

Wolf Running Alone

by

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—twenty-seven years old—

Kate had been told a woman shouldn't walk alone, drink alone, make love alone in her head. But she'd done all these things. For weeks now she hadn't slept. For weeks she had paced the floor, going from her studio to the kitchen and back again, patting Sasha, the dog, along the way. Each time she touched her, Sasha leapt up and followed, her toenails clicking on the wooden floor. But finally she would weary, realizing they weren't leaving the apartment, and lie down again close to the door. Kate couldn't paint anymore. Not a single brush stroke. The city was slowly wearing her down. She and Sasha faced Chicago's rusted-out factories, its slums and endless suburbs, gathering their strength, preparing to leave, but inertia always overcame them.

Kate lit a cigarette and leaned her forehead against the studio's cold glass window. An ambulance shrieked on its way to a nearby hospital. She remembered homes -- in Maryland, in Colorado, in Africa and Mexico. She remembered Father throwing duck decoys in the marsh, Mother riding her horse, her sister climbing an apple tree. But here outside the window was Chicago -- a city risen from the blood of stockyards, a city with a skull for a face. Trash fluttered, turning over and over, blown by the wind. And Kate stood by the window transfixed by her own reflection, remembering driving through Colorado one early spring and stopping to camp the night: she had followed a narrow deer trail away from the road and set up a tent in a meadow, then wandered gathering firewood until she came to a clearing. The clearing was littered with the smooth, white skeletons of deer -- winterkill.

It began to snow outside. Kate left the window and went to the bookcase, pulling out an atlas of the world. The maps were drawn in bright colors -- red, orange, blue, green. Sasha left her post by the door and laid down next to Kate's feet. Kate

stroked her behind the ears, waiting for the sound of Mike's footsteps while she flipped through the atlas. She waited with a combination of expectancy and dread.

Sasha whimpered and went to the door. Mike was walking up the stairs. He opened the door and kicked dirty snow from his boots, then took off his overcoat.

"Jesus, it's snowing," he said. "What's for dinner?"

"Lamb chops," Kate answered, thinking that a simple "Hello, how are you?" would have sufficed. She could feel anger mounting. Like hot fire it spread through her veins. She put on her coat. His entrance had over-filled the room -- she was suffocating. "Sasha needs a quick walk," she told him, trying to sound nonchalant. If he sensed her anger, he would attack, shout something like: What the hell's the matter with you? then ignore her when she cried.

Outside, streetlamps illuminated each snowflake. Kate caught flakes on her tongue. Her hair grew heavy with snow. Sasha chased a squirrel up a tree. Kate thought of how she'd taken to lying on the couch daydreaming of war zones and machine guns, always running, always hiding, never safe. How she dreamt of men -- of old lovers, future lovers, lovers still unknown. A hard need swelled within her, but she was afraid to take the final step, afraid to give up her dark, secure corner. She had always believed in fate. Wasn't there a lesson to be learned? Why had she been deposited in the flat midwest with its boxcars and beef? There was a reason for everything. A reason bombs dropped in her dreams. She and Sasha walked etching footprints in the new fallen snow. Somewhere out there, Kate thought, a strange animal lurks.

Perhaps her unhappiness wasn't all Mike's fault, she considered, but all the same she blamed him. There was no reason for her to live in the city. It was his work for the bank that brought them there. Okay, that was bad but not so terribly bad. What was it then? It was...it was that he didn't love her, she realized. Sometimes they went for days without talking. He would eat dinner with the t.v. on; she would try to start a conversation -- he wouldn't respond. He said she tried to make him feel guilty. Well, maybe she did. She tried to get the point across that she was unhappy living in Chicago -- no mountains, no hills, no forests, just that endless, flat expanse of brick and concrete. But Mike didn't want to hear about it. He took her complaints to be a sign of weakness. He expected her to be stoic and to put up with Chicago for his sake. If she was unhappy, she had no right to make him that way. As long as he was content, her unhappiness was irrelevant. Sasha is the only thing that keeps me sane, Kate thought -- the dog is real; this life I lead is not.

She returned to the apartment.

"When's dinner? I'm hungry."

Sasha shook, sending mud and snow flying against the white walls. Mike grimaced. Kate rushed to the kitchen for a sponge.

"Dinner won't be half an hour," she said, kneeling and cleaning off the walls, then rubbing Sasha's paws dry with an old sheet. "Why don't you fix yourself a drink?"

Her nerves felt taut as a climber's rope. Her mouth was dry. It seemed as if she were hanging above an abyss trying to remain in control, repeating over and over

again: No need to panic. In the kitchen she started the rice and made a spinach salad. The sight and smell of food made her sick. She put bloody lamb chops in a broiler pan and took out a package of frozen carrots. Then she reached up for a bottle of scotch, opened the bottle and took a big swig, then another. Calm down, she told herself, nothing is wrong. Maybe he'll want to talk to me tonight. Maybe he'll be nice. Maybe he'll put his arms around me and say: "I love you. I know it's been tough living here." That was what she wanted -- a simple pat on the back. Anything but this bleak, dead quiet, this emptiness relieved only by Sasha. She took another sip. The scotch burned her throat, flooding her body with heat, seeping into her brain. What a despicable, weak coward I am, she thought, looking at the bottle of scotch -- I'm too afraid to leave.

They didn't speak at dinner. They watched the news. She pushed her food around her plate. Mike always told her she was too fat though she weighed only one hundred pounds. When they had finished, Sasha tried to get one of them to take her for another walk. She ran back and forth between the front door and the table, bounding in the air, then dropping down low. Kate laughed out loud.

"Look at her," she said, affectionately.

"You love that dog more than you love me."

"No I don't," she answered, thinking: Of course, I do -- the dog loves me back.

"Yes, you do. I'll take her for a walk. It's nice out."

It was still snowing outside. A soft, white blanket muffled the city. The snow reminded Kate of an old dream: to go mountain climbing in the Himalayas. Once she had believed that if she wanted to do something enough, she could do it. Strange how impossible that now seemed! Mike put on his parka. Sasha leapt in the air when he removed her leash from the door knob.

"Let her run," Kate said, imagining what it would be like to course through cold snow, how alive she would feel.

"Come on, girl."

The door shut behind them. Quiet. Looking out the window, Kate saw them emerge from the apartment building and plunge into the cold night. She watched them. Light from a streetlamp caught Sasha's eyes and for a moment they shone red. Mike threw a snowball. She chased it, snapping and tossing it high in the air. It broke apart in the sky. They rounded a corner and disappeared from view.

You're selfish and self-centered, Kate remembered Mike shouting at her last night. All you do is complain and make my life miserable.

All you care about is yourself and money, she had snapped back.

Oh, leave me the hell alone, he had said. You think money grows on trees. The only reason you married me was so I could support you while you painted.

That's not true, she had insisted. I just want to have some say over where we live and how we lead our lives.

Get a job and earn the right to make those decisions, he had shot back.

He had backed her into a corner, although she had warned him not to. Please, she had insisted, don't make me leave. Don't cut off my choices. But he pushed her

to the limit: she could bow to him for the rest of her life or leave. There was no room for compromise. She couldn't paint. She didn't dare risk having children. He had stolen her freedom. She had let him take it.

She left the window and carried the dirty plates into the kitchen. She filled the sink with water. Steam rose moistening her face. Suddenly she couldn't stand it anymore -- the tediousness of her life. She leaned over the sink and cried. Tears slid into the oily water. She ran to the bedroom, took a duffel bag from beneath the bed, and began to pack. In the utility room she stuffed her climbing gear into a backpack, then went to the kitchen to pour dry dog food into a paper bag and dump Sasha's plastic bowl on top. Kate kept thinking, all I have is Sasha. She's my link to the wild. Sasha was not just a regular dog. Siberian huskies were descended from wolves. She was a connection to nature and to the primitive and real. She had nothing to do with the modern mess called civilization. Kate knew if she could become more like her dog, she might paint again someday. If she left tonight, she might have a chance. The back stairs were dark. She ran down them and piled her gear in the car, then ran back up to wait innocently for Mike.

He stomped snow from his boots. His face was Christmas red. He pulled off his ski hat leaving his hair standing on end. Sasha shook water against the walls.

"The goddamned dog tried to run away. She should go back to your mother's farm."

"You didn't have to take her out. I would have."

"Look she's not happy here," he told her. "She's not a city dog."

Neither am I, Kate thought, and we're both leaving.

He walked into the living room and turned on the t.v.

"Silent treatment?" she asked sarcastically.

"Do you have to start a fight?" he asked. "You're too attached to that dog. She'd be happier with your mother."

"And I guess if we ever have children, they can stay with Mother too. Why can't we live in the country?" she asked him. "You're telling me my dog belongs in the country, and I'm telling you that I want to live in the country with my dog. I don't want to live in a place that's so damn sterile a dog can't survive in it."

He didn't reply. His silence meant: go to hell!

On television a woman smiled pouring her husband a cup of coffee. "Mountain grown," the voice-over said. "Rich, pleasant aroma. Make him a good cup of coffee in the morning."

Let men make their own damn coffee, she thought.

She left that night. She was a grey wolf running alone across the frozen, moonlit plains. A silent wolf running like a shadow. Ancient, incorrigible, and wise. A fleeting shimmer of silver imprinting tracks in new fallen snow. She coursed across the plains -- wild-eyed and aglow, cold wind ruffling her fur. Streaking through snowbanks. Beneath strands of barbed wire fence. Skirting baited steel traps. Running effortlessly.

By dawn she had reached Nebraska. She pulled into a truck stop with a neon sign that said "EATS" and took Sasha for a walk. It was snowing lightly now. Inside, the restaurant was steamy and warm, its air thick with cigarette smoke, the floor wet with melted snow. It was crowded. Truckers dozed over coffee cups resting their elbows on the counter and their chins in their hands. How big they all seemed, balancing their large bodies on tiny stools, their weight perfectly centered.

She ordered coffee, scrambled eggs, toast, and bacon and ate ravenously.

"Where are you coming from?" the man next to her asked. He had salt and pepper hair and a big belly hanging over a brass belt buckle cast in the shape of Texas. The panhandle poked into his soft flesh.

"Chicago," she told him.

"I know that one by heart," he said. "Know most all of 'em by now. Chicago is Algonquian for 'place of the wild onion'. Used to be marsh land. Wild onions grew there."

She didn't reply.

"Course, progress changed all that." Her silence didn't seem to make him uncomfortable. "That's what I do," he continued. "While I drive, I study names. I got a dictionary in the cab, and I look up the names of all the places I pass through. Then if I want to read up more, I get myself some books on the subject."

"What's Nebraska mean?"

"The Sioux Indians used to call the Platte River 'Nebraska' meaning flat water."

"Flat water." Kate imagined Nebraska before it had been settled -- prairie grass to the horizon, the calm Platte River. "It's a good name," she told him.

"Yup," he said, "the Indians were good at naming." He signaled to the waitress to bring more coffee and poured three packets of sugar into his cup, then asked, "You running away?"

"I'm traveling."

"You traveling away from something or traveling toward it?"

"I'm doing both," she told him. "I've left, and I'm looking for something new."

"You expect to find it?"

She didn't want to be asked that question; she didn't see how thinking too far ahead would make anything easier. She took a sip of hot coffee. "I'm not sure," she answered. "I hope so."

"Hope don't always do the trick," he mentioned. "But I got a feeling about you...like you ain't traveling all alone, you know what I mean?"

For some reason, she thought she did, but she said, "I've got my dog with me." (It was the same thing.)

He ran his hand through his hair and half closed his eyes as if he were thinking. "Listen," he said, picking her check up off the counter, "I'll buy you breakfast."

"Thank you."

"If I were you I'd keep heading west." He put down a tip.

It seemed like good advice.

Kate fed Sasha by the car, adding scrambled eggs to her dry dog food. She picked out the eggs. When semis roared by, she winced. She was nervous and disgruntled, and Kate could tell she wanted to run, but she was afraid that if she let her off her leash, she would be hit by a car. It was gloomy and grey out, not so different from the weather in Chicago. Kate wondered why she was doing this.

She felt tired after driving all night and finally took a motel room outside Grand Island, falling asleep right away. When she awoke, it was five in the afternoon and already dark. The motel room was done in hideous purples and reds. She turned on a t.v. game show and considered calling Mike collect. Maybe he would want her to come home. How stupid, she thought, he's glad you're gone; now he can spend more time at work. He can get himself one of those nice, yuppy girlfriends who holds down a boring but well paying job, like that old girlfriend of his. On television the contestants, infected with greed, jumped up and down, screaming. This is the real America, she thought.

They started off again, heading west in the dark. The white line held Kate to the road. Time slipped by. Sasha curled up in a ball in the passenger seat, her fluffy tail hiding her face. She loved her dog -- Mike was right -- she loved Sasha more than she loved him. But, then, Sasha hadn't hurt her -- the dog had been through everything with her, even traveled cross country several times. They trusted each other. Kate took her hand from the wheel and stroked Sasha, her hand sinking deep into her fur. Sasha raised her head. "I love you," Kate said. The dog stretched, yawned, and went back to sleep. At the junction between route 80 and route 76 Kate headed south to Denver. She had decided to return to Santa Fe; it was a place that had always felt like home, unlike Chicago. It seemed right to circle back to some sort of beginning.

The sky was blue the way she'd remembered it. The buttes were covered with melting snow. She drove outside Santa Fe and let Sasha run. Her ex-boyfriend Mark had offered her his guest room, though she could tell his pregnant wife didn't approve. Kate had interrupted the pleasant rhythm of their lives. In a few days, Kate decided, she and Sasha would go up into the Pecos. She wanted to give Mike a chance to call. If he would make the effort, just once, to come after her, she'd go back to him. But it was a risky gamble; he'd never made the effort before. It was always she who had chased him like a wolf hunting its prey.

"It's not safe, you going camping alone this time of year," Mark warned her.

His wife gave him a look which clearly said shut up. Kate couldn't blame her. She would have done the same thing -- who wanted your husband's ex-girlfriend hanging around?

"Don't worry," Kate reassured him, "Sasha and I have done plenty of winter camping."

Santa Fe seemed different now. Visiting a place was more enjoyable than living there. Kate couldn't imagine why she'd ever left. The weather was dry and

sunny. The people were friendly. The Mexican food was good. She only wished that Mike would call. Why didn't he track her down? She would be easy to find; all he had to do was call any one of her friends. She was not going to call him. He would say he wanted a divorce. He would tell her again that she made his life miserable, that she was the stumbling block in his career. And divorce meant she would be left with nothing; she would have to go back to work. She'd be poor again with no time to paint. She'd lose her freedom. But then, she thought, I've lost it anyway; I lost it when I married him.

She stayed with Mark and Susanna for three days and three nights, overstaying her welcome, waiting for the phone call from Mike that never came. On the morning of the fourth day, she packed her gear and drove up a dirt road to the base of the Pecos. From there she skied up a trail into the mountains. The snow was crisp. Sasha raced ahead wobbling unsteadily beneath the weight of her dog pack. Snow blew off the hillsides into washes. Wind's fingers traced designs on the landscape. The sun was out. Kate skied from a stand of aspens and came to a creek. Lying on the cracked ice at the water's edge was a single yellow feather. She picked it up, feeling strange and lightheaded, yet very clear -- as if she were at too high an altitude and suffering from oxygen deprivation. The feeling was unfamiliar. Then she realized: she was happy. It had been so long since she had felt that way that she had forgotten what it was like to flow with the world, to not be an outsider. Sasha ran ahead. Kate tucked the feather away, crossed the stream, and continued skiing. The sun was warm on her back. She moved with easy strides entering the woods and smelling sharp pine. Blood raced through her veins. She felt as if she might burst. She wasn't scared now, not anymore -- she was back where she belonged. And at last she understood that her unhappiness was not Mike's fault. He was not to blame. No one was, no individual, except maybe herself. She had to learn to stand up for her rights. His interests were different from hers. She had no right to tell him they were wrong, but she had every right not to adopt them as her own. She wouldn't change him. He wouldn't change her. And if she needed the wilderness, as she did, to shelter her mind and soul, Mike had to accept that. He could no longer lock her away, keep her like a fish in a bowl. First, there was Chicago; now he spoke of being transferred back to New York. Fine, let him live in New York, she thought; he likes big cities, his career comes first. But cities gave her headaches and left her depressed. Those concrete wastelands were chilling. New York would never be her home. Her real home would always be the mountains, the forests, the deserts, the open prairies. Thinking this, she felt a surge of power. She raced Sasha out of the pine forest and up the hill, where she stopped and rested against a rock, sharing beef jerky with the dog. Yes, she thought, I'll call Mike when I get back to civilization. I'll stay married to him, but I will never again be his shadow, never again be the wolf. She was tired of being a predator, tired of being alone. She was going to turn into a big, black snake, find a warm rock, curl up and sun. She was going to do exactly as she pleased.

—The End—