

TENDER GRAPES

By Helen Armstrong



## Tender Grapes

*Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines:*

*for our vines have tender grapes.*

Song of Solomon, 2:15



**N**ot all boyfriends were foxes, but all foxes were boyfriends. All foxes belonged to somebody, and it was up to that -body to decide what to do with their fox.

Except when it was up to the fox. People got killed by their foxes all the time //



people get killed by their boyfriends all the time.



But I was lucky, always. This is something that I was told quite a lot as I escaped various harms and fates that befell my classmates growing up. Four kids died in a car crash the year I was a junior, and the whole school wore black to mourn them the next day, though it meant kids were laughing in their spurious grief, set in a blackberry field that was all sour, done for the season. Most of them hadn't known any of the dead kids: did not want to feel sad. I stepped on someone's foot and his fake black pain squirted on the floor like ink. It dissolved as soon as it had been freed from corporeality: he said, *Thank you man, thank you.*

There were other kids who caught the flu every year, and I never did. There was my cousin who drowned in the summer-lake, and I did not. I always felt I had been spared some awful thing, something that I couldn't have imagined.

Then one day after college was done and I had left with no debt, lucky again, I met my fox boyfriend.



You always knew your fox boyfriend existed, even if you never met him. Some people didn't want to; others wanted to but were afraid. If you did want to meet him, once you were old enough, you could simply call for him. Wherever he was, he would have to come to you. It was part instinct, part tradition, and part, I suspect,

Perhaps it was the mutual curiosity that acted like a magnet, pulling you together. The moon creating tides, washing fish up onto the shore, bringing to fruition everything building in that undulating sea. Calling for him felt like that: pulling a wave to crest, knowing it would soon drench the sand.

If you called for your fox boyfriend and he never came, that was because one of the many perils

As if he, too, had been freed.

something else.

dead fish



of the world had gotten to him before you did. This was always sad. To know without knowing. To want, and never to have.

Important: I had known since I was seven that he was out there somewhere. I assumed that he was in Russia, where they had first domesticated foxes. I had always been lucky so there was no reason this would not be the case. My fox boyfriend would be ready to live around humans, ready to stay in my house, drink my orange juice, and eat my toast.



I became lonely and called. There was that curiosity: what would he be like? I knew that he would belong to me easily. I wanted to hold that surety in my hands. I wanted to stroke its fur. Beyond this, though, what? Inside of it: what was he?

He was waiting for me at my door when I got home. I set down my briefcase slow so he would see that I could not cause him harm except with my own hands. It felt like it would be a fair fight, if it came to it, but then, I knew that it would not. Come to it. My fox was domesticated.

His coat was auburn, the color of leaves raked together and left in the mud to get rained on rather than being swept into a trash bag. But then the sun comes out and it sprays light on the pile of wet leaves, and it turns them to what they once were: red/gold, a little translucent.

His eyes were somewhere between green and yellow, and sharp. Each of his pupils was made up of two crescent moons holding one another.

His tail was thick and pressed against my door.



Some people's fox boyfriends will rip off their fingers while they sleep, and they'll wake up in a scream-pain, but it's too late because their fox boyfriend is gone.



There was a long time where we just stared at each other.



If you are supremely lucky, and by supremely lucky, I mean that you must be almost-a-deity, then you will be able to turn your fox boyfriend into a human. This takes a long time and a lot of patience. Not everyone can do it, and most dismiss their foxes to the trees before long. But if you can do it, you're guaranteed a life of perfect happiness with a being you created nearly from scratch, just for yourself.

You must teach him your manners and customs. You must tell him stories that all humans know: you must tell him which dangers all humans are afraid of.

You must teach him to groan when he stretches and unload the dishwasher silverware-first. You must allow him to cry when he wants to cry, because this, too, is human.

It is different than domesticating a wild animal. It is different than raising a dog. You must teach your fox boyfriend about traffic jams and the rovers on Mars. You must teach him to care about these things, but in the right ways.

When a rover dies and your fox does not howl, you must scold him. You must explain to him that we are sad, that the rover was an honorary human because it was built by humans. When your fox asks you why the rover cannot be just a rover, you have no response.



My fox spent the first couple of days in the bathroom, because he was not yet toilet trained. I couldn't have expected any more of him, and I explained that I could not let him out of the bathroom to soil my carpets. He did not know how to speak yet, but he told me anyway that he didn't see why he couldn't stay outside while he learned.

There is no toilet outside, I said, so there is no way to learn to use it.





And the cold was still hanging on to the air. To keep him outside felt like an injustice, a disrespect.



I was someone's boyfriend for a long time.

She was pretty and I wanted to love her more than I did, which did not in itself equal loving her, an unfortunate failure. But when my fox boyfriend did not immediately care for me, I found forgiveness already in my hands.



The first time I took my fox boyfriend to the movies he refused to eat the popcorn. The movie we saw was good, but he was less-than-impressed. He told me halfway through that he needed to use the bathroom, and I told him that he could go, but he had to stay low and be quiet so he wouldn't disturb everyone else. Then on his way he knocked into all the legs in the row and people snapped and groaned at him, and I scolded him when he got back for not listening to my directions, for not being quiet.

But then, I guess, it wasn't him who made all the noise.



My fox boyfriend liked to curl up on the washing machine while it was running but did not like the dryer. I suspect the aversion was because I found him inside it once and yelled, told him to never go in there again, that he could get hurt, that it could turn on and kill him. I told him that it happened all the time to people's cats, and he told

You have no response. You have no response. You have no response. You have no



Letting himself die?



me that he was not a cat, and that it had not hurt him for the nearly thirty minutes he had been sitting in it before I found him. I told him that this was because I hadn't come in and closed the door and turned it on. His eyes flashed at me when he told me that he would have warned me he was inside before letting himself die.

He said that the rumble of the washer made him feel like it did when trucks would drive by on highways that sliced through the woods. If you were near, he said, the trucks would create thunder and then, an earthquake, and you'd always know it was coming but you'd never be quite prepared. He said that if you weren't careful it could really bowl you off your feet.

But he was always careful and always prepared for the washing machine because he saw me loading it. He'd trot over and jump up on top and wait for me to turn it on.



He was also an incredibly picky eater and rarely liked what I cooked. I tried all different types of cuisine, too. I tried Mediterranean many times. He always spat out my falafel. I tried Italian but he sucked a spaghetti noodle up into his mouth and then allowed it to slide out, slow. He shook his head as it dislodged from his lips and fell back onto the plate. I made sushi once, presented it to him nice, said I had raw fish, knowing he hadn't, and he turned up his nose and wouldn't even try it.

One night I brought him his plate with leaves and sticks on it and told him to eat, that if he was going to be such an animal I would treat him like one, that he could eat wildness if he loved it so much.

He didn't eat but instead walked away. His tail swished as he disappeared into the bathroom and closed the door behind him.

Have you ever

peed in the shower.



Later I found that he had



He liked to playfully bite me when he was happy.

The first time he did it, we were watching our show, him next to me on the couch. Furry, small, solid. He did not like to be touched, so it surprised me when he nuzzled his nose under my hand. It was a familiar movement to my fingers, and I scratched beneath his jaw for a moment before he dodged and caught my fingers between his teeth. Bone to bone with just my flesh in the way.

My heart caught but he was not chewing to hurt me. He was chewing for the joy of it, of having something his own.

Dismembered fingers floated across my eyelids at night. But my door was closed, and he could not open it, because it was locked.



Of course, I didn't lock my bedroom door for my own protection. I was not scared of him. Of course I wasn't.

I locked it because I didn't want him to start getting any ideas about us sharing a room while he remained so animal. And there were a lot of things he could get into: the 50-dinar Iraqi coin from Dad and Mom's ashes.

I pictured my fox boyfriend coming in and immediately the ashes would scatter across the floor, and the coin would clatter and spin before landing in the midst of my mother. I'd need to vacuum it all up, pick out the coin and blow off the stray ashes stuck to the small metal valley between the Tigris and Euphrates, and the experience would be too raw.





So I kept the door closed. Again, not for me.  
For my things.



To be afraid of your fox boyfriend seemed to me one of the worst fates. There were many people who were. And whenever people got killed by their fox boyfriends, the families always felt awful and said that they shouldn't have been so pushy, shouldn't have forced their children to stay with their foxes. You didn't have to, after all. If you weren't patient enough it wouldn't work out anyway, and to be patient you needed to want it.



I made my fox boyfriend a collar with a tag. The tag was bright red and dangled from it, had my phone number on one side. Other people couldn't understand him when he spoke, and I didn't want him to get lost and not be able to come back to me.

He pulled at it with his paw and looked at me with this expression that was hard to read. I couldn't wait until he was a human so I could always know what he was thinking based on the set of his mouth. I could tell if he loved me based on his cheeks and

cars.



I went one day to the enclosure in the zoo made for the fox boyfriends who killed their humans. There were fences that encircled all the enclosures and ensured that you couldn't get too close to the animals, but for most of them, this was pretty much the extent of the security measures expended. The giraffes and elephants and everyone



else knew pretty much their place. But these particular foxes didn't because they had been half-taught that they belonged among the humans.

Of course, their privileges had been revoked when they killed. But they couldn't go to human-jail. And they couldn't get let out into the wild to kill again if they felt like it.

Instead, they were relegated here. I got there around feeding time and saw one of the zoo workers do it. She wore these thick rubber gloves and opened the tiny door quickly, set down a tray, and pulled her arms back to safety before the foxes could get too close.

They gathered around the tray, and I couldn't see what exactly was on it, but it was probably dead mammals, little mice or rats or something, ordered dead in bulk. Flies and other bugs swarmed, and I saw one of the foxes snatch a fly right out of the air with its teeth. It gnashed them a few times, its mouth too big to justify such a tiny snack. But it licked its lips and seemed satisfied and swished its tail as it returned to the feast.



A giant chain link fence enclosed them, and their food was pushed through a door toward the back. All day people walked by and took photos of the killing-things who weren't murderers, weren't human, but weren't foxes. The zoo's greatest freakshow.





My fox boyfriend began to construct me a gift in the backyard. He would not tell me what it was but borrowed my tools, and at night I heard him hammering.

I asked him how he was holding the hammer, the nails, and he said that was part of the surprise. I watched the structure erect itself step by step in the mornings' light, like a flash frame film of the Washington Monument going up. It seemed for awhile like a pergola, and I entertained fantasies of wisteria, and my man boyfriend and I, because he would soon be a man if he was creating me such an elaborate gift, sitting beneath it in the afternoon shine, each of us reading some classic novel. And I'd know that I had done it: I had tamed him, created him in my own image.

I asked him again and again what he was making, but he told me that it was a surprise, that he didn't want me to know. He had this particular type of secretive look that I had always liked on him. It meant that he was thinking of something to make me happy; it meant that he was thinking of me, period. Maybe he, too, was thinking of becoming human.



At work people grew jealous of my fox boyfriend. The women would all tell me how difficult their own fox boyfriends were, with most stories ending in defeat.

So I gave up and got myself a real boyfriend and now we're married. Any thoughts on

This was the theme. Of course, I was a man, and took some offense at the assertion that a man could possibly be wild.

Humans were bred to be humans, I told them, and if your human boyfriend or husband isn't

If you are

a-deity, you turn  
your boyfriend human.  
Not everyone  
can dismiss their foxes to the  
trees . if you do you're  
guaranteed a life of perfect happiness  
, just for  
yourself.

supremely lucky, and by  
supremely lucky, I mean that you must be  
almost- then will be able to  
fox into a This takes a  
long time and a lot of patience.  
do it, and most  
before long But can it,  
with a  
being you created nearly from scratch

domesticating a man?



cooperating then maybe it's something that you're doing wrong, or something you're not doing right.

The latter seemed an important distinction.



I started to teach my fox boyfriend to read. It was a key step in the process to becoming human, I told him, and he was patient. We started out with simple books. *Where the Wild Things Are*. *The Little Prince*. *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*.

I visited my dad and picked up the copy of Aesop's Fables that my mother had read to me and tore out the story about the fox. Then I brought it home and had my fox read the rest out loud to me, while I laid across the couch and he laid stomach on the floor with the book spread in front of him.



We were both planning something.

He told me that he wanted my gift to be a surprise, so he ordered a canvas tarp and covered it up every day. He only worked at night, and I obliged by not peeking, even though I wanted to. Now that he was near-human, I wanted to give him this small respect.

Meanwhile, I was planning our first date, once he was a human. I would take him to a very nice restaurant that was near the zoo, and afterwards, before dark fell completely, we would visit the fox enclosure. He'd be able to see what he could have been, what I had saved him from becoming.

I couldn't wait.



wild thing

I'll eat you up.





I heard him singing in the shower. He had begun to prefer very hot water, as opposed to the freezing chill he'd used before. His songs were not human songs; I didn't know what they were, how they came from him, didn't understand the lyrics nor how the melodies worked. But they were sad. Something about the rise and fall, fall, fall made my chest constrict. I began to dread his showers.



He also learned how to cook rice, using his mouth to hold the spoon. He would make it again and again. I'd come home to mountains of rice and him staring me down as if punishing me for what I had taught him to do.

I scraped most of it into the trash can.



One night I woke up and he was crying\*. I didn't go to him because the moment felt too intimate. I wondered if I loved him\*. For all the wondering if he loved me, I had never asked this of myself, because it seemed moot <sup>where \* is a definition</sup>. I decided that I would love him but did not yet. This was good enough to fall back to sleep: and not good enough to comfort him. \*\*



In the morning once I told him between rays of sun through the window that the traffic was bad and I would have to leave early. He told me that he was sorry. Traffic sucks, he said.

And caught us both by surprise.



\*\* [after significant pause] what for?

\*what for?





He was still building something and kept telling me that it wasn't ready yet, it wasn't time.

But I had never had to wait this long for anything.

I woke up one morning and he wasn't in the guest room, wasn't downstairs, wasn't anywhere. I looked out at the backyard: he wasn't there either. Just the tarp that rippled in the breeze and covered the phantom gift. It was a large box quivering to be unwrapped. I opened the back door and pushed out into the day, stood in the yard for some time and thought.

I'd promised myself and him that I wouldn't peek until he said that it was ready, but there must be some clue beneath the tarp that would indicate how close he was, how he felt about me, whether it was all as near the end as I thought it was.

I shouldn't look.

But the temptation was great.

I crossed the backyard. My feet and chest were bare, but it was not cold, so it didn't matter.

I lifted the tarp a little, because a small peek was just a small betrayal, and a human life was filled with those.

Thick ||| metal ||| bars ||| stared ||| at me beneath the tarp, so close that I couldn't squeeze through. I lifted it further and then was beneath it, pressed up against the outside of what was now clearly a cage, the light muffled.



I only had a moment to stare and wonder before:

The tarp was pulled from the cage and landed in a heap to my left. I turned to see a man standing there. I could hardly comprehend his solidity.

He was naked. His skin was tanned, his muscles well-defined, his dark hair long and shaggy hanging around his face.

His pupils, two dark slits surrounded by an unsettling green, a damp forest, and through the dripping trees, the moon, waning, almost new.

He grabbed onto my arm and I was silent, stunned, as he opened a door in the cage and pushed me inside. “ ,” and the slamming door rattled the bars, though they did not waver, not even a bit.

He pulled the tarp from the cage. A small wind blew from it, the air that had collected there releasing a sigh, and it swam around and across his skin. The artificial breeze raised the small hairs on his arms, on his chest, a trail downward and a swarm, then his legs.

Tears on skin felt different from tears on fur, that blanket that covered him and had now been ripped off. He wondered who felt the wind from his own blanket: from his fur.

Speaking felt wrong, but it was the only way now. He no longer had an inner voice. It had been severed. And so: he spoke the only words he could think.

