

"We thought maybe you were the naked runner." That's the way Tom greeted me that morning two years ago when I slid into the empty chair. Mostly, Bertile's coffee klatch is a bunch of retired guys who meet every weekday morning, hoping to hear a new story. I'd known for some time that, as the new guy from Atlanta, I was the source of some of their funnier tales.

I tore open the package of powered cream and spilled it into my coffee while they watched. "I didn't know there was a naked runner. And, by the way, what made you decide it's not me?" I tried to look serious.

No one answered for a while. Then, "He doesn't know, Tom. Tell him."

Tom leaned back, looked at me over his glasses, and nodded. "Billy Moreland shot him dead."

"Shot a runner? That's terrible! Where?"

"Over on Old Line Road. Did it yesterday evening. It'll be in today's paper."

"Why in the hell did he shoot a runner?"

Everyone laughed, except me. Tom was the one who reminded me. "It was a naked runner!" That started the laughter again.

I don't remember what other stories were swapped that morning. I do remember that I pretty quickly made up my mind not to wait for some sanitized newspaper account. After all, Billy Moreland and our family shared property lines over on Old Line Road. Since retiring back to Clarke County, I had sat on Billy's front porch many times, listening to stories about how the area used to be. I figured that the shooting of a naked runner over at his place would become a part of that lore. For sure, I wanted to get the story firsthand.

Billy wasn't surprised to see me that afternoon, and he didn't mind telling his story again.

His dogs had been agitated that night, barking and whimpering. Twice, he went out on his porch to see what was bothering the damn dogs and to try to shush them up. The third time, he heard the neighbor's horse whinnying not a half mile up the road. He figured there might be a bear or a wildcat out there spooking the animals. So, he went back in the house, got his rifle, and walked down to where he kept a few goats.

It was not a dark night. The moon was bright, near full, he said. The goats were pretty agitated, stomping around, crashing headlong into the fence. Billy spotted what he thought was a large coyote hunched down in the middle of the pen. He already had the rifle's safety off, so he put the gun to his shoulder and fired. He figured he had missed, for the animal let out a snarl, turned, and started to run.

Billy said he fired again. That time, what he thought was a dog or a coyote fell. Cautiously, he went to the gate, entered the pen, and walked to where the carcass lay. Only, it was a man. A naked man. The man stirred, turned his head toward Billy, and, Billy said, made a ferocious sound that didn't seem human at all.

That was the last time the naked man moved.

I watched as Billy paused and looked out toward the woodlands around his house. I could tell the experience had bothered him. It would have scared me, too.

Of course, the county sheriff had been called. He and his deputy found the two shell casings where Billy said he was standing. They also found the bloody spot where the man must have been shot the first time. They checked with a neighbor of Billy's. He confirmed that there had been a ruckus before the two shots. Something had been bothering his horse.

A picture of the man's face was posted in our post office and in the next issue of the Clarke County Democrat. This brought several people forward saying they had seen the man around town. Some even knew his name: Jonathan Wolfgang.

Jonathan Wolfgang had bought what had been a vacant house across the street from the Watson's Farm Supply store. I went to Watson's and asked if they ever saw the man around. It turned out that Wolfgang had bought wire from the store to enclose his backyard. It seemed he kept goats behind his house. In fact, Wolfgang went over about twice a month and bought sacks of dog food and sacks of feed prepared for goats and sheep.

The next time I saw Mark Livingston, the town lawyer, I asked him what happened to a deserted

house. The answer wasn't complicated. If taxes were not paid, a public notice would be made and, after some time specified by the court, the property would be confiscated by the county and sold for back taxes. Mark told me that he had not been to look at the property and, if I was interested, he would get permission for the two of us to go inside.

The following Tuesday, we did just that. The front door was locked. I looked in a window and saw some furniture in the front room. I was about to go to the back of the house when Mark stopped me. He had found a key stuck in a crevice above the door.

The place smelled like a dog kennel. Mark, never a big talker, got it in two words, "Dog poop." All the rooms other than the front room were nearly empty. There was a cot, a chest of drawers, and boxes of books in the room where the man must have slept. A computer was there, too. A few shirts and jeans hung in a closet. There were three towels hanging in the bathroom, as well as a shaving mug and straight razor on the bathroom lavatory. In the kitchen, there were no dishes and no silverware, but there was a refrigerator and a freezer. Both were still running. The refrigerator contained six baby bottles of soured milk. The freezer was almost empty, just a few chunks of meat. I had no idea if the meat was beef or venison. It might have been goat.

There was nothing in the backyard, though the fenced-in area was not overgrown. Since there were no gardening tools in sight, I guessed the goats had kept it grazed. I said that to Mark.

"Strange," was his only reply.

I thought bizarre would have been a better word.

Three weeks after Jonathan Wolfgang was shot, I was sitting in a chair at Jerry Bartle's barbershop. It occurred to me that Jerry knew almost everyone and everything that happened in our community. So, I asked him if Wolfgang ever got a haircut in his shop.

He laughed and said he did. "I've cut all kinds of hair. Fine, thinning hair like yours, thick hair, straight hair, and curly hair. But I have never seen a head of hair like that man's." Jerry had never been reluctant to talk about or add to any news in our small town. "His hair never got longer than about an inch or so. I never had to cut a single hair on the top. His hair was so coarse it would have taken all the sharp off my clippers. So, he always got a scissor cut." Jerry pushed my head forward as he trimmed down the back of my neck. "I always use electric clippers to cut the hair down a man's neck. Not that Wolfgang fellow. The hair growing down his neck was just as thick and coarse as on his head. I shaved the hair on the back of his neck with lather and a straight razor."

I asked one more thing. "Did he ever say anything about where he worked?"

"Down there at Tulane is what he told me. Biology or something."

"A professor? What's a Tulane professor doing living here?"

Jerry unsnapped the cloth that was draped over me. "I asked him if he was a teacher. He said he wasn't. He said he worked with the stuff inside cells. I forget what he called it."

"Genes?"

"Yeah. Like blue jeans." Jerry had a big grin on his face.

I gave Jerry my usual twenty dollars and got back two. I paused at the door, thinking about what I had learned. I looked back at Jerry. He was already talking to the next customer.

"Damn." I said that to myself. I knew I was getting wrapped up in something that was none of my business. Nevertheless, there was a guy on the coaching staff down at Tulane that I'd known for some time. I sent him an email asking if he had ever heard of a man in the biology department named Jonathan Wolfgang. He wrote back and said that he did not know him but that he was listed in the personnel booklet several years back as a research associate in genetics.

Genetics. Really.

There's one more thing that may or may not be related to all this. It's my habit to jog three or four times a week on trails near my home. It used to be that my neighbor's dog would bark and pace in her cage as I went by. Every so often, she would yelp and howl what seemed like all night. I mentioned this to my neighbor some time ago. He laughed and said he hoped it didn't bother me. "The she-dog howls when she is in heat," he told me. I remember that I laughed with my neighbor, both of us in sympathy with the wildness we heard coming from that pen.

I haven't forgotten what happened around a half year before the shooting. I had found my neighbor working in his garden and stopped to ask about the dog. I had no intent except to be neighborly. My neighbor took off his cap, shook his head, and looked back at what I came to see was an empty pen. "Some dog jumped the fence and knocked her up," he said.

"Jumped that fence? Holy catfish! Did you get a batch of puppies out of that?"

He shook his head. "No, sir."

He didn't say any more, so I pushed. "Is she okay?"

"Something got in the pen about three months later, ripped her open, and took the litter."

"Ripped her open?"

He went on, "I know it was a big litter because she swelled up so. She never got that big before."

"She didn't birth the pups?"

"No, sir. Like I said, she was ripped open. That's the way I found her, bloody and all. The litter was gone." My neighbor paused, looked toward the pen, and then turned back to me. "We miss her."

Billy Moreland shooting the naked man in his goat cage caused me to think back about this. No charges have ever been filed against Billy Moreland. Nobody expects there will be. After all, everybody knows Billy Moreland. He's a good man.

I have to confess, however, that the affair has caused me to change some of my behavior. Previously, I would go over to Old Line Road near Billy Moreland's house, park my truck, and hike into the woodlands. That's changed. I don't hike alone over there anymore. I bought a four-wheel drive truck, so if I want to get back in the woods, I drive.

There are two more things that I am almost reluctant to say. First, my perception is that it is quieter over where I used to hike. My wife says I don't hear as well as I used to. But I insist that I can hear the airplanes flying overhead and, in the late afternoon, I can hear the coyotes yipping.

Here's the second thing. Recently, along a sandy part of the road, I saw small barefoot tracks.

Human child tracks. I can't prove this. There were only three or four footprints in the sand. No one was with me to attest that it's true. But it's what I saw.

I know the guys at Bertile's would have another story if they knew what I've been doing, so I don't tell them. You see, for one or two days around the time for the full moon, I go over to the Old Line Road property and take a pair of binoculars. I park on a ridge overlooking a drainage area and scan the woodlands down around the creek. I'm watching. And I listen. Somehow, I have an idea that out there in those woods, I might catch a glimpse of a young, naked runner. Or maybe even a wolf pup. Wouldn't that be something?

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