

The Rule of Wild Dogs

Elena Wilson

Today, as the sun rises to unbelievable temperatures, there is no savior for liars. Lying makes the heat worse. A guilty conscious develops a red-hot itchiness on their necks. The guilt won't subside unless the person absolves themselves of it. Here, in the desert, was great absolution. Sins do not survive underneath the hot cushion of atmosphere. They burn and swell and become ash. It is the way of the desert creatures. To be absolved, to repent, and to punish those who do not.

The velvet interior sweltered with a humidity that made it hard to think. He felt the onslaught of a headache. The half-empty can of Sprite sitting in the cupholder was warm and flat. It had no purpose except to keep his hands and mouth occupied. He kept flicking the aluminum tab on top of the can while staring at the back of the bank's exterior. He knew the time it would take to get in and out. Five minutes to wait in line. Once I get up to the far-left window, I'll pull out the gun. Then it should only take about 20 minutes to get everything in the bag. 25 minutes. Keep the engine running. It was a simple but effective plan. He worried it would take longer. He dreaded sirens pulling down the street.

Being the driver was a lot of waiting. Waiting to breathe for the first time. Putting the car in neutral, ripping out of parking lots without screeching the tires, practicing on abandoned roads, all while in a 2004 Saturn ION. He glanced at the back of the bank again. His heart was beating

faster. Only slight ticks came between pumps, but it was enough to raise his blood pressure. Unable to relax, he thought about the inside of the bank. His partner would no doubt be filling bags at this point and screaming for everyone to follow his directions. He would flail his gun at everyone. Even though he was wild, he still had complete control. He had dirt all over his hands from fixing the car earlier this morning. His hair was barely brushed, and he wore a red Hawaiian t-shirt. He looked regular, except for his eyes, a gaping chasm to his brain. He's a gunslinger and deeply psychotic. This got them inside the bank. This would not help them escape though. Only he, sitting in the car, could help them get out of here. The engine was running. The sun was blistering. But no sirens.

He knew this alley and the corresponding roads. He knew that even if cops were to the left or straight ahead, he could take a right and then zip through a tighter alley but still take it downtown. If the cops were positioned to the right, he would take a left and speed through the intersection, even if it was a red light. He studied this area, he drove it through many times, he practiced, but he still sweated through his shirt. Time was now on the very beginning of running out. 18 minutes were left. His partner was still in the bank. No sirens still. But he's quick. Too fast, like an apparition. He swore that his partner could move through walls. He would sometimes sit in the car for a moment and watch quietly. It's like he could hear the ground shake and

move. His partner could smell blood like a shark. He was a brutally unemotional man. But still, he thought of his partner as wickedly efficient. They were close in age, maybe even a month or two apart. What his partner was after, he never asked. They didn't discuss much of their lives in between jobs. He never even knew his partner's name. When he asked all his partner said was: Call me Lee. That's not my real name. But we shouldn't know each other's real names. Lee called him Paul.

He hadn't even noticed his leg begin to twitch under the wheel. His heart was skipping jump rope. Sweat accumulated on his scalp. He was hot. Breathing in the air of the outside was like breathing in black coffee. It smelled like gasoline. The car started to smell. Even in this street, which looked towards the bank and a few other backs of buildings, the car smelled like it was running inside a garage. The air was spewing it back at him. 16 minutes.

You got a car?

After being arrested for stealing cigarettes, Paul had been tossed in a North Carolina County jail cell. Paul was grabbed outside by a deputy who wore aviators and sported a mustache that screamed Southern Fascist. The jail cell reeked of urine and contained nine other gangsters whose crimes ranged from petty vandalism to armed robbery. That, of course, was Lee.

"Got a light?" Lee leaned to Paul with a cigarette in his hand. Ironical.

Paul wouldn't verbally acknowledge him, just pulled out loose matchsticks from his pocket, hardly looking in Lee's eyes.

"Thanks, partner." Lee smiled as he scratched the head across the back brick wall and held it carefully to the grains of the cigarette.

Paul didn't turn towards him. Just kept a low profile waiting for bail to be posted. Doesn't matter who would. But Lee interrupted.

"Drag?" Lee pushed him the cigarette, Paul hesitated at first, but grabbed it between his fingers

without saying anything.

"Thank you." Paul said. He still wouldn't look. One of the other kids started shouting expletives at the deputies. The others either told him to shut up or laughed. You could hear desk chairs creak or the sound of boots moving around in the other room. The click of the bars, or the beep of a release.

"You got a car?" Lee said amongst the hum of incarceration.

"What?"

"Do you have a car?" He asked again.

"No." Paul wasn't interested in becoming friends.

"I'll buy you one, for bail." Lee whispered.

Paul's ear pricked up. Who was this kid? Why did he have such an offer to make?

"You got money for a car but not for bail?" Paul looked at him. The first time he'd laid eyes upon that bloodthirsty gaze; the insanity glare.

"I got money for bail, no one to post. If I'm lying you can shoot me. I got a gun too." Lee promised.

Paul had underestimated his own stupidity because he did it. After receiving his release, he scraped his cash from the bottom of his sock drawer and ran back to Lee. The promise of getting out of agrarian hell was too rich to turn down.

Lee bought him the car, if Paul drove them, and the deal was made. That was a year ago.

Yesterday him and Lee had sat around waiting for the day to end. The two were bored out of their minds, sitting in the sweaty motel room watching the VHS player. Lee was pacing back and forth like a vulture with not enough flesh in his belly. Paul was nauseous watching him.

"I'm hungry. Let's go eat," Paul suggested. Lee jumped at the idea and practically dove for the keys. Paul let him drive occasionally in case he ever needed to know how to in an emergency. He wasn't exactly sure if Lee had even gotten his license.

The two drove into town to a diner with fat, greasy portions. Hamburgers there were as large as someone's fist. Lee got an entire breakfast with pancakes, eggs, bacon, fruit, and coffee. He didn't drink the coffee. Paul got a turkey sandwich with French fries and a coke, and by the time the two were finished they could hardly move. Paul looked across at Lee as he gazed out the window to the traffic light. There wasn't a car in sight. Paul thought the heat might melt tires. There was a man sweeping in front of a drugstore, and two kids leaning against a building eating ice cream in the shade. Nobody really looked at him or Lee. But Lee looked at everybody. Lee wasn't going to hurt anyone that didn't deserve it, but sometimes Paul was unsure. One gas station employee suffered a serious pistol whip from Lee, so much so that blood spat out from the attendant's forehead and onto the glass counter. Paul had never seen blood like that.

Lee watched the kids across the street. They were unaware of his gaze and continued sitting together laughing. He was watching them like he longed to join them. To sit there in the cool, tasting sweet ice, going home at dark.

"It's hot today," Paul said, looking up at the ceiling fan.

"Just wait 'til you get to hell," Lee snickered. Paul stared at him.

"Oh, you believe in hell, Lee?" Paul asked.

"Look," Lee pointed to the man across the street. The two turned and watched as he solemnly dragged his broom.

"Do you think that's where you'll end up?" Paul asked him, staring at how the man moved his body; slow and crooked.

"That's where we're both going," Lee kept his gaze on the man. Almost envious.

"This place is like hell." Paul looked out the window. The kids were now walking down the street, towards the movie theater.

"It's not so bad. There are worse places." Lee

leaned back.

"Like where?"

"Where I'm from."

Paul waited a moment for Lee to correct himself. He hadn't told Paul any personal information before this, not even his age. The two had agreed that no one would share anything about themselves to keep from snitching. But Lee didn't take back what he said.

"Where's that?" Paul asked.

"Good ol' South Dakota," Lee said sarcastically.

"What's wrong with South Dakota?" Paul asked.

"What's wrong with right here?" Lee asked.

"It's hot."

"So? Buy a fan." Lee played with his knife on the table.

"What, are you going to live here?" Paul leaned forward.

"I could." Lee shrugged again.

"You're not law-abiding enough for here." Paul said.

Lee picked up the knife and started to push the blade into the table.

"Well good luck." Paul threw himself back into the booth. He looked outside the window, the old man sweeping before had sat down on a wicker chair, now staring at Paul.

12 minutes. Three whole minutes had gone by. Still no sign of Lee. Not even sound from inside the bank could be heard. No screams, no gunshots, no yelling. Paul was parked in a spot that no one could see, but he could see them. A dirt road that was covered by a willow and some dilapidated houses was not visible or important enough to see from the road. Even if someone did spot the car, they would think it would belong to one of the two houses he was sandwiched between. Still, he should be able to hear what was going on. Paul thought about getting out and running up to the window just

to peek. Don't ever get out of the car. So, he never would.

Paul's leg bounced uncontrollably now, his stomach doing complete 180s. Paul's sweat was getting out of hand. He was breathing in steam. All he needed to do was crack a window, only for a few minutes. Lee said to keep the windows up in case anyone saw him, but the sun was unforgiving. He rolled down the back two windows and the driver's window all the way. He inhaled a slow, exhausted breath. The air felt too good on his face. He breathed the sweet, delicious South, and it smelled a great deal better than the exhaust from his car. He peered through the small crack between the bank and the building next to it. Trying to catch a glimpse of a flashing light or even a police officer. But he saw nothing. Lee impressed Paul, every time.

Just then, a small creature darted into Paul's view. He was so alert that he stomped on the brake to shift the car. It startled him so bad that his eyes darted around like minnows. He couldn't figure out what he saw, until a small, gray coyote walked out in front of the car. Paul had never seen one. It was so skinny its coat clung to its ribs like a furnished skeleton. It looked as sick as a dog, in fact, Paul mistook it for a dog at first. But this was a wild animal. Its cheeks were slender, and its teeth sharp. These things weren't supposed to come out during the day, and Paul thought that they were supposed to fear people. But here it was. It came from down the street. It slunk around, looking for prey. Its sly head down, the coyote didn't seem aware of Paul. Paul's hands wouldn't let go of the wheel. The coyote stopped right in front of his car. It lowered its head to the ground to sniff the dirt, and its tail hung low. It looked relaxed. Paul released the brake, making a rattling sound inside the engine. The coyote turned his head and saw Paul. Paul looked into those black eyes and felt his heart skip again. The coyote looked plainly, for a moment, like he would begin speaking. Paul opened his mouth. The

coyote didn't move. He just stared at it. The coyote blinked, then turned its head, then trotted away, down the street and gone forever. Paul watched it go, his hands slipping down the wheel and into his lap.

Then, he heard an explosion. Glass shattering explosion. It hurt his ears so bad that he thought someone had shot him in the head. He panicked. Heart rate was back to 180. Sweat now dripped down his neck and to the small of his back. He looked all around him frantically. He looked towards the bank.

Lee was sprinting towards him through the small slip between the buildings. He hugged a black bag to his chest. His eyes were psychotic. He was pale and sweaty. He never looked so sick before.

He ran so fast to the car that Paul believed he teleported. Paul was so startled by the noise he had forgotten to press on the brake to shift the car. Lee had cleared the hood and panickily dove into the passenger side.

Paul was shaking violently. His eyes glazed over, and he could barely see. He ripped the car into drive. He peeled out of the alley, without realizing it, he made the car screech.

Lee was screaming expletives. He was breathing uncontrollably hard. Paul thought he was going to have a fucking heart attack. Paul took a left out of the alley. He tore through the back ripping the dirt from the ground and creating clouds of haze.

"What happened man, what happened?" Paul shouted between breaths.

"The cops, man, I could hear them coming so I shot out the back window." Lee heaved. That must've been the explosion Paul heard. Lee clutched the bag so tight with his fingers, money was slipping out the top.

"The cops came. Are you kidding me?" Paul could feel his veins underneath his skin. His whole body was on fire with heat and anxiety.

“Yea man, you didn’t hear the fucking sirens?” Lee yelled.

Paul just shook his head. He could barely talk without feeling dizzy. His foot was touching the bottom of the car, the exhaust was kicking up and throwing it back on them. His miles per hour climbed from 35 to 60 in two seconds. The engine sounded like a whistling tea kettle. Or maybe Paul had tinnitus from the gunshot. His head felt like it was being split in two, goring his brain. He still sweat but this time it was a cold, dark river. His heart was going berserk.

Gas stations were easy. Easier than this. They weren’t protected by glass shields or speaker booths. There was no one waiting in line. There was no panic button. This was hell. But they had the money. This was it. This was the ticket home.

“That was too much. I’m never doing that again. Never,” Breathed Paul.

Lee laughed. The Saturn yanked them down the road. They were now out of the alley and turning right. Right is quicker to the highway. Had Lee told him that? Shouldn’t he know? It was too late now. A decision had been made. They were ripping across the asphalt and weaving between the few cars that were on the sprawling two lane road. Paul wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, he looked down and saw it was completely drenched. Paul looked at Lee. He was silent, looking into the bag. He was gazing upon it lovingly, virtuously, like he had rescued it. Paul inhaled.

Then the sirens became more audible. Paul felt his heart drop. Why now, God? He looked to Lee, who was still devouring the inside of the bag.

“You hear that?” Paul asked. The sirens got louder. Lee sat up. Their adrenalines shot like a bullet. Paul felt the body high coursing through his system, unable to control the shaking and sweating. The pounding moved from his heart into his head. He could barely see still. But this was it, it was either drive or get caught. Paul had no other options.

“What is that?” Lee asked. Paul looked over at Lee and saw him trembling. Lee stared into the horizon. He was squinting, and Paul looked in the same direction but saw nothing. Paul thought Lee was imaging things. Paul raced through the streets. His speed was now 87. He could barely see the road and was blowing through intersection after intersection. Lee said nothing. He leaned forward, staring at what was now obvious.

A police car was stationed down the road about two miles ahead. Paul wasn’t stopping, but Lee thought he could see it. They hurtled towards the car at illegal speeds. The sirens were on. The lights were flashing. Absolution.

Lee felt a scream from inside his throat. He felt it rise and fall and never come out of his mouth. He had to warn Paul. Had to shout for him to swerve. But his tongue suppressed his cry for help.

Paul saw Lee choking and let off the gas.

“What’s wrong?” Paul asks.

“Move!!” Lee finally screeched. His eyes were bloodshot and wild. Paul swerved the car, pulling into the opposite lane onto oncoming traffic. They both shouted and Lee even tried to grab the wheel, letting the bag slip from his grasp. Paul shoved Lee off it and started to drift onto the curb of the sidewalk. They heard skids from beneath ripping the sedan’s underbelly. The police car up ahead began to fire rounds off at their tires. Paul heard glass explode. He screamed and jerked the wheel back to the center. They skidded by the police car; Paul was at 68. He heard the gunshots but cruised across the asphalt; the tires lifting off the ground. Any important part of the sedan had survived. They sped away; Paul was gasping. He couldn’t hear anything except the siren fading farther away. Paul breathed out.

Paul reached up again to brush his forehead. His speed rapidly declining, along with his breathing. Paul started to feel his muscles again, the bones sticking together underneath his skin. His

veins pulsing against his flesh. All the blood in his body pushed forward. Paul looked over at Lee.

Lee was slumped over, holding his chest. Glass from the passenger window was scattered all around him. It lay on his sweatpants and his t-shirt. His arm was covered in blood all the way up to his elbow. He gripped his chest trying to stop the flow. Paul could see it spurt between his fingers.

“Oh God, oh my God, Lee? Lee what the fu— please. Jesus Christ. Please, Lee.” Paul began to cry. Paul was begging him. “Please Lee, just wait until we get to a hospital, OK? Just hang on we’re going there right now.” Paul felt sweat and tears run down his face.

Lee was not saying anything, just groaning and gasping for air. Paul was shaking again. He tried to stop crying. Where was the goddamn hospital?

Lee’s free arm began to slip. The bag’s clasp started to open, and the bills started to flap in the wind as Paul drove. The speed of the car made them come loose. Paul didn’t even notice as they started to fly out the window. Hundreds of green slips were being swept up, one by one, and disappearing into the sickening heat. Thirty-eight thousand dollars coated the streets in five minutes.

Paul heard Lee choke and spit up. He frantically searched for a hospital or a phone so he could call an ambulance. Tears made his vision completely blurry, he was so frustrated and tired, Lee was trying desperately to grab Paul’s attention, but Paul wouldn’t look at him. Paul couldn’t stand looking at Lee’s blood all over. It was so much. And it was everywhere.

Paul looked down at the dashboard and saw his car slowing down. His foot was still on the gas, but the car was puttering along at a disheartening speed. Paul wiped his face and looked around him, there was nothing to see. They had made it. They were in the desert. They were surrounded by sand and rocks, the town in the rearview.

Paul’s sweat made the wheel slip through

his grasp, and they went careening off into the valley. The car popped and collapsed underneath his concrete foot. Paul was boiling. His skin and hair were sticky. They were in the middle of the planet, staring up into the great, dusky sky. Vermillion cliffs towered above them. From each edge of the horizon, the Earth breathed. Here, the coyotes ran in packs and had bellies full. The only skeletal remains were that of water buffalo and dead yucca. The sand was not fine, but coarse and tan. This land did not belong to people or the town, but to the wild creatures. It smelled like the agave leaves and sweet animal flesh. At sundown the valley struck a nerve and turned lapis. What became of this desert now, with industry and roads, has turned it sour. The spoilage reeks so bad it hovers over the city like an omen. Once these creatures came here to live, now they come to die.

Paul cried. He cried for so long next to Lee, who had just died. He climbed out of the sedan. His knees were weak, and he fell to the ground. He kneeled on his legs and looked up to the sky, he began to scream. Part of him wanted to crawl into the desert like a dying dog, eventually giving in to dehydration and flesh-hungry creatures. The desert would rob him of his person, the only thing he had left to give was skin. The coyotes would hunt him and take back their physicality. His bones would join the others, and he and Lee would be back in jail in Weaverville. But he rose desperately towards the sun. Even if he felt like he’d fall, he leaned on the Saturn. He limped to the passenger’s door. He opened it, where he saw Lee lying. He ducked underneath the car’s roof. He picked up Lee and pulled him out. As he held this boy in his arms, Paul tried not to fall. He would carry him out, so the two could watch the sunset together. This boy lay in Paul’s arms completely still. Paul couldn’t believe how limp he felt. He walked away from the car, holding Lee as he would a child. He sauntered into the horizon; he would keep walking until his body

gave up. He slowly lowered himself to the ground and rested Lee in his arms.

Paul put Lee's head in the crook of his elbow and held his back with his other arm. Paul gently closed Lee's eyes and stared up into the sky.

"My name is Drew." Paul whispered to him. He looked at the rocky cliffs as they burned against the sun. He watched wild dogs run across the sand.