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THE WOLF'S SON

Translation by Olivia Jung

Of all his memories, that evening he remembered the day in which he hopped on a freight train and went to see Niagara Falls. He stayed and looked at them for an entire day, he even forgot to eat. When night fell, he was still there, standing in front of all of that dark water with the sound bustling through his brain. Not even his travels at sea seemed to rinse his mind as thoroughly as those rushing waters. He could have remembered a thousand other things but, that evening, his mind went down there, to the furious roar of waterfalls and the somber darkness of the night barely illuminated by a slither of moon. He remembered how exhausted he was afterward, and that he climbed a hedge and fell asleep in a field. He was still on an empty stomach. When he woke up at dawn, the first thought that crossed his mind was returning to the waterfalls. He was walking back, sleepy, driven only by that desire, when a police officer stopped him, arrested him for vagrancy, and brought him to the Erie County jail, where he stayed for thirty days. He saw terrible things in there. But he would have to make an effort to remember them in the future. So, he fantasized about writing them down and made lists of prisoners in an imaginary page open before his eyes: inmates who were seized by convulsions, who went crazy, who plummeted from eight flights of stairs, who were beaten to death... He became a model inmate during that month, he befriended the guards, and became the privileged listener of many stories and philosophies. And yet, what stuck with him most from that time was the sight of Niagara Falls, because he recognized himself in the waterfalls that night.

He lit a cigarette in the dark so as not to wake the friend who was hosting him. In a few days, they would take his boat Spray out to sea. It would be a nice time, they would fish, drink, and forget for a while the explosion that took place in just one afternoon, after spending six hours in a hammock talking to that woman sitting on his lap under his wife's eyes.

He slowly got up from bed and headed to the kitchen with the cigarette dangling from his lips. He grabbed a beer and went to the veranda, where he sat on an old rocking chair. He thought that maybe it was foolish of him to accept that two-thousand-dollar advance from his editor on his future publishing rights. Considering how successful his book turned out... Of course, he couldn't have known that at the time. Besides, with all the money the editor had invested in the advertising campaign... If he hadn't, the book might not have been that popular after all. He sipped the beer, he could feel the bubbles making their way down into his esophagus, and he smiled as he looked at the night. "I'm the best," he said in a low voice. "Many wrote about it: they called me a revelation, the new voice of American literature." He flicked off what was left of the cigarette and followed its lit trajectory in the air. Then, he stared at its tiny ember as it burned on the ground for a little longer.

Chapter 1

Nothing in his life was ever easy. He never really complained about it much, after all, he was used to complications. Money was always short at home, he constantly heard his mother talk to her husband about their finances. Their only certainty was that they couldn't make it to the end of the month, and nobody gave the family credit anymore. It was a constant slamming of doors, although it was only his mother, Flora Wellman, who slammed them, but she did it methodically: she would start by raising her voice, then she would slam the doors of the house, one by one, in a real crescendo. Sometimes, when she still wasn't satisfied with it, she would go back and slam the last door one more time, startling those who had counted the door slams around the house and expected them to be over with.

She was a brilliant woman. When her son was still a young boy, he would attach himself to her skirts as she held conferences on the street about spiritism and life after death. The people who huddled around her were often taken by compassion and ended up giving her some money so she could feed that poor little boy of hers, as beautiful as an angel. She was feisty and never gave up; she didn't shower her son with affection, but she loved him and tried to provide for him as best as she could. And to think that she came from an excellent family: her father was a man of great ingenuity, he insisted that she have only the best private tutors, piano lessons, and the finest clothes from New York. Then, all of a sudden, Flora lost touch with her parents and started her extravagant life of vagrancy and ill-fated encounters. But she kept all her sadness and tears to herself, she knew how to masterfully interpret the role of a mother who is never worried about the future.

Her son Jack adored her. Several years later, he came to the conclusion that she wasn't actually playing any role: that was just the way she was. She just had so much enthusiasm inside her that it swept her away. She always waited for events to unfold with the same groundless hope. What made her so amenable was her frame of mind for dealing with expectations: "Joyful and joyous," as she used to say winking to her son, who was always like her little accomplice. Even when he was still too young to understand a word, she would repeat to him, "Remember Jack, expectations in desperation never come true."

Then there was that afternoon when he went on a hike outside the city with his father. They walked quietly by a stream, stopping every now and then to pick up the flattest and smoothest stones to skip on the water's surface.

"Jack," said his father, "you've gotten so much better than me."

John, that good man, was at his wits' end.

He had been talking about it with his wife for some time. They thought it was time for the boy to know. But then John kept on putting it off. He asked his wife more than once, "Flora, why don't you tell him?" She would respond by giving him that side-eye look, the one she made when he did

something that didn't convince her, and she would say, "It's a conversation for men, John. You deal with it."

And so, at a certain point, between skipping one stone and another, John told him that he wasn't his real father. Jack had just picked up a stone destined for a perfect throw, but instead of loading his arm back to give it the right speed and angle, he dropped it to the ground. The sound it made created a strange echo that filled his head with cotton.

He turned toward John and asked him, "Then who am I?"

"You're my son, because I adopted you and gave you my name. Sometimes, it doesn't really matter if a child isn't raised by his real father. You are my real boy, Jack. And your last name is London, like me."

He held him close. It wasn't a full-fledged hug, more of a tug. They stayed like that for a while, then headed back to the house, where Flora and Eliza (one of John's children from his long-departed wife) were waiting for them.

The most important person, the true linchpin of the London family, was Flora. She was an eccentric woman, easily excited about any doomed project, devoted to occultism and séances, many of which took place in their house. It wasn't unusual for somebody to arrive at their doorstep in the evening. Jack and Eliza were sent to bed, but they certainly didn't go to sleep: they would eavesdrop keeping their bedroom door ajar. As soon as they made a noise, they would pinch one another to chase away the fear; they couldn't scream, they could only make the expression of a scream, opening their mouths as wide as they could. Everyone in the neighborhood knew what went on in the London's home. They told people to be weary of that family, but then, when the time was right, they came knocking at their door with their heads bowed down. Many of them wanted to get an opinion from their dead husband, brother, parent; the spirits, as Flora explained before starting the séance, spoke through a certain Indian chief called Plume. Some wanted to talk to a lover, whom they would claim was a distant relative instead. But the truth came out when they started with their sappy small talk, which Jack would imitate perfectly in the room upstairs, twisting himself in front of his sister. She had to laugh silently, opening her mouth as wide as she could without making a sound, just like for the pinches, as her eyes filled with so many tears that they poured down her cheeks like faucets.

Everyone left those séances satisfied. People often returned the favor by bringing some eggs, bacon, milk, or bread. These gifts were always appreciated, particularly toward the end of the month when they struggled to put food on the table.

Flora was proud of herself and she liked that her family was too. She would often ask them explicitly, "Are you proud of me, family?" Which resulted in shouts of support, especially from John, that good man: he was completely head over heels for her. Flora certainly wasn't a beauty. Moreover, she often wore a curly black wig because she had lost most of her hair after contracting typhoid fever a long time ago. That disease also left her with an obsession for death. After all, that fever had aged her all of a sudden, as if it had eaten away what was left of her youth. She was physically mortified, even though she wouldn't let it show. She dedicated herself to spiritism because death was always buzzing around in her mind. Some said the fever had eaten away part of her brain too. She was very similar to Jack, but in that strange way that sometimes only happens to

parents and their children; with their respective similarities, it was as if he had absorbed all the beauty from her, leaving her only neutral tones.

What Jack certainly inherited from his parents was a strong personality. Shy striker at first, but he could always stand up for himself; his disposition was infectious, girls liked him, and he stimulated competition from the boys, which he usually then won over. One thing he was proud of was his muscular body and its physical strength. It started when he was a child, after the first frantic fistfights where he got beaten up so badly by the local kids that his attitude ended up changing. He was always the first to challenge them. With those ice-blue eyes, jaw clenched, and increasingly well-trained fists; he moved like a furious cat, approaching only to strike and then leaping back. In the end, he really changed in the eyes of those other kids. Jack knew inside him that the road to overcome his fears was still long. But already at that age, when he was barely ten, he understood that fear and courage could walk hand in hand for his entire life. When his classmate and close friend Frank Atherton asked him why, Jack spat and replied, “Not being afraid doesn’t make you brave. It only makes you reckless.” And, with a smug expression on his face, he breathed in deeply expanding his chest, and walked away swaying like a sailor, which is exactly what he would become in a few years. On January 12, 1893, on the day of his seventeenth birthday, he set sail on the Sophie Sutherland, a schooner full of seal hunters headed to Japan. The journey would last almost a year and offer him two gifts: a break from a mooching family and the view of immense landscapes, which he had previously encountered only in the books he read and in his ensuing dreams.

For some time now, Jack had a clearer picture of his family. His real father was a certain William Chaney, a brilliant traveling astrologer who was an expert in casting horoscopes and seemed to have an extraordinary talent for writing. He found out that the man wrote several essays on the causes of poverty, which filled him with pride. Jack had always been poor, and the idea that his real father had written about him without knowing it gave him a certain satisfaction. But he was never able to read anything by William Chaney. It seemed that everything had gone lost. When he thought about it later in his adulthood, Jack always reached the same conclusion, “Must be how things were meant to go.” Even though he didn’t believe all the nonsense his mother peddled, one thing did strike him: knowing that he was born on January 12th, his stepfather John on the 11th, and his father on the 13th. “Coincidence,” he told Flora in an adult manner. But she raised her index finger to her lips and, after looking around to make sure there weren’t any spirits listening, she said, “Jack, there’s no such thing as coincidences.”

“And the dead don’t speak,” he answered.

“Then what about that fright you got on the Sophie Sutherland?”

“What fright?”

“I read it in your notebook. At a certain point you say, ‘One night, on the Sophie Sutherland, looking at the ocean from the stern, I saw Bricklayer’s body floating in the water’.”

“They were just notes for a story.”

“Meh...”

“I know how to write about this stuff even without believing in it. How couldn't I? It's all I've been hearing since I was a child.”

Jack often made his mother tell him about his father, and she always replied that they were very similar. He also spent a couple of years on a fishing boat, he also enjoyed writing and, in 1866, he became an astrologer's apprentice under doctor Luke Broughton. They also shared the same handsome, willful Irish face. Transparent eyes, square jaw, full lips. “And you're both sensual,” she would add after smiling and making him turn completely red.

His mother knew how to spin people, everyone followed her, even down the most uncertain paths. Especially her husband John, who went bankrupt more than once because of her. An article printed in *The Chronicle* several years prior stated that Chaney (Jack's biological father) drove her to commit suicide. It said that she shot herself in the head because that heartless man asked her to get rid of the child she was carrying, which she refused. But that story cost more to Chaney than to Flora. Not only did she survive (it seems the bullet just grazed her), but she also put on that entire charade just to win herself some Christian solidarity, which arrived in spades. On January 12, 1876, she gave birth in the home of her dear friend Amanda Slocum at 615 Third Street, San Francisco.

They were all speculations, but apparently the astrologer claimed that the child wasn't even his. He even went so far as to state that he couldn't be for technical reasons. Not to mention the very ambiguous story that Flora started circulating in their building at the time. She managed to convince half their neighbors that she was married to Chaney, and the other half that she lived with a younger man who was also a resident in that building. How did she do it? Chaney said that although he didn't try kill her (unlike what the *Chronicle* article implied), he would have liked to because that woman was possessed by the devil himself. In the end, he was forced to leave the city: nobody in San Francisco wanted to have their horoscope done by someone who kicked out his pregnant wife. “Wife...” she would say over the years when talking about him. “I discovered he was married to at least another five or six women. And not one at the time, we were all his wives simultaneously.”

A strange destiny that of Jack London. An adoptive father whom he thought was his real one for a few years, and a real father who never wanted to meet him. When these thoughts crossed his mind, he felt different, inferior to all the other kids. It was a feeling that took his strength away and made him hold his breath, while also igniting a drunk violence. If there was one thing for which he was grateful to his mother, it was leaving San Francisco in 1879 (when he was only three years old) and moving to Oakland. It was just on the other side of the bay, but at least no one knew their business there. Jack fancied the idea that they left the city to buy a twenty-acre ranch and that he grew up with sowing, harvesting, and animals thanks to a farmer father. But there was one thing that held true: they both loved that crazy, reckless Flora. They would have gotten their heads chopped off just to comply with her wishes.