

Prologue

On Tuesday 29 October 1929, the big bad wolf left Fairyland to become a private detective in Los Angeles. He didn't realize he was swapping one land of make-believe for another. This is one of his stories.

Part One

The Wolf

“There is no red gold. There is no perfect man.”
Traditional Chinese saying.

“Seek friends who are better than you. Not your own kind.”
Traditional Chinese saying.

Chapter One

That first morning, three noteworthy things happened—my sense of smell came back, I nearly bit a guy’s hand off, and I met a ghost. Of these three, the first was unexpected and welcome, the second, unwelcome but not entirely unexpected, and the third... We’ll get back to the third. For now, let’s stick with the first, because it’s the most important.

I should also say these events were connected. I didn’t know it at the time. Maybe I should have, but I had a hangover, and I felt miserable. The way I’ve been most days, this past while. Hungover and miserable. Sometimes, for a change of scenery, I feel miserable and hungover. Sometimes, self-pity comes over to join his two pals. I let him stick around if he does. I wouldn’t begrudge him the company.

The day started with me sitting at my kitchen table, smoking a cigarette, drinking coffee, and shuffling through a stack of unpaid bills. Next to my bills stood the empty space where the stack of money I hadn’t earned from not having any work wasn’t piled up. I picked up a final demand for something or other, and my sense of smell came back. Just like that.

Maybe I should explain. This wasn’t like, “Oh, I’ve got my sense of smell back. Now I can get a whiff of all the nice things in the world again.” That’s you people. You humans. It’s different for me. Different for a wolf.

The world comes at me as a gestalt of sights, sounds, and smells, overlapping and sustaining each other, telling me who’d been here before, who’s here now, who’s on their way. Or at least, it used to, when I first came here from Fairyland back in ’29 before my senses dwindled to what they are now.

Lemme try and give you a picture of what it was like getting my nose back. Imagine someone had stuck a bag over your head, maybe like sackcloth, so you can just about see through those tiny gaps in the weave but not enough to make out what’s going on beyond arm’s length. You keep this bag on your head for a year or so.

One day, someone else, or maybe the same person, it doesn’t matter who, leads you to a place. You don’t know where you are, only that it’s outdoors. There’s dirt under your feet, a breeze against your skin, the heat of the sun. They tell you to stand real still, don’t move, not an inch.

They pull the bag off your head. And you’re standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon with toes hanging over the precipice. Nothing between you and the air and the drop. That’s how it was, getting my sense of smell back. Only more so.

I shot up, my thighs catching the table, coffee slopping everywhere. Breathing heavy, pulling in air, I could smell everything all at once. The spilt coffee and my cigarette smoldering unheeded. The fresh ink on my copy of the *Los Angeles Times*. The body scent of the paperboy, left there by his fingers when he threw my paper onto the stoop, and faint, so very faint, underneath the boy’s scent, the smell of blood—menstrual blood, probably from his momma when she hugged him before he left on his rounds.

I could follow him to where he’d gone, find where he lived, pick out his mother in a room crowded with strangers. There’s power in being able to find people who think they are invisible and beyond reach. It’s a rush, and a big one at that. It took me a second to get my act together, but I did.

First, I checked for elves. I glanced left then right. None of the sneaky bastards stood next to me, pointing something sharp at me, nor *in* me. You have to be careful with elves. Especially if you have history with them, the way I do. They’re vicious and cruel and they move real fast.

I inhaled gorgeous, scent-laden air. Elves have an odor about them. It’s not what you might think. Most people believe they must smell of apple blossom and meadows and such. They used to. Before they changed. Now they have a chemical stink, like ammonia. It’s unmistakable. The taint of magic gone sour.

How the change happened and why the elves became such monsters, I don’t know. What I do know was, my senses began to fade as soon as I came here, back in ’29. They would pick up again when I went to drop off a delivery with the elves. Being close to them would give me a boost. Not back to how I used to be, but enough to remind me of the price I’d paid to come here. The bargain I’d struck to stop the elves hauling me home and skinning me alive, boiling me in oil, making me dance wearing red-hot iron boots, or any of the other atrocities they pass off as justice.

Late in 1932, the trickle of people who found my escape route and decided to follow me out of Fairyland dried up. “Refugees” would be a better word to describe them, if I’m being honest with

myself, which lately, I've avoided. I haven't seen anyone from Fairyland since, and here we are, just past halfway through '34.

This had a downside. I'd managed to work up a fair reputation as a private eye. I became the go-to guy if you wanted something found. Right up until my sense of smell faded like the last light of day, along with my sharp peepers and equally on-the-money ears.

The work faded right along with them. Turning me into a Joe Lunch-Bucket struggling through the Depression with all the other talentless Joe Lunch-Buckets. It's been tough all over the past year. Now I'd spilt my coffee on my mail. Yup, tough all over.

Satisfied I wasn't about to be run through by a homicidal representative of the immortal race who'd decided our bargain no longer stood, I rescued my mail from the puddle on the table, wafting the envelopes over the sink to let them drip.

What just happened? My magic was back, from no obvious source and for no obvious reason. That bothered me more than I liked to admit, even though it was a gift. Bringing back memories I'd rather not dwell on. Particularly the memory of the last delivery I'd passed on to the elves. A kicking, screaming, crying, bleeding delivery, who pleaded with me to let her go free.

And people ask why I drink so much.

I sat and twiddled my thumbs, then flexed my fingers a couple of times, and perused my furry mitts. My claws could use a trim. I got my wallet from my jacket pocket. Fifty-four dollars. My entire fortune.

With my sense of smell back, I could start earning again. But since it appeared from nowhere, it might disappear the same way. I had to find out why it'd come back. I could think of only one way to do that. Time to decide.

I decided I needed a drink.