feel a tight pain in my bladder. 'But I really do need to piss, man. I'll go on the side of the road, if you're worried about time.'

Wolfman waves away my worry, bumping his fingers against the dash a little too hard so two of the flaps of the heating vent dislodge. 'Don't worry. Two more exits, and then we'll make a pit stop. If we pull over here and a cop sees, we'd both be in deep shit.'

'Okay.'

I wait in silence, trying to keep my eyes focused on the blurry yellow lines running in front of our car. We're between two lanes for awhile, then we're in the right lane and then the left, then the right again by the time we reach the third exit. Wolfman takes it too fast and has to slam hard on the brakes at the end of the off-ramp to keep from crossing into the intersecting road. The seatbelt squeezes my stomach and I have to fight back every urge to just let the piss go and take my chances with the Wolfman's sense of humor about those types of things. He turns right on the county road and we drive for another minute or two before I see an old toll booth off to the left of the road. It's standing there next to the old highway road that first opened in the forties, abandoned now in the middle of nowhere and left to the creativity of the weeds that have thoroughly surrounded, climbed and decorated the outer walls.

Wolfman pulls up in front of the small shack, breaking hard again so the wheels grind against the brittle asphalt. I get out of the car as fast as I can, feeling the squeeze inside my stomach make its way down to my groin. I can hear him laughing at the way I run but I don't care because I see the opening to the toll booth and already my hands have begun fumbling with my zipper. I step inside the booth and take a good look around the empty box, trying to decide the best place to piss. I pick the back wall and aim for the graffiti near the middle, darkening the faded red paint and washing away some of the dirty words and love proclamations that had been written in marker.

There's a photo near the top of the wall, a picture of a woman no older than thirty with faded blonde hair and dark gray eyes. It's a portrait shot, but the faint hint of her shoulders reveals all the indications of a stunning body, the kind I could look at all day and draw every shadow running along each individual naked muscle. She turns blue for a moment, and for just that one moment all of the anxiety I've felt for the past two hundred miles is washed away and all I can do is think about this woman and where she is and if she still smiles the same way. Does she smile at all, or did she just feign happiness for the photographer? Her face turns red, her complexion darkens, and I can see through her faded dark eyes. I know exactly what makes her cry, what she's afraid of, what she's afraid to face in her life. I have those exact same fears.

When I step out of the booth, Wolfman's standing in front of his car talking to a state patrol officer. The brown car is parked right behind ours, its searchlight pointed in the direction of the old highway road. The cherries and blueberries illuminate the surrounding field: first red, then blue, then red again. The red forest looks like hell. The blue forest looks like a cheap horror movie set with a too-bright moon's glow casting creepy shadows under the skeletal tree branches. Wolfman sees me walking carefully and gives a hearty wave.

'You feel better?' he asks, winking with his right eye so the officer doesn't see.

'False alarm.' I give the officer a nod. He's an old one, with sunken eyes and a sagging belly that partially hides the front of his belt. He's wearing a short-sleeved uniform, revealing two hairy, ape-like arms. 'I didn't puke.'

The officer glances down at the I.D. card in his hand, then returns his gaze to the Wolfman. 'You live around here, Dave?'

Wolfman frowns and doesn't answer.

'Huh?' the officer asks, giving Wolfman another few seconds. 'You gonna answer for me?'

The Wolfman still doesn't answer. He's managed to keep a pretty steady calm, except for his legs. If the officer looks down now, he'll see two wobbly knees and a hell of a lot of bare calf muscle jiggling. Then the gig would be up, for sure. I don't know exactly what I'd go to jail for, but I probably wouldn't be left standing here in the middle of nowhere.

'He's the Wolfman,' I say. 'Call him the Wolfman.'

The officer looks at me, probably to see if I'm smiling. He turns back to the Wolfman. 'You live around here, Wolfman?'

The Wolfman's face lightens up a bit. 'Black River, actually.'

The lines on the officer's forehead smooth out. 'Came to see the fireworks down in Grand Junction this evening?'

The Wolfman nods, smiling. 'Came and went. We're just on our way back home now.'

The officer nods and hands the Wolfman's license back. He hooks his thumbs in his belt, next to his gun and his can of mace. 'You have fun?'

We both nod, maybe a little too enthusiastically because we haven't been cuffed yet. 'We love going to Grand Junction,' Wolfman says. 'Beats the hell out of Black River.'

The officer smiles and nods. He's either chewing gum that he had previously forgotten about, or he's faking it to make himself look more authoritative. 'Understandable. And I sure as hell don't wanna ruin anyone's good time tonight, you know?'

'We know,' I say.

The officer looks at me and nods. 'The last thing I wanna do is arrest a bunch of drunks who just came down to have a little fun in our town, because I know how boring Black River is. I want you two to stick around right here for about an hour or so before you make the rest of the way back home, you got it?'

'I think we can do that,' Wolfman says with a polite smile.

The officer points one stubby finger between us. 'If I catch you driving before the hour's up, I'll throw you both in jail.'

'Thank you, sir,' I say. We watch him get into his car and pull back onto the main road. When the car's headlights disappear into the blackness, Wolfman walks over to the back seat and grabs two fresh beers from the cooler. I take one and we stretch out on the hood of the car. It's still warm from the large V-8 engine so I don't feel all that cold even with a night breeze across my bare arms and neck.

Wolfman opens his beer and takes a sip. 'I can't believe you wouldn't do it.'

'What?' I ask.

'You wouldn't shoot,' he says. 'Even if your life depended on it. Just because *maybe* the fucker has a family. *Maybe* he's not a bad guy.'

I take a sip of my own beer and stare up at the blank sky, resting my head on the windshield. 'Having guns didn't save those three hunters,' I say.

'Probably were too much like you. And now their families are stuck with all the bullshit.'

'I bet you wouldn't shoot, either.' I look at him. 'I saw the way your legs were shaking in front of that cop.'

The Wolfman grunts. 'He wasn't a cop, dipshit. He was State Patrol.'

On the radio inside the car, the preacher's voice begins to return in short bursts. Under his voice, the rap station's bass line grooves along to the homily. We spend the rest of the hour in silence, staring up at the stars whenever there's a break in the clouds. I can't stop thinking now about whether I could pull the trigger, whether I could kill someone else to save my own miserable life. What do I plan on accomplishing that would make my life so much more important?

What does it say when you'd rather give away your life to save one of the damned?