Spring 2011

Wolf Goes Down for a Cup

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At noon Wolf baby-steps out of the Frontier Assisted Living facility. He comes down the stairs one at a time in that peculiar old-folk way that renders a staircase not as a single problem to be solved but as a grouping of many small problems with no clear end in sight.

Once sidewalk is achieved the algebra of the aged proceeds and develops by way of an ever lengthening series of equations down the street, nearly twelve blocks across town, to the final, ultimate, destination—Mark'z Coffee House and Panini Palace. Specifically, a plush overstuffed chair, upholstered in a phosphorescent sort of green velour fabric that exudes odors of cooked bacon and mildew upon one's acceptance into its embrace.

To say that everyday at noon Wolf walks to Mark'z Coffee House and Panini Palace is to insult walk as abstract idea. Wolf does not walk. Wolf does not even shuffle. Most accurately, Wolf oozes, like a garden slug or the small hand on a clock, one of those things in that, upon observance, there is no noticeable change of position until you happen to look away and look back and then Wolf is there, not there. Just a little further on down the sidewalk. It has been said that God almighty created the world in seven days, if this is true then on the first minute of the first day he must have created Wolf and got him started across town just so he'd make it before Sunday, the seventh day, the day that Mark (owner of Mark'z), like God, closes up shop and takes a well deserved rest.

Wolf lost his driver's license some time around the first Gulf War conflict after an incident in which he failed to see a group of protesters standing on the sidewalk in front of the post
office and accidently parallel parked his Le Sabre on the foot of Margot Miller—former soft porn model turned political activist and prescription drug addict. At the time, popular opinion in the police station was that the crushing of Margo Miller's foot in and of itself was not sufficient cause for the confiscation of Wolf's license, however, the fact that at the time of the incident Margot Miller was standing nearly fifteen feet off the street (a distance that required Wolf to back over a eight inch curb and halfway across the post office lawn in order to parallel park on her foot) meant that there was reason to believe that Wolf was a danger to the town.

So now, Wolf is on foot, rendered (by the conjoined forces of law and nature) a slow force, stale molasses in a cold environment. Around noon he solves anew the daily stair equation in front of the Frontier Assisted Living Facility and makes his way down the sidewalk like mold growing on bread. He wears a quilted plaid jacket and aquamarine cotton sweat pants with stretch-elastic cuffs and waistband. His shoes are of the lace-less, hook and loop strap closure variety with thick grey rubber soles. His cane has a molded plastic pistol grip, stainless steel adjustable shaft, and two short outriggers on either side of the rubber tip upon which are fastened two small wheels.

Wolf has very little hair remaining on his head and the few strands that are left he gathers into a sparse gray-black pony tail tied up with a piece of mint flavored dental floss. He has exactly seven teeth left in his skull. The skin of his face is grey and soft as rotting newspaper. Wolf also has a small crescent moon tattooed in dark blue ink on his cheek under his rheumy left eye. The moon is positioned as if it were a single, indigo, moon-shaped tear about to wane from the cheekbone of the sky.

As Wolf makes his way down the street he passes the lawyer's office, the chiropractor's office, the do-it-yourself car and dog wash, the other chiropractor's office and the quick-stop, where an attendant, with bones discs in each ear the
size of tomato soup cans, cleans up a diesel spill his cigarette hanging loosely from the corner of his mouth. As Wolf passes, the attendant says, “Hey, how you doing man,” to Wolf, who says nothing, which prompts the attendant after a significant pause to say, “Well, I’m doing good myself old man, fuck you very much.” To which Wolf says nothing.

Wolf continues past the Laundromat, the Chinese place, the Mexican place, the vegetarian place, the smoothie shack, and another chiropractor’s office. Before he gets to Mark’z Coffee House and Panini Palace he passes The Mystic Feather, a new and used sacred artifacts trading post, an establishment that long ago Wolf himself had founded. Long ago when Wolf’s shoes still had laces. Long ago before he parallel parked his Le Sabre on Margot Miller’s Birkenstock. Long ago before the First Gulf War conflict. Long ago before Wolf’s tears became singular, permanent, moon shaped and blue.

Inside the Mystic Feather are many things. Many artifacts, both used and new. There are dream catchers woven from rubber bands, dream catchers in a vast array of shapes and sizes, specimens with hoops as big around as tractor tires and webbing made of tightly stretched blue rubber bands like the sort used to bunch asparagus at the grocery store. From these—dream catcher for dreamers of industrial strength dreams—all the way down to those no bigger around than a dime with insides twisted from the miniscule rubber bands found on orthodontic brace work. Beautiful, these, minute, catchers of hummingbird dreams, sized just so to fit in a pregnant woman’s distended navel, placed just so to snare the dreams of the unborn, unbearable fetal dreams of cold, dreams of drowning in air, dreams of the severed cord, intolerable, clairvoyant, womb dreams.

Beside the dream catchers, The Mystic Feather offers for sale: incense sticks of course (in sixty four flavors), but also braided bundles of sweet grass, soapstone pipe stems,
hand carved beads, strange melon-headed dolls made from dried corn husks and human hair, arrowheads in both ancient and contemporary models, animal skins tanned with borax (packed in mothballs), and a few dusty packs of baseball cards, the old-timey kind that come with a stick of crumbly pink bubble gum inside the wrapper. And then there are the carvings. Safely ensconced behind thick layers of smudged glass, out of the reach of thieves and horny adolescent boys, and outraged but equally horny middle aged church women, the carvings sit, gleaming the dull honest gleam of hand polished bone.

The figurines are arranged in rows on a piece of dusty red velvet, a neat regiment on parade in the army of the obscene. The female figures have disproportionately large pendulous breasts and full stomachs, hips and breasts like stacked scoops of vanilla ice cream just starting to melt. The male figures are short, squat, and strait, with erect members jutting out massively above their square heads. No features, just blank bone faces and rough hewn genitalia, bone bellies and breasts, bone vaginas and vulvas, bone thighs, bone penises, full bone wombs. Here—in a glass display case half obscured by a packrat's nest of moldering esoteric volumes and a thick coating of incense stick ash—lies the remnants of a man's life, a study in the reproductive particulars. The carvings warm to the touch and exuding the scalded milk smell of cut bone, some still smudged indigo with the fallen crescent moon tears of their maker.

The Mystic Feather is owned now by Wolf's son, Charley, and the store frequently smells like the barbecue flavored chicharrones he likes to eat while he tends the register. Charley has thinning hair that he keeps cropped short about the ears and flat on top. His wife is a weaver of rubber band dream catchers and at any given time there are hoops hanging in various states of completion in the small bedroom of their
mobile home. Charley hasn’t had a dream that he could remember since before he was a decorated marine in the first Gulf War conflict, he hasn’t had a nightmare either, and he thinks that is a pretty good thing. Charley doesn’t carve. Charley doesn’t have a crescent moon tear drop tattoo. Charley doesn’t wave when his father passes by on the sidewalk each day. Charley doesn’t even flinch when, occasionally, he goes to Mark’z for a panini and feels that lunar gaze fall on him from a green overstuffed chair in the corner of the room.

Every day when Wolf reaches Mark’z he stands patiently, stooped within the threshold, until someone exits or enters and holds the door for him. He slowly navigates the maze of mismatched thrift store furniture, his wheeled cane leading the way to the green overstuffed chair and a position that offers a view of the sidewalk and dining area. Eventually, Mark brings Wolf a single steaming mug of black coffee, which Wolf accepts with a nod. At one time Wolf would leave a single, crumpled, dollar bill on the counter as payment on the way out. He hadn’t done this in years. No one seemed to have noticed. Wolf never drank any of the coffee anyway; he had never cared for it. He used to roam vacant lots around town and gather mullen leaves that he dried and crushed for tea. Back when he owned the Mystic Feather he would spend hours happily sipping tea and carving bone. He fashioned tea bags out of cheesecloth filled thickly with dried mullen and tied at the top with mint flavored dental floss. He used the same bag all day and just refilled the hot water as needed. He liked the natural progression, the way the tea was strong and bitter in the morning, bracing the way it should be at that hour, and then the way it faded to just slightly grassy and herbal in the evening, soothing, and especially effective as a digestion aid. Wolf’s supply of tea had run out long ago, the vacant lot where he used to gather mullen was now a mini-storage complex surrounded by razor wire topped chain link fence.

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Wolf sits in his chair at Mark'z Panini Palace and no one pays him any mind, he is a silent moon orbiting a noisy planet. The place is full of young people with their hair cut at sharp angles and died alarming shades of red and turquoise and jet black. Mark has reggae music pumping loudly through speakers hidden by fake potted palms, some of them nearly fifteen feet tall, the plastic leaves brushing the hot ceiling lights. The kind of plastic potted palms that haven't been seen since the early Plasticiferous era at least. The air smells like bacon, and toasting ciabatta bread and coffee and melting plastic palm fronds and un-cleaned fish tanks. And there Wolf sits, a satellite, silent as all things are in space (even those falling out of rotation) blinking slowly in his green overstuffed chair, his coffee steaming quietly, untouched in the mug resting on a bony thigh.

At four o'clock Mark powers down the panini press. He dumps a black sodden mass of used coffee grounds into a five gallon bucket and sets it outside the back door. Later, he will carefully trowel the soggy coffee matter into the dank loam around the roots of his homegrown marijuana crop, a product he harvests, bags, labels and markets under the trade name Mark'z Ezprezzo Budz (LLC). Mark has been smoking marijuana seriously since he was twelve years old and is relatively certain that his constant use has rendered him infertile. Mark and his wife Edie are each thirty-five years old now and childless after ten years of marriage—childless, but not for lack of trying. On the Sundays when Edie is ovulating Mark rises first and heads down to the kitchen where he makes eight shots of strong espresso and fills a pitcher with ice water. He returns to the bedroom where he and Edie share a powerbar and gulp espresso and embark upon a caffeine stoked sex marathon that lasts until mid afternoon. At which point an exhausted Mark
does the crossword and re-hydrates while Edie reads, laying naked on her back on the bed with two pillows propping up her pelvis—to keep everything flowing downstream.

Sometimes they talk. Sometimes the usual nonsense after love things, sometimes hopeful things, sometimes they talked about Mark’s spermatazoa as if they were a downtrodden sports team in need of a pep talk. Sometimes Edie says things like, “If I get pregnant this time will you still like me, you know not me, but, my body me? Things are going to stretch and change baby. I see other women in the gym all the time, wormy purple marks and sags, some of their boobs look like elf shoes, I mean, nipples like flesh thimbles. What then?”

“What then?” Mark says, “Well, then, we get you a boob job and we get to work trying to make that kid a sibling.” Sometimes they would share a joint and get Chinese take-out for dinner. Sometimes Mark thought they would be children themselves, forever, unless they were able to create one of their own.

When his work is done Mark removes his panini stained apron and hangs it on a nail over the kitchen door. His thumb on the knob of the stereo brings the thumping reggae vibes to a halt. The kids with the sculpted hair are gone, the lunch crowd is long gone, in fact everyone is gone except for Wolf. Mark speaks to the half-bald dome of Wolf’s heads sticking up over the back of the chair.

“I hate to restrict the flow of irie around here brother, but the time has come.”

The words seem loud in the empty restaurant; they reverberate, bouncing without pause from thrift store chair to second hand table to the sticky floor to the coffee stained ceiling to Wolf, who says nothing. Wolf, who in ten years has never remained at Mark’z so much as one minute past three o’clock.

The sign in the window of the restaurant is a bright, orange neon tube light, shaped like a cup of coffee, with wavy
lines of steam rising from the rim. When Mark pulls the plug it pops once and goes dark and he stands there, holding the cord like a dead snake by the tail. "You don't have to go home," he says to Wolf without turning around, "but you can't stay here, brother." To which Wolf says nothing, and says nothing and says nothing.

On the morning of the day after Wolf's death, Mark rolls a joint the size of a carrot and smokes it down to his finger tips in the small bathroom off the kitchen of his restaurant. When this is done, he turns on the reggae and opens the doors and plugs in the open sign. He sprays the green velour overstuffed chair with lemon breeze air freshener and he makes espressos and lattes and Cajun style paninis and breves and mochas and Philly style paninis all the way through the lunch hour, after which he closes early and walks next door to the Mystic Feather.

That night Mark places two carved figurines on the headboard of his bed, side by side, male and female, two fat, naked, beautiful bone soldiers ready and willing to engage in procreative battle.

He and Edie smoke half a joint and make spaghetti with meatballs and then go to the bedroom where Mark makes loves to his non-ovulating wife as if he were a single, small, crescent moon-shaped tear clinging to a cheek facing a sun about to rise. Tomorrow is Sunday, the seventh day, the day when Mark, like God, sleeps in. He holds Edie tightly and rolls a small tendril of her dark hair so it curls and rests, just so, on her cheek under her closed eye.