

## “WAX AND WANE”

A coyote lay dead in the dirt in front of the wheatfield. It wasn't festering or nothing— a fresh corpse, just a few hours dead. And I was the one who had to move it.

Rosemary saw it from the window while making her morning coffee. She was so upset, saying she couldn't bear looking at its skinny, crumpled body; I couldn't blame her of course, it was a hard sight. I only wished *I* hadn't had to deal with it. If it were a few feet to the left, it would be Mr. Toombs's problem instead of mine. But it wasn't. It was on my land and I didn't want the animal to mess with our strawberries. So, I put on my big boots and got to work.

At the time, I lamented the fact that I couldn't use the animal for anything. Could have made something worthwhile out of it instead of dragging it half a mile into the woods and leaving it there. Well, I guess it's not going to waste, per se, other wild animals will strip its bones for a while instead of scavenging.

I got back to the house, changed clothes, and near boil-washed my hands before going back down to the kitchen to see Rosie.

“I wanted to wait til you got back to eat.” She handed me my reheated plate, “*I am* on my second cup of coffee, though.” She snickered and sat down at the table.

“How far out did you take the poor thing?” She asked.

I tried to make light of it, “Far enough, I hope.”

“*Darlene.*” She wasn't having it. I laughed anyway.

“About a half mile. That thing was hard to drag and I didn't want to touch it.”

She nodded and took another sip of coffee.

“What's the schedule for today?” I asked.

“I'm going to finish packaging up all the bread. And I'm still looking into getting us a goat; Wilma Yates said she'd be willing to let go of one of hers. What's on your agenda?”

“Fruit picking, then cleaning out the shed.”

“I'll come and help after I'm done.”

⊂

That day was uncharacteristically hot for late spring. It was the kind of heat reserved for the dead of summer.

“Miss Darlene?” I heard a voice call from the road, one that I recognized as Edmund Toombs II.

“Hey, Ed. What's the matter?” I put down what I was doing and walked closer to him. He also took a few steps closer but hesitated to cross onto the grass.

“You seen my pa' today?”

“No, not today, no. Did something happen?”

"I don't know yet. But my momma was shouting and worrying around the house for hours before she sent me over here. She kept saying 'He's lost! He's lost!' And I'm doing my best to calm her down but..."

I tried to keep the concern off my face, I didn't want to scare him. I shook my head, "Go inside and ask Rosemary, maybe she's seen him while she was out."

He nodded and headed toward the house.

I looked out past the field at the Toombs' home. It seemed to loom over the land, looking tense and awkward out near the road. It never looked like that before.

⌋

I walked in on Rosie asking about Phoebus, the Toombs's dog, "Was she acting strange?"

Ed faltered trying to comprehend the question, "Uhm- uh- strange *how*?"

"Like, unusually timid, or aggressive, was she barking more or maybe whimpering?" She was serious. I watched from the doorway.

"Oh... She was under the stairs this morning. She's usually sleeping in my parents' room."

"Did she seem frightened?"

"I suppose." He took the piece of fresh bread she offered. She looked as if she didn't get the answer she wanted.

"What's your mama have to say about this?"

"About the dog?"

"About your father."

"She's... anxious, that's the only way I can really describe her right now."

She made an empathetic sound, "I'll walk with you when you go back, see if we can sort it out together."

"Yes'm."

⌋

Rosemary didn't come back until after dark.

I was so worried, that I couldn't focus on work. At some point, I took a break but it didn't help. I paced throughout the house and kept reminding myself that nothing was wrong. *Things are fine, if not a bit strange. Rosemary is okay.* I put on a record. And another, and another.

When Rosie finally got back, she seemed tentative and lost in thought, maybe even a little shaken. I wanted to run and hug her tight but, instead, put a hand on her arm trying to ease her out of her daze. She looked up at me, eyes wide.

"What happened?"

"Something's terribly wrong." She trembled. I led her to a chair and sat her down. "Alma isn't herself and that entire house feels *awful*."

I stared at her intently, "Awful how?"

She shook her head and squeezed my hand, "*Cold and heavy.*"

"Did Alma say anything about Edmund?"

"She just kept raving— Eddy had to convince her to go upstairs and lie down. He kept trying to reassure her that he'd turn up. I just don't know what to do."

I was teary for a moment and said without thinking, "What do you think happened to him?" *Edmund*, I thought, dependable, ol' Edmund just up and left his family one day. Didn't even take the car.

Rosemary looked at me with fear in her eyes, "I have no clue."

The two of us slept uneasily that night. Phoebus and a few stray dogs howled their little hearts out and Rosie and I were wracked with a strange kind of grief.

By the time 6 A.M. rolled around, I had only gotten three hours of sleep and had decided to visit the Toombs' to get an update on everything, maybe even help Alma file a police report if it comes to that. Rosemary fell asleep on my chest at about 5 and I didn't want to wake her up or get out of bed myself for that matter. I lie awake, periodically dozing off until 9.

☾

The walk over to the Toombs' homestead was emotionally arduous. With every step closer, my soul became heavier and heavier like it was going to plummet out of my body if I ever even made it to the front step.

But I *did* make it. Soul intact.

I knocked on the door.

I heard the slow creaking of steps being taken towards the door. Alma had answered; she stood, half covered by the door, sad eyes looking down at me, "Oh, Darlene, good morning."

"Morning, Alma. Uh, Rosemary was here last night and I just wanted to check up on you, see if you were okay." Maybe I should've thought of something better to say. She softened up best she could and let me in her home.

That's when I noticed something strange: She didn't seem like she belonged, just looking at her gave me a headache. Her eyes were too bright, her movements looked like she was both falling behind and moving too quickly.

She, herself, was slightly *off* and I couldn't make sense of why. There was an energy around her that made her threatening and morbidly intriguing. It was as if both poles of a magnet were forced together and didn't instantly repel.

*Is it her or is it me*, I thought. Had the sleepless night finally gotten to me— *No, it was something about her...*

"Where's Eddy?" I wondered aloud.

"Out walking the dog. He's been wanting to get away from me lately, might as well let him. You want coffee, Darlene?"

I wanted to leave, "Please, thank you."

I'd spent three hours there with Alma, but it hadn't felt like it was even *one*.

On the walk home, I couldn't recall much of our conversation but I did remember seeing Phoebus running around in the backyard.

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A week later, Eddy dropped off a little crate on the front porch. I hadn't seen him leave it, nor did Rosie. I hadn't seen any of the Toombs' since I talked to Alma that last Sunday; that was also the last time Rosemary and I had mentioned them to one another.

It was noon and we were preparing this week's produce for the market when we heard Phoebus barking and whining around our house. I opened the door and before I could do anything, she bolted through the door and into the nook between the couch and wall, trembling violently.

I tried to coax her out of her hiding spot with food and a gentle tone but nothing worked. Rosie stood staring out the open door, towards the Toombs home.

"What do you think's out there?" I called back.

"I don't know, I don't see anything."

She closed the door and I walked away from the scared dog with a grimace, "We should call Alma and tell her where Phe ran off to." I didn't truly want to do that but it felt like the rational thing to do. I didn't know why Phoebus came here but there must've been a reason.

"No, no." Rosemary's voice wavered, "Let's just keep her here a while— if they want her they can come get her."

Phoebus dashed out of her hiding spot and into our bedroom. We let her alone, for the time being.

☾

That night, the dog stayed in our bed. I was half asleep when I felt her hop off the quilt and patter out of the room, I didn't think anything of it at first; then, she began to growl.

My eyes sprang open, expecting the worst, thinking through every possible scenario and solution. But I didn't actually have time to consider my next move. Phoebus continued growling, she sounded even further away than I thought possible; where *was* she?

I warily got out of bed. I followed the sound into the kitchen: the dog faced the door, standing straight as a pin, ears up, and watching intently.

I dared to get closer...

A cacophony of noises set off at once: Phoebus' whine of fear was overtaken by a far-off, muffled snarl laced with a woman's cry coming from outside. The sound was like a cheap imitation of a human voice, it cracked and splintered into something bestial, hoarse, and *awful*.

I couldn't move— that thing could've broken down the door and I still wouldn't have been able to move.

It sounded far away but *not far enough*.

An incessant force dragged me towards the door. *You want to go outside*, it told me, *You need to know*. It went against every instinct of self-preservation I had in me— it wanted me *dead*.

*What about your wife?*

*What about the dog?*

*What about your house?*

*What about your life?*

*Don't go out. Don't go out. Don't go out. Don't go out. Don't go out. Don't go out. Don't go out.*

*Don't go out. Don't go out.*

☾

It was colder out than I expected. It wasn't just a cool breeze drifting through the air, I could *feel* the seasons changing. The crisp night air was finicky, warm, and gentle one moment, and harsh the next; guiding us through the transitional months.

Phoebus stood beside me, as my only protection. All of the tools were up in the shed, opposite to where I was then. I peered out into the field, it was deceptively empty and a mere shift in dimension was the only thing indicating something was out there.

The wheat rustled, but not as it had in the wind. Stalks bent out of the way and sprung back in place, making room for whatever was coming toward me.

It emerged from the stocks heaving in a way that made it look disoriented, scared. I almost felt sorry for it. I thought it was only a matter of time before it noticed me.

It straightened itself up.

To this day, I'm still stunned by its form. The thing stood as big as a bear, now grossly hunched while stalking the field's perimeter. Its physical appearance was something hound-like but with the ability to stand on its hind legs, possessing an uninhibited gait as if it was *used* to being bipedal.

I watched as its long snout pointed skyward, looking for God knows what, and howled that disgustingly human howl once again.

Phoebus barked and bore her teeth. The beast, of course, took notice. It got down on all fours again, trying to blend into the grass. It seemed to be examining rather than lying in wait. It looked dead at the dog but never paid me any mind.

It stalked closer, into the light of the moon— I reeled back— its *face*, though dog in shape was *human* in detail. Visible white scleras, protruding brow, and a nose, a human nose the same color as the rest of its flesh. There wasn't much fur on the beast, few patches at the superior leading down to thickets on the inferior— primarily the legs.

The closer it got, Phoebus barked more and more, louder and louder but never moving an inch. It looked just ready to confront when a distant howl cut through the stand-off like an

arrow. It was, of course, close enough to hear but far deeper into the woods, northbound and, more importantly, *away* from my home.

It stood to chase the sound but before skittering away, it looked at me, in all its horrible glory, it *looked* at me with a twinge of knowingness. Recognition. The idea of it bore down into my soul and threatened to tear out my heart and watch it beat as I bled dry.

Again, the distant howl.

The beast wagged its wiry tail, kicking up dirt then disappeared into the wheat.

I hadn't seen the Toombs' again after that. When I told Rosemary what I saw, she'd insisted we take Phoebus and move elsewhere. I had no objections.

END.