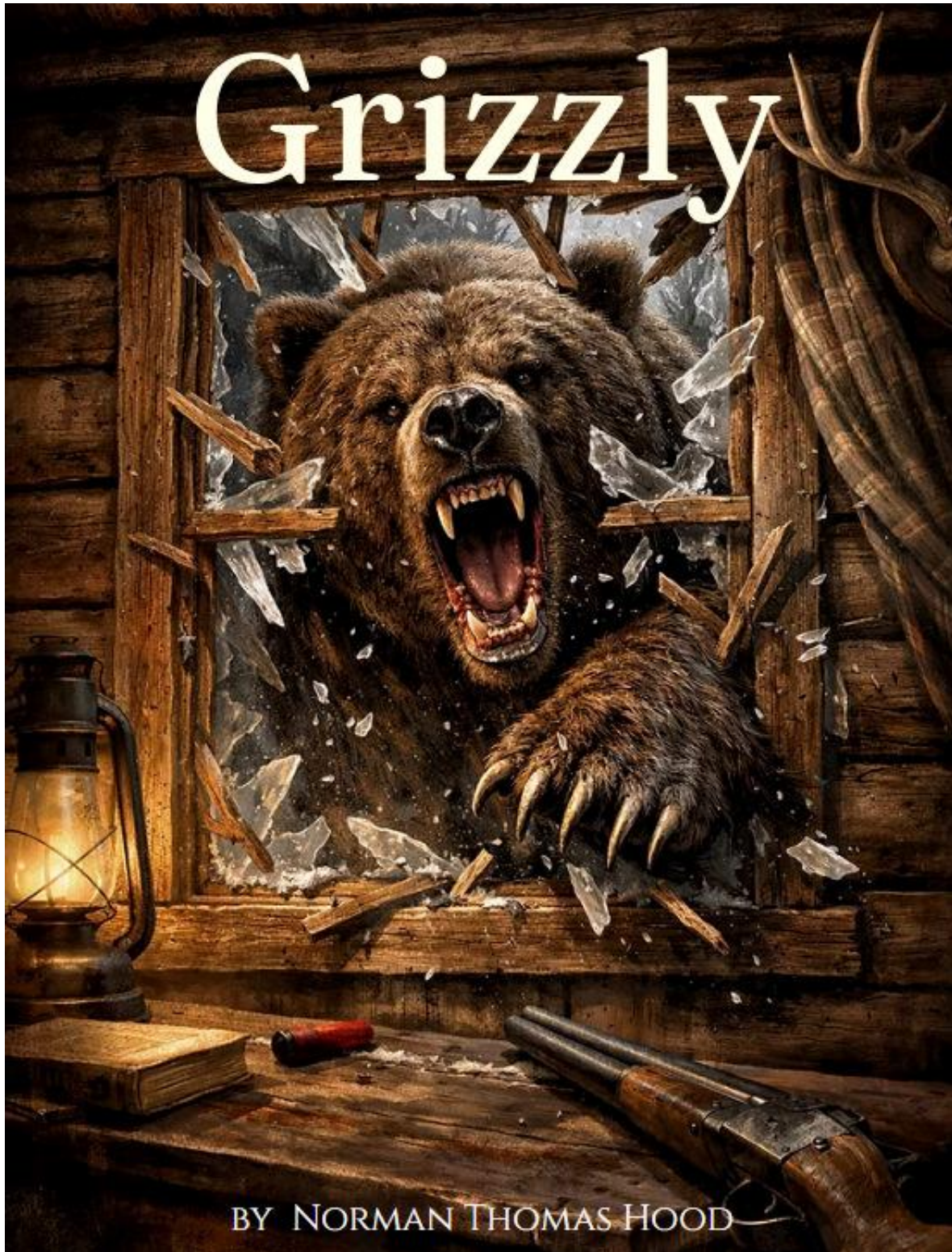




Grizzly

By Norman Thomas Hood

I remember the night the phone call came. Mason and I were at the table, arguing over how the pizza was going to be split between us.

Mom always ordered a bacon, sausage and ham for us, and a cheese and mushroom pizza for herself, since her stomach couldn't take the grease. Dad sided with us, preferring the meats. That meant Dad got three pieces of the good stuff, while Mason and I got two each with one left over. That leftover piece was the one we argued over. Neither of us wanted to cut it in two.

I refused the usual coin flip from Dad, since the last three times I'd lost. *Rock, Paper, Scissors* would decide who got it tonight.

Meanwhile, Mom ate one piece of her mushroom pizza. Yes, one. The remaining seven pieces would sit in the refrigerator until trash day next week. It was a family ritual.

"You're waiting!" Mason said, pointing at me. "You have to do it *on* 'shoot', not after!"

"No one's waiting, lump-head. You're just going too early!" I shouted in defense.

Dad put his glass down and held up his hand to stop the argument from going any further.

"I watched you, Dillon. You waited just long enough to see Mason's move before you went. That's called cheating. Now, go again."

I was mad, but he was right. I didn't want to lose a fourth time. It was bad enough that Mason was the oldest, and got away with pushing me around, but the

way he'd eat that last piece of pizza in front of me really pissed me off! It didn't matter how fast he crammed the first two pieces down his throat, he'd take his sweet time on that third piece, making sure I knew just how good victory tasted!

Dad took another drink of tea and was ready to call the game again.

"Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!" he said. We both showed paper. "Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!" Both on paper again. "Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!"

Mason had rock, I had scissors. He raised both fists in the air, clenching them in victory.

"Son of a bitch!" The words came out of my mouth before I could stop them. My mom instantly called my name and looked to my dad for backup.

"Dillon! What did you just say? You don't talk like that! Especially at the table," he said, eyeballing me.

"Yeah, Dillweed! You're only ten. What the hell?" Mason added.

"Mason, that's enough of you, too," Dad said. "Boys, clean up the table and put the dishes in the dishwasher before you go upstairs. And you can forget about any pizza for the next few weeks."

"You're not going to take his phone?" Mason asked, trying to make my loss sting even worse.

Dad waved him off. He was done with the whole ordeal.

"Dillon, you can have a piece of mine if you want. Just pick off the mushrooms. You used to eat it that way, remember?" Mom offered, trying to salvage the evening.

"Yeah, Dillweed, eat the girly pizza!" Mason laughed, chewing the last bite of his winnings.

I picked up my glass, wanting to hurl it at him.

Dad's phone rang, interrupting the drama and causing the 'hush!' hand to go into the air again.

"Yes, this is Garrett Rogers... who? Okay... yes, he is. What? No, I didn't. When? How'd it happen?"

Dad stood up, then sat down again. There was a long pause. "Oh, no... yes, that's fine. Yes, 128 Oaklawn. Okay... Monday. Thanks. I appreciate it. I will, thanks."

Dad ended the call and put his phone down on the table. We could tell he was upset. No one said a word as he stared at his phone. It was the quietest I'd ever

heard the dining room before 8pm. The only sound I noticed was the rhythmic ticking of our grandfather's clock. After a few seconds, Mom couldn't stand it any longer and broke the silence.

"What is it, dear?" she asked. "What happened?"

"It's Paul... my uncle Paul. He died three months ago in a hunting accident."

"Oh, no! In Montana?" she asked.

"Yeah... that was a lawyer. He said Paul had an accident tracking an animal and fell down a mountainside. Evidently, I'm in his will. The guy's gonna call me again on Wednesday. Says he's mailing me a copy of Paul's will tomorrow. I'll have some stuff to fill out."

"I'm so sorry, babe! That's so sad! I know you were close growing up," she said, her hand resting on his shoulder now.

"Yeah, he's only sixteen years older than me... or was, I guess. The lawyer didn't say what he left me, but he said it's in the papers he's sending. I should get them Monday."

"Sorry, Dad. You used to talk about him a lot," Mason said.

"Yeah... he was great. Taught me how to shoot... how to fish... everything my dad would have shown me if he hadn't died so early." He looked at Mom. "Cindy, I don't think we've seen him since our wedding, have we?"

She shook her head no.

Dad looked carefully at Mason, then at me.

"You two need to learn how to get along better. Life's short, kids. You spend way too much time fighting with each other."

He got up from the table and went upstairs. Mom wiped her eyes before turning to us.

"Your father's right. You two act like you hate one another. But someday, all you'll *have* is each other. Your Dad lost his father when he was only six years old. He didn't have any brothers or sisters around, just Grandmama and her brother Paul. So, you should be thankful you have each other. I'm going upstairs to talk to your dad. So, please... do as your father asked and handle the cleanup tonight. No fighting!"

Mason and I filled the dishwasher and went to our rooms without another word.

The weekend seemed like any other, really. Dad didn't say anything about Uncle Paul, and we didn't ask. Neither of us knew him, anyway... only Mom and Dad. There weren't any arguments between my brother and I, though. It wasn't because of anything Mom had said, but more of a fear of dad's wrath if we showed our asses too soon after Friday's news.

We both knew well enough that when he wasn't talking much, it wasn't wise to push his buttons. Besides, school was almost out and we were both happy about that. Last summer they took us to King's Island, and we were hoping for a repeat.

There wasn't much to do in rural Kentucky, especially for ten and twelve year olds, but Cincinnati was just two hours away, and the park only a few minutes further.

On Wednesday afternoon, I was lying in bed, dispatching zombies when Mom called both of us downstairs. I could hear Mason talking to his friend on the phone, so I dropped my tablet on the bed and hurried down, beating him by five steps. We both ended up on the couch, as far apart as we could sit from one another.

"Boys, your dad's on his way home. He left work early and said to be ready when he got here. We're going out to eat."

"Asian?" Mason asked before I could.

"Yes, so put your shoes on. And Dillon, change that shirt... you've gotten something on it."

"Probably makeup!" Mason laughed.

"No, it's not!" I said, reaching over to punch his leg.

As soon as we saw Mom's eyes, we both knew it wasn't time for normal in the house yet.

"Stop it! You boys have been really good lately. Don't go and screw it up, now. Your dad's not in the mood, and neither am I. We're going to have a good night out, without *any* fighting. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am," we replied in unison.

After filling our stomachs with as much food as we could cram in, neither Mason nor I had any fight left in us, anyway. The table suddenly became quiet.

We noticed Dad had the same look on his face he had when he got that phone call from the lawyer.

“Guys, I’ve already talked to your Mom about this, so now it’s your turn. We’re going to King’s Island like you wanted, but before that we’re going out west, to Montana. My uncle left me his cabin and some land. It’s ours now.”

“Are we moving there?” Mason asked.

“No, nothing like that. We’re going to sell the cabin, but first it’s going to need some work... cleanup, mainly. We’re renting a van and going out there for a week... kind of a working vacation for all of us. I want to see it one last time before we sell it, anyway. I have a lot of good memories from that cabin. I haven’t been there since I was in college. You guys will love it. Uncle Paul was a real, rugged guy. He taught me all sorts of things. I’ll teach you both how to shoot a rifle while we’re there.”

“Does he have a pool?” I asked excitedly.

“No, dill pickle! Dad just *said* he was a rugged guy. Rugged guys don’t swim in pools. They swim in rivers and lakes with the wild animals!” Mason said.

“So, we can’t swim? Then what are we going to do for fun?” I asked, worried now.

Dad closed his eyes, annoyed with the direction the conversation was going. Mom noticed, and quickly spoke up, knowing he wasn’t in a very patient mood.

“No, Dillon, he didn’t have a pool,” she said. “He’s way up in the mountains... or, the cabin is, I mean. Uncle Paul lived about twenty miles from Glacier National Park. There’s literally nothing around the cabin but wilderness.”

“That’s right,” Dad said. “He didn’t even have running water. Glacier Park’s just down the road, though, and so is the town of Whitefish. There’s lots of cool things we can do there... golf, tennis, swimming... but we have to get the cabin taken care of first. Basically, I just wanted to let you know where we’re going and why. After we get back, we’ll go to King’s Island. You guys help out good with the cabin and you’ll each earn \$200 for the park.”

“Alright!” Mason said, offering up his hand for a high-five. I slapped it hard, happy we were on the same side for once.

“\$200? Each?” Mom asked. “Isn’t that a little much, honey?” I felt a twinge of panic beginning.

“I don’t think so. That cabin is going to need some real scrubbing. Paul wasn’t too concerned with cleanliness. Besides, nothing’s cheap at the amusement park anymore.” He looked at Mason and I. “We’ll pay for the tickets and the food, boys, but any shirts or other stuff you want is on you.”

“Cool!” Mason said, nodding in agreement.

Both of us went to bed thinking about the money we’d earn, and wondering what cool stuff we’d find in the cabin. The way Dad talked, there’d probably be lots of knives and guns around!

The next few passed by in a fury. Mom went to the store every day or two, as she’d think of things we’d need to clean the cabin, plus what we’d need for the trip as far as food and supplies. Since Dad wasn’t sure what condition uncle Paul’s woodstove would be in, they bought a nice camping stove and enough propane bottles to last a week. Everything they brought home got stacked next to the front door. The pile grew taller than I was!

I couldn’t get to sleep the night before we left. Mason couldn’t, either. Both of us stayed on our devices with the volumes turned down instead of going to sleep like we were told. Dad told us he was setting an alarm to make sure we’d be able to leave the house by 3am. He said starting the drive at night would help us hit the big, traffic areas in the off hours.

My secret plan was to stay up until the minute we left, but the next thing I knew, Mom was waking me up to go to the van. I grabbed my duffel bag and pillow, along with a blanket for the ride.

I remember how exciting it was to leave in the middle of the night. I felt a certain energy in the night air that I’ve never experienced during the day.

Dad bought us two power banks to recharge our phones and tablets, but the rule was we could only be on our devices fifteen minutes out of each hour. He said it was going to be a long week in the cabin without power, and we’d need to conserve.

Mom kept the radio on in the van, but the ride stayed mostly quiet during the night. The van was cozy and warm, with soft, velour upholstery. It was a stark

contrast to the station wagon my parents usually drove. Those vinyl seats would tear your legs up in the summer.

At some point during the drive I fell asleep, my pillow pressed against the cool window. After what felt like ten minutes, I heard my Dad calling to us from the front seat. I opened my eyes to see the van was fully lit. It was morning already.

“Hey boys, wake up! We’re crossing into Iowa. Going to stop for breakfast at the next exit. How do waffles sound?”

Dad was acting too excited for that early in the morning.

There was a collective groan heard from our seats in the back. It wasn’t a ‘no’... just the morning grogs. We pulled into the restaurant and parked under the shade of some trees lining the back of the lot.

Dad was a certified professional for finding ways to keep our vehicle out of the sun. All he had to say after parking was “Windows!” and we knew to lower each of ours exactly half an inch, just enough to let the heat out, but not enough to let much rain in if the weather suddenly turned bad.

I ordered my favorite; waffles with chocolate chips and a glass of chocolate milk. Mason had the same without the chips.

“Well, boys, you’ve officially slept through one fourth of the trip!” Dad said, sipping his coffee. “We’ve still got a long way to go, starting with a sunny drive for the next nine or ten hours. We’ll stop at a motel for the night then start driving again in the morning. When we get back to the van, we’ll get out the window shades. That’ll help keep the sun from baking anyone sitting near a window. Don’t want you falling asleep during the next few hours and waking up with half your face on fire!”

We all laughed. Dad had a way of making the practical funny. And he was right. The Sun coming in the windows was brutal up until nightfall. Life in the van was becoming not so fun. Thank God Mom had to pee frequently, or dad would have only stopped once or twice, for gas.

Whenever he took an exit, Mason and I couldn’t wait to find some grass to race each other. It felt good to move around after sitting in those seats for hours at a time.

By nightfall, we were halfway through South Dakota and ready to stop for the night. Dad found a motel, and we eventually fell asleep to the sounds of 70’s

reruns on the motel room's TV. After a quick shower and breakfast the next morning, we were back on the road.

The second full day on the highway was even more grueling than the first. We'd all gotten tired of the *I see something you don't see* game we'd been playing, as anything other than the usual roadside scenery was always going to be the answer. I started to wonder if we'd ever make it to Uncle Paul's cabin. I wasn't the only one.

"Good Lord, honey, why did Paul move so far away from the rest of the family?" Mom asked.

"I don't know, Cindy. You can blame it on the old Westerns, I guess," Dad said. "Paul *loved* those old movies... that and *The Beverly Hillbillies*, for some reason. Probably because of Elly May, if I had to guess. After my Dad died, he'd bring a box of VHS tapes with him whenever he visited Mom and I.

"We'd make popcorn and watch them until we fell asleep. Well, Paul and I did, anyway. My mother wanted nothing to do with those old movies. Paul would tease her about it, saying she needed to get back to her roots and be a country girl.

"He always said one day he'd move out west... and he did! No one really expected him to buy a cabin on top of an uninhabited mountain, though. No running water, no electricity... just a lot of hard work and solitude. But years of living that way turned him into the type of person he loved most in those movies."

"You said you went there for college?" I asked.

"No, I stayed with him a month between my freshman and sophomore years in college. I drove the exact same roads we're driving right now, but it didn't seem to take as long back then. But I was excited, driving to see my favorite family member. Now I'm just driving to see his empty cabin."

"But it won't be empty, Dad. We'll be there with you," Mason reminded him.

I saw my mom put her hand on Dad's shoulder. At that very moment, I felt our family was closer than it'd ever been before.

After another long day of driving, we pulled up to the cabin, just about an hour before nightfall. Everyone was exhausted. The headlights from the van shined brightly on the front of the small habitat, revealing the door to the cabin was standing open. Dad told us to wait in the car while he grabbed a flashlight and a lantern to look inside.

“What’s taking him so long, Mom?” Mason asked. “It’s been like 5 minutes since he went in!”

“Just give him some grace, Mason. Your father hasn’t been here for almost twenty years. There’s no telling what’s going through his head or what he’s feeling right now. Try to be a little more understanding, okay?”

Dad eventually came out of the cabin and motioned us in. He didn’t say a word, as one by one, we walked past him into the cabin. Mom was right. We could see the experience was hard on him. His eyes were red and it looked like he had cried.

The cabin was small and dimly lit by the sun setting through the windows, and the lantern. There were two windows on the west wall, two on the east and one near the front door. Dad explained the windows were what Paul depended on most for light.

There was no fireplace, but Paul had a large woodburning stove for heat and cooking. Various pelts and rugs lined the dirty floor. I remember the look on my Mom’s face when Dad used his foot to straighten one. Dirt and dust rose quickly into the air, illuminated by the sun’s rays beaming through the windows.

“How did he even *breathe* in here?” Mom asked, waving her hand in front of her face.

“Like the Ingalls, I guess,” Dad replied, referring to *The Little House on the Prairie*.

“God love your uncle, Garrett, but at least that guy had a wife who kept the house clean.”

“Charles and Caroline, dear... heck, even *I* know that,” Dad laughed.

The cabin showcased one lovely color; brown. Brown walls, a brown table, two brown chairs, a brown bed and brown rugs. Almost everything inside the place was made of brown wood, except the stove, and it *burnt* wood!

“Where’s the bedrooms?” I asked, looking around.

“Haha, dummy! There *are* no bedrooms!” Mason said. “It’s a cabin... what you see is what you get! This *is* the bedroom, the kitchen, the living room and the... wait a minute. Dad! Where’s the bathroom?”

Dad pointed Mason to a narrow door on the back wall of the cabin. Mason went over to it and opened the door.

“Ewwww! Gross!” He shut the door faster than he’d opened it. “That’s where we have to go to the bathroom?”

“That’s it. But look, we brought a camping toilet with us and we’ll go to Whitefish, too. But after seeing this place again, I’ve made a decision. We’re not going to spend all five days here. It’s just not going to work with four of us. We’re going to spend a day or two cleaning this place and be done with it. As small as this is, it shouldn’t take more than two days. I have to admit, I didn’t remember it being this tiny. I guess it’s because I was younger when I was here, and it was just Paul and me.”

Mom looked the place over with the same look she had going into their bathroom after Dad used it.

“Honey, I know you loved your uncle, but do you think someone’s really going to buy this place? Even for an older cabin, it’s in terrible condition.”

We could tell that as disgusted as she was, she was trying to be as gentle as she could with her words. Dad sat down in one of the two chairs in the room. Once again, a billow of dust rose obediently in the air.

“I asked Paul’s lawyer the same thing when I was deciding whether it was worth even coming out here to clean it. He said good pictures could help sell it faster. Said it would most likely be a buyer interested in the land for having a place to stay during hunting trips. Look, let’s do what we can for a day or two, then we’ll spend the rest of the week at the park. It’ll be like having two vacations in one this year.”

He looked out the window for a second, then suddenly changed gears. Mason and I knew what was coming.

“Okay, everyone... we’re wasting daylight! Mason, you and Dillon go to the van and bring in the airbeds. There’s a battery-powered pump in the same box. It’s too late to bother with cleaning the floor, so we’ll just scoot things around and bunk down in the center of the cabin.

“Don’t touch anything except what we have to move for sleeping space. And before you even ask, no one’s sleeping in Paul’s bed. With that door being open when we got here, who knows what’s been living in here since he’s been gone. Animals would have been drawn to the smell on the bed. It’s just nature.”

Those were words I wish I hadn’t heard. It suddenly hit me that there were probably lots of wild animals already watching us from the woods.

After coming back from the van, we opened up some snack cakes and listened to Dad tell some stories about Uncle Paul. He set the lantern on the old dinner table before he started. It illuminated the room with a nice, spooky glow, making his stories even more dramatic.

As he talked, I noticed there were no pictures on the cabin walls, just some mounted tools and guns... lots of guns.

Before dad turned off the light for the evening, he pulled out a long two-by-four from the corner and barred the door to the cabin shut. It was only then I felt safe enough to go to sleep.

After being told more than once to stop talking, it soon became quiet enough to hear the many sounds coming from outside the cabin. There were lots of unsettling coyote calls and rustlings in the brush and trees nearby. I was scared with every sound I heard, trying to deduce what could have made it and how close it was. I think Mason was scared, too... he just didn’t show it as much. Still, since all four of us were huddled so closely together in the center of the cabin, I eventually relaxed enough to fall asleep.

The sounds of the morning were much friendlier than the ones we’d slept to. The sun helped out as well, shining through the east windows in all its glory. As I looked around the well-lit cabin, I suddenly realized what mom had said was true. The place was a disaster

“Up and at ‘em!” I heard my Dad saying through the door.

He was already outside, cooking something on the camping stove. Mom was sitting next to him. They’d been up for a while, as she was already pouring a second cup of coffee.

“Sausage and eggs, boys! That’s what Uncle Paul made for me the first day I visited here. After that, it was elk jerky or something like that,” he laughed, “but I don’t think you two would like that.”

Mason and I sat in the camping chairs they’d set out for us. He had the first question of the day.

“Dad, did Uncle Paul really shoot those wolves trying to steal his deer?”

“Yep, that’s what he told me. Wanna hear the *whole* story?”

Both of us nodded yes. Mom didn’t seem very interested, but Dad told the story anyway.

“Yes, he killed two wolves that day. He didn’t have any pictures to prove it, but his word was good enough. Paul wasn’t the type to tell tales. He always said he’d stick with the truth unless his life depended on it. So, here goes.

“He said a pack of wolves had been following him from a distance after he killed a deer one winter morning. He had wrapped the deer in a tarp and was dragging it through the snow, trying his best to get back to the cabin before the wolves got too close. He was almost out of strength when the wolves began to close in. He told me they’d been watching him closely and were waiting until he was at his weakest point before attacking.

“Wolves are smart like that... crafty hunters. Paul had his rifle and pistol ready, though, and when the wolves finally started running towards him in their attack, he dropped the tarp and leveled his rifle, waiting ‘til one was close enough to kill with the first shot. When one was just a few yards away, he fired his gun, hitting it in the shoulder! It yelped in pain and went down fast, but it wasn’t dead. The other wolves stopped advancing until the wounded one got to its feet again. Then they all began to circle Paul, slowly and methodically. He watched them close, trying to spot the leader of the pack. He knew if he didn’t kill him first, he’d be dead for sure!

“As the circle of wolves got closer, he started growling and yelling as loud as he could... acting plum crazy! At first, the wolves held their position. But soon, they started tightening their circle around him. He could tell one wolf was advancing closer than the others. It was the biggest one. It had to be the leader! He looked straight at it as it slowly paced in front of him. He knew if the wolf smelled his fear, he was a dead man! So, he pointed his rifle in the wolf’s direction and let out a deafening battle cry, his eyes locked in on the beast! The

wolf responded quickly, springing towards his prey! Paul held his ground and fired his rifle, hitting the beast in the center of its chest. It dropped over dead, its head burying in the snow, right at Paul's feet!

“Another wolf ran at him, but this time, when Paul pulled the trigger, his rifle misfired! He backed up and pulled out his pistol just in time to get a shot off before the wolf got to him! The wounded animal fell on its side at Paul's feet, right next to the first! As it struggled to get its footing, Paul put a bullet right through the top of his head! Blood splattered all over his face and clothes! When the other wolves saw their brother's blood on Paul's face, and heard him scream out another battle cry, they quickly retreated.”

Mason and I were transfixed by Dad's story. Mom looked shocked, too, but unconvinced.

“Garrett, be honest... is that story really true?” she asked.

“Well, babe, that's how Paul told it to me.”

He gave her a quick wink. We saw it, but didn't care. We took the story as true.

“Okay boys,” Mom said, “if you can get past all the blood splattered images your dad just put in your heads, eat your breakfast. We have a lot of scrubbing to do today. I'd like to get this finished soon if we can so we don't have to sleep here another ‘plum’ night, wolves or no wolves!”

Within an hour, every bit of cleaning supplies Mom had bought for the cabin was unloaded onto the porch. Dad focused on fixing the places around the cabin that needed repair, including the door to the attached outhouse, a broken porch step, and a split window frame.

Mason and I started out with trash duty, and there was a lot of it! Mom would point it out and we would bag it. We formed a formidable pile of it outside, several yards away from the cabin. Dad said later in the evening we'd burn it. I asked why we couldn't just find a dumpster somewhere. Yeah, I wished I could take that question back as soon as I asked it. Mason made me pay for it.

We got a lot done by 2pm, then were relieved of duty for a quick lunch break. Mom cooked hotdogs on the camping stove. That, with baked beans and potato

chips, fueled Mason and I for an epic fart battle an hour later. I'm not so proud of it now, but I won in stunning fashion.

The afternoon went much slower than the morning. Dad fixed several things around the cabin, but came to an impasse with one of the east windows.

"Dammit! Why the hell won't this one open? I don't see any nails or screws keeping it from moving. I don't freakin' get it!"

"Maybe it *never* opened, honey," Mom said.

"No, it's like it's been glued shut... oh, shit! That's it! One side of the framing is different from the rest. Paul must have replaced a bad board with some fresh cut wood. Sap from the new piece eventually bonded to the side of the window. No wonder. Well, *that's* not getting fixed. I'm leaving it just like it is."

"Babe, I can't do what I need to with this damn stove. I need a stronger solvent. We're going to have to drive into Whitefish."

"Well, I can make a run if you want. Just let me put some tools up first."

"Oh, no... uh, uh! We'll *all* go, honey. We're not staying here alone. What would we do if a coyote came around? Throw rocks at it?" she asked.

"Yeah, dad... you said you'd show us how to shoot. You promised!"

"That's when we thought we were staying a whole week, Mason," he said.

"But you promised! Where else can we do it? We live in a neighborhood, remember?" Mason's argument was valid.

"Fair enough. Okay, after dinner we'll do some shooting. I'll pick out a rifle and a pistol, just like what Paul used to fight off those wolves."

"Awesome! I'm the oldest, so I get to learn first!" he announced.

"You'll learn *together*, Mason, but I'll let you take the first shot, since you worked so hard convincing me to say yes."

We worked even harder that afternoon, knowing the faster we got done, the longer we'd get to shoot.

By 6pm, we could smell burgers cooking over the firepit. I'll never forget the sweet smell of that beef sizzling over smoking wood. They were the best burgers I ever ate! Mason and I finished ours in record time. Dad noticed.

“Listen, boys... I see what you’re doing, but I’m eating my dinner the same speed I always do. After that, I’m drinking a cup of coffee with your mother and resting for a few minutes. Then, and only then, do I want either of you in my ear about shooting. Got it?”

“Yes sir,” we agreed, the wind taken out of our sails.

About an hour later, Dad rose from his camping chair. We both looked at each other, giddy with anticipation. We’d never seen Dad shoot a gun. Hell, we’d never been around *anyone* shooting a gun! Dad took a hunting rifle off the wall and laid it down on the dinner table.

“What are you doing, dad? Aren’t we going to shoot now?” I asked.

“Not before cleaning it. A lot of bad thighs can happen shooting a gun with a dirty barrel, Dillon. Don’t worry, this isn’t going to take long... just running some cloth through it and checking the action.”

We waited as dad inspected the rifle and a S&W 357 he’d pulled off a shelf.

“What’s that one?” I asked, pointing to a gun standing in the corner by the door.

“Oh, no... not that one. That’s a 12 gauge shotgun, boys. I unloaded it the minute we got here. That’d tear your arm off firing it. Plus, it’s loud enough to scare your mom to death, and we don’t want to do that.”

“Well, can you shoot it outside so we can hear it?” Mason asked.

Dad looked at Mom for permission. She gave him a small shrug. That was a bonafide yes in our book.

“Okay, but no one shoots it but me. You’ll see why in a few minutes,” he said.

We were so excited we could hardly stand it! It was “yes sir” and “no sir” for the next two hours. We acted like every kid does on the day before Christmas. We were on our best behavior.

Dad taught us the basics, careful to make sure we could demonstrate safe shooting before anything was ever loaded. We were getting bored, waiting for the real action to happen. Finally, dad pulled out some boxes of ammo and drew a target on an old cardboard box. It was on!

He started with the revolver. I could barely shoot it without knocking myself in the head from the recoil, but after a few shots, I was able to control it pretty well. I have to admit, though, I only hit the box twice, and not in the circle. Mason had no trouble with it, though. In fact, he only *missed* the box once!

The rifle was another matter, though. I did better with that. But dad said it was just a .22, mainly for hunting small animals. You couldn't use it for a coyote or wolf, he said.

When we'd both shot for a while, Dad pulled out the 12 gauge. I've since referred to it as the 'big boy'. Since we weren't staying all week at the cabin, he placed a few gallon jugs of drinking water on top of the burn pile we'd formed.

"Okay boys, this is where the *real* fun begins!"

He opened a box of shells and loaded two in the barrel. After turning around to make sure everyone had their ears covered, he yelled, "Fire in the hole!" and raised the gun. The blast was deafening, even with my fingers in my ears. Two jugs of water and the top of the burn pile exploded into the air!

"Whoo hoo! Sweet Jesus! Did you see that?" he said, just as excited as we were.

Mom retreated to the cabin, shaking her head the whole way. She'd had her fill after one shot. Not us, though. We wanted more... much more!

"Wow! Do it again, Dad!" we both yelled, jumping up and down.

Dad was smiling ear to ear and ready to oblige.

"Whew! This thing kicks like a pissed off mule! I'll shoot a few more, kids, but you two have to rake that pile back together afterwards. Deal?"

We agreed, eager to hear more blasts from the gun.

"This one's for you, Uncle Paul!" Dad said to the sky as he took aim at the remaining water jug.

It exploded in fine fashion, pieces of it sailing into the air like a bomb had exploded! We both jumped around some more, waiting for the next shot.

"Two more, boys, then this shoulder gets a break or I won't be able to drive us home."

The last shots echoed through the mountains like thunder from a bolt of lightning. I could still feel the ringing in my ears as I realized I hadn't hadn't covered them for the last shots.

We became two chatterboxes as we raked the burn pile back together. After Dad put the guns away, he had us move the camping chairs closer to the pile.

"Oh, Lord, Garrett... isn't that going to stink when you burn it?" Mom asked.

"Eh, the wind's blowing east. We should be fine... probably won't even smell it."

Paul had left some whiskey in the cabin that Dad used to pour over the pile of trash. When he lit it, the pile caught fire slowly, spreading little by little. Then, suddenly, it became completely engulfed! Even with the sun not having set yet, the light from the fire lit up the area all around us! We could instantly feel the heat! My knees got painfully hot.

Soon, all of us had pulled our chairs back from the fire several feet. Mom was right again, though. Maybe it was Paul's clothes or something worse, but there was a horrible odor you couldn't ignore. When the wind shifted just right, you were covering your nose.

As the fire eventually burned down, Mom and Dad decided it was too late to drive to Whitefish for the solvent she needed. It was either leave the stove as it was, or sleep another night in the cabin and finish everything in the morning. We voted to stay another night. It was obvious Dad felt the same. Mom was the lone no-vote, but agreed, giving us the okay to inflate the airbeds again.

Dad opened up a bag of buttered popcorn and a big package of M&Ms. That was our go-to snack on trips. The combination of popcorn and the greatest of all candy-coated chocolate ever created was deserving of an award, in our opinion.

We begged for another Uncle Paul story. Dad was happy to tell us one. This time it involved him being pinned down by a herd of crazed elk and having to fight his way loose with a bowie knife.

When Dad finished telling the story, we both suspected he made it up, but we held onto the wolf story as being one hundred percent the truth. In the end it didn't matter, though. It was all about the thrill of the story.

The sounds of nature didn't keep me awake this time. After dad turned off the lamp, I settled into my pillow, feeling like we actually belonged there... part of the wilderness. I was wrong.

I was awakened by a hand jostling my shoulder.

"Dillon... wake up."

"Mom?" I said, rubbing my eyes.

"Shhhh.... talk quietly."

"What's going on?" I whispered.

She seemed upset, just shaking her head *no* in response to me. Before I could say anything else, I heard something moving around outside.

I sat up to see what was going on. Mason was already sitting and facing the front door. He looked terrified! I couldn't see much detail in the room, as the moonlight coming through the front window was barely enough to illuminate the floor.

Dad was lying between us and the window, slowly crawling toward the door. It was obvious he was trying to be as quiet as possible.

Breaking our terrified silence, I heard a loud huffing sound coming from the porch. Then I heard boards creaking! Something big and heavy was out there, just outside the door! As it moved, I could feel the floor underneath me vibrate!

Suddenly, I heard the rocking chair on the porch get knocked over! My Mom put her arms around my shoulders and whispered for me to be perfectly still. I didn't understand, as I hadn't moved at all. It was only then I realized just how hard my body was shaking.

Dad was close to the door now. I realized he was trying to get to the shotgun. Suddenly, he stopped moving. He turned his head toward us and grimaced. Very slowly, he raised his finger and pointed to the shelf above my mother. He needed ammo. The gun wasn't loaded!

Mom slowly released her grip on me. As she did, I noticed she was shaking, too. She reached out with her left hand, stretching as far as she could to keep from standing. She carefully took the box off the shelf and started to crawl towards Dad. He instantly put his hand out, signaling for her to stop. He pointed at Mason, who was closer to him. Mom handed the box to Mason and eased down behind me again. Mason nervously reached across with the box, putting it into Dad's outstretched hand. As he did, we heard another loud creak just before the front window went dark! Something huge was standing in front of it, blocking out the moonlight!

I could hear Mom's breathing getting louder as she tried her best not to panic. We heard another loud huff. Then, whatever had pressed against the window began to lower itself. I wanted to close my eyes, but I couldn't! Just enough moonlight came through the other windows to reveal a mass of dark fur behind the glass! I saw a glistening nose, then two large eyes. It was a bear! A grizzly

bear! Its head almost filled the whole window! I screamed, and instantly felt my Mom's hand smacking me in the mouth in an attempt to cover it.

What came next was the loudest growl I've ever heard. Dad quickly scrambled to get the shells into the gun. The bear raised up and slammed itself against the outside of the cabin! The scraping sound its claws made against the wall was intense! I could hear wood splintering off each time the animal swiped at it! He was trying to claw through the wall and get to us! Dad got the gun loaded just as the window's glass broke! The bear lunged his giant head inside, his jaws gaped open! I could see all of its teeth as it growled and roared, trying to tear through the window frame!

Dad put his feet against the front wall. He pushed hard against it, sliding himself across the floor, between the bear and the rest of us! We scrambled backwards, putting as much distance as we could between us and the bear! As more of the window frame gave way, dad stood and fired the gun, hitting the bear in the neck and shoulder! The beast screamed in pain before dropping out of the window and back onto the porch. Dad hurried forward, stuck the barrel out the window and pointed it as best he could at the wounded bear, firing again!

Two seconds later, the bear crashed its head and shoulder through the window again, breaking apart more of the frame this time! Dad scrambled backwards as the bear swiped its massive paws at him, trying to snare his legs! The only reason he didn't succeed was his giant size! The grizzly was stuck halfway in the opening now, desperately clawing its way forward to get inside!

Dad saw the box of shells on the floor, by the front door. He had no choice but to dive across the room for more rounds. But the moment he got his fingers on the box, the bear reached over and sank his claws into one of his legs! Dad screamed in pain as the bear effortlessly pulled him directly underneath the window, swiping down at his chest and arms with its giant claws! I was frozen solid in terror! I think I was screaming, but I have no way of knowing, as loud as the moment was!

The bear stretched its neck forward, trying to get its massive jaws around Dad's face! Its teeth made a horrendous sound each time they came together, missing his nose by fractions of an inch! When the bear realized it wasn't close enough to bite his prey, he swiped down with his paw, catching the side of Dad's cheek! Then he tried once more to pull himself through the broken window

frame. Sliced and bleeding from the bear's attack, Dad started scooting away from the window. The bear saw him moving and slammed its paw down onto his chest! Dad screamed in pain as the bear effortlessly held him in position!

As our own screaming continued, Dad's suddenly stopped. He had either passed out or was dead, we didn't know. The bear then fixed his eyes on us and continued trying to force its way through the fragile window frame! At that moment, I thought for sure we were all going to die!

Just then, something jumped across my legs! It was Mason! He grabbed a loose shell off the floor and jammed it into the gun! He stood, locked the barrel and pointed it straight at the bear, who had just gotten its other shoulder through the window! Mason yelled loudly, causing the bear to raise its head momentarily. Without hesitating, he aimed the barrel at the bear's head and pulled the trigger!

The gun exploded into the bear's face! The blast sent Mason backwards, and the gun flying out of his hands! Chunks of fur and blood sprayed the walls on both sides of the demolished window. The bear was knocked backwards, then came forward again, its head and arms falling across Dad's broken body! I watched in horror, seeing half of the bear's head was missing now. Blood poured freely out of its gaping skull, covering both Dad and the floor.

Neither one was moving or making a sound anymore. Looking at Dad, we just knew he had to be dead. His face was sliced open to the bone as well as his chest and both arms. There was blood everywhere.

The ringing that'd stunned my eardrums from the gun's blast subsided, while the screams of my mother rose to replace it. She frantically made her way to Dad and grabbed him under his arms, trying to pull him out from under the bear. The beast's arms were just too heavy! Mason got to his feet and helped her pull him out. Mom frantically wrapped up both of dad's arms and his leg as best she could with towels and shirts, screaming and crying the whole time.

The next thing I knew, all four of us were in the van, speeding down the mountainside and heading for the closest hospital. How we even got to the van, I don't remember now. I do recall watching my dad lying in the back as Mom drove, though. His eyes were closed and he showed no signs of life. I could see through his cheek, which was sliced open to the white of his jawbone. Some of his teeth were missing. As horrifying a sight as it was, I remember reaching over my seat and holding his bloody hand until we got to the hospital. I looked at Mason,

who was crouched next to him, holding a folded tablecloth against his broken chest. He was leaning forward and staring directly at me, though I knew he didn't see me.

Mom pulled up to the emergency entrance and ran inside screaming. Almost immediately, I saw the liftgate of our van rising. Two men dressed in blue put him on a gurney and sped him inside the hospital, shouting to my mother for his blood type.

She grabbed our hands, and soon we were running right behind them. They got Dad into the emergency room and worked for several hours, doing anything they could to save his life. I never heard my mom pray so loudly. We spent the next week in the hospital. I heard terms like, "touch and go", "doing all we can" and "it's up to him now."

Eventually, my grandparents arrived and took Mason and I to their home in Missouri. Mom stayed with Dad at the hospital. The next four weeks were the longest in my life.

It's been twenty-two years since our trip to the cabin. I have two boys of my own now, plus a beautiful wife and daughter. Dad miraculously beat the odds they'd given him, living through the vicious attack. He doesn't need any photos to prove it happened. The bear made sure of that. He healed up better than his surgeons expected, though, scars and all. He'll never be able to play tennis or swing a golf club again, but he's alive, and thankful to be so.

Mom made sure the cabin and land got sold as soon as possible. The first signed offer was eagerly accepted, and we were all glad to get rid of it, including Dad. It didn't bring much money, but it was enough to put a pool in our backyard. Dad put a sign next to it that read, Paul's Cement Pond.

Mason never married, but made a good career for himself in the airforce, working on military jets. Occasionally, he visits my wife and I. He dotes on my kids, much the same way Uncle Paul used to with Dad, I suppose.

Seems like every Thanksgiving or Christmas, one of my kids asks Grandpoppy to tell his famous grizzly story. Dad shares it with the same fervor he did when telling us Uncle Paul's wolf tale, but in this story, Mason is the hero. Dad's eyes

get bright when he tells the kids he has bear blood running through his veins now! He says the bear is his spirit animal, since they shared blood in the fight.

At almost thirty-two years old now, I think I've heard my Dad tell that story a hundred times. It always leaves my kids speechless, and unable to sleep.

Me as well.

The End