

Wolf's Wake

The Queen of All Magic lived in a studio apartment on Fifth Ave. Last time I went to see her she was looking a little worn around the eyes. "Baby doll," she said, "bring me some aspirin." So I did.

Her bathtub was always full to the brim with water murky as the bayou, complete with big fat lily pads big as my head floating in the water. Underneath, there were scaled creatures sliding around on top of each other, mouths puckering at the surface asking for something to eat. Sometimes they were long, black bass, and sometimes they were fat, speckled goldfish, but always they were hungry. The aspirin was in the medicine cabinet behind the belladonna and the milkweed. She took two with a shot of bourbon. The Queen of All Magic didn't have any couches or chairs. She was sitting on the floor next to a low table, all the lights dimmed, but not so much that I couldn't see her clear as day.

"You been crying?" I asked her, and she looked at me from under heavy lids and blinked really slow. "Cause of what happened?"

"And what do you know about what happened?" she said, pouring more bourbon in her cup. I shared blood with The Queen

of All Magic. Everyone does in some small way, which means everyone also shares blood with each other. They just forget that sometimes, Queen said. But me and Queen's blood was weaved together tight. My great-grandmother was her sister.

"I know Wolf is dead," I said, putting my hands in the pockets of my overalls and looking up at the carpet hanging on her wall. It was a heavy one, showing all the faces of the moon man knows, and behind them some of the secret ones men could just guess at. Queen knew them all by name, and she'd teach 'em to me by whispering 'em in my ear at night when I slept.

"Yeah, he's dead alright," Queen said, her voice steady as iron. "Got his brains blown out huffing and puffing around the wrong hussy's house." She sipped her bourbon, and fished a cigarette out of the pack on her table. She stared at the wall for a long time before tucking it in her mouth and lighting it.

Sometimes Queen and Wolf ran around together, and sometimes they didn't. 'Times they were tight as the sun and the moon, laughing and playing with the universe together. Other times they were at each other's throats, Wolf going too far and Queen having to mop up after him. Always, though, they loved each other in their way. They were each other's everything, even when they were fooling around with somebody else, which was more often than not. The Queen of All Magic was like a flower you'd find deep in a marsh, barbed but beautiful too. You never knew if touching her would end up getting you poisoned, but you had to do it anyway. And Wolf was the handsomest man in town, in his own crooked way.

"You gonna fix it?" I asked.

"Ain't nothing left to fix this time," Queen said, blowing smoke

out of her nose. It gathered in the air just above her head, and I saw inside it the shape of the universe folding in on itself, everything and everyone coming to a close.

"You mean that?" I asked, tilting my head at her and slitting my eyes. Sometimes Queen didn't fix things 'cause she thought they ought not be fixed. Like my marks at school, and the poorness of the people on the streets. She said we had to fix 'em ourselves with our own hands.

"There's only so much magic," she'd tell me, "and I can't go wasting it on every little thing."

I'd tell her that my bad marks were half her fault, 'cause she's the one who taught me all I knew. Like the time I put down on a history test that people, just like all the continents, were one big thing until slowly we all started to erode and drift away from one another. The teacher said it wasn't time for poetry. Queen just laughed when I told her.

Other times she didn't fix things because they couldn't be fixed, like when my Mama got cancer the second time, and we all just had to stand by and watch her wither. I near hated Queen then, but Grandma made me see reason after some time.

"I mean it," the Queen of All Magic said, her voice dropping like a brick. "The next time I see that dirty bastard will be when our skeletons are dancing together in the next life." She swilled the rest of her bourbon down and stubbed out her cigarette. She reached down the front of her dress and pulled out a stack of bills.

"Run on down to the store and buy us some party favors," said Queen. "Get everyone together at the usual spot. I feel like celebrating."

I took the money, but I could spot the lie. I was young but not

an idiot. Sometimes adults mix those two things up. Even the Queen of All Magic, who usually knew better.

"What do you want?" I asked her, and she gave me a list.

First, I stopped at the corner store and passed him Queen's note with all the liquor she asked for. He looked it over then looked down his nose at me. He was an old guy. One of the ones who could remember Queen in her prime. Back then, I'd been told, puddles used to part so she could pass through, and the rain only fell when she said so. Her and Wolf could go out drinking and hit every bar without having to pay a single dime.

"She taking Wolf's death okay?" asked the old man. There was concern in his voice, and maybe a little jealousy, and longing too. Maybe, I thought, he was one of Queen's run-around dudes back in the day. They always wore their age a little different. Kept something like a star twinkling right behind their eyes. I looked for one in his, but he darted his eyes down, and scanned the list.

"Tell her I'll have it to her by eight. Tell her it's on the house," he said, pocketing the paper and turning away.

Next, I went to the grocer, and ordered the meat. Along the way I stopped and told this person and that, lounging on their steps, or walking down the street, about the party.

"Queen's having a get together," I'd tell 'em, and they'd stop whatever they were doing and do a double take.

"Tonight?" they'd say, and I'd nod. With each person I told the excitement built a little bit more in the air, till the whole neighborhood was buzzing. By the time I got to the Grocer the news had already gotten ahead of me. I'd stop to tell someone, but they'd cut me off, asking if it were true. All I had to do eventually was nod

my head.

At the Grocer's I ordered the ribs, and the beef, and the fish. It was the most I had ever seen Queen order, but the Grocer didn't seem surprised. He just wrote 'em all down with a little nod of his head like this was business as usual. At the end he smiled, gave me a sucker for free, and pinched my cheek.

"You sure do look like Queen when she was young," he said.

"You ain't never seen her young," I said back. "Anyone who did is already dead."

He laughed and shook his head. "She's always young. Or at least, she look young enough. Now go on, and get out of here. I'll see you at the party."

I unwrapped the sucker and stuck it in my mouth. Tripped on out of the store grinning, forgetting for just a minute that Wolf was dead. Parties will do that to you. For a moment everything is weightless, and everyone is alive and laughing.

How I heard it told is like this: Queen and Wolf were the only two babies born on the day, years and years ago, that the moon and the sun blocked each other out twice. Wolf was born during that first eclipse in the morning, when the moon drifted over the sun and sat there for one straight hour like she was never gonna move. Then, that night right before the stroke of twelve, Queen was born when the sun came back and got his revenge. People said they knew right then and there they were a special pair. More than lovers, more than brothers and sisters, more than any blood could ever be, they were tied at the soul. There were sixteen hours between their births, and they always celebrated 'em together with one long party going from nine in the morning to twelve at night.

Then they'd stumble off together drunk as skunks, no matter if they were running around together or with some other folk. That's just how it was. People understood, even if sometimes they were a little jealous. Queenie and Wolf, they were two sides of one coin.

Until Wolf died that morning in some girl's bed. Her and her husband weren't from around here. They were new. Guess they didn't understand the score like we do. That putting a bullet through Wolf's head was like blowing apart one of the last halves of the magic and rightness in the world.

It wasn't exactly the first time he had died, but it was the last.

The party was held near the peat bogs, one of Queen's favorite places, where you can't tell for sure if you're stepping on solid ground or if it'll give way at any moment and you'll go tumbling down into the wet swamp. People came with lawn chairs and coolers, and barbeques were lined up to make one great train where folks took turns cooking the meat and wandering off to get drunk.

The whole ward was there, even the girl Wolf had been in bed with when he got his head shot off. Everyone got real quiet when she showed up, her eyes puffy and her nose red, but Queen walked up to her, put an arm around her, and offered her a plate of sloppy ribs. Everyone relaxed when the girl sunk her teeth in to 'em, and then laughed when she asked if we were sure it was safe, partying on the wetlands.

"Sure it's safe, honey," one of the men said, "so long as you watch out for gators."

Everyone laughed again, and the girl ducked her head, not sure if she was being made fun of or if she was supposed to laugh along.

"Clarence, you fool, don't you go spooking the poor thing," Queen said, batting the air with her hand and shooting him daggers. "She been through enough today. It's safe as houses, dear. Just watch where you put your feet and don't go to close to the edge." Queen gave her shoulder a squeeze and moved off through the crowd. I made my way across the soggy earth to her and cocked my eyebrows, asking what she was up to.

"Poor thing don't have any kin now that the cops snagged up her husband," Queen said, piling some chicken onto a paper plate, and shoving it into my hands. "So don't give me that look. Ain't her fault in the end. Wolf reaps what Wolf sows, and ain't a woman alive with any sense that woulda turned him down, married or not." A soft smile came to Queen's face. She already looked younger than she was, but somehow she managed to drop ten more years when she smiled like that. And she only smiled like that when she thought of Wolf. Or me, I guess. "Let's sit down and eat together, precious, and talk about how life is hanging."

And so we did. For a good half hour of the party Queen sat with me and listened to just me, which is a real honor. And 'cause she was listening, other people did too, until everyone there was asking me questions about my last test, or where I got my shoes, or what I did to my hair. Queen could do that. Pluck you up and make you a star. Redirect all her light your way so you could feel what it's like to be that warm.

That's probably how Wolf made that girl feel. Good enough that she forgot all the little details of her life were just that: little.

Not long after everybody was feeling good, drunk or not. The sun started setting and people started lighting lanterns, and hanging 'em up so all around the bog it looked like fairies were floating

just above the water, darting in and out of the trees. People started playing music, dancing, and telling stories.

"Remember that time Wolf won all the money on that gambling boat? Even won the boat, too? Queen found out he'd cheated it right out from under everyone's noses. So when he went to sleep off his drunk on his new boat, she sunk it. He woke up just in time. Said he opened his eyes 'cause he thought he wet the bed, and instead finds he's waist deep in water, and all his winnings are, too"

"Remember when Wolf swam the river in the winter just to prove he could? And he got so cold he died of pneumonia right after?"

"It was to win back Queenie wasn't it? From some big city fella who said he was in the Olympics?"

"And it worked, too. She kissed his fool ass back to life."

"That's not how it went, is it? It was the city cat that swam the river and died, right?"

Queen just smiled at their stories. Never told them herself or changed 'em. She let them rewrite them as they pleased. Stories, she told me, have lives of their own. The teller and the listener give 'em their own meaning, so when they're being told what's really being said says more about whose saying it and whose hearing it than it does about the people in the story. Even when it's about you. All the stories were about Wolf, and since they were about Wolf, they were mostly also about Queen. But I also knew they were about us. All of us there.

Soon Queen got up after she'd listened to enough stories about Wolf and she started dancing. She danced beautiful, weaving in and out of the other dancers and taking whoever's hands she pleased. She danced with everyone there. Even the girl who'd seen

Wolf died. I stood up and danced with her once or twice, and she lifted me in the air and spun me around.

"I love you, little girl," she said. She didn't say it often. She didn't have to. But it felt good hearing it. Then she set me down.

By this point everyone was drunk or falling asleep on their feet, or both, so it's never told clearly. I know Queen would say that's alright. That they're just telling it the way it is for them. The most popular story, the one that makes the most sense to people now and got run in the paper, is that she fell into the water sometime around midnight, and she was so drunk she drowned. That's the one that would be true if she weren't the Queen of all Magic. Another, and this is the one the locals tell, is that she got snapped up by a big white gator that was waiting in the water just for her. They saw it rear up and take her in its mighty jaws.

But this is my story, and I know what the truth is 'cause I watched it. I had my eyes right on Queen and could see her clear as day as always. She was dancing further and further away from everyone, out towards the water. When she got to the very edge the surface of it rippled, and out came a big white head, and then shoulders, and then arms and legs, until a skeleton was standing atop the bog. It was Wolf. I could tell cause of the cap he had set on his head. He always wore it tilted just so. Queen took his hand and he spun her round and off they danced onto the water. I had made my way right to where Queen was standing when he swooped her off, and I alone watched. Everyone else was laughing and drinking, and too caught up in their own fun.

As they danced I saw Wolf rebuild himself piece after piece until he was all flesh. I thought then that they would head back to us, yell surprise, and laugh together at how they fooled us. But

they kept dancing. Queen spun around and around, and each time I could see her face she was grinning. Until after a moment her face was nothing but a grin. Her skin was gone, her muscle gone and she was bare naked, a skeleton just like Wolf had been, and was again. They danced further and further away, and just as they were nearly out of sight, I saw her one last time raise her hand up and wave to all the people on the land who weren't looking. And then once for me.

And then she and Wolf were gone, and we never did see them again. But out by the bog during the right kind of summer night, if there's a real good party going on, every now and then I hear something like a laugh. See something like shadows dancing cross the water.

Dancing Girls

I'm going to tell you a story. About my younger brother. You're at that age now where you have to hear these things, even if you don't like it. See, what you're feeling ain't all that different. It happens to all of us, at some point or another. What really matters is how you handle it.

Jerome was my youngest brother's name. We called him the gazer though, 'cause he was always going around just looking at shit like he was half in some other world. Jerome smoked a blunt, the dude hit the blunt just two times, and he would get his mind high. He was always coming up with some of the craziest shit you could only ever half believe. But this story is true 'cause I'm telling it. So listen, alright?

Down the block there were these girls. Twelve of them, each just as hot to trot as the next. They all lived in the same apartment complex, and during the day, they'd all sit on the stoop, faces made up, long legs stretched out. They were the life of the neighborhood.

Shit was just starting to warm up and everybody was sweating a little, itchy in their jeans. Even I started running around with my shirt down the street, and usually I didn't go in for that sort of