

What the Wolf Wants

So, it's the middle of the night and there's this wolf at my window. He stands like a man on his back legs. His hindquarters bulge, all muscly and stuff. He's so silver he'd almost be blue in the moonlight, were there moonlight. But this is the suburbs, so, instead, he's almost blue in the lamplight, the streetlights, back porch security lights, light from the flicker of across-the-street TVs, the radiant glow spilling out of downtown. A lot of artificial illumination round these parts, is what I'm getting at.

Delusions aren't new to me. This last year, I haven't been getting much sleep. But, the longer I stare at the wolf, the more I realize he's no delusion—this one's *real*.

He's not a werewolf, not exactly. There's nothing mannish about him. No human hands or face. No pants. His balls hang immodestly between his knees. They swing in the breeze like something, like balls.

I shouldn't open the window, but I do, and he climbs in. I'm in just boxers, but his balls are out, plus, he's a wolf, so what does he care? I slide my feet into moccasins. They're my favorite, a gift from Tyler, leather with fur lining.

The wolf follows me to the kitchen, seats himself in my Rooms-to-Go Dynasty Collection dining room chair at my Rooms-to-Go Dynasty Collection dining room table. I want to put down a towel, something to get those balls off the chair's imitation maple laminate surface, but the look on the wolf's face tells me I'd best keep my hands away from his testicles.

"Coffee?" I say.

The wolf nods and does that thing dogs do, that bob of head, curl of lip, that almost-smile. His teeth *gleam*.

Wolves like instant. I learned this somewhere, Wikipedia, I think. I'd been out of instant since the eighties, but just last week stocked up on Starbucks, their new line, VIA. They won't call it instant, but instant's what it is.

I pour the coffee into a shallow bowl for him to lap from. I set the bowl on the table before the wolf. He blows on it to cool it down. He does this, and I think of my mother, how she taught us, me and my brother, to cool soup by blowing on it. It never worked, just like kissed cuts never hurt less. The first sip still scalded, but we pretended—me, Tyler, Mom. We drank our soup, pretending we could taste it, pretending our mouths weren't on fire.

The wolf does not pretend. The first sip burns. He lifts his head and howls. It's so loud, I cover my ears. He growls, and for the first time I wonder about the welfare of a man with a wolf in his house. My body parts, I like all of them.

The wolf watches me.

A toe's not the end of the world, I think. *I could lose a toe*. I bend to unslipper one foot.

"Yes," the wolf says. Here, I should be surprised, should be, like, "Oh, oh my God, it's a talking wolf, ahhhhh!"

But I'm not surprised, not really. Because why else *would* he be here, if not to talk, if not to ask a question or offer me wolfly counsel?

Except that it's not advice he's here to give, there's something he wants. And it's not a question he wants answered, or a piece of me to eat, it's my *slippers*.

"Moccasins," I say.

"Whatever," the wolf says. "Those are what I want."

"Anything else," I say. I'm hoping he'll take the chair. *Take the chair and your ball sweat with you*, I want to say but don't.

Let's be adult about this, I think. *Here you were, ready to give up a toe, and all he asks is one worldly possession, a souvenir from his big trip out of the woods*.

I consider furniture, clothing, maybe a nice household appli-

ance. Something he can show off to all of his wolf friends and be, like, "See, I went *inside*, man. I went into the box with the roof!"

"Consider the Whirlpool," I say. Only two years old, the dishwasher's good, the kind you can load without washing things first. "Seriously," I say. "I tried it. Just like in the commercial. A whole cake went in there, and, when it was done? The dishes: *spotless*."

The wolf shakes his head.

I proffer an Emerson brand microwave, a Lands' End thermal fleece, a 2009 Storybook Mountain Vineyards Zinfandel, my favorite. "Fifty dollars, retail," I say. "Excellent vintage."

But the wolf, he needs none of these. Food he eats raw. Fur keeps him warm. And wine, well. Wolves, he informs me, drink white.

"The moccasins," he says. "Really, they're all I want."

I ask why. The wolf shrugs.

"It's rough out there," he says. "You ever had a pine needle jammed in your pads? Ever cross a snow-covered field in bare feet?"

I admit that, no, I have not.

"Try it," he says. "Try it, and, trust me, you'll be begging for moccasins."

I sigh. "Okay," I say.

I slip off the first moccasin, then the second. The stitching is yellow. It rises like Morse code through the leather. The fur lining is soft, white.

"Real rabbit," I say, and the wolf gives me a look like, *There's nothing that you can teach me about rabbit*.

I hand the moccasins over, and the wolf stands and steps into them. They're too big, but he tugs on the laces until they bunch up around his paws like tennis balls, the kind that Tyler fastened to the feet of his walker after he lost the first leg.

"They're all I have left of him," I say.

The wolf closes his eyes and lowers his muzzle, somber-like, an expression that says, *I'm real sorry* and *I'm still taking them* at the same time.

His tail wags.

"Gotta go," he says, and, before I can say goodbye, he's out the front door and down the driveway, running fast in moccasined feet.

I shouldn't have said what I said to my brother that Christmas: "Slippers? What the hell am I supposed to do with *slippers*?"

He'd just returned from Alaska, where I guess buying local was the thing to do.

"I like them," my mother said. She held out her matching pair. A tongue of tissue paper hung from one of the holes where the feet go in.

"I buy you a thousand-dollar Cuisinart espresso machine, the Tastemaker's Model, with dual espresso dispensers and an advanced steaming action wand, and all I get is a couple of lousy *slippers*?"

"They're moccasins," Tyler said. "Hand-stitched."

"They smell like dead animal," I said.

Tyler shook his head. His hair had just grown in. He'd lose it again before summer. From the casket, he'd look back at us without eyebrows.

"I don't know what to say," he said. "I'm sorry."

I stuffed the moccasins back into the box.

I was a bad person then. Maybe I still am. It's been a year, but it takes longer than that. I think maybe it takes a while to redeem yourself in the eyes of the dead.

I go back to my room. The window's still open from where the wolf came in, and I close it. Outside, more light's coming on, real light, the sun's pink peeking through the black.

I move to the phone by my bed. I call my mother.

Her voice, when she picks up, is soft, cottony. I picture her in her bed, alone in her big house on the other side of the country. The red Renaissance quilt I got her two birthdays back comes up to her chin, and there's fright in her eyes.

"Mom," I say. "There's a wolf at my window."

"Yes," she says. "There's one at mine too. I'm just now looking at him."