THE OLD MAN AND THE WOLF

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Audie Lambert was seventy-two years old when his daughter gave birth to a wolf cub in the cellar where he had been keeping her for the last nine months. He was far too old to rear a human child, much less something like this. Audie thought he best take the pup outside and snap its neck before the girl held it. It was hard to get them to let go at that point, no matter how grotesque the child was.

His wife, Alma, had borne him six children before this girl killed her, and six times he had to pry some odd little corpse from her hands because he couldn’t snatch it fast enough. It was like her womb hadn’t memorized the pattern of a human being, sometimes producing a child with an extra limb or smooth skin where the eyes ought to
be. The fourth child lacked a head. It didn’t surprise Audie when the seventh baby killed Alma; she wanted it that way. She put everything she had into knitting one perfect human being, and when she saw that she had managed it, she smiled and gave up. She was forty-four. He was fifty-three.

Now this. He had expected hours of hard labor, but the child was so tiny that it slipped right out in a gush of blood and juices that Audie hated to see. It wasn’t right for an old man to see his daughter like this, but he couldn’t let her out of this room. She had been funny since she fell pregnant in the spring, funnier than Alma had ever been, dangerous really. The people down in Hickory Ditch wouldn’t understand; they’d arrange to send her somewhere. And what if he let them? She’d be on the cover of every trash magazine in the country by morning. Teenage Girl Gives Birth to a Wolf! And he knew what else they’d say. Accusations they’d make. Incestuous Demon Baby! And no way to clear his name but to incriminate the girl. None of that would do. Audie reached for the black cub.

The girl flung herself to the limits of her chains, teeth trimming a patch of hair from Audie’s wrist. He stumbled backward, landing on his tailbone in the wet sawdust. The girl crouched over her cub, fingers curled like claws in the sawdust, lips pulled back to reveal flat, white, human teeth. Audie held up his hands in surrender.

She ducked her head, long black tendrils of hair pooling on the ground around her cub as she snuffled it like a beast. Then she took its nape between those flat, human teeth and carried it back to the nest of old towels and blankets she had fashioned as far from
the entrance as her chains would allow. She lay on her side, positioned her child beside her lower breast. Audie turned away.

He rubbed his wrist, feeling justified in his refusal to let her off the chains to deliver. He was beginning to think she might be contagious.

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On the third day, the girl – her name was Rachel – returned to her right mind. She went straight to the claw-foot tub to rinse off the remnants of birth and insanity. Audie rocked in his orange recliner with the cub stretched out on his left thigh. He thought it was a boy, but it was still a bit early to tell. Other than being an unholy aberration, it seemed in good health. Audie ran one calloused index finger down the tiny spine.

He couldn't be sure whether Rachel had inherited her mother’s pattern-defying womb or if the fault fell on the father. He had been a drifter, a rapist according to Rachel, and now he was a patch of poison sumac in the lower field. It was Rachel who shot him with the pistol she kept in her night stand. He had tumbled over the banister of her loft, bled out on the living room floor. Audie had no choice but to redo the entire thing. Nine months later, the living room still smelled like fresh pine boards.

The cub squirmed on Audie’s knee, smacked its black lips and whined. He offered it a rough fingertip, something he had always done to newborn calves, and the cub was just as eager to latch on. Tiny claws pricked through Audie’s jeans. The cub squealed, clamped down on the fingertip with its soft gums.

“Shhh. Your mama will be back soon.” The words felt wrong. His daughter, a mother? To this? But he had seen him drop from her loins like a furry fruit.
The cub’s cries intensified. He flailed his tiny limbs across Audie’s jeans with a loud scritch sound. Audie scruffed him, held him aloft. That was supposed to calm a kitten or a pup, but this cub continued to kick and punch the air. Then he started to grow.

Audie would have thought it a trick of the eye, but he felt his hand pulled downward by the weight increase. The body swelled. The limbs grew long. The tail withdrew. The scruff that Audie grasped pulled tight against the baby’s back and Audie dropped the child into his lap.

Rachel appeared in the bathroom door, a towel wrapped around her torso and hips. When she saw the pink, naked baby squalling in Audie’s lap, she leaped across the room, losing the towel. She scooped up the infant and held him to her breast. He latched on with fervor. Audie looked away.

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The child grew. Sometimes a wolf. Sometimes a boy. Unlike his mother’s insanity, his transformations were not limited to the days around the full moon. He did change on those nights without fail, but there were other nights too and days as well. Audie believed the transformations overtook him of their own accord until the boy was five and it became clear he had mastered the ability to change himself at will.

When the boy was seven, Audie began to forget. Little things at first. Where he kept his rifle cartridges. How to button his shirt. By the time the child was eight, Audie couldn’t always remember the boy’s name. He sometimes forgot Rachel’s as well. Alma’s face could not be conjured without photographs, and he didn’t have many of those. But
not all of his lost memories were missed. He no longer remembered the potato-shaped fourth child or the second child with its heart on its sleeve.

By the time the boy turned ten, the wolf was nearly full grown, weighing almost ninety pounds when transformed, and standing thirty inches tall at the shoulder. The boy became the wolf without a single whimper, but when the wolf became a boy he always cried. He told his grandfather that it didn’t hurt to grow, but it was terrible to shrink, and Audie understood as he felt his head settling deeper into his shoulders every day, creating a wattle of floppy skin where his Adam’s apple used to be. He watched from the cabin’s kitchen window as the wolf loped in from the woods, a rabbit hanging from its jaws. Audie was useless to his family now; the wolf did all the hunting he had once done with his gun. It was much easier to poach this way. Rachel would never go hungry with a son like this. But Audie missed the thrill of the hunt, the solitude of the duck blind, the wind in the tree stand on a cold November day.

It was on one of these days that Audie recalled where he kept his rifle cartridges. He did not remember the daughter or the grandson sleeping in the loft. He remembered that Alma needed him to stock the freezer before Thanksgiving. It was no small task to provide a proper feast for six grown men and their families. They would need at least two turkeys, possibly even three. Or perhaps a tender doe to introduce the grandkids to venison. Audie leaned the rifle against his shoulder, tried not to make too many sounds as his boots waded through the golden leaves. The Germans could be anywhere.

When he heard the crash of heavy feet in the brush at his back, Audie swung around, emptying his rifle into the loping black wolf. A canine scream broke into a
human howl. Audie dropped his rifle in the leaves, ran to the naked boy’s side. Audie fell to his knees, tried to restrain that child as he wallowed in the leaves, staining the gold to match the red.

“Hold still, boy,” Audie growled, pinning the boy’s shoulder to the ground.

The boy lashed his head from side to side, eyes clenched in pain, gnashing his teeth. Audie grabbed the top of the child’s head – it was still small enough to be engulfed by his palm – and turned it to the left. A bloody furrow ran from the corner of his right eye to his ear, and then dipped beneath the lobe and trail off along his neck. It was a confusing wound until Audie realized the wolf’s ear was positioned much higher than the boy’s, and that had the boy been a boy when the bullet hit, he would have surely lost that ear. But as it was, he did not appear to be mortally wounded. Audie had patched worse wounds in his life. If he could only remember how.

The boy sunk his teeth into Audie’s wrist. Not the skin-pinches of a little boy, but a deep, flesh-piercing, animal bite. Audie fought the instinct to yank his arm away, worried he would dislodge the boy’s fledgling permanent teeth. Instead, he froze, let the wounded animal-child gnaw on his arm until blood bubble around the boy’s sharp canines and the rusty taste of old blood brought him to his senses. His eyes and jaw flew open as one. Blood dribbled down his chin.

Audie cleared his throat, hugged the arm to his stomach, blotted the wound with his red flannel shirt. “One for one, boy. No harm done.”

He hefted the boy over the shoulder of his good arm, carried him home. He left his rifle where it fell, forgot about it, and by the time he remembered again it was buried
forever in the wet, brown leaves. It was probably better that way. Although the boy
recovered quickly and held nothing against the old man – after all, he was foolish to run
up behind a man with a gun like that – Rachel was not as quick to forgive. Because even
the cheapest nursing home was outside their budget, she threatened to lock Audie in her
cellar every day that she didn’t need those chains. He knew she was right. He was
dangerous now.

The afternoon before the full moon, Audie led Rachel into the cellar, fastened the
padded restraints to her ankles and wrists, a ritual he had completed 127 times since the
boy’s father had shattered her mind. He now understood that there was a wolf inside her,
that it demanded to run under the full moon, but unlike her son’s, this wolf could not
break loose from its human form. She was trapped; he couldn’t blame her for lashing out.
He kissed her forehead, climbed the wooden steps into the sinking December sun, and
padlocked the cellar doors.

The black wolf waited for him, stiff as a bowling pin with his tail curled over his
front paws. He yawned, an anxious squeak. Stamped his paws. Neither Audie nor the boy
had spoken of the bite in the intervening weeks. It had healed without a scar, which was
more than he could say for the puckered pink line that edged the boy’s temple. Audie did
not know what to expect, but he followed the wolf into the woods.

He shucked his coat, his flannel shirt, and his undershirt, exposing his flabby torso
to the bitter wind. He chunked his boots and socks under a tree. He pulled his withered,
liver-spotted legs from his jeans. He gestured for the wolf to look away, then he peeled off
his briefs. Naked, he lowered his arthritic hands and swollen knees to the muddy forest floor.

The boy was right. It did not hurt. It felt like a yawn – a sharp intake of breath, a pleasant stretching, and then release. Audie was not restored to youthful vigor; he was an old wolf with creaky joints and cloudy eyes. His fur was black like his grandson’s, but grizzled white around the face and paws, scraggly around his shoulders where the boy’s coat grew in thick like a mane. He still could not remember the boy’s name. Now he was not even sure about his own.

The young wolf trotted so the old wolf could keep up. As they moved through the silver-lit forest, stirring up rabbits and night birds, the old wolf’s muscles loosened up. When a sleek doe flashed across their path, it was the old wolf who gave chase, and the young wolf who struggled to keep pace. The old wolf knew what to do; he did not need to be taught how to leap, where to bite. He sank his old teeth into the doe’s lean thigh and tore out the muscle that allowed her to run. She stumbled and he fell upon her throat, her blood spraying his face until finally she was still.

The young wolf appeared, wagging his tail. He let his elder eat first. The old wolf’s accomplishment did not seem so great as his teeth tore through the stringy flesh; the doe was as old like himself. But such were the ways of nature. She had lived a good life. He could taste a decade of spring rains and winter snows in her blood. He ate his fill. The young wolf approached in a deferential pose, then gorged himself on the less desirable remains.
They were home by sunrise. The boy became a boy again, made his mother a hearty stew for breakfast, served it in a stainless steel dish she could not break. The old wolf watched from a patch of sunlit leaves under a naked hickory tree. The boy and his mother could take care of themselves. It would never be easy, but it didn’t have to be any harder. When the boy disappeared into the cellar, the old wolf stretched his ancient legs, shook out his matted coat, and faded into the forest.