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The Wolf Border

Written by Sarah Hall

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SARAH HALL

The Wolf Border



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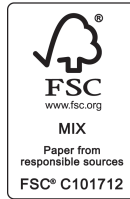
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FOR FIONA

Susiraja (Finnish) – Literally ‘wolf border’: the boundary between the capital region and the rest of the country. The name suggests everything outside the border is wilderness.

OLD COUNTRY

It's not often she dreams about them. During the day they are elusive, keeping to the tall grass of the Reservation, disappearing from the den site. They are fleet or lazy, moving through their own tawny colourscape and sleeping under logs – missable either way. Their vanishing acts have been perfected. At night they come back. The cameras pick them up, red-eyed, muzzles darkened, returning from a hunt. Or she hears them howling along the buffer zone, a long harmonic. One leading, then many. At night there is no need to imagine, no need to dream. They reign outside the mind.

Now there is snow over Chief Joseph, an early fall. The pines are bending tolerantly; the rivers see white. In backcountry cabins venison stocks and pipes are beginning to freeze. Millionaires' ranches lie empty: their thermostats set, their gates locked. The roads are open but there are few visitors. The summer conferences and powwows are long over. Only the casinos do business with tourists, with stag parties and addict crones, in neon reparation. Soon the pack will be gone, too – north, after the caribou – the centre will close for winter, and she is flying home to England. Her first visit in six years. The last ended badly, with an argument, a family riven. She is being called upon to entertain a rich man's whimsey, a man who owns almost a fifth of her home county. And her mother is dying. Neither duty is urgent; both

players will wait, with varying degrees of patience. Meanwhile, snow. The Chief Joseph wolves are scenting hoof prints, making forays from the den. The pups have grown big and ready, any day now they will start their journey. The tribal councils are meeting in Lapwai to discuss scholarships, road maintenance, the governor's hunting quota, and protection of the pack. The Hernandez comet is low and dull in the east, above survivalist compounds.

The night before Rachel leaves Idaho, she does dream of them, and of Binny. Binny is sitting on a wooden bench in the old wildlife park outside the bird huts, wearing a long leather coat and smoking a rolled cigarette. She has dark, short hair under a green cloche hat. It is Rachel's birthday. This is her birthday wish – a day at Setterah Keep: the ruined Victorian menagerie in the woods of the Lowther Valley. They have walked round the boar enclosures, the otters, the peacocks, to the owls. Binny likes the eagle owl. She likes its biased ears, the fixed orange tunnels of its eyes. She sits quietly and smokes, watches the bird beating its clipped wings and preening. She is all bone and breasts under her coat: a body better out of clothes, a body made to ruin men. Not yet pregnant with Rachel's brother. Her green nylon trousers tingle with static when Rachel leans against them. The stocky, haunched bird prowls across the pen towards its feed, gullets a mouse whole, up to the tail. Rachel hates owls. They are like fat brushes – a ridiculous shape for a thing. They sweep and swivel their heads and have sharp picky beaks. When she goes inside the hut to see the lunar white one, the darkness hurts her head. The bird shed stinks of lime and feathers and must. Back outside, she sits on the bench with Binny and kicks the ground. *Are you bored, my girl?* Binny says. *You wanted to come. Go and see the*

otters again. You can take some ice cream. Binny likes freedom. She likes the man in the sweet kiosk. He makes her laugh by asking if they are sisters. She holds his eye. *Off you go, my girl*, she says, lighting another cigarette. *Be brave.*

Rachel walks to the otter pool, unwraps the mint choc chip and licks the gritty dome. The pool has a green-stained moat that moves like a river. The otters paddle round it on their backs, eating fish heads. Their fur snugs the water. They chitter to each other. Under the ice cream is a malty cone. She goes into the snake house, where there are bright insects clinging in glass tanks. The snakes move slower than forever.

Binny is still talking at the kiosk, leaning in. Rachel is allowed to go quite far – she knows all the ways around the village where she lives, the lonnings, the drove-tracks over the moors. She walks past the netted parrots squawking at each other, past the gift shop and toilets, over a bridge over a stream, to a burnt creosoted gate, on which there is a sign, made of red writing. She can't read it because she's not yet in school. Through the gate and into the trees. The trees smell of mint too. Wooded pathways with arrows pointing, corridors of shadows either side. *Be brave.* It is very quiet. Brown needles stream between trunks, and her steps make tiny silky squeaks. Fork to the right. Fork to the left. Into the dark, filtering green. At the bottom of the cone there's a chocolate stub. Once that's gone she's more aware of where she is.

Here. Beside a fence built tall and seriously, up into the trees. The wire is thick and heavy, knotted into diamond-shaped holes. Pinned to it is another sign. Maybe it's the end of the park. What is on the other side? *Hello?* She reaches up and takes hold of the wire. She slots the tips of her shoes through and lifts herself off the ground. Beyond are bushes and worn earth. A bundle of

something pinkish, with bits of ragged hair and buzzing flies. She leans back, bends her knees, sways and rattles the metal. Emptiness beyond. Flickering leaves. *Hello?*

It comes between the bushes, as if bidden. It comes forward, mercilessly, towards her, paws lifting, fast, but not running. A word she will soon learn: *lope*. It is perfectly made: long legs, sheer chest, dressed for coldness in wraps of grey fur. It comes close to the wire and stands looking at her, eyes level, pure yellow gaze. Long nose, the black tip twitching, short mane. A dog before dogs were invented. The god of all dogs. It is a creature so fine, she can hardly comprehend it. But it recognises her. It has seen and smelled animals like her for two million years. It stands looking. Yellow eyes, black-ringed. Its thoughts nameless. She holds the fence but the fence has almost disappeared; she is hanging in the air, suspended like a soft offering. Any minute it will be upon her.

In sleep, Rachel has stopped breathing. Snow is falling on the cabin roof, through acres of blackness; the computer in the office is winking slowly, storing emails and data; elk season is open. The Chief Joseph den has been abandoned and the pack is moving single file through the Bitterroot terrain, winter nomads. Her British passport is in her jacket pocket and her mother, no longer hale or able, is dying, a long way away. *Go on, my girl*. In the dream, the wolf stands looking at her. Yellow-eyed and sheer. A mystic from the Reservation once asked her to describe the feeling of communion seeing a wolf that first time. What did her heart feel? There was money in it for him he'd hoped – she had only just arrived, maybe she would buy one of his sachets of fur, a leather charm, a tooth. *I don't believe what you believe*, she'd said.

How does it feel? Pre-erotic fear. The heart beneath her chest

jumps, smells bloody. She unclutches the wire and steps to the ground. Its head lowers: eyes level again, keen as gold, sorrowless. Then it releases its extraordinary jaw. Inside is a lustre of sharpness, white crescents, ridges, black pleated lips. A long, spooling tongue. In her brain an evolutionary signal fires. What a mouth like that means. She steps back, turns and walks carefully along the fence, her hands clenched. The wolf crosses paws, folds round, and walks parallel behind the wire. A blur of long grey, head tilted towards her, one eye watching. She stops walking, and it stops. She turns slowly and walks the other way. It crosses paws, turns, and follows. An echo, a mirror. She stops. *What are you doing?* Its ears prick up, twitch forward. She begins to run along the wire, over the slippery forest floor, needles and branches. She is fast. But it is there, running at her side, exact, switching direction when she does, almost before she does, running back the other way. It turns as she turns, runs as she runs. She runs hard through the Setterah woods, along the fence, and it runs with her. Through the trees. To the very corner of the cage, where she stops, breathing hard, and it stops and stands looking at her. *What are you doing?* she says.

But already she knows. The layers of sleep are falling away. The radio alarm is blaring, KIYE station, a rock song from the eighties. Her shoulder is cold outside the heavy covers. Her brain is restarting. That creature of the outer darkness – of geographic success, myth and horror, hunted with every age's weapon, stone axe, spear, sprung-steel trap, and semi-automatic – was playing.

5 a.m., Mountain Time. Kyle will drive her to the airport before daylight to catch the hopper to Spokane. She lies under the blankets and listens to snow dispatching softly from the roof and the

branches. Setterah Keep: a lost world. She had loved going there for birthdays as a child. Until, in 1981, the Licensing Act brought an end to many of the parks and it closed down. Even a century before, they must have known the enclosures were too small, pens, dementing places. After coffee and a shower, when she is properly awake, she phones Binny and reminds her what time she will be arriving. *Yes, Thursday. Yes, by dinnertime, if the traffic isn't bad.* Then, unusually, she tells her mother about the dream. *No, Binny says. No. That wasn't a dream. There were wolves in the park for a while. Don't you remember? You kids used to torment them. One of them got out, created havoc.*

*

The Earl is not at home when Rachel arrives at Pennington Hall. She was warned by his secretary that he is unreliable, that he keeps only some of his appointments. The prerogative of wealth and eccentricity. The drive from London has taken eight hours: congestion around the airport and the north orbital, an accident south of Kendal, all lanes halted until the air ambulance could set down on the carriageway to collect the shattered motorcyclist. As ever, the county's interior routes move sluggishly: compact dry-stone lanes and dawdling sightseers. A landslide on one of the mountain passes has resulted in road closure, so she must turn back at the barrier and take the longer lakeside road into the western valleys. The fells rise, carrying dead bracken on their slopes the colour of rust. Granite juts through, below gathering cloud. She sets the wipers to intermittent, but the rain is either too heavy or too fine; the rubber blades screech or the screen blurs. The GPS recalculates, asks her to turn round, go back the way she has come. She

switches it off and buys a map from a village shop. This is not a part of the district she knows – her home village is on the other side of the mountains.

She is extremely tired by the time she reaches the gate into the estate, nauseous with jetlag and service station coffee. But she's alert enough to notice the beauty of the place – September's russet fading in the trees, wet, glistening light on the hills – and to note that the lake would be a good territorial boundary, were this still wilderness. It has not been wilderness since the primeval forest was felled. The gate into the estate is an elaborate wrought-iron affair, bearing a coat of arms. She pulls up next to the intercom, lowers the window, and inhales. Moorland, peat, ferns, water and whatever the water touches: the myrrh of autumn. She's become used to spruce and sagebrush, the rancid vegetable smell of the paper mill downriver from the Reservation. Cumbria's signature aroma is immediately recognisable: upland pheromones.

She reaches out to press the button, but the gate opens silently. She is being watched on the CCTV. The drive is long and newly gravelled, oak-lined. She passes a tree so old and obese with bark that its lower branches are sagging almost to the ground. Wooden struts have been built underneath to prop them up. Beside the drive a handful of roe deer graze. They raise their heads as she drives by and do not move. In the rain, the red-stone manor looks patched and bloody. Ivy is growing shaggily up the facade, but for a building of its size and age it is far from dereliction. The crenellations are intact; the windows expensively replaced. Thomas Pennington has not suffered hard times, death duties, or insurmountable taxes, it would seem. The building is clearly not a casualty of democratic change like so many of the countryside's aristocratic behemoths. Perhaps the garden and house are

open to the public, or a lucrative tearoom is hidden somewhere behind the maze, bulbs and plant cuttings for sale, wedding hire, the usual schemes. Or perhaps the Earl's business portfolio has been skilfully updated and he has accounts offshore. Rachel parks at the side of the tower, next to a little blue MG and a utility van, gets out, and stretches. The air is damp and cool. Rooks clamour in the nearby trees. The mountains behind could have been built for aesthetic purposes – it is an incredibly beautiful view.

The main door of the hall is a dense medieval affair, shot through with bolts: siege-proof. On either side sit two stone lions, lichen mottling their manes. It seems wrong to use such an entrance, but there is no other way, no tradesman's signpost. She pushes the bell and a ferrous donging sounds within. A woman answers: middle-aged, plump inside her navy suit. She is auburn-haired, unadorned by jewellery or cosmetics, with winter-rose skin. Extremely English-looking; from an England seventy years gone. She would suit a rabble of hounds at her feet, Rachel thinks, a shotgun crooked over her elbow – the complete incarnation has probably at some stage existed. The woman introduces herself as Honor Clark, the Earl's secretary. Rachel shakes her hand.

Really sorry I'm late. The flight was delayed. Snow in Spokane. We were sitting on the runway too long – they had to re-spray the plane. I almost missed the connection. Then the drive up . . . I hope he hasn't been waiting long.

The apology is irrelevant. *He* isn't here.

I don't know where he is at the moment, Honor Clark tells her. The Land Rover's gone, which doesn't bode well, but it does mean he's on the estate. I'm leaving in an hour. Do you want to come in?

Rachel checks her watch.

Ah. Yes, OK. Thank you.

She follows the woman across the threshold, into a large, temperate reception hall, then down a corridor hung with portraits of stags, Heaton Coopers, and a few tasteful abstracts. She is shown into a vast drawing room containing an elaborate suite of furniture, a Bauhaus chair, glassware cabinets, bookcases, and an immense stone fireplace. The grate is un-laid but the room is warm, free of medieval draughts. The secretary holds her hands up as if fending something away.

Look, I can't offer you dinner, I'm afraid. Thomas has an event in Windermere tonight so he's dining out. We don't have guests this week – the chef's off.

I'm fine.

As I say, I doubt he'll be available before he has to go out.

OK. But I did have an appointment. I should probably wait.

The secretary nods and lowers her hands.

You said you didn't need a hotel so I haven't booked one.

No. I'm staying with family.

You're local? I don't hear an accent.

I've been away quite a while.

I see.

Honor Clark ushers her across the room, and Rachel sits on the chaise longue near the empty fire. Lambent Chinese silk, in near-perfect condition. Her trousers are badly creased. The sales tag inside the waistband is irritating her lower back but she has failed during the course of the flight or the drive to tear it out. She has not worn slacks for over a year, not since the Minnesota conference, at which she delivered the keynote speech, drank too much in the hotel bar with Kyle and Oran, argued with the chairman of the IWC, slept with Oran again, and left a day early.

Not disgraced exactly, but en route. In the bars and restaurants of Kamiah, which the centre workers frequent at weekends, the dress code for both men and women extends no further than boots and jeans. She hasn't showered since leaving the centre; any trace of deodorant has gone. She has never been received at this level of society before, in any country. Even beyond the warp of altered time zones and the *déjà vu* of coming home, the event feels deeply uncanny. Honor Clark moves to the sideboard.

OK. Well. I'll set you up and then leave you. Would you like a sherry?

Yes, alright.

Sweet or dry?

Dry?

The secretary lifts one of the cut-glass decanters, unstoppers it, and pours out a viscous topaz liquid. The rugs under her heels are intricately woven, plums and teals, each one no doubt worth thousands. Rachel's cabin in the centre complex has flat-pack cabinets and linoleum floors. There are fading plastic coffee cups with the Chief Joseph logo stamped on them. Her entire cabin would fit, if not into this capacious, silk-wallpapered room, then certainly into the wing. It feels as if a kind of Dickensian experiment is taking place, except there will be no charitable warding, no societal ascent. Her intended role has not yet been defined. A consultant? A named advocate? A class of specialist suddenly called upon in times of extravagant ecological hobbying? A delicate, bell-shaped glass of sherry is placed in her hand. Honor Clark heads for the door.

I'll come back before I go. Have to make a few phone calls and finish up. If he arrives I'll send him to you. But, as I say, it's unlikely. You'll be alright in the meantime?

Yes. Fine. Thanks.

And the woman is gone, back into the panelled opulence of the manor corridors, back into whichever chamber of the hall she inhabits while arranging the abortive comings and goings of the Earl. The sun shifts from behind a cloud and the drawing room is filled with moist Lakeland light. Rachel sips the sherry, which is crisp and surprisingly enjoyable. Not a trace of dust or mouldering cork. She finishes the drink quickly, then stands and crosses the room.

Beyond the tall windows, the estate extends for miles. It is now the largest private estate in England. Little of the acreage has been sold off. In fact, quite the opposite. Thomas Pennington owns most of the private woodland in the region, farmsteads, mostly empty, all but the common land. On the horizon, the fells roll bluely towards bald peaks. At the bottom of the sloping lawn, at the lake edge, is a wooden reiki structure – one of the Earl's alternative hobbies, perhaps, certainly safer than flying microlights, which famously almost killed him, and did kill his wife.

The lake's surface reflects complicated weather. On an island near the opposite shore is a red-stone folly, a faux architectural match for the hall, and towards this a tiny boat is rowing, leaving a soft V on the cloudy surface. The west coast is fifteen miles away, ugly and nuclear. Somewhere between, behind the autumn trees, is the enclosure.

Maps of the estate have been sent to her. Spatially, the argument is easily made; it is one of the few tracts of land where such a project is viable. The new game enclosure bill has given the Earl licence for such a project. No doubt he pulled strings to have it passed. Work is underway on the barrier. The money seems limitless. What he does not have, what he wants, is her – the native expert.

She takes her phone from her jacket pocket. Binny has rung but left no message. There are two texts from Kyle. *Left Paw radio transmitter kaput, possible dispersal. Trustafarian volunteer quit owe you 50.* Then, off duty: *How's merry old England had any warm beer?* He will be out trying to track Left Paw, whose disappearance is not unexpected. The young male has been making solo excursions, preparing to go and find a mate. Still, such events are not without worry. There's a text from one of the local rangers, married but persistent. A mistake over the summer. Another white night. She deletes it without reading.

The light outside the windows remains bright, but hanging over the lake are fine slings of rain. The boat has made it to the island and has moored. Rachel walks the circumference of the room, pauses at an adjoining door, then opens it. A library. Assuming no intrusion – is she not somehow entitled while she waits? – she goes inside. There's another fireplace, deeply recessed with seats inlaid, classical scenes painted on the tiles. On every wall shelves are fitted, floor to ceiling, in glossy hardwood. She browses the contents. Leather-bound antiques, hardbacks of contemporary novels. There are illustrated wildlife encyclopedias. An impressive row of first-edition poetry volumes: Auden, Eliot, Douglas. A large Audubon folio. It is a civil collection – with nothing particularly revealing. But what clues does she expect to find anyway? Tomes of the occult? Fairy tales? Has she imagined Thomas Pennington to be a Gothic fetishist? A Romanticist with a liking for exotic pets? Who is this man who has expensively summoned her across thousands of miles?

On the mantelpiece above the fire is a heavy bronze replica of the Capitoline wolf, the infants Romulus and Remus on their knees suckling beneath her. For all Rachel knows, it could be the

original. The truth is she suspected – as soon as she knew whose name was attached to the project – that this landed British entrepreneur, known for causing trouble in the House, for sponsoring sea eagles and opposing badger culls, is deadly serious about his latest environmental venture. That's why she is here. Not for Binny, who is simply benefiting from a stranger's generosity. She shuts the library door. She goes back into the drawing room, sits in the chaise longue, leans against the plush upholstery, and closes her eyes.

After forty-five minutes Honor Clark wakes her, with a polite hand on the shoulder. She is wearing a brown raincoat, belted at the waist, and carrying an oxblood lady's briefcase. A paisley headscarf is knotted under her chin. Rachel wants to ask, Do the shops in the county still sell such items, without irony? Are these fashions still depicted in the country magazines?

We're going to have to scratch, Honor Clark says. Can you come back tomorrow?

The tone is faintly triumphant. Clearly, she knows her boss's habits; clerical intuition and rescheduling are a normal part of her job description, and it is certainly not within her remit to apologise for the errant Earl. The airline ticket from Spokane was business class; Rachel's hire car is a BMW. Any additional expenses are being covered during her stay; all she has to do is keep and submit receipts. If the man himself is chaotic, or even a lunatic, his sovereignty seems not to suffer. Rachel stands.

Sure. Tomorrow. What time?

Let's try eleven. He has t'ai chi from nine until ten.

Of course he does, Rachel thinks. As she crosses the room, the tag inside her trousers scratches her lower back. She reaches in and snaps it from the plastic frond, crumples it, and puts it into

her back pocket. She has a week's leave from Chief Joseph, during which time her soliciting benefactor can put in an appearance or not, as he so chooses. It will make no difference either way; her obligation ends after their meeting. She knows she will not take the job, however appealing the proposal or curious she may be. Foolish and time-wasting though the courtship may result, it has at least given her a reason to come home.

*

Is that you, my girl?

You look smaller, Mum.

It's true. Since Rachel's last visit, Binny has shrunk considerably. She clutches the doorframe of her care-home apartment, a stoop-lump on her back under the quilted dressing gown. Her hair is almost gone, her scalp as cracked and dull as a shell. The hand holding the doorframe looks fossilised, like something extracted from a bog or petrified forest, out of proportion with her thin arm. On her face are brown flaky cancers. The descent since Rachel's last visit, when her mother was still able to lob a vase at the wall, has been steep.

You look like an American. You're not a bloody citizen, are you?

Not yet, no.

Good.

Binny releases the door and they embrace. She holds Rachel fiercely, a grip far exceeding her frail demeanour, a grip reminding her daughter just how long she has been gone. From under the quilted gown comes the reek of sweat and ammonia, and a masking perfume – not the Paestum Rose Binny once favoured,