

Man's Best Friend

By A. C. Zito

He didn't need them. After a tradition going on for twenty-three years did it really matter if he went alone? No; not in the least of bit. They were his friends, yes. No; they were more than that, they were his best friends. But at the last minute... after twenty-three years of tradition... twenty-three years of wedding receptions, funerals, birthday parties for the little ones, even when Randall got his tonsils removed, through it all; rain, sleet or shine, the gang always packed up every last bit of their camping gear and headed out into the woods for the annual *Beers and Bros Camp Retreat*. A time that came along every spring year on May 30 where they spent four days sleeping in tents and finishing the keg they pitched in together to get.

Kendrick looked at the foam swirling around the ridges of his red solo cup. He took a sip and sighed. He felt lonely without them. They were a team and instead of being real *bros* they decided it was time, all at once, for them to grow up and decide family was more important than four measly days of bonding time with friends.

"More like all their wives turned out to be real 'b' to the 'itches.'" He finished his cup of warm *PBR*, crunched up his cup, and chucked it into the fire. The keg had already turned warm because Adrian wasn't there like he usually was with the packs of ice in his *Yeti* coolers astonishing all of them with the story of how he traded his *Shoeless Joe Jackson* collection of mint condition baseball cards for them.

AHH, YOU LOST MORE MONEY THAN YOU EARNED! Jaleel always retorted. But Sebastian always stood by Adrian by knocking a couple of times on the coolers speaking up:

BUT LOOK HOW STURDY THESE 'BEAUTS' ARE!

The fire was going out, and Kendrick didn't feel like getting anymore wood being too much of a hassle now that it was already dark. His hands began to feel numb from the cold of the night and his tent was looking pretty enticing.

"I don't know about you guys, but I'm ready to hit the hay..." the words stung leaving his mouth due to how it was air that he was talking to and not his *hombres*. It was almost like they had abandoned him. Like all his friends were now were *lame robots* controlled by their nagging wives who were always asking them to be home by eight when Saturday night came along.

"SATURDAYS ARE FOR THE *BOYS!*" He heard a fraternity brother at another campsite call out into the star-painted sky. A cheer rose from all his fellow '*boys*' and Kendrick couldn't help it; he stood up from his log, stuck his neck out squinting in their direction and yelled back at them, all the while fighting back tears:

"JUST YOU WAIT! THEY'RE *GONNA* GROW UP, GET MARRIED, HAVE KIDS, MOVE TO DIFFERENT TOWNS, AND ALL TELL YOU AT ONCE THAT THE TRADITION IS OVER! JUST LIKE THAT! AND IT WILL COME AT THE WORST TIME BECAUSE YOU HAVEN'T TOLD THEM YET THAT YOU JUST SEPERATED WITH YOUR

WIFE, AND THE TWO OF YOU WILL MOST LIKELY GET A DIVORCE, AND YOU WILL ONLY GET TO SEE THE KIDS ON THE WEEKENDS, AND LIVE THE REST OF YOUR LIFE *ALONE! ALONE! ALONE, ALONE... ALONE!*" There was a long silence after Kendrick's outburst. Then he heard a few muffles of the college students talking amongst them of what sounded like agreement to head to the bar ten minutes down the road. Kendrick wasn't surprised. He should've kept his mouth shut and not sound like the pathetic loser he always knew he was.

Looking up into the dreamy star-glazed portrait he called *Heaven's roof*, Kendrick prayed. And he prayed hard. He knew God was busy helping some other poor, lost soul, but he only needed a few seconds of His time. Only a few seconds to ask Him for a solution to the big mess he called his life.

A shooting star threw its way across his sky. He did his best not to blink for in the matter of a millisecond it was gone.

"Oh, *God... God, you do care! GOD!*" He screamed His name with all his might. "*GOD... IF YOU'RE LISTENING... SEND ME A FRIEND!*" He stood for a couple seconds soaking in the silence. Nothing. He sighed.

Kendrick closed up the tent and decided as he got into his sleeping bag that four days by himself sitting around the vacant campsite wasn't happening. He'd rather go apologize to the drunken *kiddos* who thought college was as good as life was ever going to get.

The ground was hard; his feet ached from the running. Big bird was good inside mouth. Fire was hot.

"Ouch." Fire hurt. The man was scraggly and ruff. Any layers that covered the man were barely covering him at all. The man was hairy. He didn't need layers.

Animal sounds. The man huddled closer to the fire. Animals appeared on the cliff above the man. The man called them coyotes. They kill man for man's food. But the man was ready to die now, now that man was not hungry and felt happy.

"*ARGHH-ARGHHH-AGHHHH-YAAAAAR!*" Screamed the man at the coyotes. The coyotes pounced on the man. The man was ready for a good fight. The man caught the first coyote around the neck. Its teeth were ravaging swords only found inside the heads of monsters. But this was no monster compared to the man. The man was ready for a fight. He clawed the eyes of the coyote out of their sockets with his two thumbs. He then let it loose to whimper around aimlessly blinded by the better beast. The two other coyotes lay ready to attack, fury in the eyes for having their close companion killed and hungry with the thirst of blood dripping from their lips.

The man dropped to his knees. He had tasted the flesh of bird and quenched his thirst for justice before he was met with the claws of animal wrapped around his neck like so many others of his fellow man had gone. Suddenly, he heard a growl erupt and seething fangs flashed across in a sea of darkness. The man looked around aimlessly. Wondering, what happened to one of his death-bringers? Only one coyote stood looking back and forth, to and from the darkness of the night. Fear showed clearly, pulsing

through every muscle in its body leaving its tiny muzzle quivering in anxious as to know what lay next in its fate to come.

But the man already knew the answer to that: it knew only that with two, man stood no chance, but with one, its life stood in the palm of his hand ready to end its fate so man could go on and live for one more day.

It sprung at the petrified animal and tore its head in two tearing open its jaw into two meaty slivers. He dropped the convulsing animal to the floor watching it twitch and jerk its last muscles out of existence.

“WUH-YUH UHH KUNGA TAMI TU?” (Translation: man save man; man where?) But no man appeared. A stray wolf that must’ve have fallen back in its trail to keep up with its pack had appeared before the man.

Kendrick woke up. He stood hovering above the fire looking over at where stood a dog. He looked down at his body and then at his hands. No blood stained them. It was all a dream but all so real.

“You were where the wolf stood in my dream just previously before I woke up...” he told the dog. The dog motioned to what lay at Kendrick’s feet. It was the entire cooked chicken he had brought for lunch today. It had been torn apart like the bird he was eating when he was in his dream.

The dog helped himself. Kendrick felt confused. He didn’t understand how his dream was all too real? But instead of dead coyotes he was sure he had turned savage on, there was nothing but a pile of broken twigs and branches.

“I guess you saved me from the meanest couple of trees this side of Krookedshire had ever laid its eyes on.” The dog licked its *chompers* at him and dove back into its feast. It was a smelly dog. It definitely needed a bath. And there was no collar on the thing so it must’ve been a stray. Unless it was possibly one of the fraternity brothers’ which Kendrick didn’t feel sorry for if it was because it didn’t have any problem hopping into his backseat and letting him take it home.

After a long, drawn-out bath that took ages of wiggling and prying and slipping on the wet floor and more slipping on the wet floor, the big, old canine was as clean as a whistle. Kendrick fed it baloney slices leftover from what Violette left him before basically cleaning out the entire fridge. It must’ve drink two gallons of water before it dropped to the ground and passed out like a lightbulb.

Kendrick was back. His hair had turned into long, dirty dreads again with leaves and sticks sticking out of it from every which direction. The loose layers that covered his body showed to be possibly deerskin or from some other type of animal like such. The wolf was back. It got up from the ground and pointed in the direction they were supposed to go. Kendrick felt like he understood the wolf. It was leading him to possibly food, a fresh source of water, or shelter. Maybe all three; but he still felt unsure. What was going on? He didn’t even remember going to bed, why was he dreaming again?

He didn't have time to ask questions; the wolf was already off at a sprint. He followed in hot pursuit. And that's when he realized it; rain poured forth from the sky. Lightning struck the ground everywhere he turned. The wolf wasn't leading him to food or water; the wolf was leading him to shelter. He tried to catch up but found it hard being that the mud forming around him every step he took was making it harder and harder to keep up.

Noises erupted from the pouring rain. Screeches that rang out in the darkness bringing a sharp pain to his senses. Men with tools came charging out of pockets of darkness with blood stained to their lips. But Kendrick knew after a second glance that these savages weren't men... no, much more savage than any man that had ever walked the earth... no, not men, but Neanderthals. He never thought he'd see the light of day when Neanderthals walked the same ground he stood.

He crouched down and covered his head ready for the half-gorilla, half-man beasts to rip him from limb to limb until he was nothing but shredded flesh. They charged! Kendrick closed his eyes shielding himself of what his new reality contained for him.

"Open your eyes, Kendrick." Kendrick opened them. It was his wife and two girls. "We're leaving, Kendrick!" Kendrick looked at the three of them, concerned. The two girls didn't pay him any attention busy texting on their phones. What's new?

Kendrick asked:

"You *already* left." She shook her head.

"No. Kendrick, we're moving to London. I have a job there." Turning to her two girls, "Say goodbye, kids. You probably won't ever see your father ever again. Like *he* has money to fly to Canada or wherever we're going. And like *you* two will ask me to fly you back here to these grimy states they call Fat America..." They didn't say anything. He was sure Kylie was going to look up for a second, but it was a false alarm.

They walked out.

"They didn't even notice you," Kendrick said to the dog. The dog put its head back down and instantly he was transported back into the pouring rain. The Neanderthals were gone. But not really. He looked around at the ground to see them all scattered on the floor, dead. And standing in their place were a group of men and women. And this time they were actually humans, not the smelly beast that man once competed with.

"UUUUGH-AHHH YAAAAA!" (Translated: Welcome, man from the future. You have been granted by God to live amongst us. He has given you the duality dog; during day, you are modern man, your dog at your side to help get you through modern, present-day society. At night, you come here; you go back to your roots. A caveman, man was born as, a caveman you are able to be now. And at your side, your wolf. Man's first friend. Together we took, together we overcome, together we took what was ours!) And at that the men and women chanted with their duality wolves at their side:

“UHH-AHH-AHH! UHH-AHH-AHH! UHH-AHH-AHH!”