

Don't Ask

by M. Rickert

Mary Rickert's first collection of short stories, Map of Dreams, garnered some nice reviews over the past year and it is currently a finalist for the World Fantasy Award. Her new story is a fantasy that might make you forget the women who run with wolves and make you think of the children instead....

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When the lost boys returned with their piercings, tattoos, and swagger, we rejoiced and greeted them with balloons, bubble gum, chocolate chip cookies, and bone-crunching hugs, which they did not resist. Only later did we realize that this was one of their symptoms, this acquiescence, not a sign of their affection for us, though we do not doubt their affection.

How could wolves slope through town, unseen, and steal our boys from bicycles, from country roads, from the edge of the driveway, from our kitchen tables, dank with the scent of warm milk and soggy cereal; from our arms—wasn't it just yesterday that we held our boys close and sang them lullabies? How could they be taken from us?

Yet they were, and we wept and gnashed our teeth, tore our hair and screamed their names into the dark. Through the seasons we searched for them so thoroughly that even in our dreams we could not rest and often awoke to find dewy grass stuck to the soles of our feet, dirt beneath our fingernails, our hair matted by the wind. We continued to search even after the Sheriff, with his hound dog face and quivering hands, said he would never stop looking but couldn't keep meeting with us and the very next day we woke up and no one waited at the door with pots of coffee and boxes of sticky, bright-colored doughnuts, and we sat at our kitchen tables and listened to school buses pass, not even slowing down for the memory of our sons.

But why speak about sorrow now that our boys have returned? They are home again, sleeping with hairy feet hanging over the edges of little boy beds, wearing the too small T-shirts, the split pants that reveal their long bones and taut muscles which quiver and spasm while they dream.

Of course we realized that in the years our boys were gone they had grown, this was the hope at least, this was the best possibility of all the horrible scenarios, that our lost boys were growing in the wolves' den and not slaughtered by them—so yes, we are happy, of course we are, but what is this strange sorrow we

discover in the dark? Why can't we stop weeping during this, the happiest of times?

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Years before our boys returned there was the return of the famous lost boy, stolen from the end of his driveway, the wheels of his blue bicycle still spinning when his mother went to the door to call him in for dinner and saw the bike there but did not immediately comprehend it as a sign of catastrophe. He was missing for eight years, and was a hero for a while, until he started committing petty crimes in the neighborhood.

The famous lost boy, a man now, explains that he has been observing our behavior and the behavior of our sons. We cannot help but feel squeamish about the whole thing, we are uncomfortable with the notion that, after everything that happened, we have been studied and observed and did not know it. We discuss this in whispers in the high school auditorium, where the famous lost boy has come to speak. The therapists have their theories but we assume only one person has the truth and we are eager to hear what he can tell us about all our suffering, because, we say, nodding our heads and hugging ourselves in the cold auditorium, this happened to all of us.

"No," the famous lost boy (now a grown man with long, stringy hair) says. "It didn't."

We have been advised by therapists and counselors, experts beyond the meager fourth grade education of the famous lost boy (by the time he came back, he was too angry and unruly for school) not to ask what happened. "They will tell you when they are ready," the experts say.

We ask them if they want maple syrup for their pancakes, what show they'd like to watch, what games they'd like to play. We spoil them and expect them to revel in it, the way they did before they were taken, but oddly, in spite of all they've been through, and the horrors they have endured, they behave as though our servitude and their eminence is a given. Yet, sometimes we ask a question, so innocent, "chocolate chip or peanut butter?" which they respond to with confusion, frowning as if trying to guess a right answer, or as though unfamiliar with the terms. Other times they bark or growl like angry dogs being taunted, but it passes so quickly we are sure it's been imagined.

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The famous lost boy wants us to give him our sons. "You can visit whenever," he says.

What is he, crazy? What does he think we are?

"You don't understand them. Nobody does. Except me."

We are not sure if this is true. The part about him understanding them. Perhaps. We know that we don't. The therapists say, "Give it time. Don't ask."

We ask them if they want meatloaf or roast chicken and they stare at us as if we have spoken Urdu. We show them photographs of the relatives who died while they were gone and find it disturbing that they nod, as if they understand, but show no grief. We stock the refrigerator with soda, though we know they should drink juice, and Gatorade, remembering how they used to gulp it down in great noisy swallows (and we scolded them for drinking right out of the bottle) after games of little league and soccer, though now they are happy to sit, listlessly, in front of the computer for hours, often wandering the house in the middle of the night. We ask them if their beds are comfortable enough, are they warm enough, are they cool enough, but we never ask them what happened because the therapists have told us not to. When we explain this to the famous lost boy (though why do we feel we have to explain ourselves to him? He can't even hold down a job at McDonald's) he says, "You don't ask, because you don't want to know."

We hate the famous lost boy, he sneers and ridicules and we do not want our sons to turn out like him. He is not a nice man. We just want him to go away, but he won't. Notoriously reclusive for years, he is now, suddenly, everywhere. Walking down Main Street. Hanging out at the coffee shops. Standing on the street corner, smoking. We are sorry to see that our boys seem to like him. Sometimes we find them, running together, like a wild pack. We call them home and they come back to us panting, tongues hanging out. They collapse on the couch or the floor and when they fall asleep they twitch and moan, cry and bark. We don't know what they dream about, though we think, often, they dream of running.

They run all the time now. In the morning they run down the stairs and around the kitchen table. We tell them to sit, or calm down, but it doesn't really work. Sometimes we open the door and they tear into the backyard. We have erected fences but they try to dig out, leaving potholes where tulips and tiger lilies and roses blossomed through all those years of our grief. We stand at the window wondering at the amazing fact of their tenacity in trying to escape us when (and

this is public knowledge, much discussed and debated by newscasters and talk show hosts in those first heady weeks after they were found) they never tried to escape their beasts.

Sometimes we feel our neck hairs tingle and we find the lost boys staring at us like animals in a cage, frightened and wary, then they smile, and we smile in return, understanding that they will have these bad memories, these moments of fear.

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The famous lost boy sighs, and right there, in the high school auditorium, lights a cigarette, which Hymral Waller, the school board president, rushes to tell him must be extinguished. "What?" the word sounds angry in the bite of microphone. "This?" Hymral's words drift from the floor, hollow, balloon-like, "fire," and "sorry." The famous lost boy drops the cigarette to the stage floor and stamps it out with the toe of his sneaker. We gasp at his impertinence and he squints at us.

"Okay. So, right. You're protecting your children by worrying about me and my friggin' cigarette?" He shakes his head, laughing a little jagged laugh, and then, without further comment, turns and walks out the fire exit door.

We should have just let him walk away. We should have gone home. But instead, we followed him, through the icy white streets of our town.

He walks down the cold sidewalk (neatly shoveled, only occasionally patched with ice) beneath the yellow street lamps, hunched in his flimsy jean jacket, hands thrust in his pocket, acrid smoke circles his head. We cannot see his face, but we imagine the nasty, derisive curl of his lips, the unruly eyebrows over slit eyes, the unshaved chin stubbled with small black hairs as though a minuscule forest fire raged there.

We walk on the cold white sidewalks, beneath the blue moon and we breathe white puffs that disappear the way our sons did. We keep our distance. We are sure he does not realize we have followed him, until, suddenly, he leaps over the winter fence (meant to discourage errant sleigh riding from this dangerous hill) into the park. A shadow passes overhead, just for a second we are in darkness, and then, we are watching the shape of a lone wolf, its long tail down, its mouth open, tongue hanging out, loping across what, in spring, will be the baseball diamond. We all turn, suddenly, as if broken from some terrible spell, and, careful because of those occasional patches of ice, we run home where our

lost boys wait for us. (Or so we like to think.) We find them sprawled, sleeping, on the kitchen floor, draped uncomfortably across the stairs, or curled, in odd positions, in the bathroom. We don't wake them. Any sleep they find is sorely needed and any interruption can keep them up for days, running in circles and howling at all hours. The doctors have advised us to give them sleeping pills but we are uncomfortable doing so; we understand that their captors often drugged them.

"It's not the same thing," the experts say.

Well, of course not. The experts are starting to get on our nerves.

And now, we realize, as we stand in the dark rooms of our miracle lives, we have been consulting the wrong professionals all along. We don't need psychologists, psychiatrists, medical doctors, or the famous lost boy. We need a hunter, someone who knows how to kill a wolf.

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We find her on the Internet and pool our resources to pay her airfare and lodging at the B & B downtown. We wish we had something more appropriate, fewer stuffed bears and fake flowers, more hunting lodge, but we don't.

When she arrives we are surprised at how petite she is, smaller than our boys, with an amazingly chipmunky voice and an odd xylophone laugh. She comes into the high school auditorium bearing the strong scent of the B & B roses soap, and we think we've been duped somehow, but, once we adjust our positions, craning our necks to see between shoulders, scooting over to the edges of the cold hard chairs, adjusting to her unexpected size, she commands our attention.

"Now, wait a minute," she says, laughing (and we resist the temptation to cover our ears). "Why are you all making this so complicated?"

We explain to her again how a werewolf roams amongst us, a monster! We shout and interrupt each other. We try to tell her how the werewolf was once one of our own. "We don't really want to hurt him," someone says. "We just want him gone."

At this she looks at us in such a way that we are all victims of her gaze. "Now wait a minute, why did you send for me? What am I doing here? Are you hunting, or starting a zoo?"

There is a moment's silence. After all, a zoo might be nice, a perfect addition to our town, but from the back of the room, a voice cries out, "Hunting!" The cry is taken up by all of us. Our boys have been through enough. We will protect them at any cost.

The small pink tip of her tongue protrudes between her pretty lips and she nods slowly, smiling. "He's not necessarily a werewolf. Not all men who turn into wolves are, uh, wait a minute. I'd like to get my fee now."

Duped! We've been duped after all. Suddenly it seems we have found ourselves in the middle of a bad joke, we'll pay her and she'll say something pithy and, all right, perhaps a little funny. Here's how you do it, she'll say and tell us something completely useless. We begin to argue this plan, what does she think we are, country hicks? Until finally she shrugs and nods at Hymral, who has volunteered to be her chauffeur and local guide. He has reported that she asked him if there are any good vegetarian restaurants in the area, which we consider further evidence against her. A vegetarian hunter, who ever heard of such a thing? But when we confront her with all the evidence, her small frame, her flowered suitcases, her lack of weapons, she just shrugs. "What's going on here, folks," she chirrups. "I've got ten jobs waiting for me right now and I ain't gonna stay another night, lovely as it is. If you want my expert guidance, you are going to have to pay me up front, 'cause the fact is, catching a wolf just ain't that hard, but I have to earn my living somehow."

"You gonna use your feminine wiles?"

She fixes such a look in the general direction of that question that we all shiver and step back as if separating ourselves from the inquisitor.

"I ain't no prostitute," she says, disgusted.

Well, what were we going to do? Consult more therapists with their various opinions and modalities? Call the Sheriff who did everything he could to help us find our sons though none of it was enough and they came home only after a freak series of events? Pray, as we did for all those nights and all those days and all those hours upon minutes upon seconds when our sons were being torn apart? Or pay this little Goldilocks person to rid us of the danger that resided amongst us?

We pay her, of course.

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He lives in a shack at the edge of town and he does not expect our arrival, though certainly he sees all our cars coming up the long deserted road, headlights illuminating the taloned branches of trees and the swollen breasts of snow. Certainly he hears the car doors open and shut. We stand there whispering in the dark, observe the light go on in the small upstairs window and observe it go out again. We suspect he is watching us through the web of old lace curtain there. We feel horrible, just terrible about what we have come to do but we don't even consider not doing it. At last he opens his front door. He is wearing plaid flannel pajamas, boots, and that old jean jacket again, which, later, some of us recall, was the coat his parents bought him when he first came back, all those years ago. "What's up?" he says.

We don't look at each other, embarrassed, and then at last someone says, "Sorry, Jamie, but you've got to come."

He nods, slowly. He turns to look back into his house, as though fondly, though later, when we went in there, we all agreed it was nothing to feel sentimental about, a beat-up couch, an ancient TV, a three-legged kitchen table, and, both disturbing and proof of our right course, enormous stacks of children's books, fairy tales, and comics. To think he wanted us to send our boys here!

He shuts the door gently, thrusts his hands into his pockets, sniffs loudly. He works his mouth in an odd manner, the way boys do when they are trying not to cry.

He walked right to us, as though he had no say in the matter, as though he could not run, or shout, or lock himself in the house, he came to us like a friendly dog to kibble, like a child to sugar, he came to us as though there was no other possible destination. He didn't ask why or protest in any way. It was so strange. So inhuman.

She was giggling when she told us how to do it, as though it were all just a joke, but she was also counting a big stack of money at the time. "How you catch a wolf is you catch the man. This is something the French knew. You don't have to wait until he turns and his teeth are sharp and he has claws."

We live tidy lives; ice-free sidewalks, square green lawns, even our garages, so clean you could eat in them (and some of us do, using them as summer porches). We are not eager to do something so sloppy, but for our sons we make the sacrifice.

We cut and cut looking for the pelt.

“The wolf rests within,” she said before she wiggled her red nail-polished fingers at us and nodded for Hymral to take her to the airport.

We have grown sensitive now to the sound of screams. Our boys run through the town, playing the way boys do, shouting and whatnot, but every once in a while they make a different sort of sound, blood-curdling, we always thought that was an expression, but when a man screams while being cut, his blood is dotted with bubbles as though it is going sour.

Once it was begun, it was impossible to stop.

“Wolf! Hair!” someone shouted holding up a thatch, which caused a tremendous amount of excitement until we realized it was scalp.

All we needed was the hair of the wolf trapped within the famous lost boy to redeem ourselves. There was no redemption.

Our boys slam the doors and kick the cats. We scold them. We love them. They look at us as though they suspect the very worst. They ask us about the famous lost boy and we say, “Don’t ask,” but they do, they ask again and again and again, they ask so much and so often that each of us, separately, reach a breaking point and turn on them, spitting the words out, the dangerous words, “What happened to you, while you were lost?”

They tell us. They tell us everything about the years upon months upon days upon hours upon minutes upon seconds. We sweat and cry. They gnash their teeth, pull their hair, scratch themselves incessantly. We try to hold them but they pull away. The sun sets and rises. We sleep to the drone of this terrible story and wake to another horrible chapter. We apologize for our need for sleep, but the recitation continues, uninterrupted, as if we are not the reason for it. We become disoriented, we have waking dreams, and in sleep we have death. Our boys change before us, from the lost sons we kissed on freckled noses to sharp-toothed beasts. We shake our heads. We readjust.

And we know now that what we said for all those years was not just a promise, but a curse; we will always be searching for the boys that were taken from us. We will never find them, for they are lost, no grave to mark their passing and passage by which they can return, like dreams or the memory of sunshine in the dark. We fill their bowls with water, and they come in slobbering, tongues hanging out, collapsing on the floor or couch, shedding hair and skin and we

would do anything for them, but still, some days, when the sun is bright or clear, you can find us staring out at the distant horizon. We have discovered that if we look long enough and hard enough we can see them again, our lost boys, their haircuts ragged with youth, their smiles crooked. They are riding bicycles, jumping over rocks, playing with their friends, shoving hamburgers into their mouths, gulping soda, eating cake, running out the door, running down the sidewalk; the sun shining on them as if they were not just our sons, but sons of the gods and then, suddenly, we are brought back to the present, by that feeling at the back of our necks, and we turn to find them watching us with that look, that frightened, wary look of an animal caged by an unkind human. At moments like these, we smile, and sometimes, on good days, they smile back at us, revealing sharp white teeth in the tender red wounds of their mouths.