The Big Grey One I

On the train.

It’s early morning, in the springtime. A train stands in Winnipeg station, on platform 3. (Winnipeg is in Canada, of course. I expect you knew that.)

An announcement crackles over the station loudspeakers. It says “The train standing at platform 3 is bound for Edmonton, and will run via Saskatoon. This train will depart in ten minutes.”

A young lady with two enormous, lumpy bags hurries down the platform towards it and opens a carriage door. Inside, a young man with a very red beard is sitting. He jumps up as soon as the young lady opens the door and holds out his hand to help her into the train .

Her bags are massive.

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Young Lady: Hi.

*Young man: Hi.*

Mind if I sit in here?

*No. Of course not.*

Thanks.

*Hang on, let me give you a hand.*

Thanks.

*Heavy!*

They are a bit.

*Awkward, too.*

Very awkward.

*What on Earth have you got in there?*

Equipment, mainly.

*Oh?*

Camera stuff.

*Oh?*

Mostly a tripod.

*A tripod?*

Yes. And a really nice big lens.

*Gosh.*

Mmmm…

*So…?*

Well, I’m a wildlife photographer.

*A wildlife photographer?*

Yes.

*Interesting.*

Well, yes.

*And you’re working here?*

Well, up in the Rockies.

*Wow! That’ll be cold.*

Yes.

*It’s really cold up there at this time of year.*

Yes*.*

*What are you going to film?*

Grey wolves.

*Grey wolves!*

Mmmm…

*What’s your name?*

Len.

*Len?*

Well, people call me Len.

*Mmmm?*

It’s short for Leonora.

*Ah.*

And you are?

*George.*

Ah.

*Short for George.*

Ah!

*Where will you go to film?*

Not sure yet. Somewhere up in the Rockies above Banff.

*There’ll probably still be snow up there now.*

Yes. There may be.

*I mean, it’s spring, but it’s still going to be cold up in the high mountains.*

Yes. I expect so.

*You must be a tough cookie.*

Oh, I don’t know.

*Well it’s hard up there in the Rockies.*

So they say.

*And dangerous. Wolves live there!*

Wolves aren’t dangerous.

*Are you sure about that?*

They’re very wary of us.

*Wary of humans?*

Yes. Very.

*Ah.*

They keep well away from us if they can.

*Oh.*

Our problem is going to be getting anywhere near them.

*Near a pack?*

Yes. Packs are often quite small, and they move a lot.

*How many in a pack?*

Anywhere between 8 and 30. Usually about 8.

*Really? You imagine much bigger packs.*

Yes. But that’s a myth.

*Really?*

That wolves live in huge packs. It’s a myth.

*Oh.*

There are lots of myths about wolves.

*Like how dangerous they are?*

Exactly.

*People do think they’re dangerous.*

Yes, but they almost never attack human beings.

*Really?*

In the whole of North America only two people have been killed by wolves.

*Two people? Killed last year?*

No, no! Two people killed in the last 100 years!

*Really?*

You’re more likely to be killed by a bee than a wolf.

*By a bee?*

More people are killed by bee stings than by wolves.

*Really?*

Lots more!

*Interesting!*

Wolves keep well away from us if they can.

*I suppose so.*

Well away.

*The wolf in the Rocky Mountains is a grey wolf.*

Yes.

*The Big Grey One.*

Yes. The Big Grey one. The biggest wolf there is.

*How big are they in fact?*

Well, a big male might stand a little over 80 cm.

*Wow!*

80 cm at the shoulder.

*Right.*

And he might weigh almost 50 Kg.

*That’s a big dog!*

It is.

*A big dog!*

The female is just a little bit smaller.

*I suppose so.*

And they mate for life.

*Mate for life?*

Yes. An alpha male and an alpha female stay together for life.

*Nice!*

Well, practical too.

*Oh?*

The dominant pair keep the pack together.

*They’re the bosses?*

Absolutely.

*And a pack needs a boss, I guess.*

Absolutely.

*Have you seen wolves before?*

In the wild?

*Yes.*

No.

*How will you find them?*

Oh. Well I’m going to join a team.

*That’s good.*

There’ll be 4 of us.

*That’s really good.*

Mmmm.

*It’s dangerous out there in the forest.*

Mmmm…

*Will you have a guide?*

Yes. We will work with a guide.

*That’s really good.*

Someone who knows the forest, and where the wolf packs are.

*Yes.*

More or less, anyway.

*I guess they move around.*

Well, yes. They often run many miles a day.

*I suppose.*

Sometimes 50 miles in one day.

*Looking for food I guess?*

Yes. Hunting.

*What do they eat?*

Any large ungulate.

*Ungulate?*

Well, deer, elk, moose. They’re all ungulates. Animals with hooves.

*Ah.*

They will eat small animals, if they can catch them.

*Mmmm. Like rabbits?*

Yes. But mainly they eat large ungulates.

*I like the way their eyes shine in the dark.*

Wolves’ eyes?

*Yes. They shine in the dark.*

Well, they do if you shine a light at them.

*Like a car’s headlights.*

Yes.

*Like a dog’s eyes.*

Well, they are dogs.

*I suppose they are.*

Dogs are descended from wolves.

*Yes.*

All dogs are.

*Yes.*

Mmmm…

*How does that work?*

Mmmm?

*I mean ours don’t.*

Ours don’t what?

*Our eyes don’t shine in the dark.*

Oh. I see what you mean. No, they don’t.

*How do wolves’ eyes do that?*

They have a reflecting layer at the back of the eye.

*A layer which reflects light back?*

Yes. Almost like a mirror.

*From behind the retina?*

Yes. From behind the retina.

*Right.*

It’s called the tapetum lucidum.

*Pardon?*

The tapetum lucidum.

*Ah.*

Right behind the retina.

*So the retina gets to see everything twice?*

Mmmm…?

*Light hits the retina on the way in, then it hits it again on the way out.*

Well, yes.

*So they see twice as well in the dark as we do.*

Yes. Sort of.

*You’re going all the way to Edmonton, I guess?*

Yes.

*On this train, I mean?*

Yes. And then I’m going on to Calgary and Banff.

*By train?*

No. I have to take a coach from Edmonton to Calgary, then one from Calgary to Banff.

*That’s a long trip!*

Yes.

*I mean it’s almost 20 hours from here to Edmonton.*

Yes.

*Just on this train!*

Yes. Then I have to get to Banff.

*That’s a very long trip.*

Yes.

*This guide …*

Mmmm…?

*Your guide in the forest?*

What about him?

*I mean, will he know how to live in the forest?*

Well, yes. I suppose so.

*I mean, it’s dangerous out there.*

Well…

*I mean, you say wolves are OK, but what about bears?*

Mmmm?

*Grizzly bears.*

Apparently there are grizzly bears out there.

*Too right there are. Lots of them!*

Mmmm.

*And they’re dangerous animals.*

Yes.

*People are attacked by bears out there.*

Mmmm.

*Quite often.*

Mmmm.

*People are sometimes killed by grizzlies.*

Mmmm.

*It’s dangerous!*

Well, we’re going to sleep in huts.

*Huts?*

Some nights, anyway.

*There are huts out there?*

A few, yes.

*For walkers?*

Well, mostly for people working in the forest.

*Researchers?*

Yes.

*So you’ll be safe at night, anyway.*

Yes. Most nights.

*What about during the day?*

We’ll just have to keep our eyes open.

*Mmmm…*

Don’t forget, we have a guide with us.

*Mmmm...*

He’ll know how to keep safe in the forest.

*I suppose…*

Our problem will be finding wolves.

*They have a good sense of smell.*

It’s quite good, yes.

*They’ll smell you coming.*

Well, only if they are downwind of us.

*Mmmm…*

And only if we are quite close.

*How close?*

Maybe a mile?

*Ah.*

Don’t forget, I have a really good lens.

*Mmmm. How close do you need to be?*

To get good film?

*Yes.*

Well, maybe a couple of hundred metres.

*That’s quite close.*

Yes.

*How will you know where to find the pack?*

Well, a few wolves, in a few packs, have been fitted with radio collars.

*Radio collars?*

Yes.

*How?*

Well, they tranquillised a wolf in each pack.

*They shot it with a tranquilliser dart?*

Yes. And fitted the collar while it was asleep.

*And the radio collar transmits a signal?*

Yes.

*And your guide has a radio receiver?*

That’s right.

*Which tells you where the wolf is?*

Well, it tells you which direction he is in, and roughly how far away he is.

*Cool!*

Mmmm.

*So you have to follow the radio signal?*

Yes.

*There will be a lot of walking to do!*

Yes. A wolf can run all day at about 5 mph.

*Can you?*

Not with all the camera stuff.

*So you’ll have to hope they don’t travel too far!*

Well, sometimes they stay fairly close to a single spot.

*If there’s enough food locally, I guess.*

Yes. And if they have young pups they may stay close to a den.

*They have pups now, do they?*

Probably.

*As it’s spring, I mean.*

Yes.

*Well, I wish you luck.*

Thanks.

*Watch out for those grizzlies!*

Yes.

*Do you know what to do if you see one?*

No.

*The guide will, I guess?*

He will.

*And he’ll tell you, hopefully!*

Hopefully!

*Will you have a gun?*

The guide will.

*Mmmm.*

Just in case.

*Just in case.*

Mmmm.

*Mmmm.*

I’m a bit hungry.

*Oh yes?*

I didn’t have time for breakfast.

*Ah.*

Is there a restaurant car?

*I think it’s towards the front of the train.*

That way?

*Yes.*

I’m going to grab a bite to eat, I think.

*Good idea.*

How about you?

*Let’s go!*

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