Introduction

How I Kissed a Wolf and Became Addicted

There's a first time for everything. For my special relationship with wolves there were three 'first times': the first wolf kiss, the first wild wolf and the first German wolf.

I had my first wolf kiss from Imbo, a six-year-old male timber wolf in an American wolf sanctuary. I had left behind my old life as an attorney-at-law in Frankfurt, Germany. Crimes, rent disputes and divorces were increasingly frustrating me. Instead of helping justice to victory with great vigour, I was coming to dread every legal meeting. I lacked the detachment and the abrasiveness to be a good lawyer. I wanted to fulfil my life's dream, and combine my love of writing with the fascination I had for wolves.

Without any biological background, but with a great deal of passion and optimism, I applied for an ethology internship at Wolf Park, a wolf research institute in Indiana. At the preliminary interview the director of research, Dr Erich Klinghammer, explained that the alpha wolf of the main pack alone decides whether the trainee will be appointed.

But how do you apply to a wolf? Luckily I didn't need to dance or sing or perform any other tricks, but I swear I couldn't

have been more excited if I'd been applying for *The X Factor* – although that was precisely the wrong emotion to show when meeting a captive wolf, Klinghammer said. 'You have to stay completely cool! He'll sense your excitement.'

You try staying cool when you're facing a 50-kilo furry packet of muscles that's staring at you with yellow eyes. At that moment I thought of my German shepherd, friend and confidant of my childhood. Fine. Basically Imbo was just a big dog – a very big dog. Two pages of safety instructions had prepared me for the meeting, and provided legal insurance for the director of the sanctuary. I signed a waiver with the frightening wording: *I understand that there is a risk of injury, and that the injuries can be serious*.

Armed with this warning, I entered the wolf enclosure with two keepers, tried to stand firm and took a deep breath. Then my world was reduced to the wolf that approached me at an elegant trot. The silver stripes of his coat gleamed in the afternoon sunlight. His black nose sniffed my scent deeply, his ears pointing alertly forward. From the corners of my eyes I saw the other members of Imbo's pack waiting by the fence. They were clearly tense as they waited to see if I would pass the test and the boss would accept me. So was I, because it was only then that I would be able to start my internship. Right now the most important thing was to survive the next few seconds.

The film in my head slowed right down. The wolf's powerful hindquarters lowered slightly as he prepared to jump. As he flew towards me and I pressed against him with all my strength, there was no turning back. His paws, the size of side plates, landed on my shoulders, and his imposing fangs were only a centimetre from my face. The world stopped. Then he licked my face with his rough tongue. That 'kiss' was my introduction to the 'drug' wolf.

After Imbo had accepted me, my internship with the wolves of Wolf Park began. I learned everything about the attitude and behaviour of captive wolves, I hand-raised wolf pups with a

bottle and over the following months enjoyed countless wet kisses from Imbo and the rest of the pack.

Half a year later, when I moved to the wilderness of Minnesota, I had received an excellent training and thought I knew everything about wolves. Then I met my first wild wolf.

The log cabin in which I lived was far from civilization near a lake in the middle of wolf and bear territory. Early on New Year's Day I pulled on my snowshoes in minus 30 degrees Celsius to go off in search of wolf tracks. So far I hadn't had a glimpse of my grey neighbours; only their howls told me that they were there. But the previous night, when I stood for a long time outside the cabin, listening to the chorus of wolves, gazing fascinated at the polar lights, a movement on the lake had distracted me from the celestial spectacle. Four wolves had run across the shimmering surface of the ice and were chasing something before they disappeared over the horizon. I couldn't make out what they were pursuing.

I set off the next morning to try to find them. I carefully followed their tracks into the forest. They led into the dense woodland, over sticks and stones, through bushes, past cliffs and boulders and across vast snow-covered surfaces. I sometimes came across a circular depression, presumably the resting spot of a deer. Abundant yellow markings in the snow showed that the wolves had discovered the same place as well. After an hour of tracking I found fresh traces of blood and a short time later found a dead young white-tailed deer. I knelt down and touched it. Its belly had been torn open and one back leg was missing. The stomach lay off to the side, the heart and liver were gone. Bite wounds on the throat and legs indicated that the animal hadn't suffered for long.

There was no sign of the wolves anywhere, but suddenly I felt as if I was being watched. I was still kneeling in the snow. Not a good position if a hungry wolf is standing behind you. I got to my feet in slow motion and turned round. There he stood, only

a few metres away. A grey wolf. The hairs on the back of his neck bristling as if he had walked through an electric field, his ears pricked, he tilted his head slightly to one side and watched me closely. His nostrils vibrated as he tried to pick up my scent, but the wind was coming from the other direction. I could tell by looking at him that this young animal had no idea who or what I was. I held my breath. Of course wild wolves don't attack humans, but did this wolf know that? He was hungry, and I was standing between him and the food he had fought hard for.

'Hi, wolf!' Was that my voice croaking?

The animal flinched and jumped back. At the same time he tucked his half-raised tail under his belly. Curiosity had turned to fear. He turned a half-pirouette on his hindquarters and shot into the forest. Fascinated, I stared for a long time at the trees he had disappeared behind.

Over the following months with the biologists of the International Wolf Center in Ely in the north of Minnesota, and with the wolves outside my cabin, I learned more about the life and behaviour of wolves in the wild, about research, telemetry and monitoring.

In 1995, when the first Canadian timber wolves were established in Yellowstone National Park, the next wolfish part of my life began. I worked as a volunteer on the Yellowstone Wolf Project and assisted the biologists with their field research. I stayed mostly in the Lamar Valley in the north of the national park, known as the 'Serengeti of America' because of the diversity of its species. This is where the big herds of elk* and bison gather in

* In North America the European red deer is called an 'elk' or a 'wapiti'. It is larger than the European red deer, has longer antlers and is more adapted to the cold climate. Male and female elk have neck manes, while only the male European red deer have manes. In North America the European 'elk' is also called a 'moose'.

winter. It's the land of milk and honey for predators. Here at an altitude of 2,500 metres I was observing the wolf families that lived there and reporting my observations to the biologists.

That was over twenty years ago. Since then I've had more than 10,000 wolf sightings. Sometimes we were only a few metres apart. I've never felt threatened or scared. For me it was a great privilege to see the animals almost every day. To experience that, I flew 10,000 kilometres across the Atlantic several times a year because, officially, Germany had no wolves. When these timid animals were confirmed here in the year 2000, I never dared to hope I would ever get to see one.

It was another ten years before I saw a wolf in the wild for the first time in Germany. I was coming back from a reading, taking the express train from Leipzig to Frankfurt. The attendant set a cappuccino down on my table, and I was about to pick up a newspaper when I looked out of the window and spotted something brown in a field. When you spend a long time in nature with animals, you develop an ability not unlike the visual imprinting that wolves have of prey or a landscape in their heads. Unconsciously I absorb a scene that I see, and sense that something's not quite right, even before I can define it in concrete terms. That feeling stirred in me now all of a sudden. What was that? Legs too long for a fox. Long tail, so not a deer. *Stop the train*, I thought. But it dashed relentlessly on. I pressed my face to the glass, leaned over the table and tipped my cappuccino over my paper. Yes, a wolf! It was standing still, staring at something on the edge of the forest. Then the picture dissolved again with the speed of the train. That was the first and, so far, the only time that I was lucky enough to see a wild wolf in Germany.

Observing wolves in the wilderness is an endless story. You are there when they mate; a few months later you see the result fumbling out of the den on little short legs; you watch them fighting for the best place at Mum's 'milk bar'; you rejoice at their first

hesitant attempts at hunting (hurray – a mouse!); you suffer with them when they hurt themselves; you mourn their deaths, laugh at their fun and games, follow their attempts at flirting – until the cycle closes again and it all starts over from the beginning.

I am a self-confessed 'wolfaholic', and I suffer from withdrawal symptoms when I'm not with them. For many people it's enough if they see a wolf once or twice in their lives. Not me. I want more from them. So I wait until the next wolf sighting – whether it's at minus 40 degrees, or in scorching sunshine surrounded by stinging flies. I put on a few extra socks, put little heating pads in my gloves or cover myself with sun cream and mosquito spray. And then I stand there for hours unwaveringly, regardless of the weather. I do that because I know that wolves do things that I don't want to miss. And if they happen not to be doing something, I want to know what they're going to do next.

If there are no wolves there, I wait till they come. And if they suddenly do appear, I feel that something special is happening. They are intense moments, when the world feels vivid and very consistent.

I feel blessed that wolves let me take part in their lives – by watching their hunting, mating and the raising of their young. I've discovered that they are very similar to human beings in their behaviour: they are loving family members, firm but fair leaders, sympathetic helpers, crazed teenagers or silly jokers. My observations have taught me that the wolf is a great teacher from whom we can learn a lot about life.

Wolf packs have become a part of my life. Studying their complex social behaviour for so long has changed me. Concepts such as morality, responsibility and love have acquired a new meaning for me. The wolves are my teachers and the source of my inspiration. Every day they teach me to see the world with other eyes – theirs.

The Importance of Family

Why It's Important to Look After Those Entrusted to Us

The wolves lay rolled up in the snow for a long time. They looked like a circle of grey stones, and sometimes an ear or a paw could be seen twitching. A slender female wolf stretched out and lay down on her side. A silver stripe ran along her underbelly and through her dark grey coat. The others had dark fur on their backs, with rust-coloured patches on their chests. The wolf parents rested a few metres away, their backs pressed against each other, the two-year-old wolves and yearlings distributed around them, exhausted by chasing and tugging games with their brothers and sisters.

The little ones were just waking up. They jostled one another and jumped on the ones who were still asleep. For a few minutes they looked like a gang of over-excited teenagers. Then they shook themselves and looked around. A yearling was the first to pull away and jumped over the dozing adults, with the others following him. The youngest slipped out and skidded into his father, who jumped up and growled at him. Immediately, Junior rolled on to his back and whimpered, and his father licked his

face. Now the little rascals came back. They jumped at the leader, rolled in the snow with him and dashed away. That woke up the other adult family members.

The young wolves ran over to their parents and covered them with kisses, licks and small affectionate bites. They jumped over them and jostled them, forming a huge knot of wolves, so that it was hard to say where one began and the next ended. They lovingly enclosed their siblings' muzzles in their teeth, they twisted and rubbed and touched each other, crawled under tree trunks, hopped over cliffs and dived among bushes that blocked their path. There were flashing eyes and wagging propeller tails everywhere. The most eager leapt into the thick of it, just to be there. An expression of the pure joy of life.

One of them climbed on to a hill, followed by his younger brothers. They looked at each other, then skidded over the edge and down the snow covered slope. As they did, they spun on their own axis and left a cloud of snowy dust. By the time they reached the bottom they looked like Arctic wolves.

At last one of the group raised his voice. Others joined in. Then almost all of them stood up and howled in their different pitches. Some sang, others yelped with excitement; two wolves lying down raised their heads and howled along. The song rose into the air in a crescendo and exploded in a magnificent finale.

The first wolves ran off. A few young wolves were still playing catch. But then the whole family started moving and marched in single file over the mountain crest.

Few scenes in nature are as heart-warming to observe as a wolf family. In contrast to the growling, fang-flashing creatures that we see in films, the life of wild wolves is characterized by harmony as well as by playful and affectionate interactions. The