

The Language of Wolves

I.

Ward Vinter's first wife liked white wine. Sometimes Stella drank a little too much wine, but early on he couldn't see that drinking had much effect on her, except to mellow her out during dinner and make her comment too frequently during TV shows.

Every night no matter how much wine she had consumed, his wife buffed her feet before bed, rubbing the chronically crusty dry skin with a sort of file and then softening the reddened heels with an aloe-based lotion. She said she hated the pathetic sound and feel of poor dry heels scrabbling on the sheets.

She enjoyed reading before sleep, but frowned while she read. One evening she told him that no matter who the narrator was—male, female, northern, southern, young, old, reliable, unreliable, disembodied--she always heard her aunt's voice from the past reading aloud.

"Who knows?" Stella would sigh when she didn't like how her day had gone, "I might have to jump off a cliff." Sometimes she even made a little whistling sound, followed by, "Splat!" Sometimes she forgot what she was doing and made the splat sound when she pushed herself out of bed in the morning.

Somehow this eventually became Stella's pattern: At 5 p.m. she craved that first glass of wine, 5:30 p.m., drank it, followed by several more. At 2 a.m. she would wake him, whispering wildly, "What am I doing? What am I doing? I must want to die. Do I

want to die?” At 6 a.m. when the alarm went off she would state firmly, “Never again,” but she would be careful not to define exactly what that *never again* referred to.

She formulated a theory about drinking, or, more specifically, about the power and meaning of the hangover, which she told him was too often overlooked in books, memoirs and articles. Contrary to popular belief, a hangover provided the motivation for getting out of bed in the morning. It was punishment, sure, but it provided a focus. If she didn't have a hangover there'd be nothing to conquer, nothing to deny, nothing to prove. She'd probably quit moving altogether. Having a hangover was a sign of superiority, really, that she could accomplish just as much as sober types—cooking, cleaning, teaching—and all with the one hand of drinking tied behind her back.

Stella's hands. He loved her hands. So small and square, like a child's. She had never been much of a hand-holder, unfortunately.

But still. Nonetheless.

Once in the dark of the bedroom, he reached out. He was aiming for her breast but ended up gently grasping a handful of her soft stomach. He felt her flinch, and he immediately let go. Suddenly, she laughed and pulled his hand back. “Oh well, here we are” she mused, the tension gone for once, her voice as relaxed and loose as old elastic, and he'd never felt quite so wonderful with her.

What did he really think of her? Of their shared life? He thought about this more now that they were no longer together, where to store all the jumbled details he had accumulated, what to treasure and what to ruthlessly discard.

II.

He let himself in the back door and stood in the vestibule listening for her even though he knew she wasn't home. He had no right to be there. The place was all hers now. The house made its familiar settling noises, sharp cracks of expanding and contracting structure. Those huge beams; they didn't make houses like that any more. A windy sigh came from the furnace as it whooshed to life. He took off his shoes so as not to track the damp onto the kitchen tiles, which creaked companionably beneath his stocking feet. On the kitchen table rested a splayed-open package, a box sitting on its own wrapping paper. He looked inside and found a spice rack with white-lidded, empty jars, except for one holding a small curled card. "Congratulations Stella! Love, Jonathan," he read. He was careful to return the note to its original container.

A spice rack. But she kept the spices in one of the drawers. He opened it and the smell of cumin rose along with the clacking of a few loose bottles. Her smell, her own natural scent. Spice. What did this Jonathan person know about spice, Stella's spice in particular? Otherwise the kitchen looked as it always had, the cupboards with faded finish where they were touched most often, wine glass in the drainer, pantry door that wouldn't quite close all the way. Hey, he told himself, the house is old. It has personality. Stella had grown up here with her aunt. His feet were cold on the tiles.

He wandered from dining room to living room. This was his version of a home inspection, conducted during his lunch hour, just a short walk from the law school, two jogs, then down Liberty Street. He was just checking to see that it was all there, had been real once, had been his, too. Her usual stack of books sat on the coffee table, the flowered couch stood at right angles to the carpeted stairs, the Persian rug with its tasseled fringe

that always rucked up in one corner—all there. All the same, left the same from the aunt's time, a time-warp house. Along the stairs was a watercolor of a pond with brown squiggles indicating (rather crudely, he'd always thought) ripples, and over the couch was the heavily framed pale-toned drawing of the university campus around 1900.

Upstairs he spent some time sitting on the bed tracing the looping paisley patterns of the bedspread. He'd been the one to discover that if you stood at the foot of the bed, the patterns unintentionally revealed a row of swans marching in horizontal rows. Once seen it couldn't be unseen, and he'd told Stella, who'd been annoyed at his tendency toward the concrete. She preferred the pure abstractions of the paisley, now ruined forever. Stella always slept on her left side with one knee bent and her fists curled near her chin. He always slept flat on his back and each night headed like a log downstream until by morning his feet extended beyond the end of the mattress.

Failure. Some distaste she felt for him, for him personally, for him physically, and this was particularly hard to take, that in himself, in his very being, he lacked whatever it was she wanted. When they'd decided to marry, she'd said, and it wasn't exactly reassuring, "There comes a time when a woman has to give up her foolishness." His answer: You're anything but foolish. She considered it, then followed with that impatient shake of her head, as if to discourage some irritating fly. The word came to him now as the house creaked yet again: *settle*; she'd settled, and it hadn't been enough.

III.

Several months after the divorce Ward met the potential cure to his first wife: Susan Miller, a tall, blond businesswoman (advertising) who made more money than he

did and had an excellent retirement plan. He selected her firm to do the cover art for the annual law symposium brochure. She fanned his former samples on her desk like a spread of cards, seemingly unimpressed with the past efforts. “None of that blind justice lady for me,” she said. “And no scales. Not that I don’t love clichés.”

He and Susan began seeing each other every evening after work, but didn’t consider these meetings dates. They just met. Ward spent a week being reminded of someone, and finally came up with his high school basketball coach. Of course she was younger and far more attractive than Coach—Coach’s much younger sister?—and once the association reached the conscious level it instantly shattered. Maybe there was something in the arm-waving, the toughness act, the dark eyes contrasting with the cropped light hair; whatever, as soon as he identified it, he dismissed it. He had the sense not to mention this to her, although she probably would have been amused.

He learned Susan was a widow. Her husband had died ten years before in a single-car accident that had also killed their two German Shepherds. Dogs and husband were recalled with equal degrees of fondness. Her two daughters now were in college back east.

He soon began spending most nights at her condo. As far as he could tell, there wasn’t a neurotic bone in Ms. Susan Miller’s body. She said what she wanted, she did what she wanted, worked hard, never had more than two drinks a day. She swam on Tuesdays and Thursdays, took walks the rest of the week. For Ward’s birthday she gave him an eight-inch tall wire sculpture of a mosquito. They were sitting at the bar at Bennigan’s. Before he could think of a thing to say (he was about to say he was speechless) she began to laugh loudly enough to turn several heads.

In the meantime he heard from a mutual friend that Stella had gone through a few boyfriends, apparently both duds. She took yoga and kick-boxing at the Y across from the library and had found a new job teaching third grade in Brighton. The friend said she looked well, although to Ward, studying the school photos Stella had posted on her fridge (a sheet of twelve 2x3-inch Stellas, her hair permed and frosted, she now wore thick black mascara), she looked too glossy, not quite herself, shellacked.

He let himself out the back, down the track to the empty carport. Maybe he'd thought of drinking as a sort of babysitter for Stella. It took care of her in a way he never could. A friend, a comfort, a laugh, calm.

IV.

The crow lurched along the base of the fence in Stella's back yard, traveling the perimeter looking for a way out. One wing trailed like a shapeless cloak. When Ward approached, the bird tried to fly but was only able to get about a foot off the ground before falling back. He had the conviction that Stella should not see the crow. Ward opened the gate, then circled back to herd the crow toward the freedom of the front yard and closed the gate behind it.

V.

"*She* wanted the divorce," Ward said to Susan. "Not me. You should probably know that. We were out to dinner—she asked me to meet her after work—and she said she didn't love me anymore. I said, 'Anymore?' and she said, 'You're right. If ever.'" He remembered unrolling the silverware from the napkin, setting the pieces in order,

surprised that his voice came out evenly, as if they were discussing the menu, and in a way they were: the options, the choices, a final selection.

“At a restaurant,” Susan said. “Rough.”

He nodded. “I’m not sure I’m over it even now.” Which was a partial lie; he knew well enough he wasn’t over it.

She waited for him to say more, then shifted slightly to face him on the couch. “You’re never over it. You know at first after Burt’s accident, I was just upset at the *how* of it. At first I was hung up on the body, the pain he must have gone through, my own pain—which is surprisingly physical even though you are essentially unhurt—and the dead part, the alone part, picturing what happened over and over, where he was, or wasn’t. Then it started all over again as I started remembering the living person. Burt. The part I enjoyed. Things we did. I’m not explaining this too well.”

“Yes, you are.”

“Burt had the worst sweet tooth, for example. Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups. Wrappers in his pockets when I went through his clothes. And he always put tons of sugar in his coffee. Whenever he coughed he pressed his fist against his chest, like this.” She demonstrated. “Little things. Plus I had the girls to worry about, and he was better with them than I was. They adored him. For a while I thought the wrong one of us had died, I really did.”

“No,” Ward said.

“Yes. Usual stuff. Survival.”

He took her hand: red fingernail polish, a scraped knuckle, a mole on the bump of her wrist, a sensible whiff of chlorine. “Poor baby.”

Her hand twisted free and she clamped her fingers around his forearm and squeezed once, hard. “I’m not a baby and I’m not poor,” she said. When he looked up he saw she was smiling faintly at his surprised wince.

VI.

She was the right person for him, or had been. Stella was the first wife, complete with attendant mythology, ’til death, etc. That hadn’t changed. And yet he’d argued (begged) that she wouldn’t have to love him. People didn’t have to love each other to stay married. She answered that she didn’t even want to be needed. It was tempting to blame drinking itself, but that was too easy, too pious. He’d never tried to help her quit. Maybe there was something passive in him. Something weak. He needed affection, or maybe not even affection, just friendliness. When she would come home from work her face was always tight, her sharp nose, her forehead on the verge of a frown, but after a few drinks her features relaxed. She gained color. To him she looked softer around the edges, as if *her* drinking somehow blurred *his* vision.

Ward climbed the stairs. He paused on the landing, which was missing the small table that usually sat under the window, then returned to the bedroom and opened the closet. Several empty hangers. The hanging shoebag with its warped cardboard shelves. Blouses and sweaters he no longer recognized. A blue terrycloth robe with price tag still attached. On the bed he found a stack of posters made by children. He flipped through them, noting the awkward lettering, the colored pencil sketches, the lumpy glued photographs. Each had a different slant but the posters were all about wolves: endangered species, teeth of meat eaters, fiction about wolves, dogs and wolves, the body language of

wolves.

Why did he keep coming here? He wanted to find the missing table and put it back in place, to take one of her school photos for his wallet, to fix the wrinkle in the rug, to lie down on the bed and watch the branches move outside the window. But he couldn't alter anything or she would know. He was right up against the fact that he couldn't touch. Not inside at all, but on the outside looking in. Here's the bright window, a tableau spread before you, but you're not a part of that story.

VII.

Ward was coming down the stairs before work when he heard Susan's voice in the kitchen. "...the reincarnation of Fritzzy," she was saying, laughing. "You remember when we first got him?" She had to be talking on the telephone to one of her daughters. When he came into the room, her tone changed, she turned quickly away from him toward the window.

He got out the orange juice. "Yes," Susan continued, "Right...you've got it. Yes. Just now, in fact."

"Who's Fritzzy?" he asked when she clicked off her phone.

"Oh, I don't know. Are we getting low on juice?" She shook the carton. "I have to call the girls so early, if I want to catch them before classes. And God knows what they're up to in the evenings. I don't even like to think about it. Anyway, that was Bess. I found out, we'll see them at Thanksgiving."

She began rinsing dishes at the sink. He moved behind her and put his arms around her waist. "Helping," he said. She tensed as he leaned closer. He barked once,

right near her ear, and he felt her relax as she turned, so he barked again.

“Now you’re teasing me and I’m embarrassed.” Her hands were wet against the back of his shirt. “Well, I never can tell when people are going to get sensitive.”

“Hey, I can handle being compared to a dog. I suppose it depends on what kind of dog. A German shepherd, I assume. Handsome, loyal, good breeding. Trainable. I can live with that.”

“I’m sorry. I’m always such a clod. I’m not very good at hiding stuff, either.”

“You’re not a clod.”

“Fritzy was always very sweet.” Suddenly she was serious, looking right at him, her face flushed. He had a vision of how she saw him: kicked once too often, in need of serious adoption. “I just—”

“Shhh,” he said, “You’re the one who’s sweet.”

VIII.

Stella’s voice carried clearly from his phone, floating in a long high stream saying that she wanted to change the locks because she was afraid of a certain boyfriend, but she didn’t know how to change the locks, she was desperate, she needed two people to do it, she needed help, she couldn’t do it alone. Please.

“Just go,” Susan said. “For heaven’s sake, I can hear it from here. The woman’s terrified.”

“No,” he said to Stella. “It’s ten o’clock at night. I’m not coming over.”

But he ended up going anyway, even though it was late and cold out and he had never changed locks himself and was not, in fact, a particularly handy person. Locks? He

didn't know what he was doing any more than Stella did, or any fool who could read the package.

Stella was wearing a short black skirt with no nylons or socks, bare feet and a fuzzy pink sweater, and her breath smelled of soured flowers. She had removed the doorknobs from both front and back doors. The doors were flapping back and forth against encyclopedias propped to keep them from closing entirely, and the house was freezing. Hardware was scattered across the floor. On the table next to a near-empty bottle of Chardonnay were new brassy doorknobs and door chains and a bolt set encased in tough molded plastic, displays from a penitentiary.

“Have a drink.” She lifted her wine glass toward him. He shook his head.

They set to work. She wasn't good for much, but she could hold the doorknob in place as he worked to attach the backplate. They got the front door done, and as he was returning the packaging to the bag, she finished her wine. They crouched on either side of the back door, looking at each other through the pre drilled hole where there was some sort of latch that they had to keep from catching or they didn't know how they'd open the door again, when she pulled him inside. They were on the couch, her sweater was pushed up as if by someone else, her skirt was twisted, her feet and legs were icy underneath him, Stella, the first wife, the one—his head spun with wine fumes and hope, when she suddenly went completely limp. She left him entirely. “What's happening?” he asked, but now she was struggling against him and he could feel her fingernails dig into his shoulder. She shoved him away and rolled off the cushions onto the floor at the base of the couch while his mind continued to fly forward, unable to reverse itself.

“I can't ever again. I can't do this.” She crawled toward the stairs with her skirt

around her waist like an inner tube, sobbing now, her too-white hips shifting back and forth below the crumpled skirt. She stopped her crawl half way up the stairs. He sat up and looked at his clenched hands, which didn't seem to belong to him, but to someone who might do anything, and pictured dragging her back down by the ankles, her head thumping on each step. He realized the new locks were for him. She was locking him out. He'd become the sort of person who needed to be locked out.

"I can't," she said again. He sat next to her on the stairs. His hands were patting her back and straightening her skirt—no, not strange murderous hands after all. He couldn't tell what he thought anymore. He leaned forward to rest his head against her sweater. It was so soft. Up close he saw delicate white hairs rising out of the pink weave, some kind of mohair. He felt something dark, a wing of plain sadness. Tremors passed through Stella in waves. Every minute or so, she'd haul herself up another step, and he followed.

He listened outside the bathroom door as she was sick into the toilet, then knocked when everything went silent. There was a red mark on her forehead from where she had been resting her head against the toilet seat. He flushed the toilet and cleaned where she had missed, then spread some toothpaste on her toothbrush, wrapped her fingers around it and brought the hand holding the brush up to her mouth.

"Scrub," he said. "And wash your face."

He put her to bed propped up on pillows—she dissolved into murmurs—and went downstairs. He found the screwdriver where he'd dropped it near the back entryway off the kitchen, finished fixing the back door locks by himself and gathered packaging and tools in a pile on the dining room table. The empty wine bottle joined the others in the

basket they used for recycling.

He stood for a moment at the base of the stairs but heard nothing from above.

In the kitchen he rinsed the dishes and loaded the dishwasher. He held her wine glass under hot water and set it to drain on a piece of paper towel and wiped the counters. The grout had gone gray between the tiles behind the sink, something crunched under his shoe as he rinsed the sponge. The baseboard near the dishwasher had that same old crack that had been there forever, an irregular diagonal lined with dust. How incredibly cosmetic baseboards were; he'd never fully appreciated their function until this very moment. A wall meets a floor. Not a pretty intersection and yet—saved by the humble baseboard. He found the screwdriver again and jammed it into the crack and used it as a lever to pry off chunks of the wood, feeling a sense of accomplishment, finally, as if he'd fixed the damn thing instead of wrecking it, and he left the raw pieces scattered on the floor.