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ORPHAN CALVES

(excerpted from the novel Second Samuel)

The boy sat on a piece of canvas and added logs to the fire while his father drank coffee. Sparks rose on the heat and the boy watched them climb toward the cedar limbs and the black pools of sky.

“Do you remember your grandfather, David?”

“Yes,” the boy said, and wished it were true. He remembered a funeral, when he was three.

“Your grandfather brought me up on this mountain when I was seventeen. That was the last year he hunted.” Then silence, but the boy knew what sort of thoughts his father was having. He also knew that his own home was in Chicago now, and that he was another man’s boy now, with another man’s name.

“Why didn’t he?” the boy said.

“Why didn’t who what?”

“My grandfather. Why did he stop hunting?”

“He was sixty-seven years old,” the father said. “But that wasn’t the reason. Because he was still walking to work at the railroad office in Big Timber when he was seventy-five. I don’t know. We took a bull elk and a goat that year, I remember. The goat was during spring season and every inch of its hide was covered with ticks. I carried it down whole and after a mile I was covered with ticks too. I never shot another goat. I don’t know why he quit. He still went out after birds in the wheat stubble, by himself. So it’s not true that he stopped hunting completely. He stopped hunting with me. And he stopped killing. Once in every five or six times he would bring back a pheasant, if it seemed like a particularly good autumn night to have pheasant for supper. Usually he just went out and missed every shot on purpose. There were plenty of birds in the fields where he was walking, and your grandmother or I would hear his gun fire, at least once. But I guess when a man feels himself getting old, almost as old as he thinks he will ever get, he doesn’t much want to be killing things anymore. I guess you might have to kill one bird in every ten or twenty, or the pheasants might lose their respect for you. They might tame out. Your grandfather had no desire to live among tame pheasants, I’m

sure. But I suppose you would get a little reluctant, when you came to be seventy, about doing your duty toward keeping them wild. And he would not hunt with me anymore then, not even pheasants, not even to miss them. He said it was because he didn't trust himself with a partner, now that his hands were unsteady. But his hands were still steady. He said it was because I was too good. That he had taught me as well as he knew how, and that all I could learn from him now would be the bad habits of age, and those I would find for myself, in my turn. He never did tell me the real reason."

"What did he die of?"

"He was eighty-seven then," said the father. "Christ. He was tired."

The boy's question had been a disruption. Again his father went silent. Then he shook his head, and poured himself the remaining coffee. He did not like to think of the boy's grandfather as an eighty-seven-year-old man, the boy understood. As long as his grandfather was dead anyway, his father preferred thinking of him younger.

"I remember when I got my first moose," the father said. "I was thirteen. I had never shot anything bigger than an owl. And I caught holy hell for killing that owl. I had my Winchester .30-30, like the one you're using. He gave it to me that year, at the start of the season. It was an old-looking gun even then. I don't know where he got it. We had a moose that he had stalked the year before, in a long swampy cottonwood flat along the Yellowstone River. It was a big cow, and this year she had a calf.

"We went there on the first day of the season and every hunting day for a week, and hunted down the length of that river flat, spaced apart about twenty yards, and came out at the bottom end. We saw fresh tracks every day, but we never got a look at that moose and the calf. It was only a matter of time, my father told me, before we would jump her. Then that Sunday we drove out and before he had the truck parked my hands were shaking. I knew it was that day. There was no reason why, yet I had such a sure feeling it was that day, my hands had begun shaking. He noticed, and he said: 'Don't worry.'

"I said: 'I'm fine.' And my voice was steady. It was just my hands.

"I can see that,' he said. 'But you'll do what you need to do.'

"'Yessir,' I said. 'Let's go hunting.'

"That day he put me at the head end of our cottonwood flat and said he would walk down along the river bank to the bottom, and then turn in. We would come at the moose from both ends and meet

in the middle and I should please not shoot my father when he came in sight. I should try to remember, he said, that he was the uglier one, in the orange hat. The shaking had left me as soon as we started walking, holding our guns. I remember it all. Before he went off I said: 'What does a moose look like?'

"'What the hell do you mean, what does a moose look like?'

"'Yes, I know,' I said. 'I mean, what is he gonna do when I see him? When he sees me. What color is he? What kind of thing is he gonna do?'

"And he said:

"'All right. She will be black. She will be almost pitch black. She will not look to you very much bigger than our pickup. She is going to be stupid. She will let you get close. Slide right up to within thirty or forty yards if you can and set yourself up for a good shot. She will probably not see you, and if she does, she will probably not care. If you miss the first time, which you have every right to do, I don't care how close you get, if you miss the first time, she may even give you another. If you catch her attention, she may bolt off to me or she may charge you. Watch out for the calf when you come up on her. Worry her over the calf, and she will be mad. If she charges you, stand where you are and squeeze off another and then jump the hell out of the way. We probably won't even see her. All right?'

"I had walked about three hundred yards before I saw what I thought was a Holstein. It was off to my left, away from the river, and I looked over there and saw black and white and kept walking till I was just about past it. There were cattle pastured along in that flat but they would have been beef cattle, Herefords, brown and white like a deer. I didn't think about that. I went on looking everywhere else until I glanced over again when I was abreast and saw I was walking along sixty yards from a grazing moose. I stopped. My heart started pumping so hard it seemed like I might black out, and I didn't know what was going to happen. I thought the moose would take care of that. Nothing happened.

"Next thing I was running. Running flat out as fast as I could, bent over double like a soldier would do in the field, running as fast but as quietly as I could. Running right at that moose. I remember clearly that I was not thinking anything at all, not for those first seconds. My body just started to run. I never thought, Now I'll scoot up to within thirty yards of her. I was just charging blind, like a moose or a sow

grizzly is liable to charge you if you get her mad or confused. Who knows what I would have done. I wanted a moose pretty badly, I thought. I might have galloped right up to within five yards before I leveled, if it hadn't been for that spring creek.

"I didn't see it till I was in the air. I came up a little hillock and jumped, and then it was too late. The hillock turned out to be one bank of a spring-fed pasture seepage, about fifteen feet wide. I landed up to my thighs in mud. It was a prime cattle wallow, right where I had jumped. I must have spent five minutes sweating my legs out of that muck, I was furious with myself, and I was sure the moose would be gone. But the moose was still grazing the same three feet of grass. And by that time I had some of my sense back.

"I climbed the far bank of the mudhole and lay up along the rise where I could steady my aim on the ground. From there I had an open shot of less than forty yards, but the moose was now facing me head on, so I would probably either kill her clean or miss her altogether. My hands started shaking again. I tried to line up the bead and it was ridiculous. My rifle was waving all over that end of the woods. For ten minutes I lay there struggling to control my aim, squeezing the rifle tighter and tighter and taking deeper breaths and holding them longer. Finally I did a smart thing. I set the rifle down. I rolled over on my back and rubbed my eyes and discovered that I was exhausted. I got my breath settled back down in rhythm again. If I could just take that moose, I thought, I was not going to want anything else for a year. But I knew I was not going to do it unless I could get my hands to obey me, no matter how close I was. I tried it again. I remembered to keep breathing easy and low and it was a little better but the rifle was still moving everywhere. When it seemed like the trembling was about to start getting worse all over again I waited till the sights next crossed the moose and jerked off a shot. I missed. The moose didn't even look up.

"Now I was calmer. I had heard the gun fire once, and I knew my father had heard it, and I knew the moose would only give me one more. I realized that there was a good chance I would not get this moose at all, so I was more serious, and humble. This time I squeezed. I knocked a piece off her right antler and before I thought to wonder why a female should have antlers to get shot at she raised her head up and gave a honk like eleven elephants in a circus-train fire. She started to run.

"I got off my belly and dropped the gun and turned around and jumped right back down into that mud. I was still stuck there when I heard her crash by on her way to the river, and then my father's shot.

"But I had wallowed myself out again, and got my rifle up off the ground, by the time he found me, thank God. He took a look at my clothes and said:

" 'Tried to burrow up under him, did you?'

" 'No sir. I heard you fire once. Did you get her?'

" 'Him. That was no cow and calf. That was a bull. No. No more than you.'

"He had been at the river edge about a hundred yards downstream from where the bull broke out. He took his shot while the bull was crossing the gravel bed and the shallows. The moose clambered right out into midstream of the Yellowstone and started swimming for his life. But the current along there was heavy. So the moose was swept down abreast with my father before he got halfway across toward the opposite shore. My father sighted on him as he rafted by, dog-paddling frantically and staying afloat and inching slowly away. The moose turned and looked at him, my father said. He had a chunk broken out of one antler and it was dangling down by a few fibers and he looked terrified. He was not more than twenty yards off shore by then and he could see my father and the raised rifle. My father said he had never seen more personality come into the face of a wild animal. All right, my father said the moose told him, Do what you will do. They both knew the moose was helpless. They both also knew this: my father could kill the moose, but he couldn't have him. The Yellowstone River would have him. My father lowered the gun. When he did, my father claimed, the moose turned his head forward again and went on swimming harder than ever. So that wasn't the day I shot mine.

"I shot mine the next Saturday. We went back to the cottonwood flat and split again and I walked up to within thirty yards of the cow and her calf. I made a standing shot, and killed the cow with one bullet breaking her spine. She was drinking, broadside to me. She dropped dead on the spot. The calf didn't move. He stood over the dead cow, stupid, wondering what in the world to do.

"The calf was as big as a four-point buck. When my father came up, he found me with tears flooding all over my face, screaming at the calf and trying to shoo him away. I was pushing against his flanks and

swatting him and shouting at him to run off. At sight of my father, he finally bolted.

“I had shot down the cow while she stood in the same spring seep where I had been stuck. Her quarters weighed out to eight hundred pounds and we couldn’t budge her. We had to dress her and quarter her right there in the water and mud.”

And just that abruptly, silence again; the story finished. The boy’s father checked the tin pot, to be sure there was no more coffee.

“Why did you tell me about that?” the boy said. “Now I don’t want to shoot a moose either.”

But his father was staring into the darkness beyond the firelight. “He was only sixty-seven. He never told me the real reason.”

