

Wilderness

by Dean Ray Koontz, 1945–

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Wilderness is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Chapter 1

My mother claimed that in any mirror I had used, she could see my face rather than her own, my face and my singular eyes, and she could not thereafter have the mirror in the house. She shattered it and swept up the pieces without daring to look at them, because she said that somehow every shard contained a full image of my face, not merely a portion of it. She could hardly tolerate the sight of me even occasionally, and she most often looked past me or at something else altogether when we were in conversation. Consequently, seeing my countenance replicated in a multitude of jagged fragments of silver-backed glass, she nearly came undone.

Although my mother drank and used some drugs, I believed she told the truth about the mirrors. She never lied to me, and in her troubled way she loved me. Because of her beauty, I thought that she, perhaps more than some other women, must have been anguished to have brought into the world someone of my appearance.

Encircled by a vast forest, we lived in a cozy house at the end of a long dirt road, miles from the nearest neighbor. By some means she would never discuss, she'd made all the money that she would need for a lifetime, though in acquiring it, she had also acquired enemies who would have found her had she taken refuge anywhere but in a place as remote as that where she had settled.

My father had been a romantic who loved the idea of love more than he loved her. Restless and certain that somewhere he would find the ideal for which he yearned, he left before I was born. Mother named me Addison. I share her last name, which is Goodheart.

On the night of my birth, which followed a difficult labor, a midwife named Adelaide delivered me in Mother's bedroom. Adelaide was a good country woman and God-fearing, but at the sight of me, she would have smothered me or broken my neck if Mother hadn't been able to draw a pistol from a nightstand drawer. Perhaps because she worried about an attempted-murder charge or because fear motivated her to escape that house under any terms, the midwife swore never to speak of me and never to return. As far as the world was concerned, I was born dead.

I could use only the mirror in my small room, a full-length looking glass on the back of my closet door. Occasionally I stood before it to study myself, though less often as the years went by. I couldn't change my appearance or begin to understand what I might be, and time spent in self-consideration gained me nothing.

As I grew older, my mother found herself less able to tolerate my presence, and I was denied the house for days at a time. She was a woman of hard experience, as

tough as she was lovely, and until I came along, she'd been as fearless as anyone could be without being foolish or reckless. She detested her inability to adapt fully to my presence, her failure to control the anxiety that she could relieve only by banning me from the house now and then.

Soon after sunrise on a day in October, a few weeks after my eighth birthday, she said, "It's so wrong, Addison, and I despise myself for it, but you've got to get out, or I don't know what I'll do. Maybe for just a day, maybe two, I don't know. I'll put the flag out when it's okay for you to come back in the house. But right now *I don't want you near me!*"

For a flag she used a dish towel hung from a hook on a porch post. Whenever I was banned from the house, I checked every morning and again in the late afternoon to see if the flag had been hung, and every time that I saw it, I was elated. For me, at least, loneliness was a terrible hardship, even though it was the basic condition of my existence.

When not permitted in the house—which included the porch—I slept in the yard if the weather was warm. In winter, I slept in the ramshackle garage, either on the backseat of her Ford Explorer or on the floor in a comfortable sleeping bag. Each day she left food for me in a picnic hamper, and I did not want for anything except what mattered most—companionship.

By my eighth birthday, I had spent so much time roaming the forest that it was as much a home to me as the house. Nothing in nature's greenwood feared me or was repelled merely by the sight of me. Because I had no memory of the midwife, I had never seen a human being other than my mother, and she had impressed upon me that such an encounter would almost surely result in my death. But what traveled on wings or four feet did not judge me. Furthermore, I possessed considerable strength for my age, and quickness, and at all times an intuitive sense of where I was in the woods and of how best to navigate there. I wore hiking boots and blue jeans and a flannel shirt, and in one pocket I carried a Swiss Army knife with numerous tools. I was eight but older than eight in many ways, a boy but not a boy like any other.

The most beautiful works of humanity, which I had seen in books of photography, were not as bewitching as any mixed hardwood forest. Oaks and maples and birches and cherry. And there were alders, the humble tree that even experienced woodsmen often fail to notice, so hardy that half the city of Venice, Italy, is still supported by alder piles that have withstood the ceaseless action of the sea for centuries. Wild acacia blooming red in summer. Wake-robins with its enormous white flowers. And all the graceful ferns, holly fern and licorice fern and daintily cut pulcherrimum and ostrich ferns with their fronds arranged like shuttlecocks. Because my mother loved nature and had a library of reference books, I knew the names of things. I loved the forest, and on that early October day, banished from the house, I took refuge in the wilderness, which at that time of year stood ablaze with autumn color.

More than a mile from the house, I came to a favorite place, a formation of limestone sculpted by millennia of weather into soft flowing forms that made it appear to be melting. Perhaps forty feet in diameter, the mass was cored through here and there with natural flute holes leading to hollows within, some of which could be accessed through openings around the base. When the wind was strong

enough and blew from the north, it made a worthy instrument of the limestone and piped from it the most haunting sounds.

I sat on the highest point, seven feet above the forest floor, and offered myself to the sun, which slanted through the overhanging trees in warm golden shafts. The resplendent woods were filled with nearly as much birdsong as color, mostly juncos and orioles, but the hairstreak butterflies that had dazzled with their blue wings were gone with the summer. I mourned the summer that autumn had recently dispatched, for soon the forest would be less welcoming, and many creatures would grow less active or migrate farther south—or die.

When the wolf appeared, I was not surprised, for I had seen a few before, whidding through the trees, so silent that they might have been ghosts of wolves long gone. For years, these mountains had been purged of wolves by people who misunderstood them and wrongly supposed they were a threat to human beings, but they were returning now, as shy as they were magnificent.

Wolves rarely will make eye contact, for they are highly social animals who understand that a direct stare can be a challenge. Their tendency to study other creatures indirectly has been misinterpreted as sly cunning. This one, a large male, emerged from the gracefully arcing fronds of a mass of ferns, almost as if materializing from a spray of green scarves cast down by a magician. He stood before the stone on which I sat and stared up at me, making eye contact for a moment before lowering his gaze submissively.

We didn't fear each other. And as I would learn in the years to come, I would be in far greater danger in the presence of people than I would be alone in the woods with a wolf.

I rose to my feet and peered down at him. He looked directly at me again, and then away. Because I had no one else to talk with, I spoke to him. And why not? The *least* strange thing about me might be that I talked to animals in the absence of human company. "What do you want?"

He circled the stone formation, sniffing the air, staring off into the woods, ears pricked forward. Abruptly, as he faced east, the fur bristled along the back of his neck. He whined with distress and tucked his tail and looked at me and whined again and sprinted due west, into the brush and gone. If he had possessed a voice, he could not have expressed more clearly that a threat approached from the east. He seemed to have sought me out merely to warn me.

Nothing quite like this had happened before. Aside from what Nature had done to me in the womb, aside from making me an outcast and an object of fear and loathing, she had otherwise not harmed me in any way. I had never been bitten by any of her creatures, had not been stung by a bee, had never developed poison ivy or an allergic rash or even simple hay fever. Having done her worst to me, perhaps Nature was so satisfied with the freak she'd made that she felt any further affliction, even so much as a mosquito bite, would be one decorative detail too many, would in some way diminish me. Proud of what, in a dark mood, she'd wrought in me, she resisted the urge to improve upon the perfection of my imperfection.

Certain that the wolf meant to alert me to danger, I was about to climb down from my perch when through the trees I saw a figure, a man wearing a bright red jacket and carrying a rifle. I knew at once that he must be a hunter, though deer

season had not yet begun, which meant that he was a man who didn't play by the rules and, for that reason, might be even more dangerous than other men if he were to get a glimpse of me.

And then at a distance of fifty or sixty feet, he saw me. He called out in an affable fashion, which meant that he hadn't gotten a good look. Before he might see what stood before him, I slid down from the amorphous mass of rock. In panic, I began to flee toward the house, but then he shouted something, and I thought that he must be plunging through the undergrowth in pursuit. The house lay more than a mile away. Instead of bolting, I stooped and scuttled around the limestone formation, putting it between me and him, and when I came to an opening, I entered it on my hands and knees.

Chapter 2

This weather-sculpted stone was also a familiar warren, because I had explored its limited interior architecture as far as it would accommodate me. The tunnel was low and tight and curved to the right, and I crawled through the blinding dark, frightened not just of the hunter but of what might currently be in residence in the chamber at the end of that passageway. In the past, when I'd gone exploring there, I had done so with a flashlight, but I didn't have one this time.

The warren offered a home for various species if they wanted it, including rattlesnakes. In the cool of early October, snakes would be lethargic, perhaps not too dangerous, but although Nature's creatures had spared me all these years, a weasel or a badger or some other formidable animal would be frightened and would feel cornered when I came rushing in upon it. Leading with my face, I was vulnerable, and I shut my eyes tight to protect them from a sudden swipe of claws.

The passageway brought me around a corner and into the cave, roughly six feet in diameter and between four and five feet high. Nothing attacked, and I opened my eyes. A silver dollar of sunlight lay in one corner of the room, having fallen through one of the flutes, and a larger and more irregular pattern of light, about the size of my hand, formed under another flute. The day lacked wind, and quiet pooled in that subterranean lair—and there proved to be no tenant other than me.

I intended to remain there until I felt certain that the hunter had hiked far away. The air smelled vaguely of lime and moldering leaves that had blown in through the larger hole in the ceiling. If I had suffered from claustrophobia, I could not have tolerated such confinement.

At that moment, I couldn't have predicted that before much longer I would have no choice but to find my way out of the mountains or that by night and by arduous travel, surviving multiple attempts on my life, I would journey to a great city, or that I would live secretly for many years deep beneath its teeming streets, in storm drains and subway tunnels and in all the strange byways that exist below a metropolis, or that one winter, while visiting the vast central library after midnight, when it should have been deserted, I would meet a girl in lamplight near Charles Dickens and my world would change, and her world, and yours.

After a few minutes, as I crouched there in the dark between the narrow shafts of light, I heard noises. I thought the badger of my imagination might have become flesh and might be approaching now through the passageway that I had followed. The long claws of a badger's forefeet make it a dangerous adversary. But then I realized that the sounds came from above, carried to me with the sunshine. Boots on stone, a clank of something, a rattle. A man coughed and cleared his throat and sounded very near.

If he hadn't merely glimpsed me, if he had seen me in some detail, either he would have been searching for me aggressively or he would have decided to depart from a forest so queer that it could harbor something like me. Instead he seemed to have settled down for a brief rest, suggesting that he had not gotten a clear look at me.

What I might be, how I could be brought into the world through the agency of a man and woman, I didn't know and thought that I would never know. Much of the world is beautiful, and much more is at least fair to the eye, and what might be ugly is nevertheless of the same texture as everything else and clearly belongs in the tapestry. In fact, on the closest consideration, an ugly spider is in its way an intricate work of art worthy of respect or even admiration, and the vulture has its glossy black feathers, and the poisonous snake its sequined scales.

One thing seemed to suggest that I might have some wisp of beauty to offer the world: the nature of my heart, which remained free of bitterness and anger. I feared, but I did not hate. I knew dread, but I did not judge. I loved and wished to be loved in return. And though my life had been circumscribed, though my experience had been limited by the threats I faced, I was usually happy. In this world, where woe and misery were common, where sometimes darkness seemed about to drown civilization, perhaps a capacity for happiness and hope was beauty of a kind, a small welcome light in the flood.

Waiting in the dark warren, I wondered about the hunter, who was separated from me by a few feet of stone. His life was unimaginable to me, more mysterious than that of a lion on the veld or a polar bear on the arctic ice. The little mountain meadow in which our house stood was so far from the nearest neighbor, so remote, that hunters had not before ventured that far. It seemed unlikely that this man meant to kill a deer and then carry or drag it miles to his vehicle. A disturbing possibility occurred to me. Perhaps he hunted for the thrill of the kill and had no need of venison. If he shot a buck, he might take only the rack of antlers, and if he shot a doe, only the ears and tail. Or maybe he would kill and take nothing away except the memory of killing, in which case, it seemed to me that for the first time in my life, I might be in the presence of true evil.

I recognized the smell of his cigarette because my mother was addicted to her Marlboros. A moment later, the draft brought ribbons of smoke down the larger of the flute holes, suggesting that the hunter must be sitting near it. The pale fumes curled and quested as if they were spirits of the dead seeking a way back into the world of the living. He whistled a tune I didn't recognize, pausing now and then to take another drag on his cigarette.

Other than my mother, he was the first human being that I'd seen. I sat fascinated in the gloom, fearful but intrigued, no less than would have been an astronaut on an alien world encountering for the first time life born around

another star. His interrupted whistle, his occasional throat clearing, a few muttered words, the sounds of him shifting position—all of it made me impatient for a closer look at the man, for even the smallest detail of a hand or of the red coat he wore, because, though he was but human, he was magical to me. Gradually I convinced myself that he must be sitting so close to the flute that *something* of him would be visible, if only a shoe.

Silently I eased to the larger hole and leaned into the light and peered up and was rewarded by the sight of his hand less than three feet overhead. It rested on the stone next to the shaft, the cigarette held between two fingers. The hand was large and work-worn, and suggested that he might be strong, and red-blond hairs like fine copper wire glowed on the back of it.

The draft-drawn smoke willowed down through the hole and across my face, but I didn't worry about coughing or sneezing. I had long experience of my mother smoking, when we would sit reading in the living room, she with her book and I with mine. From the age of six, I had read at a level far beyond my years, and books were a passion we shared. Her back remained nearly always turned to me, so that she could spare herself from the sight of my face, which might cast her into despair and give her a bad case of the mean reds, which were immeasurably worse than the blues, but somehow the graceful tendrils of smoke found my face and fingered it as if to question the reality of my features.

On the rock above, the hunter adjusted his position. His hand disappeared, but as he now sat, as he leaned, humming a tune rather than whistling, I could see part of his face at such a severe angle that it seemed to be of Mount Rushmore proportions: a heavy jaw, the corner of his mouth, the tip of his nose. A portion of the cigarette appeared but not the hand that held it, and he inhaled and blew smoke out in a ring that amazed me. The bluish circle quivered dreamlike, hung for a moment as though it would remain there in perpetuity, but then the moving air distorted it and drew it down into the hole and unraveled it into my upturned face.

He blew another ring. Doing such a thing twice proved intent, which made the second more delightful than the first. Although this trick ensorcelled me, I am all but certain that I made no sound.

Yet suddenly he turned his head and looked down, and because he didn't block the sun, he saw my eye, one of my singular eyes, three feet below, regarding him from within the stone. His eyes were blue, and the one of them aimed at me registered shock and then such pure ferocity, such hatred and horror, that I knew—if ever I had doubted—that my mother's story of the midwife must be true.

Trembling, frightened as I had never been before, I retreated from the light, scooted into the dark, and pressed my back against a wall, grateful that the passageway into my den was much too small to accommodate him.

The crash of the rifle thundered down the hole and echoed around the chamber so unexpectedly that I cried out in surprise and terror. I heard the slug ricocheting wall to wall—*peen peen, peen*—and knew that I would die there, but it spent its energy without finding me. The hunter thrust the rifle farther into the shaft and fired again, and my ears rang with thunderclap and stricken stone and bullet whine.

Chapter 3

Spared again, I knew that I wouldn't be spared forever. On hands and knees, I crawled through the dark, found the way out. The passage seemed to have grown much narrower since I'd entered through it, the stone pressing relentlessly against me as though I would be flattened between strata and fossilized to mystify archaeologists thousands of years hence.

Half deafened by the two reports, I nevertheless heard the panicked hunter shouting outside. His voice came to me by the flute holes through which the wind might pipe on another day. He sounded both enraged and terrified.

The rifle fired again, but the boom was more muffled and seemed to come from a different direction than before. Vibrations translated through the hugging stone as I squirmed along. Another shot and yet another.

I realized what he was doing. He had come off the formation of limestone and had begun to circle it, seeking those holes at its base that might lead to the chamber where I had been when we came eye to eye. There were only five that would accommodate a boy my size, and only three of them bored inward to any extent, and only this one led to a pocket cavern large enough to serve as a refuge. If he fired blindly into some of those openings, he was at risk of being wounded by his own ricocheting rounds, but intuition told me that luck of that kind would not save me from him.

On hands and knees, I hastened through the darkness and followed the curve and saw precious daylight ahead. I almost hesitated, but my sole hope was to get out before he appeared and opened fire. I exited the passageway, expecting a boot in the face, a bullet in the head, but when he fired again, the report came from farther around the limestone outcropping.

I rose to a crouch, considering my options. I was on the west side of the formation and could see the place where the wolf had vanished into the undergrowth. But our house lay in that direction, and it would be dangerous to draw the hunter toward home. To the north, a deer path offered a narrow but clear route into the rising woods, and if I could get to it and disappear along it before he rounded the limestone, I might be safe.

As I sprinted toward that best chance of escape, I heard him shout like a biblical avenger offended by some outrage committed against all that was good and decent—“*Abomination!*”—and knew that he'd seen me. The rifle cracked, and a bullet tore a chunk out of a tree trunk inches from my head. Shaken by the power of my own hard-hammering heart, gasping for breath, I ran as I had never run before, along a trail scattered with coins of sunshine and with a greater currency of shadows.

I knew this portion of the wilderness better than he did. If only I could avoid being shot in the back during the next minute, I believed that I might be able to lose him. This was the next thing to primeval forest, and though he had longer legs than I did and all the firepower, anyone lacking my peculiar intuitive sense of direction might become lost here forever.

When I reached the first turn of the trail without hearing another shot, I assumed that he must be racing after me. I didn't look back but made an even greater effort.

Deer traveled by the way of least resistance, and because their sense of time measured life in four seasons rather than in minutes and hours, they lived without urgency. The hoof-beaten trails were therefore circuitous, and from time to time they branched. I took the first branch, and when that one eventually divided, I followed the new path again, hoping that at one intersection or another, the hunter would go the way I hadn't. By this strategy I reached a crest and descended and crossed a shallow vale and climbed a longer slope to a ridge, where I stopped and turned and looked back and saw no one.

I sat on the rimrock to catch my breath, and the forest below blazed with fire that didn't consume it, each autumn tree a torch of red or orange or yellow, like a vast canvas by an impressionist painter inspired and exhilarated by the quantum nature of all things.

By now I understood that he hadn't shot me in the back on the first uphill leg of the trail because he must have been out of ammunition and needed to reload, which had given me a minute to get ahead of him and out of sight. Having taken a maze rat's route from the limestone formation to this ridge, I was reasonably sure that in an attempt to follow me, he would make more than one wrong choice of trails.

I needed only to catch my breath and then make my way toward home by such indirection that I didn't risk crossing his path as he wandered in search of me. Or so I believed. The rabid ferocity of his reaction had confirmed Mother's warnings, but I didn't yet comprehend the depth of the revulsion that I inspired or how relentless he would be in his determination to kill me.

As I sat gazing down into the serried ranks of trees in their celebratory dress, I realized that if the hunter ascended through them, I might not register his movement until he was close. In that festival of color, the numerous red-leafed maples redefined his red hunting jacket as a kind of camouflage.

Chips of bullet-fractured rimrock sprayed over me simultaneously with the crack of the rifle. I rolled away across the narrow ridgetop, down the next slope, onto all fours, onto my feet, and plunged through lashing feather grass, no deer trail apparent. I made it to the tree line, into shade and ferns, blundering through undergrowth. The hunter obviously had expert tracking skills, and I was leaving in my wake a path of disturbed and broken foliage that any amateur could have followed.

Chapter 4

Out of the undergrowth, onto a deer path once more, I quickened down through a forest dressed in a million Joseph's coats, skidding where the fallen leaves underfoot were damp, no longer trusting that switching to intersecting trails would thwart my pursuer, seeking the most direct route to the floor of the next hollow.

In previous outings, I had never gone farther than this, but I knew that at the bottom a stream wound through the hollow and might offer me a way to delay the hunter or foil him altogether. I thrashed through a sudden richness of painted ferns with purple-tinged, gray-green fronds and came to shallow water flowing lazily.

On her trips to the nearest town, my mother bought my clothes and always furnished me with the best waterproof hiking boots each time that I outgrew the former pair. Although I'd never tested their reliability this boldly, I waded into the water, which was three or four inches deep, and proceeded upstream. After splashing twenty yards or so, I looked back. Through the clear and sparkling currents, I saw my footprints in the compacted silt of the streambed. The water flowed so slowly that it might need an hour to erase the tracks I'd left, but my stalker was only a few minutes behind me.

Shaken, I hurried forward and soon came to a section of the stream paved with water-smoothed pebbles, on which I left no marks that I could see. Here and there were points along the bank where I might exit onto stone, leaving no footprints or disturbed vegetation. I took the third of those and hurried into the trees and once more uphill.

I proceeded now into new territory, not sure what I might find, and I was very afraid. As I climbed the slope, I told myself that I wasn't just eight years old, that I was going on nine, that I might be a boy, yes, but not an ordinary boy, that I was strong and quick beyond my years, that already I could read at the level of a sixteen-year-old, which wouldn't save me in this situation, but which nevertheless suggested that my chances of outwitting the hunter were much better than those of other boys my age.

And maybe my appearance could be turned to my advantage. The hunter had expressed his loathing—"Abomination!"—but I had also seen terror in the blue eye when first he'd met my stare through the limestone flute. At some point his fear might get the better of him, and he might turn back.

As I ascended the wooded slope, the autumn trees lost some of their radiant color, and the scattering of sunshine faded from the forest floor. I peered up through the lacework of branches and saw that gray clouds had come in from the east and swallowed the morning sun. Cloud cover, too, might be to my advantage, for surely the hunter would find it more difficult to read my tracks in a forest that had fallen into shadow.

The woods ended just past the crest of the slope, and beyond lay a broad meadow, at the far end of which stood a couple of ramshackle buildings: an old single-story house long shorn of paint and with no window glass intact, and what might have been a stable, where now the roof sagged like the tortured spine of a swaybacked horse. A few canted sections of split-rail pasture fencing still stood, but most had years earlier collapsed into the knee-high wheat-gold grass, which swayed ever so slightly, as if it were seaweed moved by deep ocean currents. My passage through the grass would be as obvious as if I had marked my way with a can of Day-Glo spray paint.

Staying within the forest, I circled the meadow, weaving among trees as fast as I could, acutely aware that the hunter might arrive at any moment. My initial intention was to navigate a semicircle to the woods beyond the house. When I

arrived behind the structure, however, I discovered that the tall grass gave way to a short, dead, matted sedge of some kind that suggested this side of the meadow had once been much wetter but had dried out. The dense surface resembled a Japanese tatami and seemed unlikely to show tracks of any kind. Nearing the end of my resources and not certain how much longer I could continue fleeing through the forest, on impulse I crossed to the house.

The cupped boards of the porch steps protested, and half a dozen barn swallows exploded from their mud-cup nests under the eaves and arced up to roost for the moment on the rusted tin roof. There was no back door anymore. I entered the dark interior in hope of finding a good hiding place.

Even when new and painted and home to someone, the structure had been humble. Long abandoned, it groaned and creaked with my passage, and though it wouldn't collapse on me, it would announce my presence to the hunter if I so much as shifted my weight slightly from one foot to the other.

In the front room, the gray light of the clouding day came ash-pale through the glassless windows and through another opening where the front door should have been, and I narrowly avoided stepping into a hole where a floor plank had gone missing. The house had been built off the ground, on a series of piers, perhaps because the meadow had once flooded in heavy rains, and underfoot lay an enclosed crawlspace about two feet deep.

The house offered fewer places of concealment than I had hoped, and I was about to retreat when, through a window, I saw the hunter moving just within the shadowed woods, following the very route by which I had circled the meadow. I had no choice now but to hide, no option but the crawlspace.

Because they were loose, some of the twelve-inch-wide planks rattled underfoot more than others. The nails that once secured them had rusted away. At the east end of the room, near the wall, I lifted aside one plank and then another and squeezed down between the floor joists into a realm of spiders and centipedes and their kin. I pulled the first plank into place with little effort. I had some difficulty manipulating the remaining one through the twelve-inch gap, but then it settled where it belonged, and I lay on my back in darkness with the sudden thought that I had just constructed my coffin.

Chapter 5

A wilderness can be a vast tract of forest or jungle largely devoid of the works of humankind. Or a desert so arid that not even cactus will grow. Or a continent of ice and snow. A crawlspace under a small house was not of sufficient size to be a wilderness, but I found it as forbidding and cheerless as Antarctica.

Only dim, gray light found its way through the space where a plank was missing on the farther side of the front room, and when I turned my head to look between the piers in that direction, the pale glow shaped itself to resemble a human-size cocoon. I knew it could be no such thing, but when I squinted to clarify my vision, I thought I could see the spinner's pattern, the winding silken filaments woven as

tight as any cloth made on a loom, and within that faintly radiant and translucent form a shadow of something completing metamorphosis and waiting to be born. The imagination can be a kind of wilderness, too, in fact a wasteland, if you allow it to take you into one bleak and grotesque place after another, for you can imagine yourself into all kinds of paranoid delusions and even into madness.

I turned away from that far light and stared at the rough plank inches from my face, though I couldn't see it in the gloom. I waited and hoped the hunter would think that the abandoned buildings were too obvious and too small for me to seek refuge in either.

From the back of the house, a board creaked as he set foot on the porch. He proceeded cautiously, trying to be quiet but betrayed repeatedly by warped and weathered wood. When he came into the front room, the planks groaned as well as creaked, further evidence that he was a large man, and the loose boards rattled against the joists.

Near the center of the room, he stopped and stood and remained very still. Because he didn't even shift his weight, the silence was complete. Certain that he must be listening for me, I took shallow breaths and only through my mouth, and the dank air tasted sour with mold and wood rot, and I wanted to gag, but I didn't.

After a minute, he surprised me both by speaking and by what he said. "When I was fifteen, I was already humping meth and PCP and slicker stuff on the street, running the shit for a nasty bastard named Delehanty. There was this turf war, there's always a turf war in that business. These two guys brace me in an alley, mean to beat the crap out of me, take my merchandise, send Delehanty a message. I kill them both. I kill them, cut off their ears, take the ears to Delehanty. He promoted me. The killing meant nothing, nothing except because of it I moved up in the organization and lived a lot better."

He wasn't talking to himself. His words were meant for me, he knew that I hid nearby, and because no other place existed in which to hide, he believed that I had gone under the floor.

As far as I knew, only a loose plank offered an exit from the prison to which I had committed myself. If a hinged panel or sliding door existed somewhere along the perimeter of the building, I would never find it in the dark, not with all the supporting piers to make my way between. And the crawlspace wasn't deep enough to allow even a boy like me to crawl. I would have to turn facedown and squirm like a serpent. Anyway, escape was impossible, because the moment the hunter heard me moving, he could stand over me, fire through the floor, and kill me.

"I long ago stopped counting the people I put away," he said. "Some I was told to waste, some it was suggested I might want to chop on general principles, others I did all on my own hook. One way or another, it's always for money. To take from somebody else or to be sure they don't take from me. I don't try to justify it. No need to justify it. I didn't make the world how it is. It's brutal, and you do what you need to do to get along."

As he spoke, he never moved. He remained rooted to the floor, which I took to mean that even as he talked, he listened. And when he paused between portions of his monologue, he remained especially alert for the faintest telltale sound. I

wondered why he didn't just walk the room, shooting at random, until my scream confirmed a hit.

"I chopped this couple in their seventies. This is in Florida, I'm on vacation, but I'm never on vacation if I see an opportunity. They're driving this boat of a Cadillac, and she has all this jewelry. I see them in a restaurant, and I *know* these two are a major score. You have to go with your instincts sometimes. So I leave before them and then follow them, and they've got this really bitchin' house on the back bay, but it's still daylight and I need dark."

In my dank and odorous refuge, a spider or something very like it settled on my forehead and for a moment trembled but didn't move, as if it anticipated danger. But then it began to explore, crawling across my brow toward my left temple.

"So I come back in the evening, and I'm figuring to go right to their front door and talk my way in with one spiel or another. You'd be surprised what stupid crap your average marks will believe, want to believe, even from a total stranger at their door. But there's a gate at one side of the place, it isn't locked, so I follow a walkway to the back, just scouting the place. And there they are, sitting on the patio in the dark, with just a couple of candles, looking at the lights on the bay and drinking martinis. My piece has a muffler, so I shoot him dead in the lounge chair, no one can hear. Before the old bird gets out a word, I slam the pistol upside her head and drag her through the sliding door into the house."

As the spider quested along my left temple and down my cheek, I decided that the hunter must not have much ammunition left. If he possessed only a few rounds, he couldn't find me the easiest way, by shooting up the entire floor. He needed to unsettle me with his tales of murder, work on my nerves until unintentionally I revealed myself. Toward that end, the spider seemed determined to assist him, and it crept toward the corner of my open mouth, through which I had been breathing quietly. I pressed my lips shut, and the spider crawled upon my chin.

"Me and the old bird went through the house room by room, so she could show me where they stashed their best stuff. She kept pleading poor, and I busted her up pretty good to make her talk. It turned out funny, a real joke on me. Her jewelry was all fake, and the antiques were lousy reproductions, and about all they had after the latest stock-market bust was a stupid pension and the bitchin' house, where they could still live because of a reverse mortgage. So I waste the two of them *and* an evening of my vacation, and all I get out of it is six hundred twelve dollars in cash and this crystal paperweight from the old man's desk, which I kind of liked but now I don't know what the hell ever happened to it."

As the spider ascended my right cheek, doggedly circumnavigating my face, I listened to the silence of the hunter patiently listening for me. The eight-legged explorer detoured to my nose, and I thought it might be curious about my nostril, which would be too much for me to endure. But as the silence held, the spider moved toward my right eye, where perhaps it would mistake my lashes for another of its kind.

When I heard a footfall and the protest of ancient wood, I thought that I must have made a sound, that the hunter was on the move at last. But then another man said, "Oh, hey," and my stalker seemed to turn in place, surprised by the voice. He opened fire, three quick rounds. The scream lasted only a moment,

though it was terrible even in its brevity. A weight crashed to the floor and rattled the planks.

“Who the hell are *you?*” the hunter asked, and I supposed that he must be speaking to whomever he had shot. Curses unspooled from him, an obscene rant that sounded to me like the panicked profanity of a terrified man.

As the spider crept toward my ear, I dared to raise a hand to my face, offering it another option. My leggy visitor didn’t frighten away but quivered delicately from fingertip to fingertip and then down onto my palm.

“Whatever you are,” the hunter said, speaking now to me, “I’m gonna get you, I’m gonna kill you, I’ll come back and chop you good.”

The merest glimpses that he’d had of me had filled him with rage and hatred, had inspired violence, but evidently had robbed him of the courage to confront me without plenty of ammunition. He fled the ruined house, his footfalls thundering off the planks, the wood cracking under his plunging weight. Maybe he stumbled, and I’m sure he fell against a wall, judging by the way the place shook, and he cried out like a terrified child. Cursing once more, he righted himself and found the door and left.

In the stillness, I lowered my hand to the earthen floor of the crawlspace, and after some fascination with my thumb, the spider grew bored with me and went elsewhere in the darkness.

Chapter 6

Because I am not one to take chances, I remained on my back in the crawlspace, listening, waiting, thinking.

That long-ago day, when I was only eight, I didn’t arrive at this realization, but in time I came to see that of the many kinds of wilderness, the human heart can be the bleakest and the most hostile. Many hearts contain great beauty and the smallest measure of darkness. In many other hearts, beauty brightens only remote corners where otherwise darkness rules. There are those in whom no darkness lies, though they are few. And others have purged from their inner selves all light and have welcomed into themselves the void; their kind are to be found everywhere, though they are often difficult to recognize, for they are cunning.

In the years following my escape from the hunter, I encountered the best and worst of humanity, in days of much peril but also days of triumph, through years salted with much grief but also sweetened with joy. My life would be constrained by the horror and fierce rage that my appearance inspired, but I would know peace as well as fear, tenderness as well as brutality, and even love in a time of cruelty. I will not say that my life would prove to be the strangest in a world replete with strangeness; but I would never have reason to complain that my life was ordinary.

At last, convinced that the hunter had gone away, I slid aside the two loose planks and rose from the crawlspace. I brushed off my clothes and wiped my face

as if to gather the spider silk with which my imagination had festooned my features.

I saw the body lying just inside the front door, the pooled blood more black than red in the dim light. Although I wanted to exit by the back door and avoid the dead man, I knew that it was incumbent upon me to look into his face and bear witness.

Apparently he had been a hiker, one who loved nature and the mountains. He dressed the part, and he carried a large backpack. He might have been in his late twenties, a curly-haired man with a well-trimmed beard. His eyes were open wide, but as grotesque as I might be, even I couldn't frighten the dead.

I had seen just two living people in all my eight years, and this was the first that I had seen dead. He hadn't willingly offered his life for mine, but fate had spared me by taking him. Perhaps he'd heard the hunter's voice but not his words, or if he had heard nothing, then he might have come into the old house for no reason but curiosity. Each life is a spool of thread that unravels through the years, and it is by a thread that we are so perilously suspended.

I thanked him and closed his eyes and could do nothing more for him than leave him there to the attention of Nature, that she might take him unto herself and be one with him again, which is the way of all flesh.

If the hunter had lingered, he would have by then attacked me. Nevertheless, I didn't walk boldly through open grass, but returned to the woods and circled the meadow with caution. Clouds masked the entire sky, and in the dismal light, the trees no longer blazed with color but seemed to have faded a bit more to brown than they had been when I'd set out that morning. The sycamores, quicker than some other species to drop their foliage, were nearly stripped, black-limbed and stark against the sky.

By a somewhat different route, I hiked toward home, wondering if the hunter would indeed return and take the forest from me, so that I would belong neither in my mother's house nor in the wild. I decided not to seek sadness by dwelling on that prospect, and soon I felt as welcome in the woods as ever.

When I found the wolf waiting on the rimrock as I crested the ridge, I felt certain that he was the same one who had warned me of the hunter.

We stared at each other for a long moment, and then I said, "If you would like some chicken, come home with me, and I'll give you a nice dinner."

He cocked his head to the left, then to the right, as if I were a puzzle to him.

"Shall we be friends?" I asked, crouching and holding out one hand to him.

Perhaps because he was of the true wilderness and I was of two worlds, he didn't approach me. But when I rose and started down into the trees, he followed. Eventually we came to a stream different from the one that I had walked earlier, a lively one that chortled over a stony course. I knelt at the water's edge and drank directly from the flow until my thirst was slaked.

The wolf stopped to watch me. Only when I had finished and had gotten to my feet did he go to the water and lower his muzzle and drink upstream from me, as if he understood the health protocols of refreshment in the wilds.

We set out once more. Although the day was cooling and lacked sunshine to celebrate, birds sang us toward home. After a while, when I glanced back to see if I still had a companion, I discovered that a second wolf had joined the first. Their

heads were high, and they wagged their tails, and their smiles in no way suggested that their intentions toward me were the same as those of the storybook wolf toward Red Riding Hood. I had no fear of them, and I continued on, and when next I looked back, they were three.

By the time we reached the tree line beyond which lay the yard around my mother's house, the pack had grown to five. Now they loped past me and onto the grass. One of them executed a play bow before another, and the bow was reciprocated, and soon they were tumbling together and pretending to bite, chasing this way and that. One of them turned a hundred eighty degrees on one leg so that the chased became the chaser, and they displayed with every move a grace that enchanted me.

I had never seen anything like this before, and I felt that it was a performance for my benefit. I stood watching with delight and knew intuitively that I was not invited to participate. After a while they tired themselves and retreated to the edge of the forest and stood there staring at me, their eyes warm yellow in the dreariness of the day. I believed their play had a purpose greater than mere frolic, but I had no idea what it might mean.

Tongues lolling, flanks heaving, they turned away from me and faded into the trees, quite like the wolves of sleep might wither into the vaporous forest in a dream. I stood alone.

I intended to go directly to the weathered building that served as a garage and see what my mother had left there for me in a picnic hamper, but then I saw the flag—the dish towel—hung from the hook on a front porch post. My banishment had come to an end much sooner than I expected.

In spite of the terror of the day and my sorrow that the hiker had come to his death that I might live, elation swelled in me. My mother suffered from anxiety in my presence and sometimes became so despondent that even drink and drugs were slow to rescue her from depression. But in the end, however, I was her child, and she loved me in her way. If she could seldom bring herself to touch me and even more seldom look at me directly, she nonetheless made a place for me in her life.

To that point, my greatest fear had been that my mother might grow ill or die by accident, leaving me alone. Even a freak such as I could dread solitude in a world of wonder made for sharing. As I headed toward the small but beloved house, I would soon begin to learn that our greatest fears are seldom realized, because the world is a machine that produces endless surprises and mysteries layered on mysteries—and shocks that either temper or shatter the spirit. My life was not to be this house or this forest, but instead the wilderness that is any city and the world beneath the city, where we few, we hidden, live in secret.
