

Towards Violence

By Blandine Rinkel

A novel

Sample translation from French by Ella Bartlett

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At the dawn of World War II, wolves had vanished from France. As of 1937, not a single one was left. The National Office of Hunting and Wildlife declared, “As an identified breeding population, the wolf is now extinct in the country.” However, one week after Christmas in 1954, a commotion spread through the whole Bas-Dauphiné region. Between Bourgoin and Morestel, locals began finding half-devoured dogs. As the days went by, the attacks continued and the evidence pointed to a conclusion. The wolf of Sermerieu was back.

Where did it come from? How did it survive when the residents of Vasselin, deemed “wolf burners,” used to locate cliffs, dig out holes to trap the wolves inside, and then burn them alive as the earth watched them suffer? How did this one continue to live, alone?

Contrary to popular belief, lone wolves are rare. A wolf only finds itself alone if it has been chased from the pack after a fight and it is close to the end of its life, weakened, hurt, and bleeding. Sometimes it leaves the pack in despair after losing its partner or cubs, voluntarily isolating itself in order to avoid being vulnerable. Is this how the wolf of Sermerieu put itself in danger? Was it chased out of the Carpathian Mountains by a brutal winter, did it come to the Drome region to find a final refuge in the forest and feed itself on game it found by accident, like we believe it to have done?

Nonetheless, eighteen years after the supposed disappearance of *Canis lupus*, the snow was stained with blood once more. In response, a hunt was organized to track down this unforeseen wolf of Sermerieu.

On January 12, 1954, forty hunters set out, and after seven hours they finally captured the creature at the bottom of a hill near Vignieu, where its hide is still on display in the town hall today.

On January 12, 1954, the first post-war wolf was inscribed into history.

On the same day, Gérard was born.

I. FEELING THE KNIFE (2000)

“The terrible thing about the world is this: everyone has their reasons” -Jean Renoir, *The Rules of the Game*

*I hold you, you hold me
by our little goatees
the first one of us who laughs
will get a little whack!*

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He's holding me by my chin, and I'm afraid I'm going to die.

Gérard's thumb is pressed against the front of my small chin. He clamps my jaw with his pointer and middle fingers, whose knuckles dig into the hollow of my throat. He holds my bone with his three strong fingers like this while I also put my hand around his square chin, squeezing it with all my might so it will never slip from me. As if we are in an impromptu, family-style western film, we hold each other face to face, sitting at the kitchen table, exploring the shared darkness in our pupils.

Although our eyes are smiling, the bottom half of our faces do not blink.

We have just finished eating. *I hold you, you hold me...* we sang the song, so we know what is coming if one of us cracks. The last word in the lyrics makes me shiver. I can't really imagine Gérard whacking me, but I can imagine him slapping me, manly and serious, like I saw him do to our dog Blaze. The idea of it puts me on edge. Deep behind this man's eyes, I detect tenderness, but I know instinctively this does not protect me from anything. I need to learn to be serious: my only chance of winning is to respect the rules of the game, so I concentrate as hard as I can. Under the table, I clench my other small fist. Despite my dad's provocative grimaces, despite the humor in his eyes and his distraction tricks—yes, despite his efforts to cajole me, fear instructs me not to give in.

Later, I will discover that the goatee game was adapted from a deadpan comic show in which one person's face would be pinched all over by fingers covered in ash—a form of humiliation. Later, I will not be afraid of being humiliated, and I will excel at any activity that requires concentration. I will be known as a sarcastic, impassive woman, a spartan poker player, and a tireless worker. As an adult, I will draw my energy and my stamina from these childhood games, but now, it is the first one to smile who gets whacked. So I try not to: I stare into Gérard's eyes with all the intensity my six-year-old self can muster, and in secrecy—yes, in terrible secrecy—I will his downfall.

As a young girl, I was in love with my dad. To insist on this idea is to give it light and weight again. Ever since I was four or five, I wanted to marry Gérard. I was convinced he'd be better off with me than my mom Annie, who was small and fearful, and who I found instinctively to be ill-matched for someone so big and brave. Gérard promised me we could celebrate our marriage when I was of legal age. The thirty-eight years between us was more of an obstacle than our filial bond. According to him, there'd be no problem. Now, I can understand it: Gérard, mature and seasoned in his life as a man and a father, was happy to agree. He said yes, without a doubt. He promised me. But only once I was also an adult. It was very important to him that only two consenting adults could marry. And therefore, it was with pure chastity that we lived under the same roof (and under my mother's gaze, who laughed at this), awaiting our future union. One day, we'd run away together, we'd free ourselves from this household and conquer the world.

Gérard had begun exploring on his own. He said, *I'll take the lead, you join me when you can*. Then he went off to scout for our future life.

In reality, he was a police officer in the Vendée for eight months every year, and he did trainings in the oversea territories for the other four. He was an absent father whose explorations and encounters for our future life became more and more frequent. Two months in Guadeloupe when I was three, one in Guyana the following year, then a few weeks in Saint-Martin, in Mayotte, then in French Polynesia. He rotated between these various places, circling the world. During each of his excursions, my love for him had time to sharpen and crystalize. From the bits of information about his job my mother gave me and the magnificent lies he brought back, I imagined his life. It was full of dangers, ferocious high-speed pursuits, drunken meals in front of sunsets, fluorescent orange cocktails, and meetings with world-

famous people. When he was gone, I fantasized about his adventures, waiting for him.

All my best memories with him are tinted.

In winter, it was the warm toast, melted butter, and hot, soothing drinks after swimming, our eyes red from the chlorine. Our hair literally froze when we left the pool so much that, when he ran his hand through his hair, he cast ice shavings. In summer, it was us versus the waves of the restless Atlantic, the strongest and most dangerous on the coast, the ones that were not waves but torpedoes sent by Amphitrite, goddess of the sea, and by her wolffish henchmen.

“Did you know we’re under surveillance here?” Gérard asked me each time we found ourselves alone on the beach, splashing water on our necks to avoid cold water shock.

“Yes, I know, we have to be careful,” I replied, serious.

“Careful about what you say about the ocean. Do you know why?”

“Anything I say can be used against me.”

“Exactly. Speak only in the presence of your lawyer.”

And Gérard, then more of a child than I, smiled. He had a feral smile. During a joke, it revealed not only all his thirty-two teeth but also the entirety of his red gums and the whole circumference of his jaw. It was the smile of a wild horse. A contagious warmth that I loved.

The beaches near our town were mostly dirty. We found cigarette butts, plastic wrappers of various candies, and sometimes even needles there. How did a town with so few habitants produce so much waste? The grime was an anomaly in my parents’ eyes. *Do people just meet up to wreck the beach or what?* When Gérard was sad, he complained about the dirtiness with a crassness in his voice that was rare for him—he called people assholes who didn’t know the rules, argued that the ocean can never be cleaned. The state of the coastline depressed him, but as long as we were able to receive messages sent by the marine world, he concluded, all

was not lost.

“Hold on, trooper!” he said from the water. “I just received a message from Amphitrite!” He held out an algae plant in his hand.

“What?” I asked, jumping up and down. “What does it say?”

“It says... it’s difficult to decipher, I don’t know if I can...” Gérard squinted, concentrating on this brown sea specimen, a plant made of hundreds of similar branches, like a miniature fern or a flattened, limp tree. “I don’t think it’s a message from Amphitrite,” he said.

“Who is from?” I asked, impatient, patting the surface of the water with my hand, which made a vigorous clapping sound.

“It’s someone anonymous who’s warning us that Amphitrite is sending torpedoes right at us, she’s well-armed today! We have to hold our breath—are you ready, trooper?”

I nodded earnestly.

“Watch out, it’s coming!” he cried suddenly, darting further out into the water with his torso first. He pointed to the immense wave rushing toward us like a horse stung by a bee, and before it submerged us, he had the time to count. “Three, two, one, let’s go!”

We dove beneath the water vertically, head first, noses pinched between our fingers to avoid swallowing water, eyelids squeezed shut, muscles activated and concentrated as to let nothing sent by the goddess get through us. We were the resistant, the brave, the adventurous: us, father and daughter.

Sometimes, my fingers surrendered to the pressure and my nostrils took in water, and I emerged from the waves with a wobbly head. It was as if my brain was flooded, but I was careful not to tell the lieutenant. I had to keep up pace.

“Everything alright, sailor?”

“Roger that!” I answered, signing an “O” by placing the ends of my fingers against my

thumb bone like my dad had taught me. *In water*, he'd said to me once, *if you put your thumb up, it means you want to get out of there, not that you're okay, you understand?*

Now, he asked, "Ready to go to war with Amphitrite?"

"Readier than ever!" I yelled.

"You'll keep it up even when I'm no longer here, won't you, sailor? It's a life of war!"

"I will," I promised, and we swam off in a breaststroke race to the yellow buoy in the distance that marked the territory of Poseidon's wife.

Sometimes the current was too strong, and it ended up discouraging us, so Gérard admitted that the Mother of the seals and dolphins had won the battle ("but not the war!"). Other times, we reached the finish line, and my dad, whose muscles were more developed than his daughter's, touched the neon marker first. There he waited, his hand on the trophy—a trophy bombarded with greenish seaweed, shells, barnacles, and millions of marine bacteria on all sides, but a trophy all the same. It was an important, even essential prize, the beacon of the gods' territory.

"Do you know what will happen if we swim further into their empire?" he asked me.

"There'll be mermaids?" I asked, remembering this lesson.

"Not only mermaids, but maybe even dolphins. You know that Amphitrite, daughter of Nereus, is the goddess of sea monsters—"

"So there will also be monsters!" And I gripped my arms around the yellow buoy to catch my breath.

"That's the problem," my dad said. "There'll be dolphins, but there'll also be monsters, and I don't know if you're capable of facing monsters." [to be continued...]