

**Angela Carter, "The Company of Wolves"**

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1 One beast and only one howls in the woods by  
2 night.  
3 The wolf is carnivore incarnate and he's as  
4 cunning as he is ferocious; once he's had a taste  
5 of flesh then nothing else will do.  
6 At night, the eyes of wolves shine like candle  
7 flames, yellowish, reddish, but that is because  
8 the pupils of their eyes fatten on darkness and  
9 catch the light from your lantern to flash it  
10 back to you – red for danger; if a wolf's eyes  
11 reflect only moonlight, then they gleam a cold  
12 and unnatural green, a mineral, a piercing  
13 colour. If the benighted traveller spies those  
14 luminous, terrible sequins stitched suddenly on  
15 the black thickets, then he knows he must run,  
16 if fear has not struck him stock-still.  
17 But those eyes are all you will be able to  
18 glimpse of the forest assassins as they cluster  
19 invisibly round your smell of meat as you go  
20 through the wood unwisely late. They will be  
21 like shadows, they will be like wraiths, grey  
22 members of a congregation of nightmare; hark!  
23 his long, wavering howl . . . an aria of fear  
24 made audible.  
25 The wolfsong is the sound of the rending you  
26 will suffer, in itself a murdering.  
27 It is winter and cold weather. In this region of  
28 mountain and forest, there is now nothing for  
29 the wolves to eat. Goats and sheep are locked  
30 up in the byre,<sup>1</sup> the deer departed for the  
31 remaining pasturage on the southern slopes –  
32 wolves grow lean and famished. There is so  
33 little flesh on them that you could count the  
34 starveling ribs through their pelts, if they gave  
35 you time before they pounced. Those slaving  
36 jaws; the lolling tongue; the rime of saliva on  
37 the grizzled chops – of all the teeming perils of  
38 the night and the forest, ghosts, hobgoblins,  
39 ogres that grill babies upon gridirons, witches  
40 that fatten their captives in cages for cannibal  
41 tables, the wolf is worst for he cannot listen to  
42 reason.  
43 You are always in danger in the forest, where  
44 no people are. Step between the portals of the  
45 great pines where the shaggy branches tangle  
46 about you, trapping the unwary traveller in nets  
47 as if the vegetation itself were in a plot with the  
48 wolves who live there, as though the wicked  
49 trees go fishing on behalf of their friends – step  
50 between the gateposts of the forest with the

51 greatest trepidation and infinite precautions, for  
52 if you stray from the path for one instant, the  
53 wolves will eat you. They are grey as famine,  
54 they are as unkind as plague. .  
55 The grave-eyed children of the sparse villages  
56 always carry knives with them when they go  
57 out to tend the little flocks of goats that  
58 provide the homesteads with acrid milk and  
59 rank, maggoty cheeses. Their knives are half as  
60 big as they are, the blades are sharpened daily.  
61 But the wolves have ways of arriving at your  
62 own hearthside. We try and try but sometimes  
63 we cannot keep them out. There is no winter's  
64 night the cottager does not fear to see a lean,  
65 grey, famished snout questing under the door,  
66 and there was a woman once bitten in her own  
67 kitchen as she was straining the macaroni.  
68 Fear and flee the wolf; for, worst of all, the  
69 wolf may be more than he seems.  
70 There was a hunter once, near here, that  
71 trapped a wolf in a pit. This wolf had  
72 massacred the sheep and goats; eaten up a mad  
73 old man who used to live by himself in a hut  
74 halfway up the mountain and sing to Jesus all  
75 day; pounced on a girl looking after the sheep,  
76 but she made such a commotion that men  
77 came with rifles and scared him away and tried  
78 to track him into the forest but he was cunning  
79 and easily gave them the slip. So this hunter  
80 dug a pit and put a duck in it, for bait, all alive-  
81 oh; and he covered the pit with straw smeared  
82 with wolf dung. Quack, quack! went the duck  
83 and a wolf came slinking out of the forest, a big  
84 one, a heavy one, he weighed as much as a  
85 grown man and the straw gave way beneath  
86 him – into the pit he tumbled. The hunter  
87 jumped down after him, slit his throat, cut off  
88 all his paws for a trophy.  
  
89 And then no wolf at all lay in front of the  
90 hunter but the bloody trunk of a man, headless,  
91 footless, dying, dead.  
92 A witch from up the valley once turned an  
93 entire wedding party into wolves because the  
94 groom had settled on another girl. She used to  
95 order them to visit her, at night, from spite, and  
96 they would sit and howl around her cottage for  
97 her, serenading her with their misery.  
98 Not so very long ago, a young woman in our  
99 village married a man who vanished clean away  
100 on her wedding night. The bed was made with  
101 new sheets and the bride lay down in it; the

102 groom said, he was going out to relieve himself,  
103 insisted on it, for the sake of decency, and she  
104 drew the coverlet up to her chin and she lay  
105 there. And she waited and she waited and then  
106 she waited again - surely he's been gone a long  
107 time? Until she jumps up in bed and shrieks to  
108 hear a howling, coming on the wind from the  
109 forest.  
110 That long-drawn, wavering howl has, for all its  
111 fearful resonance, some inherent sadness in it,  
112 as if the beasts would love to be less beastly if  
113 only they knew how and never cease to mourn  
114 their own condition. There is a vast melancholy  
115 in the canticles<sup>2</sup> of the wolves, melancholy  
116 infinite as the forest, endless as these long  
117 nights of winter and yet that ghastly sadness,  
118 that mourning for their own, irremediable  
119 appetites, can never move the heart for not one  
120 phrase in it hints at the possibility of  
121 redemption; grace could not come to the wolf  
122 from its own despair, only through some  
123 external mediator, so that, sometimes, the beast  
124 will look as if he half welcomes the knife that  
125 despatches him. The young woman's brothers  
126 searched the outhouses and the haystacks but  
127 never found any remains so the sensible girl  
128 dried her eyes and found herself another  
129 husband not too shy to piss into a pot who  
130 spent the nights indoors. She gave him a pair of  
131 bonny babies and all went right as a trivet until,  
132 one freezing night; the night of the solstice, the  
133 hinge of the year when things do not fit  
134 together as well as they should, the longest  
135 night, her first good man came home again.  
136 A great thump on the door announced him as  
137 she was stirring the soup for the father of her  
138 children and she knew him the moment she  
139 lifted the latch to him although it was years  
140 since she'd worn black for him and now he was  
141 in rags and his hair hung down his back and  
142 never saw a comb, alive with lice.  
143 'Here I am again, missus,' he said. 'Get me my  
144 bowl of cabbage and be quick about it.'  
145 Then her second husband came in with wood  
146 for the fire and when the first one saw she'd  
147 slept with another man and, worse, clapped his  
148 red eyes on her little children who'd crept into  
149 the kitchen to see what all the din was about,  
150 he shouted: 'I wish I were a wolf again, to teach  
151 this whore a lesson!' So a wolf he instantly  
152 became and tore off the eldest boy's left foot  
153 before he was chopped up with the hatchet  
154 they used for chopping logs. But when the wolf  
155 lay bleeding and gasping its last, the pelt peeled

156 off again and he was just as he had been, years  
157 ago, when he ran away from his marriage bed,  
158 so that she wept and her second husband beat  
159 her.  
160 They say there's an ointment the Devil gives  
161 you that turns you into a wolf the minute you  
162 rub it on. Or, that he was born feet first and  
163 had a wolf for his father and his torso is a  
164 man's but his legs and genitals are a wolf's. And  
165 he has a wolf's heart.  
166 Seven years is a werewolf's natural span but if  
167 you burn his human clothing you condemn  
168 him to wolfishness for the rest of his life, so  
169 old wives hereabouts think it some protection  
170 to throw a hat or an apron at the werewolf, as  
171 if clothes made the man. Yet by the eyes, those  
172 phosphorescent eyes, you know him in all his  
173 shapes; the eyes alone unchanged by  
174 metamorphosis.  
175 Before he can become a wolf, the lycanthrope  
176 strips stark naked. If you spy a naked man  
177 among the pines, you must run as if the Devil  
178 were after you.  
179 It is midwinter and the robin, the friend of  
180 man, sits on the handle of the gardener's spade  
181 and sings. It is the worst time in all the year for  
182 wolves but this strong-minded child insists she  
183 will go off through the wood. She is quite sure  
184 the wild beasts cannot harm her although, well-  
185 warned, she lays a carving knife in the basket  
186 her mother has packed with cheeses. There is a  
187 bottle of harsh liquor distilled from brambles; a  
188 batch of flat oatcakes baked on the  
189 hearthstone; a pot or two of jam. The flaxen-  
190 haired girl will take these delicious gifts to a  
191 reclusive grandmother so old the burden of her  
192 years is crushing her to death. Granny lives two  
193 hours' trudge through the winter woods; the  
194 child wraps herself up in her thick shawl, draws  
195 it over her head. She steps into her stout  
196 wooden shoes; she is dressed and ready and it  
197 is Christmas Eve. The malign door of the  
198 solstice<sup>3</sup> still swings upon its hinges but she has  
199 been too much loved ever to feel scared.  
200 Children do not stay young for long in this  
201 savage country. There are no toys for them to  
202 play with so they work hard and grow wise but  
203 this one, so pretty and the youngest of her  
204 family, a little late-comer, had been indulged by  
205 her mother and the grandmother who'd knitted

206 her the red shawl that, today, has the ominous  
207 if brilliant look of blood on snow; her breasts  
208 have just begun to swell; her hair is like lint, so  
209 fair it hardly makes a shadow on her pale  
210 forehead; her cheeks are an emblematic scarlet  
211 and white and she has just started her woman's  
212 bleeding, the clock inside her that will strike,  
213 henceforward, once a month.

214 She stands and moves within the invisible  
215 pentacle of her own virginity. She is an  
216 unbroken egg; she is a sealed vessel; she has  
217 inside her a magic space the entrance to which  
218 is shut tight with a plug of membrane; she is a  
219 closed system; she does not know how to  
220 shiver. She has her knife and she is afraid of  
221 nothing.

222 Her father might forbid her, if he were home,  
223 but he is away in the forest, gathering wood,  
224 and her mother cannot deny her.

225 The forest closed upon her like a pair of jaws.

226 There is always something to look at in the  
227 forest, even in the middle of winter – the  
228 huddled mounds of birds, succumbed to the  
229 lethargy of the season, heaped on the creaking  
230 boughs and too forlorn to sing; the bright frills  
231 of the winter fungi on the blotched trunks of  
232 the trees; the cuneiform slots of rabbits and  
233 deer, the herringbone tracks of the birds, a hare  
234 as lean as a rasher of bacon streaking across the  
235 path where the thin sunlight dapples the russet  
236 brakes of last year's bracken.

237 When she heard the freezing howl of a distant  
238 wolf, her practised hand sprang to the handle  
239 of her knife, but she saw no sign of a wolf at  
240 all, nor of a naked man, neither, but then she  
241 heard a clattering among the brushwood and  
242 there sprang on to the path a fully clothed one,  
243 a very handsome young one, in the green coat  
244 and wideawake hat of a hunter, laden with  
245 carcasses of game birds. She had her hand on  
246 her knife at the first rustle of twigs but he  
247 laughed with a flash of white teeth when he  
248 saw her and made her a comic yet flattering  
249 little bow; she'd never seen such a fine fellow

250 before, not among the rustic clowns of her  
251 native village. So on they went together,  
252 through the thickening light of the afternoon.

253 Soon they were laughing and joking like old  
254 friends. When he offered to carry her basket,  
255 she gave it to him although her knife was in it  
256 because he told her his rifle would protect  
257 them. As the day darkened, it began to snow  
258 again; she felt the first flakes settle on her  
259 eyelashes but now there was only half a mile to  
260 go and there would be a fire, and hot tea, and a  
261 welcome, a warm one, surely, for the dashing  
262 huntsman as well as for herself.

263 This young man had a remarkable object in his  
264 pocket. It was a compass. She looked at the  
265 little round glass face in the palm of his hand  
266 and watched the wavering needle with a vague  
267 wonder. He assured her this compass had taken  
268 him safely through the wood on his hunting  
269 trip because the needle always told him with  
270 perfect accuracy where the north was. She did  
271 not believe it; she knew she should never leave  
272 the path on the way through the wood or else  
273 she would be lost instantly. He laughed at her  
274 again; gleaming trails of spittle clung to his  
275 teeth. He said, if he plunged off the path into  
276 the forest that surrounded them, he could  
277 guarantee to arrive at her grandmother's house  
278 a good quarter of an hour before she did,  
279 plotting his way through the undergrowth with  
280 his compass, while she trudged the long way,  
281 along the winding path.

282 'I don't believe you. Besides, aren't you afraid  
283 of the wolves?'

284 He only tapped the gleaming butt of his rifle  
285 and grinned.

286 'Is it a bet?' he asked her. 'Shall we make a  
287 game of it? What will you give me if I get to  
288 your grandmother's house before you?'

289 'What would you like?' she asked  
290 disingenuously.

291 'A kiss.'

292 Commonplaces of a rustic seduction; she  
293 lowered her eyes and blushed.

294 He went through the undergrowth and took  
295 her basket with him but she forgot to be afraid  
296 of the beasts, although now the moon was

297 rising, for she wanted to dawdle on her way to  
298 make sure the handsome gentleman would win  
299 his wager.  
300 Grandmother's house stood by itself a little  
301 way out of the village. The freshly falling snow  
302 blew in eddies about the kitchen garden and  
303 the young man stepped delicately up the snowy  
304 path to the door as if he were reluctant to get  
305 his feet wet, swinging his bundle of game and  
306 the girl's basket and humming a little tune to  
307 himself.  
308 There is a faint trace of blood on his chin; he  
309 has been snacking on his catch.  
310 He rapped upon the panels with his knuckles.  
311 Aged and frail, granny is three-quarters  
312 succumbed to the mortality the ache in her  
313 bones promises her and almost ready to give in  
314 entirely. A boy came out from the village to  
315 build up her hearth for the night an hour ago  
316 and the kitchen crackles with busy firelight. She  
317 has her Bible for company, she is a pious old  
318 woman. She is propped up on several pillows  
319 in the bed set into the wall peasant-fashion,  
320 wrapped up in the patchwork quilt she made  
321 before she was married, more years ago than  
322 she cares to remember. Two china spaniels  
323 with liver-coloured blotches on their coats and  
324 black noses sit on either side of the fireplace.  
325 There is a bright rug of woven rags on the  
326 pantiles.<sup>s</sup> The grandfather clock ticks away her  
327 eroding time.  
328 We keep the wolves outside by living well.  
329 He rapped upon the panels with his hairy  
330 knuckles.  
331 'It is your granddaughter,' he mimicked in a  
332 high soprano.  
333 'Lift up the latch and walk in, my darling.'  
334 You can tell them by their eyes, eyes of a beast  
335 of prey, nocturnal, devastating eyes as red as a  
336 wound; you can hurl your Bible at him and  
337 your apron after, granny, you thought that was  
338 a sure prophylactic<sup>c</sup> against these infernal  
339 vermin. . . now call on Christ and his mother  
340 and all the angels in heaven to protect you but  
341 it won't do you any good.  
342 His feral, muzzle is sharp as a knife; he drops  
343 his golden burden of gnawed pheasant on the  
344 table and puts down your dear girl's basket,  
345 too. Oh, my God, what have you done with  
346 her?  
347 Off with his disguise, that coat of forest-  
348 coloured cloth, the hat with the feather tucked  
349 into the ribbon; his matted hair streams down  
350 his white shirt and she can see the lice moving

351 in it. The sticks in the hearth shift and hiss;  
352 night and the forest has come into the kitchen  
353 with darkness tangled in its hair.  
354 He strips off his shirt. His skin is the colour  
355 and texture of vellum. A crisp stripe of hair  
356 runs down his belly, his nipples are ripe and  
357 dark as poison fruit but he's so thin you could  
358 count the ribs under his skin if only he gave  
359 you the time. He strips off his trousers and she  
360 can see how hairy his legs are. His genitals,  
361 huge. Ah! huge. The last thing the old lady saw  
362 in all this world was a young man, eyes like  
363 cinders, naked as a stone, approaching her bed.  
364 The wolf is carnivore incarnate.  
365 When he had finished with her, he licked his  
366 chops and quickly dressed himself again, until  
367 he was just as he had been when he came  
368 through her door. He burned the inedible hair  
369 in the fireplace and wrapped the bones up in a  
370 napkin that he hid away under the bed in the  
371 wooden chest in which he found a clean pair of  
372 sheets. These he carefully put on the bed  
373 instead of the tell-tale stained ones he stowed  
374 away in the laundry basket. He plumped up the  
375 pillows and shook out the patchwork quilt, he  
376 picked up the Bible from the floor, closed it  
377 and laid it on the table. All was as it had been  
378 before except that grandmother was gone. The  
379 sticks twitched in the grate, the clock ticked  
380 and the young man sat patiently, deceitfully  
381 beside the bed in granny's nightcap.  
382 Rat-a-tap-tap.  
383 'Who's there?' he quavers in granny's antique  
384 falsetto.  
385 'Only your granddaughter.'  
386 So she came in, bringing with her a flurry of  
387 snow that melted in tears on the tiles, and  
388 perhaps she was a little disappointed to see  
389 only her grandmother sitting beside the fire.  
390 But then he flung off the blanket and sprang to  
391 the door, pressing his back against it so that she  
392 could not get out again.  
393 The girl looked round the room and saw there  
394 was not even the indentation of a head on the  
395 smooth cheek of the pillow and how, for the  
396 first time she'd seen it so, the Bible lay closed  
397 on the table. The tick of the clock cracked like  
398 a whip. She wanted her knife from her basket  
399 but she did not dare reach for it because his  
400 eyes were fixed upon her – huge eyes that now  
401 seemed to shine with a unique, interior light,

402 eyes the size of saucers, saucers full of Greek  
403 fire,<sup>7</sup> diabolic phosphorescence.  
404 'What big eyes you have.'  
405 'All the better to see you with.'  
406 No trace at all of the old woman except for a  
407 tuft of white hair that had caught in the bark of  
408 an unburned log. When the girl saw that, she  
409 knew she was in danger of death.  
410 'Where is my grandmother?'  
411 'There's nobody here but we two, my darling.'  
412 Now a great howling rose up all around them,  
413 near, very near, as close as the kitchen garden,  
414 the howling of a multitude of wolves; she knew  
415 the worst wolves are hairy on the inside and  
416 she shivered, in spite of the scarlet shawl she  
417 pulled more closely round herself as if it could  
418 protect her although it was as red as the blood  
419 she must spill.  
420 'Who has come to sing us carols,' she said.  
421 'Those are the voices of my brothers, darling; I  
422 love the company of wolves. Look out of the  
423 window and you'll see them.'  
424 Snow half-caked the lattice and she opened it  
425 to look into the garden. It was a white night of  
426 moon and snow; the blizzard whirled round the  
427 gaunt, grey beasts who squatted on their  
428 haunches among the rows of winter cabbage,  
429 pointing their sharp snouts to the moon and  
430 howling as if their hearts would break. Ten  
431 wolves; twenty wolves – so many wolves she  
432 could not count them, howling in concert as if  
433 demented or deranged. Their eyes reflected the  
434 light from the kitchen and shone like a hundred  
435 candles.  
436 'It is very cold, poor things,' she said; 'no  
437 wonder they howl so.'  
438 She closed the window on the wolves'  
439 threnody<sup>8</sup> and took off her scarlet shawl, the  
440 colour of poppies, the colour of sacrifices, the  
441 colour of her menses, and, since her fear did  
442 her no good, she ceased to be afraid.  
443 'What shall I do with my shawl?' 'Throw it on  
444 the fire, dear one. You won't need it again.'

445 She bundled up her shawl and threw it on the  
446 blaze, which instantly consumed it. Then she  
447 drew her blouse over her head; her small  
448 breasts gleamed as if the snow had invaded the  
449 room.  
450 'What shall I do with my blouse?'  
451 'Into the fire with it, too, my pet.'  
452 The thin muslin went flaring up the chimney  
453 like a magic bird and now off came her skirt,  
454 her woollen stockings, her shoes, and on to the

455 fire they went, too, and were gone for good.  
456 The firelight shone through the edges of her  
457 skin; now she was clothed only in her  
458 untouched integument<sup>9</sup> of flesh. This dazzling,  
459 naked she combed out her hair with her  
460 fingers; her hair looked white as the snow  
461 outside. Then went directly to the man with red  
462 eyes in whose unkempt mane the lice moved;  
463 she stood up on tiptoe and unbuttoned the  
464 collar of his shirt.  
465 'What big arms you have.'  
466 'All the better to hug you with.'  
467 Every wolf in the world now howled a  
468 prothalamion<sup>10</sup> outside the window as she freely  
469 gave the kiss she owed him.  
470 'What big teeth you have!'  
471 She saw how his jaw began to slaver and the  
472 room was full of the clamour of the forest's  
473 Liebestod<sup>11</sup> but the wise child never flinched,  
474 even when he answered:  
475 'All the better to eat you with.'  
476 The girl burst out laughing; she knew she was  
477 nobody's meat. She laughed at him full in the  
478 face, she ripped off his shirt for him and flung  
479 it into the fire, in the fiery wake of her own  
480 discarded clothing. The flames danced like  
481 dead souls on Walpurgisnacht<sup>12</sup> and the old  
482 bones under the bed set up a terrible clattering  
483 but she did not pay them any heed.  
484 Carnivore incarnate, only immaculate flesh  
485 appeases him.  
486 She will lay his fearful head on her lap and she  
487 will pick out the lice from his pelt and perhaps  
488 she will put die lice into her mouth and eat  
489 them, as he will bid her, as she would do in a  
490 savage marriage ceremony.  
491 The blizzard will die down.  
492 The blizzard died down, leaving the mountains  
493 as randomly covered with snow as if a blind  
494 woman had thrown a sheet over them, the  
495 upper branches of the forest pines limed,  
496 creaking, swollen with the fall.  
497 Snowlight, moonlight, a confusion of paw-  
498 prints.  
499 All silent, all still.  
500 Midnight; and the clock strikes. It is Christmas  
501 Day, the werewolves' birthday, the door of the  
502 solstice stands wide open; let them all sink  
503 through.  
504 See! sweet and sound she sleeps in granny's  
505 bed, between the paws of the tender wolf.