

Outhouse Moon
K.D. Wentworth

"Ain't nothin' good ever happens under an Outhouse Moon, boy."

Willy watched in disgust as Grandpa's weak whiskery chin worked on the mouthful of shredded tobacco for a moment. He dodged out of the way as the old man leaned over and aimed for the spittoon.

"Mind you keep this here young'un home tonight, Aline." Closing his eyes, Grandpa tipped his chair back against the faded cherries and bananas on the kitchen wallpaper. "Dark things'll be afoot on a night like this."

"Ma!" Panic welled up inside Willy as he paused with his hand on the doorknob. "You know I'm going over to Rick Peterson's. You promised!" Outside, the fall wind skittered dry leaves across the windowpane like dead folks' fingernails.

Grandpa's brownish-gray eyes slid sideways to look knowingly at him. "There'll be things out there tonight what could eat a young'un up afore he knowed what happened to him. You might never come home to your ma and me, boy. How would you like that, caught out there in the dark forever?"

Willy felt ridiculously close to tears for a man of eleven years. "Ma, you promised!"

"Don't you raise your voice to me, young man." Up to the elbows in soap suds, his mother looked up from the cracked porcelain sink and groped for a dish towel. "Besides, it's getting late. I thought you were going over to the Petersons' before it got dark."

Willy's fingers tightened around the coolness of the worn brass doorknob. "We're—we're going coon hunting. Rick got a new hound for his birthday."

She wiped her hands on the threadbare towel. "Don't be ridiculous. You wouldn't so much as touch a dog if your life depended on it."

"We're just going to run some of his hounds for an hour or two and see how the new one goes." Willy did hate dogs with their sloppy wet noses and great bone-white teeth, but he hated Rick teasing him about it even more. After tonight, no one would be able to say that he was afraid of dogs ever again. "There's no harm in it. Pa used to—"

The unfinished sentence hung there in the air between them like a blow waiting to fall. Willy swallowed hard, trying not to say anymore than he already had. He didn't want to make his mother cry again.

"I see." Her weary face, drained of color now, tightened until her cheekbones stood out stark white against her skin. "You were just going traipsing off all over the countryside without telling me, is that it?"

He hung his head. "I was gonna tell you."

"When? After you broke your neck and laid out there all night in the cold and wet?"

_ -like your Pa did._

Willy heard the words as plainly as if she'd actually said them. Suddenly, he could almost see his pa again, sitting here in the kitchen, letting Willy help him off with his heavy boots after a long day's work.

"You better think on this, boy. Look what happened to your pa and he weren't out under no Outhouse Moon neither." The front legs of Grandpa's chair thumped back onto the floor. "I knowed how it was gonna be when I saw that brazen sickle moon ahangin' up there like that, all cozied up to that Jezebel-lookin' star. No decent star fools around with the moon like that." He aimed another sideways shot of dark liquid into the spittoon. "Course you never listen to your poor old Grandpa."

"That's just Venus!" Willy twisted the doorknob with both hands and hauled back on the door, letting the cold anger of the late autumn wind blast past him into the kitchen. "We learned about it in school! Miss Robinson said we could see Venus near the moon tonight!"

"William Bennett Harrison, you come back—"

His heart thumping like it would bang clean out of his chest, he scooted through the open doorway out into a cold that bit at his eyes and scared his breath away. The door slammed behind him with the force of a gunshot. He hunched into his thin jacket and dashed into the stand of tall maples that lined the stretch from his house to the lane, plowing dead leaves behind him like a plume of spray.

Why did she have to listen to that crazy old man? No one with any sense ever believed a thing he said. If Grandpa said do this, then it was sure a sure thing you should do just the opposite. Willy crammed his fists down into his pockets and waded through the rustling dried leaves up to his ankles.

A dark shape leaped out from behind the solid mass of a tree, screeching and waving its arms. Startled, Willy staggered backwards and fetched his head up sharp against a trunk. He caught a glimpse of the mean-faced Outhouse Moon through skeletal dark tree limbs as he fell without ever hitting bottom—

"—jeez, I said I was sorry, Willy!" Hands tugged at his jacket. "Quit playing around, will you?"

The back of Willy's head was wet and numb and sore, all at the same time. "R-Rick?"

The dark figure sat back on its heels and stared down at him. "This ain't funny, Willy," it said reproachfully.

Willy tried to sit up, then felt his stomach roll sickly. He clenched his teeth and fought it off.

"Are you gonna be all right? Do you want me to go fetch your grandpa or something?"

"No! You leave my grandpa out of this!" A tree root gnarled into the shape of a bony knee was digging into the back of his neck. Willy squirmed weakly, trying to ease off it. "Where's your dogs?"

"I left 'em shut up in the barn." The other boy swallowed hard. "I was planning to pick 'em up on our way over to Fox Hollow, but you don't feel like hunting no more, do you?"

"Sure I do." Willy hoped that he sounded better than he felt. "Help me up, toadface."

Taller than him by a head, Rick grabbed his shirt and hauled him back onto his feet. "Willy, I didn't think you'd really be scared or I'd never have done it."

"I know." Willy balanced there, the world spinning around in silly circles, the stupid Outhouse Moon floating around up in the air where it belonged one minute, then fooling around down somewhere below his feet the next. He shook his head and started on wobbly legs toward the fields.

By the time they reached the barn, Rick's dogs were all shivery with excitement, yelping and jumping up on his chest when Rick let them out, and practically beating him to death with their whip-thin tails. Shuddering, Willy pushed the slobbery things away, then backed against the rough boards of the barn until Rick whistled them off into the night.

"I dunno. Maybe you ought to go on home, Willy." Rick fingered the barrel of his twenty-two. "You still don't look so good. We can go out again tomorrow night."

Willy was half-inclined to agree, what with the burning throb in the back of his head and all, but he thought of how Ma would be waiting with her birch-bark switch for him to get home, and how Grandpa's toothless mouth would smirk because he'd been right after all. "Naw, I'm fine, and besides, I ain't never been hunting before."

Just then, one of the hounds belled loud and clear. Whooping, Rick thrust his rifle into the air. "There's Daisy! She's always first and she's always true! Come on!"

He sprinted away into the darkness across the hay meadow, headed for the edge of the woods on the far side. Willy struggled after him.

The shorn meadow shone silver under their feet in the faint moonlight. Their steps crunched in the cold brittle air. Willy heard the hounds moving farther and farther away, their baying voices building into a frantic

crescendo. At least they were having a good time, Willy thought, glancing up at Grandpa's Outhouse Moon and hating it with all his might.

When he caught up to Rick at the edge of the trees, the other boy was just standing there, listening.

"What is it?" Willy managed to wheeze out between breaths.

"The dogs sound different." Rick climbed up on a low rock and craned his head around, trying to get a fix on the baying as it echoed through the thick trees. "Listen. They don't sound like they're on coon track no more. Can't you tell?"

"Sure." Willy grimaced behind Rick's back in the dark. It didn't sound any different to him, but he'd rather have been skinned alive than admit it.

"Come on!" Rick pulled him into the dark underside of the forest, keeping Willy beside him. The low leaveless limbs whipped across their faces and tore at their clothes. Willy's chest felt like it was on fire as he gasped down lungful after lungful of the scorchingly cold air. They ran on and on, following the hounds' voices.

"That's Singer now with the lead," Rick called back over his shoulder.

Willy could only follow. His feet hardly seemed to touch the rocky ground at all.

Then a dog screamed, a high thin wail that cut off as abruptly as it began. Rick stopped dead under a huge tree and listened with all his strength. "Damn!" He shook his head. "That sounded like Slim. That stupid dog is always getting too close."

Willy leaned his cheek up against the rough bark of the tree and wrapped his arms around it for support. The wind swayed the dark branches above them, and he caught another winking glimpse of the crescent moon and its companion star.

Rick fastened his fingers in Willy's shirt again. "Come on! We got to find them before it gets another one of my dogs!"

"But-but what do you think they're running?" Willy gasped as his feet scrambled through the tangled brush, towed along by Rick's relentless arm.

"I dunno! Not coon, though, that's for sure!"

Then they came upon the dog's broken body, curled up as though it were only sleeping by the gnarled foot of an ancient tree. "Jeez!" Rick handed him the twenty-two, then knelt to touch the dog's brow with his fingertips.

The wind gusted, and the trees creaked in the cold, sounding a little like squeaky, high-pitched laughter. The hair crawled on the back of Willy's neck. "Maybe you should call them in, Rick." Staring around under the dark trees, he shivered. "Maybe that's a bear or a cougar they're running."

Rick stood up and reached for the twenty-two. "Maybe, but, lessin' I catch up with them, they won't be back until breakfast." He swiveled his head, listening intently. "Come on!"

Rick dashed off between the twisted trunks. Willy plunged in after him with a choking feeling like his heart was too big for his chest. And now that Rick was scared for his dogs, he wasn't laying back for him anymore. After a few minutes, Willy could only follow him by sound. They were so deep into the woods now that the trees made an impenetrable ceiling above them and every sound they made echoed crazily.

The crash and crunch ahead of him stopped; Willy froze, terrified that he had turned wrong. The seconds dragged by as he tried not to breathe so that he could catch a sound, any sound to follow out of this suffocating darkness.

"Willy!" a faint voice called.

"Here!" he called back.

"Willy!" the voice came again, from somewhere on the left up ahead of him. "Goddammit, where are you?"

"Over here!" Willy floundered toward him, skinning his ankle against an invisible broken-edged rock, then struggling up again, thinking that his gasping breaths were the loudest things he'd ever heard in his life. Finally an arm snagged him as he stumbled past a split, half-fallen oak.

"Willy, look!"

Rick's fingers dug into his arm as Willy tried to focus through the dark, then finally got down on his knees before the dark tumbled heap of bodies. "It's Daisy and Singer and my new pup, little Poco." His voice was hoarse with restrained tears. "All's I got left now is Betsy and Old Jobe running out there all by theirselves. We've got to get to them!"

Willy stared at the tangled mass of hounds lying there as though a giant had scooped them up and thrown them against the old oak. Somewhere in the night, baying continued thinly, moving steadily off to their right.

Rick jerked at his sleeve. "Come on!" And he was off again into the darkness.

Willy lurched back onto his feet. "This is stupid!" he called after Rick. "What if that old bear decides to up and chunk your head against a tree?" As he strained to hear an answer, he caught only the wind groaning through the trees and the branches scraping over one another.

His hands out before him, he followed the crashing of Rick's footsteps, falling to his knees several times and once plunging ankle-deep into cold unseen mud. The wind blew, stirring the dead leaves on the ground, whistling thinly through the branches.

Willy struggled on, remembering the whiteness of his ma's face when he'd said that he was going coon hunting, remembering how his pa had been lost out on a cold fall night like this, five years ago. He'd fallen and broken his neck, and though the whole community had searched, it had taken three days to find him. Willy had been only six.

The hounds' baying abruptly changed in pitch, ascending the scale until it seemed that it could go no higher, and yet it still climbed. Willy oriented on it and changed direction slightly, realizing sickly that he was heading even deeper into the woods. "Rick, where are you?"

The wind came up again, howling and clattering the tree limbs against each other so that they sounded like two bucks knocking antlers together.

"Rick!" He stopped and held his breath, praying for an answer. "Wait for me!"

Then he thought that he heard a reply, very faint and off to his left. He changed direction again, thinking that the hounds did sound nearer now. He listened to his own feet clumping and crashing through the unseen brush, promising himself that he would never go coon hunting again if only he got home safe tonight. Even Ma's switch would look good compared to this.

"Over here!"

His face smarting from a deep scratch, Willy turned again. "Rick?" The hounds' baying grew clearer. "Have they got it treed?"

"Not exactly."

The hounds were yelping frantically now, as though they'd been hurt. Willy glanced around, his heart hammering against his chest. "Jeez, where are you? I can't see you!"

"Well, that depends on what you mean." The voice sounded nearer now. "The Rick you knew is over there by that tree on the left."

Willy stumbled to his left, finally making out the dark mass of a fallen body and the frenzied hounds whining and licking at its face.

"But the Rick that you're going to know is over here," the voice continued.

The wind surged again; the tree limbs made creaky whispering noises all around him. Willy edged closer to the hounds and the body. "What are you talking about?" he whispered between clenched teeth. "Is it someone we know? Should we go for help?"

"It's too late for that," Rick said, his voice strangely smooth and easy. "And besides, we have all the help we need right here."

Grabbing the collar of one of the crying hounds, Willy pulled it away, then knelt and tried to see the person's face. "It's not funny! Do you think that bear got him?"

The creaking grew louder all around him, squeaking and cackling, sounding for all the world like his grandpa laughing.

"No bear did that."

Footsteps shuffled through the dead grass and the brittle leaves.

"Rick's hounds don't run bear." The footsteps stopped just behind a tree. The hound by the fallen body whined and cringed back against the tree.

Willy kept hold of the other dog's worn collar, feeling its exhausted sides heave against his leg. "Look, we've got the dogs now. Let's get on home and tell your pa about—"

"About this?" The footsteps crunched closer. "But nobody will know about this—ever."

"Nnnobbodyyyy," answered the creaking.

Something dark and solid moved through the closely packed trees, its head so high up that it knocked the stiff tree limbs aside as it came. Willy squatted down in the dead leaves and the hound cowered back into his arms, snarling and snapping out there in the dark.

Willy wiped at the sweat on his face with the back of his sleeve, flinching at the salt stinging in his scrapes and scratches. "Let's get out of here, Rick. These dogs are scared plum out of their minds and I don't feel so good myself."

"In a minute." The shuffling black mass moved another step forward. "You're very warm."

"Wwwarrmmm!" the creaking agreed.

"Course I'm warm!" Willy snapped and struggled to his feet, keeping a good hold on the dog's collar because he didn't want to have to chase it again. "I've run over half the county after you and these dadblamed hounds!"

"Yes, you were a good friend." Rick sighed. "It's so touching, two good friends out on a night of hunting."

"Gooooooodddd," the creaking chimed in.

Willy glanced around, his knees shaking until he wasn't sure that they would hold him. "How do we get back?" The black mass moved another step closer and suddenly he could see its vaguely manlike shape.

"Oh, I'm going back, but you're not." Blacker than the inside of a well at midnight, the shape melted down into a shape that was more human with each second.

Willy wanted to run, to scream, to do anything, but he was mortared right there to that spot.

Growing lighter now as well, it leaned over and suddenly picked up the other hound in stiff spiky arms, raised it high over its head, and dashed it against the tree.

Willy stiffened as the dog thumped hard, yelped, then slid down to rest on the unmoving body already lying there. He started to run, but the shape, now no taller than Rick and its face a white blur, moved in and stiff-armed him back against the rough bark of a huge tree. "But someone will go back in your place, just like I'm going for Rick, so don't you worry about your ma. She'll be looked after."

"Yyyeeesss!" the creaking agreed. "Yyyeeesss!" Then the trees moved closer, shuffling toward him with snakey tree root legs, peering at him with knobby knothole eyes, scratching at his face with spidery branch-end fingers.

Willy ducked his head and ran off into the darkness, holding onto the hound as though it were part of him, the branches whipping at his face and clutching at his arms.

"This is our place," the calm voice-that-sounded-like-Rick said from behind him. "You came into our place on this special night, and now one of us will go to yours and enjoy all that warmth. That's fair, isn't it?"

"Faaaiirrrr!" the squeaking agreed, then degenerated into a raucous, clattering laughter.

A branch speared down through the front of his jacket, taking a patch of his skin with it. He wriggled out, holding the frantic, squirming dog with first one hand and then the other. Then he ran as hard as he could, slipping and falling, then slipping again, slicing his chin open on a rock.

"Bllloooddd!" the squeaking, creaking voices chortled all around him.

Willy pushed himself up, half-dizzy with pain, still holding the dog, but no longer knowing which way was out of the woods. He hesitated, trying to remember how he'd come in, but there had been too many turnings and the trees were so thick that he couldn't even see the sky or that damn moon and star.

"We can't let you go back," the voice said reasonably from behind him. "Someone else will go in your place."

The hound snarled, straining against the worn collar in Willy's hand, tugging him away. Willy resisted for a second, then suddenly the meaning of that penetrated his brain. Away! The dog knew the way home!

Giving into the dog's pull, he let it lead him wherever it would, on and on through the darkness and the branches that scraped and grabbed at him from every side and the woody voices that gibbered at him until he couldn't hear his own breathing.

After forever, he thought that he could see just a glint of starlight up ahead between dark branches. He took another deep aching breath and floundered on, then something caught his ankle, yanking him down.

He hit the ground chest-first, knocking the air out of him. He lost his grip on the hound's collar. The dog sped on, never slacking its pace. Willy would have screamed or cried, but he had nothing left. Was this what had happened to his pa, he wondered dully, something wild and dark crushing the life out of him far away from anyone's eyes or ears?

Digging at his ankle, he wrenched it out from under a thick knobby root sticking out of the ground, but it was too late. The rustling, creaking, whispering branches closed in on him, pressing down, pinning him to damp cold ground with hard, stiff fingers. He turned his head aside to keep his mouth out of the dirt and leaves and-

A cold wet nose thrust up against his cheek, then a moist warm tongue. Willy reached out and dug his fingers into the thick velvety fur; Rick's hound had come back for him. He wrapped both arms around its neck and closed his eyes. "Home!" he whispered to it. "Home!"

Whining deep in its throat, the dog strained toward the edge of the woods and Willy crawled along with it, breaking through the thin branch-ends that tried to hold him.

"Now, you know we can't have that," the voice-that-wasn't-Rick said from behind him.

The dog bunched its muscles, trying to jump over a huge fallen log into the open field beyond. Half-blind with exhaustion, Willy pulled himself up the rough bark, then slipped back, leaving a sticky warm trail of wetness beneath his smarting hands.

"Be reasonable." The voice chuckled. "Do you really want your mother to see you like this?"

Ma . . . the aching look in her eyes earlier when she'd mentioned his pa . . .

Willy worked his fingers into the rough-edged bark and climbed up the side of the trunk again, scooting forward on his stomach. Something tough and thin grasped his ankle from behind and held on, growing tighter and tighter. Under his other hand, the hound stiffened, then looked back over its shoulder, snarling.

"Home!" Willy tried to push it ahead of him. "Go home!"

The dog strained forward to the top of the fallen tree, then fell back, unable to free him. The grip on his ankle began to inch him backwards and the exhausted dog whimpered.

Willy thought of his mother again, and then let go. "Go home, dog! Get on home!"

The dog scrambled over the trunk, then stood there, just on the other side, watching him with terrified, white-edged eyes. "Go home!" he shouted at it, but it was frozen there, its tongue lolling out. Willy realized that it wouldn't go on without him.

The voice laughed again. "So, we'll have two for the price of one after all. Very generous of you both."

"No!" Turning around, Willy saw an army of black shapes whose tops rivaled the trees, shuffling forward with dangling black arms that were reaching out even as they inched forward. So scared that he couldn't even breathe, he attacked the thin fibrous root looped around his ankle, tearing at it with his bare fingers as the rustling crept closer and closer. He couldn't make a dent in it, but as he strained back away from it, he thought he felt his shoe give just a little. He hauled back harder and pointed his toe, the way his pa had when Willy used to help him out of his boots. The shoe gave a little more, then slipped off. He pushed the vine away and scrambled over the log, on out into the open treeless field.

The dog took off running before him across the hay field. One-shoed, dirty, and bleeding, he followed the weaving head through the silvery dried stubble without looking back.

"You can't bring that filthy thing in here!"

Half in and half out, Willy stood in the doorway and stared up at his mother, too exhausted to argue.

"You get on in here and clean yourself up." She put her hands on her hips. "But that's not even your dog. Just leave it outside and it'll get on home by itself."

Grandpa shuffled toward the door and peered over her shoulder at the two of them. His watery mouth smiled. "Escaped that Outhouse Moon after all, did you?" He shook his head. "And what's that you got there? Thought you was afraid o' dogs."

"It's—it's my dog." The words came out like a gust of wind, but even as he said them, Willy knew that they were true. The Rick that he'd left behind in the woods had no need of dogs now, and the Rick that was going over to the Petersons' house wouldn't want them either. "Rick gave it to me."

"Well, I never said that you could have a dog, young man." A furrow appeared between his mother's eyes. "Least of all a dog in the house."

Willy looked her square in the face, highly conscious of the creakings and rustlings of the trees out in the darkness behind him and the quivering body of the redbone hound pressed against his leg. More than he'd ever wanted anything in his whole life, he wanted to come into the warmth and light.

He laid a hand on the furred head. "Either he comes in, or I don't."

"What did you say?" His mother stared at him in disbelief.

"Better get out from under that there Outhouse Moon, boy." Grandpa cackled to himself for a moment, then hobbled back to his kitchen chair. "All sorts of creepin' nastiness afoot on a night like this." Nodding to himself, he tilted his chair back against the wall.

Willy tightened his fingers around the hound's worn old collar.

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" His mother grabbed him by the shirt and yanked him inside. The hound squeezed in with him. "You get on into the back and get cleaned up, and—and see you wash that filthy animal while you're at it!"

Willy started to limp past Grandpa, but the hound suddenly dropped into a bristling crouch and snarled at the old man. Leaning over, Grandpa aimed a stream into the spittoon, then smiled his toothless smile at the two of them. "Durn right, dog." He winked. "Can't keep no secrets from the likes o' you. Guess you might say as I was born under an Outhouse Moon too." Then his eyes closed again. "But don't you worry none. There'll be other nights, and other moons for you and that half-growed boy."

He was so quiet for a moment that Willy thought he'd fallen asleep. He reached for the snarling hound's collar.

Grandpa's lips parted in a wide, loose-lipped smile.

"Why," he said, and stretched his arms high over his head, "I suppose that we'll all have to go out huntin' together one of these here fine, moonlit nights and see what we can scare up."

