

New Fiction by Helen Benedict: WOLF SEASON

STORM

The wolves are restless this morning. Pacing the woods, huffing and murmuring. It's not that they're hungry; Rin fed them each four squirrels. No, it's a clenching in the sky like a gathering fist. The wet heat pushing in on her temples.

Juney feels it, too, her head swaying, fingers splayed. She is sitting on the wooden floor of their kitchen, face raised, rocking and rocking in that way she has. Hair pale as a midday moon, eyes wide and white-blue.

"It smells sticky outside, Mommy. It smells wrong," she says in her clear, direct voice, no hint of a whine. Soldiers don't whine. And Juney is the daughter of soldiers.

"Nothing's wrong, little bean. Maybe we'll get a summer storm, that's all. Come, eat."

Juney is nine years old, the age of curiosity and delight before self-doubt clouds the soul. Fine hair in a braid to her waist. Bright face, wide at the temples, tapering to a nip of a chin. Delicate limbs, skinny but strong.

She lifts herself off the floor and wafts over to the kitchen table, a polished wooden plank the size of a door, where she feels for her usual chair and settles into it with the grace of a drifting leaf. Starting up one of her hums, she dips her spoon into the granola Rin made for her—sesame seeds, raisins, oats, and nuts, every grain chemical-free.

"More milk, please."

Sometimes, when Rin is not hauling feed, chopping wood, weeding, or fixing some corner of their raggedy old farmhouse,

she stands and watches Juney with wonder, her miracle daughter, and this is what she does after pouring the milk; she leans against the kitchen counter, still for a moment, just to absorb her. Juney moves like a sea anemone, fingers undulating. She can feel light and sun, shadow and night, and all the myriad shades between.

“I want to go weed,” she says when her bowl is empty, sitting back to stretch, her spindly arms straight above her, twiggy fingers waving. The scrim of clouds parts for a moment, just enough to allow a slice of sun to filter through the windows, sending dust motes spinning and sparking into the corners of the kitchen. She rocks on her chair inside a sunbeam, hair aglow, fingers caressing the air. She can hear their cats, Purr, Patch, and Hiccup, stretching out on the floor. Smell their fur heating up, their fishy breath slowing into sleep.

“Me, too,” Rin says. “Let’s go.”

Juney was born in the upstairs bedroom, amid Rin’s outraged yells and the grunts of a stoic midwife; she knows her way around their ramshackle house and land as well as she knows her own body. Rin only helps by keeping unexpected objects out of the way, as even the dogs and cats have learned to do. No tables with sharp corners; no stray chairs, bones, mouse corpses, or drinking bowls. The house itself might be a mishmash of added rooms and patchwork repairs, windows that won’t open and trapdoors that will, but everything inside has its place.

Out in the backyard, Juney stops to sniff the thickening heat—the clouds have closed over again, gunmetal gray and weightier than ever. “Itchy air,” she declares, and makes her way to the vegetable garden. Ducking under the mesh Rin erected to keep out plundering deer and rabbits, she squats at the first row of tomatoes. Weeding is Juney’s specialty. Her fingers climb nimbly up the vines, plucking off the brittle spheres of snails, the squishy specks of aphids. Her palms

caress the earth, seeking the prick of dandelion leaves and thistles, the stubs of grapevine and pokeweed, and out they come, no mercy for them.

Her father loved planting. Jordan Drummond was his name, Jay to all who loved him. Jay, flaxen-haired like Juney, face white as a Swede's, eyes set wide and seaglass blue. Tall and rangy, with enormous feet, and so agile he might have been made of rubber. He, too, was born and bred on this property, back in the time when it was a real farm. Helped his parents raise cows and corn all his life, until the farm failed and drove him into the army. When his platoon razed the date groves around Basra, acres of waving palm trees, their fronds a deep and ancient green, their fruit glistening with syrups—when they ploughed those magnificent trees into the desert just because they could, he wept as if for the death of a friend.

Now Rin arranges her days around forgetting, pushes through a list of tasks tough enough to occupy her mind as well as her muscles. Juney comes first, of course, but her wolves take concentration, as do her chickens and goats and vegetables. She has staked out her ground here with all her companions. If anyone wants to find her, they have to negotiate half a mile of potholed unpaved driveway, barbed wire, electric wire, a gate, and her four dogs, who are not kind to strangers. Not to mention her army-trained marksmanship.

Juney feels her way around the spinach and carrots, pulling and plucking. "Mommy, what are we doing today?"

"Going to town. The clinic. Not till we finish the chores, though. Come on, let's feed the critters."

"Which clinic?"

"Yours."

She hesitates. "Have I got time to do the birds first?"

Juney's favorite job is tending the bird feeder. Rin wanted to throw it out after that mama bear knocked it off its squirrelproof stand, plunked herself on the ground and dumped the seeds down her throat like a drunk—Rin watched the whole thing from the kitchen window, describing the bear's every move to Juney. But the feeder means too much to Juney to relinquish. She judges how empty it is by feeling its weight in her palms, plants it between her feet to hold it firm, fills it to the brim from the seed sack, and deftly hangs it back up. Then she sits beneath it, head lifted while she listens and listens. "Shh," she says this morning. "There's a nest of baby catbirds over there." A faint rustle, the quietest of hingelike squeaks. "Three of them. They want their breakfast."

Leaving her to sit and listen, Rin kicks the sleepy cats outside to make their way through the day and eases her car out of the barn. The barn sits to the side of her house, on the edge of a flat field that used to hold corn. Beyond that, a hardscrabble patch of rocks and thistles meanders up a hill to scrubby hay fields and a view of the Catskill Mountains to the south. Otherwise, aside from her yard, the ancient apple orchard in the back, and the vegetable patch, she is surrounded by woods as far as the eye can roam.

Ten acres of those woods she penned off for her three wolves, leaving them plenty of room to lurk. Wolves need to lurk. They are normally napping at this time of morning, but the seething heat has them agitated and grumbling. Rin can sense their long-legged bodies moving in and out of the shadows, scarcely more solid than shadows themselves. Even her absurdly hyperactive mutts are feeling the unwholesome weight of the day, but instead of expressing it with restiveness like their cousins, they drop where they stand, panting heavily into sleep.



Frederic Remington. *Moonlight, Wolf*, 1909.

The entire compound is preternaturally still. The yard, the woods, the porch cluttered with gnarled geraniums and fraying furniture; the rickety red barn with its animal pens clinging to its side for dear life; the piles of lumber and rusting machinery—all are as somnolent as the snore of a summer bee.

Rin looks at her watch. "Time!"

Juney straightens up from under the bird feeder, wipes her earthy hands on her jeans, and walks toward her mother along the little path planted with lilac bushes, a path she memorized as an infant. She puts her head on Rin's chest, reaching the exact level of her heart.

She smells her mother's fear even before she hears it in her

voice. The sweat breaking out slimy and oyster-cold.

Juney was conceived in the back of a two-ton, Camp Scania, Iraq, under a moon as bright and hard as a cop's flashlight. A grapple of gasp and desire, uniforms half off, bra up around Rin's neck, boots and camo pants flung over the spare tire. Jay's mouth on her nipples, running down her slick, sandflea-bitten belly, down to the wet openness of her, the salt and the sand of her, the wanting of her, his tongue making her moan, his fingers opening her, his voice and hers breathing now and now and now.

Wartime love in a covered truck, that desert moon spotlighting down. His chest gleaming silver in its glare, eyes glittering, the scent of him sharp and needing her, the voice of him a low growl of yes like her wolves.

But even through the slickness, even through the wanting and wanting, she felt the desert grinding deep into her blood. Toxic moondust and the soot of corpses.

As Rin drives her rickety maroon station wagon along the rural roads that take her to town and the clinic, Juney hums again beside her, rocking in her seat, her warbly tune following some private daydream. The windows are open because the AC refuses to work and the sweat is rolling down Rin's arms, soaking the back of her old gray T-shirt, the waistband of her bagged-out work pants. She glances down at herself. She is covered with dirt from the yard. Probably has burrs in her hair. Once she was slim with just enough curve and wiggle to make Jay smile. Long hair thick as a paintbrush till she cut it for war. These days, squared-out by childbirth and comfort food, she looks and moves more like a lumberjack. Still, she should have had the decency to shower.

Juney is mouthing words now, rocking harder than ever to her inner rhythm. Rin should teach her not to do that—it makes people think she's retarded—but she doesn't have the heart.

Juney rocks when she's happy

"Tweetle tweetle sang the bird," she croons in some sort of a hillbilly tune.

"Twootle twootle sang the cat.

You can't get me, sang the bird.

I don't want to, sang the cat.

Tweetle and twootle, tweetle and—"

"Juney?" Rin is not exactly irritated but needs her to quit. "You're going to be okay at the clinic, right? No screaming like last time?"

Juney stops singing long enough to snort. "I was a baby then. And they stuck me with that long needle." She takes up her song once more, then stops again. "Are they going to stick me this time?"

"Soldiers don't mind needles. It's just a little prick, like you get every day in the yard from thistles."

"Yeah. Who cares about needles?"

"It's just an annual checkup to see how much you've grown. Nothing to worry about. They'll probably tell you to eat more, skin-and-bones you."

"That's 'cause you won't let me have candy. I'm going to tell the doctor to order you to give me candy."

This is an old battle, Rin's strictness about food. She is strict about a lot of matters. No TV, no cell phones. No radio, either, not even in the car. Yet there are limits to how much even she can cushion her daughter. Thanks to the law, she is obliged to send her to school, and there, as if by osmosis, Juney has absorbed the need for the detritus that fills American lives. Despite all Rin's efforts, Juney has

caught the disease of Want.

Rin wonders if Juney's daddy would approve of how she's raising her: Jay, the only man she's ever wanted, ever will want. Jay, gone for as long as Juney has been alive. And look what he left behind. A broken soldier. A fatherless daughter. The wolves who patrol the woods like souls freed from the dead, their thick-furred bodies bold and wild—the ones who won't be tamed, won't be polluted, won't be used.

It was Jay's idea to raise wolves. His plan was to do it together once they were done soldiering—he had always wanted to save them from extinction, the cruelty of zoos and those who wish to crush them into submission. "They need us, Rin," he said to her once, his big hand resting tenderly on her cheek. "And we need them." So when she found herself alone and pregnant, she decided to carry out the plan anyway. She tracked down a shady breeder over by Oneonta and rescued two newborn pups, blue-eyed and snub-nosed, blind, deaf and helpless, their fur as soft as goose down, before he could sell them to some tattooed sadist who would chain them up in his yard. One was female, the other male, so she hoped they would breed one day. As they did. "Never try to break wolves," Jay told her. "They've got loyalty. They might even love you, who knows? But we must never tame them. They're wild animals and that's how it should stay."

Her guardian angels. Or devils. She hasn't decided which.

"We're here!" Juney sings out. She knows the town of Huntsville even when it's midmorning quiet and raining: the asphalt steaming, the wet-dust funk of newly soaked concrete.

Rin drives down the main drag, a wide, lonely street with half its windows boarded up and not a soul to be seen. A Subway on the left, a Dunkin' Donuts on the right, its sign missing so many letters it reads, duk do. The CVS and three banks that knocked out all the local diners and dime stores. A Styrofoam

cup skitters along the gutter, chipped and muddied by rain.

Pulling up the hill into an asphalt parking lot, Rin chooses a spot as far away from the other cars as she can get, her stomach balling into a leathery knot. She hates this town. She hates this clinic. She hates doctors and nurses. She hates people.

Pause, swallow, command the knot to release. It won't. She sweeps her eyes over the macadam, down the hill to the clinic, over to the creek bubbling along behind it. Back and forth, back and forth.

"Mommy, we're in America."

"Yeah. Sorry." One breath, two. "Okay. I'm ready."

If Rin could walk with her wolves flanking her, she would. Instead, she imagines them here. Ebony takes the front guard, his coat the black of boot polish, eyes green as a summer pond, the ivory curve of his fangs bared. Silver brings up the rear, her fur as white as morning frost, her wasp-yellow eyes scanning for the enemy, a warning growl in her throat. And the big stately one—the alpha male, the one Rin named Gray, his body a streak of muscle, his coat marked in sweeps of black and charcoal—walks beside her with Juney's fingers nestled into the thick fur of his back, his jaw open and slavering, ready to tear off the head of anyone who so much as looks at her.

With her invisible wolves around her and her daughter gripping her hand, Rin plows through the now-strafting rain to the clapboard box of a clinic and up to its plate-glass front, on which, painted in jaunty gold lettering, are the words *Captain Thomas C. Brittall Federal Health Care Center's Pediatrics/U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs*.

"Department of Vaporized Adolescents," she mutters, pushing open the cold glass door and its cold metal handle. They step

inside.

Naema Jassim is standing in the white starkness of that same clinic, suspended in one of the few moments of tranquillity she will be granted all day. Her hands, long-fingered and painfully dry from constant washing, press down on the windowsill as she gazes into the hot wetness beyond. The sky has turned an uneasy green, tight with electricity and tension. Even from inside her clinic office, the air smells of singed hair and rust.

“Doctor?” Wendy Fitch, the nurse, pokes her head into the room. “Your nine a.m.’s here. We have four more before we close. TV says the hurricane’s due around two.”

“Yes, the rain, it has already come.” Naema turns from the window, so slight she is almost lost inside her voluminous white coat, her black hair gathered in a loose knot at her neck. Face long and narrow, eyes the gold of a cat’s. A star-shaped scar splashes across her otherwise smooth right cheek.

Behind her, a sudden wind catches the weeping willow outside, sending its branches into a paroxysm of lashing and groaning. But the tightly closed windows and turbine roar of the clinic’s air-conditioning, set chillingly low to counteract the bacteria of the sick, render the premature storm as silent as dust.

Naema slides her clipboard under her arm and moves to the door.

Outside, the trees bend double and spring back up like whips. The clouds convulse. A new deluge drives into the ground, sharp as javelins.

A mile uphill, the wind seizes a tall white pine, shaking it until its ninety-year-old trunk, riddled with blister rust,

splits diagonally across with a shriek. It drops onto the Huntsville Dam, already thin, already old, knocking out chunks of concrete along its crest until it resembles a row of chipped teeth.

Rin grips Juney's hand while they sit in the waiting room, her palms sweating as she scans every inch of the place: walls too white, lights too bright, posters too cheerful, a television screen as big as a door blasting a cooking show. But she refuses to look at the other women. Their calculating eyes. Their judgments. Their treachery.

The monologue starts up in her head, as it always insists on doing at the VA, even though she is only in an affiliated pediatrics clinic, not a full-fledged hospital full of mangled soldiers and melted faces. She fights it as best she can, trying to focus on Juney, on her wolves growling in their hot fur by her feet, but it marches on anyhow, oblivious to her resistance: *Where were you ladies when I needed you, huh? I saw you fresh from your showers; I saw you listening. Scattered, every one of you, like bedbugs under a lamp. Where were you when, where were you. . . .*

"Stop." Juney pulls Rin's hand to her chest. "Mommy, stop."

Rin looks for her wolves. They are crouched around her still, tongues lolling, their musky fur and meat-breath reassuring. She should have brought Betty, her service dog. She keeps telling herself she doesn't need Betty. But she does.

Juney lifts her nose and Rin can tell she is smelling the medicinal stinks of the clinic. All scents are colors to Juney, an imagined rainbow Rin will never see. The disinfectant in the wall dispensers, sickly sweet and alcohol sharp—this is her yellow. The detergent of the nurses' uniforms, soapy and stringent, she calls bright orange. The chemical-lemon odor of the floor polish: purple. The pink of

freshly mown grass, magenta of oatmeal, green-bright breath of their cats, black of their dogs panting. The glaring white of her mother's alarm.

Rin sends her mind to her hand, still clasped against Juney's narrow chest. Juney's heartbeat reminds Rin of the chipmunk she once held in her palm, soft and weightless, alive and warm—a tiny bundle of pulsating fluff.

Another soldier mother is squeezed into the far corner, holding a feverish infant to her breast. A second sits by the wall with her child, its back in a brace. A third walks in with her toddler daughter, whose right hand is wrapped in a bandage. The beams of the women's eyes burn across the room, avoiding one another yet crossing like headlights, smoldering with their collective sense of betrayal.

Time inchworms by.

Finally, a hefty nurse with frizzled blond hair steps through the inner door, the name fitch pinned loudly to her bosom. She runs her eyes over Rin and Juney and all the other mothers and children suspended in this stark, white room. "Rin Drummond," she calls.

Rin cannot speak.

"Mommy?" Juney lifts Rin's hand off her chipmunk heart and jumps down from her chair. "We're ready," she tells the nurse and pulls her mother's arm. She and Rin follow the nurse's broad back down the corridor and into an examining room.

"Just strip to your undies, honeypie, and hop up here," the nurse tells Juney. "Doctor Jassim will be here in a jiffy."

"Thank you. I know what to do. I'm nine years old and my name is June Drummond."

"Of course it is," the nurse says, unruffled.

“Did you say ‘Jassim’?” Rin asks, finding her voice at last. “Who’s he?”

“Doctor Jassim is a woman. She’s been a resident with us for half a year now. She’s very good, don’t worry.”

“Where the fuck is she from?” Rin’s hands curl up tight and white.

“Mrs. Drummond, relax, okay? She’s the best physician we have here. You’re lucky to get her.” The nurse leaves, closing the door with a snap that sounds more as though she is locking them in than giving them privacy.

Juney peels off her T-shirt and shorts and kicks away her flip-flops. Both she and Rin are dressed for the heat of the August day, not for the clinic’s hypothermic AC, so her skin is covered in goose bumps. Rin finds a baby blue hospital robe hanging on the back of the door and wraps Juney’s shivery body in it before lifting her onto the plank of the examining table, its paper crackling beneath her. She is so fragile, her Juney, a wisp of rib cage and shoulder blade, legs pin-thin as a robin’s. Rin holds her tight, not sure who is comforting whom.

The wind rampages through woods and parking lots, streets and gardens, seizing sumacs, maples, and willows and shaking them until their boughs drop like shot geese. Up the hill, the rain-bloated creek presses its new weight against the crumbling dam, pushing and pounding until, with a great roar, it bursts through, leaps its banks and rushes headlong down the slope toward the clinic; a foaming wall of red mud, branches, and rocks flattening every shrub and tree in its path.

Inside, the air-conditioning hums. Voices murmur. Babies whimper.

Wendy Fitch hovers by the door of the examining room, checking her watch. Dr. Jassim might be great with her patients but the woman has zero sense of time. Whether this has something to do with her culture or is only an individual quirk, Wendy doesn't know, but the doctor needs to finish up here and fetch her son from his friend's house, the boys' summer baseball camp having sensibly closed against the impending storm. The rain is beating on the windows now and Wendy can feel the patients' parents growing more restless by the minute, as eager as she is to get back to their canned food and bottled water, their batteries and candles. Her pulse quickens. As a lowly nurse, she has to bear the brunt of the parents' ire, and these are no ordinary parents, either. They are all military veterans, half of them ramped up or angry. Like that pit bull of a woman, Rin Drummond.

"We better hurry, storm's coming on quick," Wendy says when Naema emerges at last from the first examining room. "Watch out for this one," she adds in a whisper, touching her temple. "Room three."

Naema nods with a resigned smile and walks toward the door.

Rin can't believe they gave Juney an Arab for a doctor. Typical of the VA to hire the second-rate. The woman probably bought her certificate online, did her training on YouTube. Probably blew up some sucker of a soldier or two on her way here, as well.

"Mommy, what's wrong?"

Rin takes a breath. And another. "It's okay. It's just this place." She strokes her daughter's hair and pulls her close once more, feeling her frail body shiver.

A knock on the door. Gentle, yet it sends a spasm through Rin's every nerve.

The door opens and in walks a woman in a white coat, as if she's a real doctor. No head scarf, at least, but there's that familiar olive-brown skin and blue-black hair. She's carrying a clipboard file, which she reads before even saying hello, which Rin considers damned rude. Then she looks up.

A splattered white scar on her right cheekbone. Most likely a shrapnel wound. Rin would know, having some fifteen herself.

"Good morning," the doctor says to Juney, voice snake-oil smooth, accent not much more than a lilt but oh so recognizable. "You are June, right?"

But Juney isn't listening. Her head's up, cocked at the angle that means her mind is elsewhere. "Mommy?"

Rin is shaking. The face. The scar. Her breath is coming short and airless.

"Mommy?" Juney's voice is more urgent now. "I hear something."

"There is no need to be frightened, dear," the doctor says, and Rin can't tell whether she's talking to Juney or her.

"Mommy!" Juney jumps down from the examining table, her robe falling off, leaving her in nothing but white cotton underpants, skin and bone. "Something bad's happening!"

"Get out of here!" Rin yells at the doctor.

"What is the matter?" The doctor looks confused.

"No, not her!" Juney cries. "Run!" And she hurls herself into the dangerous air, unable to see the metal table covered with glass bottles and needles, the jutting chair legs on the floor.

Rin reaches out and catches her, but she wriggles free in true terror. "Let us out!" she screams, and the doctor turns around, bewildered, saying something Rin can't hear because at

that moment the window bursts open and a torrent of red water crashes through, smashing them against the wall, knocking them over, pounding them with a whorl of mud and branches and shattered glass. . . .

Rin's soldier training, her war-wolf heart, these are not in her blood for nothing. She struggles to her feet, seizes Juneey around the waist and forces the door open, kicking away the flailing doctor tangled in her white coat, her long hair, her scar, and her legacy.

Rin slams her face down in the water and steps on her, using her body to lever her daughter through the door and out of the water to safety.

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