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LAURA PRITCHETT*

Sight the Gun High

He'll admit that he's not the typical rancher and five seconds in his kitchen confirms this. BUSH MUST GO reads the bumper sticker on his fridge, COWS NOT CONDOS, WORLD PEACE, and SELECTED NOT ELECTED with Bush's name X'd out. I've been in a lot of ranchers' kitchens, but not one like this, not with organic soap next to the sink, a Christmas card from John Kerry, a peace sign on the wall. And unlike other ranchers I've known, he's chatty on the phone, which rings about every five minutes—he's running for the Colorado State Senate as a Democrat—and given the political feelings out here, there's probably a lot of talking to do. While he takes one such call, I glance around his kitchen, at the wood stove keeping the room warm on this rainy fall day, the wooden floors and walls, the huge windows.

There are 1300 acres out there—mountain meadows that comprise his base ranch that borders the Elk River. Close by, Red Angus bulls rest, knees folded under hulking bodies, chewing their cud, and far beyond, the pines of Routt National Forest slope upward and give way to waves of mountains. We're pretty far north here, past the boutique-ized Steamboat Springs, past the ranchettes, past the fancy houses, into country of round hay bales, pickup trucks, and horses that, invigorated by the cool fall weather, gallop across pasture.

Jay Fetcher is a lithe man in a fleece jacket, khaki hiking pants, and comfy-looking moccasin shoes, and to be honest, he looks like he belongs a little closer to town than out here. He's been ranching his whole life, though, and with an advanced degree in animal genetics and a reputation for progressive practices, he seems an interesting mix of tradition and new-school science and ideology. I figure if any rancher is open to the possibility of ranching alongside wolves, it would be him. And he's going to be one of the first to *do* that, as the gray wolves migrate from Wyoming into the top portion of the state. He and his neighbors are the testing ground, basically, for wolves in northern Colorado, and I'm curious what he and others are going to do when they come.

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"People aren't going to be very happy," he says calmly when I pose this question to him. "They're not. But wolves are right at the doorstep, they're coming, they're probably already here. What we do when they get here, that's the question."

I wait for him to say more, but he doesn't, so I nudge him. "And what will that be? The three Ss?"

I try to make a joke of it—this rancher lingo for "shoot, shovel, and shut up"—but he doesn't smile and he doesn't blink an eye when he says, "Yep, pretty much."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Like, how many ranchers are going to take that approach?"

"Like around Craig, about one-hundred percent."

"About one hundred percent of ranchers around Craig would shoot a wolf if they saw it?"

"Yep, pretty much."

I bite my lip and look out his window. I was hoping Jay—this notoriously liberal rancher—would dispel my fears that this was true. That he, if anyone, would be optimistic enough to see a different pattern, a different take, a changing ideology. I've been asking every rancher I bump into lately what he or she thinks about wolves, and I get the familiar arguments: We worked hard to get them out of here, for a reason; Colorado is too populated; wolves roam and kill too much; it's too late to bring them back; they're just flat-out unnecessary; they're some romantic nonsense that only rich urbanites could think up; and why the hell would we want to make more trouble than we've already got? The Colorado Cattleman's Association doesn't want them; neither does the Farm Bureau, the Colorado Wool Growers Association, or any other agricultural organization I know of. And though ag-based people only make up 2.5% of Colorado's population these days, they're the ones who will be dealing with wolves. They've got political sway and they've got guns. There's just not a lot of support for *Canis lupus* out here, not among the ranching crowd I come into contact with.

Jay looks about as discouraged as I am. He admits he's open to wolves, under certain circumstances, but acknowledges that he's a rare duck—so I ask him how other ranchers could come around, or at least think twice before taking a shot and getting out the shovel.

And here the conversation turns a little, into something more hopeful, and we discuss real-world ways of walking this very narrow path. How to acknowledge and deal with, as he puts it, the "very tight balance."

"Here's what I want," he says, holding up a finger for each point: "One, the ability to protect my property; Two, and protect my cattle; Three, aggressively; and Four, but carefully."

Meaning this: Jay wants the right to take a shot "across the bow" at wolves that are threatening his cattle—to teach them to fear humans and their belongings—and to have this be within his legal rights. There's no doubt that wolves are going to kill livestock, and that they need to be discouraged from doing so if they're going to have a chance.

And when the wolves do kill livestock, the subsequent action is important too. The idea of ranchers being compensated for wolf-caused losses is not universally popular, to be sure. Ranchers expect compensation, arguing that wolves put their livelihood in jeopardy; opponents say that ranchers shouldn't be reimbursed for losses suffered because of Mother Nature. Plus there's the question of who's going to pay, how much, and how all that gets determined. It gets complicated. But one clear thing is that if ranchers are going to keep the guns down, they're going to want compensation for dead animals.

"Well, but you lose animals to lightning," I say.

"I can't control lightning, wolves I can," Jay says. "Look, I'm willing to put up with a few dead animals a year. Accept it as part of the bargain, part of the gamble. But more than that, no way."

And so I ask him: "In the best of all possible scenarios, how would the system work so that you—and other ranchers—would be compensated in such a way that the wolves could stay alive?"

"If I find a dead animal," Jay says, "and there's enough evidence of a wolf-kill, here's what I want:

(1) No rigmarole—I want to be compensated quickly and easily.

(2) That compensation should not always be based on market value. What some people don't realize is that losing a cow sometimes means the loss of fifty years of genetic material—there's *a lot* more than market value at stake. There also needs to be compensation for losses and injuries. For example, I have a friend in Wyoming who had his horses chased into a fence by wolves, and they were all cut up. Wolves cause trouble, trouble that's expensive.

(3) Local control. Twenty years ago, I could talk to the Forest Service guy about problems, now everything has to go to Washington, DC and it takes a year. Decisions coming out of DC are so out-of-touch with what locals want that it's crazy. Bring the control back home.

(4) Trust. There needs to be trust between Division of Wildlife/Forest Service and the rancher. Right now, relations are poor. The situation always depends on the local government guy. And I don't think ranchers will claim wolf responsibility if it's not a wolf. But when

they make a claim, they don't want to have to defend that claim. They want to be trusted.

(5) And finally, if a wolf is in the act of killing one of my animals, I want to be able to take it out."

A rancher's primary job is to husband livestock. I grew up on a small ranch in northern Colorado, and my childhood memories are dominated with scenes of doing just that. The calf born in cold weather put into the bathtub, its blood streaming with warm water down the drain. Other calves in the kitchen, late at night, their new soft-looking hooves sliding across linoleum as they tried, by instinct, to stand. Coke bottles full of milk and newborn calves sucking, mouths wrapping around glass and plastic. Once I saw my mother, desperate to save a suffocating newborn calf, bend down and administer mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, and I watched the calf kick and come back to life. I remember my dad reaching his finger into the mouth of another, expert and with lightning speed, to pull out the fluidy goop that was suffocating her. I've checked on cattle with him a hundred times—counting, looking, searching for the stray, caring. I have watched his eyes as they watch, as they pay attention.

This deep-rooted care is at the core of ranching, and it goes way beyond reason or economic sense. It's an odd form of love, to be sure—fierce protectiveness for an animal that will probably be sold or slaughtered, but also the belief that while it's alive, by god, the animal is going to be protected and nurtured.

I stop frequently at my parents' ranch these days—I ended up settling down very near the place where I was raised, and their ranch is on my way home from town. I wander in the farmhouse to play a few notes on their piano, since I don't have one; or to the garden to pick a cucumber or two; or out back, to look at the cows. Often my husband and I help with the haying, or fixing an irrigation pipe, or putting up a fence. Generally I find my parents checking cattle or tending to horses or feeding the chickens. Or they're caring for some odd creature—they've been known to have peacocks and pigeons and raccoons in the house—and there are often stranger's horses and mules and sheep outside, since my parents' place seems to be some sort of unofficial way-station for traveling animal people. My parents are like magnets to animals-in-need, and the only thing that would surprise me now is if I showed up and some unusual creature wasn't present.

There was a time, on this ranch, when animals were shot—fox, coyotes, rattlesnakes, prairie dogs. I grew up with guns and the idea that wild animals were to be killed. But times changed, and so did my family. Hunting hasn't been allowed on the place for years. Now, when a fox

eats the chickens, my parents buy new chickens and are more careful to lock them up. When the bear tears apart the new beehives, my mom actually seems a little happy for the bear. There aren't as many guns sitting around anymore, and when they're fired, it's only at pop cans. There has been a real shift in my lifetime; the ranchers I know have given up the idea that every undomesticated creature in sight is suspect.

Wolves, though. That's a hard one. My parents probably won't need to contend with them—not in this part of the state—but the impulse I see in them, I see in other ranchers. An honest-to-god willingness to live-and-let-live, but also a knowledge that livestock must be protected. It's a fragile balance. There's a deep need to protect, and there's a suspicion of the things that can come in and hurt.

No wonder ranchers don't embrace the wolf. A bloody dead calf is something more than a lost miscellaneous animal, or a monetary figure. The heart *hurts* in these cases. And how many of us open our arms up to a painful thing, ready to embrace danger? I think ranchers would like wolf proponents to understand this: Why it's so hard to welcome an animal who is, yes, gorgeous, and wild, and part of the natural balance—yes, all of those things—but also a creature that's going to break their heart a time or two.

Fascinating conversations occur on the Internet, no doubt about it. With anonymity and ease comes words that shoot right out, no censorship, no discretion. I love listening, though I can't say that I love what I hear.

A quick search brings up an online debate prompted by a federal wolf agent being accused of trespassing by a rancher in Wyoming. This particular chat group has a moderator, and the conversation runs like a rowdy dinner gathering, everybody throwing in fragments, not all logical or sequential. The chat-room conversation goes something like this:

That rancher in WY should S. S. S.

What's that mean?

Shoot, shovel, shutup.

Comment Removed by Moderator.

If the rancher gets upset over seeing a stranger on his land, sounds like he is hiding something.

Maybe he's just trying to protect something. Like his cattle.

Comment Removed by Moderator.

Sounds like a juvenile pissing contest.

Rich environmental wackos have bought ranches in the West with the intention of raising predators like wolves and coyotes to drive the real ranchers off their land.

Comment Removed by Moderator.

Wolves have been seen happily ripping tails and udders off of cattle almost to the Colorado state line.

The wolves are getting fat off ranchers' calves.

I agree 100%. Make sure to cut the radio collars off and go to some truck stop with a Mexican plate on it, then throw the collars on board (should get them tracking boys in quite a tizzy). I doubt the brownshirts at USFW would understand, but ALL illegal aliens need to go, two or four footed!

Comment Removed by Moderator.

I know my land and what I have to do to protect and prolong its use. It's called stuartship [sic]. The practice that is coming into widespread use is the 'three S's.' Works for me.

Shoot, shovel and shutup is what I say.

I read on and on. There are a few thoughtful comments too, questions and philosophical enquiries, but most of the conversation is angry venting and it makes me sad. I'm not surprised, though. I'm used to this language and this defensive stance.

It's hard to understand such language in the context of love. It's almost impossible. It's hard to imagine that these are the same people that are out in the middle of the night lugging a calf through a snowstorm, keeping it alive. But I'm telling you that they're related. This is the one thing I most want to convey: the harsh words come out of something more tender. And it comes out of feeling attacked and misunderstood.

And that goes for both sides.

For some time, I've lived in two worlds. A poetry reading one night, a Grange meeting the next. A concert to benefit the environment, then a Cattleman's Association dance. I've heard unkind words and angry rhetoric from both groups, and I've also heard thoughtful, careful speech. In both cases, I know that most of the words come from a place of care and concern.

If we would all approach with a little grace and sensitivity, maybe the rhetoric will change, and people will back down, and voices will get softer. Maybe, just maybe, the three Ss will slowly fade away. It could happen.

Jay is taking another phone call—he's talking politics, hoping to change some ideas—and so I have a moment to look out his window toward his ranchland. What if? What if a gray wolf was out there, running, hugging the valley, moving unseen? Thick fur dark over the

back and lighter at the chest, black-tipped ears, sharp eyes, skinny legs, alert. Alive. Perhaps it's a female, and there are wolf pups growing in her belly. Perhaps it's a male and he's moving toward a kill—elk or calf or deer—and his body leaps, caught in flight, between space, and then there is a thud, as both prey and predator come down.

How can that happen, and ranchers survive too?

I believe ranches are one of the best ways of preserving land and ecosystems in the West. *They* are, in large part, what give the West space—and yet, an acre of Colorado's agricultural land is lost every three minutes. I'm a sentimental sort, and when I drive by a bulldozer tearing into rural land, I shake my head *no* to the tears that threaten to spill out, every time I see this land being ruined, every single time.

I eye a kitchen towel in Jay's kitchen: "Give up drinking, smoking, and fat and you'll be really healthy till you kill yourself."

Funny. And it seems to indicate that some dangers are worth it.

Like wolves, maybe. When he's off the phone, I ask him: "Okay, final question: What would you do if you saw a wolf here tomorrow?"

His eyes and body shift from explanation mode to a place that's more about his heart. He thinks for a minute and then he says, "That would be a great thing to see. I'd say 'yippee!' I'd tell authorities. And then I'd wait and see. A wolf. Well, that would be something, wouldn't it?"

Hope is like a campfire: it rises up, comes close to dying out, the embers wait to be rekindled. At a cattleman's dinner and dance I attend this weekend, there's a crowd gathered outside an old Grange building, and I bring up wolves again with an old acquaintance of mine, a rancher with land right at the Wyoming line. She hasn't seen any wolves, she says, but there's rumors, and she wouldn't be surprised if she saw one soon.

"And if you do?"

"Oh," she says, "Well."

"The Three Ss?"

"Well, yeah."

And then the usual: the people who want wolves are not the people who know the land. The government makes everything too difficult. Compensation is never fair. Wolves won't work.

I bite my lip and look away. There's a gorgeous sunset, full of pinks, and I keep my eyes there. I've noticed that about myself—how my body and eyes orient themselves toward the mountains any time I'm feeling sad, as if there's strength for me out there in the wild. I wander toward the mountains, away from the party, and stand in the dark and listen to country music and, as the stars start to reveal themselves, I think

hard about how wolves can make it here. It won't be easy, and I guess that means it's going to have to start with some maybes.

Maybe ranchers can move their cattle around more, use guard dogs and hazing devices, and even take shots "across the bow," and maybe the non-ranchers will have to trust them.

Maybe we, as consumers, will pay more attention to what we buy. There's wolf friendly beef out there, sort of like dolphin-safe tuna—a certification given to ranchers who allow wolves on their property. Maybe it's up to consumers to demand, buy, and pay more for it.

Maybe this wolf debate is much bigger and involves a reassessment of our underlying philosophical assumptions. Maybe we need to conserve more, change our consumptive practices, and figure out what we value. Maybe there would be more room if we all quit using so much.

Maybe if ranchers weren't operating on such fragile financial margins, they could tolerate more losses. Maybe ranching is no longer a viable enterprise—and if we want it to be, we'll have to rethink current policies; and if we don't, maybe we can think up ways to protect the ranchlands of the West.

Maybe, when balance is restored, wolves will take care of the over-abundant elk and deer, and the aspen and willow stands will return, and there will be more migratory birds, and more riparian vegetation for beavers, and then aquatic life will improve, and maybe this will make it all worth it, to ranchers and non-ranchers alike.

Maybe a fair and friendly compensation can be worked out and employed locally and with grace.

Maybe the rhetoric can sound more like the heart's words.

And maybe, then, there can be a shift. Maybe, at that moment of aim, at that moment of decision, when breath is being held and the crosshairs on the site find wolf, maybe that gun will move up a little, and there will be enough space, and life.