ONE SHOT

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For Isaac and Jack

1.

By the time I came into this world, bawling and bloody, Ma was tired of raising babies. She'd had three in five years and one of them had died. I was the fourth. Ma's milk dried up when I was no more than a week old and after that I depended on the cow. Ma took sick and couldn't even rock me in my crib. So, first thing every morning, Pa filled a bottle, strapped me to his chest with Ma's shawl and took me along with him. I grew from baby to child out in the woods with Pa, listening to the birdsong and breathing in his smell along with the sweet scent of pine.

Pa was a quiet man. Say "quiet" to some folks and they think meek. Mild. Timid. Pa was none of those things. He didn't waste breath on words, but when he did speak, every last syllable was worth hearing. I never once saw him fidget or make a move that wasn't necessary. But

Pa's stillness was like that of a tiger. There was a powerful strength to it. I don't mean he was menacing; I mean he was mighty. Nothing seemed to scare him.

One time, when I was maybe four years old, Pa and I were out setting traps in the woods. The wind changed direction and a strong animal stink came drifting towards me. I wasn't far from Pa, not really. But then I heard the crunching of something heavy walking over dead leaves, and a bear came strolling through the undergrowth. That small distance between my father and me suddenly seemed like a hundred miles.

The bear stopped. Sniffed. Looked right at me. I felt a scream growing in my chest, but Pa breathed out slow, through his teeth. He said, as soft and calm as could be, "Come here, Maggie. Nice and slow." And he smiled like there was nothing at all to worry about.

I fixed my eyes on Pa's and he held me in his gaze. He pulled me in like a fish on a line, until I was by his side. The bear had come closer by then, but Pa wasn't inclined to rush. Slowly, he loaded his rifle. He poured a charge of powder

into the barrel, dropped in a wad of cloth and a bullet and rammed it all down. Pa was talking to the bear the whole time. "I'm doing this just in case," he told it. "I don't want to go shooting you if I don't have to." Pa put a cap into the lock and pulled back the hammer so it was cocked and ready. But he didn't take aim. Instead, he sat himself down on the ground next to me, leaned against the tree, raised his face to the sun and yawned like he had no troubles in the world. The bear took a long, long look at him, then turned away.

"That's right," Pa said. "We ain't your next meal. And we ain't gonna hurt you none. You go your sweet way and we'll go ours."

The bear shuffled off into the trees and I breathed an almighty sigh of relief.

"I'm glad you didn't have to shoot it," I said.

"So am I," Pa replied with a laugh. "This old rifle will take out a pigeon or a squirrel well enough. I ain't sure it could bring down a full-grown bear. Heck, it would be more use as a club! I could have whacked that old bear to death."