The Wolf Road

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Part One

Endings

The road ran through the summer fields and we raced it like wild things. It was so dusty the back of my throat tickled, and when sunlight struck the windscreen the glass turned misty white. In the verges rushing past, the willowherb had exploded into smokiness and the blackberries looked ripe, as ripe and sweet as the ones Dad liked to pick in the evenings. Mum sang softly along with the radio while Dad whooshed us through the bends of the Somerset lanes.

'Oh, I love this one,' said Mum, dialling up the volume as a new song came on. 'We saw them live once.'

'Were they any good?' I asked, leaning between their seats.

'They were amazing.'

'They were all right,' said Dad, on one of his wind-ups, 'they weren't amazing.'

Mum didn't rise to it, just rolled her eyes at me. I laughed and sat back. It was a Saturday afternoon and we were going into town, Mum and Dad to look at tiles for the kitchen and me to meet up with Mitesh.

Mum's face appeared round the headrest and, in an

undertone that was deliberately loud enough for Dad to hear, she said, 'They *were* amazing,' and winked.

We swept around a bend and Mum's hair swung across her cheek. Beyond her, in the middle of the lane, stood a dog. Dad braked sharply. Mum's face vanished. I was flung forward. We swerved, skidding, and I was slung sideways. Dad shouted in fear. My head struck the window. Another window burst. Branches came in. The car ceiling approached with hundreds of tiny holes in its grey fabric. I was pushed down into my seat with tremendous force, lifted up, turned over, and plunged down again – crunch.

Everything was still.

I lay at the bottom of the car. But now the bottom was the door and above me, coming in through the smashed window, was green hedge. There was a smell of burned rubber and, weirdly, perfume.

Hanging limp in her seat belt above me, like a trapeze artist, was Mum. Her hair clung to her cheek, stuck. Blood dripped from her mouth onto the driver's seat. Onto Dad.

Dad didn't move. He was crumpled against the driver's window, his head bent at an odd angle.

A branch sprang free and whipped the ceiling. When I moved, glass fell on my face. I was covered in white crystals.

'Mum?'

The only sound was blood dripping from Mum's face onto Dad.

'Dad?'

He didn't answer.

The back window was smashed. I released my seat belt and crawled out. Cloud slipped across the sun and I was in cool shadow, then it slipped away. I was on an earth bank. I slithered down. The smell of burned rubber was stronger now, and there was a smell of petrol too, so powerful it filled my mouth and I wanted to scrape it off my tongue.

The dog was in the middle of the road. It was the colour of smoke, or dusk when light has seeped out of the world and it's almost night, except for its eyes which were orangey brown with tiny black pupils. It didn't seem to see me properly although it looked right at me. It looked at me the way a soldier might who is about to go into battle. It stood very still. It had paws the size of a boxer's fists, and long legs. It had a broad chest, a big ruff of fur, and its shoulders were bony. Suddenly it dipped its head as if it was going to attack.

I scrambled up the bank. As I did, from the corner of my eye I saw the animal spring into a long bound. Not towards me, but away. It seemed to flow across the road. It flowed up the opposite bank and into the hedge and all that remained was the empty country lane, scorched by fierce black tyre marks.

It was not until the birdsong began that I realised that the lane had been silent the whole time.

In the birdsong a white minibus zoomed around the corner. It braked and came to a halt. For a moment nothing happened, then its doors were thrown open and men jumped out. All with beer bellies, dressed in cricket whites. Beards and moustaches, all older than Dad, all running round.

*

After the cricketers had prevented me from returning to our car, after the fire engine had arrived, after I had been taken away in the ugly yellow light of a windowless ambulance, after the paramedic kept changing the subject when I asked what was happening to Mum and Dad, after waiting in Accident and Emergency for a doctor, after being X-rayed on a cold slab, after the doctor had refused to answer my questions about Mum and Dad, after I had started shouting at him and his mates, after I had tried to leave, after I had been injected with a dark liquid, I fell asleep.

It was a strange sleep. Not really a sleep, more a blankness.

When I woke it was dark. The bed I was in had thin sheets that were tucked in so tight I could hardly move. I was lying on my side. There were other beds, white shapes floating in the darkness, and I could hear the breaths of

other teenagers and children, sleeping. At one end were curtainless windows. The ward must have been high up because the windows framed sky. Just sky. It was night, and the moon was tiny and very far away.

I couldn't believe it – I had slept since afternoon. How could I, when my parents needed me? Whatever the doctor had injected me with must have been strong, so strong I couldn't wake up properly, and the strange blankness lurked. I felt it at the edge of my mind and I knew that at any moment it might return. I had to find Mum and Dad quick. I had to find out where the doctors had put them. I tried to get up but the sheet was too tight and when I rolled over to loosen it, I had such a shock I completely froze.

A woman stood at the end of my bed.

She stood very still and looked at me. Her serious clothes and her grey hair made her seem like a doctor. But she was so motionless I wondered if she might be something else. A sleepwalker, a lost visitor, a crazy person? I decided she must be a doctor. I asked her where Mum and Dad were. Before she could answer, and before I could ask her again, the blankness eased in.

*

When I woke properly it was morning and the ward was full of noise. I was still groggy. A team of cooks were clattering steel hatches on a big, steaming, stainless-steel

trolley. In about ten seconds they had brought everyone in the ward their breakfast and rolled out. A pair of nurses were going from bed to bed, wheeling a drugs trolley. They fed tablets in little paper cups to unhappy kids. A cleaner mopped, singing a song in a language I didn't know.

'Where's my mum and dad?' I croaked to the two nurses at the next bed. As they left, I called after them, 'Where's Mum and Dad?'

I kicked off the tucked-in sheets and stood up. For a moment everything in my vision went red and I had to wait for the blindness to go, then I went after the nurses. I was in a hospital gown, open at the back. I didn't remember putting it on. Which meant someone had taken off my clothes while I'd been asleep.

'Please,' said the cleaner in an East-European accent, stepping in front of me. 'You slip on my floor. You go to your bed.'

'I have to find out what happened to my parents. What happened to my parents?'

'I do not know. How could I know? You go to your bed.'

She barred my way with her mop.

I went round her. I rushed towards the ward doors. As I approached they opened and the serious grey-haired woman from the night before hurried towards me, a male doctor in a white coat behind her calling, 'Stop!'

'Where's Mum and Dad?'

'Lucas,' she said in a flat, tired voice. 'Lucas.'

'What's happened to Mum and Dad? Where are they?'

'Please,' the male doctor said, arriving out of breath. 'You can't be here.'

'What's happened to my parents? I want to know what's happened to my parents.' I could feel panic, my voice getting tighter, louder. 'Where's Mum and Dad?'

The woman with the grey hair touched my arm and I felt a shock. There was something familiar about her. She was the doctor from the night before but it wasn't that which was familiar – she reminded me of Mum.

Quietly, as if it was difficult for her to utter the words, as if they were rough objects she brought up painfully from the depths of her body, she said, 'They're dead.'

Her eyes were grey with dozens of black flecks in them.

'I'm sorry, Lucas,' she said.

The male doctor said, 'Can I get you some water?'

The woman led me back to the bed. The soles of my feet were cool on the mopped floor. She sat beside me and her tanned hand rested on my forearm. She wore a watch with a red strap, its leather worn. The second hand moved round and it seemed baffling that it kept going like that. How could it, when Mum and Dad had stopped, simply stopped?

'I'll leave you to be alone with your grandmother,' the

male doctor said. 'If you need anything, please come and get me.'

It took a while for his words to sink in.

I turned to her.

She wore a grey knitted tank top and a short-sleeved shirt. One collar-tip was under the V-neck and one collar-tip out. Her grey hair was upright, stiff, short. She had olive-coloured skin like Mum's. Her face was broad. She had a small, unhappy mouth. She looked exhausted.

'Do you remember me?' she said.

I'd spoken to her on the phone each Christmas but only met her twice.

Nan.

*

We walked the hallway with a gap between us that widened as we made room for people coming the other way: elderly patients in wheelchairs, visitors striding. I was puzzled that they all seemed … not happy exactly, but cheerful somehow. A hospital porter pushed a trolley-bed with an old woman inside. She was so frail her head on the pillows didn't make a dent. She stared upwards at the ceiling, tubes taped to her nostrils.

Automatic doors parted and we stepped into warm September air.

'Wait here. I'll get the car.'

I hadn't thought of the future and what would

happen next until that moment. My brain seemed stuck. I couldn't get beyond the absence of Mum and Dad. The fact didn't fit the world. The world didn't fit the fact. The world didn't make any sense. Why were ambulances coming into the courtyard? Why was the day warm? Why were the giant fans on the side of the building rotating? Why were the clouds moving across the blue? It seemed impossible they should all just continue in the same way. None of it fitted with the fact that Mum and Dad were dead.

I couldn't think beyond that.

A small red car drove into the courtyard. As Nan drove towards me I heard again the thunder of our car up the earth bank, the tear of metal, the snap of plastic, the crunch. The reflection of the hospital's concrete and glass flowed up the windscreen and Nan stopped and I remembered how that strange animal had stood in the middle of the road, how its amber-coloured irises and the black pips of its pupils had fixed on me, how it must have stood there during the entire accident because when I crawled out of the car, it was in the same spot.

Nan got out. In the daylight she looked ill, her olive skin almost grey. Squinting against the sun, shielding her eyes, she said, 'Let's get you home.'

I didn't respond; then, suddenly, with the car's lethal bonnet rising beside me, I felt a terror. 'I can't,' I said, pleading with Nan with my eyes.

Nan's face didn't change expression but in a flat voice she said, 'I haven't the energy, Lucas,' and got back in the car.

The hospital fans hummed. The passenger door popped open.

I didn't move. I couldn't.

An ambulance with flashing blue lights pulled up behind Nan's car. The car's door-handle gleamed. The paramedic in the ambulance hooted his horn then waved at me to hurry up.

My chest tight, I stepped forward and pulled open the thick wall of door. As I got in, I was super-aware of the steering wheel, the dashboard dials, the rubber rug in the seat-well. They were almost startling. Nan turned to me as I pulled on the seat belt. She has thick eyebrows like Mum's.

'Okay?' she said in her tired voice, her breath wafting sourness and coffee.

I didn't respond.

'God, what a place,' she said, glancing up at the hospital, then she switched on the ignition, put the car into gear, checked over her shoulder, and as I gripped the side-bar and my stomach clenched, she worked the pedals with round-toed DMs.