

The Wolf Who Ate Pizza



by jj white

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The Wolf, or *Canis Lupis*, according to our human system of designation, ate pizza. Let's call him Kai since, in the Lupin form of language, we would be hard-pressed to put it in writing, and wolves scoff at the notion of names anyway. He was of the gray wolf strain, pepper with a hint of salt in color, tending to gray with beige undertones, and with a whiter muzzle, making the dark lips appear as a knowing smile.

Kai first tasted the heavenly delicacy by delightful happenstance. As is the wont of his kind, he had set up an observation post just outside the ring of light from a sizeable campfire surrounded by a group of a dozen or so revelers. One of the more drunken partygoers initiated a pizza-slice hurling contest and flung his meatza pizza slice skyward in a majestic arc any home run hitter would be pleased with. No one else cared to join the contest and thus part with their slice and the competition died without the challenge being taken up.

The slice landed between Kai's paws and he ate it. In an instant, he understood how members of his species could enter the ring of light ancient humanoids kept for warmth and safety and how they eventually became tame and lost their wolfishness. Kai was determined to find more pizza but not to follow the tamed ones' footsteps laid down so many seasons ago. Wolves are roughly aware of time but have no concept of 'years'. Wolf time is measured in seasons – seasons of want or plenty; snow, new beginnings, warmth, the season of fading light; and mating season.

It was late in the season of new beginnings, Kai's third such season, which put him on the verge of leaving the pack to seek his fortunes and either be a lone wolf or find a mate and establish a pack of his own. Kai was not the sort of wolf to be a lower pack member, taking orders from the alpha and every she-wolf in the pack. Maybe, just maybe, he could be second and run the sweep during hunting expeditions, and some of the pups would be his. Perhaps.

He considered his options while the fire died down in concert with the energy in the rave as couples peeled off to culminate the rituals of mating or fall into a stupor alone by the fire as the champion pizza-flinger had done. Kai's options had taken on an enhanced urgency with the introduction of pizza. He would be called by the Alpha to make a report of this night's observations but he decided that pizza would not enter the report as it was a concept hazy in his mind and could be dangerous to the pack.

As the season changed from new beginnings into warmth Kai planned to strike out on his own in search of a new territory and females who were inclined to leave their packs for heritages of their own. The concept of leaving the White River Pack and the wilderness around Mt. Hood was a bit disconcerting, especially in the face of his discovery of a new food source and his desire for it. He anticipated a late afternoon when he would announce to the Alpha, and thereby the pack, his intention to roam and search, to disperse. He planned to submit to the Alpha and make his declaration not to return for report the following morning. As the Alpha Female, his mother would be pleased. All the members of the pack would recognize this as Kai's fate and not one of them would be surprised. Each in turn would sniff and send him off with a newly promoted First Watcher trailing Kai on the first part of his traditional rounds where at some point he would turn to his replacement, sniff once, and pad off. South is the direction he had chosen.

And that is how it played out with only the surprise coming in a salute of howling round and throughout the pack.

He was not the first to disperse from his home pack and head south, others have been coming south with the same hopes of mates and territory since, by human reconning, the 1920s when the last native California wolves were wiped out. Mankind only became aware of such wolfish wonderings over the last ten or so cycles. Others have come and gone without notice, or at least without being publicized when ranchers fearing a loss of revenue

easily disposed of a lone wolf and then told no one about it. Frankly, as the teller of his story, I hope and pray Kai can find his way and all he is searching for.

Kai worked his way in a general south-southeast direction. He skirted the territory of the Shasta Pack in Siskiyou County; they knew he was out and about but he had given them a wide berth to respect their territory. The Pack Siskiyou posted additional watches along his way to stay vigilant just the same. He did the same with the Lassen Pack in Plumas County. He hunted along the way and ate a variety of rodents and small game. Fortune smiled at Kai at the edges of the other pack territories and he killed two deer, ate what he needed, and left the rest for the resident pack. The first was an aging stag left to itself and the second was a doe with a broken leg.

While Kai was respectful of the pack territories, he held out a hope that females looking for a new home would learn of him and follow his scent trails. His exploits at the kill and provisioning for the resident packs should have gained him honor in the females' eyes.

He nearly perished while homing in on a fresh kill. It was along a roadway he had been loosely paralleling for some time. When he went to cross the unnatural surface to take advantage of a dead raccoon a behemoth bore down on him at astonishing speed, only a last-second spurt saved him from being crushed by the eighteen-wheeled gargantuan that came so close and at such a high rate of speed that the turbulence of its passing sent Kai tumbling into the drainage ditch alongside the highway. Kai lost his appetite and made a mad dash for the tall grass and sparse oaken forest. He vowed never to cross such a trail again, an oath that he would be hard-pressed to keep the further south he roamed.

The windfall from his brush with the semi-truck was that he was now east of the ribbon of black hardpack. He had seen repeated human signs alongside the track, smallish runes in an arc over the top of two repeated signs with a separate placard underneath with black runes in a rectangle, as if a wolf would care what an unnatural shape was. Highway 99, South for we human readers.

Kai found it increasingly difficult to avoid the large gatherings of humans in their towns and cities. Despite his vow not to cross the hardpack trails, he had no choice. His lesson learned; he waited until he saw no lights before sprinting across. Even so, there were times he barely made it before being in the aura of light created by the machines whose drivers were simply happy they hadn't hit the healthy-looking coyote they could barely make out diving into the brush.

He bypassed campgrounds in the dead of night hoping for the scent of pizza but was disappointed at every turn. During the daylight hours, Kai took to the underbrush and slept relatively undisturbed. His route took him over many highways of varying widths; the 70, 20, 49, 80, and for a nice long spell, through the Tahoe National Forest without roads where black bears and mountain lions are the apex predators. He fit in nicely but the area did not suit him.

He had been feeling a pull to the east and a high-country lake he could sense but as he approached and awaited his chance to cross what we know as Highway 50. He could see long strings of cars, trucks, and over-large 'camping' vehicles heading east. East was not for Kai. It was near the end of the third watch before his chance came to cross. He headed in a more southern direction, eventually crossing more highways; 88, 4, and 108. It was over the span of two sleep cycles when Kai realized he had seen no human interference save an occasional trail. A deep-seated sense of home overtook him as he stood atop a huge rock known as Granite Dome. He stayed just long enough to see lakes and streams and nothing built by human hands. Loath to be so exposed in daylight he retreated to the undergrowth to rest and consider the possibility of setting boundaries for his new pack.

He rose into full wakefulness knowing he was home and that his first duty was to set the boundaries for a pack that would become known as the Emigrant Pack should others join him. Upon human discovery of him, he

would be called Emigrant Wolf. The process of setting the range is arduous – finding a suitable den, ranging half a day’s lope in every direction, identifying mortal enemies, namely mankind, and scent marking. All of it would be registered in Kai’s exquisitely designed brain using scents and natural markers translated into wolf-speak to inform new pack members.

Kai had marked all the major compass points except for east-southeast and was ranging along a game trail in that direction when he came upon concerning evidence that human habitation would be nearby. He determined that he needed to identify where the major human activity was taking place but was somewhat relieved when it took him another day’s lope to find it. By human standards, the town was barely that and would only be noted as a permanent community.

The wolf found a brush hideaway slightly up-slope with a good vantage point from which to observe the community. All his senses were on high alert. The largest of the nearby buildings seemed to have a gathering of humans not unlike the revel he had observed in his old home area. A female came around a corner and out of the light into the shadows. She was cloaked in a hooded cape of a deep burgundy color. She carried a flat box. A change in the wind brought the heavenly scent to him. Now, how could he get pizza?

Two males came around the corner to find the girl and Kai immediately sensed they were wrong. They harassed the girl calling her ‘retarded red riding hood’. The words meant nothing to Kai but the cruelty toward the girl raised his hackles. They got physical with her – touching her, pushing her, and tapping the box. Kai inched forward and was only a brief sprint away from their throats when they laughed and smashed the box from the girl’s hands. Kai let a primal growl loose, his bared fangs glistened in the moonlight. He was in a position to lunge.

The boys stopped and looked up to see the reflected light in two yellow eyes held in the vague canine outline. The fear was palpable in them and Kai knew he had them. For the first time since his old pack had sent him off, he let go with a howl that curdled the blood of the ruffians and they ran.

The girl stayed and gathered the box and edible slices to herself before taking a hesitant step toward Kai. She was different than other humanoids. When a shaft of light lit her face, he saw that it was soft, rounded, and missing definition in the jaws. She had only a short neck. She seemed simple to him, though that didn’t seem right to him. Curious rather than concerned, Kai tilted his head to one side as if a change in perspective would help him understand her.

She took another step toward him and called to him, ‘My Wolfie, my hero’. She took a slice of pizza and flung it toward Kai to land at his feet. He started and backed up. The draw of the slice was nearly too much as it lay on the ground within easy reach. The girl backed up while making soothing sounds. A sharp voice came from the other side of the building, she told Kai goodbye and hurried toward what could only have been her mother. Kai snatched the slice and sprinted back to his observation post to devour it.

When other humans came around with pointed lights, Kai left, careful not to leave any trace. Once a day’s lope from the town, he marked the last of his territory in such a way that others from the pack knew never to wander further. Those sorties would be left up to the Alpha of the Emigrant Pack.

Author's Notes: It is now May 4, 2022, nearly a year since I last worked on this short story. My first order of business was to search for wolf number OR-93 and I read that it was reported as having been struck and killed by a vehicle along Interstate 5 in Kern County, the report of his body was made by a truck driver on November 10, 2021. My story was to have been a sincere wish for this amazing animal to survive and help repopulate California with a new pack. Now I will work to update the story and make a tribute to OR-93. I am saddened for him and disappointed in myself for not having finished my wish for him before he died. I think I will grieve while writing.

July 18, 2024: No excuses. The presence of a new, unnamed pack in the Sierra and Nevada Counties has revived my interest in completing this story, my hope, though the just-completed election darkens hope.

December 3, 2024: I asked a good friend who is a freelance editor where a good editing service could be found, but I did not want to infringe upon our friendship. He never replied to my email. I now use Grammarly.com to spruce up my text so I can 'publish' the story feeling good about the basics.

On December 2, 2024, the L.A. Times ran an article entitled, "2 new wolf packs confirmed in the state". They wrote about the two new packs in Northern California: the 'newly minted Diamond pack' roaming 50 miles north of Lake Tahoe and another -as yet unnamed- pack ranging south of Lassen Volcanic National Park. We now have nine packs in the state.



California Department of Fish and Wildlife photo used by the L.A. Times on 12/2/2024