The Big Grey One II

In the restaurant car.

Len and George have found a table in the restaurant car. The train is well under way. Canada rolls past them on the other side of the window as they eat.

George ordered toast and coffee, but Len went for a huge plate of waffles with maple syrup, and a pot of herb tea. Now she sits back and wipes her lips with a napkin…

-----------oo00oo-----------

*George*: *You look as if you needed that!*

Len: I did!

*Good?*

Very.

*Good.*

Feel a bit more human now.

*Good.*

You know we were talking about wolves?

*The Big Grey One. Yes.*

Well, I was thinking.

*Yes?*

About how I should film them.

*Yes?*

Maybe my angle could be myths.

*Myths?*

Yes.

*How do you mean, exactly?*

Well, there are so many myths around the Grey Wolf.

*Stories, you mean?*

Yes. And misinformation.

*Misinformation?*

Yes. Misinformation and disinformation.

*Right.*

Mmmm.

*And what’s the difference?*

Between what?

*Between misinformation and disinformation.*

Oh, right.

*What’s the difference?*

Well, misinformation is just bad information.

*Bad information?*

Yes. It’s wrong, but not deliberately wrong.

*Like?*

Well, like people think wolves live in huge packs.

*But they don’t.*

No. But nobody made that up on purpose.

*So it’s misinformation.*

Exactly.

*Not disinformation?*

No.

*So what’s disinformation?*

Disinformation is bad information made up on purpose.

*Information which is deliberately wrong?*

Exactly.

*Maybe to try to win an argument?*

Yes. Or make something happen which wouldn’t otherwise.

*Something which wouldn’t happen if people knew the truth?*

Exactly.

*Like when some people want it to happen but other people don’t?*

Exactly.

*Like?*

Well, when people want wolves killed.

*And a lot of people don’t like wolves.*

Exactly.

*So they might invent a nasty myth about wolves.*

Exactly. They might claim that wolves are dangerous.

*Dangerous to people?*

Yes. That’s disinformation.

*Like, lying. Telling a lie on purpose.*

Exactly.

*Disinformation.*

Exactly.

*So, tell me about some of these myths.*

OK.

*Tell me about misinformation and disinformation.*

Well, the idea that wolves kill other animals for sport.

*How do you mean “kill other animals for sport”?*

Some people claim that wolves kill for fun.

*Not just for food?*

No.

*Why do they say that?*

Well, sometimes wolves leave a kill half eaten.

*Right…*

So people say they killed, even though they were not really hungry.

*But? I can tell there’s a ‘but’ coming up.*

But the wolves have probably been scared off their kill.

*When the people arrived? The people who found the half-eaten kill?*

Yes. Wolves will run off if people come too close.

*So these people would think they hardly ate any of their kill?*

Exactly.

*But? There’s another but, isn’t there?*

But, if the people go away from the kill, the wolves will come back to finish it off.

*Ah.*

They always do. Wolves hardly ever leave a kill uneaten.

*So that’s just misinformation.*

Well, yes.

*But?*

But some people do use this misinformation against the wolf.

*You mean they spread it on purpose? As disinformation?*

Some do.

*Ah.*

Then there’s the myth that wolves are dangerous to humans.

*We talked about that, didn’t we?*

We did.

*You said more people die from bee stings than wolf attack.*

Yes. Or bear attack.

*Well, yes. Bear attack is quite common.*

Sometimes people claim that a body has been killed by wolves when it’s hasn’t.

*Oh?*

When it’s really been killed by a bear.

*Oh. How can you tell?*

Well, bears claw a body, but wolves tear it with their teeth.

*Nice!*

Wolves eat the liver and heart for choice, bears don’t.

*I’m glad we’ve already finished eating!*

Bears often drag a carcase away to eat, wolves don’t.

*This may be more information than I need.*

Mmmm?

*At the breakfast table, anyway.*

Oh. Sorry.

*No problem.*

But you did ask.

*True…*

The myth of the Big Bad Wolf carries on, though.

*Either as misinformation or sometimes used as disinformation.*

Exactly.

*Now you mention it…*

Yes?

*In one small town people worried that wolves might snatch children.*

Really?

*Snatch kids waiting for the school bus.*

That’s never going to happen!

*No.*

That’s never going to happen.

*Sometimes people mount campaigns to eradicate wolves.*

They do.

*Places where there are conflicts between the interests of wolves and people.*

Well, yes.

*About 100 years ago they did eradicate all the wolves somewhere in America.*

Wyoming, I think.

*Yes. Probably.*

Sometimes there really are conflicts of interest.

*Like?*

Well, I’m thinking of ranchers.

*Ranchers?*

Yes. They want wolves eradicated.

*They worry about them attacking their livestock, I suppose?*

Well, yes.

*And do they?*

Do they kill livestock?

*Yes. Do they?*

Not in large numbers.

*Oh. But there’s a but, right?*

There is.

*So?*

Well, less than 1 in 100 livestock deaths are due to wolves.

*That’s still quite a lot…*

Mmmm…

*I mean a rancher might have a few thousand* *head of cattle.*

Yes.

*So he might lose maybe 100 cows.*

Mmmm…

*Not good.*

No.

*Or sheep.*

Yes. Wolves do sometimes kill sheep.

*It’s what wolves do, I suppose.*

And it’s worse than that.

*Oh?*

That 1 in 100 figure is an average.

*Right.*

So some ranchers lose less than that but some lose more than that.

*Right…*

Some lose much fewer than 1 in 100, but some lose much more.

*Not good at all!*

No.

*I suppose ranchers out in the wilder parts lose more.*

Yes.

*So what is to be done?*

Well, on some ranches the ranchers are allowed to shoot wolves.

*You mean they can’t otherwise?*

Oh no. Wolves are protected.

*Ah.*

By law.

*Ah.*

But on some ranches some wolves can be shot.

*Just a few?*

Yes. Only a few.

*How many?*

Just enough to keep the numbers down.

*One or two, then?*

Yes.

*Does that work?*

I think it does, quite well.

*It’s a conflict of interests isn’t it?*

Yes.

*The wolf’s interests against the ranchers’.*

Exactly.

*Difficult.*

Yes. It can be.

*So what about misinformation and disinformation?*

Well, for example one ranch lost 120 sheep in a single night.

*Right…*

Which was true.

*OK. But…?*

But everyone who wanted wolves eradicated jumped on that information.

*Spread it about, you mean?*

Yes. Made it sound as if most ranchers lost that sort of number most nights.

*So those 120 sheep became a sort of disinformation?*

Exactly.

*Hunters don’t like wolves much, either, do they?*

No. They don’t.

*They say they kill all the elk.*

Which is disinformation.

*Really?*

They do kill elk, of course.

*They eat elk.*

Yes. They eat elk.

*But…?*

But they don’t kill many.

*Oh.*

And they tend to kill the weaker animals.

*So the elk herd loses only the weaker animals?*

Exactly.

*Which is good for the herd?*

In the long run, yes.

*How many elk will a wolf eat in a year?*

A very big wolf might eat 35.

*And how big is the territory held by a pack?*

Anything from 100 to 1,000 square miles.

*So they don’t kill all the elks!*

No.

*Maybe only about 250 a year, all told.*

Yes. About that.

*In maybe 500 square miles of wilderness!*

Yes.

*So they’re not killing all the elk!*

No, of course not.

*But maybe they spook the elks a bit.*

The wolves?

*Yes.*

Make the elk nervous, you mean?

*Exactly.*

So it’s more difficult to hunt them, perhaps.

*Exactly. They’re more wary.*

It’s hard to get close enough to shoot them.

*And hunters won’t like that.*

No. I guess not.

*That’s against their interests.*

Well, yes. I hadn’t thought of that.

*Another conflict of interests.*

Yes.

*You say that a wolf pack has a territory.*

Yes.

*How do they mark it?*

Two main ways, really.

*Like?*

Howling is one.

*OK.*

It tells the world where the howling wolf is.

*Tells the pack, and any other wolves, I suppose.*

Yes. And it also tells them which wolf is howling.

*And all wolves have a different voice, do they?*

Oh yes. Every wolf has a different voice.

*And what’s the other way?*

Of marking territory?

*Yes.*

Well, every 250 metres or so the big male will spray.

*Spray urine?*

Yes.

*And other wolves can smell this.*

Yes. Each wolf has a different smell.

*So they can tell who sprayed?*

Yes. And roughly how long ago.

*Really?*

The smell lasts 2 or 3 weeks.

*You’re kidding!*

No. Really. It does.

*Wow!*

That’s the main way they mark their territory.

*The scent spray?*

Yes.

*Oh.*

Mmmm…

*Well, I think I’ll just go and mark my territory.*

Pardon?

*I need the toilet!*

Oh.

*I’ll be right back.*

OK.