

Howling at the Night

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And just like that I am awake. I sit up and instinctively sniff the cool air as my pupils readjust, trying to recognize the shapes and shadows around me. The seconds tick, tick, tick and I listen to the sleeping rhythm of the house. And then it starts up again, angry and insistent and familiar. It intersects the stillness of the air and reverberates its way around the room. My son, my baby, my caged animal, is howling at the night.

He senses that I am awake. He hears the bed springs creak when I shift my body. He is searching for me. He is waiting for me to come to him. His crib is in a nook carved out of the master bedroom, a space just large enough for a baby, just compact enough for a few pieces of small furniture. There is no door that separates us. We are ten feet apart but unable to see one another. He jumps on his mattress. Phwump, phwump, phwump. He pulls himself up and then drops his twenty-two pound body back down, and up, and down and adds “mama” to his angry howls. He is trying to lure me to him. I resist. I lie in wait, listening to his movements, studying his patterns, contemplating my next move.

“Mama, mama, mama,” he calls out for me until his voice becomes raspy. I wonder how long he can go on. I wonder how long I can let him go on. His cries become the whimpers of an injured animal. I hold my hand to my mouth to stop my own cries and bite down on the fleshy softness of my palm. I am too tired for battle, too tired to fight. This nightly ritual is wearing me down. Please, please go to sleep, I mouth the words to him.

And, as if he can hear my thoughts, he stops crying. I lie back and pull the covers over my body without making a sound. Silence. I roll onto my side and exhale, but the hibernating bear beside me rolls the other way, pulling the covers with him, and releases a snarling snore.

The howling starts up again, louder this time. My son is angry. So am I.

Blinking back tears of exhaustion, I sit up, and straighten my legs. My muscles are stiff. My head feels too heavy for my neck, my shoulders too weak to control my arms. I wonder why no one else wakes. At least the windows are closed so the neighbors won't hear the noise, won't call the police, won't think we are murdering our young in the night, but I'm sure they can hear it anyway. I am sure that his howls must be able to penetrate walls and windows and city blocks and early morning fog.

I perch on the edge of the bed and close my eyes, just to see if I can block it out, if I can ignore it. But his cries escalate and circle and swarm around me and inside of me, rebounding about my brain, making it hard for me to breathe. My heartbeat accelerates in response. I can't take it anymore. I get up and go to him.

He quiets down but gets excited when he sees me. He jumps faster, hoping I will pick him

up, but I don't. I don't turn on a light, or speak to him. Instead, I turn him over onto his stomach and cover him with his favorite blanket, and then I add another. I pull it over his ears and I rub his back with the palm of my hand. I lean my right elbow on the edge of the crib and rest my head on my forearm. I continue to rub and pat with my left hand. I do this for five, ten, fifteen minutes. I can't tell. I slow down and stop to see if he notices. He does and begins to push himself up. I push him back down and start rubbing and patting again. Five, ten, fifteen minutes. My back begins to ache. My legs and feet are cold and my nose starts to run. I wipe it with the sleeve of my nightgown. He starts to squirm, and I continue to rub and pat, five, ten, fifteen minutes. I close my eyes. I'm so tired I feel like crying, like screaming into the silence. But I rub and pat some more until his body begins to soften and settle under my hand and his breathing slows. I pull away, just slightly, and straighten up painfully. My right arm is numb. I stand for a minute, or an eternity, and listen to his breath -- making sure it is steady and uniform, making sure he is asleep so I can begin my retreat.

Like a hunter in the woods, I tread slowly, careful not to misstep, careful not to make any sound. One step, inhaling, another step, exhaling. Listening and stopping; stopping and listening. I make it to my side of the bed and pause. Nothing. Still breathing steadily, still asleep. I lie down and submerge into the soft warmth of the mattress.

And just as I close my eyes, he realizes I've escaped. He rolls and stands and screams in one fluid movement.

The red glow of the bedside clock reads 3:48am. I push away the covers and go to him. He stops crying when he hears me coming. He holds his arms up like the baby he is, and I lift him to me. He buries his wet face into my collarbone, his legs hang heavily and I wrap them around my waist. I hold him hard against my chest, with a ferociousness that takes over my senses, and I rock back and forth, back and forth. He sighs and yawns and sinks his weight into mine.

"Shhhhh, shhhhh, my love," I whisper into his salty forehead. I give in. I give in.