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DOPPLER

by

ERLEND LOE

Translated by Don Bartlett and Don Shaw



*The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.*

ROBERT FROST

My father is dead.
And yesterday I took the life of an elk.

What can I say?

It was either her or me. I was starving. I'm beginning to get quite thin, I really am. The night before, I was down in the Maridalen district of Oslo and helped myself to some hay from one of the farms. I cut open one of the bales with my knife and filled my rucksack. Then I slept for a bit, and at daybreak I went down to the ravine east of camp and spread out the hay as bait in a place I had long considered perfect for an ambush. Afterwards I lay on the side of the ravine and waited for several hours. I knew there were elk here. I'd seen them. They've even been right up by the tent. They lumber around here on the ridge apparently following their own rational impulses. Always on the move, elk are. They seem to think all other pastures are greener. And perhaps they're right. Anyway, in the end one came along. With its calf tagging behind. That put me off a bit, that did, the calf being there. I would have preferred it if it hadn't been there. But it was. And the wind was coming from just the right direction. I put the knife in my mouth, not the little one, the big one, the



big knife, and waited. The two elk were ambling slowly towards me. Nibbling at the heather and some of the young birch trees down in the ravine. And at last there it stood. Right beneath me. A hell of a size. Elk are big. It's easy to forget how big they are. I leaped onto its back. Of course I had rehearsed the routine in my head dozens of times before. I had anticipated that she wasn't going to like it and would try to get away. And I was right. But before she managed to get any speed up, I had driven the knife down into its head. With one mighty thrust the knife had gone right through the elk's skull and into its brain, from which it stuck out like a slightly odd hat. I jumped off and crawled to safety on a large rock while the elk saw its life flashing before its eyes: all the good days of plentiful food, the lazy, hazy, days of summer, the brief love affair with the bull during the autumn breeding season and the subsequent loneliness. The birth and the joy of having passed on the genes, but also the taxing winter months of earlier years, and the restlessness, that unsettled force from which, for all I know, she may have considered it a relief to be delivered. She went through all this in a few short seconds before she dropped.

I stood watching her for a while, and her calf, which had not run away but was now standing beside her dead mother, not totally aware of what had happened. I felt a pang of something unpleasant, something alien. Even though I'd lived out here for quite a while this was the first time I'd killed, and now I had killed a large animal, perhaps the

biggest in Norway and, contrary to all my good intentions, I had brutally exploited nature and probably taken out more than I could put back in, at least in the short term, and I did not like that. There should be a kind of balance in things. Hunger is hunger, though, and I would have to give something back later, I thought, jumping down from the rock and chasing away the calf before I pulled the knife out of the skull and slit open the dead elk. Piles of intestines spilled out and I sliced myself a bit of the belly and ate it raw. There and then. Like a Red Indian. Next I hacked what I could into manageable pieces and carried some of them up to the tent, where I collected the axe and went back to chop up the rest. By the evening I had transported the whole of the animal to camp. I fried large chunks of meat on the fire and ate my fill for the first time in several weeks. I hung the rest of the meat to smoke in a primitive kiln I had spent the previous days building. Then I went to sleep.

And when I awoke today, I heard the calf outside my tent. I can still hear it. I hardly dare get up. I can't look it in the eye.

I can't stay lying here, though. I need some milk. Skimmed milk. I don't function well if I don't have any milk. I get irritable and I'm quick-tempered. And I know very well that I'll have to go down amongst people for some milk. That's why I'm reluctant to go, but I simply have to have some milk. Occasionally I do go down to Ullevål Stadium like any normal man. I used to do it a lot more before, I know, every



day in fact, but after I, well, how can I put it, after I moved into the forest, for that is actually what happened, that's what I do, I live in the forest, since then I have been there less and less often. One of the reasons is that I don't have any money. Another is that I don't wish to meet people. They disgust me. Increasingly so. But I must have milk. My father also drank milk. But now he's dead.

I can still hear the calf outside the tent. It's actively and noisily reproaching me. It's trying to psych me out. But I burrow even further down my sleeping bag and tie up the top so that there's like a gap between me and the rest of the world. I can't get out and the world cannot come in and I'm lying there as quiet as a mouse, like a child, pretending nothing has happened for quite some time. But the calf won't give in. It just stands there, and stands there. And then I have to go for a piss. My God, it's just a calf, I tell myself. Why should I, a grown man, have a bad conscience about killing an elk? It's nature's way. The calf will have to learn, and it should be happy that it's me, Doppler, who is teaching it and not some more unscrupulous individual who might have made cold meat of the calf as well while he was at it.

I go outside for a piss. Same place as always. On the flat rock below the tent. From there I can usually see the whole town and the fjord, but not now because it's misty. And I completely ignore the calf. I simply pretend it doesn't exist. It's wary and watches me pissing. I try standing with my back to it, but it must have caught a glimpse of me and wants to see

more. It moves and watches from a new angle. I turn away but the calf follows me. It's as if it wants to make sure it wasn't seeing things. Like everyone else. The story of my life. OK, OK, for Christ's sake, I say, and turn to it with my trousers around my knees and my arms in the air. Have an eyeful, I say. Feel better now? Have you seen enough? Satisfied?

But the cheeky little bugger's not satisfied. It keeps staring. And there are limits to the shit I can put up with from elk. I grab the axe lodged in a nearby tree and hurl it with all my might at the calf. It leaps to the side and runs off between the trees.

Life's taught me that I come off badly if I try to hide the truth, so I may as well give it to you straight: I have a big member.

What can I say?

I have a remarkable, indeed an extremely large, organ.

In short, a gigantic chopper.

I always have had. It is large. There's no better word for it. It's long and it's heavy. And fat. Hence, large.

At school they called me Chopper Doppler.

Fortunately, that's many years ago now. It's not something I think much about any more. But it was hurtful. After all, I did have other qualities I wanted people to see.

Chopper Doppler.

Actually, it is very annoying to be reminded of it. I hadn't thought about it for ages. That bloody elk. If it comes back, I'll split its skull open.



There was no milk for me yesterday. I spent all day hunting that damned calf. Of course it came back fairly soon after I had chased it into the forest. And to my great annoyance it hung around for hours on end outside my tent. Not unlike the pupils at Sogn Secondary School beneath me here – which looks as if it was designed with the purpose of relieving some Gulag. I've cycled past it for years. And now I can see it through the binoculars if I can be bothered and if there isn't any mist. The pupils usually stand on the street corners hanging about in a pathetic, ungainly way while smoking as much as they can before the school bell rings. If the calf could get hold of cigarettes, it wouldn't think twice about starting to smoke. It's all alone and it's beginning to realise the world is a harsh place, and it cannot see any future or meaning in anything. Of course, it's immature of it to take out its frustration on me, but what else can you expect? After all, it's only a child.

After a while I'd had enough, child or no child. I quietly put on my hunting gear and charged out of the tent with raised axe ready to strike, but the little sod got away again. And for many hours I hunted it all over the place up here. We went along Vettakollen Ridge, down by Lake Sognsvann and even almost the whole way up to the high Ullevålseter meadows. The GPS showed that we had covered almost fifty kilometres at an average speed of twelve kilometres an hour. In the forest and over mountainous terrain. It was dark before I returned to the tent, absolutely exhausted. And, when the

calf turned up shortly afterwards, I had run out of steam. I gave up. We slept together in the tent that night. The calf supplied a surprising amount of heat. I used it as a pillow for most of the night, and when I woke up this morning, we lay looking at each other in a close, intimate way that I had seldom experienced with people. I don't think I've ever experienced this with my wife. Not even at the start of the relationship. It was almost too much. I apologised for killing its mother and said that it didn't need to be frightened any longer and that from now on it could come and go as it pleased.

The calf, naturally enough, said nothing. It just looked at me with its big trusting eyes.

It's fantastic being with someone who can't speak.

Yesterday we spent the whole day in the tent chatting. I gave the calf some water and fetched it some branches with succulent bark on while frying myself large chunks of meat in the embers of the fire. As I groomed its coat with my comb, I explained, in pedagogical manner, that while humans had hunted elk for thousands of years, it wasn't for fun but borne of simple necessity. And if the elk stock had been allowed to multiply uncurbed it would have had catastrophic consequences, I said, without quite knowing what I was talking about, but I thought I had heard or read about this somewhere, so that's why I said it, and I said that when there are too many elk, then they spread diseases, mental as well as



physical, and in the end what you get is a really unpleasant atmosphere in the forest. Just imagine it, I told the calf, who by the way ought to have had a name, I'll have to find it one, but I told it to imagine the situation: row upon row of plague-ridden, mentally ill elk fighting over food and running around in all directions mooing and bellowing, breaking the laws of the forest and elk etiquette in a most degrading manner. No one wants that. That was why my forefathers hunted elk, and that's why we hunt elk today, I said. Even though today we don't need their meat or skins to survive, I added in an undertone, we still do it. We think it's good fun to go into the forest and shoot elk. There's a feeling of camaraderie between the hunters, I've learned, I said, and that has become a custom. It's force of habit. And, furthermore, to keep the numbers down, as I've already mentioned. So that's how it is. But I didn't kill your mother from force of habit. I did it out of need. I hadn't eaten for days, and besides I hadn't had a full stomach since the blueberry season finished. And I'm sorry I did it with a knife, I said. That was unnecessarily brutal, but I haven't got a gun, and I can't shoot, either. And I do understand it if you feel resentful and are caught between emotional extremes in your relationship with me, I said. That's okay with me. You'll have to examine your feelings and draw the line wherever you think. But I want you to know that I'm ready to support you in these difficult times, I said, and by the way, I continued after a short pause, your mother would soon have brutally broken the ties between you two in any case. She

would have shoved you away from her and told you to push off. Because that's the way elk are. You lot seem so good-natured, but you treat your kids like shit. You're bestial. You give birth to kids and give them milk and a helping hand and then whoosh, just as the kids are feeling snug and out of harm's way, they're given the heave-ho. Before long, maybe even next week, your mother would have insisted you go your way and she hers, and it would have been a sorry day for you, a day most elk never get over, but now you're spared that experience because I did her in, and instead of remembering her as someone who spoke with a forked tongue, you'll remember her now as someone who was always there for you and who was suddenly and meaninglessly whisked away, I said, grooming its coat with my comb.

Incidentally, I also lost someone not so long ago, I went on. I lost my father. I hardly knew him. I never knew who he was. And now he's gone. So in a way we're in the same boat. You've lost your mother and I've lost my father. And instead of directing your anger at me, you should direct it at Herr Düsseldorf down in Planetveien. For a long time I had easy access to food in his cellar, I explained. His late wife used to make enough jam from berries to last me a lifetime, and not only that he's got a well-stocked freezer full of bacon and other types of meat, and after studying the neighbourhood closely for several weeks I discovered that Düsseldorf's house was the easiest to break into, and that Düsseldorf made it even easier by being inattentive and generally lethargic and



also somewhat given to drink, so in the evenings while he was sitting there engrossed in his stupid war models, always Second World War vehicles, which he made on a 1/20 scale or whatever, paying all too much attention to detail of course, and to giving them the correct colours, I entered the house by the back door which was wide open all summer, and went down to the cellar where I unashamedly helped myself to the goodies, into my sack with them and out I went again, through the garden and back to the forest. This was an arrangement which I found to be perfectly satisfactory for both Herr Düsseldorf and me. You see, he's got everything he needs in this world. Big house, a stock of food, plenty of money according to the bank statements on his bureau next to the cellar door, and on top of that a hobby which apparently fulfils and enriches his life. It's difficult to imagine what more Herr Düsseldorf could wish for, I told the calf. It was almost as if I had begun to believe that if I rang his bell and asked him straight out if it was okay for me to break into his house once in a while and freely partake of the surplus in his cellar that he would smile and say yes. But then he must have changed his mind, for one day not so long ago the back door was locked and a sign and stickers had been put up about alarms, security guards, crime and punishment. That's what the world has come to. People brick themselves up and are frightened of each other.

So I was left high and dry and as the days passed I began, as is only natural, to get hungry. And I just got hungrier and

hungrier and in the end I could see no other way out, I had to lure your mother into an ambush and stick that large knife of mine in her skull. That's what hunger does to you. Nothing else matters. You just have to have food, I said to the calf. Maybe you've experienced something similar yourself, maybe not. Let's hope not.

The need for milk has become acute and I stuff fifteen to twenty kilos of elk-meat in the sack and make my way down to Ullevål Stadium. The calf trots after me, but in a stern voice I tell it that's not on. You'll have to wait here, I say. Wait, I repeat with conviction, as if talking to a slow-witted child. I'm unshaven and scruffy and look conspicuous enough without your help, so I don't want to have an elk straggling behind me. Don't worry, I say, I won't be long. But it does worry. It doesn't want me to go. Poor little elk, I say, you think I'm going to abandon you, but I won't. I just have to go to the shop and get some milk and a few other things I need. This has no effect. Separation anxiety shines out of its eyes, and it concerns me that it is so clingy. I thought elk were more independent. It's attaching itself to me in a way I'm not sure I'm ready for yet. I catch myself blaming its dead mother for taking the calf with her on a walk, slap bang in the middle of the hunting season. What was she thinking of?

I stop, put down my sack and cuddle the elk. Try to lift it up, but it's too heavy, so instead I massage its head with my knuckles in a playful, affectionate way. I give it knuckle, as we

