

TO SWIM WITH WILD CATS

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That winter the sinews of reality went brittle, then snapped.

My wife had disappeared months earlier, a torrential week in May; I did not know the reason. She had been happy, had laughed often and carelessly, with her whole body. At unexpected moments, she had drawn her face to mine and kissed me. In the dark, her skin hummed beneath my fingers. When she yawned, her face stretched like a cat's.

The weeks passed. Over Christmas, it did not snow. When January arrived—cold, whip bright, lashing—she did not return. A new year, a new decade. I had thought by then, had hoped. For an explanation at least.

I avoided family gatherings and phone calls. Kept the house clean, moving furniture to dust crevices I would otherwise ignore. I waited for her. Made small offerings: a carton of rice milk left untouched in the fridge, the can of lentil soup she'd left out for lunch, enshrined on the counter.

The first snow arrived in a shock of white and with it a new certainty: I would not see my wife again. The windows in our room had fogged. The house breathed: damp laundry left over the radiator. I crawled from the bed we'd once shared. No part of me wanted to stand, so I continued to crawl, up the stairs to the third floor and into the bathroom, to the clawed bathtub she'd loved so much. I hauled myself onto toilet lid, turned the

tap. The water was senselessly hot, but I could not get in a cold bath that day, not even to drown myself.



The doorbell rang. Still perched on the toilet lid, I watched heat curl from the water in vapour. The bell chimed a second time, a third, a fourth.

I slunk from the bathroom and slid down the stairs on my ass—two flights, mind—but I stood to answer the door. If you can't stand to answer the door, you shouldn't answer it.

And I shouldn't have.

So sorry to hear, Jensen said. So very sorry. He brushed snow from the shoulder of his coat, fiddling with the buttons, and quirked his lips. Not a smile precisely. Not a grimace.

Yes, I said. A little late to come by.

You needed space, of course. Jensen's boot crept over the threshold. He forced himself into the entryway, slid the grey coat from his shoulders to hang it over the banister. How about some coffee if you don't mind? he said. A long night. And more to come, I'm sure.

Jensen showed himself to the kitchen. Filled the kettle and set some water to boil. I watched from the doorway, unsteady on my legs, then joined him at the sink. I rinsed the cafetiere, ground coffee in an eruption of noise. The chair clawed the floor as Jensen sat. Steam rose from the kettle, squealing. Time folded in on itself and I set a cup of black coffee in front of Jensen and joined him at the table.

We kept our silence. Sipped our coffees and avoided eye contact. Jensen picked lint from his sweater. I thought about the bath water, losing heat.

Realistically, what are the chances of her coming back, do you think? Jensen said.

I was silent.

You see, my wife was wondering after her clothes.

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Jensen lifted the mug to his mouth but did not drink.

I didn't want to come by too soon, he said. To seem insensitive. But my wife insisted. Insisted. Your missus was always about the same size as her and...well, she's got her twin sister coming to stay with us for a while.

I was under the impression her sister had died, I said.

Jensen nodded. Yes, she drowned about a month ago. Outside of Izmir. Doesn't that...conclude her need for clothing.

Hardly, Jensen said. He punctuated with a wet swallow.

But she is dead? I lifted my coffee, not sure what else to do. It scalded.

Yes, he said. Drowned, or eaten. A leopard pulled her under.

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My wife was hoping you wouldn't mind sending a few things over.

I thought leopards were extinct in that region.

Hmm?

Leopards, I said. I didn't think there were any left near Izmir.

Yes, well. Jensen flicked his hand in the air. Tell that to her sister, he said. About those clothes?



I waited in the kitchen while Jensen ransacked my wife's closet.

When the rumble of his car receded, I slid back to the floor, crawled out of the kitchen and up the stairs. The water was cool now, a freshwater lukewarm.

I discarded my clothes and submerged myself to the neck. The lights were off, the room drenched in four o'clock gloom. Snow flurries, weak beyond the window. I closed my eyes.

I used to read to my wife during her evening baths. I would sit on the toilet lid, or in more intimate moments, with my back against the tub, so she could run her wet hands through my hair while she soaked. I remembered her steam-slicked head, how hot she ran the water, the way she listened to my voice like she was far away and I was distant wind. Most of the time, she arched her head back, looked up and out the window to the sky. But she would turn when a phrase caught her and look at me, eyes reflective. Cat-like in the candle glow.

To find yourself in wild water with a leopard you presumed extinct. To see the slicked fur in among the swell and have the reality of the animal unfold before you faster than your mind can register.

Then, the moment everything clicks.

The speckled head above water, the bulk of the body, shifting below: a mirage beneath the current.

Do you try to swim away, or look it in the eye? The gruesome would-you-rather. If you swim, you let it take you with your back turned. You could never move fast enough; no, you are not built for it.

My knees poke out the water: awkward, knobbly, somehow mine. I may be sick, it's true. I choose to see it. The eyes so real they give me vertigo, show me past lives.

Deadly, yes. But wouldn't it be something to sustain that last leopard, home after so long.