

WOLF

by

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When my editor called me to her office, I was a bit nervous to tell you the truth. I was experienced enough as a reporter to know that I'd hardly been setting the world on fire recently with my articles. But what can you do? You can only work with what you've got. With the staff cuts I'd had to take over medical reporting in addition to my old job in science, so you'd expect at least the odd dodgy doctor scandal to come along. But the medical profession had chosen this particular time to behave, well, professionally. Nothing, day after day. It felt like I would have to wait for the discovery of life on Mars to get onto the front page.

"Wolf paws" she said, "know anything about them?" She was an enigmatic woman, but this time I was ready for her.

"Well, there was that hoax a few months ago."

"Not so sure now that it was. I've been hearing a few funny things on the grapevine. Check it out will you, a nice juicy scoop would go down very well at the moment."

"Absolutely" I said, relieved to have escaped so lightly. "Straight onto it." I turned to leave.

She looked up from her notes for a parting shot. "If I can hear things on the grapevine you should too."

It hadn't been much of a story and had gone off the boil very quickly, so it took an tortuous trawl on the Internet, bypassing innumerable horror movies, to come up with details of what appeared to be the first case. Reluctantly, I had to admit that she was right. It was obvious that it was likely genuine, I should have been more diligent at the time and not just followed the pack in dismissing it. A sixty-eight-year-old dairy farmer from down Goulburn way. Not the sort to appear at his local Emergency department with fake wolf paws poking out from his sleeves.

The one paragraph from the local paper wasn't very informative but at least I found out his name, Matt Waterson. The article was dated 10th June, eight months ago, much earlier than I'd recalled.

I needed to find Matt, but for background I had to start closer to home. One of my regular sources for things medical, a geneticist acquaintance, Josh.

Further internet searches of a more scientific nature had revealed about a hundred similar reported cases in the state so far. It was strange that there hadn't been more about it on the news. Maybe he could tell me why, surely some of them had crossed his path?

"Sonic Hedge Hog," he said, sitting across from me at a wooden picnic table in the grounds of the Institute, away from prying security cameras, "that's what we think is the culprit."

He took another bite of his sandwich. Probably secretly enjoying my somewhat nonplussed expression. I had a Master of Science degree, of course. That's how I got my

job, but that was years ago. In my line of work stories can come from anywhere. It's impossible to keep up. *Sonic Hedgehogs, was he kidding me? Not like him.*

"SHH gene," he explained after swallowing, "they named it after some kiddie thing. We're pretty sure it's the cause of the problem. What we don't know is why. Look, I've got to be quick, we're flat out in there so you'll have to look up about the gene stuff yourself. This is big, we've got a top-notch team working on it and hooking up with other testing facilities here and overseas."

I looked up, startled.

"Oh yes, it's happening in other countries. As of this moment we think the most likely connection might be Australian beef." I'm scribbling all this down on paper. That's the rule for me when I meet my sources. Nothing electronic, my devices are all as innocent as a babe unborn.

He checked his watch, for not the first time. "You probably don't know this, but about thirty years ago they introduced a wolf muscle gene into the stem cells of embryo beef cattle to try and get a leaner product with a sort of gamey flavour. Well, the SHH gene is on the same chromosome only a few exons down. It was sloppy work, the DNA fragment was too big. Now it seems to be activating in our subjects. We're detecting high target RNA formation. As I just said, that was thirty years ago, and it didn't last very long. The consumers didn't like it, wanted to know why their meat tasted funny. But no problems all this time. So why is it activating now? We have a few ideas, but we don't know for sure, and we're trying to keep it under wraps until we do."

He gulped the last of his coffee and shook my hand. "Got to go. You came in through the golf course gate, didn't you? I'm a bit nervous talking about this to anyone, even you, to be honest."

"Mate, I wouldn't get you into trouble, you know that. Great to see you again." I gave him a manly slap on the shoulder and took off, heading for the local library to look up Sonic Hedgehogs on their untraceable computer. If he was nervous, I was excited.

Skipping the kiddie stuff and going to the scientific sites made me want to go back to the kiddies. It's an incredibly complicated gene. Even reading the same information over and over on different websites I still didn't really understand it. Majorly important in brain, limb development and lots of other things. My one overwhelming impression was that you wouldn't want to mess around with this guy.

It was time to go and visit my farmer. Finding his phone number wasn't too difficult so, being polite and circumspect, I phoned up first. It was only a harmless little lie. I was following up case studies for Health NSW. His wife answered, she was very guarded, so just as well I hadn't told the truth. She put the phone down and was away for so long that I thought she's forgotten me. Finally, she came back to say that her husband had agreed to see me. I confirmed their address and made a show of fitting the appointment into my crowded schedule.

By the time I'd driven up and down the dirt road three times I was beginning to regret stopping in town for a much-needed coffee. I was going to be late. It was only the chance sighting of a tiny name on one of a group of letter boxes that allowed me to turn up, what

I hoped, was the right driveway. It was a long driveway and my city car was making heavy weather of the corrugations. The sight of brown paddocks and spindly trees on either side not helping to raise my spirits. Come to think of it I couldn't remember the last time that it had really rained. Visiting the country makes you more aware of these things, I guess.

I came across a few black and white cows picking contentedly at a large bale of hay. A good sign for a dairy farm, if not an infallible one. I suspected that black and white cows were quite thick on the ground in the area.

At last, a second gate and the house visible in the distance. The woman who opened the door looked distraught and haggard. Not your classic blooming country housewife that's for sure. "Mrs Waterson," I said uncertainly. She nodded and motioned me to come in with a jerk of her head. As I passed, she grabbed my elbow. "He's not too good today," she whispered, "go easy."

She opened the door to a dingy room where her husband sat in an armchair staring morosely out the window. I started to reach out my hand to shake his, dropping it again at the sight of the claw-like deformed fingers resting in his lap.

"You don't wanna touch 'em do you," he growled, "well you seen them now. If you're from the government you can tell them what they did to me. Sit down, sit down." He gestured to a hard-looking wooden chair on the other side of a small table. His wife took up a position behind him. Hands on his shoulders.

"I didn't want them pills, I only took 'em to save the farm. Kids weren't interested, I just had to keep going, and now look." He waved out the window.

"I saw some cows" I said, helpfully.

He looked at me with pure distain. "Dry," he said, "the missus hangs on to them to keep me happy. Should take them to the sales and be done with it."

"What pills did you take Mr Waterson?"

"That drug to keep you from ageing, you know. Wasn't more than a couple of months before me hands started feeling funny and then me feet, a bit. I didn't like the sound of it, but they said it was safe or I wouldn'a done it."

"Our GP gave him the pills for free," said his wife. "Got them from a drug company rep he said. He knew Matt was having trouble with his back and knees and the milking was getting difficult. He said it was a miracle drug, trialled in America and safe as houses. I've still got some of it."

She trotted off and came back with a bottle which she plonked on the table in front of me.

"REVEITERMAB."

"Afterwards they sent me to a big hospital in the city," said Matt. "All expenses paid; I'll give them that. Said they'd fix me. Fix me! Ha! Ended up with these claws."

"The surgery looked good at first," said Mrs, "but then the bones kept growing. They had another go, but it made it worse. All the scar tissue and the bones still growing they said."

I'd been dutifully taking notes on a fake official looking form that I'd printed out.

"Well I think that will be all, thank you both so much for your time."

This time I did reach out and he handed me his paw to shake.

“You tell ‘em what they done to me,” he shouted at my retreating back.

Mrs Waterson followed me. “He’s getting more and more angry. Depression the doctor says. If it weren’t that he’s so weak now, and for the pills that they’ve put him on, I’d be frightened for my safety.”

I took her hand. “All the best and thank you. Rest assured that something will be done about this.”

I’d no idea what, of course.

Two days later I was back in the Institute grounds with Josh, showing him my notes.

“Yes, we already thought there might be a connection with anti-aging monoclonals, because of the way they work.”

“But thousands of men will have taken those drugs and not one of them will be able to remember what meat they ate thirty years ago. There could be panic if this gets out.”

“I know, I know”, he said, pushing back his hair. I realised now how tired and depressed he looked. “I want the truth out there, that’s why I agreed to talk to you. I know you’ll report it responsibly. But I’m torn about it. I’m sort of half regretting it now.”

“And there’s that stuff I read about that gene and the brain. I didn’t like the sound of that. That old guy was quite aggressive. Probably just depression, but still....”

“You’re enough of a scientist to know that just because a gene can act somewhere it doesn’t mean that it will. As far as we know there hasn’t been any problems with

anybody's brain. Just their hands, and a few feet, I suppose; couple of dental changes. But no brains. For God's sake don't you mention anything about brains or I will regret this."

"But...."

"You realise, I only tell you about these things because I can trust you to stick to the facts and not sensationalise them. The public deserve to know some details. But it's not a scoop. There's already been some discrete leaks to the media at appropriate times. You know, 5pm on Friday afternoons of long weekends, Grand Final day, and so on. It's not our fault if nobody followed up on them. So, we've told the public; we didn't cover anything up. Anyone can find something about it on the web if they look hard enough, as you know.

"More men will probably be affected, but we'll explain it away, play it down, eventually find a cure. There won't be any panic. But you start even hinting that men whose brains have turned into wolves are out there it will only take one person to notice and it could go viral on social media. Werewolves! Don't do it buddy please."

I believed him of course and realistically I had to agree. I still had principles and I owed him. I saw my hope of fame, my front page, slipping away. Disappointed, I started work on my piece. I got my notes together, consulted the legal guys for the go ahead to mention the drug name. Described the gene and what it did. The possible connection to men who had eaten the meat. Emphasised that it was thirty years ago. As if that made it any better. I could feel the readers turning off in droves, but I was quite pleased with myself really. Good science. Wouldn't be setting the world on fire, but that couldn't be helped.

My editor wasn't happy with me but agreed to a half-page story in the Opinion section after the News the following Saturday. I was lucky to get that. "That's when people have time to read the long stuff," she said. I had a horrible feeling that I should start looking for another job.

I was walking home after work on Friday evening. I'd left the car in the garage that morning. It was getting more and more demoralizing looking down at my expanding gut when I showered. Passing our local newsagent, I glanced as usual at the newspaper headlines on the boards out the front. What I saw under the 'Sydney Star' heading stopped me in my tracks.

"MUTILATION ." It shrieked. "Woman and two children dead. Husband shot." That sort of bizarre thing happens occasionally these days I suppose. But a sixth sense, made me run in and grab the paper, throwing a five dollar note on the counter. I read the story. Then I read it again. Even watered down it was horrible, but the reporter was good. He described the husband's mental and physical problems in detail and, more importantly, with photos. How he got them I couldn't begin to guess.

Heart thumping, I rang my editor. "Sydney Star," I spluttered, "read it and hold the front page!"

"But. What? Why?"

"Trust me."

I had a bit of work to do to revise my article now. I sat down at the computer and called it up. This was the big one. I could sense it. The story I would be remembered for. Would Josh ever forgive me? Hopefully, when he found out what had happened, he

would. I'd made certain that he couldn't be traced as my source. Ultimately, it's a journo's job to report the truth and that has to trump friendship.

Sad, but elated also, I started with my new headline...

Caps lock on, big and bold. Four letters—**WOLF**.