

Becky and the wolf

With all her big brothers and sisters off to school, our ranch became a lonely place for our three-year-old daughter, Becky. She longed for playmates. We promised to buy her a puppy but in the meantime, “pretend” puppies popped up nearly every day.

I had just finished washing the lunch dishes when the screen door slammed¹⁾ and Becky rushed in, cheeks flushed with excitement. “Mama.” she cried. “Come see my new doggy. I gave him water two times already. He’s so thirsty.”

I sighed. Another of Becky’s imaginary dogs.

“Please come, Mama. ” She tugged at my jeans, her brown eyes pleading. “He’s crying--and he can’t walk. ”

“Can’t walk? ” Now that was a twist. All her previous make-believe dogs could do marvelous things. Why suddenly a dog that couldn’t walk?

“All right, honey, ” I said. By the time I tried to follow her, Becky had already disappeared into the mesquite²⁾. “Where are you? ” I called.

“Over here by the oak stump. Hurry, Mama.”

I parted the thorny³⁾ branches and raised my hand against the glare of the Arizona sun. A numbing chill gripped me.

There she was, sitting on her heels, toes dug firmly in the sand, and cradled in her lap was the unmistakable head of a wolf.

“Becky. ” My mouth felt dry. “Don’ t move. ” I stepped closer. Pale-yellow eyes narrowed. Black lips tightened, exposing double sets of two-inch fangs⁴⁾. Suddenly the wolf trembled. Its teeth clacked, and a piteous whine rose from its throat.

“It’s all right, boy, ” Becky crooned. “Don’t be afraid. That’s my mama, and she loves you, too. ”

Then the unbelievable happened. As her tiny hands stroked the great shaggy head, I heard the gentle thump, thump, thumping of the wolf’s tail from deep inside the stump.

What was wrong with the animal? I wondered. Why couldn’t he get up? I couldn’t tell. Nor did I dare to step any closer. I glanced at the empty water bowl. My memory flashed back to the five skunks⁵⁾ that last week had torn the burlap⁶⁾ from a leaking pipe in a frenzied effort to reach water during the final agonies⁷⁾ of rabies⁸⁾. Of course. Rabies. Warning signs had been posted all over the county, and hadn’t Becky said, “He’s so thirsty” ?

I had to get Becky away. “Honey. ” My throat tightened. “Put his head down and come to Mama. We’ll go find help. ”

Reluctantly, Becky got up and kissed the wolf on the nose before she walked slowly into my outstretched arms. Sad yellow eyes followed her. Then the wolf’s head sank to the ground.

With Becky safe in my arms, I ran to the barns where Brian, one of our cowhands, was saddling up.

“Brian. Come quickly. Becky found a wolf in the oak stump near the wash. I think it has rabies.”

“I'll be there in a jiffy, ” he said as I hurried back to the house, anxious to put Becky down for her nap. I didn't want her to see Brian come out of the bunkhouse. I knew he'd have a gun.

“But I want to give my doggy his water, ” she cried. I kissed her and gave her some stuffed animals to play with. “Honey, let Mom and Brian take care of him for now, ” I said.

Moments later, I reached the oak stump. Brian stood looking down at the beast. “It's a Mexican lobo, all right, ” he said, “and a big one. ” The wolf whined. Then we both caught the smell of gangrene⁹).

“Whew! It's not rabies, ” Brian said. “But he's sure hurt real bad. Don't you think it's best I put him out of his misery? ”

The word “yes” was on my lips, when Becky emerged from the bushes. “Is Brian going to make him well, Mama? ” She hauled the animal's head onto her lap once more, and buried her face in the coarse, dark fur. This time I wasn't the only one who heard the thumping of the lobo's tail.

That afternoon my husband, Bill, and our veterinarian came to see the wolf. Observing the trust the animal had in our child, Doc said to me, “Suppose you let Becky and me tend to this fella together.” Minutes later, as child and vet reassured the stricken beast, the hypodermic found its mark. The yellow eyes closed.

“He's asleep now, ” said the vet. “Give me a hand here, Bill. ” They hauled the massive body out of the stump. The animal must have been over five feet long and well over one-hundred pounds. The hip and leg had been mutilated by bullets. Doc did what he had to in order to clean the wound and then gave the patient a dose of penicillin. Next day he returned and inserted a metal rod to replace the missing bone.

“Well, it looks like you've got yourselves a Mexican lobo, ” Doc said. “He looks to be about three years old, and even as pups, they don't tame real easy. I'm amazed at the way this big fella took to your little gal. But often there's something that goes on between children and animals that we grownups don't understand. ”

Becky named the wolf Ralph and carried food and water to the stump every day. Ralph's recovery was not easy. For three months he dragged his injured hindquarters by clawing the earth with his front paws. From the way he lowered his eyelids when we massaged the atrophied limbs, we knew he endured excruciating pain, but not once did he ever try to bite the hands of those who cared for him.

Four months to the day, Ralph finally stood unaided. His huge frame shook as long-unused muscles were activated. Bill and I patted and praised him. But it was Becky to whom he turned for a gentle word, a kiss or a smile. He responded to these gestures of love by swinging his bushy tail like a pendulum¹⁰).

As his strength grew, Ralph followed Becky all over the ranch. Together they roamed the desert pastures, the golden-haired child often stooping low, sharing with the great lame wolf whispered secrets of nature's wonders. When evening came, he returned like a silent shadow to his hollow stump that had surely become his special place. As time went on, although he lived primarily in the brush, the habits of this timid creature endeared him more and more to all of us.

Becky's first day of school was sad for Ralph. After the bus left, he refused to return to the yard. Instead, he lay by the side of the road and waited. When Becky returned, he

limped and tottered in wild, joyous circles around her. This welcoming ritual persisted through out her school years.

During Ralph's twelve years on our ranch, his habits remained unchanged. Always keeping his distance, he tolerated other pets and endured the activities of our busy family, but his love for Becky never wavered. Then the spring came when our neighbor told us he'd shot and killed a she-wolf and grazed her mate, who had been running with her. Sure enough, Ralph returned home with another bullet wound.

Becky, nearly fifteen years old now, sat with Ralph's head resting on her lap. He, too, must have been about fifteen and was gray with age. As Bill removed the bullet, my memory raced back through the years. Once again I saw a chubby three-year-old girl stroking the head of a huge black wolf and heard a small voice murmuring, "It's all right, boy. Don't be afraid. That's my mama, and she loves you, too."

Although the wound wasn't serious, this time Ralph didn't get well. Precious pounds fell away. The once luxurious furred turned dull and dry, and his trips to the yard in search of Becky's companionship ceased. All day long he rested quietly.

But when night fell, old and stiff as he was, he disappeared into the desert and surrounding hills. By dawn his food was gone.

The morning came when we found him dead. The yellow eyes were closed. Stretched out in front of the oak stump, he appeared but a shadow of the proud beast he once had been. A lump in my throat choked me as I watched Becky stroke his shaggy neck, tears streaming down her face. "I'll miss him so," she cried.

Then as I covered him with a blanket, we were startled by a strange rustling sound from inside the stump. Becky looked inside. Two tiny yellow eyes peered back and puppy fangs glinted in the semi-darkness. Ralph's pup.

Had a dying instinct told him his motherless offspring would be safe here, as he had been, with those who loved him? Hot tears spilled on baby fur as Becky gathered the trembling bundle in her arms. "It's all right, little. . . Ralphie," she murmured. "Don't be afraid. That's my mom, and she loves you, too."

贝基和狼

哥哥和姐姐们都上学去了，对我们3岁大的女儿贝基来说，牧场是个很孤独的地方。她渴望有玩伴。我们答应给她买只小狗，可在此期间几乎每天都有“假装”的小狗出现。

我刚洗完午饭的碗碟，听到纱门砰地关上，贝基跑着进来，激动得双颊飞红。“妈妈。”她叫道，“来瞧我的新小狗。我已经给它喝了两次水了。它渴极了。”

我叹了一口气。又是一条贝基想像的狗。

“妈妈，请来啊。”她拽着我的牛仔裤，她那棕色的眼睛露出哀求的神情。“它在叫着——它走不了路。”

“走不了路？”这倒是没想到。她以前虚幻的狗都能干意想不到的事。为什么突然这只狗不会走路？

“好吧，宝贝，”我说道。我尽力跟着贝基，可她早就消失在牧豆树丛里。“你在哪儿啊？”我叫着。

“这儿，在栎树墩边上。快啊，妈妈。”

我用手分开带刺的树干，又举起手来遮挡亚利桑那州耀眼的太阳。一阵寒战，我浑身麻木。

贝基就在那儿，坐在脚跟上，脚趾牢牢地插在砂子里，她膝上的是确实实一只狼的头。

“贝基。”我的嘴都干了。“别动。”我挪近些。狼的淡黄眼睛眯了起来，黑嘴唇绷紧了，露出两副两英寸长的尖牙。突然，那狼颤动了一下，牙齿咯咯作响，从嗓子眼里发出一声令人怜悯的哀鸣。“没事，孩子，”贝基低声对狼说。“别害怕，这是我妈妈，她也爱你。”

然后，难以置信的事情发生了。贝基的小手摸着它那长满粗毛的大头，我听见狼尾巴在树墩深处的啪啪敲打声。

这头狼怎么了？我在想。它为什么起不来？我看不清，又不敢走近。我看了一眼空空的水碗。一下子想起上个星期有5只臭鼬忍受狂犬病的极度痛苦，疯狂地找水喝，咬碎了包在渗漏管子上的粗麻布。对了。狂犬病。整个县里到处都张贴着警告告示，贝基不是说过，“它那么渴”吗？

我得把贝基引开。“宝贝。”我嗓子都发紧了。“把它的头放下，到妈妈这儿来，咱们去找人帮忙。”

贝基不乐意地站了起来，吻了一下狼的鼻子，然后慢慢走进我伸出的双臂。狼那忧伤的黄眼睛跟随着她，然后头落在地上。

贝基安全地在我怀里，我跑向谷仓。我们的一个牧牛工，布赖恩，在那里上马鞍。

“布赖恩。快来。贝基在干河床附近的栎树墩发现一只狼。我想它有狂犬病。”

“我马上去，”他回答说。我匆忙回到房子里，急着要让贝基上床睡午觉。我不想让她看见布赖恩从工人宿舍出来，我知道他会拿着枪。

“可我想给我的狗狗喝水，”贝基嚷着。我吻了她，还给了她几个毛绒动物玩具让她去玩。“宝贝，现在让妈妈和布赖恩照看它。”我说。

过了片刻，我回到那栎树墩。布赖恩站在那儿，低头看着狼。“没错，是只墨西哥狼，”他说。“还是头大狼。”那狼发出一声哀叫。然后我和布赖恩都闻到坏疽味。

“唷，不是狂犬病，”布赖恩说道。“不过它肯定伤得挺厉害。你不认为杀了它，免得它受罪，是最好的解决办法吗？”

“行”这个词刚到嘴边，贝基就从灌木丛里冒出来。“布赖恩会把它治好吗，妈妈？”她又把狼的头拽在膝上，她的脸埋在黑黝黝的粗毛里。这回不止我一个人听到狼尾巴的啪啪敲打声。那天下午我丈夫比尔和我们的兽医来看那狼。兽医注意到狼对孩子信任，他对我说，“我想你还是让我跟贝基一起来照顾这家伙。”几分钟之后，贝基和兽医一边哄慰那受伤动物，一边就给它注射了一针。那黄眼睛闭上了。

“它现在睡着了，”兽医说道。“帮我一把，比尔。”他们俩把身躯魁梧的狼从树墩里拽了出来。那家伙定有5英尺多长，100多磅重。子弹造成臀部和腿伤残。兽医做了该做的，清洗伤口，打了针青霉素。第二天，他又来用金属棒条取代了失去的骨头。

“看来你们添了只墨西哥狼，”兽医说道。“它看上去大概3岁，即使是只幼狼，也不好驯服。这大家伙喜欢你们家小闺女真令我惊讶，不过孩子和动物之间经常有些我们大人无法理解的事情。”

贝基管那狼叫拉尔夫，每天往树墩送食物和水。拉尔夫的恢复期很长。有3个月，它用前爪抓地，拖着受伤的后腿。我们按摩它那萎缩的腿时，从它耷拉着的眼皮，可以知道它在忍受着难熬的疼痛，可它从来都没咬过按摩它的手。

整整4个月过去，拉尔夫终于自己能站立了。长时间没有用的肌肉一活动，它那大大的身躯都在颤动。比尔和我拍拍它表示赞赏，可是拉尔夫却惟独喜欢贝基的柔声细语、亲吻或微笑。拉尔夫粗重的毛尾巴像钟摆一样来回晃动，回答她钟爱的表示。

拉尔夫的体力日见恢复，它跟着贝基在牧场上形影不离。他们一起在沙漠牧草地上游荡，

金发的贝基常常弯下身子，在跛瘸大狼的耳旁低声述说自然界奇迹的奥秘。夜色降临时，拉尔夫如静静的影子回到空树墩，那里无疑已经成为它专有的地方。随着时光消逝，虽然它主要生活在灌木丛里，这头胆怯动物的习惯越来越为我们所有人喜爱。

贝基头一天上学，拉尔夫很悲伤。校车开走后，他就是不回场院，而是躺在路边等着。贝基一回来，它欣喜若狂地围着她一瘸一拐地蹒跚绕圈。贝基上学期间，这样的欢迎仪式从没间断过。

拉尔夫在我们牧场的12年期间，它的习惯没有改变。它总保持一定的距离，不侵扰我们其他的宠物，而是避开它们，也不干预我们繁忙家庭的各种活动。可是拉尔夫对贝基的爱始终坚定不移。第13个年头的春天来临时，邻居告诉我们说他开枪打死了一只母狼，也打伤了跟她一起跑的伴儿。没错，拉尔夫再一次身上带着弹伤回到我们牧场。

贝基如今已快15岁了。她坐在那儿，拉尔夫的头搁在她膝上。它也该15岁了，年纪大了毛已经灰白。比尔给他取出子弹的时候，我想起了往事。再一次看见一个胖乎乎的小女孩摸着一只大黑狼的头，听见一个细柔的声音在说，“没事，孩子，别害怕，这是我妈妈，她也爱你。”

虽然伤势不重，可这次拉尔夫却没有完全恢复健康。硕大的身躯日渐消瘦，原有的一身密密的亮毛变得又干又暗，也不再来庭院和贝基作伴，成天静静地歇着。

尽管它老了，行动不便，可是一到晚上，就又消失在沙漠地里或周围的山上。拂晓时他的食碗又空了。

一天早上，我们发现拉尔夫死了，黄眼睛闭着，四条腿伸开地躺在栎树墩前面，似是生前豪壮动物的影子。我喉咙哽住，看着贝基流着眼泪，抚摩拉尔夫的粗毛脖子。她哭着说，“我会很想念它的。”

但我拿毯子盖上拉尔夫时，我们惊讶地听到树墩里面有奇怪的沙沙声。贝基往里瞧，两只小黄眼睛目不转睛地看着她，小尖牙闪现在昏暗中。那是拉尔夫的孩子。

是不是它临死前，本能告诉了它，它的孤儿在这儿会很安全，像它一样，和爱它的人在一起？贝基抱着那颤抖的小毛团，热泪落在婴狼的乳毛上。“没关系，小……拉尔夫，”她轻声说道。“别害怕，这是我妈妈，她也爱你。”

NOTE 注释：

slam [slæm] v. 砰地关上

mesquite n. (=mesquit)豆科灌木

thorny ['θɔ:ni] adj. 多刺的，痛苦的

fang [fæŋ] n. (犬，狼等的)尖牙

skunk [skʌŋk] n. [动]臭鼬

burlap ['bɜ:læp] n. (由黄麻制的做麻袋等用的)粗麻布

agony ['ægəni] n. 苦恼，极大的痛苦

rabies ['reibi:z, 'ræ-] n. [医]狂犬病，恐水病

gangrene ['gæŋgri:n] n. 坏疽

pendulum ['pendjuləm] n. 钟摆，摇锤