opening extract from

Eye of the Wolf

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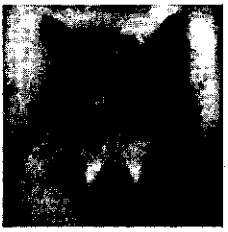
How They Met



· I ·

The boy standing in front of the wolf's cage doesn't move a muscle. The wolf paces backwards and forwards. He walks the length of the enclosure and back again without stopping.

He's starting to get on my nerves, the wolf thinks to himself. For the last two hours the boy has been standing in front of the wire fencing, as still as a frozen tree, watching the wolf walking.

What does he want from me? the wolf wonders. The boy makes him feel curious. He's not worried (because wolves aren't afraid of anything), just curious. What does he want?

The other children jump and run about, shout and burst into tears, stick their tongues out at the wolf and hide their heads in their mums' skirts. Then they make silly faces in front of the gorilla's cage, or roar at the

lion as he whips the air with his tail. But this boy is different. He stands there silently, without moving a muscle. Only his eyes shift. They follow the wolf as he paces the length of his wire fencing.

What's your problem? Haven't you ever seen a wolf before?

The wolf only sees the boy every other time he passes him. That's because the wolf only has one eye. He lost the other one ten years ago in a fight against humans, the day he was captured. So on his outward journey (if you can call it a journey) the wolf sees the zoo with all its cages, the children making faces and, standing in the middle of it all, the boy who doesn't move a muscle. On the return journey (if you can call it a journey) the wolf sees the inside of his enclosure. It's an empty enclosure, because the she-wolf died last week. It's a sad enclosure with a solitary rock and a dead tree. When the wolf turns round, there's the boy again, breathing steadily, his white breath hanging in the cold air.

He'll give up before I do, thinks the wolf, and he carries on walking. I'm more patient than he is, he adds. I'm the wolf.

· II ·

But the first thing the wolf sees when he wakes up the next day is the boy, standing in exactly the same spot in front of his enclosure. The wolf nearly jumps out of his fur.

He can't have spent the night here!

He calms down and begins to pace again, as if it is nothing out of the ordinary.

The wolf's been walking for an hour now. And the boy's eyes have been following him for an hour. The wolf's blue fur brushes against the wire fencing. His muscles ripple beneath his winter coat. The blue wolf keeps on walking as if nothing will ever stop him. As if he's on his way back home to Alaska, where he comes

from. The metal plaque fixed to his cage reads ALASKAN WOLF. And there's a map of the Far North, with an area marked in red: ALASKAN WOLF, BARREN LANDS.

His paws don't make a sound when they touch the ground. He moves from one end of the enclosure to the other, like a silent pendulum inside a grandfather clock. The boy's eyes move slowly, as if he's following a game of tennis in slow motion.

Does he really think I'm *that* interesting?

The wolf frowns. The bristles on his muzzle stand on end. He's annoyed with himself for asking so many questions. He swore not to have anything more to do with human beings. He's been true to his word for ten years now: he hasn't thought about human beings once, or even glanced at them. He has cut himself off completely. He doesn't look at the kids making silly faces in front of his cage, or the zookeeper throwing him his meat from a distance, or the artists drawing him on Sundays, or the stupid mums showing him to their toddlers and squawking, "Look at the big bad wolf! He'll gobble you up if you're naughty!" He doesn't look at any of them.

"Not even the best human beings are worth bothering about." That's what Black Flame, the wolf's mother, always used to say.

Sometimes the wolf would take a break from pacing. Up until last week, that is. He and the she-wolf would sit facing the visitors. It was as if they couldn't see them. He and the she-wolf would stare straight ahead. They stared straight through them. It made the visitors feel like they didn't even exist. It was spooky.

"What are they looking at in that strange way?"

"What can they see?"

But then the she-wolf, who was grey and white like a snow partridge, died. The wolf hasn't stopped moving since. He walks from morning to evening, and leaves his meat to freeze on the ground. Outside, straight as the letter i (imagine the dot is his white breath hanging in the air), the boy watches him.

If that's the way he wants it, that's his problem, the wolf decides. And he stops thinking about the boy altogether.

· III ·

But the next day the boy is there again. And the following day. And the day after that. Until the wolf can't help thinking about him again. Who is he? What does he want from me? Doesn't he have anything to do all day? Doesn't he have work to do? Or school to go to? Hasn't he got any friends? Or parents? Or relatives?

So many questions slow his pace; his legs feel heavy. He's not worn out yet, but he might be soon. Unbelievable! thinks the wolf.

At least the zoo will be closed tomorrow. Once a month there's a special day when the zookeepers check on the animals' health and repair their cages. No visitors are allowed.

That'll get him off my back.

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Wrong again. The next day, just like all the other days, the boy is there. He seems to be more present than ever – all alone in front of the enclosure, all alone in an empty zoo.

Oh, no, groans the wolf. But that's the way it is.

The wolf is starting to feel worn out now. The boy's stare seems to weigh a ton. All right, thinks the wolf. You've asked for it! And suddenly he stops walking. He sits bolt upright opposite the boy. And he starts staring back. He doesn't look through him. It's a real stare, a *fixed* stare.

So now they're opposite each other.

And they just keep on staring.

There isn't a single visitor in the zoo. The vets haven't arrived yet. The lions haven't come out of their lair. The birds are asleep under their feathers. It's a day of rest for everyone. Even the monkeys have stopped making mischief. They hang from the branches like sleeping bats.

There's just the boy.

And the wolf with the blue fur.

So you want to stare at me? Fine! I'll stare at you too. And we'll soon see...

But there's something bothering the wolf. A silly detail. He's only got one eye and the boy's got two. The wolf doesn't know which of the boy's eyes to stare into. He hesitates. His single eye jumps: right-left, left-right. The boy's eyes don't flinch. He doesn't flutter an eyelash. The wolf feels extremely uneasy. He won't turn his head away for the whole world. And there's no question of starting to pace again. His eye begins to lose control. Soon, across the scar of his dead eye, a tear appears. Not because he's sad, but out of a sense of helplessness and anger.

So the boy does something strange that calms the wolf and makes him feel more at ease. The boy closes an eye.

Now they're looking into each other's eye, in a zoo that's silent and empty, and they've got all the time in the world.