

WHAT WOLVES KNOW

by Kit Reed

Kit Reed's most recent novel, *The Baby Merchant*, is now available in trade paperback from Tor. *Thinner Than Thou* (Tor, 2005) won the A.L.A. Alex award, and two of her books—*Little Sisters of the Apocalypse* and *Weird Women, Wired Women*—were finalists for the Tiptree prize. Her next project is a young-adult novel, *The Night Children*, that is forthcoming from Tor. In her latest story for us, Kit takes a look at what happens when a young man, whose wolf family may have been less feral than his original human kin, finally decides to make use of...

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When you have been raised by wolves people expect better of you, but you have no idea what they mean by *better*.

Happy comes out of the crate panting and terrified.

When you have been raised by wolves, you expect better of people.

Injured in the struggle before the dart bit him and his world went away, Happy blinks into the white glare.

A dark shape moves into the blinding light. Sound explodes, a not-quite bark. "Welcome home!"

This is nothing like home. Then why is the smell of this place so familiar? Troubled, Happy backs away, sucking his torn paw.

He hears a not-quite purr. "Is that him?"

"Back off, Susan, you're scaring him. Handsome bastard, under all the filth." The dark shape gets bigger. "Hold still so we can look at you."

Happy scrambles backward.

"Wait, dammit. What's the matter with your hand?"

The not-quite bark-er is not quite a wolf. Pink, he is, and naked, except for fur on top, with all his pink parts wrapped like a package in tan cloth. A ... Hunter is the first thought that comes. Happy has never been this close to one, not that he chooses to remember. He looks down. His body is

choking. There is cloth on Happy too! It won't come off no matter how hard he shakes. He tears at it with his teeth.

The not-wolf yaps, "Stop that! We want you looking good for the press conference."

Happy does not know what this means. With his back hairs rising, he gives the wolf's first warning. He *grrrs* at the man. Man. That's one of Happy's words. And the other? Woman. The rest, he will not parse. The man grabs for him even though Happy rolls back his lips to show his fangs. The wolf's second warning. Now, wolves, wolves know when close is too close, and they keep their distance. With wolves, you always know where you are.

Wolves don't stare like that unless they are about to spring and rip your throat out, but unlike the wolf, man has no code. If Happy bolts, will this one bring him down and close those big square teeth in him?

"Hold still! What happened to your hand?"

Happy does as taught; he snarls. The wolf's last warning.

"Now, stop. I didn't bring you all this way to hurt you."

"Brent, he's hurt." The other voice is not at all like barking. "Oh, you poor thing, you're bleeding."

The man growls, "Come here. We can't let the people see blood."

Happy bunches his shoulders and drops to a crouch, but the man keeps on coming. Happy backs and backs. Oh, that thing he does with his face, too many teeth showing. Just stop! The more Happy scrambles away the more the man crowds him. At his back the walls meet like the jaws of a trap. He tips back his head and howls. "*Ah-whooooooo ...*"

"Quiet! What will people think?"

"*Ah-whooooooo.*" Happy stops breathing. He is listening. Not one wolf responds. There is an unending din in this bright place but there are no wolves anywhere. Even though he was running away when the humans caught him, Happy's heart shudders. He is separated from his pack.

"Shut up. Shut up and I'll get you a present."

There are words Happy knows and words he doesn't know, but he remembers only one of them well enough to speak. "Oh," he barks bravely, even though he is cornered. "Oh, oh!"

"That's better. Now, hold still." When a human shows its teeth at you it means something completely different from what you are taught to watch out for, but you had better watch out for it.

The woman purrs, "Brent, you're scaring him!"

Woman. Another of Happy's words. The sound she makes is nothing like a howl, but he thinks they are kindred.

"Are you going to help me or what?" The man lunges. Should Happy attack? Other words rush in. Clothes. Arms. Clothes cover the man's stiff arms and he is waving them madly. How can Happy tear out the throat with all that in the way? Can he bring the man down before he pulls out his...

Another of Happy's words comes back. Gun. It makes him shudder.

"Brent, he's shaking."

"I'm only trying to help him!"

"Oh, you poor thing." Sweet, that voice. She sounds like his ... Another word he used to know. *Mother*. Parts of Happy change in ways he does not understand. She says, "Look at him, Brent, he's shaking!"

"Oh," Happy barks hysterically. "Oh, oh!"

"Come on, now. Calm down or I'll give you another shot."

The man makes a grab for him. In another minute those hands will close in his fur. Grief touches Happy like a feather, for like the man with his grasping fingers and not-quite barking, Happy is more pink than fur. It is confusing.

"Don't be afraid," the woman says. "Come on, sweetie, come to Mother."

Happy will not know exactly who he means when he thinks, *This is nothing like Mother*. It does not explain, but measures the extent of his confusion. In this and every other circumstance, Happy's position is ambiguous.

This is not one of Happy's words: ambiguous. He has been pulled out of a place he can't explain into a world he doesn't understand and it makes him sick with grief.

He doesn't belong anywhere.

"Oh," Happy yelps. Then more words come. "Oh, don't!" Although he has outlived his mother Sonia and half his litter-mates, in wolf years, in human time, Happy is still a puppy.

He does what any puppy does when cornered and outnumbered. He rolls over and shows his throat.

"For God's sake, kid, get up. What will people think? Get him up, Susan, they're staring."

Others come. Men. Women. People with—how does he know this—cameras! People are pointing their cameras. Kept out by the rope that protects the live baggage claim area, strangers jostle, straining to see.

There are words Happy knows and words he does not choose to understand. She growls, "You should have thought about that before you snatched him."

"Not snatched," the man says firmly. He says in a loud voice because they are not alone here, "*Rescued*. This is not what you think," he shouts to the onlookers. "This is my long-lost brother, I went through hell to save him."

"Stuff it, Brent. They don't care who he is or what you did."

"I rescued him from a wolf pack in the wild!"

She says, "They aren't interested, they're embarrassed."

He shouts, "They stole him from our family!" He is trying to get Happy on his feet but Happy flops every which way, like any puppy. Brent tells the crowd, "When they found him, the police called me."

Happy gnashes at his hand.

"Ow!" Brent shouts over Happy's head, "Olmstead. My name is on the dogtag!"

Dogtag. It is confusing. Is he less wolf than dog?

“Hush, Brent,” the woman says. “Let me do this.”

Flat on his back with his paws raised, Happy lifts his head.

Unlike the pink man, the woman is gentle and she smells good. Hair. Not fur. Nice hair. Clothes like flowers.

“Sweetie, are you all right?”

Oh, that soft purr. Happy wriggles, hoping to be stroked, but there will be no stroking. What was that word he used to have?

Ma’am. It doesn’t come out of his throat the way it’s supposed to. At least this part comes back: if you can’t speak when they make a question, you nod. Happy nods. She shows all her teeth (“See, Brent?”) and he shows all his teeth right back to her in ... Oh! This is a smile. You do it because they expect it. You always did. From nowhere Happy can name, there comes a string of words: *Songs my mother taught me.* Now, why does this make his heart break? He doesn’t know what it means and he doesn’t want to know where it’s coming from. *Songs my mother ...*

She touches his hair. Parts of Happy go soft and—oh! Another gets hard. Smile for her, she is soft in interesting places. At eighteen Happy feels like a puppy, but he isn’t, not really.

Then she prods him with her toe. Her voice drops so he will know she is serious. “Okay then, get up.”

Slowly Happy rolls over and rises on his hind legs, although he is not all that accustomed. Susan shows her teeth at him, but in a nice way, and her voice lightens. “That’s better. Let’s get him in the car.”

* * * *

With wolves, you are always certain. Your wolf mother loves you. Get out of line and she will swat you. Grey Sonia did it as needed. Get too far out of line and your father will kill you. Happy bears the marks of Timbo’s fangs in his tender hide—this torn ear, that spot on his flank where the gash is healing.

If you are male and live long enough, you will have to kill your father. It is the way of the pack.

The wolves aren't Happy's real parents. In a way this is news to him, but from the beginning he had suspicions. Happy's captor—er, rescuer—doesn't know what Happy knows, and what the boy knows is buried so deep in early childhood that it is only now coming to the surface. All his life Happy has run after the hope that the next thing will be better.

He only left the woods after Timbo tried to kill him.

He thought his real family would be kinder, although for reasons he only partially understands, he had forgotten them.

In fact, he was the last child in a big family. Happy made one too many, and the mother put him in clean clothes when they went out but at home he was forgotten, sitting for hours in his own messes. She yelled at him for being in the way. One did things that hurt, but he will not remember which person. When he cried nobody cared. They didn't much notice. He wasn't supposed to hear his mother snap, "And this one's my mistake."

Words are like weapons, no wonder he forgot.

The night the wolves took him, Happy was alone in his little stroller in a mall parking lot, hours after the family car pulled out with everyone else inside. He was so thoroughly combed and scrubbed that it may have been accident, not neglect, that found him there in the dark, crying. A central fact about Happy is that he doesn't know.

He cried and cried. Then the wolves swarmed down on Happy in his stroller and the bawling toddler lifted his arms to them. The big males paced, slavering. The child didn't read their watchful eyes but Sonia knew. She turned on them, bunched and snarling. They backed away. Then she nosed Happy. He looked into her yellow eyes and clamped his arms around her magnificent neck. He buried his face deep in her thick white ruff. Timbo picked Happy out of the stroller and dropped him at Sonia's feet. The pack took the message and backed off. He has been running with them ever since.

The first thing Sonia did was rip off his little outfit with her teeth and lick him raw so he would smell of her and not the other pack, the one he quickly forgot. The only thing left of them was the scrap of metal dangling from his neck. Timbo wanted that off too. Even though he was the leader, Sonia rolled back her lips and snarled. It stayed. Happy ran with the wolves

but the cold square tap-tapped on naked flesh, a sign that he was different. Sonia fed her new pup off her sagging belly and licked his tears away. Then she dragged him through dirt and rotting dead things until he was fit to run with the other cubs and from that night on she was his mother. The rule of the pack is: never get between a cub and its mother. He knew he was loved.

Timbo did not love Happy, but he protected him.

In time the pack forgot that he was not one of them. Howling to stay in touch, they ran at night, *ah-whooo*, ranging wide, *ah-whoooooo*, and with the knife he found on a dead man, Happy was as good a hunter as any. Even Timbo came to respect him. This, he thought, was all there was to life. The howling and the hunting, Happy and his litter-mates running free in the night.

When you are raised by wolves but are not one of them, time is never what you think. You do not age at the same rate.

Happy he was, yet living with the wolves, nursing injuries when his litter-mates grew up and the challenges began, Happy thought: *This can't be my real family. Some day my father the duke and my mother the movie star will come for me.* Where did these words come from? Who were his people, really?

The litters he ran with grew up much, much faster than Happy.

It was a mystery. The other cubs grew tall and rangy while he was still an awkward pup. They flirted and rutted, things Happy thought he understood and longed for vaguely but was not built to do. He was shaped all wrong, too young in ways Sonia would not explain to him; she was, after all, a mother and there are things mothers keep from you until it's time. His litter-mates frolicked and did things Happy was not yet old enough to do. When he tried to play they snapped: *don't bother me*. In time, he played with their cubs. Their cubs grew up. Sonia got old. Then Sonia died, and with Sonia gone, craggy Timbo began stalking him, licking his chops.

Now Happy was old enough to do all those things he had been too young to do before, and Timbo?

Timbo had to die. Happy had reached the age of kill or be killed. Wolves know that when you are grown, you have to kill your father. Kill him before he kills you.

He thought he could take Timbo in a fight and so he scent-marked a tree, making clear his intentions. The wolf's challenge!

He bunched himself as Timbo circled, snarling. Imagine his surprise. The gouge in his flank goes all the way from *here* down to *here*. Now, a wolf can lick all the hurt places, but Happy wasn't built to reach the places wolves can reach without trying. Pain drove him sobbing out of the woods.

When you have been raised by wolves, you know what to expect.

Foolish to expect better of people.

Nursing the fresh gash in his flank, he watched the building, men walking back in front of lighted windows. He heard a sound like a forgotten lullaby: human voices. He limped out of the woods, whimpering, "Oh, oh, oh." Then, when he least expected it, a word came to him. He pointed his nose at the sky. "Oh, help!"

He expected helping hands, kind words, but big men clattered out shouting, "Stop where you are!" They were nothing like he expected. Happy froze.

Somebody yelled, "What *is* that?"

Somebody else yelled, "Some kind of *animal*."

They were so angry! *This is nothing like I thought.*

Happy did what wolves do when they are in trouble. He howled. *Ah-whoooo*. One by one his brothers responded, but the howls were scattered, the howlers far away. Wolves know never to come out of the woods, no matter who is calling. *Ah-whoooooooooo!*

The men pulled shields over their faces and raised their guns. Guns: a word Happy didn't quite know. In the struggle, the chain around his neck parted and the only scrap of his old life fell into their hands. Why did he imagine it made him special?

He limped back into the woods. The other wolves—his brothers!—smelled men on him. He was ruined for life in the woods and there was as well ... what? The curiosity. When the men fell on Happy, he felt his flesh smacking into human flesh and there was no difference

between them. Even clothed, his attackers were more like Happy than Happy was like the wolves. Like the missing limb that hurts at night, he felt the ghost family. Wolves run in packs or they prowl alone; they kill and are killed and that's the end of it. Men have families.

Night after night Happy doubled back on the clearing. He was drawn by half-remembered smells—hot food, the scent of bulky, not-wolf bodies—and sounds: music and forks clattering, the buddabuddabudda of low, not-wolf voices. Circling, Happy yearned for something he missed terribly. As for what ... he was not certain.

Alone, Happy howled to the heavens. He wanted to bring out Timbo, even though he knew Timbo would kill him. *Ah-whooooo*. If they fought to the death, one way or the other it would end his confusion. Happy's howling filled the woods but not one wolf howled in reply. *Ah-whooooooo!*

The loneliness was intense.

This is why Happy did what wolves never do. For the second time, he left the woods. For a long time, he circled the police station. Then he dropped to his haunches on the front walk and howled to heaven. He howled for all he was worth. Unless he was howling for everything he was losing.

Now look.

* * * *

The needle Brent used to get him out of the airport left Happy inert, but aware. They are riding along, he and Brent and this Susan, he can smell her. The car is much smaller than the van that took him to the hospital after the fight at the police station. They sewed him up and Brent came. Happy did not know him, but he knew him. He rolled off the bed and fell into a crouch, ready to lunge. Guards came. He struggled but the doctors gave him to Brent anyway. They said he was next of kin. Family.

...Brent?

It was on the dogtag. That's Brent's word for it. But why was Brent's name on the dogtag? *Am I his pet?* Happy wonders. *Do I belong to him?* He is no dog. He runs with wolves.

He does not like Brent. Keep your eyes shut, Happy. Keep them closed and he won't know you're in here.

He is riding along between them. The nice soft woman is soft, but not as nice as he thought. She says over Happy's head, "Why in hell didn't you hose him down before we got in the car?"

"It's not my fault he stinks."

"You could have put him in the trunk!"

Smelly breath mists Happy's face as Brent peers at him, but he keeps his eyes clenched. "Lie down with wolves and you smell like one. You hear?"

"Save your breath, he's out cold." The woman riding along next to him, what does this Brent call her? Susan. Susan gives Happy a little shake; his head rolls back and settles on her arm. "If you want him smiling on TV, you'd better revive him."

"Not now, Suze. *Live at Five* next Thursday."

"Like they aren't already waiting at Chateau Marmont?"

"No way! We can't go public until Dad makes the deal." *Dad*. The word Happy refused to remember. His teeth clash and his hackles rise. It is hard to keep from growling.

"You should have thought of that at the airport. Mr. Show biz." She goes on in Brent's voice, "' I rescued him.' Like you didn't see the phones and camcorders. Screen shots. Everybody knows!"

"Well, tough. Nobody sees him until the press conference. Dad is talking eight figures."

Happy's insides shift. He is confused. Wolves don't think in figures.

Brent barks, "Driver, get off at National."

"What are you *thinking*?"

"Gonna hide him!"

"Not in this town," Susan says. Distracted, she's let parts of herself flow into Happy. She thinks he is asleep. Parts of him flow back and she lets him.

“Outskirts. Inland empire. The valley.”

She says, “Too close.” Happy leans a little closer; she shrugs him off, but he slips back and she lets him. It is hard for him to keep from smiling. They ride along like this for a while. At last she says thoughtfully, “Your mom stayed back in Caverness, right?”

“She did,” Brent says and then he just stops talking.

The car rounds a corner and Happy leans into the body next to his, but only a little bit. He can feel her voice vibrating in his bones. “Then take him to your mom’s.”

Warm, she is so warm.

“No way. She hasn’t forgiven me for losing him.”

Something changes in the car. “You lost him?”

Happy’s ears prick.

The woman has asked a question that Brent won’t answer. He says instead, “Come on, Susan. What are we going to do?”

“You lost your very own brother?”

“Not really. Well, sort of.”

Happy is trying to make his mouth into the right shape to frame the big question. Even if he could, he knows not to bring it out. It is disturbing.

“Brent, what were you *thinking*?”

The fat man whines, “Mom *said* he was a mistake. I thought she would thank me, but she freaked.”

Mom. Another word Happy can’t parse. Oh. Same as mother. That word. Soft, he remembers. Other things. He will not remember other things.

“She never forgave Dad either.”

“So he lives in L.A. Got that.” Susan adds dryly, “Too bad you can’t divorce your kids.”

“Could we not talk about this please?”

She stiffens—*is it something I did?* “Back there.” Her voice goes up a notch. “Look. Tell me that’s not a mobile unit.”

“Holy crap, it’s TV Eight. Driver, take Laurel Canyon.”

The car goes around many curves and up, up, higher than Happy remembers being, and whenever they round a curve too fast he bumps against Susan’s soft parts like a sleeper with no control over what he is doing, but in all the uphill and downhill and veering around corners he never, ever bumps Brent, not even accidentally.

He is aware of a hand waving in front of his closed eyes. A pinch. He wants to play dead but he can’t stop himself from flinching. The needle bites. The world goes away again. He can’t be sure about the days or the nights, which they are or how many.

Happy sleeps and he wakes up, then he sleeps again and in the hours they drive he can never be certain which is which, or whether the woman is touching him by accident or because she intends it.

At last the car crunches uphill and stops for the last time. Happy’s head comes up. The smells when Brent hustles him out of the car and hauls him to his feet on the hard, hard street are terrible and familiar. They are climbing steps to a wooden ... porch. Happy knows almost all the words now. Brent slaps the door and a remote bell rings. Footsteps come.

Terrified, he begins to struggle.

“Brent, he’s waking up!”

“Not for long.”

Happy yips as the needle goes into his butt. What they do and say when the door opens is forever lost to him.

When he wakes everything is as it was and nothing is the same. Will his life always be like this? Happy is curled up in his room. He knows it is his room because it used to be his room in the old life, and he knows from the sights and smells that nothing has changed here. It feels good and bad, lying in the old place. From here he can see the pretend bearskin rug in the center of the room with its plastic fangs and empty glass eyes, and lodged

in the corner, the faded pink volleyball that he remembers from his very first time on the floor in this room and his very last day here.

When wolves quit the lair they stalk away leaving it untouched because they are done with it forever; they do not expect to come this way again. Is this what not-wolf mothers do?

Not-wolf mothers leave the lost son's room exactly as it was in hopes he will come back, but there is no way Happy can know this. He has no idea who he is or why he feels both good and bad about being back here, although he is a little frightened. He doesn't know why all this makes him miss Sonia so terribly or why, on that night so long ago, his hateful big brother slammed the door to the family car and let them drive away without him.

Brother. That's what Brent is.

Oh.

Happy would throw back his head and howl for Sonia but his hideout is constricted, the woods are lost to him and Sonia is dead now. He could howl for this other mother but before, when he was small and crying out lonely, she was a long time coming and when she did.... There are things you don't remember and things you don't want to know.

Can you want to belong in two places at once and know you don't belong in either?

At least Happy is safe. When he came to, instinct sent him off the bed where they'd dumped him and under here, where they won't see him before he sees them. Holed up, he counts the cobwebs hanging from rusting springs. He wants to weep for the blue dogs and pink teddies cavorting on the plastic mattress cover. He is under his old crib.

When you can't go back to being what you used to be, you go back to what you were in the beginning. You were safe because she loved you, and Happy does not know whether he means the old mother, or Sonia.

The sounds in the house are so different from the crackle and whisper of the woods that it takes time to name them. The hum of the refrigerator, the washing machine grinding because—Happy looks down—they have changed his hospital rags for grey stuff like the clothes—clothes!—he used to wear when he was a ... The bark of the furnace kicking in. A telephone ringing, ringing ringing and soft voices:

women talking, a strange man's voice downstairs in the hall. Brent is arguing with the other.

The smells in this house at this moment in his life are enough to break Happy's heart. He can smell mold in the foundations, laundry products; dust, in this room in particular; there is the residue of memory and oh, God ... —*God?*—there is the smell of something cooking. Whatever else is going on in this place he used to know so well and had forgotten completely, *Mom* is baking brownies. Everything waters. Happy's mouth, his nose, his eyes.

* * * *

It's getting dark, but nobody comes. Cramped as he is, stuck under the crib for too long when he is used to running free in the woods, Happy is restless and twitching. He thought by this time Brent would be in here raging; they could have fought. He could have killed the brother. Unless Brent jabbed another dart into Happy and dragged him out from under here. Instead the shouting stayed downstairs, sliding into the low, grating whine of a long argument. Then doors slammed and the cars roared away. Now there is no more talking. The machines have stopped. There is almost-silence in the house, except for the stir of a body he knows, approaching. What does he remember from the last time he heard her footsteps? Nothing he chooses to remember. Trembling, he pulls himself out from under the crib just long enough to run his hand along the bedroom door. He finds the lock. He loves the click.

There is a long silence in the hall outside his room. Then there is the soft footfall as she goes away.

* * * *

Alone in the tight space he has created, Happy considers. Wolves are taught to lay back in this situation, and he is more wolf than anything else. He's been out cold for a long time, and there are problems. Wolves wake up ravenous. Happy hasn't fed since he came to in the crate and emptied his dish. Another thing: a wolf never fouls the den where he is sleeping. When the old house has been still for a long time he eases out from under the crib, unlocks the door and leaves the room.

Where Happy loped along on all fours when he ran with the pack, race memory kicks in, now that he is here. This place he hoped to forget was not built for wolves. He stands and prowls the house on bare feet. She has left food: some kind of meat on the kitchen table, brownies. He empties the

plate, pulling strings of plastic wrap out of the half-chewed chocolate squares before he swallows them. Now, the other thing? As Sonia's cub he never fouled the lair. There is a bathroom just off the kitchen. Happy cringes. What was he supposed to do back then, when he was small and trapped in here? Who used to hit him and hit him for forgetting?

He touches the nail where the belt used to hang and the ghost family rises up like the missing limb miraculously restored. Growling, he quits the house.

Can you ever walk out of your old skin and back into the woods where you were so happy, running with the wolves? There are no woods outside this house, just streets and cement sidewalks and metal fences around house after house after identical house; there are few trees and no hillside which means no caves, no undergrowth and no place to dig, where he can pull in brush to cover himself; it is worrisome and sad. The urban sky is like a cup with Happy trapped under it. He relieves himself and goes back inside. The old room is safe, now that he knows he can lock it.

* * * *

His days don't change.

At night he goes out to eat what she leaves and to relieve himself. One night it was a meat pie, another, a whole ham.

People come. Sometimes they call outside his room, but Happy will not answer. The wolf doesn't howl unless there is another like him out there, howling or yipping the reply. Brent comes, but not Susan. In the long periods he spends curled under the crib, Happy thinks about this. Her body, expanding with every breath as they rode along in the car. The way it felt, and how he misses it.

If he can't do what wolves do, he understands, he wants to do what he *can* do with Brent's woman. How the parts go together remains a mystery; he only knows what he needs. Brent comes with a doctor, a talking-doctor, he says through the locked door. The doctor talks for a long time, but wolves have no need for words. The doctor goes away. Brent comes with a man who promises money. When you have nothing, you need nothing. Brent comes with another man, who makes threats. Wolves will not be threatened. When you are threatened, you go to ground and stay there. They go away. Brent comes back. He shouts through the locked door. "Just tell us what you want and I'll bring it! Anything, I promise, if you'll just come out so we can get started."

There is one thing, but Happy will not say it.

The brother hits a whine that Happy remembers from the time he refuses to remember. Oh. *That* Brent. This one. Same as he ever was, just older.

Brent snarls, “Dammit to hell, are you in there?”

No words needed here, either. None spoken.

Brent comes back with a woman. The scent brings Happy’s head up. It is a woman. “He’s in there? Why is he in there when he knows I’m out here?” She goes on in a loud, harsh voice. “*Do you know who I am?*”

It’s the wrong woman.

“Listen, baby brother. This is your new agent standing out here in the cold. If you know what’s good for you, come out and say hello to Marla Parterre. She can make or break you.”

Time passes.

“She’s from C.A.A.!”

The agent goes away.

The mother comes. *Mhmhmmm*.

Brent shouts. “How can we sell this story if he won’t come out? Dammit, Mom...”

She says in the old tone that makes Happy tremble, “Don’t you dare talk to your mother like that.” He knows her voice, but he always did. He just doesn’t know what she used to say to him.

“I’m calling Dad,” Brent says. “Dad will get him out.”

Then his mother says, “Your father is not coming back here, Brent.”

“But Mom, he got us front money in six figures, and we have to...” Figures. Happy is troubled by the figures. Skaters, he thinks, short skirts, girls gliding in circles, and wonders how he knows. Women, he thinks, trembling. With their pretty figures.

“No.” Her voice is huge. “Not after what he did. No!”

Brent brings a locksmith. There is talk of breaking in. She says, No, she says, over her dead body. Will Brent kill her? Happy shivers. They argue. She uses that huge voice on Brent and they go away. She bakes. Sometimes now, she leaves the food outside his door, hoping he'll come out to see. Happy lies low until she sighs and takes the untouched tray back to the kitchen.

At night she lingers in the hallway outside the room. She does not speak. He won't, or can't. Sometimes he hears her crying.

Happy waits. Sooner or later she always goes away. She leaves things on the kitchen table. Meat, which Happy devours. Fruit, which he ignores. Something she baked. She leaves the door to that old, bad bathroom open so he won't have to go outside to relieve himself. What's the matter with her, did she forget? The sight of the toilet, the naked hook where the belt hung, make Happy tremble.

Outside is worse than inside. Nights like these make Happy want to throw back his head and howl. Alone in these parts, he could howl to the skies and never hear their voices. The other wolves are deep in the old woods, and he is far, far away. He wants to cry out for Sonia, for the past, when everything was simple, but one sound will bring police down on him with their bats and rifles, visors on bug helmets covering their faces.

Happy knows what wolves know. You never, ever break cover.

Wolves know what Happy is only now learning. He can't go back! Happy's feet are soft and his muscles are slack from days under the crib. He'd never make it and if he did, Timbo would outrun him in seconds. Timbo would kill him in one lunge, and even if he could kill Timbo? His parts and the bitch wolves' parts don't match. They have forgotten he was ever one of them.

He sits on his haunches and tries to think. He is distracted by the buzz of blue lights on poles overhead, where he is used to looking up and seeing trees; by a sky so milky with reflected glare that stars don't show; by the play of strident human voices in the houses all around, the mechanical sounds of a hundred household objects and the rush of cars on the great road that brought them here. Looking up at the house, he groans.

He doesn't belong in there.

He doesn't belong out here, either.

He gets up. Sighs. Stands back. Upstairs in the house, there is a single light. She is awake. Now he knows, and knowing hurts somehow. She doesn't go into her lair and sleep after she leaves Happy's door the way he thought she did. She sits up all night waiting. He steals back inside and goes upstairs to his room. Inside, he closes the door. Tonight, he will not turn the lock.

* * * *

After not very long—did she hear or does she just know?—the bedroom door opens. She says his name.

“Happy?”

He always knew Happy was his name. This is just the first time he's heard it spoken since he joined the wolves and made Sonia his mother. Does Brent not know? The name Brent calls him is different. Is this big, leaden woman who smells like despair the only one who knows who he really is? In the hospital where the police took him, Brent shouted at the doctor like a pet owner claiming a dog that had strayed. “Olmstead. It's right here on his tag! Olmstead. Frederick.”

Her voice is soft as the darkness. “Oh, Happy. I'm so glad you came back.”

There is another of those terrible long silences in which he hears her shifting from foot to foot in the dark, pretending she's not crying.

She says, “You don't have to come out from under there if you don't want to.”

She says, “Are you okay?”

It's been a long time since words came out of Happy; he only had a few when they lost him. He isn't ready. Will he ever be?

She says, “Is it okay if I sit down on the bed? I mean, since you're not using it?”

Words. He is thinking about words. He knows plenty now, all that talk going on outside his locked door. He has heard dozens. He could spit out a

word for her if he wanted, but which one? He waits until she gets tired of him waiting.

She says softly, "I'm sorry about everything."

Then she says, all in a rush, "Oh Happy. Can you ever forgive me?"

This is not a question Happy can answer.

There is a lot of nothing in the silence that follows. She is breathing the way Sonia did before she died. It's a rasp of pain, but the mother smells all right to Happy. Wolves know nothing of the pain of waiting, nor do they know anything about the pain of guilt.

Her voice shakes in a way he is not used to. "Son?"

Son. It does not parse. Happy rummages through all his words, but there is no right one.

The first morning light is showing in the window; Happy sees it touch the fake fur of the ruggy bear; he sees it outlining the hands she keeps folded on her plump knees and he watches as it picks out every vein in her sad, swelling ankles. She says, "It's all my fault, you know."

What should he do now, bare all his teeth the way they do, to show her he's friendly? Beg her to go on? Howl until she stops? He doesn't know.

She says, "I never should have had you." Slumped on the edge of the bed she leans sideways and tilts her head, trying to see under the crib where Happy's green eyes glint. He makes no expression a human could recognize, although Sonia would know it without question. She says, "Poor little thing."

A sound stirs the air, a kind of shudder. He wonders but does not ask, *Mother, did you sob?*

Her head comes up. "Happy?"

Startled, Happy looks inside himself.—*Did I?* There is nothing he has to say to her.

Then she just begins. "You don't know what it's like living with a man who beats you. I was pregnant with Brent and our parents forced the

marriage, crazy thing to happen in this day and time, like it ruined his life to marry me, we had too many babies, and who—*who* got me pregnant every time? Do you see what I mean?”

Happy won't speak. The words come so fast that he chooses not to understand them. *Ow, it hurts!*

Never mind, nothing he says or does not say will stop her. “Hal hated his life so he drank, and the more he drank the more he hated it so he drank some more and the more he drank, the madder he got and nothing I could do or say would make him happy. Every little thing I did used to make him mad at me. The madder he got the more he hit me, but he never hit me when I was pregnant. Oh, Happy, do you understand?”

For another long time, they are both silent.

A long sigh comes ripping out of her. “You do what you have to, just to keep it from happening again. When anger takes hold like that, it has to come out somewhere. Look.” She holds up a crooked wrist; even from here it looks wrong. She touches a spot on her temple; she doesn't have to tell Happy about the long white scar under the hair.

He tried so hard not to remember, but he remembers. On his belly under the crib, Happy watches her over ridged knuckles.

Again. She says it again. “He never hit me when I was pregnant.” Her breath shudders. “So I had you. I'm so sorry!”

Happy strains to make out what she's trying to tell him but there is no way of translating it.

“I tried. I even named you after him!”

Frederick, he supposes. He supposes it was on the dogtag, but Brent says *his* name was on the dogtag, and Happy? Frederick is not his name.

In the still air of the bedroom, her voice is sad and thin. “My four big boys fought back when he hit them, so I had you. Anything to stop him. But this time.” That sigh. “He didn't stop. Forgive me, Happy. I did what you do to make it through. I couldn't take it!”

The story she is telling is sad, but it's only a story. Wolves know that fathers aren't the only ones that hurt you.

"You cried. you cried so much. He got so mad. He came at me. He kept coming at me and oh God, oh, Happy. I put you in front of me."

Happy flinches.

"I couldn't watch. I left him to it." Relieved, she says in a light voice, "And that was it." As if it's all she needs to do.

Fine. If she is done, then, she'll leave. As soon as she leaves he'll get up and lock the door.

Then, just when he thinks it's over and he can forget this, she groans. "I'm so sorry, son."

There is another of the long, painful pauses that wolves prefer to using words. Silence is clear, where words are ambiguous.

She says, "I never knew what he was doing. I didn't want to know."

She says, "I know, I know, I should have left him, but where can a woman go with four little boys and a baby? I should have kicked him out, but how would I feed my children then?"

The silence.

"So you do forgive me, right?"

Forgive is not a word wolves know.

"Right?"

He won't move or speak. Why should he?

"These things happen, son. Things happen when people are stretched too far and their love is stretched too thin. Oh, *please* try to understand."

There is a long silence while she thinks and Happy thinks.

Just when he's beginning to hope she's run out of words forever, she says in a voice so light that it floats far over his head, "Then you got lost. And everything changed. He got himself a nice new wife and moved to Hollywood. After everything I did to make him happy. The others grew up and moved away. Until you came, I didn't have anything."

Happy doesn't expect to speak, but he does. The words that have been stacked in his head for years pop out like quarters out of a coin return.

"You didn't look for me, did you." It is not a question.

She sobs. "You don't know what it's like."

He does.

After a while she goes away.

Happy slinks to the door and locks it even before he hears her stumbling downstairs, sobbing.

* * * *

"Can I come in?" Her voice is sweet. Just the way he remembers her. Even through the door, Susan is soft and he will always remember that body. He almost forgets himself and answers. Happy is stopped by the fact that except for the slip with the mother, he hasn't spoken. There are too many words backed up in him. He can't get them in order, much less let them out. He just doesn't have the equipment.

Instead he hitches across the floor the way he did when he was two and sits with his back against the door, putting his head to the wood. Feeling her. He feels her outline pressed to the other side of the panel, her heart beating. Susan, breathing.

"Don't worry," she says, "I understand. I just want you to come out so we can be together and be happy."

His fingers creep along the door.

"Happy," she says, and he will not know whether she is talking about their future or using his name, which is his secret. "You know, you're really a very lovely man. It's a shame for you to be shut up in there when you could come out and enjoy the world!"

Swaying slightly in time with that musical voice, he toys with the lock. He can't, he could, he wants to open that door and do something about the way he is feeling. With Susan, he won't have to wonder how the parts fit together.

Like a gifted animal trainer she goes on, about his bright hair, about how lucky she felt when she first saw him; she is lilted now. “It’s sunny today, perfect weather, and oh, sweetie, there’s going to be a party in the garden!”

Then he hears a little stir in the hall. Someone else out there with her, breathing.

“A party in your honor. Cake, sweetie, and champagne, have you ever had champagne? You’re going to love it...” He does indeed hear music. Someone tapping a microphone. Voices in the garden. Behind Susan, someone is muttering. She breaks off. “Brent, I am *not* going to tell him about the people from Miramax! Not until we get him out of there!”

The brother. Happy shuts down. What else would he do after what Brent did to him? Things in this room, he realizes; Brent was that much older. Brent giving him a mean, sly look on his last night in this world he outgrew, letting their father hit the gas on the minivan and drive away without him.

After a long time, when it becomes clear that there’s no change in the situation, Susan gets up off her knees—he can feel every move she makes—and leans the whole of that soft body against the wood. He stands too, so that in a way, they are together. She says in a tone that makes clear that they will indeed lie down together too, “Champagne, and when it’s over, you and I...”

There is the sound of a little struggle. Brent barks a warning. “Ten minutes, Frederick Olmstead. Ten minutes more and we break down the door and drag you out.”

He does not have to go to the window to hear the speech Brent makes to the people assembled. He can hear them muttering. He smells them all. He hears their secret body parts moving. They are drinking champagne in the garden. Then it changes. There is a new voice. Ugly. Different from the buddabuddabudda of ordinary people talking.

“Thank you for coming and thank you for your patience. Okay, Brent. Where is he?”

It’s him.

Brett whines, “I told you, Dad, I couldn’t...”

“Then I will.”

Another voice. The mother. “No, Fred. Not this time.”

There is a smack. A thud. Under the window, the father raises his head and howls, “Two minutes, son. I’m warning you.”

Happy’s hackles rise. His lips curl back from bared fangs as in the garden under the window the mother cries, “I told you never to come here!”

There is a stir; something happens and the mother is silenced.

Him.

He commands the crowd. “Give me a minute and I’ll bring the wolf boy down for his very first interview.”

* * * *

His father comes.

He will find that Happy has unlocked the door for him.

Big man, but not as big as Happy remembers him. Big smile on his face, which has been surgically enhanced, although Happy will not know it. Smooth, beautifully tanned under the expensively cropped hair, it is nothing like the angry face Happy remembers. The big, square teeth are white, whiter than Timbo’s fangs. Even the eyes are a fresh, technically augmented color. Blue shirt, open at the collar. Throat exposed, as wolves will do when they want you to know that they do not intend to harm you. Nice suit, although Happy has no way of knowing.

“Son,” he says in a smooth, glad tone that has sealed deals and gotten meetings with major players all over greater Los Angeles. “You know your father loves you.”

This is nothing like love.

Caught between then and now, between what he was and what he thinks he is, Happy does what he has to.

He knows what all wolves know. If you are male and live long enough, you will have to kill your father.

It doesn't take long.

* * * *

Brent finds the door locked when he comes upstairs to find out how it's going. He says through the closed door, "Everything okay in there?"

Although Happy has not spoken in all these days, he has listened carefully. Now he says in the father's voice, "This is going to take longer than I thought. Reschedule for tomorrow. My place."

There is a little silence while Brent considers.

Happy is stronger than Timbo now. Louder. "Now clear out, and take everybody with you."

* * * *

It is night again. The mother knocks. Happy has mauled the body, as Timbo would, but he will not eat. There is no point to it.

"Can I come in?"

He allows it.

There will be no screaming and no reproaches. She stands quietly, studying the body.

After a long time she says, "Okay. Yes. He deserved it."

When you remember old hurts you remember them all, not just the ones people want you to. Therefore Happy says the one thing about this that he will ever say to her:

"He wasn't the only one."

"Oh, Happy," she says. "Oh God." She isn't begging for her life, she is inquiring.

It is a charged moment.

There are memories that you can't prevent and then there are memories you refuse to get back, and over these, you have some power. This is the choice Happy has to make but he is confused now by memories

of Sonia. Her tongue was rough. She was firm, but loving. This mother waits. What will he do? She means no harm. She wants to protect him. Poised between this room and freedom in the woods, between the undecided and the obvious, he doesn't know.

What he does know is that no matter what she did to you and no matter how hard to forgive, you will forget what your mother did to you because she is your mother.