

“Guess I get sort of emotional about my dog, most dogs,” Wade found himself confessing to the anger management counselor. “That would include coyotes.”

RANGER AND DOG hiked along a wash for a good mile, the small stray Buck still moving on his own four pads. Wade saw a big rock ahead, a huge boulder perched at the edge of the wash. As they approached, he saw water in the wash, small pools at least. No evidence of larva or tadpoles in the shallow stream, but Buck jerked his head about, following gnats and a dragonfly darting from one tiny puddle to another. Wade gave him slack and he tentatively waded in a large pool. At once, he started to paw, slap, and thrash at insects in the water. Just as soon he gave up, confused to find the pool vacated of all bugs. He settled for tanking up on cool water.

The ranger felt they were between a rock and a pleasant place this time and had found a good location for a campsite. He scaled the big boulder and surveyed a vast, painter-perfect desert to the east, a land spotted with piñon and pine trees dotting the foothills and lining the higher ranges. From his rock perch, he could glass a whole cluster of mighty Sky Islands to the southeast, distant swells stretching toward borders east and south. He was high enough that he could sneak a hazy view of the massive Chiricahua’s farther east to the New Mexico border.

Buck, tethered to Wade’s backpack below, sprawled near the water pools, his short legs splayed, playing the part of road kill. Wet and tired from hiking and chasing anything that moved, he lay quiet, tongue hanging loose, the soul of patience, the urge to explore on hold.

Wade eased off the boulder and set up sleeping gear nearby. A quiet site, except for the periodic ping of insects upon water pools. He found a deeper pool to filter water, passing a bowl of water to the dog, his tired button eyes watching the ranger’s every move. Food next, Wade pulled cold snacks from his pack. The usual—jerky and a little trail mix with water.

Buck stirred and came over to sniff at the backpack but snubbed the usual grub. Gingerly, Wade opened the bag of smelly dead rabbit and tossed it on a rock well beyond them. He put the snack mix under the dog's nose. Buck ignored him and nosed up to the foul-smelling bag.

"Oh, of course," Wade sighed. "Not too tired for stinkin' raw rabbit, eh?"

Two things dawned on him: Buck craved real protein, but how could he risk feeding Buck raw day-old rabbit. Wild faunae can carry infectious parasites like trichina worms from undercooked meat. And this was a raw, stinky dead rabbit. Wade broke down and decided to start a tiny fire, to roast the damn rabbit as fast as possible for the little canine carnivore.

Wade bitched to himself as he gathered some sticks and dry brush for a fire next to the creek, thanking the camp gods for an absent Jesse. With the dog still tethered, he pulled out his all-purpose knife and sat at a pool of water with rank rabbit on a flat rock. He hadn't gutted and skinned one in ages but once the procedure is performed, it's much easier the next time.

The job finished, the game rinsed in a pool of water, he was back at the fire with the rabbit skewered on a sharp branch, supported by a Y of limbs on each side of the fire. Plenty of well-cooked rabbit with leftovers to seal and dole out later to the hungry little beast. After all, he figured Buck would need all the energy he could muster for the final leg to the trailhead in the morning.

Buck nosed up close to the skewer to witness each turn of the spit, until the ranger removed the still sizzling meat and dabbed it with a bit of cold water to cool it.

"Have at it, little predator." He set chunks of rabbit in a bowl in front of Buck. Watching him devour it as the camp darkened, he swore he'd never seen an animal enjoy a meal more—and no house pet was more deserving. Wade even sampled a bit, but couldn't get much past the pungent odor.

... Wade gazed at a sky of diamonds, the ragamuffin tucked under the bivy against him, fast asleep except for quiet groans and the odd yelp.

The ranger's thoughts turned to dogs and their human companions. Would the Westie's family give up all hope of finding their Buck? You never give up on them;

never easily, not ever, really ... words as familiar to Wade as a mantra. Since Abby disappeared, he'd pondered the misfortune from every angle, right into the ground. That she might have run away, that dog behavior could be like human behavior, like that of homeless souls, even street kids like Jesse. Does something snap and they just need to run off on their own, however miserable or frightened they are? Perhaps they can't find their way out of the maze of their minds, let alone find a way back home.

He seldom let on much to his fellow humans about his natural-world affinity. He knew how weird and unfeeling it would sound to a species as self-centered and destructive as humans. "Are you some interspecies weirdo?" somebody might ask. Better to let things be (except for those serial killers who work for organizations that hide under mislabels like "Wildlife Services"), and he mostly didn't share his sense of how much healthier, how much saner, living among animals could be.

He tried to doze off again but Abby kept coming into his mind. When he brought her home from the animal shelter, just a puppy, he never for a moment considered her a rescue. He was the blessed one, the rescued one—from the very beginning. And he knew they would be the perfect pair after their run-in with the badger.

It was a quiet morning in early spring, Abby not a year old, a curious, sprawling puppy, weaving her clumsy way along a foothill trail not far from the ranch house. She was on a long line ahead, snooping around a tight corner when he heard a sudden yelp, then a string of agonized cries. When he rounded the bend, the creature had hold of Abby's face—in its jaws! Wade pulled back on her lead, but the beast held on firmly. A badger with a vicious grip on her nose and would not let go. He rushed in, grabbing at the badger to pull it away, but the darn thing had loose skin, hard to take firm hold of. He managed to work his way up to its jaws, got a purchase, and yanked its mouth open enough to free poor Abby. But then the badger clamped down on his right hand and he was in a struggle with a varmint that might never let go.

With blood running out of the badger's mouth—ranger blood—he had to find another way to get free. That was when he went all calm and left off struggling. OK, OK, you win, was all he could remember thinking, and darn if the badger

didn't let up on its vise-like hold, and the furry thing dashed away without taking his right hand with it. For Wade, another incident in a series that got him wondering if he might at least have an unusual way of relating to wild ones. Maybe passive resistance was the way to go. But try telling that to a hunter being chased by a grizzly. Hearing his story, a native friend advised that if he ever tangled with a wild animal again, he should sing to it. Go figure.

Yet, if ever two beings fused over a shocking mishap, it was he and Abby who became perfect companions. Henceforth, he never doubted he was capable of deep devotion to another being, if not a human, then an animal for sure. Even now, he felt the choke of emotion as he recalled all their minor hassles with neighbors and their adventures against the world, especially among his brief liaisons. Lady friends who had to audition for Abby to see if they fit in, to qualify for hanging around the place.

There was the spick-and-span lady who always washed her hands after petting Abby; another he pegged a discipline freak as she considered a dog unacceptable up on any furniture, and God forbid, never on the bed. There was even one who wished Abby to be strictly an outdoor pet. And when he found out that the shopper lady tied Abby up like a horse at the hitching post outside the outfitters store, he practically had a conniption fit. She didn't last long at all.

Then "vet gal" entered the picture. That was what he took to calling Katy when he learned she was studying for a second career in animal care—"like a nurse practitioner," she said, "but for pets." He knew at once she was a serious contender for Abby's affections—and his. After dating for a while and having their first serious argument, Katy stopped seeing him. Shortly after that, Wade realized Abby was gone, as well.

He couldn't find her. Whatever special animal empathy he possessed, vanished.

At his wit's end, he broke down and called Katy to tell her Abby was missing—could she come and help look for her?

"Did you check underneath the house?"

“Why would she be under the house?” That would be odd, but when he went under to check, there she was. And when he called her to come out, she wouldn’t move. Even treats wouldn’t lure her out.

Wade called Katy again. “She won’t come out.”

When Katy arrived and got down under the house, she talked real quiet with her. Abby came out right away.

“What was that all about?” he asked.

“Oh, it’s a girl thing,” she replied, matter-of-factly. “But she’s OK now—we’re both OK.”

Must be a girl thing. From then on, he knew Katy was the right one—if she would have him back.

At last, he was drifting off when another wail rang out. He sensed something peculiar going on with this wild coyote creature. He’d read those early trappers and settlers figured coyotes the most intelligent animals in the world. Of course, they used a highly scientific phrase, smart sonsofbitches. Was it possible Shóódé had actually been tracking them for the last two days? Plum odd

Buck rolled over. The ranger felt his short legs poking him in the ribs as the dog stretched out. Must be dreaming, imagining those short legs of his got suddenly long like a coyote’s, so he can run and keep up with the big ones. Wade smiled. Now it was a soft muzzle up against him. Abby did that when she wanted a treat. Back home, there were even moments when he was sure she was still there. He could feel her pushing her muzzle against him—her touch like the ache of an amputee’s phantom limb—but when he looked down then, it was only Buck, too tired now for a treat.

What a mess, out on a big mountain with a small white dog. And hardly anything decent to feed the beggar.

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