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1

I'll Never Understand My Wife

by Steven James



I'll never understand my wife.

The day she moved in with^① me, she started opening and closing my kitchen cabinets, gasping, "You don't have any shelf paper! We're going to have to get some shelf paper in here before I move my dishes in."

"But why?" I asked innocently.

"To keep the dishes clean," she answered matter-of-factly. I didn't understand how the dust would magically migrate off the dishes^② if they had sticky blue paper under them, but I knew when to be quiet.

Then came the day when I left the toilet seat up^③.

"We never left the toilet seat up in my family," she scolded. "It's impolite."

"It wasn't impolite in my family," I said sheepishly.

"Your family didn't have cats."^④

In addition to these lessons, I also learned how I was supposed to squeeze the toothpaste tube, which towel to use after a shower and where the spoons are supposed to go when I set the table. I had no idea I was so uneducated.

Nope, I'll never understand my wife.

She alphabetizes her spices^⑤, washes dishes before sending them through the dishwasher, and sorts laundry into different piles^⑥ before throwing it into the washing machine. Can you imagine?

She wears pajamas to bed. I didn't think anyone in North America still wore pajamas to bed. She has a coat that makes her look like Sherlock Holmes^⑦. "I could get you a new coat," I offered.

① move in with: 搬进来和……一起居住

② 我不明白灰尘怎么就会魔法般地从盘子上离去。

③ 没有把抽水马桶盖放下来。

④ 这句话的意思是她家里有猫，把马桶盖放下来是为了怕猫掉进马桶。

⑤ 她把调味品按字母顺序排列好。

⑥ 把要洗的衣服分成不同的几堆。

⑦ Sherlock Holmes: 舍洛克·福尔摩斯

- ① 到处背着一个小型货车一般大小的尿布包。
- ② 意思是她讲话简洁干脆。
- ③ playpen: *n.* (供婴儿在里面玩耍的) 游戏围栏
- ④ oddity: *n.* 古怪的人
- ⑤ snicker at: 对……窃笑
- ⑥ bumper sticker: 粘贴在汽车保险杠上的小标语
- ⑦ warranty registration cards: 产品质量保证书的登记卡
- ⑧ check: *v.* 在……旁边打钩

“No. This one was my grandmother’s,” she said, decisively ending the conversation.

Then, after we had kids, she acted even stranger. Wearing those pajamas all day long, eating breakfast at 1:00 P.M., carrying around a diaper bag the size of a minivan^①, talking in one-syllable paragraphs^②.

She carried our baby everywhere—on her back, on her front, in her arms, over her shoulder. She never set her down, even when other young mothers shook their heads as they set down the car seat with their baby in it, or peered down into their playpens^③. What an oddity^④ she was, clutching that child.

My wife also chose to nurse her even when her friends told her not to bother. She picked up the baby whenever she cried, even though people told her it was healthy to let her wail.

“It’s good for her lungs to cry,” they would say.

“It’s better for her heart to smile,” she’d answer.

One day a friend of mine snickered at^⑤ the bumper sticker^⑥ my wife had put on the back of our car: “Being a Stay-at-Home Mom Is a Work of Heart.”

“My wife must have put that on there,” I said.

“My wife works,” he boasted.

“So does mine,” I said, smiling.

Once, I was filling out one of those warranty registration cards^⑦ and I check^⑧ “homemaker” for my wife’s occupation. Big mistake. She glanced over it and quickly corrected me. “I am not a homemaker. I am not a housewife. I am a mother.”

“But there’s no category for that,” I stammered.

“Add one,” she said.

I did.

And then one day, a few years later, she lay in bed smiling when I got up to go to work.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Nothing. Everything is wonderful. I didn’t have to get up at all last night to calm the kids. And they didn’t crawl in bed with us.”

“Oh,” I said, still not understanding.

“It was the first time I’ve slept through the night in four years.” It was? Four years? That’s a long time. I hadn’t even noticed. Why hadn’t she ever complained? I would have.

One day, in one thoughtless moment, I said something that sent

her fleeing to the bedroom in tears. I went in to apologize. She knew I meant it because by then I was crying, too.

"I forgive you," she said. And you know what? She did. She never brought it up again. Not even when she got angry and could have hauled out the heavy artillery^①. She forgave, and she forgot^②.

Nope, I'll never understand my wife. And you know what? Our daughter is acting more and more like her mother every day.

If she turns out to be anything like her mom, someday there's going to be one more lucky guy in this world, thankful for the shelf paper in his cupboard.

① 字面意思是拖出重炮。这里是夸张和比喻的说法，意思是她可以翻旧账大闹一气，但她却没有这样做。

② forgive and forget 是一个惯用词组，意思是不念旧恶，不记仇。这里拆开用，起到了强调的效果。

About the author

Steven James (1954-) is one of the U.S.'s most innovative storytellers. He has written more than twenty books and is a full-time speaker, having appeared more than 1,500 times throughout North America, Europe and Asia since 1996. With a Master's Degree in Storytelling, he shares his unique blend of drama, comedy, and inspirational storytelling at events across the country. His debut novel of psychological suspense, *The Pawn*, reached #10 on the CBA fiction bestsellers list and is a finalist for the 2008 Christy Awards. In addition, he has written numerous critically acclaimed nonfiction books and hundreds of articles and stories that have appeared in more than 80 different publications.

Exercises

Questions for comprehension

1. The line "I'll never understand my wife" appears three times in the article. What are the things about the author's wife that he doesn't understand?
2. What was the author's wife trying to do when she moved in with him? Did the author think that the shelf paper would keep off the dust? What does the dialog between the couple suggest about their habits and personalities? When the author said he knew when to be quiet, what did he mean? Was he afraid of his wife? Or was he convinced by his wife?
3. Why did his wife look so shocked when the author left the toilet seat up? What was the author's reaction to that? What did that tell us about his wife's family and her upbringing?
4. What were the other lessons that his wife taught him? What kind of changes was his wife trying to bring to his life? What was his attitude towards these lessons? Did he really mean it when he said "I had no idea I was so uneducated"?

5. Why did the author find his wife wearing pajamas to bed a strange thing? Why didn't he give her a new coat? Why did she refuse to change the coat for anything else?
6. How did his wife's life change after she became a mother? Why wouldn't she take her friends' advice and let her baby cry? How did the author look at his wife in her new role as a mother?
7. Why did the author's friend snicker at the bumper sticker on the back of their car? What was the author's reaction to that? Why did the author's wife object to her being categorized as a "homemaker"? What is the difference between a "housewife" and a "mother" in her mind?
8. When his wife told him she hadn't slept through the night in four years, what was his reaction? Why hadn't she complained before?
9. What happened when he had to beg for his wife's forgiveness? Did he hurt her feelings terribly? How do you know? Did his wife forgive him? What kind of quality did that show about his wife? Is it easy to really forgive and forget?
10. Did it worry the author that his daughter was getting more and more like her mother? Why did he say his future son-in-law would be a lucky guy and should be "thankful for the shelf paper in the cupboard"?

Questions for discussion

1. What do you think is the proper role for a woman in the family? Should she be primarily a housewife or a homemaker or a mother? Are there any differences between these roles?
2. Do you think the author really means it when he says that he doesn't understand his wife? Does he find his wife strange throughout their married life? How does he view their differences eventually?
3. When the author talks about his wife's strange behavior, is he complaining or actually singing her praises? Does he consider himself lucky or unlucky to have married such a woman?
4. Is the tone adopted by the author ironical or humorous? Give examples.

A New Millennium

by J. M. DeGross



I'm driving south on Interstate 81^①, returning home from a business trip. It's January. The rain is pouring down. I'm in northern Virginia and I'm worried about freezing conditions. I see a small herd of Black Angus heifers^② walking along barbed wire, up a hill that has those three crosses on the top. They're a Bible belt thing—the crosses that is^③. And I'm thinking maybe Black Angus live an odd life, maybe they don't. Just then my cell phone rings.

It's my wife, but at first I can't understand her. Her voice is all wobbly^④ and the rain is noisy. Then I get it^⑤. She's crying—the words trying to get out between tears. My wife almost never cries. I remember one other time, when her aunt decided to tell her she wasn't her daddy's daughter. She cried on and off^⑥ for a couple of months back then.

Right away I think something has happened to her, or maybe one of the kids. "Honey, what's the matter?" I say.

"Wolf just killed the cat." She's barely able to get it out^⑦.

Wolf is our dog—a German Shepherd^⑧. He's usually sweet, but he's never liked the cat—the cat that showed up a couple of days before the new millennium. I was setting up for the fireworks display—putting the launchers in place for the airbursts I'd fire off^⑨ in celebration at midnight, when this little cat appeared. She purred and meowed and rubbed up against my arms, but she was a mess—hair all tangled and matted^⑩, and she smelled awful.

① 81 号州际高速公路

② Black Angus = Aberdeen Angus: 阿伯丁安格斯牛 (苏格兰产黑色无角肉用牛); heifer: *n.* 小母牛

③ 它们是“圣经地带”常见的东西，我是说那些十字架。“圣经地带”指美国南部及中西部历史上基督教势力最强的地方。

④ wobbly: *a.* 不稳定的

⑤ get it: 明白了

⑥ on and off: 断断续续地

⑦ get it out: 说出

⑧ German Shepherd: 德国牧羊犬

⑨ 把放花炮的发射器装好。

⑩ 身上的毛乱糟糟地缠结在一起。

- ① (冲着猫叫的) 主要是 Wolf, 它 4 岁, 好动爱闹。
- ② Lab = Labrador: 拉布拉多猎狗
- ③ stand up to: 勇敢地对抗
- ④ predator: *n.* 食肉动物; bobcat: *n.* 美洲野猫, 山猫之类
- ⑤ cocked: *a.* 竖起的
- ⑥ 简称就叫 Millie, K.B. 表示 “kick butt” (〈俚〉享受快活时光)。
- ⑦ 最后决定叫她 Millie。
- ⑧ Millie 受过不少罪。
- ⑨ coyote: *n.* 一种产于北美大草原的小狼, 山狗
- ⑩ 给她一个旧隔热柜栖身。
- ⑪ a mean drunk: 一个可恶的醉鬼
- ⑫ 把可怜的小东西 (猫) 扔下了露台。

Now I have to tell you, we live on a mountain in the middle of nowhere—no neighbors for miles. My wife saw the cat standing by me and she smiled. “I know that cat,” she said. “I’ve seen her in the woods. I’ll bet it was two or three months ago,” and she sounded proud.

“She looks hungry,” I said, and I don’t know why we both thought it was a she. We didn’t think she had claws, either, but she did. She just never showed them. And of course the dogs were barking at her—mostly, Wolf, who’s four and frisky^①. Blue, our other dog is a working Black Lab^②. He’s old and he’s seen a lot of dying. You could tell he only barked at the cat because when Wolf got started, he thought he was supposed to.

You should have seen that cat, no bigger than a half-year old kitten, stand up to^③ those dogs. They were twenty times her size. She’d growl and hiss—I mean really growl, like a predator—a bobcat^④. She never backed off. She’d bat Wolf so fast and so hard on the nose that you could hear the contact-thump, and he’d back off and just look at her with his head cocked^⑤ to one side in confusion or something. I only saw her run from him once, and that was so she could get under a chair and then stand her ground. So, I never worried about him getting her. She was too fast and too tough, and she wanted to be with us. That’s what I thought. And I guess I thought Wolf wouldn’t kill another creature. I don’t know why.

We called her K.B. Millennium—Millie for short and the K.B. stood for “kick butt”^⑥. We came up with some other names, too. My wife suggested “Freedom”, “like in the song,” she said (she even sang the line: “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.”). And our five-year-old granddaughter wanted to call her Tabby, but we settled on Millie.^⑦

Millie had it rough^⑧, surviving in those woods with bears and coyotes^⑨. It was cold and I knew she wanted in the house because she’d try to follow me in, but we didn’t need a house cat. So we agreed, if she wanted to, she could hang around outside. We fed her plenty and we gave her an old insulated cooler for shelter^⑩. She seemed content.

Then at the millennium party somebody was a mean drunk^⑪—tossed the little thing off the deck^⑫ during the fireworks display. It’s forty feet down from the deck to the first treetops on the mountain. I

didn't see it happen—didn't know about it till the next morning because I was too busy with the fireworks. One of our other guests said Millie hissed and cried out in the air and then they heard breaking branches and more cat-sounds as she crashed somewhere down in the dark—yes, just a mean drunk. I might have stopped it if I had known.

She wasn't around on the First^①, so we thought she had died from the fall. I left on the business trip feeling badly. But she showed up again a day or so later. My wife called to tell me (long distance service is free on the cell phone). That's when my wife noticed Millie was pissing blood^②, so she took her to the vet who verified^③ that Millie was a she, had claws, and serious internal injuries.

Now the rain is really pelting^④ the car, and my wife is saying that Wolf got her. "Millie didn't even try to run," she says. "It was awful. He grabbed her and shook her—I yelled to make him let go. Then I wrapped her in a towel and held her." My wife is really sobbing now. "She was lying on my lap with her little paws crossed and she was shaking and blood was coming out of her mouth and she just gasped and died." My wife gets it all out in one breath.

"I'm so sorry, Darling," I say. And I wish I could say something more meaningful, but with the rain and all, I'm having a time^⑤. "I guess the dog didn't know any better^⑥," I say. Then there's a lot of static and we lose our connection^⑦.

Now I'm terribly sad, too, thinking about that little cat—such a hard life—and I can't see with all the rain. But it gets worse because this idea hits me out of nowhere—she only had a borrowed life. Borrowed things have to be returned, I'm thinking. And I don't know why, but something borrowed and something blue^⑧ runs through my head. Maybe that's all she had—nothing old or new. Then a memory of our little daughter who died ten or fifteen minutes after she was born oozes out. She didn't come with all her parts and when the doctor saw what she looked like, he tossed her onto the stainless steel sink in the delivery room^⑨. I suppose he meant well^⑩, but I remember her gasps and her trembling—then she was still^⑪ (and I remember how normal her tiny hands looked). My wife didn't see—she was doped up^⑫. But I did. And then there was my sister who died from hate and alcohol—no old and no new in her life, only defeat—maybe like Black Angus. These thoughts are flying by in forms resembling shadows at warp^⑬ speed.

① the First: 指新千年的第一天

② piss blood: 尿血

③ verify: v. 查证

④ pelt: v. (雨) 急落

⑤ have a time: 不方便, 不自在

⑥ 我想那狗犯了糊涂。

⑦ 电话里有许多静电声, 随后通话就断了。

⑧ blue: a. 忧郁的

⑨ delivery room: 产房

⑩ 他是好意。

⑪ 静止不动了。

⑫ 被全身麻醉了。

⑬ warp: n. (科幻小说中的) 翘曲飞行

① stray cat: 走失的猫

② make out: 辨认出

③ 把车开到 80 迈 (即时速 80 英里, 美国的州际高速公路限速一般为 75 迈)。

The phone rings again. “I don’t know what happened,” I say.

My wife apologizes for the tears.

“No, it’s okay, it’s very sad,” I say. “It’s like Millie had a borrowed life.” And I hear the tears get started on the other end, again. I have to pull off the road for a few minutes. I can’t believe we’re so sad over a stray cat^①.

It stops raining and I can just make out^② the sun because it’s going down behind the mountains. And then I’m thinking, maybe Millie let Wolf get her—wanted him to, like the hate and alcohol got to my sister. The line is quiet. “Honey, are you there?” I say.

“I’m still here,” she says.

I start to drive. Before I know it, I’m doing eighty^③ and we’re both crying. What’s left of the sun creates odd long shadows and the static starts again.

“I wish I could have been there for you,” I say. I’m shouting into the phone.

“I know,” she says.

The phone goes dead again and I have this really bad feeling because it’s getting dark fast, and colder, too. Then I see a herd of dairy cattle—black and white ones. They’re all huddled together in a barnyard. I figure they’re waiting to be let into the barn—to be milked and fed and for some reason this makes me feel better. After a while I slow down, and I start watching road signs, looking for a place to eat and rest. And I’m hoping they’ll have a payphone so I can call my wife back. I’m thinking, maybe we’ll do better with a payphone, maybe not.

Exercises

Questions for comprehension

1. What was the narrator worried about when driving home from a business trip? Where was he and what time of the year was it? What did he see? Were those things delightful to the eye? What feelings and thoughts did they trigger in his mind? What did he mean by saying that Black Angus maybe lived *an odd life*? Was he referring to the beef cattle or the county in Scotland?

2. What did the narrator's wife call him for? Is she a sentimental woman by nature? Does she cry often? When was the last time she cried and why? Did the fact that she was not the natural daughter of her father have anything to do with her feelings toward the cat?
3. Had the cat been raised as a pet like Wolf? How did the narrator find her? Was she welcomed by the dogs in the household? What kind of character did the cat have?
4. Why was the cat named K.B. Millennium? Does the name bear any good will of the couple? What happened to her at the millennium party? What was the narrator's reaction to the incident? Was he very concerned about the cat? What do you make of the tone when he said "I *might* have stopped it if I had known"?
5. Did the mean drunk kill the cat immediately? When did she come back home and in what condition? Did the narrator's wife succeed in saving the cat's life? Who eventually killed her? Did the cat try to defend herself or run away this time?
6. How did the narrator's wife feel about the death of the cat? Did the narrator share his wife's feelings? Can you understand why the couple felt so sad over the death of a cat?
7. What painful memories of the narrator did the tragic death of the cat reawaken? How did his daughter and sister die? How do you understand the narrator when he said, "She only had a borrowed life"? Did this idea also apply to his daughter and sister?
8. The narrator says "maybe Millie let Wolf get her—wanted him to, like the hate and alcohol got to my sister." Does this make sense to you? How do you understand this?
9. When the narrator said that there was a lot of static and they lost connection, do you think that was the real reason why they couldn't continue their conversation? Why did the narrator suddenly start to drive eighty miles an hour? Why did he have to pull off the road for a few minutes?
10. At the end of the story, the narrator said, "maybe we'll do better with a payphone, maybe not." What did he mean? Did he really believe that the payphone may have better connection than the cell phone?

Questions for discussion

1. How do you understand the title of the story? How is the word "millennium" relevant to the story and its theme?
2. How do you look at the emotional bond between humans and their pets?
3. Is the writer really talking about how this sentimental old couple mourn over the death of a stray cat here?