

In the Woods II

by David Ackley

On the trek into the pond they were planning to stock, lugging pack baskets that contained 5 gallon cans of cold water and a few hundred baby brook trout, they talked, stopping to set down the baskets, and have a drink of water, or in short breathers at the end of a steeper pitch. When they paused to sit and eat their sandwiches, Coudreau told Spook about his neighbor, an old lady who lived up the road from his trailer on Old County Road. He'd dropped in on her just after he'd moved there from the house his ex-wife had got.

The neighbor was a little woman, grey-haired, who'd never lost the French-Canadian accent, long-widowed, living alone. Bony, bent-over so that she had to look up at him from under her eyebrows like a four legged animal. At first she wouldn't open the door more than a crack, until she saw the uniform. Then she stuck her head out to look at his truck and and said, " You see him, dat *bete sauvage*? You get him, yes?"

Inside, the place was dark, with rough board floors, and a paper patch on one window pane. Two rooms, one her kitchen and bedroom at once, the other he didn't know what, never saw it. She cooked and heated with an old iron, woodburning stove, and more or less forced him to sit at a rickety wooden table with two chairs, while she made him tea.

She and her husband, a paper mill worker, had bought the place many years back, just the shack and a bit of land, all she ever had.

The one who had her terrorized was a nephew or grand-nephew, a great big fella who had a sheet long as your shirt, in and out for everything you could name, including a stretch up to Thomaston for assault with intent, and so many stints in county for D&D they had a cell reserved for him.

She never knew when he was out, until he came roaring at her door in the dark of night. She had to let him in or he'd have broken

it down. He wore a big knife on his belt that he ate with and laid on her table. He took her money, loaves of bread, any little souvenir he could sell, her fry pan. She never knew when he was coming back, so she lived awaiting him in endless fright, her days bare relief from the shuddering sleepless nights.

I don't guess she could move into town?

"They sweat blood for that place. It's all she's got. And she's just about as scared of going into the county home. You know how they are about that." Coudreau shook his head. "Fucker could be anywhere out there. Or not. I try to stop by when I can, give her a little relief by just setting with her for a bit. Not a lot you can do."

Short of ambushing him and dropping him in a crevice somewhere, Coudreau was probably right. He tried to imagine a life that was nothing but fearful waiting surrounded by the trees and their shadows, but his mind refused to stretch that far.

