

Jody Azzouni: I thought I was so clever: “We’re wolves.” And one day, after the story has been published, I google the phrase and a ton comes up. Rock groups. Dinner clubs. In retrospect I should have realized: it’s a really easy pun.

I was never interested in werewolf horror as a kid; too brutal, maybe. Too out of control. But wolves aren’t out of control. They’re a very hierarchical animal. Way more than we are. They don’t tolerate idiosyncrasy very much. I wouldn’t work out as a wolf. *Rusty, c’est moi*. I’ve made my peace with that. I wouldn’t have been a very good cop either. Or a bad cop, for that matter. We all need to find out who we are: where we belong. Niche-hunting. That’s what growing up is all about. Becoming mature. Recognizing your niche and fitting yourself into it. Finding out what you are. Which means: where you belong in the landscape.

I wrote the story in the summer of 2007. *Wisconsin Review* published it in 2008. So it’s still really close. I was thinking about what a lot of us are still thinking about. Global warming. Global pandemics. Terrorism. Wars over water. Various sorts of apocalyptic imagery. Think of it as a background aesthetic to the story. The world hasn’t ended, or anything. It’s just gone on (the way many worlds do). This is a coming of age story. Long tradition of those. Jack London, or maybe Mark Twain, or something. I didn’t see that coming when I was writing it. These days, you don’t sit down to write a coming of age story. Why would you? My generation isn’t that into growing up. (In case you haven’t noticed.) But I did. And I’ve done it twice. Now that I think about it.

We're wolves

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We eat a lot. Because we're so huge. And because we can change shape. All this takes calories. A lot of calories. We have big brains. It takes lots of calories to have big brains. We lope along the highways at about seventy miles an hour. Where cars used to be. Lope. That takes calories too. We're a very expensive animal. From the environment's point of view, I mean. We leave huge ecological footprints. Our carbon costs are very high. Like all predators. Like all big predators. Especially big social predators. Like us.

We forage in packs. We hunt. We hunt you. We're very hungry. We're always very hungry.

We're the children of omnivores. Us. Just like you are. We hunt vegans. You. You call us werewolves. We call you deer. Or living food. Meals on Wheels. Sheep. Dinner. And when you come right down to it, meat. Warm meat. Fresh meat. Oxygenated meat. There's a lot of prejudice on both sides. Even name calling. Understandably. It's not as if we can get together any time soon to negotiate a lasting peace between our kinds. Lie down in the fields, as it were, and chat up an agreement or contract. That's been ruled out. By our parents. By your parents. Making us what we are. Ancestors make choices and their descendents live out those choices. These days, anyway.

We always find your cornfields and wheatfields. Sometimes raspberries too. Blueberries. Potatoes. All tended by machinery. In farms just off the highways. We know that the meat we want is hiding underground somewhere nearby, but we don't know how to get at it. Nothing above the ground smells good to us. Around here, anyway. Soil and plants, oil and metal. Fertilizer. We smell the rain too. All we have left to eat, all the food we're traveling with, has been canned. Jellied. Jerkied. We need fresh meat. We need you.

We don't ravage your farms. Not ever. We leave everything as it is. We respect your need to eat. To eat well. We're all in this together. That's how we see it.

We're quite reasonable. Predators usually are.

Once upon a time there were unintelligent things we could eat. Cows. Chickens. Pigs. And wild game too: Caribou. Moose. Yak. Bison. Elk. Camel. There were lots of ungulates. A lot of different kinds of ungulates. Ruminants. In farms, even. Once upon a time.

Alpha Jack's in the lead. Always. Loping, up close behind him, are Tiffany and Kimberly. Then Christina, Amanda, and Stephanie. Lisa and Rebecca. Heather, Jennifer, and Nicole. Sam, our unambitious beta male. Then Crystal and Kelly. Rusty and me are in the middle of the pack along with several younger pups. Then, bringing up the rear are the two omega males, Pete and David. The adults in our pack are mostly female. I saw a rumor on the web that said that females handle group-think better than males do. Apparently that's always been the case, even with our

ancestors. The females, I mean. But I've also seen specials about packs that were supposedly mostly males. They don't just eat their prey. If they've trapped someone nubile, they rape her instead. Leave a latent surprise for her family. Nine months after the rape event, I mean. Packs like that sound like fun. If it's true, I mean.

Some of the females are wearing jewelry. Goth jewelry. Harnesses. Black metal skulls hanging from chain mail. Spiked dog collars. Tiffany doesn't wear anything. She doesn't have to. None of the men wear anything either.

A lot of us have blue eyes.

I'm Tiffany's son. I call her Mom. Because I'm still young enough to. I'm still young enough to be part of this pack. Her pack. Mom's an alpha Mom. She's big. Really big. And beautiful. She's got several other lovers. Besides Jack. There's Rebecca and Kimberly. And sometimes Lisa. That's why I'm still around, I think. Because Mom's an alpha. That's why Alpha Jack hasn't driven me away yet.

I don't want to leave home. I'm not ready to. Not yet, anyway. Alpha Jack might be my Dad. I don't know about that. I'll probably never know because no one talks about stuff like that. No one talks about how long Alpha Jack's been running the show. The name of the last guy he killed off, or how recent that was. Which pups of the other guy were allowed to live. If any.

Shame. Shame's what's involved. I understand. Alpha Jack and I have an understanding. At some point either I go or he goes. But I'm still young enough for him to take a fatherly interest in me. On whatever basis he manages to do that.

At night we sit around the campfire, trying to stay cool. Its flames are blue and chilly. Beautiful to look at. Most of us, however, aren't watching the icy campfire at all. We look like we're dozing with our eyes closed as we surf the web. In our heads, I mean.

We're still shaped like wolves. No one's changed shape for weeks. Because there's not enough food. Kaitlyn's telling me about a site she's found. Kaitlyn's a really cute pup. Someday, if I'm running things, she'll be the alpha female. My alpha female. That's what I fantasize about. Me and Kaitlyn bring the site she's been watching into hologram form. A couple of the others come over and look too. It's the History Channel. About evolution. And choice. Back when accidents were the rule of thumb. How slowly things changed back then. Dinosaurs for some 160 million years. Humans for about 250,000 years. *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Maybe they would have been dominant longer if they hadn't gotten in control of the process. Made themselves into all sorts of other things. Us for example.

Humans. They're almost all gone. Aborigines. That's what we call the ones that are left. That's what everyone calls the ones that are left. They're the intelligent creatures that can't change into anything else. That refuse to. The stubborn ones that are going extinct. They didn't have to stay human. No one else has.

Rusty told me about a special he once saw on a kind of human called the Amish. That's sort of what all humans are like now. For all I know, maybe all the remaining humans are Amish. Or Atavists. Ludites. Orthodox. We find humans fascinating. Real ones, I mean. We're always looking at websites on humans. Everyone does. You would too. They started the whole thing. It's ancestor worship. Of a sort.

We watch the hologrammed tree grow in time. It's beautiful, colorful and intricate. With all sorts of pretty little animals climbing around on its branches. To indicate when they showed up in evolutionary history. And when they vanished. As the branches move in time, small landscapes bud and expand, so that the evolving animals have small terrains to move around in. Like bubble universes coming to life. Amazing graphics, Kaitlyn says. We all nod in agreement. We watch primates emerge, spears in hand, evolving slowly from what look like big-eyed chipmunks or lemurs. Some kind of rodent. That's what our ancestors looked like. And then the homo sapiens sapiens finally show up. In clothing. Suits. Dresses. Ties. This cracks everyone up. Kelly barks the loudest, scratching one of her hairy teats with her muzzle.

Kelly's not too swift, but she's cute. She gives it out generously. I've done Kelly, and I'm not fully grown. She even lets the omegas have some. She's never going to have a pup with any clout, but she doesn't seem bright enough to care.

We keep watching the timelined tree. How humans splintered into different species. Different survival strategies. This isn't as interesting. We already know about all this. Nature's invented most of the good tricks already, some geneticist is saying. He looks like he might have been

human. Really human, I mean. It's an old piece of film. That's been spliced into the program, I mean.

We channel surf. Now we're watching something on the deer network. It's not been encrypted. Deliberately probably. Deer sites are often public. So wolves can check them out, find out where the other wolf packs are. So they can try to kill them.

That's how it works. If we find other wolf packs, we exterminate them. If we can. Or they exterminate us. If they can. There can't be too many wolves. That's the deal, the carbon deal. We're big animals. Life isn't supposed to be easy for big animals. If you produce a lot of carbon, then you're fair game. For the other big carbon producers. There can't be too many of us.

Territories. Each pack has its own territory. In principle, anyway. But territories are large and mobile. So it really doesn't protect packs from other packs. Laws. Always with the loopholes.

It makes everything rougher. In life I mean. No one likes to let deer survive. Set them free if there are too many to eat. They might tell on you.

The Ethics of Eating. This is a regular program deer like to watch. It cracks us up. Ethics. That's just a bunch of creatures making temporary deals with one another. Based on what they are. At that moment. And what they want. At that moment. The ethics of eating. Ha.

That's like thinking slaves have rights, Nicole says. When slaves weren't part of the deal. That's not the same thing at all, Rusty says to Nicole. When humans had slaves, they were all the same species even if they pretended not to be. All bets are off if you're not the same species, when you're different kinds of animals. Even if you can talk to one another.

Rusty's grinning the way he always does when he wins an argument. He shouldn't have said what he said to Nicole. She doesn't say anything back, but we can tell. Rusty's too young to mouth off to Nicole. He's always taking chances like that. He should be careful. She might take him out. Kill him. It happens. A lot. Rusty doesn't think enough about who he's talking back to.

It's odd. Teamwork combined with mortal enmity. All over the universe that's how it works. Enemies functioning together like cogs in machinery. Successfully. We use the web, and it's run by *lots* of creatures. Many of them wolves. But not from our pack. Many of them the sorts of things wolves eat. Many of them the sorts of things other things eat. That also work on the web. Or in other jobs in the service industries. Information is shared a lot. By everyone. Intellectual property is respected. Patents are respected. We even have a common currency. All of us, I mean. We're an economic community. Us together with the creatures we eat. And our competitors. That we try to kill, if we get a chance. Business is still flourishing. Big businesses. Small businesses. We buy and sell. Creatures buy and sell from creatures they kill or who kill them. Or eat. If they get a chance to.

And, we send emails to one another. I once corresponded with a young doe. When I was a child. For years. Talking to food. That's what I was doing. Children do stuff like that. That's why we

can all still watch Disney cartoons. Not a whole lot of the other stuff humans made makes much sense to us. Disney, though, Disney's forever.

There really aren't any outlaws. Not even us. Despite all the rhetoric on the deer networks. It's pretty odd, if you think about it. The kind of community we all belong to. All the thinking creatures. Civilization. Friends. That you eat if you get a chance. That's how it is now. That's how it's always been. If you think about it, I mean.

Probably you can tell. That I'm sort of into philosophy. As a hobby.

We've flushed out some deer. Centaurs, really. God knows what they thought they were doing above ground. In what looks like a village or something. God, we're so hungry. Endorphins, Rusty's saying to me, between bites, something still screaming beneath the two of us. That's why eating fresh meat is such a rush, he says before taking another big gulp. The meal stops screaming, goes unconscious. We chew now, a little more carefully, a little more calmly, tear muscle from bone in a more relaxed manner, gnaw the flesh off.

Centaurs. That's what we've flushed out. Blinking in the gray daylight. The upper part's a little thin, but there's plenty of nice meat on the legs and trunk. We're delirious with hunger. Centaurs don't change shape much. It's kind of the carbon compromise they've adopted. Half and half, all the time. More or less. Different folks, different strokes.

Alpha Jack's always warning us to save some meat, not to eat too much. Not to waste any of it by getting sick. The young ones always have to learn this the hard way. No matter how much Alpha Jack warns them. I deliberately pull away from the dead meal, let Rusty have the rest, wipe my mouth with my paw, and look around. It's mostly dead centaurs all over the place. Small scattered groups of wolves chewing contentedly, here and there. I decide to lope around the village a little. See what there is to see.

I catch up with Kelly, near what I guess is supposed to be a barn or something. Interested in a roll in the hay? I ask her. I got the phrase off of the web. I don't know precisely what it means, but the general intent is clear enough. Kelly looks like she might go for it when we both smell something in the barn. She starts to growl, getting ready to pounce. The door swings open and what looks like a human child emerges.

We're both taken aback. It looks like a human child. Really human, I mean. Not with still-webbed feet and fingers, like we have. Or with too much hair everywhere. And not with hooves. Like centaurs or pigs. Or with foreshortened upper arms. Or no shoulders. Like other creatures. We can all still take aborigine form. More or less. That's something everyone still has in common. More or less.

This one looks perfectly proportioned, though. Only real humans can do human right. Kelly's still readying to pounce. And eat. Whatever, I think.

Then Mom's there, barking fiercely at Kelly. That's a human, she's saying. There's blood all over Mom. In her mouth, her teeth stained red. She can't look pretty. To something edible, I mean. The child is running, arms outstretched. Towards Mom. And Mom's taken human form. Sort of. Half-human form. She's squatting on her wolf-haunches.

We're stunned. No one's ever seen anything like this before. The child is in Mom's arms, crying, pulling piteously on the fine curled hair on her stomach, burying her face between Mom's two human breasts. I see how Mom's taut stomach tenses as the child pulls, her muscles pulsing. In response, I feel something rising in my stomach too. A kind of rage. Jealousy too, deep in the pit of me. Despite my sudden hunger, I don't want to eat this child. I just want to kill it.

We don't know what to do. Mom's forced Crystal, who's still lactating, to feed the human child. Crystal's pup screams in rage until Mom frightens him away. That's when Alpha Jack finds out what's happening, from the shrieking pup, I guess. Alpha Jack's furious. What the fuck is this? he says when he shows up. He's warily watching the child suck on one of Crystal's teats, Crystal still in wolf form.

Mom is stroking Crystal with one human hand, and keeping a firm grip on her harness with the other, keeping her calm and steady. The child keeps sucking at Crystal's teat hungrily. I sympathize with Crystal. That thing pawing her teat is ugly and hairless. But you don't mess with Mom. What's going on? Alpha Jack says again. Fuck off, Mom says back. She grips Crystal's nape. Hard. The child keeps sucking. The sound of it is loud. Because the rest of us are frozen. The way only wolves do it. Waiting for the next thing to happen.

You don't say things like that to Alpha Jack. *Fuck off*. Not even Mom can do that. I'm afraid something bad is going to happen. Like she'll be killed. By all of us. Or by Alpha Jack. But that's not what happens. The rest of us paw the ground, looking down. No one watches either Mom or Alpha Jack. But we're all listening. Intently. As only wolves can.

Alpha Jack speaks. Very quietly. Very quietly for Alpha Jack. Who's always loud. He says: I don't think that's going to work. Crystal nursing her that way. She's going to get sick. Really sick. And die. *Fuck off*, Mom says again, and she grips Crystal tighter, on the back of her neck. Crystal growls, but she doesn't try to move. The child keeps sucking and drinking. Sloppily. And loudly.

And then the bad moment is over. Alpha Jack steps back, moves away from them, and the rest of us move away with him. Motherhood gone nuts, he says to himself, but so that the rest of us can hear it. And then he sort of chortles. The way a wolf would.

Not much later Alpha Jack mounts Kimberly. And then Rebecca. From behind. And then, almost like an afterthought, Lisa. He's pretty much human when he does it. When he mounts them. While they're still in wolf form. These aren't just fun fucks, what he's doing. They're messages. For Mom and for the rest of us. He's still Alpha Jack, that's what he's telling us. So be careful. That's what he's saying with each thrust into Kimberly. And into Rebecca. Who only likes to do it with other females. Who only likes to do it with Mom, actually.

No one watches him fuck the women. We all keep our eyes looking into the distance, or towards the ground. We don't make any noise. We all listen. We all get the message.

Mom and the child. And Crystal. They're off somewhere else. I'm playing with Crystal's pup, trying to cheer him up. Time to eat *grown-up* food, I tell him. It's working. He's kind of interested. He's going to take a chance on what I'm holding out to him. This one is going to grow up fast. I like that.

What was a human child doing with a bunch of centaurs? that's what I'd like to know, I'm saying to Rusty. Some kind of sacrifice you think? Nah, Rusty says, centaurs don't do shit like that. Maybe she was a pet, he muses. Pet, I say.

I really don't get pets. None of us do. The point, I mean. That's one more thing humans did that we really don't understand. It's like farming animals, Rusty says, like he knows. Only you don't eat them, he adds. Yeah, I say, it's like having teeth on your ass.

That's a saying we have. *Like having teeth on your ass*. Where they can't do you any good. And maybe even some harm. Pets are a transference of fears, of primitive fears, Rusty says. He just doesn't know when to shut up. If you're scared of something big, he says, like a wolf or a tiger, then you'll find a small harmless version of that animal really cute. It's transference. Of fear. We don't really do fear, Rusty keeps explaining to me, that's why we don't get pets. Submission's not fear, he adds. Uh huh, I say, waiting for him to realize I want him to stop talking.

Deer are scared of everything, Rusty tells me, they're even scared of aborigines. So maybe the centaurs found the little girl cute. Because she's so little. Whatever, I say. It's a theory I guess, I tell Rusty. And that's when Alpha Jack comes over, lets me know that we have to talk. Now. Uh oh, Rusty says, as I get up. You're so fucked, he says. Because of your mother, he adds. Because she's really lost it this time. Rusty really doesn't know when to shut up. I like him, but I know that he's not going to live that long. Somebody is going to kill him. Somebody like Nicole. Before I have a chance to.

But I think about what he's said as I lope over to where Alpha Jack's standing. How Mom hasn't had any pups since me. That's a little weird. Something's going on with her that I don't understand. Why she's still an alpha without any more pups. Besides me. I've heard on the web that females can stop it if they want to. Stop ovulating, I mean. But why would Mom want to do that? Pups give status. Not that Mom needs any more status, I guess. She's a big one, the biggest one here.

Alpha Jack's taken human form. He's staring out into the dark. You used to be able to see stars when you looked up at night. Or the moon. Not anymore. Not for a long time now. I take human form, and stand next to Alpha Jack. Submissively. Like I'm supposed to.

You feel sorry for her, Alpha Jack says to me. I don't know what he means. The child, he says, the human child. I do, I say, and I'm surprised when I say that. I'm surprised that it's true. I realize that you can want to kill something, and that you can feel sorry for it at the same time. At exactly the same moment. Emotions, they're so complicated.

So do I, Alpha Jack says, and I'm even more surprised. You have to understand, he says to me, that whatever happens between us, that child is the past. It's over for her. You, he says, you're the future. Uh huh, I say, submissively. I don't really see where this conversation is going, what Alpha Jack is trying to tell me.

This is some kind of fuck up, Alpha Jack is saying. Your mother and that human. It's not going to work. It's not Romulus and Remus. It's never going to be Romulus and Remus. I nod. I have no idea what he's talking about. He turns to me. The child is going to die, he says. It's going to be agonizing. When that child dies. And your mother isn't going to be able to do anything about it. Do you understand what I'm saying? I think I do. And then I realize I don't.

Alpha Jack exposes his throat to me. Just a little. Subtle. Then he winks. I'm bewildered, really bewildered. Alpha Jack is looking back out into the black. You're going to have to go up against your mother. That's what he tells me. I decide that I don't know what he means.

We're standing there together, looking out into the black. That's the future, Alpha Jack says to me. That? I say, the black we can't see into? You can see a little, Alpha Jack says, you can always see a little into the future.

Mom hasn't let anyone near the human child for days. We hear the child screaming. She's been screaming constantly. It's driving everyone nuts. We don't do pain and suffering. We always kill quickly. This is torture for us. Hearing this child suffer. This is torture for everyone. Mom is off

alone with her, trying to soothe her. Rocking the child in her arms, crooning to her. I can't imagine what this is doing to Mom. It has to be so painful. None of us go anywhere near Mom and the child. None of us dare. But we hear everything.

Alpha Jack kneels by me. He's expecting me to do something. He's been expecting me to do something for a while. I think I know what it is.

I come into the clearing where Mom and the child are. In human form. I can see that Mom is ready to kill me. When she sees me. She's crazed by the screaming, which only stops for moments. And then starts again. She's put the child down in the grass, turned towards me. She's growling, she's getting ready to attack me. I'm not going to survive this, that's what I'm thinking. I can't concentrate because of the child's screaming.

It's just me, I call to Mom. I lower my head submissively. It's just me, I say again. Whisper really. Mom nods, barely controlling herself. I can tell. We have to do this, I say to Mom. She nods again, bracing herself. Preventing herself, I know, from trying to kill me. Love. She loves me. Then I stand up slowly, very slowly. I take a careful step and then another towards the child, towards the screaming. She's convulsing, I can see that now. Meningitis. It's some form of meningitis, that's what Rusty's claimed. Something we carry. Not deliberately. It just happened. Evolutionarily, I mean. Like a lot of things.

There's no hope, I tell Mom softly.

She already knows that. She's known it for a while. It's whether or not she can control herself. That's what it's all about now. She backs away slowly, still growling at me. Then she turns rapidly, leaves the clearing. I didn't know if she would. I didn't know what I would do if she didn't.

I kill it quickly. Me. After Mom leaves. I look down at the child convulsing in the grass. She's blinded by her fever, she's not even aware that I pick her up. And maybe, because I'm in human form, I see how pretty she is, how cute she is.

I'm crying, just a little. And then she starts screaming again. I can't stand it. I change, use my jaws, kill her quick, stop her screaming, stop her suffering. This is the hardest thing I've ever done. We kill for food. We really don't torture our food the ways cats do. We're civilized.

After a while, after a long while, I come back to where the group is. I don't see Mom. I've left the dead child behind on the grass, in the clearing. No one is looking at me. I slump down near a rotting stump, close my eyes, and breathe. I don't think I'll ever be calm again. Then I hear Alpha Jack, near me, speaking very softly. To me. In a year or two, he says. In a year or two what? I snap. I open my eyes and look at him. I'm not being submissive. I'm too exhausted, too sad. Alpha Jack sighs. In a year or two I'm going to step down, he says. Retire. I'm going to yield, he adds. To you. I'm looking at him, and I'm not hiding my amazement. It's different in other packs, he tells me softly, they have to fight. They have to kill one another. We're civilized, we're not like the other packs.

We don't say anything more. We listen to each other breathe.

And then I'm thinking, a rite of passage. That's what I've just gone through. And then I think, that's just so fucked up.