

# Wolves

By Bill Ricardi

The attic used to be a great comfort to me. It was a place where I spent many of my happier days, back when Marie and little Edward were still alive.

I remember the lazy Sunday afternoons, sitting by the roof window that we had painstakingly installed. The damned thing leaked for weeks, resisting fix after fix, treatment after treatment. But eventually, the three of us were able to sit under that massive slab of glass, looking on defiantly as the rain spattered impotently against our monument to man's ingenuity.

Back then, the reclaimed pine flooring was clear of dust and debris, allowing Edward to rumble through with his toy trucks. He knew not to go behind the thick black curtains that partitioned off Marie's film development setup. That was her space, her realm. I was content to play with my son in our fortress of imagination, where Tonka became titanic, and where Lego became legendary.

That was three years past. Wolves they said. Those CSI chaps had it figured out within hours. "Wolves." said the moustached sergeant with a sad, practised little shake of the head. "Wolves I'm afraid sir, and I know this must be devastating. The development a few miles out has driven them out of their habitat. I'm deeply sorry sir. If it's any consolation, it happened very fast."

There was no consolation. The bloodstain on the back lawn that opened onto the northern woods was indistinguishable from one of those scenes in a comic book. You know, the ones where there's nothing left of the villain but a fine red mist and a mark on the pavement. There was nothing left to bury.

The funeral was nice. Tasteful. During the service, I wondered if things would have been different if I would have taken the day off from work. But it was an improbable thought. I was just as addicted to IT as Marie had been to photography.

That addiction, that workaholic nature, all ended on that tragic day. I don't work at all these days. The life insurance and the settlement from the development company, found guilty of gross negligence and falsifying the natural impact report, meant I didn't really have to worry about a job.

But even though I did little more than putter around the house, I allowed the attic to fall into a state of disrepair. It was covered in dust... I just didn't see much need to come up here. Not without them. In fact, I only came up here today because the damned roof window had started

to leak again. The moisture was running along the beams and starting to drip through cracks in the kitchen ceiling.

It was heavily overcast this afternoon, but not raining. Poke and prod as I might, I didn't see any clear defect in the window's rubber sealant or caulking. I would have to run a hose outside if I wanted to find the leak.

Defeated for the moment, I wandered past the heavy curtains and over to Marie's workbench, untouched save for the removal of those pungent development chemicals. I opened up her portfolio, an oversized photo album meant to show off 4 inch by 5 inch landscapes. She had loved this format, it was her passion. Her 1950's era Crown Graphic hadn't been recovered from the scene of the accident, but I could still hear that crisp, unique camera action in my mind.

I flipped through some of her favourites. The train trestle. The airport. The moors. And then, startlingly, I found two new pieces at the very back of the album. One was the tallest oak tree I had ever seen in these parts. Another was a low shot of an abandoned playground. I flipped back to the beginning, wanting to understand these 'new' pieces in the context of her complete body of work.

Going through the pictures I was briefly swept away by the nostalgia. Then one of the pictures fell out of the album. What I saw sent a chill through my bones.

It was a mistake. That's the first thing that came to mind. But Marie didn't print mistakes, didn't blow them up, didn't lovingly and carefully bathe them in her potent chemicals. She didn't slide them into her precious portfolio for due consideration. It was so out of character as to be alien.

And yet, the picture was white, as if it had been fully overexposed. No. Not pure white. I crouched down, getting on my haunches to examine this oddity in the dim light of the afternoon's cloudy bleakness.

It was a picture of another white picture, one that had been offset counter clockwise, which was a picture of yet another smaller picture offset again. And this pattern spiralled down into infinity, where it met some kind of photographic singularity: A lone dot in the very center.

I stared at this abomination in confusion, in rage. This was a waste of Marie's time, of her considerable talent. To perform this sort of crude, faux-clever mechanical exercise was so far outside the nature of the woman that I knew and loved, that I felt this had to be the work of an impostor.

It was only after my rage had left me weak and shaking that I discovered the power of the piece. The depth. The singularity that wasn't singular at all, but seven. Seven black limbs that crawled up out of that infinity. Seven black tentacles that pulled with them the final subject of Marie's

work. I watched, enraptured, as the gateway she had opened three years ago finally opened for me.

I laughed, a sound of pure fear and pure elation. As the creature, flayed and dripping black blood, crawled up through the Droste portal, I suddenly understood. I knew why the back door was open that day. I knew that I would have been helpless to stop it then, as I was helpless to stop it now. Each of the seven leathery limbs, muscles bare to the air and flexing as they pulled the horror back into the third dimension, reached up and out at impossible, oblique angles.

I was helpless before the incongruity of it all. Piss flooded my trousers and my jaw hung open. The sound coming from my throat now was somewhere between a scream and a croon, involuntarily calling this naked predator forth. To witness, to feed. To be.

I would soon be with my little Edward and my too-clever Marie once again. The pain was exquisite, sacred, as it reached out and tore off my limbs, my gaping jaw, my sex. Soon I was nothing more than a comic book blood splotch, a puzzle that even the cleverest of CSI blokes couldn't solve.

Wolves indeed.