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THE ANATOMY OF WOLVES

The wolf has legs.

And these were the parts of him that I saw first. I was standing at the bottom of a backstage staircase and he was standing at the top, his hairy shins and Blundstone boots sticking out from beneath the hem of a taffeta ballgown in an alarming shade of yellow, his hair cropped close for a soldier's part.

'You must be Reporter Rosie,' he said, and I liked the sound of his voice.

'Is now a good time?'

'Rehearsals start again at two, so we could do it over lunch, if you like,' he said.

'Only if you leave that dress on. And promise not to say "eclectic".'

'What?'

'Eclectic. If you say the word eclectic then I shall be forced to hate you and write evil things about your play,' I said, brandishing notebook and pen.

'In which case, I forswear all words beginning with "e". From now until we have finished our fish and chips.'

At least, I think that is what we said. We were, after all, of an age when first conversations are frequently blurred by the static of the subtext. I was twenty-two and only just beginning to acknowledge my transformation from painfully skinny to quite acceptably thin. However, I was yet to discover that the girls I went to school with — the ones who had been so enamoured of their various swellings — were now beginning to worry that their bodies' expansionist programs knew no bounds.

I had graduated from university and begun work. Cured of my adolescent desire for Latin terms, I embarked on my career ready to treat words with the no-nonsense discipline they deserved. I had read my George Orwell. And so, on the day I went down the coast to the city to begin my cadetship at the slightly less well regarded of the two metropolitan daily newspapers, I knew that I wouldn't be the type to write 'commence' when what I really meant to say was 'start'. I would not let Latinate terms fall on the facts like snow. No, my words would be as blunt as clubs made from the timber of good, solid Anglo-Saxon tree trunks.

I became the arts reporter. But you should not imagine that my job was glamorous. Those just ahead of me had progressed to more prestigious rounds such as Special Correspondent for Chrysanthemum Shows or Chief Animal Story Reporter. And believe me, those on the animal beat got a lot more front pages than I did. Many of the early days of my working life were spent interviewing earnest young musicians who wore black and said ‘eclectic’.

‘Our style is really, um, eclectic. We don’t like to categorise ourselves,’ they said. They ALL said, five minutes before they lay down on the ground and were photographed from above with their heads in daisy formation, and a few hours before they taped their set lists to their amps and launched into a night of tuneless covers. For a while, I put a dollar in a tin on my desk every time I heard the word eclectic. Within a couple of years, I was fairly certain, I’d be able to buy a car with the proceeds. Trade in the Mini on something with more cachet: a little old Triumph Spitfire or a Fiat Bambino. But about three weeks later, when the tin contained twenty-seven dollar coins, I bought a pair of strappy red velvet heels that were on sale, but which I never could wear because when I stood up in them my toenails went black from the pressure (the Shoe Goddess, presumably, was on leave).

But all of this is to one side of the point, which is, as I’m sure you’ve divined, that I did interview the actor in his yellow ballgown, over a lunch of fish and chips, during which he only once slipped up on his solemn oath (an ‘emotion’ sneaking into one of his sentences), and by the end (he would have said ‘conclusion’) of which, I was almost certainly in love.

The wolf has a tongue.

At the party on the opening night of the play, he licked my ear.

‘You smell of raspberries,’ he said.

‘Strawberries,’ I corrected.

It was the perfume I always wore.

‘Whatever. It’s definitely edible.’

‘Careful. That’s an “e” word.’

But when he took me home to his bed in his Boys’ Own Adventure share house, there were no more words. In that den-smelling room, licking turned into nipping turned into sucking and biting. We were young and playful animals, rough and tumbling. We were roly-poly cubs. Afterwards, we had a shower together in the dark. Hot water

stung on grazed and tingling skin, and I remember breathing steam into which, it seemed, had been dissolved the very essence of him.

We returned to his bed and stayed there all through the heat of the day, listless as midday lions for the most part, but rousing ourselves occasionally for the purpose of consuming food, or each other. In the evening, I walked with him to the theatre and, at the stage door, offered up my tongue for him to swallow.

‘Good luck for the show,’ I said when we pulled ourselves apart, just before I remembered that this was not the thing to say at all.

A Word from Rosie Little on:

Theatrical Traditions

Whistling backstage, the naming of the Scottish play, the wishing of good luck: all these things are forbidden in the theatre. Instead of ‘good luck’, one might of course say ‘break a leg’, a saying that may or may not, once upon a time, have referred to the hope that an actor’s performance would be so good that when it was over, s/he would have to ‘break’ the line of his/her leg in the action of bowing, or in bending down to pick up coins from the stage. Alternatively, it may or may not refer back to the actual leg of John Wilkes Booth, which was literally fractured in 1865 when Booth leapt up onto a stage while attempting to escape after having assassinated Abe Lincoln.

But there is another traditional alternative to ‘good luck’; one that I have recently learned, and one that would — in hindsight at least — have been eerily apt in the circumstances in which I found myself outside the stage door that evening. In bocca al lupo, I might have said. Into the mouth of the wolf. It’s an Italian phrase that is meant to bestow luck and instil courage, and it is properly answered crepi il lupo: I shall eat the wolf.

The wolf has a stomach.

Only weeks later, we moved in together, renting a small flat behind a pizza shop, although this did not prevent us from ringing up to order home deliveries. In those early months, we played house like newlyweds, learning to make apricot chicken from the recipe on the back of the French onion soup packet and buying white goods from garage sales. Each payday we got something new from the supermarket: a peeler, a potato masher or a whisk. Once the kitchen cupboards and drawers were full, we were at a loss, so we made ourselves into a nuclear family with a tabby from the cat shelter. We called her Gelfling and smiled, indulgent as fond parents, while she frayed our furniture and tortured lizards on the front step.

The wolf has eyes.

They were big and green and sad — set deeply in the kind of strong-boned face Laurence Olivier wore to play Heathcliff — and when I met his mother, I found out where they were from. Hers, however, seemed even bigger and sadder because they lived in a tiny heart-shaped face that looked as if it were crafted from some sort of flesh-coloured putty. The jaw and the brow, it seemed, had come from his father: a priest with a limp.

His parents, he told me, had come together out of childhoods full of alcohol and violence. Through good works, he said, they were determined to repair the damage. They didn't approve of us living together, but since they were proper Christians and did not judge, we were invited as a couple to the family home for dinner. I wore a nice blouse and my hair neatly brushed and took my place at a table that was extended and set with plastic salt and pepper shakers which, when set together, formed a pair of hands in prayer. There were wineglasses on the table and his father filled them from a carafe of diluted orange juice. We bowed our heads while one of the foster children said a simple grace. The other — little more than a toddler, I was told — was in a bedroom beating his head against a wall that he had already smeared with his own shit. Through two closed doors we could hear the banging as well as a noise that sounded like the screaming of a trapped rabbit.

'I don't know if I'll ever crack that one,' said his mother, looking sad.

The wolf has claws.

But I didn't see them for quite a long time. There were too many diversions. Often, he did the housework as Jesus, wrapped in a white sheet and singing Sunday school hymns over the top of the howling industrial vacuum cleaner that we borrowed once a fortnight or so from the pizza shop. He was ecumenical, though. Sometimes the sheet was orange and he chanted faux-Buddhist mantras as he scrubbed the shower and the loo. Once, when I was sick with a cold, he borrowed a nurse's outfit from the theatre's costume hire shop, and ministered to me in a lispy falsetto until I laughed myself better.

In the name of cheap fun, we sprayed our hair silver and bought old-people's clothes from the Salvos. He in a stinky, crumpled suit, and me in a lavender print frock and fake pearls, staggered theatrically on walking sticks through the car yards of the city asking to test drive the motors of any salesmen we judged to be too inexperienced or too superstitious to tell us to get lost. For the winter solstice we took blankets and candles to the local cemetery and read vampire stories to each other while the concrete cold of the graves seeped into our bones through our bums.

More and more often, though, we stayed home at night on the weekends and watched old movies on video. We told ourselves that we were compiling a history of our culture.

We stopped cooking and lived on Hawaiian pizzas and on the rolls of garlic bread that would otherwise have been chucked in the pizza shop's bin. We slept late, always on the weekends and often on weekdays too, Gelfling purring between us. I brought home two copies of the newspaper each evening to avoid fights over who got to do the crossword puzzle. We folded into each other like a pair of socks.

I remember the night of his birthday in colours. There was the beetle-green glitter in Cleopatra-tapers on the eyelids of one of the girls from the theatre crowd, and the peacock silk shirt of a guy with a mass of salty-white hair. There was the red of my brief tartan skirt, beneath which my knickers showed each time I leaned over the pool table to take a shot, and the swirls and layers of bright liquor that were poured into shot glasses as we competed to drink more, and in stranger combinations, from the top shelf. The music was loud and silly, but with an irresistible dance-about beat. I got drunk. We all did. I was heady, giggly and high. And then, suddenly, alone.

'Oh yeah,' said the Cleopatra girl, lining up the black. 'He went home.'

Cross and confused, I walked the few blocks to our flat without a coat, the cold of the night bringing a kind of sobriety. When I got there, he was sitting in the dark. The light I switched on was bright and I saw that he had been crying. The rims of his eyes were stretched and reddened. He looked as if he had been poisoned, his irises a malignant green, his lips and cheeks pale and slack. But I was not sensible enough to be afraid.

He shouted and accused.

'Why didn't you just fuck him?'

'Who?'

'Why didn't you just get up on the pool table and spread your legs for him?'

'You're not making any sense,' I said, shouting too.

He stood over me, but I did not back down. Nor did I see it coming. It was too far beyond my experience, too far outside my expectations. His fist felt huge against my small face.

On the couch, I couldn't sleep. In our bed, he could. In the early hours of the morning I was still awake, stunned and pressing a packet of frozen peas to my cheek, when he briefly woke and stumbled into the living room. He was disoriented, and did not seem to see me. I watched in the darkness as he took aim and pissed all over the television set, then took himself back to bed.

When the true morning came I woke from an uncomfortable half-sleep clutching a warm bag of squashed peas. He was squatting by the television, dressed neither as Jesus nor a monk, but looking penitent anyway with a bucket of soapy water and a sponge. He saw that I was awake, but said nothing; just went on cleaning and wiping and dusting, in the living room, the kitchen and the bathroom, while I watched from my couch-island in silence. When the house was clean, he shaved and showered and dressed a little more neatly than was usual. On his way out the door, he kissed my cheek softly and I smelled shampoo in the wet flick of his hair against my nose.

He came home with treats, and to begin with I was like a child who would not be enticed. I shook my head to chocolates in the shape of ladybirds wrapped in shiny red foil and to a tiny iridescent fish in a plastic bag of water. I cried and said no to striped socks with toes in them and to a jar full of tiny rubber dinosaurs that were purple, orange and yellow.

But I caved in when he ran me a bath and filled it with bubbles from a bottle that looked like a magnum of champagne. I let him put a cotton pad soaked in witch-hazel over my bruised and swollen eye, and read to me — doing all the voices and accents, too — from The Snow Goose, which made me cry. He put me to bed in clean sheets and got in beside me, and I kept crying while he kissed every part of me, and the tears were a drug whose effect felt strongly like love.

I slept all day and, when I woke up, there was pizza for dinner and National Velvet on the video.

‘Come on the Pie,’ he said, in perfect mimicry of little Lizzie Taylor, and I laughed. There had been some kind of aberration, but reality, it seemed, had now been restored. The next day, at a pharmacy in a suburb where I would never normally shop, I bought the kind of make-up that older women wear to give them ‘more coverage’. I wore it for a week, and then life went on as before.

The wolf has fur.

When I first met him it had been clipped close to the scalp, but by the time we had been living together for nine months it was brushing the collar of his shirt. It was very dark, with a patch of bright white in the back where, he said, it had lost its memory. It was soft and glossy and I loved to fiddle with it while we were watching television and sculpt it into devil’s horns when it was full of shampoo in the bath. Over the winter, I took an impressive lead in the all-time Scrabble match tally that we kept in permanent texta down the side of our fridge, and he threatened to cut his hair unless I agreed to a ban on the tricky two-letter words that were the centrepiece of my strategy. Within a month, we were back to level-pegging.

The morning after the night on which he hit me for the second time, he looked at my

face and then he put his head in my lap and cried. I stroked and soothed him, pushing my fingers into the dense, dark pelt of his beautiful hair. The grazed skin on the inside of my mouth felt, to my tongue's touch, like raw steak. I could still taste blood.

I had been late home from work. I could claim no big story, no pressing deadline — only a need to catch up on all the mornings lost to late sleeping and extended lunch hours spent going home to him. I had arrived to find the flat in darkness and full of the sweet smell of crushed juniper berries. I flicked on the light and saw the unhidden evidence of the empty gin bottle.

I let some light into the black bedroom along with myself, but he was not in the bed. He was crouched in the corner, a foetal shape, just the outline of him and his shaggy head picked out by the scattered motes of light.

'I thought you'd left me,' he said. A whimper.

I crouched down beside him, held out the back of my hand as if to a wounded dog.

'Hey, I was just at work. I'm sorry, I should have called.'

'You'll leave me. One of these days you'll leave me, I know you will,' he said, louder now.

'I won't. I won't. I won't ever leave you.'

'Don't LIE,' he snarled, a fist striking out of his dark hunch.

Later that week, my bruises under the cover of the older women's make-up, we sat at his parents' table while the only foster child in the house said grace. The head-banging one had gone to live somewhere else. We all said amen into our laps and then the house resumed a silence that didn't feel safe. For all of the time it had taken her to make the gravy, his mother had said nothing. Now she pushed some food onto her fork and brought it halfway to her mouth, then put it down again as if it disgusted her. She looked up at her son with her big and green and sad eyes.

'Did you do that to her?'

'What?'

'You did do that to her, didn't you?'

'Do what?'

'I know what it looks like when a man hits a woman. I know exactly what it looks like.

And it looks like that.’

‘Mum.’

‘I can’t. I just can’t,’ she said, standing up at the table and taking away his still-full plate and mine. She tipped our meat and vegetables into the pedal bin and let the lid fall. She was standing over it, sob-breathing and gulping, as we left the house. In the dark of the driveway, I felt ashamed.

The wolf has teeth.

It was true that his top incisors sloped inward a little, making his canines appear quite prominent; but it was not these that bit. It was the clean and white-painted right angle of the edge of our bedroom door. I hammered into it fast, a dervish, whirling. My brow-bone fractured on impact. Skin split and out poured unexpectedly dark blood. It streaked down the white paint as I slid to the floor.

I had gone home, to my parents’ house, for a weekend. I had rattled northwards, out of the city, in my little old Mini, but not without fear of what I would find when I returned. This time, it was tequila instead of gin. And this time, my hands were up, quickly, in a flimsy block between my face and his chest. I felt adrenalin gush to my hands and feet as he grabbed me, tightly, and held me by both wrists.

‘Why did you even bother to come back?’

‘I have no idea,’ I screamed, my pulse hammering.

‘You love them more than you’ve ever loved me.’

‘Of course I do, you stupid fuck.’

He pulled me towards him and then pushed. I left his grip in a fast, hard spin, a dance move out of control, and collected the door with my face.

In the second moment of impact it was me that was stationary and the object that was moving. It was a needle, coming right towards my eye. Slowly, slowly, leaving plenty of time for the apprehension of pain.

‘Close your eyes,’ the nurse said from out of white space.

But I couldn’t. I could only think of aqueous and vitreous humour, the liquid and the jelly that made my eyeball a globe, and how, if the needle slipped, they might leak out and my eyeball would be just a slimy white casing like a fish skin tossed in the scuppers.

It didn’t slip. It just numbed my skin so that when the second needle came, towing its lengths of black thread, I could feel only the tugging as the nurse quilted the skin between my eyebrows. When he had finished, he let me sit up so I could look at myself in a mirror.

The wound would heal and, over time, fade into a pale crescent scar. One time, much later on, I would colour the moon-shaped mark blue and call myself a maiden of Avalon. But now it was an ugly gash of puckered skin and knotted twine marking the midpoint of eye sockets stained magenta and purple. My forehead was swollen and misshapen. The fine crack revealed by the X-ray was concealed beneath my swollen forehead, but in the mirror I could see the unmissable sign of ownership. A brand.

I was not allowed to leave the hospital until I had seen the domestic violence counsellor. She was not much older than I was, and her long hair was held back with a polka-dot bandana. She wore her wrong-side-of-the-tracks accent like a badge of pride, saying ‘arks’ for ‘ask’ and ‘was’ for ‘were’. But it was a dialect of blunt truth and I could not evade its meanings, no matter how delicately I danced around them with pretty words.

‘He’ll bash you again,’ she said.

I argued that I knew how to avoid it now. If I could just keep my mouth shut at the right moment. If I didn’t provoke him when he’d been drinking. She looked at me wearily, and I began to hear myself. After I had been silent for a time, she looked at her watch and said that I could go.

‘You’ll have to have someone pick you up, but. Your mum, maybe?’

I shook my head.

‘Well, who was you going to call then?’

I didn’t know. Beyond the yellowed curtain of the Emergency Department cubicle there were people milling about, but none of them belonged to me. I was alone. I had been delivered to the hospital by policemen (called to our house by the pizza cook), and one of them had sat in the back of the car with me and held his handkerchief to my bleeding face.

‘Must be someone.’

There was only one person. I was cold and shivering and all I wanted was him. I wanted to kiss him on his lips, and then to drive my teeth into them, furious with love for him, and draw blood. But instead I took a taxi to the home of a friend who wouldn’t

scold.

In the late morning — washed, and dressed in borrowed clothes -– I went back to the apartment behind the pizza shop. He was sleeping. I sat beside him for a while, on the edge of our bed, watching dream-tremors flit through the muscles under the skin of his face. Gelfling, plump as a cushion in the crook of his knees, fixed me with one yellow and disdainful eye, as if she knew my decision already.

The wolf has a heart.

And there were times, during the year of my lesson in wolf anatomy, when I was close enough to see it. Just a glimpse of it, beating red and slick inside the dark fur. I have to think hard, now, to remember how it looked. But I did see it. I’m sure that I did.