

Reading Group 7-28-2016

PROLOGUE from GOD'S MIDDLE FINGER by Richard Grant

This is from a non-fiction book written by a British writer who travels into the heart of the drug territory in Mexico in hopes of understanding what is going on and why.

So this is what it feels like to be hunted through the woods at night. My spine is pressed up against the bark of a pine tree. My heart hammers against my ribcage with astonishing force. Here they come again. Here comes the big dented old Chevy pick-up with its engine roaring and its high beam lights swinging through the darkness and the trees. The men in the truck are drunk and they have rifles and now there are other men on foot looking for me with flashlights.

Why? I have done nothing to them. I pose no threat. Nor do the men imagine that I pose a threat. They are hunting me because I'm a stranger in their territory and the nearest law is three hours' away over a potholed and bandit-infested road and because they are the type of men who pride themselves on their willingness to kill.

"We are the real killers here," the tall one growled at me in a gruff mountain Spanish, back when I was desperately trying to make friends with them. "Further north they grow more drugs but here we are hundred percent killers." He had a silver scorpion affixed to his white straw cowboy hat and the first moment I saw him I knew I was in bad trouble.

The lights are swinging closer now and I press back into the corrugated bark of the tree. I turn my face to the side, afraid that it might reflect the light. My breath comes short and fast and it makes no sound. The lights swing away and I take off running again. Deeper into the forest and the darkness, with the wide eyes and edgy floating gait of a frightened deer.

I come to a creek with a high undercut bank and I wedge myself into a shallow cave under its lip. The earth is damp and cold. It feels like a good place to hide. Then I realize that I can't see them coming from here and I can't hear anything except the water rushing through the creek. I have neutralized my two key senses. They could be twenty feet away. What if the men with flashlights are following my tracks? The ground I ran across was bare and dusty with a scant covering of pine needles and the men in these mountains grow up hunting game and tracking stray livestock.

I un-wedge myself from the cave and step from one pale silver rock to the next across the creek. My eyes are well adjusted to the starlight from all the watching and waiting and I fear the rise of the moon. Like all hunted creatures, I want darkness and deeper cover.

On the other side of the creek I start climbing a steep slope covered with dry crunching leaf litter and find a thicket of oak saplings with a large boulder in front of it. I work my way into the thicket, concerned about rattlesnakes and scorpions, and hunch down behind the boulder. My breathing slows and lengthens. My heart no longer feels like it's going to smash its way through my ribcage and bounce off through the forest.

These mountains have already taught me more than I ever wanted to know about fear. It comes in many forms and normally has an element of numbness and panic but not this time. I feel focused and alert, clear-headed, and agile, with a deep black dread in my core. I stand up and peek over the boulder. The lights are still strafing the darkness. They are still out there. How can they be so drunk and yet so persistent? Ah yes, the cocaine. Instead of snorting it like gentlemen, they poured out little white mounds of it on the palms of their hands, threw it down their throats and chased it back with more beer.

"You say you're alone and unarmed," said the short fat one. "Aren't you afraid someone will kill you?"

“Why would anyone want to kill me?”

The tall one smiled and said, “To please the trigger finger.”

The short fat one smiled and said, “Someone could kill you and throw your body down a ravine and no-one would ever know.”

I should have grabbed that warm fleece-lined corduroy shirt when I bolted away from them into the forest. I can keep running and hiding all night but we’re high up in the mountains, at 8,000 feet or so, and I’m already shivering in jeans and a T-shirt and by dawn the temperature will be close to freezing. If I had matches or a lighter, I would walk a long way from here and light a fire. If I had a shirt with sleeves, I would stuff it with dead oak leaves and pine needles for insulation. If I had half a damned brain, I wouldn’t be here in the first place.

And now another problem: what sounds like a large wild animal is walking through the dry leaf litter towards me. Its footfall is too stealthy, graceful and purposeful to be a cow or a donkey or a goat. A coyote perhaps? It sounds bigger. A mountain lion? The men said these mountains were full of them. They also said there were onzas — a kind of mutant mountain lion or lion-jaguar cross which has never been photographed and never furnished a verifiable pelt to a scientist. I don’t believe in the existence of onzas and yet now I see one in my mind’s eye. The brindled elongated torso. The tufted elbows. The low skulking gait.

Whatever it is, this creature needs to know that I’m here and willing to fight. The human voice would be the most effective warning. Wild animals are extremely wary of people here, because the custom of the mountains is to shoot all wild animals on sight. But I daren’t make a human sound. I’m afraid human ears might pick it up. So I make a low snarling growl and the animal stops. I growl again and the footsteps veer away.

Deprived of language, hunted through the woods like an animal — what in the name of Jesus am I doing here?

You can’t say I wasn’t warned. From the early planning stages of this long twisted journey, I have been bombarded and deluged with warnings. They came in such quantity that I stopped listening to them. I started trusting to luck and I was luckier than I deserve to make it as far as this thicket.

As I shiver through the long cold hours on the wrong side of midnight, growling to keep the wild animals away, waiting for the men to give up and go home so I can get back to my truck and leave these mountains forever, one quiet husky voice keeps echoing in my head: If you go up there alone, you become prey...

1. Why is Richard Grant running and hiding?
2. Is it daylight or night?
3. What kind of men are these that are hunting him?
4. Why do they say they would kill Richard Grant?
5. Have you ever heard the term “itchy trigger finger”? What do you think it means?
6. What does he wish he had grabbed? Why?
7. Why does he decide the cave is a bad spot to hide?
8. What is an onza? Does Richard believe they exist?
9. How did he make the animal go away?
10. What did his friends think when he told them about this trip?
11. What does he remember his friend telling him?
12. Read the paragraph where he describes his fear.
13. Did you read this excerpt quickly? Did the writer make you feel his fear? Did the writing pull you into the story?

14. How do you think this story ends?