

The Girl and the Wolf

wolves are like that: they can let things go



A GIRL IN A HOOD was picking mushrooms in the forest when she came upon a wolf. He was a handsome wolf, and she was a brave and romantic girl. So when he stretched his mouth open wide and showed her all his teeth, she reached out her hand—the one with a silver ring on it, given to her by her grandmother—and stroked his head. This was not what he was expecting—in fact, *dinner* is what he was expecting. So instead he caught himself a rabbit, and another for the girl, and together they ate them with mushrooms. Afterwards, he licked his lips, and she scratched behind his ears, and they fell asleep in the woods each curled around the other.

Early the next morning, a pair of crows passed by, hopping from branch to branch. They jumped from foot to foot in excitement when they saw the inappropriate couple sleeping on their bed of moss. Crows like nothing more than causing trouble, so one flew straight to the woodsmen's village, and the other flew straight to the wolf pack's den. By the time the wolf and the girl were up and awake and thinking about breakfast, their names were burning the ends of a hundred tongues.

Wolves run faster than men, so the wolves got there first. They wanted to tear the little girl up, and eat her—not with mushrooms, not with cooking, not with anything. But the handsome wolf stood in front of the girl when they tried to get close. He bared his fangs and snarled at them so fiercely, with his fur all abristle and his eyes all aflame, that they slunk away and left him to her. Wolves are like that: they can let things go.

Men run slower than wolves, so the men got there second. They wanted to shoot the wolf—right between the eyes, *bang*, one neat hole—so that the girl would be saved and his fur would be intact for making excellent hats. But the brave and romantic girl stood in front of the wolf so they couldn't get a clear shot. She flung words at them so fiercely, with her finger wagging and (perhaps more to the point) her body so unhelpfully in the way, that they slunk away and left her to him. But men are not like that: they cannot let things go.

It's true that none of the men needed a hat that badly, nor indeed any of them really thought the girl was particularly worth saving. No; the problem here was that the girl was in love with a wolf—there! it's been said, and now it's in the open—and that's plainly wrong. You know it is wrong because wolves are nothing more than savage beasts, as anyone can tell you, whereas humans are sophisticated, with their guns and their bibles and all their cleverness.

It's too early in the story for the wolf and the girl to live happily ever after because they've only just met. But still, it starts well, and if anything goes wrong—which in a manner of speaking it will, of course—it won't be their own doing. She made daisy chains to hang around his neck, and he carried her, riding on his back. They went swimming in the forest pools. They would sit on high rocks to watch the sun set, and later, if the night were moonlit, sometimes he would howl for joy and she would sing for happiness.

When the wolves heard these duets, their thoughts turned to their brother and his unusual mate. They knew that no matter how much he loved her he must sometimes miss running with the pack. So over time the wolves came closer. On some nights they joined in the song, and when he heard it, it made the hair on his mane bristle, and she felt it too, and hugged him dearly and told him to sing back to his brethren. Eventually they came to see him, and they brought a freshly killed deer as a gift to share with him and the girl. One of the old wolves had a thorn in his paw, and that's

just the sort of thing a girl's fingers are better at taking out than a wolf's claw can ever be. So you can see how it went; and by the time the girl was grown up, whenever the moon was full, the whole pack would gather and howl, and in that awful howling one beautiful human voice would add the melody.

The creatures of the forest would listen to that music with wonder, their ears pricked up and their eyes shining in the dark. It was a song the likes of which you will probably never hear, because it was made of love and passion and nature, and these things do not combine in the world so often today. Some people who heard it—travellers, mostly, or the one or two people who lived in the forest but not in the village—thought perhaps a faerie or a dryad born of a tree was singing to them like an angel. But when the people of the village heard the voice of the wild wolf-woman, the one who had been stolen by wolves and lived like a beast, they decided to have her killed, so they could sleep peacefully whenever there was a full moon, without the unearthly racket.

When men go hunting they are noisy and clumsy, so the wolf and the woman were usually warned long before a hunting-party ever got close. But men have gunpowder, which gives them one unnatural advantage, and that is *range*. A man with a gun can—if he is lucky—kill something he would never have the wit to get close to, let alone fight, provided he is brave enough to point a metal tube at it from a long way away. So one day a lucky shot rang out and the wolf's hind leg was suddenly broken, even though there was nobody nearby.

The gunman thought he had hit the woman, because the wolf was brave and silent, and it was his partner who screamed out. She screamed such curses and howls that even *your* blood would have been chilled had you heard them, and you're on her side. He went back to the village and told them he was sure he had wounded the she-demon, because he'd seen a wolf through the sights of his gun, but after the bullet had hit, it was a woman's voice that had torn through the air. They barricaded the doors of the village that night and the following nights, because judging from the noise she'd been making when he ran away, the gunman didn't think he'd fully killed her. In fact, for a while afterwards the village was jumpy and even more suspicious of strangers than usual, especially if any of those strangers should happen to be lame in one leg.

Now you may remember that some people who heard the wolfish music were not villagers. Wherever you go, if you're lucky and if you're polite, you sometimes meet people who keep themselves to themselves, not because they have something to hide, but because they don't need the excitement of company. Sometimes, but not always, the absence of chitchat and gossip provides a space where wisdom can grow. So there are wise old men of the woods, healer women, and crazy hermits, all of whom are four times smarter than anyone you will ever meet in a busy street or a crowded university.

In this case, there was a thoughtful old woman who lived behind the waterfall in the forest. She had listened to the wolfish music over the years. She knew what it was, because she'd seen the couple swimming in her pool when the girl was still a girl and the wolf still wore daisy chains. Back then the old woman had stood so still for so long, leaning on her stick, that dragonflies had settled on her and spiders had made little webs. So even the watchful wolf hadn't noticed her watching them bathe.

When the old woman heard the shot echo through the trees, and the howling of the wolf lady, she gathered up her most precious mosses and barks, and went to find them. When she arrived in the clearing where the wolf was lying, his hind leg bleeding, and his woman sobbing into his fur, they didn't see her coming. In fact, until she shook out her cloak and some of the leaves fell from it, she could as well have been invisible. She'd obviously been living in the forest for a long, long time.

She knelt down and looked at the wolf's leg. There was a hole in it where the shot had gone through, and the bone was shattered where the bullet had clipped it. She told the woman to fetch water, while she prepared a poultice of moss and lichen in a wooden bowl. When the woman came back, she mixed the water into the bowl and layered it onto the bark she had brought.

"I will wrap this around his leg," she said, "and it will heal. But I can do more for you two, if you want. I can tie your two fates together, so you will never be separated. Do you want that?"

And the woman who loved the wolf did want that, because nothing is as terrible as the thought of the loss of your beloved, and this is especially pressing when people have taken to shooting at you both.

"Then lend me your silver ring," said the old woman, and held out her hand. The woman lifted her ring off—it was on a twine round her neck, because her fingers had grown over the years, and it didn't fit the way it had when her grandmother had given it to her—and placed it in the other woman's palm.

So the old woman took a needle and a thread, and passed it through the bullet hole in the wolf's leg. He looked at her calmly, weak from the loss of blood. She tied it off with a complicated knot, and passed the other end through the ring. This too she tied with a complex and special knot. Then she took the thread in her teeth and snapped it in two. She put the ring in her pocket, and placed the bark on the wound. She splinted it with sticks and bound it with leaves and twine.

"Rest for four days, and don't walk on the fifth," she said. "I will give your ring back to you. In the meantime, take care of him."

And before she could be thanked, the old woman disappeared.

The wolf's leg got better quickly in the next few days, and in time it was even good enough to run on—although it ached on frosty winter mornings and wasn't ever as strong as the other three.

True to her word, the old woman did come back, once, to return the ring. She had taken it to the place where the knots of destiny are tied, and looped it around this and passed it under that, tying a fate to bind the two lovers together. It's not an uncommon knot, but few people know how to tie it properly, because it's a skill that takes patience and concentration to learn. She was away for nine months, according to the young woman's reckoning, although to the wolf it seemed just a little more than two. Just as suddenly as before, she stepped out of the trees where they hadn't noticed her. She handed back the ring, still with the little thread knotted onto it.

"It is done," she said, and she went back to the waterfall, to stand and watch and not be troubled by chitchat and gossip.

Strangely, at almost exactly the same time, the wolf and the woman had a little wolf-child. He grew up knowing how to pass amongst humans like a man, and how to run with the pack like a wolf, and this made his parents very happy.

The wolf and woman themselves grew old. One day, of course, one of them died—not in a bad way, not in a villager's wolf trap or from a bullet shot from half a mile away, but probably whilst peacefully asleep after staying up too late howling at the full moon. Whichever one of them it was doesn't matter, because the other one lay down the very next day and followed; the two were not apart for long. The wolves sang a song that night without harmony.

So yes, in fact they did live happily ever after, because that was the fate that the old woman tied for them, and it was tied in that boy, who brought them so much love.

* * *

BUT PERHAPS the old woman of the woods ought to have thought more about the fate of the son. What remains after happily ever after?

It would be good to say that he was as handsome as his father, and as beautiful as his mother, but that's not quite how it was. When he was a wolf, he was a splendid wolf; and when he was a man, he was as pleasant a chap as you could hope to meet (although, for those who care to notice such things, his eyebrows did meet in the middle). But when he was neither one thing nor the other, well, then he would put the fear of God into anyone careless enough to be looking in his direction. All sinews and bristles and fangs and fingers, all snarl and slobber and quivering nastiness. So the important thing was to know, at any one time, which of either half he wanted to be. It wasn't his fault—it wasn't anyone's fault—it's just the

way two things are, sometimes, when tied together. Two things bound that, truth be told, perhaps ought not to have been.

So you can guess what happens. He's a wolf lapping up water from a stream deep in the woods when a girl wanders by wearing a bonnet. She's as pretty as the prettiest thing you've ever seen, and, worst of all, she's brave and romantic. She sees the wolf, his sleek fur and his powerful body. Because she's brave, she looks straight at him instead of at the tell-tale reflection right there under his chin. And because she's romantic, she imagines making him daisy chains, and running through the woods on his back.

And he looks up, crouched down there as a wolf but struck with the tiny thunderbolt of a young man's love in his heart. It's not his fault.

She runs back to the village, screaming all the way. She lives in the church for the rest of her life and is one of those people who are always very easily startled. She only goes out when she must, and then she is always careful to fix her gaze nowhere but upon the ground before her, afraid that her glance might set off things better left unseen.

As for him, well, he runs with the wolves, as deep in the forest as it is possible to get, far away from people and the terrible effects they seem to have. He has wolf cubs, and they look just like he does now that he is back to his native, wolfish form. But sometimes when they sleep they dream, and if they dream of girls in bonnets or pretty little hoods then they change, if only briefly; and when that happens even the other wolves are scared, and creep away.

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