

WE SHOT THE WRONG GUY

a short story by John Barker ©

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The horse lay dead in a shallow gully which had its own spread of iced-over snow. There were other iced shapes on the higher ground, blotches on the khaki steppe. The coldest spots evidently. The wounds were a mess, head bites and a ripped throat. Stiff trails of blood smeared the coat of hair above the skin. The full length of its mouth was filled with big teeth open to the gums. I believed I saw the terror that had been.

The big guy, Batbayal, had stopped the Toyota. He got out, leant across from the edge of the track and felt the corpse. He said something, in Russian. Danny translated. Wolves; last night, he said. Later, on the road back to town, he said they would be back that night, that was for sure. To feed, he said. Later still as we sped past the yards, huts, yurts and horses that surrounded the city, he talked of a wolf hunt that very night. The way Danny said it, the way I understood it, this was a serious business, like it was a regular thing. These were nomads in a city; he'd said it enough times. If I wanted, he said, we were invited.

He'd been through a few ups and downs over the years. Too eager to be enthusiastic. Now he was based in Mongolia. I'd had similar problems, that and the horses, it's why we were still friends. Since then I'd allowed some shrewdness to speak up, opened my ears to what it might say. I assumed it was the same for him, we were both getting older, had a bit of money between us and the idea was sound. For a clientele, Japan now, and then there would be Shanghai, Guandong province and places whose names we didn't know, all ready to get on the map. It was the clientele was going to be my job.

We'd met Batbayal just that afternoon, introduced by a descendant of a hero of the revolution who, it was said, was close to securing the post of

Deputy to the Governor of the Central Bank. Batbayal, he said, had heard of our active interest in the development of horse breeding and utilisation in the country, and believed he could be part of the process, had some horses to show us. Batbayal nodded. He was a giant in his smart city clothes. A bracelet flashed from his wrist as he spoke. Not any horse, Bouriyat horse, he said. Top class Bouriyat horses.

We set off straight away, his vehicle, a standard model LandCruiser without the extras. They had been his business, he said. They were his business even if everyone knew Toyota had opened up its own outlet in the recent past, Sales, Spares and Repairs all under the one, vast pre-fabricated roof. The guy might therefore be in need of money, a new income. That's how it was, we had grown older and had to think of Might Therefores, and then again what they might signify. It was a fact to be taken into account.

Twentyfive kilometres out of the city we turned off the jigsawed asphalt on to a sandy track across the steppe. Mountains ran on into mountains. Trees ran down their ridges mane-style, Mohican haircuts. One ridge after another till we turned off the track, went into four-wheel low gear and up a scrubby hill towards empty buildings that had once had windows. From the time of the Russians, Batbayal said, stables from when there had been a Veterinary Service. It was up for grabs. Sure some work was needed, but here was stabling ready made.

Up for grabs?

Interesting, I said, like I did these days of whatever might possibly be of importance for the future, a scam to be sidestepped, or part of the package.

Now lets see those horses, Danny said.

Up and down we drove, hills and ridges, the Toyota showing its paces. At a yard out in the flat, a yurt stood with cattle round about. A young man was chopping wood. He pointed us further into the hills. In and out of low-gear we went over crests of scrub that were each the top of the world. Panorama. In series.

The horses came as a surprise, grouped on a hill like so many hills

before, forty or so, a mixed group. The Bouriyat stood out, a head and a half taller, sleek black and powerful. Out of the LandCruiser the air was an all-round pleasure under the wide all-blue sky. The horses were branded, small symbols that looked as though they might all be the same. Down below stood a single yurt, closer by a shepherd with a group of sheep. Batbayal went down to talk with him like perhaps the shepherd was the one who kept his eye on the horses.

What must be in his head, Danny asked, out here everyday in this vast.

I didn't know at all, quite beyond what I could imagine. Then he said: a shepherd on foot, I don't believe it, where is his own horse. More observant these days, Danny, but how could I know, whether shepherds in this country were all the same.

The Bouriyat horses were not showing off, not clannish either, heads up and down to the scrub side by side with the others that were brown-skinned and closer to the ground. I liked them, they were magnificent, the promise of powerful speed in their build, and democratic with it. Mongol horse only bigger is what we wanted for the adult clientele. East Asia, its rich nouveau riche playing cowboys in the wild, that was the plan. I saw happy families with Mongol horses for the kids, yurt accomodation to be arranged.

There were more animals than people in the country by a margin. Who owned what when the Russians had been here; who owned what since they'd left? What did it mean when it came to animals? On the other hand, the obvious facts were not always Might Therefore of a negative hue. The horses were branded and Batbayal had known exactly where to find them.

We started back to town cutting corners, down steeper hills in the lowest gear of Four-Wheel Drive, easing across fast-running, stony streams till we reached a new sandy track on the flat. It was from there we saw the dead horse. Beside its head two streaks of blood were branded in the snow.

Back in the city it had gone dark which gave a fresh chill to the cold. Queues for hard-worked Japanese buses took up whole pavements. You

can't believe how tough these people are, their endurance, Danny said. Incredible.

Back at the hotel I felt tired from all that space and oxygen and turned on the TV. It ran to cable, CNN. Hewlett-Packard's General Asia Manager said that the region's economic crisis had impacted on business, but had not impacted on the company's regional prospects; for those with the right skills and attitude, it was a flowering sector. Later, after I'd moved my chair next to the hot water pipes, a heating system the Russians had left behind, Danny rang from his mobile and suggested we meet up for dumpling soup and a beer.

In the same steamy basement the food and drink were run separately, two different tough ladies in charge. A young Mongol with a big smile and a black eye offered his wife for the night. Three bottles of vodka, he said, putting up three fingers pointing to a woman at another table. I didn't know much, not this city, but if he ever made the deal she'd punch his lights out. It was obvious.

He needs money this Batbayal but he's not an asshole, Danny said. He was a weightlifter when he was younger, doesn't drink and knows how to get angry.

It had to count for something. This was Danny's place, where he wanted to be, but it had to count for something, the not-drinking, when the young guy was still smiling and now held up two fingers.

A man I could work with, Danny said.

It's you would be doing that, working with him, the most of it, I said. But I'd still like to see those Bouriya horses in his own corral, his own yard.

Of course, he said. And a good look at the papers for those stables.

What papers?

Oh for a proper building that close to the city, there will be papers.

Then when the dumplings were finished he talked of the future of Mongolia, how it might be if honest men ran the world.

But I have discovered something about myself, he said, now leant

across the table. I could not myself kill even the worst and biggest of thieves, not the worst of people, no matter how bad their consequences. Hard to accept about myself, but it's true.

If it was that clear, I said, bad guys and bad consequences, responsible for misery, I don't think I'd have a problem.

What are you saying, you can only say it because it is not a situation you have faced, real, in your face, both the need and the possibility. When you see that the thief, the monster, is another human being shaking with fright when you hold a gun to his head.

Then you're giving no chance to your honest men. What's that, them running the world, just a pleasant fantasy to go to sleep with?

I'm talking real situations, one human being to another, Danny said.

What was he talking about, *real*? It was an imagined situation. Just then his mobile rang. I looked around while he spoke, saw the wife he'd tried to sell with a tight grip around him with the black eye.

The wolf hunt is on, Danny said. Batbayal will wait in half an hour outside the Ulan Baataar hotel. Don't get any romantic ideas about a chase in the saddle, it will be done in the four-wheel drive. You want to go?

Despite the qualifications it would be a new experience; adventure; once in a lifetime; life is short: the usual attractions, and we'd get another chance to weigh up the guy.

What about you, I said.

Lets go, 4-Wheel Drive or not, living in the city these guys are still nomads, it will be good for you. But wolves are not stupid, you think they are going to wait around for a Toyotas they can hear from far off. You have to admire them, their intelligence, their loyalty.

They kill horses, I said.

But they're as much a part of the world as us. Besides, that one we saw, it was old or sick, on its own.

Nature, red in tooth and claw, I said. We'll definitely want the stabling.

We set off again with Batbayal's rifle in Batbayal's vehicle. He was wearing fatigues and a leather jacket. I was brooding on the real bad guys

of the world and why not be crafty rubbing them out till I got tired of it, hypothetical ethics and all that, what a wank. By then the headlights on the road had thinned out and soon after we made a stop at a murky police station. Batabayl was not sure he had brought enough bullets and went inside. Sat in the Toyota out in the yard Danny started on a story about some other hunters, Mongolians, how they'd made a tape loop or some other gizmo that could broadcast a mimic wolf call. It had worked he said, a pack had appeared on the horizon and they'd shot the bitch. Afterwards all that was left of the hunters was a single shoe, They'd run out of bullets.

What, and this was a regular thing? So. So, this Batbayal was thinking ahead, leaving nothing to chance, you couldn't fault it. A scary story nevertheless, just the one shoe left. Other places they had clay pigeons, fat grouse, and loaded duck-shoots.

What, they chewed their way through a LandCruiser?! I said.

You are worried, Danny said. No, they had obviously moved too far from their vehicle.

Not a mistake I will be making.

I am telling you, we will not find any wolves.

Batbayal came out with a fresh round of cartridges. They started to talk in Russian and I looked out at the stars. We turned off the broken highway and stopped at one yard amongst others, a small group. Batbayal went round the back of a shack. I got out for a piss under the stars.

There was no sign of any other vehicles. OK it wasn't to be on horseback but I had thought there would be other guys involved.

You don't know these people Danny said, they are individualists who do not know what it means to be individualist.

Batbayal came out of the yard with another man who wore the traditional wraparound coat with orange waistband and a red baseball cap. He carried a bulky something with some metres of cable attached. I got a look at it as it was put in my hands, cold through my woollen gloves as he opened the bonnet. It was not a speaker but a floodlight. It took a while to get the cable ends secure to the battery, testing with the light's On/Off

switch. The fourth time it worked, a shock, a dark corner of the yard as lit up as daylight. A sleepy dog jumped up to bark. I switched the lamp off, passed it through the open rear window and got in the other side. My hands warmed slowly between my thighs.

It was midnight when we drove off, silent till we reached the sandy track. The man with the light powered down the electric window, and wriggled outwards, twisting sideways to sit on the window frame rider-style like they'd always done on the chase stood up in the stirrups. The light he held cut out a slice of steppe many times the range of the Toyota's main beam, first to one side then the other.

For the horse corpse the vehicle's own lights were enough, it had gone like it had never been there at all. They lit up the snow in the gully bland but for the streaks of blood iced over. Batbayal said that other people, human beings, had taken it away, the hide was worth something. Which people? Where had they come from? Get lost in Mongolia and the odds were, you could die. The wolves would have eaten it on the spot later in the night, Batbayal said. Speaking for himself Danny said now there was no chance of us seeing a wolf. No chance, like he'd been persuading himself and finally got there. The man with the light borrowed Danny's leather gloves and got back out on to the window-frame as we drove off into the hills. The beam stayed out to the left, then to the right. Draughts of freezing air arrowed through the spaces round his body.

On we drove past hill and mountain, the pitted track half-muffled by the LandCruiser's shocks and suspension. My eyes stuck to the beam, found their range, lost it, found it again.

The excitement came first, the feel of it in the dark of the tight cab, then the words. In a stroke we had slowed to a crawl. I followed a finger and saw eyes that seemed too big lit up on the ridge, two dull torch beams bright in the dark. The guy with the light chuck-chucked what might be wolf sounds. Batbayal flicked off the rifle's safety catch and touched the driver-window button. He drove in low gear towards the ridge, one hand on the wheel, the gun on his lap. The eyes like lit-up saucers, were stuck on

the spot up the slope, paralyzed in the lights like I'd seen furry little nocturnals on tarmac'd roads. He put the gun up, elbows planted on the window-frame, eyes to the sights and the bright eyes woke up, were gone. I followed the desperate rush of the thing across the ridge face. Then it turned to look, maybe to see. Batbayal fired at the eye-glow and it was off again faster than ever to disappear over the base of the ridge.

We drove on, the cab silent after the crash of the gunshot, the guy with light steady out the window passing one hill and then another, dark shapes in the night. We circled the yurt in the yard that we had seen in the day. Close by cows moved slowly in a corral. Dogs barked. Up another slope we went to a bigger stretch of trees, silvery silver birches, then down a little, circling the higher ground. A pair of eyes glowed across hundreds of metres but there was no time to shoot. Danny relaxed. I could see it from behind, his shoulders, his neck. He lit a cigarette. Then Batbayal lit a cigarette.

Zigzag we went, right down to the plain. He was some driver when, you couldn't see the gradients, how steep or not, not till Batbayal had tiptoe'd us over the crests, front wheels already committed. And not to be lost, that was something in itself when there was so much of it that some places had to look just like other places.

We were back by the yurt with the penned cattle. Perhaps this was it, finished for the night so we could start back towards our beds. Dogs barked. They chased the LandCruiser as we circled, their eyes glowing too, till they gave up and we started the climb back up to the same neck of woods. Anything that moved in that stretch of trees would have to know we were around, blessed with advanced hearing is what I understood. But then what did I know, I'd never been hunting in my entire life, not for anything whereas Batbayal clearly fancied the spot. And the fact that whatever moved knew that some alien thing was doing a steamroller express on their patch, maybe that didn't help: because there was something in those trees you depended on; or you were too slow; or the missile was so fast that how quick you were made no difference.

The searchlight stayed steady on the edges of the wood. The trees were still shedding their leaves which lay brown and papery on the scrub. We made a turn and went in, silver birches to either side, Batbayal finding a route. Out we came, round the fringes we went again, the hero with the light probing the undergrowth. How had he not died from the cold, this guy, his head out of the rushing Toyota at roof level. Minus Five, Ten even, OK in itself but out there, the wind chill, the wind chill factor, it would be shredding his skin, his face, his ears.

He was alive, he was chuck-chucking just as we came out of the trees again. His light had picked out eyes at the upper corner of the wood. The engine was idling, the safety catch off and the eyes waited, it was like they were waiting. The shot report bounced round the cab, echoed back from the slope and beyond. The thing streaked away lop-sided.

It's been hit, it's wounded, Danny said like this was absolutely the worst thing could have happened. Batbayal was driving fast, taking the bumps as they came.. I hung on to the hand grip above the seat, judders up and down my arm. Down over hillocks we went, past another stretch of silvery trees and up-over a ridge. Bam-boom, helter-skelter, trees and scrub from every angle with Batbayal the hunter not letting go the pace.

It's wounded, they've left it wounded, Danny said in English.

Maybe he was wrong, maybe this was not the place for him, this country where he had settled.

We zig-zagged through more trees. A thin moon was out in the sky and re-silvered them. We came out like our ears were going to pop into a shallow spacious crater of scrub and caught a flash of eyes. The fast dark shape of its body was heaving as it ran zig-zag. Batbayal drove in loops to cut it off, the gun propped on his knees then out of the window. The eyes turned to look and the gun boomed. The momentum carried it on, twenty, thirty paces, its ribs in and out like trampoline, then it staggered, fell and waited. Yellow eyes stared at the vehicle. From the back Danny looked suddenly old, his head down towards his chest. The hero with the light got out leaving his light placed on the cab roof. He circled the animal, wary, his

orange waistband bright in the night. He moved in close from behind, a rock in his hand. Now it was clear, the thin face of the animal and its bushy tail. Danny turned his head away. The thud on its head was soft but the lights went out all the same. Still he was cautious, the way he crept in, grabbed the tail and hung it upside down.

Batbayal got out and from the back of the Toyota brought out a tough plastic thing like a laundry bag.

There, you see what I'm saying, that's no wolf, it's just a steppe fox, Danny said as the Mongolians stuffed it into the bag.

Maybe I looked old too, the usual attractions-new experience, once in a lifetime, all that-they'd gone cold like the aftermath of a greedy wank. Leastways Danny spoke again like he felt he ought, said he'd been impressed that this Batbayal hadn't left it wounded, had had the skill to find it again which he had not, he said, expected when we'd been up in the trees.

The next day, short of sleep, I kept an appointment out of town, a guy with several permanent yurts bunched reasonably close together. I wanted a weekly price on a guaranteed full season's rental on the lot, and filmed a sequence or two, panoramas and close-ups. The location was good, the site banked by a steep slope with trees, and not so far from town or those Bouryiat horses.

My translator, a young man over-qualified for the world open to him, said the price proposed was too high.

It would be a surprise if it wasn't, I said.

Things went well enough. Some thrust and parry as the three of us took turns to whisk the mare's milk in the red bucket; then the three of us taking turns in drinking it from the beaten goblet. We agreed to think about our final offers and resume negotiations in a few days. It all made sense, that Danny liked it here.

Back in the city we hooked up for a beer in the Olympic-sized bar of the hotel. I told him how it had been, the price to and fro, the parameters reached.

I told you we would kill no wolf, he said. They are too smart. Loyal and smart.

There's always an element of ego involved when it's obvious someone has not been listening to a word you've said. Nevertheless I went on to high alert. This was business, crucial to whether the figures would add up.

One wall of the bar looked like dancing heroes in cubist style, zig-zags of shady colour. I stared at it and the white piano stood in front. An indoor fountain played close by.

You know, Danny said, the hunt last night, that Batbayal, he only did it for our benefit, to show off.

A hole in the ground had opened up but I said nothing.

It will have cost him half a day's work to catch up on his sleep, Danny said.

This was wiseguy stuff, wise after the event.

And my guess is, didn't enjoy it himself, Danny said.

I said I was tired too.

First thing in the morning I was at the airport. Berlin via Beijing was possible. One way or another Beijing transit would cost, time and money. I was prepared to pay and phone him from there. Thanks, but No Thanks I would say.