

The Wolf Wife

by Marianne Villanueva

One cold February night, his wife began to howl.

The becoming was a long process. His wife had been a small woman, barely a hundred pounds. The wolf she became was massive, almost double her human weight. She had thickly furred ears and a long, dense, whitish coat.

A long time ago, he'd seen a movie about a boy who turned into a wolf: the boy-animal became furtive, but fierce. In his wife's eyes, now, was that same furtive intensity.

"Is this about the baby?" Gabe asked her.

At night, he dreamt of grasslands and forests.

He did research on wolves and ended up stumbling on a website about runaways. *1 out of 7 kids in the United States will run away at some point during teen years.* On another site, he read about wildfires near the redwood forests, and dead wolves. He read that even further north, near the Canadian border, wolves were so plentiful that for one month each year, people were allowed to hunt them from helicopters. Less determined hunters poisoned them with strychnine, or trapped them in snares.

His Wolf Wife gazed at him with imploring eyes.

"I don't know what to feed you," Gabe said. "Please don't make a mess of the living room."

But she did make a mess, so he had to keep her locked up in the basement. After a week, the smell from the basement became horrendous.

If this could happen to me, it could happen to anybody in America, Gabe thought. He didn't expect to find the tumor, but it was there, hiding beneath her dense, grey coat.

He pushed her exercise ball into the room, then lifted her paws so they rested on the ball. "Yay! Gabe said. "Your favorite ball."

One day, he asked Joe, the neighbor across the street, who always wore a patch over his right eye and looked like a pirate, if he knew anything about wolves.

"I am a tow-truck driver," Joe said, giving Gabe a strange look.

"You're a tow-truck driver and you know *nothing* about wolves?" Gabe was incredulous.

"Nothing," Joe said. "Why would I lie?"

Then Gabe went to the woman who lived by herself in the house next door. This woman wore very thick glasses and squinted at Joe unwelcomingly. She came to the door with her hair in curlers and smelling of patchouli.

"What do you know about wolves?" he asked her.

"Nothing," she said. "Why?"

Gabe thought, *All these years and I have never seen this woman out on a date. Not once.*

When he didn't answer right away, she said, "Your lawn needs mowing," and slammed the door.

He did want to make his wolf comfortable, so he gave her blankets, which she worried into shreds. He remembered his wife liked looking at herself in the mirror, so he moved the full-length mirror from their bedroom to the basement.

After two weeks, the Wolf Wife began to howl without cease. The only time she was not howling was during the early mornings, or when Gabe stroked her back. Then Gabe finally managed to get a few hours of sleep.

One morning, early, Joe knocked on Gabe's door. When Gabe opened it, Joe said, "I just remembered something I read when I was a little boy. Wolves are very ancient. They were alive 10,000 years ago."

"You don't say!" Gabe said. He was flabbergasted.

"Indeed!" Joe said. "By the way, where is your wife now?"

"She's not my wife anymore, she's a wolf."

"What happened?" Joe said.

"She always lived life her own way. By the way, do you know the secret of happiness?"

"No, but I know it's not good for your mental health to live alone."

The two men stared at each other's feet for a few moments.

"They shoot them, sometimes," Joe said. "It's called 'culling the herd.'"

"Oh. I thought maybe just divorce."

"I am not saying that," Joe said. "But you need a lot of money to keep a Wolf Wife fed and happy."

"She is happy," Gabe insisted, "in the basement. I protect her from all harm, both animal and human. It's just that now I feel a little detached."

"I have heard of another Wolf Wife. She's in Montana somewhere."

"What is she doing there?"

"She is not there anymore, but people tell me she used to be."

Gabe pondered this.

Every day, Gabe went down to the basement and unburdened himself to his Wolf Wife. "At least in the basement, you have no black bears or cougars. You are safe."

One night, Gabe began trembling. He wanted to put something out there, but he didn't know if the wolf would be angry.

"Oh, Wolf Wife," he finally began. "Oh, Wolf Wife, you are so desperate and so beautiful. I am not worthy of you, my Wolf Wife. First of all, it would be best if I lived near a forest, but I do not. It would be best if you have lots of caribou meat to keep you alive, but I don't even know where to procure caribou meat. Oh Wolf Wife, I feel so sorry for you. Not to be able to run and run and run."

The Wolf Wife did not respond. The silence lasted two days.

On the morning of the third day, Gabe knocked on the door.

She still did not respond.

He pushed the door open. He didn't see her at first, and for a moment he was happy. Then he noticed a shape curled in a corner. Carefully, trying to avoid stepping in puddles, he crawled towards it.

Her eyes were half-open. Her chest heaved with dry, raspy pants.

Her coat had lost its sheen. Her fur had fallen out in patches. He could count her ribs. This further difficulty unmoored him. He quickly left the room, taking care to shut the door as quietly as he could. That night, he dreamed that life was beauty.

The next morning, he remembered the wolf. Life, he told himself, is duty. He forced himself to descend the basement steps. He pushed open the door. The wolf was lying on her side, barely breathing.

"Please accept my apologies," he said. "But I am in a difficult position. I never knew it would be so much trouble to keep a Wolf Wife."