

Perhaps a Wolf & a Lamb

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LET'S SAY IT'S 1980 IN CALGARY, ALBERTA AND THE PRAIRIE SKY DARK IN THE early evening is clouded with November storm. Snow licks a hospital parking lot clean. Imagine air so cold you can see breath or lose an ungloved pinky. In this scene, a bleary-eyed wolf in a blue sweatshirt pulls out of a stall. Accompanying him is a lamb, his wife of only a couple months, who holds a wailing infant close to her curly black fleece in the front passenger seat. Let's say this is an old story, a parable even, about what happens after a wolf woos a lamb, about how endings are sewn into beginnings, about how it's hard to tell the difference between the wails of humans and the cries of animals.

Checking over his shoulder as he reverses amidst the fuzzy blur of snow on windshield, the wolf can barely see. The noise from the crying child zaps the last nerve of his under-slept brain. The baby cries because she is new to this world, and beginnings are scary even in the best of times. The lamb murmurs to soothe but soon slips into bleats of her own distress. She has just given birth to a human child that irrevocably links her to its father, the wolf. The lamb whimpers her own soft tears because holding the newborn reminds her of how she was never held.

The smell of feces stuns the air in the small boxy 1970s-green Toyota. The wolf's sensitive snout takes in the rank odour. A low grumble begins then escalates. How dare the baby shit herself for the first time while he's driving, he snarls with fangs. Can't the lamb and baby see he's trying to navigate all this goddamn snow?

The lamb pulls the infant away from her chest and stares at its red face. She has no idea what to do next. The hospital stitched her up and sent her on her way with no supplies, no diapers, no training. The baby cries and the lamb joins her and the wolf's roars ricochet off the car's interior and fill the small bubble with a fear so electric the

baby will learn to never make the mistake of shitting, crying, needing ever again.

The baby has executed one of the few functions human infants can do, but a wolf doesn't know how to care for a human baby birthed by a lamb. He is overwhelmed. Perhaps he growls with rage because when he was a pup his human parents didn't know what to do with a wild animal that shredded the chesterfield and whined for raw meat.

As the wolf drives down the highway in the snowstorm, he continues to scream and slam his paws against the wheel. The stench of the baby's inaugural defecation wells, and the infant shrieks. The lamb bleats now in terror. A terrified lamb is not equipped to fight a wolf or nurse a human baby. A lamb can't put a wolf in his place nor is she capable of holding a human infant in the soothing way she needs to be held, what with the lamb's cloven hooves and stocky torso. The lamb is too scared for her own life to properly rear this newly pulsing life plopped onto her lap. Added to the snow and howls of this eternal winter is a small human that wails as much as she does.

This poor lamb didn't have much of a choice. She never learned about birth control. As an immigrant, she had no family or money, so when the wolf got her pregnant she knew she had to follow him to Calgary where he had a job lined up. He could promise her a townhouse and, maybe one day, a bungalow.

She had tried to leave him back when they were college students and first dating in Montreal. He had yelled at her over dinner and then roared at a waiter for trying to intervene, accusing both lamb and waiter of conspiring against him in French. Back then she had had the quiet wherewithal to collect her books from the dinner table and leave. But then he had called to apologize. His voice was so sheepish, a far cry from the growls, while he promised to never howl again. As he spoke in gentle

whimpers, she remembered the soft fur on his belly and how it warmed her during the cold months. Despite her fleece, she had never grown used to Canadian winter. The wolf's call reminded her how alone she was.

In the town house in Calgary, the human infant requires milk, sleep, regular cleanings, and a body's warm core to soothe her delicate newborn nervous system. The wolf and the lamb provide some of these needs, but the wolf howls incessantly and the lamb can't stop her anguished bleating.

Despite the melee, the lamb feeds and cleans the infant the best she can while attuning her ears and side eyes to the wolf constantly nipping at her heels. With his shaggy muzzle, the wolf huffs and puffs. He snarls that he is only a breath away from blowing the townhouse down. He threatens to devour the lamb and her human child whole. His hunger is insatiable, stemming from shame or injury or maybe something darker. It's hard to grasp what, amidst the cloud of fur and glassy eyes, motivates a wolf to marry a lamb and sire a human child and then scream at them all day long.

"This house is filthy!" he bellows one day after work. "I'm surrounded by filthy fucking pigs!"

Tiny flames leap off the wolf's tongue and sizzle with spit.

The lamb baws. The baby cries. And though there are no pigs in sight, the lamb and baby come to believe they must be the pigs the wolf is screaming about. The lamb whispers *oink*. The baby gurgles *oink*. The wolf screams that he works all day for this family and now he's come home to a fucking mess. His tail thumps against the kitchen floor. He sits down on a kitchen chair and paws at a freshly baked olive oil cake on the table. It's a little crumbly, overbaked.

It is understandable that the pressure for a wolf to hold down a job and pay for the mortgage on a town-

house is immense. It is challenging for a wolf to wear a suit and make business calls in a gray cubicle all day. It is difficult enough for humans to perform these acts let alone a wild animal with no opposable thumbs and a driving instinct to hunt. But since the baby's arrived, the wolf's growling has gotten worse. He cries through the night more than the child.

Maybe the wolf is jealous that the infant's survival is now supposed to take primacy over his own need for attention. The wolf is easily threatened—this will become a motif in this precarious familial triad of lamb-wolf-human baby. The wolf will howl that he feels bullied by the soft helpless infant he brought into this world. The menace of a furless, clawless child justifies his violent rage. He will carry this refrain forward as the child grows. When kicking his teenage daughter for coming home late drunk, the wolf will call his actions *self-defence*.

Maybe the issue is that there is so much fear and shame in raising a human daughter. The experience pushes the wolf to teeter on the edge of destruction daily. The lamb crumples and frays until she is a loose electrical wire whipping in the wind. She can no longer perceive the wolf's threats and instead startles at shadows. In lieu of seeing the ways the wolf bullies her and the daughter, she notices intently how the world is perfectly poised to harm a small child—Halloween candy in flimsy crinkly plastic wrapping surely contains poison, trampolines are how children break their necks, the sandbox at the park is full of razor blades. The lamb worries a scarf might strangle a child so she cuts it with dull craft scissors. Her concerns grow from sugar and red dye no. 3 to microwaves and vaccines. The lamb beholds worlds of danger and yet can no longer see the hazard that is the foundation of her own home.

Let's say this fable about a wolf and lamb who begat

a human infant started seven years before I was born. I, another human child, am forced to enter the story as a baby sister. Seven years is a long time to wait for a second act. I was a prayed for second coming—a hope the wolf, lamb and baby could all pin their hopes on. That's a lot for a zygote to carry.

Even though I got a front-row seat and was eventually woven into this ragged drama of the wolf and lamb, I remain most haunted by what transpired before I arrived on the scene.

How did my sister survive for seven years as a child alone with a wolf and a lamb in a den with the constant soundtrack of violence? I have to imagine her as an enclosed capsule with a hardened exterior, an acorn thrown to the ground, waiting to find soft earth.

In kindergarten, the first child, who you now know is my sister, is unable to sit still and chooses not to speak. The nuns at the French Catholic school call the wolf and lamb into a meeting to explain the child doesn't understand language and needs to be held back. Amidst walls dotted with kindergarten vocabulary—colours, months of the year, animals—the wolf fumes, his fiery breath almost setting chains of construction paper hearts on fire. He rants that the teachers at this school don't know how to discipline children and let them run all over the place. These kids are animals, he huffs. How are kids supposed to learn anything with the nuns' ridiculous talk of saints?

The child is expelled on the basis of her wolf-father's comments and her quiet lack of promise, so the lamb and wolf enroll her in an English public school where, still silent and restless, the child tries kindergarten once more. The kid still doesn't speak, but without a spiritual vocation to guide them, the teachers don't press the issue.

But the child does possess language—in fact she can speak both English and French. While being

pushed in the pram, she points at animals, landscape, and plants—l'arbre, la montagne, l'écureuil. The child rolls her rs like she's a hissing cat.

The reason the child doesn't speak at school or at home is that there's no room for her voice amidst the screaming vortex the lamb and wolf suck each other into. Cowering in a closet under musty dresses, she presses the record-button on a clunky tape player, but the scratch of her tiny murmurs on cassette tape can't be heard over the shouting in the background. It's been five years since she was born, and the wolf circles the lamb with howls almost every day. And everything the child does is bad. If she speaks, it's bad. If she's silent, it's bad. If she runs around the room or knocks something or gets scared when entering a darkened room or wants the kinds of snacks other kids have, the wolf screams that she's bad and the lamb weeps.

The question endures: how does a human child survive a wolf and a lamb hell-bent on destroying each other? The answer is she survives until she doesn't.

Silent, restless, and curly-haired like the lamb, the human child murmurs to herself as she hopscotches on the sidewalk of the townhouses' courtyard. The growling in her own home makes her feet want to jitterbug or tap dance, so she picks up a hula hoop leftover from a neighbour and begins to circle her hips. She discovers she's good at it and can keep circling the hoop around her hips forever. She can hear their voices even from outside on this summer day, but the whizzing of the hoop distracts her. She hula hoops until the sun falls from its high perch in the tall prairie sky. When she goes back inside, the wolf is still storming up and down stairs and the lamb is somewhere hiding. The child goes to her room, lays down the hula hoop and curls up inside the safety of its ring.

She has learned that in her heart she's bad because everything she does—every word she squeaks, every

spill, sneeze, earache, nightmare, giggle—activates the wolf's implosions and causes the lamb to erupt into high-pitched bleats. She doesn't know how to ask the God that the nuns at her old school taught her about or neighbours in townhouse's courtyard for help, but when she plays with off-brand Cabbage Patch dolls by herself, she wishes for a companion.

In the late autumn of her second round of kindergarten, she learns the wolf and lamb will have another human child. There have been attempts before. Throughout the years of the wolf's bellowing, the lamb miscarried, making her bleats sharper and her wails deeper. The human child is so excited she pees a little bit when she finds out. The urine absorbs into teal corduroy pants that she'll one day pass down to her little sister.

At night, she sorts through her toys and sets aside stuffed animals, colourful blocks, a Fisher Price telephone. She will shower this new human with gifts to play with and love to grip onto amidst the chaos. She has a cardboard suitcase decorated with plastic stars in which she tucks socks and t-shirts she has outgrown to save for the incoming human who will join her in this hard and terrifying den. She wants to make it as soft as possible for the new baby to land. She needs the new baby to know there's someone waiting to care for her on the other side. She doesn't want the new one to arrive alone like she did.

It is mid-summer and the days are long. Each evening after dusk, the city erupts with fireworks and parties. Businessmen in white Stetson hats and tall boots stomp in and out of bars and flood the casino. Country music plays on every radio station all hours of the day and even corner stores prop up their wares of soda and candy bars with bales of hay. It's Christmas for cartoon cowboys.

The fanfare is for the Stampede festival, but the

lamb likes to believe it's really for the new human who had to be scooped out of her with spoons in the high-noon heat. That night as Roman candles and Catherine wheels spark and flare the sky, the lamb prays to a new saint she's just birthed.

The child whose birth has been anointed by the auspicious Stampede spectacle arrives home from the hospital in the arms of the lamb. This time around the wolf is less startled by the infant's wanting and shitting. Although he still bellows and thumps his tail with force, he seems at least a little more primed for the infant's wailing needs. Meanwhile, the lamb's panic has sunken to deep melancholy. She drapes the baby across her woolly body while she lies down on her bed for hours without will. In addition to shrieking, she weeps soft rain to accompany the wolf's thunder. The townhome's vortex of violence and fear now admits moroseness to its swirl.

The human child who came first begs the wolf and lamb to let her hold the wriggly infant. They refuse to let her touch the baby because they say the older child's dirty and full of germs. They're afraid she'll get the baby sick with her filthy touch and slobbery kisses. She is stricken by their refusal to let her care for the thing she has prayed for and sworn to protect. She uses her once-quiet voice to cry and bargain with the wolf and lamb even though she knows the cost of her pleading could be an earthquake. Even so, she fills her lungs and lets her longing roar. She never dares ask for anything, but she is drawn to this tiny human who is so small and, though only an infant, has been tasked with solving the disaster of the unholy triad of a family that the wolf, lamb and child have cobbled together.

Still the sister begs and the lamb relinquishes, instructing the older child that she may plant a small kiss on the baby's forehead. The lamb bows to tip the infant closer to the older daughter.

As she peers at the baby's scrunched pink face with two big bright brown marbles for eyes, she vows she will protect this infant no matter the cost. She will love this infant, give up her favourite toys, wrap her in the softest blanket she can find. She will put her body on the line to protect the tiny human from the violence the wolf stirs up and inflicts. She will care for the baby in all the ways the lamb fails to—she will feed her, notice her every flinch.

Now that she's a big sister, she decides she will coax her own voice out of hiding from the depths of her tightened throat and fight back on behalf of this powerless baby. She finally has something to live for and she will scream to defend it. She seals her oath with a kiss on the infant's head that is fuzzed over with wisps of black hair. The kiss, because of its intention and care, becomes a spell of protection that cradles the child. Since this kiss is something the child truly needs, it conjures a thin, invisible forcefield that wraps around the child to shield her from the wolf's violence and the lamb's sadness—it can't block out everything, but that tiny bit of safety matters. It's more than she ever got. The older sister grants this fresh-as-dough baby the love and protection she never had.

For all the imaginings, whimsy and metaphors I have conjured to write about the early years of me and my sister, I need you to understand that I'm not exaggerating. I know I wasn't present for those first seven years my sister lived through that I'm now telling you about, but I was afterwards, and my birth did little to disrupt the violence. Besides, I have heard this origin story through its vibrations in the nervous systems of the wolf, lamb and human child I know so intimately. These details I'm sharing with you are etched imprints on the hides of these creatures and I have stroked their fur and soothed their skin. I have spent my life studying their gestures and smelled the stale fear in their sweat. I have a pretty decent picture

of what happened, although it makes more sense outside of language—it comes through in the low hum I always hear in a silent room or the terror that visits me nightly and keeps me from surrendering to sleep.

In all likelihood, I'm probably underselling whatever happened after my sister's birth and before my own because I don't have any way to truly access and represent it. I can barely hold the shards of memory I do possess long enough in my mind to fully remember, before my brain goes off line and ejects itself up into the sky. I remember everything and nothing all at once. I need the imaginings to tell the story or else I'll remain a child who crawled into a closet or wet the bed until middle school. In my mind's eye, I can't ever see the faces of my mother, father and sister in those early years, even the ones when I was alive enough to form memory. All I have is the muffled eerie dread that opens a horror movie and this paltry attempt at a fable.

What I do know is that my survival was reliant on my sister's very presence. Her ability to love and care for me—even as an imperfect, teasing jitterbug of a child—to offer shelter in the form of a safe and loving nervous system attentive to my needs when I was in my most vulnerable and helpless state of human, mitigated the harm of the violent domestic abuse that permeated every moment of every day in the hell my parents created. My ability to survive the violence we were born into comes not from my own innate resilience but from the care my older sister afforded me. I am able to live because she loved me. Due to birth order, I could not offer her the same level of intimate support. A deep well of survivor's guilt haunts every corner of my life because I am alive while my sister isn't. I am not the stronger one because I lived and she didn't. I am alive because she was there for me when I arrived on this shaky earth, but no one was there for her when she most needed it.

My therapist suggests that in healing the trauma that roves through my body, I am perhaps also healing my sister though she is now dead. It's not something I fully comprehend or believe, but I know her trauma and mine were so intertwined, much like our bodies, and even with her gone, I can feel the ghost-pain of our conjoined suffering. Does that mean that the flashes of relief that come from my healing extend to my ghost sister? When I am to be held by my partner in a way that soothes rather than jolts me, does she feel it? When I emerge from a depressive state and re-discover food has flavour through the tang of tomato sauce, does she taste it too?

She is sewn into my nervous system as I was sewn into hers. Do the molecules that once belonged to her body—and that have eroded and been transformed into new materials and form—feel the release of my shoulders, the loosening of my hips as my therapist gently places her hand on my adrenal gland? When I can grasp the hazy edges of a world not entirely ruled by fear, could I be imparting that hope onto my sister, dead or alive, past or present? As the vehicle of my nervous system heals, it will forever be firing messages to my sister, whispering of safety she never received, impossibly beckoning her to join me.

The home I'm building within my shaken bones houses humans, lambs, and wolves I have both lived with and also never known. It's busy under my pelt. My cells, like me, are still learning what to let in and keep out. In the quietest rooms, I will always hear wolves howling and lambs bleating—there's no shutting their uproar out. In order to live, I need to remember the curse of a child who had to care for a child, how my sister magicked into being a gift that no one had ever offered her. I am learning in offering myself that care. I am maybe bending the rules of time and logic and linear narrative to offer her that very care, too.