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...about 2,300 words

The Boy and the Wolf

by Max Hambleton

The boy woke to absolute silence. It was still dark, not a shadow in the room. He shook his hand in front of his face, knowing he would see nothing. He loved these first moments on the island. When he could walk around the small room not knowing if his eyes were open or closed. He wondered if he was really awake. Slowly walking past the other beds in the room he found the wall that led him down a narrow and turning flight of stairs. His legs were still stiff with sleep, and he had the feeling he floated down the last few steps, still in his dream. He noticed the main stove was not burning, though the room felt warm. I'll have to get the coals going when I come back in, he thought. He stepped out onto the porch and smelled the cool fresh morning. Rich with dew and sulfur. He grabbed the first coat he recognized off the rack. His fathers. A puffy down jacket that kept his body warm, but left his legs with goose bumps. He stepped into his thick woolen Duck boots and opened a door to the world. He heard the screech of an owl and then another one farther away, returning the call. He heard ducks. They cackled loudly from every direction. They laughed and told jokes about arrogant hunters and men. Walking toward the shed, the boy thought of what the day would hold. Cold benches. Burning fingers. Thick gloves. Laughing ducks. Powder. Impact. Blood. He unlatched the wooden door

and stood before the small gasoline generator. First light was beginning to hit the island, and he could see the outline of the machine and its plastic starter. He grabbed the T-shaped handle firmly in his right hand, finding the choke with his other. Flooding the motor with gas he pulled firmly on the chord. It started on his first try, which he was proud of. He wanted to be strong one day. The roar of the combustion engine filled every pore of the boy, and forced him back out into the breaking dawn. He stared out at the boggy marshes looking for the hunting-blinds that were spread out across the island. He knew them by name, and with the rising sun tried to spot each of them. The Liberty blind. The Longshore. The Enclave. He thought again about the day. Cold. Numb toes. Fire! Head. Wings. Feet. Lungs. Heart. Warm. Blood smells the same as it tastes.

After stoking up both the cast iron stove, which heated most of the house, and the open brick fireplace, which gave light and general life to the main room, the boy sat down on a couch and waited for his father to wake. He thought of nothing, the sun slowly cresting the horizon and piercing into the room like small bullet holes, dust dancing in the beams. The boy began to doze. He felt the warm sun across his face and opened his eyes. It was strange no one else was up. Now that the generator was on and humming, the house should be alive with his brother, his uncle, grandfather, and his father. But nothing stirred besides the wind and maybe the raccoons in the attic. He decided to check on his uncle first, who was amiable and slept that night in the same upstairs room as the boy. He climbed back up the winding stairs, which groaned beneath his feet, and found the room empty. Two of the beds had been slept in. He decided his uncle must be in the bathroom and went back downstairs to the back room, where his the rest of his kin lay. The boy cracked the door, letting a window of light into the dark room. Every bed was empty and unmade. He went back to the main room, then to the porch. No one. He listened hard.

Nothing. Only the whirl of the generator and the laughing ducks. He stood still to think. They must have gone out to the blinds early. But his fathers coat... It was below freezing out. Had he taken another? The boy went back to the porch and froze. On a wooden bench stood half a dozen shotguns in their racks. His brothers Remington Automatic, his uncles pump action, the Winchester double barrel, the break-action 20, the 410... Every gun was there. He turned around and saw an assortment of boots and jackets. His mind whirled. They couldn't be outside, but they weren't here. Each scenario that went through his head made as little sense as someone suffering the cold without the proper gear.

The boy decided he had to search the island. There were no phones to call anyone and the caretakers, two rotund watermen named Charlie Brown and Little Duck, didn't usually stop by the house until the afternoon. He found his clothes, hat and scarf and gloves, dressing warmly. He stepped outside and was blinded by the cold morning sun. He rubbed his eyes. When he opened them again he saw a large red wolf standing a dozen yards away, his head slightly lowered, staring at him. Not his breath, or his hands, or his feet could move. The boy was frozen. He saw in his head, the animal darting towards him, long legs thick with matted fur closing the gap between them. The weight of it as it pinned him down and sank its teeth into his flesh. It took everything the boy had. All of him, to turn and run the few feet to the door. He crashed into the wooden frame struggling to grab the handle in his thick gloves. His hands slid around the knob, unable to grip, and he heard steps behind him, bounding closer. He used both hands and turned hard. The door swung open and he dove inside, throwing the door shut behind him. He crept back to the window and saw the wolf, who hadn't moved. It hadn't even tried to come after him. Now it put it's head up, but kept it's eyes on the boy. He watched the wolf for a long time. After a while it laid down, resting its head between its paws but

never broke its gaze. The boy walked into the kitchen and stood in front of the window there. It only took a moment before the wolf adjusted its gaze, spotting the boy's eyes like a magnet. They stared endlessly. No one moved. Eventually the boy's thoughts returned to his family and his failed attempt to search the island. He decided to go back outside, this time with his gun, to shoot the wolf that was keeping him from finding his kin. He loaded both barrels of his 20 gauge, which his grand-father had handed down to him only a month earlier. He slowly opened the door and without stepping outside, raised the barrel and took aim. The shells were buckshot, which send a cloud of bb's in a wide direction, and at such a short distance, made the wolf was an easy target. He peered at it past his gun-sight, the rich sun reflecting off its light red fur seeming to shimmer in fire. He checked the safety and braced himself for the recoil. The wolf still didn't move. It lay there with its head down, staring. The gun began to feel heavy in the boy's arms. The barrel shook. He lowered his weapon and once again stared with the wolf. He tried walking around it, and as he moved away, the wolf trotted a little closer. No more than 20 feet. The boy stopped, and then so did the wolf. The animal moved with him. Following at a distance. It frightened the boy, and he thought again of what the wolf could do to him, but he had no choice. A mallard jumped up from the brush between them. The wolf snapped a few feathers, as the duck took flight into the sky. Just as quickly it was gone. 50 feet in the air, honking sarcastically. The wolf stared after it for a moment, then looked back to the boy.

The boy and the wolf continued to walk. The wind picked up and the boy readjusted his scarf and moved his fingers inside of his gloves. He was feeling overcome by something. A feeling he didn't recognize. That something had been done that couldn't be undone. Something he couldn't explain or control. A heaviness settled itself deep

inside of him. He felt tired and realized he hadn't eaten. He thought about turning back. He might make it to the house before sunset. The boy and the wolf had walked nearly half the island. Morning had turned to afternoon. But it was cold and grey and the wolf hadn't allowed the boy to think of anything else other than his family.

Relatively the island was small. About three miles long and two miles wide at it's thickest point. High grass and deep mud coated most of the island with patches of forest and water. Tough ground to cover. Galoshes would let you walk right through the thickest mud. The boy was thankful for the woolen lining of the ones he had on, which only came up to his knee. He would walk for another hour, and then head back. Before dark. He looked at the wolf, who was staring at him, and thought again about shooting it. But he knew he wouldn't. They walked together. Alone.

The boy reached the southern tip of the island in poor time. It was all marsh and ice on this side, and he was forced to move backwards and find a new path several times. The sun was beginning to descend behind the water and as the air cooled, the ducks' laughter grew. Their honking drove into the boys mind until it was all he could hear. He fired his gun into the air to silence them, but they didn't stop, or even pause. Guns didn't scare them. They laughed at his desperation and his despair. The boy's fingers and toes felt numb. His ears burned and his lips were dry and rough. He reached the bay that surrounded the island and looked out at the water. He could make out the pine needles flicking in the wind that gave camouflage to the blind. Liberty blind. Beside it was a small white boat, and air rushed into his lungs. Men were getting into the boat, handing down their guns and ammo. The boy called out for them. His voice cracked and he coughed but he kept calling. The last man landed heavily onto the cramped boat, which began slowly backing up from the flimsy four legged structure that kept hunters hidden

from their prey. The boy ran forward, crashing into the water, waving madly and screaming at the top of his lungs. The last man stared out at him, and the boat continued to go in reverse towards the boy. He took another step and fell over one of his frozen feet, slamming face first into the ice-cold water. He was up an instant later, and already the boat sped away, the front end bucking. The boy cupped his hands and called out. A few moments of ash colored wake was all that remained. And then, nothing.

The cold crushed the boy. His body shook violently, and he struggled to breathe, and his feet wouldn't move. Below the water, his boots were sunk deep in the sticky mud. His numb feet left him feeling like he couldn't move his legs at all. He yanked on the left with both his hands, managing to slip his foot out of his boot, and fell backwards into the water. Just then, he knew he a mistake had been made. His other leg was still stuck in the mud, and as his body fell, the boy felt it snap.

The boy had always been afraid. Sometimes he hid it well. But underneath he feared a thousand things. A thousand ways to die. He pulled at his leg despite the awesome pain and for the first time in his entire life, the fear left him. The earth slowed down, and he felt very clear. He felt alone, and free. There would be no possibility. There was nothing else. This would be the last thing that ever happened to him.

He clenched his jaws at the pain as he tried to shake his ankle loose. It became something else. A sound. A color. It whirled and shot through him and he thought it might destroy him. Slowly, the foot slid free and the boy plunged backward again, struggled to keep his head above water. His lungs now drew quick frantic breaths on their own. He swam and crawled forward, no longer able to feel his arms or legs. With a final lunge he plummeted face first onto the muddy silt above the shore. He raised his head and saw the red wolf standing a few yards away, staring into his eyes. The boy cried out

at it. Tears burned his face. He knew how helpless he looked. In his desperation, the boy tried to call out for the wolf. But his breath would not let him speak. And his lips and tongue were numb. All that came out of his mouth was a mush of garbled sounds. He cried harder and begged the wolf in his mind to help him. To keep him warm. The wolf stared silently, only moving to lick its nose. The boy laid his head back down. Too exhausted to move. He closed his eyes and breathed down into the dirt, feeling hot, moist breath against his cheek. He felt something press beside him. Something large, and warm. It would protect him. The boy drifted into sleep feeling safe.