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Away in Night

Jerry Bumpus

He lay listening in the darkness. He knew what woke him, but he didn't let himself think about it. Then he heard the noise again—out back, as if they were trying to get in the barn. Then the noise seemed to slowly swing around the house, and they weren't out by the barn but down where the road bends and heads up toward the house, and in the darkness he could see them smoothly loping up the road, their mouths open, their long red tongues lolling out, their eyes set and narrow, staring through the darkness at him.

It was a dream, that was all. He turned on his side and was nearly asleep again when he heard them out front, their voices half-choked, speaking low among themselves. They wouldn't howl, not yet, with their heads tilted back, eyes nearly closed, their lips strangely puckered as if kissing the moon. The howling would come later . . . And just then their voices broke, gave way to rapid, eager whining, and he realized they were coming nearer. They had come around the bend and now by their petulant dog-like whining he could tell they were down where his old, unused turn-off joined the road.

He lay still, listening, not admitting it but knowing he was waiting and hoping for them to pass his turn-off and go on down the road.

But they didn't. He knew they wouldn't.

Now their voices were louder—not because they were howling but because they were nearer, and he knew they were by now inside his gate, and he saw them sniffing the trunks of the two maple trees . . . Then they started howling.

His heart swelled in him like a bubble and his mouth opened and he moaned in the darkness and it joined their cold full howling which rose blue and black in the darkness, rising with such volume it sent steel through the sky and suddenly everything—the wide flat fields, the sky, even the darkness of night itself—shone a cold and radiant blue.

He stood to the side of the window and, reaching out, slowly closed it. In the front room of the house he swung the door shut and slid the bolt.

Then he went down the short hall, his left hand lifted and guiding him along the worn-smooth paper on the wall. Through the kitchen he went to the back room. "Bob," he whispered. Following the heavy snoring he went to the cot and shook him. Bob woke calmly, not at all surprised or alarmed. "Ella Ud Te," he said, talking in the way no one but the old man could understand—and he could

understand it only because he had lived nearly thirty years out here in darkness with the boy.

"Get up," he told Bob. "There's wolves out there."

"Wolves?"

"Big dogs." And as he said this, it struck him that maybe they *were* just dogs—farm dogs out roaming, or, at worst, dogs turned wild. But that howling . . . that was wolves.

"Hear them?" They listened. There was a long clear silence like a broad sheet of metal shining blue under a moon . . . and as the silence stretched on and on he was about to believe that they had gone up the road.

But then a long howl split the silence, a howl strangely deep, almost rumbling, as if groping for speech.

"There." He reached out, found Bob's shoulder, and gripped it hard. "Listen to that."

"Idda wao?" Bob whispered.

"Yes. It's wolves. Come up front and you can see them. They're out by the trees."

They went up through the house, Bob walking heavily, knocking against the rocking chair as he always did when he came into the front room. By the window the old man motioned for Bob to stand back and peek out from the side. "They can see you," he whispered. "They got good eyes. They can see in the dark like it was daylight. Out there by the trees. See them?"

He waited, knowing Bob was looking.

"Sounds like there's five, ten, maybe more." He waited. "They'll look like dogs, but bigger. Lots bigger. Crissake. There's nothin like a dog about a wolf. See them?"

He heard Bob chomping and swallowing the way he did when he was thinking or taking a good look at something.

"They'll just stay out there a while," the old man said. "Then they'll mosey on. They came down the road. As big as day. Crissake. A pack of wolves come walking *right down the road*. What do you think of that? How many is there? Count them. Like I showed you. One, two . . ."

"One, two . . ."

"And then . . .?"

"Two . . ."

"*Three.*"

"Three."

The old man straightened up abruptly. "No," he whispered so loudly he was afraid the wolves would hear. "*Tell me. You count. Count the things out there and tell me how many there is.*"

Bob was silent. In his mind the old man could see Bob standing there by the window **blinking** his eyes and looking back at him.

"Okay," **the old man** said. "I'd say there's . . . ten. Yes, ten is about it. Each one of them **has a different** way of howling. You can tell if you listen close. There's that **one with** the real deep voice. He's the leader of the pack. And then there's a **bunch of smaller** voiced ones, them's younger but they're still wolves,

damn *sight* they're wolves!"

"What do they do?" Bob asked him.

"They just prowl around. Now that there's towns and cities they got to go at night, so they go at night. And they kill things and eat them."

"They ever kill a man?"

"They do. But more likely it's cattle. They'll kill a calf when they can, and they're bad on pigs, and chickens . . . Christ A'mighty! The *coop!*" He grabbed Bob's shoulder. "Listen. They're going to get the chickens. That's what they're going to do. You hear?"

He knew Bob was nodding his head.

"Say it, boy. You hear?"

"Yes, Uncle Ted."

"Okay. They're going to kill all our chickens and eat them up. And if they do that, we got nothin left. You see?"

"Yes."

"So we got to stop them."

"You and me."

"That's right. So now we've got to stop them. Yessiree. Stop them." He paused and the night was totally silent. He moved nearer the window, turned his head and put his ear to it. "They still out there?"

"Huh?"

"Look out and see if they're still out there."

"No."

"They're not?"

"No."

"You don't see them?"

"I don't see nothin."

"Is there a moon?"

"Huh?"

"Is the moon out?"

"I don't know."

If there wasn't a moon maybe Bob couldn't see them now—especially if they were lying down and starting to move closer to the house . . . Or move *around* the house. That was it. They had got scent of the chickens and while he and Bob had been talking they had slipped around the house to the barn.

"They're after the chickens," he shouted, grabbing for Bob again but missing. "Quick. Out back. Hurry," motioning for Bob to follow, going down the hall again to the kitchen, and then in the kitchen stopping beside the old table, his hand touching the familiar corner. "No." In his mind he saw the barn lit by a huge full moon—the barn and its bare yard glowing in an eerie silver-blue daylight, and he saw wolves, so many he couldn't count them, moving slowly toward the barn. "Don't go out there." He spun around. The house was completely silent. Had Bob already gone out the back door . . .? "Bob," he shouted, "Don't . . ."

"Huh?"

He was behind the old man.

The old man turned to him. "Don't go out there. If they get into the chickens, that's just that. There's nothin we can do to stop them if they want to get into the chickens. We can't go out there." He found his chair at the table and sat down. He heard Bob sit down at his place.

"There's just nothin we can do. We'll just have to sit in here and listen to them while they kill the chickens."

They sat waiting.

The silence deepened as if the presence of wolves brought forth an even deeper quality of night, an even more tangible silence than that which the old man knew so well. And he knew the wolves weren't after the chickens. No. If they had been after the chickens they wouldn't have stopped there in the front yard, and they wouldn't have howled. Wolves were too smart for that. If they howled in front of your house, you could know they weren't after your chickens.

He got up from the table slowly. "Come with me," he said and heard Bob get up. They went to the front bedroom, to the big closet there. "Dig around in there in all that stuff and see if you can find the shotgun."

"The shotgun?" he said slowly, with dread. Years ago Avery, whose farm was up the road, had shot crows out of his field next to the old man's place. The noise scared Bob and he ran out and hid in the barn.

"Dig it out. We'll have to shoot it to drive them off."

"I don't know where it is."

"It's in there. You look in there and you find it. You hear me?"

"Yes."

"All right. Do it right now. I'm going to stand here and see you do it."

He started looking. The old man heard him scoot the big trunk and knock over a tin can full of buttons and nails.

"I can't find it."

"Keep looking. I got to have it."

Bob looked a little longer and found it. The old man broke it down. Both barrels were empty. "Now get down and look in them cans and jars for shells. They're red and green and they're about this long."

Bob found a shell, then another. The old man loaded the gun and snapped it shut. "Now we're ready for them."

Bob went to sleep, his snoring resounding loudly from the kitchen table. The old man sat across the table with the gun across his legs. Several times he woke Bob—the snoring made so much noise he couldn't hear anything. The wolves could have come right up on the back porch and stood on the other side of the door and he wouldn't have heard them. But a minute or two later Bob was asleep again and snoring just as loud as before.

The old man got up and went to the back door and opened it. There was the screen door. It wouldn't stop wolves, but it would slow them down enough for the old man to fire both barrels.

He moved his chair over in front of the screen door and held the gun ready and listened to the night. Now the silence wasn't the eerie, awful silence of before. He heard frogs out at the pond, their steady droning dirge rising and falling in slow waves . . .

He must have dozed, then suddenly he was standing with the gun lifted but not all the way to his shoulder, and though the silence was a wall, he was certain that what woke him was the soft tap of claws as a wolf glided across the porch and into the grass.

He swallowed hard, opened his eyes wide, blinked them against the darkness. Breathing lightly with his mouth open so he could hear better, he waited.

They didn't come up on the porch again, but he knew that now they were trotting around out there. He could hear them, though the sound they made was just beneath hearing. He backed away from the screen door and lifted the gun to his shoulder. He aimed it into the large black well where he knew the doorway was, and waited.

Maybe a wolf was at this moment standing there on the other side of the screen door, not panting, its mouth closed, staring at him with large yellow eyes. Fearless, droll, the wolf faced him until the old man's arms grew weak and he had to lower the shotgun and then, moving very slowly—a sudden movement would startle the wolf and it would come through the screen door—the old man swung the wooden door shut.

So weak he couldn't stand, he lay down right there on the floor and slept, not knowing if he would wake.

Bob didn't want to go because he didn't like Avery and his hired hand. He liked Mrs. Avery fine—she didn't make fun of him, and she always gave him something to eat or something to play with. But she couldn't stop her husband and the hired hand from making fun of Bob and playing jokes on him.

To get Bob to go, the old man told him they were taking money to buy candy from Avery.

Bob led him by one hand, and with the other hand the old man balanced the shotgun on his shoulder—and Bob didn't like that either. The old man didn't mention the wolves. If Bob started thinking about the wolves maybe he would know that if they had been there last night, they could still be around somewhere—like in Avery's woods.

As they walked down the dirt road the old man listened for the wolves and listened for the cold silence that followed the wolves wherever they went. And to keep Bob watching for them, he played a game. He told Bob he could eat pancakes for supper if he saw a red bird before they got to Avery's. He kept reminding Bob to look for red birds, and each time after he reminded him the old man could for a while tell Bob was looking all around.

Then the road passed Avery's woods. The old man felt the cool air that hung in the woods no matter how hot a day it was, and his listening went deep into the heavy silence of the woods. He told Bob to look into the woods for red birds, and when they were past it, the old man took a deep breath, and then Bob shouted, "There's one!"

The old man jerked the gun down from his shoulder, dropped it, fell down in the road looking for it, "The gun. Goddamnit, the gun," he shouted, seeing the wolf running down the road toward them, its eyes narrowed tight, its mouth open, a wolf three, four feet tall, its big head two hands wide, and the old man got the

gun and put it to his shoulder and was on his knees aiming the gun and he shouted, "Where. Where. Tell me. Where. My God, boy, *tell* me," by then knowing it was too late, he could see it leaping, and he clenched his teeth for the impact . . .

"It flew off. You scared it and it went off. Did you want to shoot it?"

The old man stood up. After a moment he put the gun on his shoulder. "Do I get pancakes?" Bob said. They walked on down the road.

Avery and the hired hand were out in the fields. Bob was happy about that. Mrs. Avery had them come in the kitchen and eat pie, and the old man told her about the wolves.

He told her Bob had counted them and there were ten.

"You sure they wasn't just somebody's dogs out slippin around?" Mrs. Avery shouted. She and Avery always yelled at the old man and Bob as if they thought they were hard of hearing.

"They were *wolves*," the old man said. "Big. Bigger'n any dog. *I* could tell by the way they was howlin. Chrissake, it's a warning when you hear a wolf howl."

"Well." The old man could tell she was slipping Bob another piece of pie. That was the way she did—just as soon as Bob would finish one piece, she would put another on his plate, and they didn't think the old man knew what they were up to.

"Where'd you say Avery was?"

"He's back out by Higgs' creek."

"By a creek. That don't sound good to me. They follow water, you know."

"Oh, Avery's all right, Ted. The hired hand's out there, and Tige and old Fuss went out with them. They're good huntin dogs. They wouldn't allow wolves to slip up on Avery."

"Dogs is nothin to a wolf. My God, they just *walk* over dogs."

"Well, I'll tell Avery to keep his eyes open . . ." She cut off short and he heard her picking up the things from the table.

"The candy," Bob said.

"Why you just had *pie*, boy," the old man said.

"What's that he said?" Mrs. Avery asked.

"He's just sayin how good the pie was."

"Does he want some more?"

"Oh, no. He's all filled up. And he's havin pancakes tonight for supper, ain't you, boy? He seen him a red bird, he did, so he gets pancakes tonight. That's the way we do things over at our place."

"Well."

The old man and Bob started back up the road and it didn't take nearly as long going back as it had coming.

They fed the chickens and gathered the eggs, and they made sure the coop was shut up tight.

Bob ate his pancakes and went to bed even though the sun was still up—the old man could tell by the birds and the wind.

Along about sundown the old man dozed off sitting in the front room, and

when he woke it was still early in the night. He rose to go in to bed and then he heard something out back.

His heart was in his mouth and it was just like last night all over again, he was just as scared, he felt just as sick, even worse, dead-out disappointed and weary. But then he heard the steps on the back porch and knew they were Bob's—he was coming back in from the privy. "Oh, Bob," he called.

"What?"

"Come in here." He came through the house.

"I don't want you going out to the privy again at night, you hear?"

"Yes."

Bob followed the old man back to the kitchen. "Here's a pan," the old man said. "You use that, you see?"

Bob was silent.

"You pee in this. Then in the morning I'll throw it out. Don't you go outside, you hear? At night them wolves might come around," and as the old man said it, he was pleased by the sound of it—"might come around"—and he knew they wouldn't come back. They had been here once, and that was that. It was one of them one-time things that you can later look back at and shake your head because it was a pretty rough time, but now it's over.

Bob went back to bed and was snoring in a minute, and the old man went up to his room and went to bed.

After a while, though, he got up and put on his overalls and shoes, just in case. Tonight he would sleep with one eye open, just in case. But he was confident the wolves were by now twenty, thirty miles away, and as he walked away into sleep he could nearly see the wolves walking over a hill, far down the road, not one of them looking back over its shoulder at him.

"Oh God, no. Please, no," he whispered and opened his eyes as wide as he could.

They were running around the house.

He heard them running along the side of the house, then their claws clattered as they loped across the front porch, then he heard them cross the back porch.

Slowly he sat on the side of the bed, remembering he had left on his overalls and shoes but now angry with his carelessness, as if his leaving them on had somehow brought them back, and wearily he reached down to the floor, found the gun, and he stood up. The thudding of their feet and the clatter of their claws were now making a din that shook the house, and he walked without aiming himself, though habit led him from the bedroom into the front room, to the closed door. He stood there, a few feet from them, separated by the door, and he pictured their long gray bodies stretching as they raced across the porch, their long red tongues hanging out the sides of their mouths, and he leaned his forehead against the door, as if he would hold it closed that way, and the shotgun was tremendously heavy, and the darkness shifted as if the little house and the flat fields were slowly tilting—everything would soon start slowly sliding—and he tried to lick his lips but his mouth and tongue were dry, and his mouth hung open. He tried to call Bob, but he had no voice, it was buried under

the thudding of their feet, the prancing of their claws on the porch . . .

Then silence.

He waited, thinking perhaps he was asleep, that he had dreamed and was now free from the dream and in the cool lake of sleep.

But he was still standing, his forehead numb against the door, the shotgun slipping from his cold hands.

He straightened up, got a grip on the gun and lifted it, and he turned.

At the rear of the house the back door and the screen door were wide open. Bob had gone out to the privy and he had left both doors open and as the old man stood looking through the house it was a great distance, an endless corridor, and beyond the door, outside the house, he saw a wolf coming toward him, running across the yard toward the back door, its head slowly, steadily bobbing up and down as it ran, though its eyes didn't lose his, as if their eyes were at the ends of a golden wire that was reeling up faster and faster, and then the wolf was on the back porch and across it and through the door, and the wolf was suddenly much larger, enormous, its shoulders brushing both sides of the door, and it was now in the kitchen, its footsteps heavy, and with each long stride the wolf was larger and larger until it was the biggest thing the old man had ever seen, and the old man lifted the gun to his shoulder and pulled both triggers and the shotgun knocked him back as the blast blew out the roof and walls and a bright red mouth of fire gaped through the darkness and the old man floated away into a low moan soft as a howl coming from a mile away and the old man listened to the moaning as he slowly spun away and he vaguely recognized words forming in the moan, words no wolf could ever utter unless perhaps it was a wolf that had shared the darkness of a blind man's life.

With the first warm breeze of morning he left him and went out the front door, not shutting it behind him, and walked down to the road, and out of habit he held his hand out as he always did when Bob led him. Finding the road, he turned to the right and, head lifted, his eyes open, he walked slowly at first, then faster, following the wide smooth rut, and at the bend he followed the turn without once losing the rut. Then further on he was in the coolness where the road passed the woods, and he heard its heavy silence cut by the clear song of a bird, and he stopped. He felt the woods' cool breath on his face, and he stood there so long he felt time passing, felt it by the increasing warmth of the sun.

He turned from the woods and walked on, following the rut, and he heard them trotting along behind him.

When he stopped, they stopped. He knew they would follow him all the way to Avery's, and they did.