

CRY WOLF

by Sophie Masson

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Randall was proud of his name. No one else in his class, or his school, or even in his neighborhood, could boast the same name. And boast Randall did. He'd become an expert on unusual names, and even usual ones: their meaning, and where they came from. "Oh, Randall means wolf's shield, you know," he'd say casually to anyone who asked (not that anyone asked much anymore—they all knew Randall and his boasting). "It's an Anglo-Saxon name," he'd continue, not even noticing that no one was listening. "There were lots of wolves around then."

Sometimes Randall imagined being alive in those far-off days, when the forests were deep and haunted by wolves, and you could go out with a spear and hunt them. There were other wolf names—Rudolph, and Rolf, and Ralph, for example—but, thank goodness, there was no one with those names in Randall's world. So he could be free to imagine himself as the magnificent yellow-haired champion wolf-killer, who fought singlehanded all the big grey wolves in the wild forest.

Randall had a younger sister, Agnes. At twelve years old Agnes was two years younger than her brother, who never lost a chance to impress on her how much he knew about most things, particularly wolves. And Randall delighted in telling his sister just what a meek and mild name *she* had. "Agnes means lamb!" Randall told her triumphantly, waving his *Origin of Names* book at her. "A lamb, imagine!"

Agnes shrugged. A name was a name. You didn't make a fuss about it any more than you made a fuss about the colour of your hair or your skin, or the shape of your face. Her golden eyes behind their glasses looked thoughtfully at her brother's head bent over his book, his fair, curling hair like softest lambswool around his face. She smiled, showing her sharp little white teeth, but said nothing.

It was getting close to summer and already it was stinking hot. The cicadas were out, screeching away happily. Agnes collected all the cicadas she could find—

Greengrocers and Black Princes and Yellow Mondays and many others. Randall thought her collection of insects was pretty weak: his own hobby was to collect pictures of wolves, which he brought out at every opportunity. There were big white wolves from the frozen north, as Randall liked to call it; grey timber wolves from Canada; dark wolves from India. Wolves stared out of zoo cages with their big sun-gold eyes, pacing, and Randall imagined he could smell their heavy dark breath.

Agnes didn't like his collection. "Poor wolves," she said, looking at those desperate golden-dark eyes.

"Poor wolves!" Randall repeated in mock amazement. "You must be joking! Wolves are ferocious—killers, you know!" He told her the story of the Beast of Gévaudan, a huge grey wolf which had terrorised a mountain village in France last century. He told her the story of the dog in the Middle Ages which had died protecting his master's baby from a ravening black wolf. He even reminded her of Little Red Riding Hood. But still Agnes shook her head, her eyes narrowing, every movement of her head rippling her wild tawny hair like wet fur. "Why always wolves?" she said. "They don't kill for fun, like people. They kill only because they're hungry."

"What do you know?" said Randall angrily. "You only know about those yelling cicadas! I wish there were wolves around now, so you could see me fight them—and win! They're cowardly brutes, wolves! They'd not stand before Randall of the wolf's shield!"

Agnes thought he was a dag. She turned away from him impatiently. But Randall was off on a daydream. He imagined himself bringing back the wolf's head to a grateful population and being heaped with honours. What sort of honours he'd get he wasn't sure. But he wouldn't say no to a year's supply of chicken and chips. It would save him from his father's lentil patties and his mother's constant spaghetti and macaroni!

The summer dragged on, and so did school. Soon the holidays would be starting. As usual, there wouldn't be much to do. But at least he'd be able to start a new scrapbook on wolves, Randall thought; maybe even go again to see the wolves in the zoo. Agnes would be out of his hair because she'd be working on her paper round. Randall wished that, just for a change, their parents would surprise them and say,

“Guess what, we’re going to wolf country, to the frozen north, on a holiday!” But of course it didn’t happen, even though Randall mentioned it one day at breakfast.

“Don’t be stupid, Randall!” his mother said with a great bark of laughter. “The north isn’t frozen here! You’d meet leeches and crocodiles, not wolves!”

Randall tried to explain that he’d meant Alaska or Canada or Siberia, but he got such bored and blank looks that he decided to drop the issue. “I’ll get back at them!” he thought. “You see if I don’t!”

But how would he get back at them? That might be difficult! After all, you couldn’t make things appear out of thin air—or could you? Randall decided to investigate. Maybe if you wanted things badly enough, they *would* happen! He started borrowing books on magic and psychokinesis from the library. “Mind over matter,” he muttered to himself. “That’s how to do it!” He looked up more books about people who could make things happen just by thinking about them. He became really engrossed in it all. He forgot all about “getting back” at anyone. “Imagine,” he thought, “if I could really make it all happen—the past, and the forests, and the wolves!” For days he carried in his head pictures of frozen tundra and dark forest, hoping that somehow the pictures would come out of his brain and become real...

No one in his family seemed to notice, although Agnes had seen his books and her quick yellow eyes had twinkled. Randall walked around in a cloud of imaginings. He concentrated on making good wolf-weather, willing the sky to change from bright clear blue to heavy, lowering Arctic grey. But nothing happened. The weather stayed stinking hot, the cicadas kept up their squawking, and feet became even more uncomfortable in their little sneaker-saunas. Still Randall didn’t give up. He was sure it would all happen, one day.

It was in the last week of school that Randall got his big surprise. He was feeling pretty cranky that day, having caught Agnes reading his library book on psychokinesis. He didn’t really want her to know about it. She’d looked at him very seriously with her dark golden eyes and said, “You know, Randall, it’s not really very clever to mess about with things like this,” and there’d been something in her eyes which had made him feel a bit uncomfortable. But he wasn’t one to be caught on the hop, and he’d sharply informed her that he, Randall, knew what he was doing, unlike some people around here! Agnes had said nothing more, but the slight smile around the corners of

her wide pink mouth had annoyed Randall, so that he burst in to breakfast in a bad temper.

Downstairs, his parents were discussing the strangeness of the weather, and for the first time that morning Randall noticed how bleak it was outside. The argument with Agnes had made him forget about wolf-weather, but now he felt a strange excitement as he looked at the metallic grey sky, the sharp wind knifing through the clouds.

“If it wasn’t summer, I’d say it looks like snow!” their mother said.

Randall smirked, but said nothing. Agnes lifted her eyes from her cornflakes and said, “Snow, Mum? But that’s impossible, isn’t it?”

“No, not really. It’s been known to happen,” answered their father. “I expect it’s a pressure system from the Antarctic or something.”

Randall couldn’t help looking up with a smile, just in time to glimpse the look on Agnes’s face—and odd, somehow leering look...

At school everyone was talking about the weather. Kids had on sloppy joes and tracksuits, and the teacher was talking about lighting up the oil heaters. Randall went to class feeling rather good about what he thought must be his own work. The teacher was half-way through the first class—a history period—when the door of the room burst open on a billowing gust of cold air.

There, at the door, stood three boys, school cases in their hands. The teacher looked up in surprise. “Yes?” she said.

“Please, Miss,” said one of the boys in a strange, growly sort of voice, “we’re new. We’re brothers. We were told to come to this classroom.”

“Oh?” The teacher still seemed rather taken aback. “I wasn’t told.”

“We’ve only just moved in,” the second boy said, his voice as low-pitched as his brother’s. “We won’t be here long.”

“Traveling people,” the teacher thought. There were usually a few of them around. They stayed at the caravan park and worked on the pea-picking or the potato-planting, took their kids to the school, and then after a few weeks or months moved on to the next caravan park and the next job.

“Righto,” she said. “You’d better come in, boys. Wait till I write your names in the roll, then I’ll find you some seats.”

The three brothers stood awkwardly in front of the teacher's desk, waiting. Now the class got a good look at them. The first boy had pale ash-brown hair and a white-toothed smile, and he was tall and gangling, with loose limbs. The second boy had jet-black hair, straight and thick, and a short, stubby, powerful body. The third boy was wiry and graceful, and had hair so blonde it was almost white. You would hardly have known they were brothers, except for the similarity of their eyes—almond-shaped, brown-goldy-black eyes, with strange black rims. And their low, growly voices.

Randall looked at the three boys, and he felt a shiver ripple over him like a cold white wind from an earlier age. "Don't be stupid," he told himself. "There's nothing to be scared of."

"Randall!" said the teacher. "You don't mind if Rolf, Rudolph and Ralph sit next to you, do you? There are no other spare seats."

"No, no," stammered Randall. "I mean, that's fine." No one was sitting next to him, no one behind him. So there *were* three spare seats.

Rolf, Rudolph and Ralph loped slowly down the aisle towards Randall. All three smiled at him, showing strong jaws, shining white teeth, long pink tongues.

"Hello," Randall managed to say.

"Hello, Randall—wolf's shield," came the soft voice of Rudolph, the blonde one.

Randall was terrified. The boys were looking at him with their sharp, deep amber eyes, and suddenly he knew without a doubt what they reminded him of. He groaned inside himself as he remembered his boasting, his stupid psychokinetic experiments. He fully expected to be attacked on the spot. But the three boys merely smiled at him again, and slid into their seats.

The morning seemed to go very slowly. The boys next to Randall seemed to be concentrating very hard on their work, but every so often one of them would look up and smile at Randall. He found their smiles so offputting that he could barely see the work he was supposed to be doing. He caught faint whiffs of a strange smell coming from them, too—a sharp, full, heavy smell. They had tawny light hair on their forearms, he noticed, where the sleeves of their jumpers were pushed back.

The recess bell rang and Randall sprang up from his seat, ready to bolt off into the quadrangle, grab his bag and dash off home. But—"Randall!" the teacher called out to him. "Look after Rolf, Ralph and Rudolph, will you? Show them where everything is."

Miserably, Randall waited for the three brothers to follow him. They padded silently next to him in their grey sneakers, talking to each other in their growly voices and occasionally trying to draw Randall in. But Randall could barely speak through the fear that crouched in his brain like the deep grey clouds in the sky.

In the quadrangle Randall suddenly saw Agnes. Never had he been so pleased to see anyone. If he introduced the brothers to her, they might leave him alone. A lamb, after all, might be good company for three...wolves, he thought to himself desperately, hating himself for even thinking it.

Just then, Agnes saw him and came over.

“Hello,” said Agnes. To Randall’s amazement, his sister was smiling. Randall could only stare as the three brothers walked right up to her. Rudolph put his arm around her shoulders. It was then that Agnes looked at Randall, and his knees turned to jelly as he suddenly understood.

Agnes’s eyes behind her glasses were big and browny-goldy-black, with deep black rims, and her wild frizzy hair was as tawny as the hair on the boys’ forearms. In her sharp amber eyes, Randall saw amusement and slight contempt—and a softness, a kinship, as she looked at the three brothers. “Come on,” she said to them. “We’ve got a lot to talk about.”

Randall watched them go, the fear in his mind suddenly changing direction. Had he really seen what he thought he’d seen? His sister Agnes, little lamb Agnes, walking away with a wolf’s measured step, a wolf’s yellow stare? Or was it all his imagining, just another picture in his mind? He couldn’t be sure, but as he was debating it, trying hopelessly to disentangle it all, he saw them again, down by the school gates, their soft short hair gleaming in the grey light. They all turned to wave at him, the four pairs of golden eyes narrow and amused, the four white-toothed smiles flashing.

Randall’s belly lurched. He knew now. Didn’t he?

He was very quiet for the rest of the day, and went home fearfully, expecting Agnes to be there with her three wolfish friends. But she was alone, doing her homework, when he came in.

“Hello,” he said nervously.

“Hi,” Agnes said, quite normally. “Mum’s left us some cake in the fridge if you want.”

Randall got himself some cake, although he wasn't hungry. He stood at the fridge for a while, staring at Agnes's back as she worked steadily. Several times he tried to say something, but couldn't. Finally he could stand it no longer. "Where are the boys?" he said, and his voice came out in a strangled croak.

"The boys?" Agnes looked up a bit impatiently. "They're home, I suppose. Why?"

"Nothing," Randall said. Agnes looked at him then, her smile wide and bright, her yellow eyes laughing. Randall shivered. She'd never tell him, would she? Never. He'd always have to wonder...

The teacher was a little surprised, the next day, when Rolf, Rudolph and Ralph didn't turn up for class. "Oh well, traveling people," she thought. "Here today, gone tomorrow."