

OF WOLVES AND MEN

He couldn't recall when they had begun to argue. Her tone was different too. It had been getting more strident, more agitated. Not like Rose, not like her at all. Not his little girl, his Rosie. All of this came to mind, not for the first time, as she spun her chair around toward him to note, "Oh, Raymond, that is just such nonsense." It was one of those rockers that rolled about like a barrel with the least nudge of a toe and even a slight woman like Rose could make it go around like a top. But he'd never noticed her doing it until recently, or using its kinetic spin to emphasize her annoyance with him. What they were arguing about was, of all things, whether they had been arguing more lately. He had noted that he thought perhaps they were.

"I think we're not arguing any more or less than we used to," she responded.

"Maybe you're just beginning to hear me."

"I can't imagine what you're talking about."

"I mean usually you just go on talking, talk right over me."

"Rose, I do no such thing. I'll have you know that I've been told I'm a very good listener."

"Probably by people who don't listen themselves and so don't notice that you don't either because they're too busy telling you what a good listener you are."

That was the kind of thing she was saying now, the kind of thing she'd never said before. He remembered when she'd told him how smart and observant he was, how

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witty. For years she had smiled as he spoke, often slightly nodding, sometimes quietly laughing. Now she was telling him he just talked over her and didn't listen. What had happened to her? Now, after nearly forty years, what had happened to her?

"Listen, I'll replant the daffodil bulbs."

"What?"

"You know, in the front bed. You said I planted them in a perfectly straight line and that wasn't what you wanted. You wanted a natural look. Remember, you told me when I was halfway through and I said I couldn't change it then."

"Oh, Raymond, don't worry about the bulbs, really."

"Well, I just thought—"

"I'm sorry but I think I'll go on to bed," she said, closing her eyes for a moment.

"I seem to be developing a headache."

"Can I get you anything?"

"No, no . . ."

He sat down across from her chair and watched it continue to rock back and forth until it was finally still. Maybe it was just him. He was a little worried about himself. He'd been having strange dreams. There were wolves in them. What kind of normal, healthy man dreams about wolves in this day and age? He'd never even seen a wolf. And he'd never been particularly imaginative. All those years ago in school nothing had filled him with greater apprehension than to be told by the teacher that the assignment was to write a story. And he had never dreamed, at least that he could remember, until recently. He was proud of the fact that he didn't dream. He wasn't a dreamer, he was a doer. Then he'd not only started having dreams, there had been wolves in them, wolves

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lurking in the shadows, ominous wolves. He'd started having the dreams at about the same time he and Rose had started arguing. He'd not thought about that before but it was true.

He went upstairs to find her in bed reading a magazine. With the blankets pulled up under her armpits, and the warm glow of the bedside lamp illuminating her blond hair, she looked serene and calm, as if the scene of but moments before hadn't occurred. Still, her look as she peered at him over the top of the magazine said otherwise. He knew he needed to say something.

"Should you be reading if you have a headache?" he asked.

"I'm just going to read for a minute before I turn out the light. It helps me get to sleep."

Of course he knew this, knew that she always read before she went to sleep. Why had he even said anything about it? Then it came to him what he'd meant to ask her earlier.

"So how's Sue doing after her rhinoplasty?"

She looked at him as if he'd just danced into the room in a straw boater twirling a cane.

"Her what?"

"You know, her nose job."

"Sue Sargent?"

"Yes, I don't believe we know any other Sue. At least I don't."

"Sue Sargent hasn't had a nose job, Raymond. Wherever do you get such ideas?"

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“It was a good one. The differences are subtle. The plastic surgeons these days are very, very good. But there’s no question Sue’s nose has become less aquiline and gentler in its contours and slope. You can tell her I approve.”

“I will be quite happy to tell Sue that you approve of her nose, if that’s important to you. But she may ask why you have suddenly become so interested in it.”

“Rose, it’s all right. People have plastic surgery all the time these days. Sue doesn’t need to be embarrassed.”

She put aside her magazine with some emphasis.

“Raymond, listen to me: Sue Sargent hasn’t had a nose job. Between book group and bridge I see her every week or two and she hasn’t had a bandaged nose or any other evidence of surgery. Her nose looks exactly as it has always looked. It’s not a big nose, not a small nose, not a pointy nose, not a grotesque or ugly nose, it’s just a nose. It’s not a nose anybody in their right mind would do anything with. It’s a perfectly fine nose. It’s the same nose it has always been. Besides, you know Sue. If she’d had a nose job, she’d tell everyone. She talks about everything. We must have heard about her knee replacement a hundred times at bridge.”

Rose loved hyperbole. He doubted they’d even played bridge a hundred times, even though the club was old. Eighty-five maybe.

“Whatever you say, Rose.”

Her hands tightened atop the bedclothes.

“Raymond, would you do me a favor?”

“Of course, dear.”

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“Would you please leave me alone for a little while? My headache seems to have gotten much worse.”

“I’m sorry. Can I get you anything?”

“I told you no. I just need some rest.”

Later, when he came to bed, the wolves were there again. When he awoke they were gone. Sometimes he could close his eyes again and there they would be, sometimes not. They would have darted behind the trees of his mind, drifted to the edges of visibility in his imagination. They were menacing, of course. But, more than that, they were somehow otherworldly. When you thought about it, things you could see only when not looking would have to be that way, wouldn’t they?

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Raymond watched as Rose picked up a knife that was next to the cutting board and began to cut cubes of cheese to be melted in the dish she was preparing for dinner.

“You shouldn’t use that knife,” he said.

They had a cheese knife, but it was not out and this one was. As she always did, she noted the utility of her choice. But with a more testy tone than usual, he thought. And as he always did, he noted that her use of this particular knife to cut cheese was wrong. She paused, holding the knife and looking at it, then put it down and took the cheese knife from the drawer. He nodded approvingly as he put a glass into the dishwasher. She watched him linger over the open dishwasher. She knew what would happen next. He would move every plate and glass that she’d placed there since breakfast, rearranging everything by size and shape until the interior would be a vision of order and symmetry. After all these years she still shook her head.

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By the time dinner was ready he'd placed their dinner plates on the table in the dining room even though they would be serving themselves from the stove and the plates were in the cabinet directly adjacent to the stove. This was as invariable as the sun rising in the east, as was her trek across to the dining room table to bring the plates back to the stove to serve. "If you set the table, you have to put on the plates," he'd used to say, long ago when saying such things was novel. And she'd said . . . well, you know what she'd said.

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It had been nearly three years since the man had stood at the front of the room behind a lectern. A small group of people sat at tables, empty plates before them, some looking directly at him, others twisted about in their chairs to face in his direction. There was the sound of stoneware cups of coffee being placed into saucers, and of idle conversation drifting off into the distant corners of the room. The man at the lectern had short gray hair about the color of his suit, and wore a red tie with a blue-and-white regimental stripe that stood out against the snow-white expanse of his shirt. He held the sides of the lectern with firm wide hands as if it were weightless and would float away if he loosened his grip.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "as you know, we are gathered here tonight to honor Raymond on his retirement. As actuaries we know retirement is the expected outcome for working people who live long enough, but I'm confident that Ray not only knew that he was going to retire, he knew the hour and the minute when he would do it." There was a murmuring of laughter. "And," the speaker continued, "knew it *in utero*." Gales of laughter at that. "We've all worked with Raymond and know he's that certain

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about things. We all know what we do is not as precise as we'd wish. Informed by minute analysis, honed by every mathematical and statistical tool we know how to bring to bear, but still imprecise." Pause. "Unless Ray does it." More laughter. "Ladies and gentlemen, I'm here to tell you I've never worked with anyone who is better at what he does than Ray. The accuracy of what he does just amazes me. I really think that if Ray were to conclude through the application of his analytic actuarial tools that you wouldn't die, you would be immortal. Ray, please come up and say a few words."

Rose watched as Raymond approached the lectern. In his powder-blue shirt and paisley bowtie and tweed jacket he looked far too young to be retiring. He was, he had assured her that morning, but there were things he wanted to do. More wood-working in his shop. Refinishing the tables in their basement family room that he'd gotten last year at an auction. Indexing his collection of CDs. All of that was true. But she knew that fundamentally he wanted to be home with her, to do the things in the garden that she herself seemed no longer able to do. She just got so tired. And the sun bothered her so. What was wrong with her? He would be helpful, she told herself, almost obsessively, he *would*. She smiled as Raymond looked down at his index cards. Unplanned remarks just weren't in his nature.

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Raymond had found the book where it lay open on a table in the den. Since he'd retired there was more time to walk about the house, see things. It was book on autoimmune disorders. Rose had always been an adventurous reader, but he'd never noticed her reading anything quite so esoteric. It traced every disease it covered back as far into history as it was known, or was even suspected to have been known. It was

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opened to a section on *Lupus*. “Lupus is a malignant ulcer quickly consuming the neather parts; and it is very hungry like unto a wolfe.” This cheerful sentiment was attributed to Barrough, *Meth. Physick* (1590). The poor dear, he thought. No wonder she’d seemed depressed and irritable lately if this was the best thing she could find at the library. He’d have to get her some good mysteries.

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Raymond sat at the dining room table beneath the dimmed glow of the chandelier and watched the flames at the tips of the candles in the candelabras bob and dance. In the background Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* were playing on the stereo. They were being performed on the harpsichord, of course. He had expressed his opinion more than once that it was simply wrong to play the *Goldbergs* on the piano. Subtlety was lost and Bach’s nuanced structure of sound became clamorous and wrong. And all of the repeats were being observed. Bach knew what he was doing, knew how to create splendid order, thick complexity organized with the highest precision, and at what length to do it. Who were we to shorten it or play it on the wrong instrument? No, this was the way it was meant to be, he thought, looking contentedly at the silver service on the sideboard he had polished that morning to a burnished gleam.

Rose was at the opposite end of the table. Between them on one side was a young man with the pale complexion and blue eyes and thin lips of Rose. Plates had been cleared and coffee served. A young woman emerged from the kitchen with a cake topped with burning candles. The center candle was a large numerical 50 shaped from wax. It was surrounded by 18 additional candles. The young woman placed the cake before Raymond and began singing happy birthday, in which she was joined by Rose and then

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nearly inaudibly by the young man. Raymond looked vaguely embarrassed. “Blow out the candles, Dad,” the young woman said. “We know you’ve got enough wind.”

He managed a sheepish smile, then demonstrated that he did indeed have enough wind.

“Peter,” the young woman said, in an assured tone, “get the champagne.”

Peter rose from his chair and set off to the kitchen as she cut the cake into servings that looked so precisely equal that they could have been placed in scales and achieved perfect balance. Raymond watched with an almost imperceptible nod.

“Anne,” said Rose as Peter poured the champagne, “it’s so good to see you. I wish you weren’t so far away.”

This was at least the third time Rose had said this since Anne had been back on the east coast from Seattle where she worked in a CPA firm. Anne was not one to let such things go unnoted. “Mom, that’s at least the third time you’ve said that,” she said.

Rose didn’t believe that it was but also didn’t understand why, even if it was, it was a big deal. Didn’t Anne want to be missed, to feel loved?

Peter concluded his sommelier duties and sat back down. He lived out of town too but only a hundred miles up the interstate in the state capital. Always in the shadow of his older sister, his self-esteem had never quite recovered from a low LSAT score and he worked in a Barnes and Noble there.

Raymond rose at the head of the table, natty and trim in his cranberry cardigan and tattersall Oxford cloth shirt. He raised high his champagne glass.

“I’d like to propose a toast to my wonderful family.”

“Why, Dad,” said Anne, “how sweet.”

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Peter donned a smile that looked vaguely unnatural but not insincere.

They clinked their glasses together and drank. Then they sat down and quietly began eating their identical servings of cake.

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Rose was thinking, as she seemed always to be now, should she have told him sooner? Would things have been easier if she had? Of course, she'd known she'd have to tell him, that she couldn't just keep quiet about it, that doing that wouldn't be fair or considerate. She knew that she would be hurt and feel demeaned if he withheld similar information from her. Still, she couldn't bring herself to say anything. Perhaps because she couldn't quite believe it herself. Or perhaps because she knew so precisely how he would react. He would deny it, of course. And as much as she wanted him to be right, the last thing she wanted was an argument about it. Did he know better than the doctors? He would most certainly think so. Then one day he abruptly said, in one of those wholly unpredictable moments of insight into her carefully concealed moods that he occasionally had, "You have seemed depressed lately."

She said, no, she didn't think so. Then she began to cry.

* * *

He sat up in bed. The wolves had been there again. He knew now where they came from and the thought sent a chill through him. Were they there in the dark, he thought half asleep, there in the pitch black of the bedroom, in the utter stillness? No, surely not. He couldn't forget their eyes, their cold luminous eyes. Everything was black. There were no eyes. Yet he still felt as if something was watching him, something unknowable and forbidding. He shivered, slipped back down beneath the

blankets, curled into a ball. Reaching out beneath the covers he touched Rose where she was breathing quietly in sleep and sighed.

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“You have a disease known as lupus,” the doctor was saying. “We don’t know much about what causes this condition, and at this time there is no known cure. It is an autoimmune disorder. In one form it affects only the skin, exhibiting the symptoms you have experienced for some time: rash, fatigue, aching joints, sensitivity to sunlight. In the other more serious form, so-called systemic lupus erythematosus, these symptoms are accompanied by the body creating antibodies that actually attack the patient’s own tissue.”

He paused, and as the pause became increasingly oppressive she knew.

“What can I do?”

“Treat the symptoms. We will put you on a regime of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs. Daily cortisone treatments. You may need dialysis if it doesn’t go into remission.” He paused, seeming to be looking for something reassuring to say.

“Many patients live long, perfectly normal lives with lupus.”

“Can you be sure? About the diagnosis, I mean.”

“We’re pretty confident. As you know, we’ve been working on it for a while. Lupus erythematosus is not easy to spot. It’s a process of elimination. But I think we’re right. We’ve done every test we know how to do.”

He seemed so proud of his diagnostic prowess that he lost sight of the fact that what she wanted to hear was every possible reason for doubt. After a moment he suddenly looked embarrassed.

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“I’m sorry,” he said.

She took the drugs and the cortisone. The symptoms receded. Life went on. As she’d known he would, Raymond simply *knew* that the diagnosis was wrong. For all of their bravado doctors were still largely working in the dark, making educated guesses. Medical technology had advanced greatly but the fundamentals of diagnosis were still riddled with human error. Doctors lacked the analytic tools of actuaries. He argued her doctor into submission. It wasn’t lupus. It was just fatigue, the natural consequences of aging, perhaps even some of it was psychosomatic. All of that was possible, the doctor had to admit. Possible became probable. Probable became fact. Still, on the doctor’s advice, she kept up the cortisone treatments. He didn’t object. He knew that a placebo could have a desirable effect, could give her peace of mind.

And so it went until that night when he turned off the lights and went up the stairs as he had done so many times before and found her sitting up in bed without a book or a magazine, just sitting there staring blankly before her.

“I thought you’d be asleep,” he said.

“I think I’d better make an appointment with Doctor Sands.”

He saw the fear in her eyes. He went to her and she rested her head on his chest and he hugged her. She shook slightly, as if she were crying, but made no sound. He closed his eyes and they were there, the wolves, more vivid than ever. For a moment he felt all the strength go out of him.

* * *

Anne sat to his right in the front row of the packed church, Peter on his left. The minister was speaking very movingly about Rose. He had not gone to church—waste of

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time, he thought, riddled with superstition and closed to rational analysis—but Rose had. The minister had known her well. Flowers were everywhere. She had loved flowers. Even when they were planted in perfectly straight rows.

He said quietly to Anne, “You know, at the end she said we argued all the time.”

“That’s normal. You were under a lot of stress.”

“We were happy,” he said, the phrase floating off into the air and seeming almost a question.

Anne took his hand and pressed it.

“Of course you were.”

Her eyes held his firmly. To his other side Peter blew his nose. They *were* happy. At least he’d thought so. But some of the things he knew, thought he knew, he wasn’t so sure about anymore. He’d been wrong about the diagnosis. What else had he been wrong about? He looked back over their life together, seeking reassurance. Random bits of routine cluttered his mind as if they were the signposts of their marriage: their fixing dinners together, listening to music, reading newspaper articles to each other at the breakfast table. Those small, recurrent things had been the essence of their life together. Not the arguments at the end. But had the arguments always been there waiting beneath the surface, simmering frustrations that she’d kept in check, the wolves that were always lurking in the shadows? This thought left him feeling dizzy and light-headed, as if he’d stagger and fall if he hadn’t been seated. He looked down, closed his eyes, then looked back over his shoulder. There, about halfway back in the church, he saw Sue Sargent. He watched as she turned her head toward her husband Walter, as if she were about to say something. As the minister continued his funeral homily, the sun suddenly

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shone through the stained glass window to capture the perfection of her surgically altered nose. He shifted his gaze back to the front of the church as the minister concluded and the organist began to play. It was Bach, the splendid order of Bach.