

## *Nobody Understands You Like You*

We encouraged her to get the dog. Not that we take responsibility, because we don't, and the word we used was *puppy*, by which we meant a retriever for the kids or a terrier she could train to wave bye-bye, but she's one of those sanctimonious types hell-bent on salvaging wrecks, so of course she went to the pound, and of course she started with Death Row, and of course she chose an animal no one else wanted. That no one wanted *for good reason* is our point, but she didn't ask our advice. Never mind that we shared twenty feet of chain-link in the back. Never mind the howling. We'd have told her to avoid anything high-pitched or hairy, no googly eyes or missing legs, nothing elderly or special-needs, and okay, pick an ugly one if you have to, but for god's sake, don't bring home an animal that belongs in the woods.

We might not have thought to say, specifically, don't bring home a wolf.

What she did was she brought home a wolf.

Claimed it was a mixed-breed husky, but no amount of paperwork could convince us it was domesticated at all. It didn't walk; it slunk. Army-crawled across the sidewalk. Patchy fur and beady eyes, silver tuft between its shoulders that stood up like a dorsal fin. The leash like an insult around its neck.

The day she brought it home, one of us — was it me? — whispered, *That thing has definitely eaten Grandma.*

Swear to god, right then every bird in the neighborhood went silent.

We didn't confront her right away. Poor thing was a divorced mom, no family or friends, and if she'd made a single good decision in her life, we didn't know about it. Her ex was a real condescending type who once stole a snow shovel off our porch and replaced it with an inferior snow shovel. We were glad she'd gotten rid of him. We wanted her to heal and be the good neighbor we knew she could be, inviting us over for dinner and whatnot, the kids clinging to our legs when we walked in . . . we didn't have children, but we thought we'd be good godparents, though we weren't entirely sure what the job entailed, and anyway, we weren't trying to jump the gun on the relationship, just that she was exactly the kind of lost

soul we liked to befriend. We had a whole bevy of lost souls in our rotating potluck, and they always brought the best cocktails.

We hoped if she ever stopped moping she'd see how she didn't need anyone else because we could mow her grass in the summer, and bring chicken soup if the kids were sick, and give her a cup of sugar if she was—well, she wasn't the cookie-making type, but you know what we mean—and that's the kind of neighborhood we wanted to live in. We could've taught the puppy to balance a biscuit on its nose, or—we're not opposed to thinking big—to do magic tricks like in that video that went viral. We could've been famous, and not in the way we are here, now, talking to you.

She was suffering. You hear stories about mothers who crack, and you always wonder about the bystanders, the family, the *neighbors*, and there we were, watching her unravel and telling ourselves we had to do something. We're not heartless. We worried about the children and also our property values. There had been a number of car prowls and a problem with graffiti, and we're not saying her oldest son was responsible, but we'd caught him in the alley more than once. So yes, we called Child Services. And yes, they did a home visit. And when she asked if we knew who'd narked on her, and when she explained how *that little curveball* was going to affect her custody battle, and when her tone got too snippy for us, we suggested she get a puppy.

But she brought home the wolf, and then instead of buying dog biscuits, we were stocking up on pepper spray to keep the thing from lunging at us every time we returned the gym balls her kids whiffed over the fence.

But now we're getting ahead of ourselves.

Those kids were trouble, it's true, but we admit to not entirely thinking through the whole Child Services thing.

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The day she brought home the wolf, we were at her door within the hour, holding the gift we'd made, a mug for her and a matching water dish for the puppy. Her eyes slid from one of us to the other.

"Greg," she said. "Linda."

"Hi, Jamie," we said.

She smiled. Well, smirked. Difference between laughing at and laughing with, as Mr. Fletcher, our high school band director, used to say. Band kids get picked on, which was why we stuck together. *You should get married*, he told us. *Nobody understands you two like you do.*

The wedding was perfect. We said our vows in unison.

That was almost thirty years ago. Sometimes, when the rotating potluck lands at our house, we break out the clarinets and play our wedding march from memory. We can also do the fight song and national anthem, and we take requests when our friends remember to bring sheet music. Jamie came once, but she drank too fast and clogged the toilet, and when this one guy, Clark, who always said what everybody else was thinking, asked her what she did in her free time, she pounced. "Time is always free," she said, raising a shaky glass. "When we stop believing that, we cease to be human." The glass tipped, and the wine went everywhere.

She declined all invitations after that, even though we told her the stain came right up.

We appreciated that she thought about what it meant to be human. When we got philosophical, our friends told us to lighten up, and that was disappointing because of the unexamined life not being worth it or whatever.

The day she brought home the wolf, Jamie stood in her doorway waiting for us to say what we wanted, so we started in, volleying back and forth and interrupting each other how we do: *congrats on the new pet, is it really a husky? big enough to be a guard dog, must be some kind of zoo reject, not going to lie, looks like a flipping wolf!*

"A wolf?" she said. "I guess a little."

*Not judging! Not criticizing! But what's the return policy because it seems dangerous, frankly, and we're worried about you and the kids, which, where are the little bellions by the way, bellions in a good way of course, they upstairs?*

"With their father." She slumped against the doorframe. "He gutted me in court."

We gasped. She frowned.

"It wasn't because of you," she said. "He dragged in my whole personal life."

We knew what that meant. A visit from Child Services was nothing compared to her personal life, which, truthfully, we didn't approve of either. Her new friends were worse than her ex. We

say friends, but they were her lovers or whatever you call it. They didn't make polite company, so we didn't know their names, but we called the last one the witch doctor because she carried this old-fashioned medical bag for a purse and wore a fur coat—we're put off by the whole business, so we don't even want to speculate—mink?—and once we asked our friends what everyone thought was in that huge bag, if it was herbs or spells or body parts on ice, but Clark just said it was probably booze, and where was the fun in that?

The witch doctor is the one you heard about, but there were others. One had a yappy dog she kept in her car all night, parked on the street in front of our house, so we left a note on her windshield that we didn't appreciate the dog's noise, and the next day our lawnmower got stolen.

Another one kept knives in her glove compartment. Don't ask how we know. Not pocket knives, either; more in the category of weaponry. *Deadly weapons*, as Kip Clipson, the host of *America's Likeliest Criminals*, says, and if we're being honest, there were striking similarities between Jamie's new friends and America's likeliest criminals.

It was like Jamie needed to love things that were hard to love. Maybe that was her talent. Maybe that was her downfall. It was definitely her downfall, but maybe it was what she needed to survive. Like she dealt with pain by summoning it. If not pain, then danger. Maybe she thought she was being proactive, inoculating herself against real tragedy.

She wasn't. But we admire her for the thought, if that was her thought.

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Is it wrong to say we expected better because she was a mother? We'll put it this way: Jamie was no victim. We're not saying she got what she deserved, but we want you to know it's not like it sounds. She took unnecessary risks. She fostered tendencies in herself she would've done well to suppress. We thought a puppy might convince her to act less like a sex-crazed lunatic. We hope you don't mind if we're blunt about that. It's not like we *want* to say these things. We liked Jamie. She was good people, as Mr. Fletcher used to say. She was solid.

But she left her windows open when she and her lovers were going at it—they called it  *fucking* , if you want to know, and we didn't think that was appropriate in a house with children—and we don't think she even owned curtains.

Sometimes, listening to them, we'd kiss each other and promise never to be mad. Sometimes we got a little frisky ourselves and wondered what would happen if we let loose like that. We didn't really want to find out, just that they seemed so grateful to be alive and young and naked, and don't get us wrong, we love each other, but we're not young anymore, and we certainly never walked around naked. We've also never had to call the cops on each other, so there you go. It was like living next door to this great movie. Maybe it makes your life seem smaller, but once it's over, you're grateful to be back in your car and headed somewhere familiar.

Jamie never knew where she was going. She needed stability. We thought that even if a puppy didn't help, it couldn't hurt. Boy were we wrong about that.

To be fair, she didn't get a puppy. We want to be very clear about that. We never suggested she get a wolf.

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We told Jamie we were sorry about the custody thing, and she invited us in for tea, and we would've gone in, we absolutely would've, if the wolf hadn't right then skulked up behind her. Fixed us in its evil gaze, tongue lolling. It looked at our necks and salivated. She'd tied a red bandanna around its neck, which she took in one hand while she stroked its back with the other. Its expression didn't change or soften. Just meeting its eyes rearranged your soul.

We told her we didn't want to intrude, that we'd talk another time about the wolf.

She smirked again. It was hard not to take offense. "You really think my dog is a wolf." Like she was making note of it.

We backed off the porch, calling our goodbyes from the sidewalk. Jamie petted the wolf hypnotically, muttering, "Goodbye, neighbors."

We tried to talk to her about the wolf on three other documented occasions, but she refused to listen. We've been asked why

we didn't call Animal Control, but you have to understand that the thing *came from Animal Control*. It's not like vigilante justice is in our natures. We were band kids. We preferred dinner parties to stakeouts.

We even called our Realtor, Sue Singleton, and she did a walk-through but advised us to hold out until spring. "I'd call someone about that dog next door," she said when she left. "It's real off-putting."

We started unlatching Jamie's gate. That's our confession. Maybe it wasn't right, but we felt trapped. We wanted the wolf gone, and we didn't care how it happened.

Meanwhile the thing with Jamie got worse. The witch doctor was there whenever the kids were not, and we'd seen Jamie throw the witch doctor's clothes on the lawn, and we'd seen her lie in the snow while the witch doctor tried to persuade her to come inside, and we'd seen her drink a whole bottle of vodka and then vomit off the porch, and we knew she was falling apart. Domestic violence is wrong, and we were pretty sure Jamie was getting the brunt of it. It made us jumpy and exhausted. We never knew when they might have an outburst. Once the witch doctor pounded on our door, and when we didn't answer, she waved her hands around like she was either casting a spell or swatting bugs, but we were pretty sure it wasn't bugs.

"Perverts," she yelled. "Stay off our property." Which was a weird thing to say since it wasn't her property, and all we'd done was politely knock and inform Jamie that we'd seen the wolf stalking somebody's cat across from the Dairy Queen two blocks over.

Before she left, the witch doctor kicked a pot of our begonias off the porch. Jamie was over sweeping terra cotta shards before we could call the police, so we didn't call them, though, in retrospect, we should have.

"Sorry about that." Jamie wore the red bandanna around her head. "It's been hard."

We kept it short: *You deserve better.*

"I know," she said, nodding, but we could tell she didn't.

Later, Jamie and the witch doctor walked to the ravine at the end of our street and stayed down there a long time. Hours. When they returned, Jamie was wearing the fur coat, and they had the wolf back on its leash. Her ex dropped the kids off that evening,

and the witch doctor made a huge meal that they all ate in the dining room like a regular family. Jamie set out a bowl of food for the wolf, but it looked like it'd just as soon eat her face.

*Something bad is going to happen*, we said to each other. Jamie's problems had become our problems. We talked about what we needed to do. We agreed that nobody was going to help us, but we were in this together.

You pulled out one of those weekly sales fliers, folded around an ad for a tent sale at Gun World.

I thought that was your idea.

Anyway, we went together.

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We know what this sounds like. It sounds fake, right? The wolf, the witch doctor? It sounds like we're making this up to get on TV.

We'll take a lie detector, if you have one.

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The marquee outside Gun World advertised training classes and party rentals. We browsed the pink and orange Swiss Army pens in the tent out front before heading inside. The place was packed. A guy in a white button-down swiped our driver's licenses at the door and directed us to a waiting area, where a girl in an identical button-down shook our hands. "I'm Brittany," she said. "Is this your first visit?"

We nodded. Brittany wore a lot of mascara. She told us she was a psych major at Eastern and had four older sisters, which explained the mascara. She listened attentively to our story, frowning like she was used to hearing bad news.

"Nuisance animals compose a large chunk of our business," she said. "We know the value of a peaceful home." She folded her hands at her chest. "I'm a yoga instructor here, too."

*Here?* we said. *How wonderful and surprising!* We asked what we should do about the wolf, although we called it a dog. We didn't want to alarm her.

"I can't advise any particular course of action," she said. "But I can show you some options."

We told her that options were exactly what we needed her to show us.

She led us to a roped-off section where demo weapons hung on the wall like athletic shoes. They had names: Happy Ending, Last Resort, Old-Fashioned. One of us modeled the First Timer in a three-way mirror while the other compared Hustler Pro to Hustler Comfort. We eliminated anything too complicated or cheap. Brittany was encouraging but discerning, talking us out of the flashy Rorschach and the nostalgic Western. She recommended the Problem Solver for our needs, and we appreciated the ease of its point-and-shoot operation, as well as the handcrafted holster. Brittany guaranteed our satisfaction and signed us up for a marksmanship class on Mondays and her own Yoga for Stress Reduction class on Wednesdays.

“It’s for every body type,” she said as we left.

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On Mondays we learned how to aim and fire, and on Wednesdays we meditated on a world where our problem no longer existed. Brittany wore a headset and asked us to imagine how it would feel to live in a stress-free world. She asked us to consider what we could do to eliminate the stressors in our lives. We peeked at each other and the cross-legged people around us, an older woman in sweats, a lanky man breathing loudly. We pictured them solving problem after problem like superheroes.

We appreciated how the class increased our ability to empathize.

At first, the presence of the Problem Solver really did seem to solve our problem. Jamie bought a padlock for the gate, and the witch doctor built this elaborate doghouse in the backyard. She had the kids out there hammering and painting and putting little candy-striped curtains in the windows. Jamie put down mulch in the front yard, even planted a couple of hot pink Gerber daisies. We would’ve picked something less ostentatious, but we were glad she was finally trying to fix the place up.

We felt okay, and even went ahead with our night of the rotating potluck. That was when one of us—no, it was you; I never would’ve done that—brought out the Problem Solver for the first time. Clark said, “That’s frightening,” but everyone else seemed

impressed. You pointed it out the window at Jamie's house, where the wolf was standing in the window, staring at us as usual. The rest of us laughed nervously until you pulled back the hammer. "Play dead," you said.

The beast stared, unmoved.

"It's not loaded," I said, and you said, "Yes, it is."

You dropped your arm, the Problem Solver by your thigh. Said you needed to take a shower.

I said, "Right now? In the middle of the party?"

You raised the gun and pointed it at me.

Our friends tutted around, *come on now* and *that's not funny* and they poured more wine and made jokes—*tough guy, eh?*—but they could tell I was shaken. You cracked a smile, finally, and said, "Just teasing."

But you sort of said it to the room, not to me.

Then you went upstairs and took a shower.

Later that night, you climbed on top of me, and I could've sworn your eyes glowed. We did it every night that week. Can we say that? It's true. You smacked my behind once. You'd never done that before.

I thought you said you liked it.

I never said I didn't like it.

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We were so caught up in each other, we ignored what was going on next door, which is a shame because the next week was when all hell broke loose.

We've traced it to the doctor's bag. Seemed that Jamie, like the rest of us, was curious about what was in it. So she snooped, and whatever she found upset her. We heard them before we saw. We were walking back from the Dairy Queen, where you'd put my hand in your pocket, and I'd felt the Problem Solver there. I hadn't known you'd brought it, but I kissed you right there on the sidewalk.

"You guys are so cute," a girl watering her lawn told us.

My hand was still in your pocket when we heard the yelling. We knew right away who it was.

"That's private property," the witch doctor barked.

"You lied to me," Jamie yelled.

And so on.

We weren't sure what Jamie had found, but there was a skirmish on the lawn, and at one point Jamie dumped the bag. We got a glimpse of ripped envelopes and tiny liquor bottles before the witch doctor scooped everything back up.

"You bitch," the witch doctor yelled.

Something was going to happen. We could feel it in the air, even before Jamie's son came outside with the wolf. Jamie told him to go back inside, but he picked up a handful of mulch and threw it at her. Hard as he could, right at her head. The wolf jumped around like it was delighted, then it broke free of the leash and leapt right for Jamie's throat.

We could say we only meant to scare them. That's what people say about situations like this. But that would be a lie. We felt calm. Our blood pressure was normal. We didn't want to scare anybody. We wanted to save Jamie.

You took the gun from my pocket.

But you were the one who'd brought it.

I always wondered what kind of person I'd be under pressure, and now I knew.

You were flipping amazing.

We were. The car prowls stopped after that.

You knew right what to do. Didn't you? Didn't you know exactly what to do?

I did.

And your aim! Blam: problem solved.

Shout-out to Brittany at Gun World.

The poor kids, though. They were traumatized for a good long while, though we're sure they're okay by now, or at least we haven't heard otherwise. The thing we'll remember forever, though, is how Jamie held that damn wolf after it died. Everyone froze at the explosion of the gun, and it was like nobody wanted to move again to see what damage was done. The witch doctor held her bag like a shield to her chest. We never saw her again after that.

The wolf's head was blasted open, but Jamie, god bless her, crawled over and gathered that creature in her arms like it was her baby. Stroked its horrible side. Buried her face in its fur. That woman — she generated hope like a force field. Rejected the label *vicious dog* to the end, though that was the official verdict.

We never could explain to her that she didn't have to deal with all that transmutation of pain. We heard she moved into an apartment complex with a gated entry and a no-pet policy.

Our new neighbors are a young couple in some buzzword science field we can never remember, bookish and waifish, the kind of people who reminded us of ourselves just starting out, before houses became things to stage, lists of interchangeable amenities and spin. Before we learned how to spray-paint and spot-clean. The day they moved in, the sun was setting behind the house in a way that covered the roof in light and made it seem holy, like the end of a movie. The trees were still as cardboard.

*Welcome to the neighborhood, we said. Let us know what we can do.*



A. Gannon, photograph