The Pack

Barry Grills

THESIS

The gray wolf moves southwest, downwards out of higher country. It is morning and the sun drifts over a horizon to the left rear of his shoulder, reaching him in tiny slivers refracted by distant Rocky Mountain peaks and stands of white and black spruce or jackpine. A few days ago, the wolf's large feet traversed miles of open alpine tundra where he caught and ate deer mice and jumping mice, before lucking upon a marmot. This morning, though, his paws whisper over deep carpets of fallen coniferous needles now brown, rust or golden, as he works his way in a southerly direction.

He has begun his autumn molting and is scruffy in appearance. His thicker winter fur is coming in and the down he wore for the summer bursts out of his outer coat in white tufts light enough to float on the wind behind him, a delicate vapour trail catching on shrubs or tree branches in his wake. He is grey, black, white and brown, in patches or in combination. In a way, anachronistically, this concoction resembles the landscape of a beach rendered in miniature, someone's oil painting of a storm-tossed seashore -- white breakers, grey sea, brown beach and black shadow. Strange to imagine this scene on the body of a wolf in this remote section of British Columbia far from the Pacific Ocean, strange but not difficult to manage.

His face is a blend of all these colours except for his muzzle where the greys and browns give way to a white snout and black nose with just a hint of beige etched across the top, black lips covering his teeth, pink tongue dancing to the rhythm of his panting. His eyes -- at times red, often brown, sometimes yellow or green in colour, depending on how the light hits them -- are wary, although his eyesight is less than satisfactory, a flaw in his species. There are dark crevices originating in the corner of each eye as if he secretes an acid that burns a riverbed into the fur on his face as he weeps.

His sense of smell is keen, making up for what he tends to see in a blur. Scents arrive at his nostrils in currents and compounds, and he sorts them automatically. Earth scents, tree smells, the aroma of food in the air, the unsavory pungency of danger. Occasionally he stops at some other animal's stool to sort out details of its source, age or potential. He sniffs at mule deer or moose pellets, bear manure, sometimes even the less familiar droppings of a wood caribou or elk. At times he encounters the fur-twisted scat of his own kind, lying out in the open along a frequently travelled path. These deposits of animal waste tell him the story of when, what or why.

Smell is the wolf's morning newspaper, hearing is his radio bulletin. Sound and smell are utilitarian, they offer little delight or amusement, preferring to tell him only what he needs to know to survive. This morning, for instance, an early call by a killdeer implies all is as it should be. And he can smell no danger at this moment. Everything is satisfactory -- there will be food further down the mountain and man, so potentially wicked most of the time, is out of range for the time being, some great mysterious distance away. He knows this because here in the woods he can detect sounds from four miles away. On the tundra, out in the open, it is ten miles.

This wolf is frequently alone and is therefore extremely practical. He is

unchanged by ceremony or ritual, chooses to be aware only of what he needs to know to be ruggedly prepared, to continue to persist. A large wolf, more than one hundred and twenty pounds, he is what humans call *their* practical survivors, “the strong and silent type.”

Yet he has a genetic history in this remote section of the mountains in the northern interior of British Columbia. Relatives. Offspring, children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and their mates. Sometimes, when he meets up with them, these other wolves remember his parenting and let him accompany them for a day or two of their wandering. In turn, he does not challenge them for a permanent place in their various packs, respecting their current hierarchy, content to be just a visitor. In human terms, he is like an uncle from a distant, but neighboring town who drops by to share in the news, enjoying a meal or two while he’s at it, quiet and unobtrusive, the kind of uncle, if he was human, you’d find out on the porch in the twilight, smoking his pipe reflectively, responding to your remarks with affirmative nods or grunts, conveying that he has wisdom he is too shrewd to share, someone who makes you feel unexpectedly at peace, newly aware of things you haven’t noticed recently even though they’re always there. Or *because* they're always there.

This wolf descending from higher country mated more than five years ago. For life. But his mate was shot by a poacher one day last year and he dimly recalls this event in continually dissolving fragments. His mate’s sudden yip of pain, then her body rocketing up from the ground, twisting in the air, then falling twitching, shuddering and soon dead onto the forest floor. And he recalls the thunderclap of the shot, showing up a few seconds after the deadly bullet, late and breathless, some tragic afterthought.

Frightened by the roar of the echoing rifle shot, he darted into a wide crevice

between some rocks, unknowingly unnoticed. Stealthily he fled down the side of the mountain, slipped into some trees, then evaporated into the deeper forest. Although there were no other shots and he never glimpsed the poachers, he didn't return to the body of his mate until well after dark, many hours later. And when he did return, he didn't get close. He discovered by smell, sniffing at the graphic currents of carnage, that the head and the tail were missing, removed by the poachers for bounty or trophy. Bits of other flesh had been eaten by coyotes, ravens, magpies and an assortment of other scavengers. He even detected the intrusion of one of his enemies, a wolverine, not just hungry, he suspected, but likely bent on some kind of glutinous revenge, a grudge as old as the Earth itself.

Ever since the day of his mate's death, he's been alone, evolving into a powerful, resourceful loner. Allies or friends, if he had any, would consider him noble, martyred, and wronged. But he doesn't have any friends, and nobility and martyrdom have no place in his consciousness. Most of the time he is alone, even among the packs he helped to sire, an unusual circumstance in what is convention to the society of wolves.

He doesn't see many men in this rugged part of the country. Highways are hundred of miles away and he keeps to his territory here. Still, he crossed trails with some men one afternoon earlier this year, members of the Omenica Wildlife Patrol, although *he* didn't know who they were. As such, they didn't shoot at him. Instead, patrolling *against* poachers, one of them waved his hand. But the wolf didn't understand the greeting. Unnerved by the blurred suddenness of the gesture, he faded into some trees, too aloof to bolt, heading towards a place a few miles deeper inside his territory.

Territory is important in this section of the mountains, it is key to his survival. Here, where the wilderness is so much more remote than most areas of modern Canada,

wildlife remains prolific -- grizzly, black bear, wolf, coyote, wolverine, marten, beaver, muskrat, otter, lynx, mountain goats, cougar, infrequent wood caribou or elk, and, in places not far away, errant pockets of wild sheep clinging like the roots of desperate evergreens to the cold, ungiving rock.

Last night a cougar screamed in the distance and the wolf, realizing he had inadvertently encroached on the territory of a dangerous enemy, abruptly departed, jogging along for more than two hours to vacate the cougar's domain. He's heard the scream of a cougar often enough to recognize its phlegmy chorus of outrage. Big cats are frequently ill-tempered, their anger naturally built in. Their rage is so innate they do not need to nurse it . . . it goes with them everywhere.

The wolf was headed down to lower country anyway last night, vaguely aware of the need to be looking for beavers building lodges for the coming winter, in stream and pond capillaries draining down from a glacier heart now many miles away. He's seen the glacier only from a distance because he doesn't move up that high. But it's there just the same, large and craggy, melting in tints of light blue, pinned between the mountain peaks in a cold, secretive elevation he does not with to visit.

This wolf has a preference for beavers stronger than that of most of his peers. Beavers are practical prey for a wolf who hunts so often on his own. Not as welcome as deer or the rare baby moose he can take, they're so much more accessible, at least until winter comes. Although this wolf is rugged and strong, he must be an opportunist, eating the occasional red squirrel, pouncing on whatever he happens upon, caching for later what he doesn't need at the time of the kill. A few days ago, the heavens sullen with clouds, a small and tattered snowshoe hare fell like a gift to him, dropped by a gyrfalcon as it was climbing back into its medium overhead. He was on this unexpected boon

quickly after it struck the earth. The gyrfalcon kept going despite its size, not challenging him for the prize, resigned to accepting its losses.

On the way down to where the beaver are, the wolf will even fish for trout if he happens on a shallow stream. As a fisher, this wolf is proud. He likes the way fishing tests his mettle, the speed of his head and jaws. When he was a yearling, half the joy in catching fish was in the skill that it required. His mother and father showed him how back then, their lessons seasoned with urgent warnings about those other dangerous fishermen, the unpredictable grizzly bears they encountered a couple of times, the giants of the mountains who stumble so noisily and ferociously through the cracking, protesting woods.

This morning the wolf moves out of the trees into a rocky clearing. The sun, now positioned a little higher, parts a deeper cleft in the rocks and penetrates a stand of spruce, washing brightly along his body. The wolf has seen many other mountain mornings like this one and he appreciates their value. If he knew about death as a contrast to life, that someday he will surely die, he would feel glad to be alive on a morning such as this. Instead, some primeval instinct, some historic wisdom imbedded in his genes, merely tells him this morning isn't crazy and he should be relieved. To him, his days aren't marked by life or death. Instead, in human terms, they're defined by crazy or not crazy. Not crazy is the easy relief that comes from living preciously, crazy is finding some desperate inevitability in dispensing or embracing death for some reason other than survival. He doesn't think about these things but he's aware of them just the same, instinctively cognizant of how dangerous crazy can actually be.

In other species he encounters, he feels such craziness rippling towards him like a pool. Rutting stags, quarreling men. Even on a morning like this one sometimes, he feels

its approach, a greedy, larger neurosis he can never comprehend, intruding, encroaching, pushing, taking, clutching. As it comes for him he knows he must retreat from it or eventually give in. Even on a morning like this one, sun-drenched and breeze-breathed, filled with the comforting scents and sounds of his private wilderness life.....