

PROSE

adapted from **Taseko**

by Christian Petersen

- 1 The rifles, in their leather scabbards, were placed behind the seat of the pickup. The boy's parents were talking quietly on the porch, while he waited with Lars in the truck. He was fidgety. At last, his father came down the steps, carrying his hunting boots which shone with dubbin¹. As they pulled out, Mother waved, especially to her boy it seemed. He almost wished she hadn't. Like Lars he simply lifted his hand.
 - 2 They drove several hours on the highway, tires whining on the dry, grey pavement, sunshine glinting on the hood, warm on the dash. The two men spoke about work. He listened to them, and to the fading radio, but most of his attention was on the land: growth lines dividing the spruce and aspens, rock ridge colours, cattail ponds and open grassy slopes. West of Lee's Corner was gravel road and dust. They crossed the Chilcotin River, then climbed higher up the Plateau. Now, on the crest of a hill, great reaches of country came into sight, vast dark stands of jackpine, and autumn wild meadows. It was largely untouched, except for occasional corrals or rail fences sketched into the distance.
 - 3 Lars geared down as they neared a number of plain plywood houses. Long-travelled cars were parked under the trees, or already half-buried in the weeds. Children came close to the road to watch them pass. Lars waved, and the kids grinned and ran behind the pickup shouting. Past the houses was a pole corral holding a half dozen horses. A man stood inside the corral holding an open lariat. He did not turn to the road. The boys, perched on the fence, looked briefly, but then went back to watching the man with the rope and the horses. The boy in the pickup twisted in his seat, gazing back until they had rounded the next bend.
 - 4 By late afternoon they were into the first folds of the Coast Range, following a river that was glacial green and laced with rapids. The road became two ruts worn in scant mountain turf. Lars pointed out a big blunt peak to the west, called Tatlow, that was sacred to the Tsilhqot'in people.
 - 5 The men had a site in mind for a camp; from there they could cover two adjoining valleys. They stepped out of the truck into the bite of an icy wind. The boy's fingers numbed as he helped his father assemble their tent. As dusk crept quickly westward, the snow on the peaks and in the facial crevices retained the essence of the day's light.
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- 6 In the morning, frost clustered in the bunchgrass and the juniper needles, and clung in webs against the tires and fenders of the truck.

¹dubbin: *waterproofing*

- 7 The boy was first up and made a fire with bone-white branches of pine. Then he dug the charred coffee pot out of the campbox and took it down to the creek. The boy dipped into the icy stream, then scooted back to his fire. He sat on his heels with his back to the warmth, hands tucked deep into his coat. A vibrant light rose above the mountains as the pine sticks snapped in the fire.
 - 8 Lars always hunted alone. This trip he was after a goat, so he worked the higher ridges, sometimes crossing the patches of grainy snow that had lasted through summer at that altitude. He left early each morning, taking only rye bread and cheese for lunch, and did not return until dusk.
 - 9 The boy and his father stayed below timberline most of the time, watching the game trails and meadows for moose or mule deer. They each carried their lunch and a Thermos. On a leather sling over one shoulder his father had an Enfield .303, with a long black scope. It was accurate at three hundred yards or more. The boy carried his own Winchester carbine. He was proud of the gun, careful not to scuff it in the brush, but leery with it too. Lightly he touched the cool lip of the trigger and the gnarled steel hammer end. They stopped often, to listen, waiting for movement in the woods.
 - 10 Scanning, his binoculars in hand, the boy's father would point out their next route through alpine slopes and mossy rock-slides.
 - 11 Each evening his father and Lars spread the map on the tailgate and described the country they had crossed. Under a kerosene lamp hanging from the truck's canopy the three of them prepared a meal. Afterward they settled close to the fire and Lars poured their tea. The boy cupped his hands around the hot drink, listening closely to the men's talk and quiet laughter. He was intently aware of when his father spoke. For a moment he did not recognize that voice, and he did not trust his own. Often, as if he heard something, he looked over his shoulder. Just there, beyond the firelight, was the wild, an absolute darkness.
 - 12 After four days they had seen no game. Any tracks or sign they found, seemed to be more than a week old, which puzzled Lars. He had hunted the region for years and had always known it to be rich with wildlife. But each day it grew colder and perhaps the animals had already moved west or south to lower valleys.
 - 13 Lying in the tent one night, after his father was asleep, the boy heard a low, lasting howl, but the aged wolf may have been calling from the dark slope of a dream.
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- 14 On the morning of the fifth day there were two inches of snow on the ground and the boughs of the pines, and grey clouds were banked above the mountains, covering the peaks. Over breakfast they had to make a decision. It was two hours by truck to the good road. If it began to snow again during the day, and continued for any time, they could have real trouble getting out. However, the snow would allow them to finally determine if there was any game around, and if there was, today it could be easily tracked. They chose to hunt one last day.
 - 15 It was tough going. The snow on the dried grass made any incline slippery and for the first time the boy had trouble keeping up. His boots chafed him. It was cold and he'd worn extra clothing which now had him sweating. Perhaps his father had wanted to leave that morning; he seemed impatient. He looked gruff with five days of beard.

16 Not wanting to range too far in the uncertain weather, they checked benches and thickets they had covered on previous days. The boy's father hoped to get a deer. He recalled his own first hunting trip, and he wanted something like that for his son. The boy sensed this. For a time he shared his father's frustration. But that afternoon when they turned back for camp, the boy felt only relief.

17 A shot ripped the white valley.

18 When the boy started to speak, to ask—his father sharply raised a hand. The man's attention strained for the direction of the echo.

19 During those few taut moments—the gun's report gone, snow and wind rising, spirits moaning in the timber—in that time the boy first perceived his own unfolding solitude.

20 Another shot. His father headed towards the sound. The boy jogged behind, frightened now by the haste with which they broke through the brush. His father wanted to find Lars and help him dress the animal. They stopped in camp to gather some rope and an axe.

21 It was difficult to see the depth of ravines until they had plunged into them. Icy branches clawed at their clothing. Despite the pace their progress seemed slow and stubborn. Then his father stopped, motioned for the boy to be quiet, and called out to Lars. A shout from behind them startled the boy.

22 In a few minutes they discovered the hunter in a tiny matted clearing, a moose bed. Lars knelt close to the dead bull.

23 They cleaned the animal, and his father rigged a rope harness around it. They had to get the meat to camp that night.

24 The boy looked over at the long head of the moose. When Lars removed the rack, the boy winced. Lars held them a moment, and then handed them to the boy. The men took up the ropes on the sides of glistening meat. The boy shouldered the rack and followed them through the darkness.