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DARK PINES

Written by Will Dean

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DARK PINES

WILL DEAN



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1

Gavrik, Sweden

An elk emerges from the overgrown pines and it is monstrous. Half a ton, maybe more. I stamp the brake, my truck juddering as the winter tyres bite into gravel, and then I nudge my ponytail and switch on my hearing aids. I get the manufacturer's jingle and then I can hear. The elk's thirty metres away from me and he's just standing there; grey and shaggy and big as hell.

My engine's idling. I think of Dad's accident twelve years ago, about his car, what was left of it, and then I punch the horn with my fist. Noise floods my head, but it's not the real sound, not like you'd hear. I get a noise amplified by the plastic curls behind my ears. The horn does its job and the bull elk trots away down the track with his balls hanging low between his skinny grey legs.

I speed up a little and follow him and my heart's beating too hard and too fast. The elk walks into a patch of dappled sun up ahead and then stops. He's prehistoric, a giant, completely wild, ancient and taller than my rented pickup. I brake and thump the horn again but he doesn't look scared. I'm panting now, sweat beading on my brow. Not enough air in the truck. There are no police here; no headlights behind me and none in front.

The fur that coats his antlers glows in the sun and then he swings his heavy head around to face me. His posture changes. Utgard forest darkens all around me and he stamps his hoof down and breaks a thin veneer of ice covering a pothole. My headlights pick out a

splash of dirty water hitting his fur and then he looks straight at me and he drops his head and he charges.

I brake and pull the gearstick to reverse and slam the thick rubber sole of my boot down on the accelerator. My scream sounds alien. The truck pushes backwards and opens up a clear space between me and the bull elk; between my face and his face, between my threaded eyebrows and his rock-hard antlers.

I lift my phone out of my pocket and place it on my lap even though everybody knows there's no reception in Utgard forest. My eyes flit between the windscreen and the rear-view mirror. I'm trying to look in front and behind at the same time, and there's a flash of movement in the trees, something grey, a person maybe, but then it's gone. This is all my fault. I should never have driven after this elk. I see dull sky through his antlers and somewhere inside I reach out for Dad. I hit potholes and fallen branches and those black eyes are still there in my headlights. Thirty kilometres an hour in reverse gear. My phone falls off my lap and rattles around in the footwell. I reverse faster. The light levels are dropping and the elk's still coming straight at me. My left tyre gets caught by the edge of a ditch and I have to turn hard to jump out of it, and then his antlers touch my bumper, metallic scratches piercing my ears, and I can't see a damn thing. I feel a stick of lip balm digging into my thigh and then my mirrors flash and it's someone else's headlights.

Behind me in the distance there's a truck or a tractor, something driving straight at me. It should be a welcome sight but it's not. This track's only wide enough for one of us. The antlers scrape my bonnet again and I wince at the screech. My mouth's dry and I'm hot in my sweater. I'm reversing into a crash with an elk in my face.

And that's when I hear the gunshot.

The elk bolts to the trees and he jumps a ditch and flees into the darkness of the woods. The last thing I see are his rear legs as Utgard forest takes him back.

My palms are sweaty and the steering wheel feels damp and slick.

I brake but keep the engine ticking over. The vehicle behind me, perhaps a quad used by a hunt team to haul out a fresh kill, has turned off into the pines.

'Breathe,' I tell myself. 'Breathe.'

I've been saved by a rifle shot on the first day of the elk hunt. Three years ago, in London, that sound would have been a headline and it would have been horrific. Now, here in Värmland, in this life, it's normal. Safe, even.

I pull my sweater over my head and it gets tangled in the seat-belt. I fight with it for a while, hot and flustered, before pulling it loose. Strands of fine blonde hair float up from the fabric on a breeze of static.

I push the gearstick forward and drive. Not as fast as before, and not as fast as I'd like, but carefully, headlights on full beam, eyes glancing into the dark places at the side of the track. And then I'm swinging the truck up and onto the asphalt road and back towards Gavrik town. The traffic on the E16 is still gridlocked but from now on I'll stay on the motorway. No more shortcuts. No more parallel forest roads.

I'm tired and hungry and the adrenaline in my blood is starting to thin. I've got thirty-two hours to write up eight leading stories before we go to print on Thursday night. I dip my headlights and I can still hear the sound of antlers scraping my bonnet. I pass the sign for Gavrik and the streetlights begin. Civilisation returns in layers. First cat's eyes and lines down the centre of the road, now municipal lighting. Unlit forests can keep their fucking distance. I want pavements and cafes and cinemas and fast food and libraries and bars and parking meters. I want predictable and I want man-made.

I pass between the drive-thru McDonald's and the ICA Maxi supermarket and head onto *Storgatan,* the main street in town. My pulse is slowing down but I keep getting flashbacks to Dad's crash. And I wasn't even there. My memories are lies, the images solidifying over the years. I drive on. The twin chimneys of the liquorice factory

loom in the background like the spires of a cathedral. Shops are closing and staff are saying goodnight in as few words as possible before they shuffle off, collars raised, to their Volvos and their homes and their underfloor heating and their big-screen TVs.

My parking space is marked with my name, but if it wasn't it wouldn't matter. The town is over-catered with parking facilities. It's future-proofed, but nobody knows if and when that future, the future where Gavrik grows by fifty per cent, will ever happen. Why would it? Those who grow up here, leave. Those who visit don't seem to return.

I lock my truck and open the door to *Gavrik Posten*, the town's newspaper and my place of work. Weekly circulation: 6,000 copies. I didn't expect to end up here, but I did. I interviewed at four decent papers all within a three-hour radius of Mum and I got four offers. My mother lives in Karlstad and her family consists of yours truly so when she got sick I moved back from London. It's not easy, *she* is not easy. But, she's my mum. Gavrik's close to Karlstad but it's not too close and Lena, the half-Nigerian editor of the *Posten,* is someone I can learn from. The reception is two chairs and a dusty houseplant in a plastic pot, and a counter with a brass bell and an honesty box.

Lars, our veteran part-time reporter, isn't in. I flip the counter – a slice of pine on a squeaky hinge – and hang up my coat. My fingers are still shaking. I kick off my boots and slip on my indoor shoes. The front office is two desks, one for me and one for Lars. Then there are two back offices, one for Lena, and one for Nils, our pea-brained ad salesman. Altogether, it's a shithole of an office but we turn out a pretty decent community paper each and every Friday.

I don't want to live in Gavrik. But I do. Mum needs me although she's never said as much, not even close. It's spread to her bones and her blood and if I can do tiny things – bring her the rose-scented hand cream she loves, read to her from her favourite recipe books now that she finds it too tiring, bring in fresh cinnamon rolls for her

to taste – then I will. I'm not good at all this, it doesn't come naturally to me just like it never came naturally to her. But I do what I can. And then one day, one sad-happy day, I'll return to the real world, to a city – any city, the bigger the better.

'Tuva Moodyson,' Nils says, stepping out from his office. His hair's spiked with gel like a teenage boy's and his shirt's so thin I can see his nipples. 'What happened to you? Go home for a quick roll between the sheets, did you?'

I sit down and realise my T-shirt's still sticking to my skin with sweat and my hair's all over the place, strands plastered to my face, my ponytail falling apart. I'm a mess.

'Just a quick threesome,' I say. 'Would have invited you to join us, but there were criteria, so . . .'

He looks a little confused and slowly closes his door, returning to his office which is actually the staff kitchen.

I wake my PC from its slumber and find the articles I've written and those I've just titled and outlined. I hear a beep in my left hearing aid, a battery warning, the first of three before it'll cut out and leave me with the ten per cent hearing I have remaining in that ear.

Behind my PC's anti-glare screen, I have eight Word documents stacked one behind the other. A local nursery is expanding, creating three more childcare places and one new job. The facade cladding of a block of apartments near mine is being rebuilt because the original wasn't fit for Värmland weather and it's coming off in chunks like flakes from a scab. The local council, *Gavrik Kommun*, has decided we can make do with one less snowplough this winter. It's keeping two extra farmers on standby. The contest for the 2015 Lucia is underway and applications need to be sent to the Lutheran church on *Eriksgatan* by the end of the month. There's a Kommun-wide tick warning because of a spike in Lyme disease and encephalitis cases. The critters will be frozen dead soon but thanks to a mild September we still have a few more weeks of their company. Björnmossen's, the

largest gun and ammunition store in town, will stay open two hours later than usual for the first week of October so hunters not taking time off work can still buy their supplies. There will be a handicraft fair in Munkfors town on October 21st. Finally, the story I've been working on today, the unveiling of a new bleaching plant at the local pulp mill, the second largest employer in the area after the Grimberg liquorice factory.

That's my news. That's it. Derived from rumour and council minutes and eavesdropping in the local pharmacy. It may sound pedestrian but it's what my readers want. How many times have you torn out an article from a national paper and stuck it to your fridge? How many times have you cut out a piece from your local paper, maybe your daughter scoring in a hockey match or your neighbour growing the town's longest carrot, and stuck that to your fridge? My readers give a shit and because of that, so do I.

Lars walks in and the bell tinkles and he starts to peel off his old-man coat.

I'm writing so I switch off my aids to concentrate. The fabric of my T-shirt is loosening from my skin and I'm starting to feel normal again. I can smell my own sweat but my deodorant masks most of it. If I was still interning at *The Guardian*, I'd have freshened up, but here, no. It's okay. Not a priority.

Lena's door opens.

She's standing there. Diana Ross in jeans and a fleece. Her eyes are wide and she's saying nothing.

'What?' I ask.

She holds her hand over her mouth. She's shaking her head and speaking but I can't see her lips. I can't read them.

'What?' I say, fumbling to switch on my hearing aids. 'What's happened?'

Lena takes her hand away from her face.

'They've found a body.'

2

'Put the news on,' says Lena, pointing at the old TV attached to the wall.

My aids come to life and the jingle plays in my ears.

'I knew it,' says Nils, as he joins us in the main office. He looks excited like a schoolboy. 'Didn't I say, Lena? Them woods are cursed. My brother reckons the body's down in Utgard forest, that's what he reckons. His mate down at the ambulance station got the call. Didn't I say it'd happen again in them woods? Yes I did.'

I switch on the local news.

'What did you hear, Nils?' I ask. 'What exactly did your brother say?'

Nils looks at Lena. 'You reckon it's Medusa again?' Then he turns to me. 'Before your time, Tuva.' And then he looks to Lars. 'What year was Medusa?'

'The last body was found in 1994,' says Lars. 'But this won't be . . .' He scratches his bald patch. 'That was twenty ago, this'll just be some hunting accident.'

'Yeah, right,' Nils says. 'Just an accident. In Utgard forest. Sure. My brother reckons they found the body in Mossen village.'

I take my coat.

Nils looks at Lena. 'You gonna let her go to Utgard all on her own?'

I pull on my boots and nod to her. 'Call me if you get details.'

'Take the camera,' she says.

Of course I'm going to take the fucking camera. 'Sure,' I say, and

then I grab it from Lars' desk, where it's recharging and step out into the dark empty street.

It's not raining but a damp haze drifts through the air in waves. Was the gunshot that scared my elk the same one that killed somebody? I shiver and jog to my parking space.

I drive thirty kilometres straight out of town and under the motorway. Utgard forest is everything I can see on the right-hand side of the road. I pass a signpost covered in bindweed and approach the mouth of the woods, a barely visible gap in a thick barrier of spruce. I skirted Utgard earlier on my way south from the pulp mill to avoid traffic, but now I have to drive deep inside it. Radio Värmland interrupts a folk song to tell me that the police have sealed off an area of Mossen village due to the discovery of a body. They ask hunters and dog-walkers to stay away until further notice.

The radio starts to break up as I leave the asphalt behind and turn onto the grey gravel track. It's wide enough for two cars to pass if both nudge the open ditches. It's as dark as crushed velvet out here so I switch my beams to full and squint into the floating mists. In spring the forest is okay if you're inside a truck. It's all light green spruce growth and wild-flowers. Driving my Hilux pickup, I can handle it. But this is October and the pine needles are dark and sodden and the moss is brown and the birches are naked. My dash reads two degrees above zero. I'm driving up a dark alley with pine walls as tall as lighthouses.

The radio comes back on intermittently but it's just a weather forecast. More rain. My GPS map shows a thin track that enters a featureless green area from the south and then stops right at its core. There are five houses dotted along the track so I just need to find the one with a cop car parked outside. I scratch my left ear and touch my hearing aid, partly because it's unavoidable, and partly because it's reassuring when I'm somewhere like this.

The Medusa murders were twenty years before I arrived. They're a kind of local legend with a few facts and then plenty of bullshit

piled on top. Three shootings in four years. The police never charged anyone and then the killings just stopped. The bodies were all found out in the woods and they were mutilated in some way, and that's about all I know. Local people don't like to talk about it. And the ones that do aren't worth listening to.

I approach the first house of the village with my radio on low in case there's more news. I slow down to ten kilometres an hour. The place looks run down. The wooden clapboards need painting and ivy covers some of the windows. The only thing I can really see is a garden, lit dimly by barely functioning solar lights, the cheap kind that this far north work a little in summer and barely at all in October. The houselights are off. Nobody home. As I accelerate away, I look in my mirrors and notice a light I didn't see before, but it's not in the house. Then it goes off as quick as it came on.

My phone battery's low so I plug the adapter into the truck's cigarette lighter. The music on the radio changes from harmonicas to banjos but the signal's weak and there's lots of white noise. I drive slower now. The track gradually gets narrower and narrower and on each side of it are scratched cliffs of granite and boulders piled on top of each other in clusters. The pines lean in towards each other, meeting in some places over the centre of the track, so that it's almost enclosed. Looks like an awkward reverse to me.

The next house looks normal. It's lit up with pendulum lamps hanging in all the windows and outdoor lights attached to the walls. One-storey high, it's a *torp*, a traditional dark red cottage. I slow down again and let the truck amble with no pressure on the accelerator pedal. I switch on my wipers to clear the windscreen and stare out of the passenger-side window. Through a cloud of bugs I can see a *Taxi Gavrik* Volvo in the driveway. There are dead plants in the window boxes, some kind of geranium. I think I see a face look back from a window; a child's face, low at the sill. But now I'm past the house and approaching a steep hill. I rev the Toyota and pick up speed. Heated seat to low. The hill has been recently gritted

and my truck sounds noisy, winter tyres chewing up the stone chips as I climb. At the top, the track bends sharply to the right so I brake and my wheels skid on a slick of fallen leaves.

Each side of the track is marsh now, not ditches. The gravel track, elevated a few centimetres, slices through boggy land with reeds and murky water reflecting the sky.

The next house is on the right side of the road and I smell it before I see it. My lips are dry from the car heat so I take the lip balm out of my jeans pocket. I can smell fire, woodsmoke, and it's reassuring in a way. Like a home. But this place doesn't look like a home, it looks like some kind of workshop. I don't slow down because inside there are faces lit by fluorescent strip lights. A one-storey workshop, open on one side with a wood burner in the centre and two, maybe three men in overalls – maybe three carpenters, carving and sanding. Next to the workshop is a modest house painted yellow with a couple of dead birds hanging from a hook outside the front door. Pheasants, maybe? Partridges? There's a row of five numbered post boxes screwed to a metal bar.

The road narrows even further so I have to focus to stay on the level. The ditches either side look steep and full. They're October full, just like the lakes and the reservoir outside town and the wells in local gardens. I think I see a flashing light in the distance but then the trees obscure it.

My phone has 22% battery. I pull it from the adapter and throw it down next to the camera. The windscreen starts to fog and I switch on the fan and crack open the window. The forest smells earthy like soil underneath an upturned stone. It smells of woodlice and rotten apples and slugs and wet carpet. I turn a corner and swerve past a fallen birch branch. There are lights up ahead: flashing blue roof-lights on three cars and an ambulance, and I'm happy because they're protection and they show me where my story's at, but also I'm happy for the powerful lights on their roofs, flashing up and bouncing off the wet pine branches like blue strobes at a rave.

I park and switch off my engine. The rain's stronger now so I pull off my hearing aids and tuck them into my jacket pocket. If they get wet, they won't work and I can't afford to replace them. Each aid is a month's salary. If I wear them with a hat I get crackling and feedback. I take my camera and my phone and pull up my hood and step out onto the track. The air smells even more pungent than before. Mulch. Old leaves and sitting water.

The house is quite nice, actually. It looks more expensive than the others, two storeys with large windows and a first-floor veranda wrapping round the entire building. A TV's on upstairs. The room's flashing.

I sense a voice somewhere but can't hear the words or see anyone. I reach under my hood and slip my left aid over my ear.

'Tuvs,' says a voice from the veranda above me.

I look up.

'You took your time.'

It's Constable Thord Petterson, number two in command of Gavrik's two-man police force.

'It's the middle of nowhere,' I say. 'Can I come inside?'

He shakes his head and smiles, rain dripping from the gutter above his head. He points to himself and then points down to me.

I keep the camera in my bag and wait by the front door. The veranda above protects me from the rain so I place my right hearing aid back in and switch it on.

The front door opens but something else seizes my attention. To my right, behind the house, I see two paramedics carrying a stretcher out of the woods escorted by Gavrik's police chief. Soaked through and covered in mud to their knees, they step carefully over a derelict stone wall and through a thick patch of brambles. Then I see the other one. There's a man walking behind the police chief and he's wearing a bright orange baseball cap and he's carrying a rifle.