

The Warden

by David Ackley

After the last surgery, he'd gone back out with MacNeil, an old timer assigned to the south coastal suburbs to ease him through his last few years to retirement, Spook enduring the riding around and the biweekly physical therapy in hope of leaving such places behind. Most of the open land in this part of the state was under contract or pavement; they rode past thickets of real estate signs in MacNeil's cruiser, pausing for the roadkill which they tallied and pulled or scraped each day from the public thoroughfare. Every field paved, every species carrion; the carnage evoked trench warfare.

Once with Spook behind the wheel they were northbound on the interstate near Gray, carried along on the evening commute, when a skipper—a yearling whitetail—jumped a fence into the melee. It had come through the backyard of a row of duplexes like somebody's runaway pet, with that stifflegged bounce nearly over the hood of a red Subaru, nearly under the great, chrome bumper of a semi, across the median and into the flow south, the lanes so close-packed they resembled three trains on parallel tracks; in the rearview he'd rooted the deer across two of the three lanes when it went airborne, pinwheeled nose over tail in a high arc, then disappeared beyond the staccato flash of metal.

In the mirror no one had even hit their brakes, but by the time they got to an exit and turned back, two cars had pulled over. The first on the scene, a bulky man in a dark suit, was backing toward the open hatch of his SUV, dragging the deer by its hindquarters, its chin plowing a small furrow in the gravel. When they came toward him, he paused still gripping his trophy, and gave them a look that solicited approval. Spook grinned and jerked his thumb, dismissing him empty-handed. MacNeill clipped a tag to the skipper's ear.

They donated the meat to the Little Sisters of Charity in Gray. "Perfect hide," said MacNeil a little wistfully when that had to be given away as well. "No marks, soft as butter. Make a nice glove."

After Spook got away the time and place resided for him in the driver's look, pleading indulgence for some strain of avarice detached from need or even desire, not even really his, but of the place itself, like the low charred haze over the cities and the sweetish smell of carrion baking into the pavement.

The beat they gave him happened to be the one adjoining Coudreau's in the crumpled terrain of the state's western foothills, sub-boreal forest insistently logged for pulp but still wild enough to suit. Coudreau seemed cheered by his arrival. He'd been covering both beats since Red Lovett had retired and was drawn pretty fine. Once Spook had got his wife and daughter settled and introduced himself at the town and county offices, Coudreau took him around, following obscure back roads between their beats. Coudreau had grown up nearby and had the local's feel for the countryside, negotiating the twisting, narrow blacktops at speed with one hand on the wheel, occasionally pointing out a honey hole as they passed a small trout stream. Spook pictured a boy carrying a fish pole and a can of nightcrawlers, coming home with a brookie half the length of his leg that would send his old man cursing out the kitchen door.

On the third day they were on Spook's side, driving up a mountain road gouged by logging trucks, freeze cycles and indifferent repair. Midway through a curve, Coudreau swung to the shoulder and shut off the engine. A small sign on a tipped stake, said, like a terse directive, *Overlook*.

They got out and walked to the edge, where a steep pitch of parched grass and scrub fell to a ledge which cut away to the lake, stilled by distance, a thousand feet below. Windrows seamed the blue surface. Below them, the minute silhouette of a raptor grew larger as it rose on a thermal, then stroked once and banked down and away. A white ribbon, the wake of an invisible boat, was towed deliberately across the blue. From the distant shore, hills rolled

north, shifting from blue to slate to smoke that merged with the sky. Over all was an immense quiet. He tried to take it all in. Beyond sight to the north his beat came to an end in a jig northeast along the Quebec border to a line due east through several of the unorganized townships—unsettled places, mere formal designations on the map of the northern timberland. He didn't even own the house he lived in but all that could be seen in every direction, and a good deal more, was in effect, his.

He looked at Coudreau and laughed.

"Bunch of it, ain't they?" Coudreau said. "Takes a while to get to know, I tell you what. Put two armies up here and they'd waste the goddam war looking for each other." He could have meant the old forest wars centuries gone, the long whispered trek through wood and bog, the quick bloody ambush and harried retreat...

"Wonder we ever catch nobody," he added—an excuse lying in wait for a complaint, it sounded like.

Coudreau had gotten on as one of the last few under the old standard, before a bachelor's degree became mandatory and a high school diploma, experience in the woods, and a passing score on the test boosted by a few points of veteran's preference was enough to make you a warden. He was divorced and lived alone. He and Spook had both grown up on the same kind of tilted, rock-grubbing farm that had sent him into the Air Force and Spook off to the university, neither with much more in mind than escape. After a second hitch,

Coudreau had taken his discharge and come back home to a lathe in a turning mill making dowels and mop handles until the warden's job came along. Spook had graduated in Forestry and after a few years timber cruising for a paper company north of Bangor, decided marking stands for pulpwood had him in the right place for the wrong purpose. Though they were about of an age, he had five years as a warden on Coudreau. They talked with shared loathing of indoor jobs they'd had, like ex-cons sharing stories of life on the block.

Near the end of the week they were up on 49, one of the townships on Coudreau's beat, when he turned the truck onto a

logging road, which, from the dust on the leaves and crisp tread marks in the dirt, had seen recent and regular use. "I been saving this," was all Coudreau offered. He drove it fast and familiarly, gravel pinging off the fender wells as they followed long curves and shallow undulations through clearcuts filled with slash.

Around a quick bend, Coudreau grunted, "Oh shit," and fought the pickup to a slewing halt. "Somethin' new."

A double strand of barbed wired, rigged just below bumper level had been strung across the dirt road. On the right side it could be opened and closed—assuming you knew it was there or had seen it in time. Spook got out to unhook it and left it aside and they drove on through, Coudreau drawing his right hand across his forehead for the close call.

A half mile beyond they broke starkly into a clearing where the ground was hardpacked and bare; a two story dwelling, a hunting camp with ambitions, had been left partly covered in Tyvek, partly in unfinished plywood. Along its front, there were eight or ten vehicles, mud-runner pickups, a listing Dodge van, a polished black Harley, dirt bikes; even an army-surplus deuce and a half still bearing its battalion insignia.

Two shirtless men sat on a sagging porch peering at the pistol one of them held; when Coudreau shut off the engine, they stood without moving closer and the one with the handgun tucked it into the back pocket of his jeans. Three others drifted from inside, while another, taller and fatter than the rest, came around the corner cradling a rifle and approached the wardens with a spew of cheerful curses. Black curls covered his ears and he had a splayfooted rocking gait and the demeanor of a large and lethal boy.

"What's this?" Spook asked. "The hole-in-the-wall gang?"

"Workin' on it," Coudreau said. They slid out of the cab and stood beside the truck. Two young women in halters and shorts had appeared on the porch.

"Whatchoo doin' up here, Virge?" The rifle-toting greeter shouted from six feet away. "Come to fuck me over again?"

Coudreau's head jerked from side to side, discomfited, overemphatic.

"Nothin' like that, Joe. Nothin' like that. Just passing by, is all."

Somewhere in back, roused dogs bawled, hounds for the most part, though silent among them were likely pit bulls, with raw pit slashes. The breeze carried a rank streamer of dog shit. There was the pulse of a diesel generator; lights in the windows, the blare of a tv. There'd be a freezer, with haunches of frozen venison, ready for sale.

The other men had moved closer, young studs in dirty jeans with pistol butts overhanging their pockets. The women watched from the porch, hip-slung, arms folded across their breasts, their faces in the shadow of the porch roof.

"Who's your friend, Coudreau? That Spook Wilder hisself? Heard you was out this way." The voice came from the middle of the half-circle they'd formed around the side of the truck body where Spook and Coudreau rested, a neat, compact man, with short hair, a new white t-shirt and immaculate black jeans. His face was smooth, as featureless as an eggshell with a low, downturned nose and a compressed slit of a mouth. The eyes that slid across Spook's were flat, indifferent.

"Tell him what you done to me, Virge," the fat boy demanded.

"Caught Little Joe redhanded, didn't you, Virge? Got him six months down the county."

"Hell, no-one was going to overlook that," Coudreau appealed to Spook. "They was half a moose in his pickup."

He wondered why Coudreau was apologizing. The smooth face said to him, "You ever catch up with the one put that hole in your leg?"

"Not yet."

"They say you crawled three mile out of them woods bleedin' the whole way."

"That so? Who says that?" He let his eyes wander the compound as if the conversation was of no interest. A shed leaned against the

side of the house and there was another structure about thirty feet from where they stood, something knocked together from eight foot pallets and rough boards in a kind of enclosure.

"Them." The man laughed without much mirth.

"I don't recall seeing them, but if that's what they say..."

"They say you can track anything anywhere. Track a cat up a stone wall. Found that sugar got lost up to Baxter and brung her in alive."

"Movie Star!" Joe offered.

"Teevee, you dumb shit. Kim Melaney, that's on that *Hope Reborn* in the afternoon." His attention returned to Spook. "Downstater'd get lost pissin' by the turnpike." Downstate seemed to take in most of the continent to the south.

As if to confirm the obvious, he added, "You fucked her, right? I mean you *did* fuck her? That's way too sweet to pass up. Fact, I might of kept her. Put her in a pen like my wolf over there. Feed her right. Take her out for a ride couple times a day." His friends were amused.

"Wolf." Spook unfolded his arms. "I'd like to see that." He ambled through the encircled men toward the pallets nailed together in a rectangle, about eight feet tall and open to the sky. He looked through a crack and when his eyes adjusted to the shadow saw the dark form curled in one corner, the yellow eyes looking through the walls, through him to something beyond.

The same voice, now at his shoulder, confided, "Prob'ly aint no wolf. Prob'ly German Shepherd or somethin' like that. Just some old stray wandered up this way."

"Like one of those old strays Jib Gentry was breeding from the stock they trapped up near Chibougamou."

The man shrugged. Spook walked back to the truck, nodded to Coudreau and got in.

"Good seein' you boys," Coudreau said, leaning forward behind the wheel so they could see his face.

"You too, Virge," the man said, looking at Spook through the open side window. "Come on up anytime. Bring all your friends. We'll get

down to see you one of these days. Still out to Coventry Road in that double-wide? Old lady still living in the house?"

They'd know where he lived as well. He applied that smooth face to a form moving up through the wild grass to the yellow house at a time when Danielle and Lila would be alone—after school, making brownies in the spare little kitchen, maybe—and he miles away as usual, off somewhere in the wild. His leg, with its own reasons, endorsed a pre-emptive barrel crease across that incurved nose but Coudreau had started the truck, gunned the engine and they were already pulling away; in the side mirror he watched them watching the truck recede.

On the ride out, little was said. Coudreau lit one cigarette from the butt of the other. They stopped so Spook could clip off the barbed wire trap and throw it in the truck bed, knowing it would be replaced before the day was out.

If Coudreau had asked, he wouldn't have minded helping clean them out of there, but he didn't want to insult the other warden by offering. You were put out where you might be the only law worth the name for a hundred miles and expected to handle whatever came up. Asking help from those who had their own problems could be a bad career move. As Coudreau had said, guns and grudges came with the territory. Maybe he'd hoped showing Spook would be worth something, but the boys up on 49 weren't impressed. If Coudreau was going to go poking nests, he'd best be ready for what came flying out.

The man's name was Pud Lester, the camp a leasehold on Worldwide's timberland where there had been sporting camps close held by families for generations. There was no open paper on Lester except for a restraining order taken out by an ex-girlfriend. There'd been a few moving violations, one simple and one aggravated assault, both filed when the complainants backed down. Lester's sporting licenses were clean though he'd been hunting—and tagging deer—since he was eleven. Finding nothing in the paper trail, Spook dropped the matter and though he and Coudreau were often in

touch over the following year, the encounter on 49 only came up once more and then just in passing.

It was some months before Pud Lester's name came up again. Spook was on the southern end of his beat, in a mill town with a state two-lane doubling as the main drag. A few peeling stores leaning together were flanked by faded double deckers with shades but no curtains in the windows, making up the town's center, which tailed away in a string of several trailers across from the planing mill that more or less accounted for the place.

Behind an outbuilding was the tallest visible structure, a rusting water tower whose tank bore the usual class numerals in red paint and the shadows of previous years under patches of gray primer. He got the story from the owner of a hardware store, a wiry man in an old fatigue cap with the three faded stripes of a buck sergeant:

One hot Saturday a few summers back, a fellow name of Billy Navins charged out of his trailer with his deer rifle, a box of shells, and a fifth of Wild Turkey and climbed to the roof of the mill where he began sighting in the rifle on various targets of opportunity, being the display windows of this same store and Claire's fabric store beside it; glass insulators on the crosstrees of telephone poles, dissolving in a satisfying cascade of green splinters; the mirror of a parked car; the stop sign for the one cross street; a cat moving across so fast it seemed to outleg the bullet. Baking in the heat, the town laid low, listening in silence for the retort of the rifle and the intermittent howl of Billy Navins, cursing his wife (They thought she must have been disposed of on his way out the door.), his super at the mill, the dealer who'd repoed his pickup, this shithole where he'd been born, raised and stuck his whole fuckin' useless life.

Law? Christ, the nearest statie was down to Sabbathday Falls, eighty mile south and Red Lovett was up by the Quebec border. One of the shots had done in the phones. Sure they had a town constable--part-time, paid from the moving violations he wrote up, never seen a problem he couldn't avoid.

In the end it was Pud Lester who took it on himself to climb the water tower, his scoped Remington Two-Two-Three slung, climbed the ladder to the catwalk in plain sight, if Navins had thought to turn around and look, which he didn't. On the catwalk Lester moved around from the off side, sat back against the tank, put the crosshairs on Billy's left earhole and with no more forethought than you'd give a dumpster rat touched off a 125 grain copper point that made hardly a mark going in and removed the offside of his skull coming out.

"Like you'd slabbed off the right side of his head with a ax. And brains—lord. You wouldn't figure the damn fool for half what was sprayed all over that roof." The storekeeper removed his cap by the bill and rubbed his forehead hard with the same hand.

Afterwards, whether Lester should be charged became the hot question. Billy's widow, loud and alive as ever, his few friends and the young minister pushed hard for satisfaction from the law. Aside from Billy's, the only blood spilled was from a slight cut on Claire's wrist that owned the fabric shop from when her window fell in on her. Otherwise, just a lot of shattered glass and punctured tin, for which crimes Billy Navins had been executed on the spot.

"Call that justice?" roared the grieving, who swore her husband couldn't shoot worth a shit, drunk or sober, was no risk to anybody but his self, had never even tagged a deer in the 15 seasons he'd snuck off to deer camp to play cards, drink and get away from home. That day he was just mad because she'd kicked him out of the trailer, deer rifle and all.

Lester, for his part, was a big game hunter who'd been all over the country and the provinces, killing grizzly in British Columbia; spikehorn in the Yellowstone Valley; mountain sheep, elk and cougar and had the heads and hides to prove it. There wasn't anything righteous in what he done, some said, just the chance for a trophy you couldn't get a permit for.

But others maintained that Billy Navins was a mad dog who had to be put down and were just glad Lester had been around to do it. Someone even said: "Call it a mercy killing...Put the poor bastard

out of his misery, didn't he?" As usual, the more opinions, the fuzzier the picture until even those who'd started with strong views weren't really sure what had happened or what they thought about it.

No charges were ever filed. Nobody was going to come out looking very good if Lester got brought up by the guardians of life and property for doing their job for them. The county attorney let it slide without even an inquest, the only record left, in the memories of those like the hardware storekeeper who'd told Spook the story.

But the tale turned out to have a life of its own, people kept coming back to it and whether for that or other reasons, before long Pud Lester left town and moved to the camp up on 49.

Coudreau knew the story of course. When Spook told him what he'd heard from the storekeeper, all Coudreau said was, " I tell you what: it wasn't no fun at all takin' Little Joe out of there."

"Still. You did it."

" Yeah, " Coudreau said. " Just."

