

Elk Hunters

by Larry Strattner

"Damn! All I've got is a hundred dollar bill." My daughter and I are in the checkout line at the Eureka co-op and I'm going to pay as I always do when I visit my daughter. She can't have more than \$15 in groceries on the belt. I feel embarrassed.

"For godsakes Dad, don't worry. It's all growers around here. Everybody's got hundreds. Nobody pays for a bale of Weed with American Express." Rosie is just like her Mom; to the point, gifted with directness. In the Humboldt County redwood forest they grow some of the best marijuana around.

"Well, at least I get an extra ten percent off. I'm a senior" I smile at the checkout woman, nodding my head toward the discount sign near the register.

"You get ten percent off if it's Tuesday", the checker says curtly, pointing at a smallish type, "Tuesdays," I hadn't noticed on the bottom right of the placard.

Embarrassed all over again. But Rosie bags up the items in her efficient mode. We leave before my blush gets too red.

I'm always uncomfortable away from home. Places where I don't know the routine, the lay of the land. At least there isn't any snow. Multitudinous weirdoes maybe, but no snow. My daughter came out here in the first place because she doesn't like snow. When she graduated from college I asked something along the lines of "What are you going to do with your life?" She said, "Move somewhere where it doesn't snow." I thought, "Right. Give up cash outlays when you visit me. A free place to bunk when you visit your friends. Unlimited rights to the washer and dryer?"

Turned out I was wrong. Two weeks after graduation she took off in a Subaru station wagon that looked two hundred years old with a couple of girls from college and one of their boyfriends. I got some postcards. Bryce Canyon, Rattlesnake Canyon, the Grand Canyon. They seemed to be big on canyons. I got an occasional phone call, or if I wasn't at home when it came, a message on the machine, "*Hiiiiii*

Dad. It's Rosie." She hadn't yet gotten over that sing-songy speech habit from college.

I got an occasional picture. Dirty, dust streaked people with back packs, smiling and squinting into the camera. It was hard to tell who was who. I didn't really know any of them but I even had a hard time with who was Rosie. Once I got a picture of her in a swan dive position, arching out over a huge ravine with a bungee cord tied to her ankles. The floor of the ravine far below was littered with boulders. The next time we talked I said, "Don't send me any more of those goddamn bungee-cord-type pictures. I've got enough to worry about already." She laughed and her laugh had love in it but it crackled on the wire. The name of the town she was calling from sounded like it might be in Mexico.

Eventually Rosie settled successively in a few places on the west coast, never staying in any one too long but at least long enough so I could visit. We hadn't been overly close when she was a child. I mostly worked and my job required extensive travel so she just sort of squirted on by me. In college she started to pointedly advise me on dress, music and behavior. I experienced a renaissance of coolness. I felt comfortable among her friends. It escaped me she was growing up. When she left home for the west I quickly slipped back into the Nerd world and except for reading and riding my bicycle I was alone.

My wife Marnie died in Rosie's last year of college. I didn't know what to do with myself. I took my chips off the table and quit working. Money wasn't on my mind. I got over the crying and shattered feeling; at least enough so it didn't pop out of me unexpected in public places. Marnie and Rosie had been mother—daughter close and Rosie came home and stayed with me for a month before she went back to college and then out west. I was thankful to her for being there when I needed her. I tried to get out and socialize but couldn't. I tried drinking but one night in the midst of taking a leak I fell into the bathtub and gave myself a black eye and woke surrounded by porcelain and a vicious hangover.

I finally found some peace and safety in routine. Marnie had been big on routine and before she got sick she cared for me in a particularly organized way. It was my turn when she was sick and I did all I could but lost her anyway. I missed her but there was nothing to be done. I was older. I didn't want any older women and younger women didn't want me. Stalemate. I tried to visit Rosie about four times a year. Once in every season. I always got a vibe from her how long I should stay. Rosie is telepathic like that. You can sense when it's time for a graceful exit. If my visit happens to be a time not to stay long I try to visit other friends from my traveling years. Sometimes it worked out. Sometimes not. Sometimes I wound up just seeing the Cadillac Ranch, or the House of a Thousand Reptiles, or Wall Drug, on my drive home, listening to sad music in the car.

Rosie works every day but now she has a place, also a dog, Oscar. Oscar is a good dog. An appreciative dog. He likes his butt scratched. He likes to take walks. He likes to go to the beach and run. He likes to ride in the car with his head out the window quietly clicking the electric window control in the back seat to get the window open wider. When you ride with Oscar you have to lock the window control from the front seat or he'll have the whole top half of himself out the window before you know it.

All this appreciation makes Oscar a perfect daytime friend. He'll always be Rosie's dog but during the long lazy days, while Rosie works, Oscar is good company. Mostly he and I go to the beach. The long walks along the firm sand, just beyond the reach of the waves are relaxing. I pick up worthless stones and ascribe value to them. I talk absently to Marnie as lovers do. Oscar chases terns, gulls and tennis balls, sniffs the butts of other dogs who happen by and sniff his. Generally he lets it all hang out. After a day at the beach Oscar collapses with appreciation while Rosie and I have a drink and dinner. Then we talk, sometimes about Marnie the Wife and Mother. Sometimes just about life in general with Marnie just below the surface. Rosie and I have grown comfortable with each other.

This particular night the stories and reminiscences have been poignant. All of a Suddenly Rosie says, earlier than usual, "I've got to hit the sack. I have an early meeting tomorrow." I'm alone. Just like that.

I look around the apartment. Oscar looks at me; but not with as much interest as earlier in the day. At the moment Oscar is curled into his special blanket, lounging on the sofa. He looked disinclined to do much of anything even remotely strenuous. I look at Oscar. Oscar looks at me. I exhale and say, "Guess I'll go for a walk." I slip into my coat and walk out into the Northern California night.

There are billions and billions of stars here. I guess there are billions and billions everywhere, but here you can see them. Back home there are neon signs, streetlights, more cars, more parking lots. Too many unhappy lights, dimming the stars. Tonight though, the marine layer from the nearby ocean hasn't intruded and the sky glitters over me as I walk. After about five blocks I'm lost but the town isn't really big enough to be lost. I'm merely on an unfamiliar street. A dimly blinking sign down the block says "Bunyan's" in white, with a red oval around it, in front of a green double bladed ax. I walk down to Bunyan's, open the brass-knobbed door and walk in under a faint jingle from a bell above me on a spring. A few of the customers glance, probably just because I'm a big man, a shaggy dog kind of man, and then return to their conversations. The place is appropriately named. A picture of Paul Bunyan and his blue ox, Babe, hang on one wall. Plaid shirts, beards and a few knit hats round off the dress code. I sit down at the bar.

"What'll it be, Bub"

"Dark rum on the rocks with a beer in back, Bub"

"Name's Mike, Bub"

"Pleased to meetcha, Mike. I'm Hugh"

"Likewise, Huger" I didn't bother to correct him and heard a snicker to my right. I look over into the eyes of a woman of about fifty with black hair and black eyes half smiling at me. "Be careful

with that booze, Huge," she says and snickers again in a friendly way.

I look around at the tools and wildlife pictures on the walls. The polished wood interior. "Nice place." I say.

"It's about loggers and woodsmen" she says. "That's who a lot of us are around here."

"I know", I say. "My daughter works down at the mill. In the office."

"My brother is on the supply side. He works in the woods." She did the little snicker.

I felt a little creep in the hair on my arms. Magnetism. This babe is really attractive in an outdoorsy kind of way. Fairly slender. Sitting erect and poised on the bar stool. Her hands are long fingered but look like working hands. I can't recall ever meeting a woman like this any older than 25. "Do you come here often?" I ask the cliché question.

"Hardly" she smiles. "I'm usually outdoors. My brother and our friends are elk hunting this week. I was under the weather when they left. Normally I'd go too, but I stayed home. I felt a little better tonight. It's probably the clear skies or something. Anyway I thought I'd go out for a glass of wine. I actually thought they might not have wine in here, but it's close to my house."

"It's close to my daughter's too. I'm visiting her. She had an early meeting tomorrow so I'm on my own. You hunt?"

"Sure. Everybody around here hunts. I like to hunt. I'm slowing down a little though. My brother and his crowd are starting to leave me behind in the woods. That's why I didn't go. They string me out even when I'm feeling tip-top. I can't imagine what would happen if I was with them and I wasn't one hundred percent."

"You need to start going with people who pace themselves better. I hang out with my daughter's dog during the day. He and I don't seem to have too many problems keeping up with each other."

"I'll say you do look a little more my speed. Do you hunt?"

"No. I run a little, ride bicycles, swim, stuff like that."

"Well you should try hunting" she says with an expansive sweep of her hand, "It's an exciting world out there" and knocks over her wine glass, I grab for it and miss. It falls and shatters on the bar.

"I'm sorry. So sorry. Here let me help you." She's picking up pieces of glass, putting them in the gutter at the back of the bar.

I'm dabbing at little spatters of wine on the sleeve of my shirt with a bar napkin when she says, "My god, you're cut" and takes hold of my right hand, looks at its side, just below my little finger. There's an inch long mark seeping blood. "My goodness!" and she bends her head and licks the blood off, startling me, then presses a napkin to the cut wrapping it around an ice cube she fishes from my drink. It stings a little but not as much as it tingled where she licked me. "This will help. The cold will stop the bleeding. I'm sure Mike has a band aid somewhere. Maybe even a huge one." The snicker is back. "I apologize for licking your hand. Just some kind of reflex, although these days not too politically correct what with all the STDs. But I got the blood off, the alcohol will clean it out and you'll be good as new."

I wasn't sure about that. The tingle where she licked me goes all the way up to my shoulder. I wondered if it was a pheromone or something. She stuck her hair in my face bending over my hand. I was starting to feel positively horny. I hadn't felt this way in a long time. This was the first older woman I'd met who made me feel randy. I look at her and she looks back, a slight smile playing around her lips.

God her teeth are white, even, and her eyes are deep. Her fingers, long. Nails short but strong looking. I think how much trouble Marnie used to have with her nails breaking. I can't seem to think clearly. The tingle is all over me. I actually am feeling strong. She's looking at me and her eyes have turned expectant. She is smiling a little more broadly. I can see her tongue, pink behind her teeth. She inclines her head toward me.

"Well, I've got to get going too. Just like your daughter I have an early day at work."

She slides off her stool. Standing she is almost as tall as I am. "I'm Cam. Short for Camarilla. I already know you Huge, from your joust with Mike" she smiles again and holds out her hand.

When we touch the shock was almost palpable. "You work down at the mill too?" I hazard. The mill dominates the beach side of the town.

"Nothing so predictable. I'm the day person over at Board and Barkfest, the doggy day care and boarding kennel on 18th. I'll bet I know your daughter's dog."

"I'll bet you do too." Still a little discombobulated by my reaction her touch. "Maybe we could get together for another drink tomorrow night, and you could wound and bandage me again." I couldn't believe my corniness. "That is, if you don't have to go elk hunting."

"Sure. Why not. That bunch doesn't need me. I think they only bring me along to cater to them anyway. How about a little earlier tomorrow? The day care dogs all come in pretty early and I have to be there so they feel comfortable."

"Sure, why not? I'll come over here about six thirty, right after I finish dinner." I have no idea what Rosie will have to say about this but I know I will clearly hear whatever she thinks.

We part company out on the sidewalk. Cam gives me a final toothy smile and a "See you tomorrow night", walking off to her home, somewhere in the darkness.

I turn toward my daughter's house and begin walking. Even though I'm on an unfamiliar street I know where I am. I know the way home. Stars are still out in the clear sky. Softly moving air carries what seem like hundreds of smells upon it. Usually I could only smell the mill, and it was not pleasant. This was different. I smell flowers, leaves, pine cones and faint notes of the sea. I smell moss and ferns and the pungent dampness ever present in this coniferous rain forest territory. When I turn onto my daughter's street I'm out of Bunyan's little neighborhood . The street runs along

the edge of a hill sloping toward the beach. A screen of woods cuts the beach off from view. Even though I'm walking on the side of the street with houses on it I can clearly hear the nocturnal animals moving about their business in the woods. I don't walk in the dark often and certainly not in a place as quiet as this one.

A rabbit, spooked, bursts out of the brush in front of me and I instinctively take a step toward it. Hot on the rabbit's tail a fox appears, takes one look at me and wheels back into the wood. I laugh to myself. Maybe I'm an intrepid hunter after all. Cam will be proud of me when I related my prowess. Even so, I feel more alert, stronger, keener, than I have in a long time. "Infatuation does that", I think. I had probably felt this way as a teenager, but have forgotten. I seem to remember feeling like this when I first met Marnie. A really "up" feeling. The difference with Cam is the sharpness of feeling and sensing, apart from, beyond, the "up". When I arrive at the apartment I go to bed and sleep immediately, dreaming some sort of chaotic, exulting dream. When my eyes open in the morning the dream is gone.

I don't beat around the bush at breakfast and come straight out to Rosie the way she likes. "I've got a date tonight."

"You're kidding" says Rosie, long used to my solitary coping mechanisms. "With who? How did this happen?"

"I wandered into Bunyan's last night. I met this woman who lives down the street. She was interesting." I leave out the horny, tingling arm part. "She works over at some Dog Care place."

"Cam," says Rosie. "Sure, Camarilla."

"You know her?"

"Sometimes I bring Oscar over there. She's really good with the dogs. Almost preternatural. All the dogs love Cam."

"How well do you know her?" I ask, dreading a premature end to my new relationship.

"I don't know her personally at all. She's pretty private. But she's the only woman at B&B so everybody knows who she is. She usually won't give a guy the time of day. Congratulations on your pheromone

powers." Rosie doesn't seem concerned. I suppose I'm apprehensive about a negative reaction. We both loved Marnie.

After Rosie leaves for work Oscar and I go to the beach. Normally Oscar is a good dog but also a rambunctious dog, taken to dropping his tennis ball and chasing flocks of Terns in mid-retrieve. Today he's exceptionally good. He gives me the Play Bow frequently and submissive smiles as we wander along the beach following in the footsteps of Oscar's thousands of canid ancestors who coursed this beach before him. Occasionally, I sit down in the shelter of the dunes and Oscar lies beside me and we luxuriate together. Then we get up and do it again, wandering the beach for miles, almost up to where the sand runs out and cliffs meet the water making further exploration problematic if not downright dangerous. We turn back, more out of inconvenience than fear. I do not feel tired and Oscar, looping into the surf and dunes as he runs, covers twice as much ground as I and is in his glory. Oscar is of unknown origin but obviously bred to run. When he is with the spirit of his wild cousins on the beach he is transported. I feel a strange and close kinship with Oscar on this crystal bright day, throbbing with smells and sound. I move fluidly as I walk, the way I used to feel when I played sports competitively, a feeling athletes call *being in the flow*.

We get back home and Oscar and I thrash happily around in the shower together, getting the sand off and generally making a mess shaking and drying off. I clean up. Oscar passes out on the sofa.

When Rosie gets home she laughs. "You trashed him. *Pooooor* puppy." She scratches his ears. "You should be with him more often. You're cut from the same cloth. I'm going out for drinks and sushi with some of the people from work tonight. I'll see you tomorrow and we can see how your big date went." And she is gone again reminding me of a younger Rosie, always on a mission, a trip, or a new exploration. Whenever Rosie got too much for me and Marnie we would say to each other in unison "*Your* daughter did such and so," and insert the complaint, both disclaiming any genetic responsibility.

This night the marine layer is in and the early evening, ethereal fog will probably thicken as the night progresses. The Bunyan sign glows colorfully as I approach. When I reach out for the door handle a voice from the mist says, "Right on time. I like that in a man." Then the snicker.

"After you, my lady" and I hold the door for her as we enter getting a longer look from the patrons than I had received the night before, perhaps because, as I see in the mirror, we are a striking couple, tall, dark, fit and oozing the special aura ideal pairings seem to emanate. I can hear Rosie as I looked at myself and Cam in the mirror, "For godsakes Dad, you've lost your mind!" I smile at Cam. Show her some teeth.

"How's your cut?" she asks as we sit down.

"Good." I say. "My arm felt a little funny last night but good."

"That's my spell working" Smiling. The tip of her tongue between her teeth "My ministrations made you a new man, I could lick the cut off again, make sure it's healing all right", and laughed. She looks at me like Oscar does when he thinks I have a treat in my pocket.

"Huge!" Mike greets me. "How's it going?" He's smiling.

"Good, thanks. How about a red wine and a beer please."

"Comin' right up."

"I feel like some sort of nutty kid" I start to say, but she reaches out and pushes a little hair back over my ear with the tips of her fingers.

"Let's not talk a whole lot" she says. "I know how you feel. I feel the same way. I knew it when you sat down last night. I made sure you'd be back." She laughs again and takes my hand. Stroking it a little where I'm cut. This time the tingle feeling is almost overpowering. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Every detail about her comes at me like I'm looking at her through a magnifying glass. I see every pore, every hair. I see her entire body move in front of me. I see ferocity and submission, lust and tenderness and I hear her breath, smell her breath, a scent of plants in faraway forest groves, a hint of meat, a waft of a spring-fed

stream, and I know. Looking into her eyes dark with flecks of gold, I know.

I stand up still holding her hand and take out my cell phone, punching the speed dial to leave Rosie a "don't worry" message. "Let's go" I say.

"Go where?" Smiling, all eyes and teeth.

"To the woods. We'll do some Elk hunting" I reply. "Maybe get together and run with your brother and his group. Without a word she gets off the stool, graceful and elegant and we walk out of Bunyan's together, into the mist.

She picks up a few things at her house, a small and simple one-story. I don't stop at Rosie's apartment. "Everything you'll need is at the cabin" A good thing since I don't have anything even approaching hunting clothes.

The drive is slow. Very dark. The road twists and turns. High, into the forest. She turns down the dash lights so she can see. I'm feeling a little twitchy and itchy as time spools by almost like when I was a kid in the car. "Will we be there soon?" I ask.

"Right around the next curve." We turn onto a dirt, two-track road winding into the deeper woods.

The headlights pick out the cabin just as I'm getting downright antsy to get out of the car I bang the door shut a little firmly in my haste.

"A little wound up are we?" she laughs, getting out on her side.

"There's no one here. The place is pitch black."

"They should be around in a while."

"What's a while? It's already dark. How can they even find their way back to this place? Did you have a damn cat in the car? I'm allergic to cats. They make me itch like crazy."

"Don't worry so much. I have a key. The itching will stop as soon as you're ready. And I can hear my brother coming now."

I suddenly sense other people around me in the clearing. The hairs on the back of my hands stand up for the strangers.

"I knew you were Mr. Right" she laughs. "The moment I saw you. That's why I licked you. That's all it takes, you know. A little

exchange of body fluids. A lick's not as good as a bite. But in Bunyan's we can't be biting."

"You won't need anything special to wear", she says. "That's all taken care of" She moves up beside me. I'm overcome with the scent of her. She is sleek and graceful, elegant in her maturity. I wonder what I'm going to tell Rosie. The situation is strange enough so I'm sure Marnie would be OK with it. Oscar will probably be overjoyed. A new someone to really run with. I feel a brief unsteadiness. I can feel the fur on the backs of my hands "What do we do now?" I ask..

We go Elk Hunting" she says, smiling at me, the yellow flecks in her eyes sparkling in the darkness. "There's still a lot of night left." Around me the rest of the Pack assents with a few soft, happy growls. I growl happily with them, a smell of the promise of Cam in my nose.

