

What If?

Imagine your daughter was lost.

Suppose she had vanished, not returning from an ordinary trip out of the house.

A day trip. The sort of journey she made at least once a month. A normal excursion, not a voyage to an exotic or dangerous place.

A simple day trip. Out immediately after breakfast and expected home in time for tea. A short errand in the woods.

Consider how you would feel. What if she only went out because your wife sent her? And now imagined in a ditch, bludgeoned by robbers, or cut to pieces. Or worse, strung up in some tree, her legs dancing in the wind. Or else caught in a trap intended for wild animals, bleeding to death or starving slowly.

Would you wish you had been there to protect her, to rescue her, to bring her home? Would you blame her mother for laziness or neglect?

Why did she have to go that day of all days? Couldn't her mother have let it go just that one time? Why did she drive the girl so hard?

And surely there should have been a warning. Hadn't you brought her up to be cautious? Didn't you always tell her to check in the shadows behind the trees? You and your wife always reminded her to stay on the path.

Did she listen? Had she ever listened?

What can you do if your child is wilful or capricious? You try to raise them well, tell them what not to do, but they go right ahead and do it anyway.

"Spare the rod and spoil the child," the blacksmith might say later, once the fuss had died down, his daughter watching from a dark corner, her eyes fist-blackened.

To what lengths would you go to find her, to be with her again? You would search, of course. You would be there with the team of men from the village, staves swinging through undergrowth of bramble and fern, boots crushing cyclamen and violets. Out each day at first light though they all told you to stay home and rest.

At first your friends and neighbours would be more than willing to help, thinking of their own children at home by the hearth or as yet unborn. But time, for them, would pass more quickly than for you. "There is no reasonable hope of finding her alive," they would say quite reasonably. But what is rational about this situation, what is reasonable? How would you find cause to stop your hunt? Who has the power to take away your hope?

Wouldn't you continue to rise each morning before dawn, and only stumble home in the dark? Would your voice grow hoarse from calling her name? Would your ears ring with the silence of her answer?

Would you track down the wolf that had eaten her? Would the hairs in your mother's bed be all the clue you needed, and would you take the blood on the pillow as a hint? Although, if the beast had swallowed both women whole, perhaps the signs would be fewer.

Of course, it would have to be the very same beast. No vengeance on the species in general would provide you comfort.

But why would you hunt this one animal? "To reach closure," as the spinsters recommend? "To find answers," as the old men suggested? "To cut the creature open and set your girl free," as the raving woodsman advocated?

Surely she couldn't have survived for so many days in the belly of the wolf, holding tight to her grandmother's scrawny body for solace against the crimson darkness. Would your knife rip its stomach open, a single slash from neck to groin? Would you expect to see her body tumble free, spluttering and coughing up bile that was not her own?

Or would you only want to butcher it out of anger?

I think I would track the wolf for just one purpose: to have it swallow me as well, so that I might be reunited with my daughter.