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The Tenderness of Wolves

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Extract

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DISAPPEARANCE

THE LAST TIME I saw Laurent Jammet, he was in Scott's store with a dead wolf over his shoulder. I had gone to get needles, and he had come in for the bounty. Scott insisted on the whole carcass, having once been bamboozled by a Yankee who brought in a pair of ears one day and claimed his bounty, then some time later brought in the paws for another dollar, and finally the tail. It was winter and the parts looked fairly fresh, but the con became common knowledge, to Scott's disgust. So the wolf's face was the first thing I saw when I walked in. The tongue lolled out of the mouth, which was pulled back in a grimace. I flinched, despite myself. Scott yelled and Jammet apologised profusely; it was impossible to be angry with him, what with his charm and his limp. The carcass was removed out back somewhere, and as I was browsing, they began to argue about the moth-eaten pelt that hangs over the door. I think Jammet suggested jokingly that Scott replace it with a new one. The sign under it reads, 'Canis lupus (male), the first wolf to be caught in the Town of Caulfield, 11th February, 1860.' The sign tells you a lot about John Scott, demonstrating his pretensions to learning, his self-importance and the craven respect for authority over truth. It certainly wasn't the first wolf to be caught round here, and there is no such thing as the town of Caulfield, strictly speaking, although he would like there to be, because then there would be a Council, and he could be its Mayor.

'Anyway, that is a female. Males have a darker collar, and are bigger. This one is very small.'

Jammet knew what he was talking about, as he had caught more wolves than anyone else I know. He smiled, to show he meant no offence, but Scott takes offence like it is going out of fashion, and bristled.

'I suppose you remember better than I do, Mr Jammet?'

Jammet shrugged. Since he wasn't here in 1860, and since he was French, unlike the rest of us, he had to watch his step.

At this point I stepped up to the counter. 'I think it was a female, Mr Scott. The man who brought it in said her cubs howled all night. I remember it distinctly.'

And the way Scott strung up the carcass by its back legs outside the store for everyone to gawp at. I had never seen a wolf before, and I was surprised at its smallness. It hung with its nose pointing at the ground, eyes closed as if ashamed. Men mocked the carcass, and children laughed, daring each other to put their hands in its mouth. They posed with it for each other's amusement.

Scott turned tiny, bright blue eyes on me, either affronted that I should side with a foreigner, or just affronted, it was hard to tell.

'And look what happened to him.' Doc Wade, the man who brought in the bounty, drowned the following spring – as though that threw his judgement into question.

'Ah, well…' Jammet shrugged and winked at me, the cheek.

Somehow – I think Scott mentioned it first – we got talking about those poor girls, as people usually do when the subject of wolves is raised. Although there are any number of unfortunate females in the world (plenty in my experience alone), around here 'those poor girls' always refers to only two – the Seton sisters, who vanished all those years ago. There were a few minutes' pleasant and pointless exchange of views that broke off suddenly when the bell rang and Mrs Knox came in. We pretended to be very interested in the buttons on the counter. Laurent Jammet took his dollar, bowed to me and Mrs Knox, and left.

The bell jangled on its metal spring for a long time after he walked out.

That was all, nothing significant about it. The last time I saw him.

Laurent Jammet was our closest neighbour. Despite this, his life was a mystery to us. I used to wonder how he hunted wolves with his bad leg, and then someone told me that he baited deer meat with strychnine. The skill came in following the trail to the resulting corpse. I don't know though; that is not hunting as I see it. I know wolves have learnt to stay out of range of a Winchester rifle, so they cannot be entirely stupid, but they are not so clever that they have learnt to distrust a free gift of food, and where is the merit in following a doomed creature to its end? There were other unusual things about him: long trips away from home in parts unknown; visits from dark, taciturn strangers; and brief displays of startling generosity, in sharp counterpoint to his dilapidated cabin. We knew that he was from Quebec. We knew that he was Catholic, although he did not often go to church or to confession (though he may have indulged in both during his long absences). He was polite and cheerful, although he did not have particular friends, and kept a certain distance. And he was, I dare say, handsome, with almost-black hair and eyes, and features that gave the impression of having just finished smiling, or being just about to start. He treated all women with the same respectful charm, but managed not to irritate either them or their husbands. He was not married and showed no inclination to do so, but I have noticed that some men are happier on their own, especially if they are rather slovenly and irregular in their habits.

Some people attract an idle and entirely unmalicious envy. Jammet was one of those, lazy and good-natured, who seem to slide through life without toil or effort. I thought him lucky, because he did not seem to worry about those things that turn the rest of us grey. He had no grey hairs, but he had a past, which he kept mostly to himself. He imagined himself to have a future, too, I suppose, but he did not. He was perhaps forty. It was as old as he would ever get.

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It is a Thursday morning in mid-November, about two weeks after that meeting in the store. I walk down the road from our house in a dreadful temper, planning my lecture carefully. More than likely I rehearse it aloud – one of many strange habits that are all too easy to pick up in the backwoods. The road – actually little more than a series of ruts worn by hooves and wheels – follows the river where it plunges down a series of shallow falls. Under the birches patches of moss gleam emerald in the sunlight. Fallen leaves, crystallised by the night's frost, crackle under my feet, whispering of the coming winter. The sky is an achingly clear blue. I walk quickly in my anger, head high. It probably makes me look cheerful.

Jammet's cabin sits away from the riverbank in a patch of weeds that passes for a garden. The unpeeled log walls have faded over the years until the whole thing looks grey and woolly, more like a living growth than a building. It is something from a bygone age: the door is buckskin stretched over a wooden frame, the windows glazed with oiled parchment. In winter he must freeze. It's not a place where the women of Dove River often call, and I haven't been here myself for months, but right now I have run out of places to look.

There is no smoke signal of life inside, but the door stands ajar; the buckskin stained from earthy hands. I call out, then knock on the wall. There is no reply, so I peer inside, and when my eyes have adjusted to the dimness I see Jammet, at home and, true to form, asleep on his bed at this time in the morning. I nearly walk away then, thinking there is no point waking him, but frustration makes me persevere. I haven't come all this way for nothing.

'Mr Jammet?' I start off, sounding, to my mind, irritatingly bright. 'Mr Jammet, I am sorry to disturb you but I must ask…'

Laurent Jammet sleeps peacefully. Round his neck is the red neckerchief he wears for hunting, so that other hunters will not mistake him for a bear and shoot him. One foot protrudes off the side of the bed, in a dirty sock. His red neckerchief is on the table… I have grasped the side of the door. Suddenly, from being normal, everything has changed com-

pletely: flies hover round their late autumn feast; the red neckerchief is not round his neck, it cannot be, because it is on the table, and that means…

'Oh,' I say, and the sound shocks me in the silent cabin. 'No.'

I cling onto the door, trying not to run away, although I realise a second later I couldn't move if my life depended on it.

The redness round his neck has leaked into the mattress from a gash. A gash. I'm panting, as though I've been running. The doorframe is the most important thing in the world right now. Without it, I don't know what I would do.

The neckerchief has not done its duty. It has failed to prevent his untimely death.

I don't pretend to be particularly brave, and in fact long ago gave up the notion that I have any remarkable qualities, but I am surprised at the calmness with which I look around the cabin. My first thought is that Jammet has destroyed himself, but Jammet's hands are empty, and there is no sign of a weapon near him. One hand dangles off the side of the bed. It does not occur to me to be afraid. I know with absolute certainty that whoever did this is nowhere near – the cabin proclaims its emptiness. Even the body on the bed is empty. There are no attributes to it now – the cheerfulness and slovenliness and skill at shooting, the generosity and callousness – they have all gone.

There is one other thing I can't help but notice, as his face is turned slightly away from me. I don't want to see it but it's there, and it confirms what I have already unwillingly accepted – that among all the things in the world that can never be known, Laurent Jammet's fate is not one of them. This is no accident, nor is it self-destruction. He has been scalped.

At length, although it is probably only a few seconds later, I pull the door closed behind me, and when I can't see him any more, I feel better. Although for the rest of that day, and for days after, my right hand aches from the violence with which I gripped the doorframe, as though I had been trying to knead the wood between my fingers, like dough.

We live in Dove River, on the north shore of Georgian Bay. My husband and I emigrated from the Highlands of Scotland a dozen years ago, driven out like so many others. A million and a half people arrived in North America in just a few years, but despite the numbers involved, despite being so crammed into the hold of a ship that you thought there couldn't possibly be room in the New World for all these people, we fanned out from the landing stages at Halifax and Montreal like the tributaries of a river, and disappeared, every one, into the wilderness. The land swallowed us up, and was hungry for more. Hacking land out of the forest, we gave our places names that sprang from things we saw – a bird, an animal – or the names of old home towns; sentimental reminders of places that had no sentiment for us. It just goes to show you can't leave anything behind. You bring it all with you, whether you want to or not.

A dozen years ago there was nothing here but trees. The country to the north of here is a mean land that is either bog or stones, where even the willows and tamaracks cannot take hold. But near the river the soil is soft and deep, the forest around it so dark green it is almost black, and the sharp scented silence feels as deep and endless as the sky. My first reaction, when I saw it, was to burst into tears. The cariole that brought us rattled away, and the thought that, however loudly I screamed, only the wind would answer, could not be pushed away. Still, if the idea was to find

peace and quiet, we had succeeded. My husband waited calmly for my fit of hysteria to subside, then said, with a grim sort of smile:

'Out here, there is nothing greater than God.'

Assuming you believe in that sort of thing, it seemed a safe bet.

In time I got used to the silence, and the thinness of the air that made everything seem brighter and sharper than it had back home. I even grew to like it. And I named it, since it had no name that anyone knew of: Dove River.

I'm not immune to sentimentality myself.

Others came. Then John Scott built the flour mill near the river mouth, and having spent so much money on it, and it having such a nice view of the bay, decided he might as well live in it. Somehow this started a fashion for living near the shore, inexplicable to those of us who had gone upriver precisely to escape the howling storms when the Bay seems to turn into an angry ocean intent on clawing back the land you have so presumptuously settled. But Caulfield (sentiment again; Scott is from Dumfriesshire) took in a way that Dove River never could – because of the abundance of level land and relative sparseness of the forest, and because Scott opened a dry goods store that made backwoods life a lot easier. Now there is a community of over a hundred – a strange mix of Scots and Yankees. And Laurent Jammet. He hasn't – hadn't – been here long, and probably would never have moved here at all had he not taken the piece of land that no one else would touch.

Four years ago he bought the farm downstream from ours. It had been lying empty for some time, on account of the previous owner, an elderly Scot. Doc Wade arrived in Dove River seeking cheap land where he would not be so much under the noses of those who judged him – he had a wealthy sister and brother-in-law in Toronto. People called him Doc, although it turned out he was not a doctor at all, just a man of culture who had not found a place in the New World that appreciated his varied but nebulous talents. Unfortunately Dove River was not the

exception he was looking for. As many men have found, farming is a slow, sure way to lose your fortune, destroy your health, and break your spirit. The work was too heavy for a man of his age, and his heart was not in it. His crops failed, his pigs ran wild in the forest, his cabin roof caught fire. One evening he slipped on the rock that forms a natural jetty in front of his cabin, and was later found in the deep eddy below Horsehead Bluff (so named, with that refreshing Canadian lack of imagination, because it resembles a horse's head). It was a merciful release after his troubles, said some. Others called it a tragedy – the sort of small, domestic tragedy the bush is littered with. I suppose I imagined it differently. Wade drank, like most men. One night, when his money was gone and the whisky finished, when there was nothing left for him to do in this world, he went down to the river and watched the cold black water rushing past. I imagine he looked up at the sky, heard the mocking, indifferent voice of the forest one last time, felt the tug of the swollen river, and cast himself onto its infinite mercy.

Afterwards, local gossip said that the land was unlucky, but it was cheap and Jammet was not one to take note of superstitious rumours, although perhaps he should have. He had been a voyageur for the Company, and had fallen under a canoe while hauling it up some rapids. The accident lamed him, and they gave him compensation. He seemed grateful rather than otherwise for his accident, which gave him enough money to buy his own land. He was fond of saying how lazy he was, and certainly he did not do the farm work that most men cannot avoid. He sold off most of Wade's land and made his living from the wolf bounty and a little trading. Every spring a succession of dark, long-distance men would come from the northwest with their canoes and packs. They found him a congenial person to do business with.

Half an hour later I am knocking on the door of the biggest house in Caulfield. I flex the fingers of my right hand as I wait for an answer – they seem to have seized up into a sort of claw.

Mr Knox has a poor, greyish complexion that makes me think of liver salts, and is tall and thin, with a hatchet profile that seems permanently poised to strike down the unworthy – useful attributes for a magistrate. I suddenly feel as empty as if I had not eaten for a week.

'Ah, Mrs Ross… an unexpected pleasure…'

To tell the truth he looks, more than anything, alarmed at the sight of me. Perhaps he looks at everyone this way, but it gives the impression he knows slightly more about me than I would like, and thus knows I am not the sort of person he would want his daughters to associate with.

'Mr Knox… I'm afraid it is not a pleasure. There has been a… a terrible accident.'

Scenting gossip of the richest sort, Mrs Knox comes in a minute later, and I tell them both what is in the cabin by the river. Mrs Knox clutches at the little gold cross at her throat. Knox receives the news calmly, but turns away at one point, and turns back, having, I can't help feeling, composed his features into a suitable cast – grim, stern, resolute, and so on. Mrs Knox sits beside me stroking my hand while I try not to snatch it away.

'And to think, the last time I saw him was in the store that time. He looked so…'

I nod in agreement, thinking how we had fallen into a guilty silence on her approach. After many protestations of shocked sympathy and advice for shattered nerves, she rushes off to inform their two daughters in a suitable way (in other words, with far more detail than if their father were present). Knox dispatches a messenger to Fort Edgar to summon some Company men. He leaves me to admire the view, then returns to say he has summoned John Scott (who in addition to owning the store and flour mill, has several warehouses and a great deal of land) to go with him to examine the cabin and secure it against 'intrusion' until the Company representatives arrive. That is the word he uses, and I feel a certain criticism. Not that he can blame me for finding the body, but I am sure he regrets that a mere farmer's wife has sullied the scene before he has had a chance to exercise his superior faculties. But I sense something

else in him too, other than his disapproval – excitement. He sees a chance for himself to shine in a drama far more urgent than most that occur in the backwoods – he is going to investigate. I presume he takes Scott so that it looks official and there is a witness to his genius, and because Scott's age and wealth give him a sort of status. It can be nothing to do with intelligence – Scott is living proof that the wealthy are not necessarily better or cleverer than the rest of us.

We head upriver in Knox's trap. Since Jammet's cabin is close to our house, they cannot avoid my accompanying them, and since we reach his cabin first, I offer to come in with them. Knox wrinkles his brow with avuncular concern.

'You must be exhausted after your terrible shock. I insist that you go home and rest.'

'We will be able to see whatever you saw,' Scott adds. And more, is the implication.

I turn away from Scott – there is no point arguing with some people – and address the hatchet profile. He is affronted, I realise, that my feminine nature can bear the thought of confronting such horror again. But something inside me hardens stubbornly against his assumption that he and only he will draw the right conclusions. Or perhaps it is just that I don't like being told what to do. I say I can tell them if anything has been disturbed, which they cannot deny, and anyway, short of manhandling me down the track and locking me in my house, there is little they can do.

The autumn weather is being kind, but there is the faint tang of decay when Knox pulls open the door. I didn't notice it before. Knox steps forward, breathing through his mouth and puts his fingers on Jammet's hand – I see him hover, wondering where to touch him – before pronouncing him quite cold. The two men speak in low voices, almost whispering. I understand – to speak louder would be rude. Scott takes out a notebook and writes down what Knox says as he observes the position of the body, the temperature of the stove, the arrangement of items in the room. Then Knox stands for a while doing nothing, but still manages to

look purposeful – an accident of anatomy I observe with interest. There is a scuff of footprints on the dusty floor, but no strange objects, no weapon of any sort. The only clue is that awful round wound on Jammet's head. It must have been an Indian outlaw, Knox says. Scott agrees: no white man could do something so barbaric. I picture his wife's face last winter, when it was swollen black and blue and she claimed she had slipped on a patch of ice, although everybody knew the truth.

The men go upstairs to the other room. I can tell where they go by the creak of their feet pressing on floorboards and the dust that falls between them and catches the light. It trickles onto Jammet's corpse, falling softly on his cheek, like snowflakes. Little flecks land, unbearably, on his open eyes and I can't take my gaze off them. I have an urge to go and brush it off, tell them sharply to stop disturbing things, but I don't do either. I can't make myself touch him.

'No one has been up there for days – the dust was quite undisturbed,' says Knox when they are down again, flicking dirt off their trousers with pocket-handkerchiefs. Knox has brought a clean sheet from upstairs, and he shakes it out, sending more dust motes whirling round the room like a swarm of sunlit bees. He places the sheet over the body on the bed.

'There, that should keep the flies off,' he says with an air of self-congratulation, though any fool can see that it will do no such thing.

It is decided that we – or rather they – can do no more, and on leaving, Knox closes and secures the door with a length of wire and a blob of sealing wax. A detail that, though I hate to admit it, impresses me.