

PAT MURPHY

POINTS OF DEPARTURE

Jan first heard wolves howling in the streets of Manhattan on the night of the blackout.

It was two in the morning, but Jan was awake. She had been lying in bed watching the all-news cable station on TV. For the third time that night, a well-dressed newscaster was telling her about a sniper in a Miami shopping mall. Distraught over his divorce, the man had opened fire with a rifle, picking off six women shoppers and a saleslady before the police apprehended him. The blackout cut the announcer off in mid-sentence.

Just before the lights went out, Jan had been crying. A month before, Dennis, her husband, had said that he wanted a divorce, and that unexpected event had shattered the rhythms of her life. "I'm leaving," he had said. And then he said many other things – about finding himself, about feeling trapped, about being confused, about love. But of that storm of words only two had stayed with her: "I'm leaving."

In the end, since the condominium that they shared belonged to him, she had been the one to leave, subletting an apartment in the Village from a friend who was vacationing in Florida. Jan lived out of a suitcase and fed her friend's two cats, who regarded her as a convenient source of food and no more. The cats prowled around her bed and on her bed, pouncing on her feet when she shifted position and staring at her in the flickering light of the television.

After Jan had left her husband, she realized that she had forgotten how to sleep. She found herself sitting up late at night, watching TV. Sometimes she drank brandy to put herself in a drifting hazy state from which she could nod off. Sometimes the murmur of the television lulled her to sleep. But she always slept badly.

On the night that the lights went out, Jan sat for a moment in the darkness, then got out of bed and went to the window to see if the lights were out across the street. That was when she heard the wolves.

First, the sound of distant barking – maybe someone's dog disturbed by the sudden darkness. Then the animal began to howl, starting low and rising slowly to a high-pitched wailing note. Others joined in with wavering voices, each on a slightly different pitch.

No lights shone in the surrounding buildings. The streetlights were out. Moonlight glistened on the fire escape outside her window, reflected from the empty windows of the apartment building across the way.

Jan opened the window and listened. A trick of the wind, she thought. But the howling rose and fell in a chorus that was unrelated to the wind. Wolves in the

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window and listened. A trick of the wind, she thought. But the howling rose and fell in a chorus that was unrelated to the wind. Wolves in the streets of Manhattan. She shivered and closed the window. When she dialed 911, a woman's voice answered.

"There are wolves in the street," Jan said. "I can hear them howling."

"What is the nature of your 911 emergency?" the woman asked. She sounded bored.

"I can hear wolves howling" Jan repeated. "Not far away."

"Noisy dogs do not constitute an emergency," the woman said briskly. "Contact Animal Control during normal business hours."

"But I can hear. . . ." Jan was speaking to the dial tone. She hung up and listened at the window again. The wind sang through the latticework of the fire escape and a taxi passed by in the street below. Again she heard howling a little nearer now.

She hesitated, then dialed her husband's number. She imagined him fumbling for the telephone on the bedside table, his eyes half-closed, his body naked under the covers. She imagined the click as he switched on the bedside light, a brass lamp that she had bought at an antique shop a few months ago. She was reassured just by the sound of his sleepy hello.

She said nothing. Since she left him,

she had called him every now and then - maybe once a week, no more than that. She did not want to talk to him; she only wanted to hear his voice. Each time, she swore she would not call him again, but her resolve always failed.

"Hello," he said again. She listened to the sound of his breathing, but she did not speak. What would she tell him? The power was out. Wolves were howling in the street. What would he say? He would tell her that she was just letting her imagination run away with her. He would tell her not to call. It was best just to listen to his voice, visualizing the bedroom that she had once thought of as her own.

"Who the hell is this?" he demanded.

"God damn it, will you say something?" Finally he swore and slammed down the phone. The dial tone returned. She hung up the phone and returned to the window. She could no longer hear the wolves. She lit the candle that she kept by the bed. By the flickering light, she wrapped herself in a blanket and lay down to listen for howling on the wind. She was still awake when the power returned at four o'clock and the television came to life. A talk show was on and a psychologist was discussing stress. "Inability to sleep is one symptom of stress," he was saying. Jan fell asleep, listening to him chatter.

She slept through her alarm the next morning and woke up half an hour late,

groggy from lack of sleep. The candle had burned itself out and an "I Love Lucy" rerun was on. The cats yowled at her and she dumped dry cat food in their dish. Hurriedly, she dressed and walked four blocks to the subway station. As she walked, her breath made clouds of steam in the cold air. The temperature in the subway station was tropical, the humid air heavy with pungent odors. The advertisements that hung on the white tiled walls had been decorated with spray paint in jungle colors: great slashes of greens brilliant reds and blues, like the plumage of exotic birds.

As Jan waited for her train, she noticed an old woman wandering down the platform, peering into the face of

each commuter she passed. The woman wore a man's overcoat and scuffed black shoes. Her hair, as gray and tangled as rag paper stuffing spilled from beneath her knit cap. In one hand, she carried a pink plastic shopping bag crammed full of clothing. As she drew near, Jan could hear her muttering to herself. Jan looked away, pretending great interest in the advertisement across the way.

The smiling woman in a cigarette ad had been artfully disfigured by a graffiti artist: her ears were slightly pointed and tipped with tufts of fur; her smile had been subtly altered --the teeth sharpened with a careful touch of paint.

"They come out at night," the old woman said, stepping between Jan and

the advertisement. "Out of the dark." The woman's eyes were the muddy brown of coffee that's been left in the pot too long and her hands moved in an uneven rhythm that was unrelated to her words. She glanced down suddenly, as if startled by the movement of her own hands. There was a smear of red spray paint on the cement at her feet and she stared at it fixedly. "Blood of the beast," she said and then she lifted her eyes and regarded Jan with an unnerving smile.

"It's just paint," Jan said.

The old woman shook her head and continued smiling. Though she had not asked for money, Jan fumbled in the bottom of her purse for change and spilled her findings into the woman's

hand: a crumpled dollar bill, a quarter, a couple of dimes.

The woman's eyes lingered on Jan's face. "They come out at night and no one knows where they go," she muttered dreamily. Her smile grew broader, a wide unthinking grin. "No one knows." She laughed, a high brittle sound, like glass bottles shattering on a city street.

Jan backed away from the woman and the rumble of an approaching train drowned out the laughter. Jan fled on the train. When she looked back through the steamy window, the old woman waved and Jan looked away.

Jan had a temporary position in a legal office, typing endless briefs into a word processor. She worked in a small

windowless cubicle at the back of the office. Through the cubicle's open door, she could see men in suits hurry up and down the hall on their way to meetings. She typed, letting the words flow through her without touching her as they passed. She ate lunch alone, sitting by the window of the coffee shop and trying to think of nothing. She made it through the day.

That evening she met her friend Marsha after work. Jan and Marsha had attended the same small college in upstate New York. Jan had called Marsha when Dennis first said he was leaving. After Jan moved out, Marsha had insisted on getting together at least once a week. Marsha had been through a

divorce and she said she knew what Jan was going through. Marsha bullied Jan to a certain extent, but Jan tolerated that with good grace: she liked the flamboyant dark-haired woman. She met Marsha at an Italian restaurant. Marsha, who was perpetually dieting, ordered pasta, then agonized over her decision. "You'll have to eat half of it," she told Jan. "You must have dropped ten pounds since you left Dennis. You're so lucky." Marsha regarded any weight loss as fortunate, whatever the cause.

"I haven't been hungry lately," Jan said.

"I can always eat," Marsha claimed. "Especially when I'm miserable." Jan shook her head. "I just don't feel like

eating." Marsha studied Jan's face. "You've got to get your mind off him. Get out and do things. Meet new people."

"I don't think about him much," Jan said, and it wasn't really a lie. She lay awake at night not thinking her mind filled with white noise. She did not think about anything.

Jan drank too much red wine and listened to Marsha's heartfelt advice. After a few bites of pasta she felt nauseous, but the wine eased the tension that knotted her stomach. The wine made talking easier, shrinking the world to an intimate circle that included only her, Marsha, and the waiter who refilled their glasses.

"I can't sleep at night," Jan told Marsha. "I hear sounds in the street."

"What kind of sounds?"

Jan hesitated, then plunged ahead. "The other night, I heard wolves howling."

"A neighbor was probably watching a horror movie on TV," Marsha said. "That's all."

"There was a blackout," Jan said stubbornly. "No TV."

"Then it was teenagers howling under your window. Or a bunch of drunks, trying to sing. You hear all kinds of weird stuff in New York at night. Nothing to worry about."

Jan fidgeted with her wine glass. "I'm afraid all the time. All the time. In the

apartment at night; in the subway; when I'm walking to work. All the time." Marsha reached across the table to pat Jan's hand. "It's hard to get used to being alone."

Jan noticed that her hand was in a fist, and she made an effort to relax.

"Things are out of control," she said softly. "I don't know what's going on anymore. I don't know who I am. When Dennis was with me, I didn't worry. Now I worry all the time."

"You're spending too much time alone," Marsha said. "I'll tell you what - I'm going to an art show on Thursday night. The artist is a friend of mine. He's a nut, but the opening will be fun. We can both get dressed to the teeth. Why

don't you come with me?"

Jan shook her head. "I don't have anything to wear. I left most of my clothes at the condominium. I escaped with one suitcase and my life." She tried to laugh, but it sounded wrong.

"You can borrow one of my dresses. I have a great little basic black number that will fit you just fine."

"I don't know."

"We're going" Marsha said. "And that's that." It was late when they finally called for the check. Outside the restaurant, snow was falling --great flakes that drifted lazily down and melted when they hit the pavement. Marsha hailed a cab. At first, she insisted that Jan take it, but for once Jan

prevailed. "You take it --I'll catch another." Marsha acquiesced at last, and Jan waved goodbye.

She hesitated for a moment, glad of the cold air on her face. Another taxi passed, but she did not hail it. She wanted, for reasons that were not clear to her, to take the subway. Neon signs were lit and the colors reflected from the wet asphalt, making glistening streams of color. She liked the darkness and the cold and the neon red reflections that ran like blood on the street. The subway entrance was marked with tall old-fashioned green-tinted streetlights. A straight-backed woman dressed in Salvation Army blue was standing by the stairs, handing out leaflets. Without

thinking Jan accepted a leaflet and hurried down the grimy stairs into a hallway that stank of urine. Only a few people were waiting on the platform. A teenager in a dirty denim jacket lounged against one of the pillars. A bag lady lay on a wooden bench, her head cushioned on a shopping bag filled with old clothes. An elderly man sat at the end of the bench, resting his head in his hands.

One of the fluorescent lights over the platform had been broken: bits of glass glittered in the rubbish that had accumulated near the station's tiled wall. Another light had burned out. The platform was filled with shadows. Jan stood with her back to one of the pillars by the tracks, staring into the darkness

from which the train would emerge. The wine had filled her head with a humming that would not stop. Though she waited here each day for the train home from work, the station seemed unfamiliar. She found herself staring at the graffiti on the walls, trying to puzzle out the meaning of the illegible words. On a level that she did not want to acknowledge, she felt that the scrawled letters held a message for her. The graffiti shifted and moved before her eyes. In the dim light, her hearing seemed exceptionally keen. She heard the crackle of paper as the bag lady shifted her head on her shopping-bag pillow, the rasp of a match as the teenager lit a cigarette, the hoarse whisper of the old man's breathing. She

thought she heard him say something, but she caught only a few words.

". . .safe in the tunnels," he murmured. ". . .warm and dark. . ." Jan glanced at him, but he was talking to no one. His head was in his hands and he was staring fixedly at the tracks. She turned away, keeping her back to the pillar.

". . .can't find us here," sighed another voice. Jan glanced back and saw the bag lady shift on her bench.

Another voice, just as soft, joined the bag lady's muttering. "We come out at night," the teenager said.

Jan pressed her back to the pillar. She did not look around. The station was filled with whispering voices that ebbed and flowed like wind in the trees. She

caught fragments of sentences --or did she imagine the words.

". . .place to hide," the bag lady said.

". . .come out at night," whispered the man. Jan heard the distant rumble of a train and stared into the darkness, watching for the first glow of the headlight.

". . .good hunting" murmured the teenager.

The train pulled into the station and Jan flung herself into an empty car. Harsh light shone on molded plastic seats and graffiti-decorated walls; there was a faint smell of old cigarette butts and piss. Through the dirty glass of the window, Jan looked back at the platform. The teenager smiled as the

train pulled away.

Jan sat on the plastic seat and blinked at the darkness that rushed past the windows. An unintelligible voice announced the coming station. She rocked with the motion of the train.

The train pulled into a station. The doors opened and closed. The train was pulling out when she saw a poster on the station wall. "MARK OF THE WOLF," it said, but the words flashed past the train and were gone before she could read more.

She pressed her face to the glass, but saw only darkness. Beyond the glass, she thought, there is no world. Just darkness. She could imagine any world she chose

--any world. She closed her eyes and thought about the world she would create. In the darkness of her mind, wolves ran through the darkened tunnel, keeping pace with the train.

She opened her eyes as the train slowed for the next station. Lights appeared outside the window, creating a new world of glistening tile and advertisements. She did not see any posters that said "MARK OF THE WOLF," but she got off the train and caught an uptown train to the station she had passed. She could not find the poster though she walked up and down the empty platform, staring at each advertisement. After the train pulled out, the only sound in the station was the

tapping of her footsteps. The tunnels stretched away into the darkness. Anything could hide there.

She felt her heart beating quickly, but she could not tell whether it was from fear or excitement. When she closed her eyes, she could feel the air pressing close around her, warm and filled with unidentifiable smells. She lingered in the shadows at the far end of the platform, staring into the tunnel and breathing in the aroma of the darkness. She found herself listening, straining her ears to hear something. She did not know what she was listening for. From the direction of the turnstile, she heard footsteps, and she glanced back toward the brightly lit section of the platform.

The colors were gone from the advertisements, the benches, the graffiti on the walls. The scene was painted in black and white and shades of gray. She blinked, wondering if this were some trick of the light.

"Hey, lady," called the guard. He stood under the light, his feet set slightly apart, his head tilted at an aggressive angle. "What're you doing there?"

"Waiting" she said, not moving from the shadows.

"No sleeping on the platform," he said. "None of that here." She watched him. His face was shiny with sweat and she could smell his fear.

"Who comes out at night?" she asked him.

"What?"

"Who comes out at night?"

He said nothing. The train came and she got on. She stared out at the darkness and imagined a new world, constructing it from the shades of night. That night, she felt restless. The borrowed apartment was not her home. Her clothes were still in her suitcase: she had never unpacked. The closet and the bureau drawers were filled with her friend's clothes. Jan was temporary, a transient guest who would come and go without leaving a trace of her passage. She did not belong here.

In the pocket of her coat, she found the flier that the Salvation Army woman had thrust into her hand. It was badly printed

on cheap stock, and the letters were smeared where her fingers had rubbed them. The text was littered with exclamation points and loud with religious exhortations: "DOOMSDAY IS NEAR!

Behold! Beware! Be Watchful! Satan's evil dominion is rampant. You must choose between light and darkness. Do not go down into the darkness without Jesus in your heart. Let Jesus be the torch that lights your way. ARE WE MEN OR ARE WE

BEASTS? Accept the Lord into your heart and renounce the ways of the beast." Yes, she thought, they dwell in darkness. The tunnels are dark and very private. At three that morning, she called

Dennis. She stood at the window, looking out as she listened to the phone ring. In the glass, she could see her own reflection. Her eyes were enormous; her pupils dilated. Outside, it was snowing. The phone rang twenty times before he finally picked it up. She did not speak, but listened as he swore into the receiver. His voice did not reassure her as it once had. He sounded muffled and far away.

She hung up and listened to the wolves howling in the street, a chorus of keening voices raised to serenade the waxing moon. She opened the window to let the sound enter the apartment.

The cats watched her nervously. The howling sang in her blood, agonizingly

sweet and piercingly high, rising and falling like the wind. She paced to and fro in the tiny apartment, and the cats stared at her. The larger of the two followed her, meowing as he twined between her legs. At last, tired of his persistence, she throttled him, closing her hands around his throat softly, then applying pressure. It seemed, in that moment, like the right thing to do. The dying animal struggled, but she did not release her hold. She put the warm body in the kitchen trash. The other cat hid beneath the bed and made no sound. That night, she turned down the sound on the television. She lay awake and listened, her eyes wide. She wanted to run through the streets, to race through the

night toward some unknown goal. In the darkness of the room that was not hers, she smiled, thinking of the subway tunnels where secret creatures lived. The next morning, she found paw prints in the snow beneath her window. The snow had melted in most places, but on the sidewalk beneath Jan's window, there was a patch that had lingered. The first set of prints was joined by another, and then by a third. For half a block, she followed them. Then the paw prints were obliterated by the footprints of commuters, and she went down the subway stairs alone.

On the side of the train that took her to work, someone had painted a running wolf. Gray and black, with slashes of

red for the eyes. She boarded that car and puzzled over the graffiti on her way to work. If she squinted, she thought she could almost read it --not read the letters perhaps, but figure out the sense of it. Something about darkness and silence. Something about freedom and pain. Marsha bustled around the studio apartment, fixing coffee and talking about the art opening. Jan sat on the couch, watching the snow fall outside. The apartment smelled faintly of perfume and powder.

"You just don't give yourself a chance," Marsha said. "You need to explore. Experiment. Really let yourself go wild."

Jan studied the coffee in her cup. The

cream formed white swirls, like hurricanes viewed from space. "I'm thinking of going away," she told Marsha. Her friend was rummaging in the closet, looking for the dress she wanted Jan to wear. "Going where?"

Jan shrugged. "Away."

"I could use a vacation myself," Marsha said. "Bermuda maybe? Ah, here it is!" She pulled a black dress from the closet. "I bought it on sale. I've been trying to diet. down a size, but I just can't fit into it." At Marsha's insistence, Jan put on the dress. Marsha put up Jan's hair and applied eye liner and shadow to her eyes. "You can't look until I'm done. Oh, you look so good."

Jan was startled by her reflection in

the mirror. Her eyes had a faintly carnivorous look. Her lips were red -- Marsha's choice of lipstick. They took a cab to the gallery. Staring out the window, Jan saw the reflected image of her own face: red lips, dark eyes. She listened to the hiss of the cab's tires against the wet pavement. She was cold --the fur wrap that Marsha had loaned her was for show, not warmth --but the cold was a distant feeling somehow unreal. She liked the feel of the fur against her shoulders. The gallery was warm and crowded. She drank a glass of white wine --then another. She lost track of Marsha in the crowd and wandered through the gallery, stopping before each painting. The images were dark and

violent: a tattooed man with the head of a dog; a group of punks in the subway, their eyes glowing in the dim light; a naked woman running down a dark street, her body silver in the moonlight, her shadow twisted and misshapen. Jan shivered when she saw that one, but she studied it for a long time while people moved past her, chatting about the artist's painterly technique, his use of mythic themes. She met the artist when she was getting her third glass of wine. He was a tall, dark-haired man who talked in a low voice about art and life. "There are people who live on the surface of life, never seeing beyond the illusions of daily existence. Then there are some who see past the sham. Those

are the people who see the truth in my work."

He leaned close as he spoke and let his hand rest softly, as if by accident, on her bare shoulder. She nodded. He seemed to be saying exactly what she had wanted to tell Marsha. She was considering telling him about the wolves when Dennis interrupted the conversation.

"Jan?" Dennis said. "I didn't expect to see you here. I almost didn't recognize you."

She studied him for a moment. His eyes looked bleary and his shirt needed ironing. His voice was too loud, and she guessed that the glass of wine in his hand was not his first. She smiled without

warmth and introduced him to the artist as her ex-husband. The artist did not remove his hand from her shoulder.

"I've been trying to call you," Dennis said. "Seems like you're never home." She shrugged. She did not tell him that she was often home. In the last week, she had chosen to stop answering the phone. She preferred to let it ring while she gazed out the window into the night.

"Dennis!" Marsha's voice cut through the babble of conversation. She was bearing down on them, intent on rescuing Jan from an awkward situation. "Since when have you been interested in art?"

Jan listened to their conversation and watched them as she had watched the falling snow. She was separated from

them by a pane of glass. Marsha waved a hand on which ivory bangles rattled and Jan heard the noise from a great distance.

In the cab ride home, Marsha said, "Oh, he was eating his heart out. He was. What do you want to bet you'll be heating from him?"

"Jan?" said Dennis' voice. He had caught her at work, where she had to answer the phone. "I thought maybe. . .It was good seeing you last night. Would you like to go out to dinner sometime? I'd like to talk."

"Talk?" Her voice felt rough and unused. She had not slept the night before, and that morning, when she dressed for work, her clothes had felt

strange against her skin.

Dennis was saying something. ". . . know you must think I'm a jerk, but I miss you. I don't know. When I saw you last night, I guess I realized" He went on and she stared at the blank wall of her cubicle, thinking of nothing.

"How about tonight?" he asked. "I could meet you after work."

"All right," she said. "Tonight."

"I've changed since you left me," she told him over dinner. He didn't seem to understand. He seemed clumsier than she remembered him, more awkward. One thing led to another: dinner to drinks, drinks to her borrowed apartment. He came up for a nightcap. She hoped that he would not look in the kitchen trash

where the body of the cat still lay, curled as if asleep. The bed creaked beneath their weight as they made love. She noticed, as he kissed her, that she did not like the way he smelled. His hair and skin smelled of soap and skin lotion, a sweet clean scent that she found disturbing. His skin was too smooth, too clean.

Dennis was asleep when the moon rose, but Jan lay awake. She knew that the moon was rising, she knew it even before the howling began. Her husband slept beside her, his breathing steady and undisturbed. The air in the apartment was stuffy

--warm and stinking of cats. The distant howling touched her with

urgency. She slipped from the bed silently and opened the curtain to let in the light.

"I'm leaving," she said softly, but Dennis' soft breathing did not change. She opened the window and stepped out onto the fire escape. She was naked. Her bare feet melted the snow that had settled on the metal platform. The metal was cold against her feet, the air icy on her bare skin, but these were distant pains, like something that had happened long ago. Deep within her, she could feel a change --a shift in allegiance, a trade of light for dark. This, she was certain, was what she had been waiting for all along.

The wolves came from the shadows

and the moonlight caught in their silver fur. They sat in a circle, looking up at her expectantly. She knew that they were waiting for her to join them.

On the fire escape's last landing, she hesitated, suddenly noticing the gold wedding band on her hand. She took it off and left it balanced on the metal railing. Quietly, without hurrying, she descended to the street. The falling snow filled in the marks of her bare feet.