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Crime in Fiction

Systime, 2008

Lee Child

Safe Enough

Wolfe was a city boy. From birth his world had been iron and concrete, first one city block, then two, then four, then eight. Trees had been visible only from the roof of his building, far away across the East River, as remote as legends. Until he was twenty-eight years old the only mown grass he had ever seen was the outfield at Yankee Stadium. He was oblivious to the chlorine taste of city water, and to him the roar of traffic was the same thing as absolute tranquil silence.

Now he lived in the country.

Anyone else would have called it the suburbs, but there were broad spaces between dwellings, and no way of knowing what your neighbor was cooking other than getting invited to dinner, and there was insect life in the yards, and wild deer, and the possibility of mice in the basement, and drifts of leaves in the fall, and electricity came through wires slung on poles and water came from wells.

To Wolfe, that was the country.

That was the wild frontier.

That was the end of a long and winding road.

The road had started winding twenty-three years earlier in a Bronx public elementary school. Back in those rudimentary days a boy was marked early. Hooligan, wastrel, artisan, genius – the label was slapped firmly in place and it stuck forever. Wolfe had been reasonably well behaved and had managed shop and arithmetic pretty well, so he was stuck in the artisan category and expected to grow up to be a plumber or an electrician or an air-conditioning guy. He was expected to find a sponsor in the appropriate local and get admitted to an apprenticeship and then work for forty-five years. Which is precisely how it turned out for Wolfe. He went the electrician route and was ten years into his allotted forty-five when it happened.

What happened was that the construction boom in the suburbs finally overwhelmed the indigenous supply of father-and-son electrical contractors. That was all they had up there. Small guys, family firms, one-truck operations, Mom doing the invoices. Same for the local roofers and plumbers and drywall people.

outfield det yderste af banen

be ob'livious to ikke lægge mærke til

tranquil rolig

dwelling bolig

drift bunke

the front'ier kolonisationsgrænsen

ele'mentary school

grundskole

rudi'mentary "tidlig"

wastrel døgenigt

artisan håndværker

shop værkstedsklasse

plumber VVS mand

ap'propriate passende

local lokalavis

ap'prenticeship lære-

plads

al'l'ot tildele

in'digenous lokal

con'tractor entreprenør

ope'r'ation virksomhed

invoice faktura

drywall gipsvæg

Demand outran supply. But the developers had bucks to make and couldn't tolerate delay. So they swallowed their pride and sent flyers down to the city union halls, and followed them with minivans: pickup at seven in the morning, back in time for dinner. They found it easy to compete on wages. City budgets were stalled.

Wolfe was not the first to sign up, but he wasn't the last. Every morning at seven o'clock he would climb into a Dodge Caravan full of stuff belonging to some suburban foreman's kids. A bunch of other city guys would climb in behind him. They would stay silent and morose through the one-hour trip, but they watched out the windows with a degree of curiosity. Some of them were turned out early in a manicured town full of quarter-acre lots. Some of them stayed in until the trees thickened up and they hit the north of the country.

Wolfe was put to work on the last stop of the line. Anyone who had seen a little more geography than Wolfe would have pegged the place correctly as mildly undulating terrain covered with hundred-year-old second-growth forestation and a few glacial boulders, with some minor streams and some small ponds. Wolfe thought it was the Rocky Mountains. To him, it was unbelievably dramatic. Birds sang and chipmunks darted and there was gray lichen on the rocks and tangled riots of vines everywhere.

His work site was a stick-built wooden house going up on a nine-acre lot. Every conceivable thing was different from the city. There was raw mud under his feet. Power came in on a cable as thick as his wrist that was spliced off another looping between two tarred poles on the shoulder of the road. The new feed was terminated at a meter and a breaker box screwed to a ply board that was set up right in the earth like a gravestone. It was a two-hundred-amp supply. It ran underground in a graveled trench the length of the future driveway, which was about as long as the Grand Concourse. Then it came out in the future basement, through a patched wound in the concrete foundation.

Then it was Wolfe's to deal with.

He worked alone most of the time. Drywall crews were scarce. Nobody was slated to show up until he was finished. Then they would blitz the Sheetrock job and move on. So Wolfe was a small cog in a big dispersed machine. He was happy enough about that. It was easy work. And pleasant. He liked the smell of the raw lumber. He liked the ease of drilling wooden studs with an

auger instead of fighting through brick or concrete with a hammer. He liked the way he could stand up most of the time, instead of crawling. He liked the fresh cleanliness of the site. Better than poking around in piles of old rat shit.

He grew to like the area too.

Every day he brought a bag lunch from a deli at home. At first he ate in what was going to be the garage, sitting on a plank. Then he took to venturing out and sitting on a rock. Then he found a better rock, near a stream. Then he found a place across the stream with two rocks, one like a table and the other like a chair.

Then he found a woman.

She was walking through the woods, fast. Vines whipped at her legs. He saw her, but she didn't see him. She was preoccupied. Angry, or upset. She looked like a spirit of the countryside. A goddess of the forest. She was tall, she was straight, she had untamed straw-blond hair, she wore no makeup. She had what magazines call bone structure. She had blue eyes and pale, delicate hands.

Later, from the foreman, Wolfe learned that the lot he was working on had been her land. She had sold nine of thirty acres for development. Wolfe also learned that her marriage was in trouble. Local scuttlebutt said that her husband was an asshole. He was a Wall Street guy who commuted on Metro North. Never home, and when he was he gave her a hard time. Story was, he had tried to stop her from selling the nine acres, but the land was hers. Story was, they fought all the time, in that tight-ass, half-concealed way that respectable people use. The husband had been heard to say *I'll f---ing kill you* to her. She was a little more buttoned-up, but the story was she had said it right back.

Suburban gossip was amazingly extensive. Where Wolfe was from, you didn't need gossip. You heard everything through the walls.

They gave Wolfe time and a half to work Saturdays and slipped him big bills to run phone lines and cable. Being a union man, he shouldn't have done it. But there were going to be modems, and a media room, and five-bedroom phone extensions sharing three lines. Plus fax. Plus a DSL option. So he took the money and did the work.

He saw the woman most days.

She didn't see him.

He learned her routine. She had a green Volvo wagon, and he would see it pass the bottom of the new driveway when she

patch sammenflikke
slate bestemme til
blitz lave hurtigt
Sheetrock varemærke indenfor gipsplader
cog hjul
dis/persed vidtforrenet
stud tap
p.49
auger snedkerbor
poke around famle omkring
deli(catesen) delikatesser
venture vove sig
pre'occupied andsfraværende
bone structure markerede træk
delicate fin
scuttlebutt sladder
com/mute pendle
tight-ass smålig
con'cealed skjult
buttoned-up tilknappet
time and a half halvdelen gang den normale timeløn
phone ex'tension ekstra telefon
DSL bredbånd

down smide
property line skel
yard 0,914 m
pad gå med bløde skridt
badge tegn
distinction anerkendelse
more fool them det er så meget dummere at dem
furnish line hovedled-ning
stride gå med lange skridt
strobe light stroboskop-lys
se'quantial efter hinanden
pose attitude
rail rase
vulnerable sårbar
roundhouse boksesving
beat to a pulp slå til plukfisk
fleshy kødfuld
bulk korpus
stun chokere
livid blodunderløben
print trykke

went to the store. One day he saw it go by and he downed tools and walked through the woods and stepped over the property line onto her land. Walked where she had walked. The trees were dense, but after about twenty yards he came out on a broad lawn that led up to her house. The first time, he stopped there, right on the edge.

The second time, he went a little farther.

By the fifth time, he had been all over her property. He had explored everything. He had taken his shoes off and padded through her kitchen. She didn't lock her door. Nobody did, in the suburbs. It was a badge of distinction. "We never lock our doors," they all said, with a little laugh.

More fool, them.

Wolfe finished the furnish line in the new basement and started on the first floor. Every day he took his lunch to the twin rocks. One time-and-a-half Saturday he saw the woman and her husband together. They were on their lawn, fighting. Not physically. Verbally. They were striding up and down the grass in the hot sunlight, and Wolfe saw them between tree branches like they were on a stage under a flashing strobe light. Like disco. Fast, sequential poses of anger and hurt. The guy was an asshole, for sure. Completely unreasonable, in Wolfe's estimation. The more he railed, the lovelier the woman looked. Like a martyr in a church window. Wounded, vulnerable, noble.

Then the asshole hit her.

It was a kind of girly roundhouse slap. Try that where Wolfe was from and your opponent would laugh for a minute before beating you to a pulp. But it worked well enough on the woman. The asshole was tall and fleshy and he got enough of his dumb bulk behind the blow to lift her off her feet and dump her on her back onto the grass. She sat up, stunned. Disbelieving. There was a livid red mark on her cheek. She started to cry. Not tears of pain. Not even tears of rage. Just tears of sheer heartbroken sadness that whatever great things her life had promised, it had all come down to being dumped on her ass on her own back lawn, with four fingers and a thumb printed backwards on her face.

Soon after that it was the Fourth of July weekend and Wolfe stayed at home for four days.

When the Dodge Caravan brought him back again he saw a bunch of local cop cars coming down the road. From the woman's house, probably. No flashing lights. He glanced at them

twice and started work. Second floor, three lighting circuits. Switched outlets and ceiling fixtures. Wall sconces in the bathrooms. But the whine of his auger must have told the woman he was there, because she came over to see him. First time she had actually laid eyes on him. As far as he knew. Certainly it was the first time they had talked.

She crunched her way over the driveway grit and leaned in past the plywood sheet that was standing in for the front door and called, "Hello?"

Wolfe heard her over the noise of the drill and clattered down the stairs. She had stepped inside the hallway. The light was behind her. It made a halo of her hair. She was wearing old jeans and a T-shirt. She was a vision of loveliness.

"I'm sorry to bother you," she said.

Her voice was like an angel's caress.

Wolfe said, "No bother."

"My husband has disappeared," she said.

"Disappeared?" Wolfe said.

"He wasn't home over the weekend and he isn't at work today."

Wolfe said nothing.

The woman said, "The police will come to see you. I'm here to apologize for that in advance. That's all, really."

But Wolfe could tell it wasn't.

"Why would the police come to see me?" he asked.

"I think they'll have to. I think that's how they do things. They'll probably want to know if you saw anything. Or heard any ... disturbances."

The way she said *disturbances* was really a question, in real time, from her to him, not just a future prediction of what the cops might ask. As in, *Did you hear the disturbances? Did you? Or not?*

Wolfe said, "My name is Wolfe. I'm pleased to meet you."

The woman said, "I'm Mary. Mary Lovell."

Lovell. Like *love*, with two extra letters.

"Did you hear anything, Mr. Wolfe?"

"No," Wolfe said. "I'm just working here. Making a bit of noise myself."

"It's just that the police are being a bit ... distant. I know that if a wife disappears, the police always suspect the husband. Until something is proven otherwise. I'm wondering if they're wondering the same kind of thing, but in reverse."

circuit kredsløb
switch koble sammen
outlet stikkontakt
fixtures armatur
sconce lampe
grit grus
clatter skramle
halo glorie
disturbances husspek-
 tabler
distant utilnærmelig
in reverse lige omvendt

rambling usammenhængende
recap opsummere
be on the outs være på kant med hinanden
up front meget direkte
leastways i det mindste
alter'cation skænderi
load bed bagagerum
rug groft uldent tæppe

Wolfe said nothing.
 "Especially if there have been disturbances," Mary Lovell said.

"I didn't hear anything," Wolfe said.
 "Especially if the wife isn't very upset."
 "Aren't you upset?"
 "I'm a little sad. Sad that I'm happy."

Sure enough, the police came by about two hours later. Two of them. Town cops, in uniform. Wolfe guessed the department wasn't big enough to carry detectives. The cops approached him politely and told him a long and rambling story that basically recapped the local gossip. Husband and wife on the outs, always fighting, famous for it. They said up front and man-to-man that if the wife had disappeared they'd have some serious questions for the husband. The other way around was unusual but not unknown, and, frankly, the town was full of rumors. So, they asked, could Mr. Wolfe shed any light?

No, Mr. Wolfe said, he couldn't.
 "Never seen them?" the first cop asked.
 "I guess I've seen her," Wolfe said. "In her car, time to time. Leastways, I'm guessing it was her. Right direction."

"Green Volvo?"
 "That was it."
 "Never seen him?" the second cop asked.
 "Never," Wolfe said. "I'm just here working."
 "Ever heard anything?"
 "Like what?"
 "Like fights, or altercations."
 "Not a thing."

The first cop said, "This is a guy who apparently walked away from a big career in the city. And guys don't do that. They get lawyers instead."

"What can I tell you?"
 "We're just saying."
 "Saying what?"
 "The load bed on that Volvo is seven feet long, you put the seats down."
 "So?"

"It would help us to hear that you didn't happen to look out the window and see that Volvo drive past with something maybe six-three long, maybe wrapped up in a rug or a sheet of plastic."

"I didn't."

"She's known to have uttered threats. Him too. I'm telling you, if she was gone, we'd be looking at him for sure."
 Wolfe said nothing.

The cop said, "Therefore we have to look at her. We have to be sensitive about equality. It's forced on us."

The cop looked at Wolfe one last time, working man to working man, appealing for class solidarity, hoping for a break.

But Wolfe just said, "I'm working here. I don't see things."

Wolfe saw cop cars up and down the road all day long. He didn't go home that night. He let the Dodge Caravan leave without him and went over to Mary Lovell's house.

He said, "I came by to see how you're doing."

She said, "They think I killed him."

She led him inside to the kitchen he had visited before.

She said, "They have witnesses who heard me make threats. But they were meaningless. Just things you say in fights."

"Everyone says those things," Wolfe said.

"But it's really his job they're worried about. They say nobody just walks away from a job like his. And they're right. And if somebody did, they'd use a credit card for a plane or a hotel. And he hasn't. So what's he doing? Using cash in a fleabag motel somewhere? Why would he do that? That's what they're harping on."

Wolfe said nothing.

Mary Lovell said, "He's just disappeared. It's impossible to explain."

Wolfe said nothing.

Mary Lovell said, "I would suspect myself too. I really would."

"Is there a gun in the house?" Wolfe asked.

"No," Mary said.

"Kitchen knives all accounted for?"

"Yes."

"So how do they think you did it?"

"They haven't said."

"They've got nothing," Wolfe said.

Then he went quiet.

Mary said, "What?"

Wolfe said, "I saw him hit you."

"When?"

utter fremkomme med
sensitive "tage hensyn til"
ap'peal for anmode indtrængende om
fleabag billigt
harp on hele tiden snakke om
ac'count for gøre rede for

con'spirator sammen-
svoren

"Before the holidays. I was in the woods, you were on the lawn."

bo'hemian boheme

"You watched us?"

"I saw you. There's a difference."

"Did you tell the police?"

dis'miss afvise

"No."

upscale eksklusiv

"Why not?"

com'mitted forbundet
med

"I wanted to talk to you first."

sour gå skævt

"About what?"

"I wanted to ask you a question."

"What question?"

"Did you kill him?"

There was a tiny pause, hardly there at all, and then Mary Lovell said, "No."

It started that night. They felt like conspirators. Mary Lovell was the kind of suburban avant-garde bohemian that didn't let herself dismiss an electrician from the Bronx out of hand. And Wolfe had nothing against upscale women. Nothing at all.

Wolfe never went home again. The first three months were tough. Taking a new lover five days after her husband was last seen alive made things worse for Mary Lovell. Obviously. Much worse. The rumor mill started up full blast and the cops never left her alone. But she got through it. At night, with Wolfe, she was fine. The tiny seed of doubt that she knew had to be in his mind bound her to him. He never mentioned it. He was always unfailingly loyal. It made her feel committed to him, unquestioningly, like a fact of life. Like she was a princess and had been promised to someone at birth. That she liked him just made it better.

After three months the cops moved on, mentally. The Lovell husband's file gathered dust as an unsolved case. The rumor mill quieted. In a year it was ancient history. Mary and Wolfe got along fine. Life was good. Wolfe set up as a one-man contractor. Worked for the local developers out of a truck that Mary bought for him. She did the invoices.

It soured before their third Christmas. Finally Mary admitted to herself that beyond the bohemian attraction, her electrician from the Bronx was a little ... boring. He didn't know anything.

And his family was a pack of wild animals. And the fact that she was bound to him by the tiny seed of doubt that had to be in his mind became a source of resentment, not charm. She felt that far from being clandestine co-conspirators they were now cell mates in a prison constructed by her long-forgotten husband.

For his part Wolfe was getting progressively more and more irritated by her. She was so damn snooty about everything. So smug, so superior. She didn't like baseball. And she said that even if she did she wouldn't root for the Yankees. They just bought everything. Like she didn't?

He began to sympathize vaguely with the long-forgotten husband. One time he replayed the slap on the lawn in his mind. The long sweep of the guy's arm, the arc of his hand. He imagined the rush of air on his own palm and the sharp sting that would come as contact was made.

Maybe she had deserved it.

One time, face-to-face with her in the kitchen, he found his own arm moving in the same way. He checked it inside a quarter inch. Mary never noticed. Maybe she was shaping up to hit him. It seemed only a matter of time.

The third Christmas was when it fell apart. Or to be accurate, the aftermath of the third Christmas. The holiday itself was okay. Just. Afterward she was prissy. As usual. In the Bronx you had fun and then you threw the tree on the sidewalk. But she always waited until January sixth and planted the tree in the yard.

"Shame to waste a living thing," she would say.

The trees she made him buy had roots. He had never before seen a Christmas tree with roots. To him, it was all wrong. It spoke of foresight, and concern for the long term, and some kind of guilt-ridden self-justification. Like you were permitted to have fun only if you did the right thing afterward. It wasn't like that in Wolfe's world. In Wolfe's world, fun was fun. No before, and no after.

Planting a tree to her was cutesy. To him it was a backbreaking hour of digging in the freezing cold.

They fought about it, of course. Long, loud, and hard. Within seconds it was all about class and background and culture. Furious insults were thrown. The air grew thick with them. They kept on until they were physically too tired to continue. Wolfe was shaken. She had reached in and touched a nerve. Touched his core: *No woman should speak to a man like that.* He knew it

re'sentment fortrydelse
clan/destine hemmelig
pro'gressively mere og
mere

snooty storsnudet
smug selvtilfreds
root for heppe på

arc bue

sting svin

check standse

shape up gøre sig klar

aftermath eftervirkning

prissy sippet

self-justification selv-
retfærdiggørelse

cutesy nuttet

core inderste sjæl

ignoble gemen

down dun

detour gå en omvej

maple ahorntræ

plunge støde

clod klump af jord

vicious voldsom

stringy trævlet

ligament ledbånd

at'tached fastnet

state trooper delstats-

politi

exca'vation udgravning

search warrant ransag-

ningskendelse

cre'denza lavt hyldemo-

bel med skuffer foroven

carpentry tomrer-

re'mains jordiske rester

was an ignoble feeling. He knew it was wrong, out of date, too traditional for words.

But he was what he was.

He looked at her and in that moment he knew he hated her. He found his gloves and wrapped himself up in his down coat and seized the tree by a branch and hurled it out the back door. Detoured via the garage and seized a shovel. Dragged the tree behind him to a spot at the edge of the lawn, under the shade of a giant maple, where the snow was thin and the damn Christmas tree would be sure to die. He kicked leaf litter and snow out of his way and plunged the shovel into the earth. Hurled clods deep into the woods. Cut maple roots with vicious stabs. After ten minutes sweat was rolling down his back. After fifteen minutes the hole was two feet deep.

After twenty minutes he saw the first bone.

He fell to his knees. Swept dirt away with his hands. The thing was dirty white, long, shaped like the kind of thing you gave a dog in a cartoon show. There were stringy dried ligaments attached to it and rotted cotton cloth surrounding it.

Wolfe stood up. Turned slowly and stared at the house. Walked toward it. Stopped in the kitchen. Opened his mouth.

"Come to apologize?" Mary said.

Wolfe turned away. Picked up the phone.

Dialed 911.

The locals called the state troopers. Mary was kept under some kind of unofficial house arrest in the kitchen until the excavation was completed. A state lieutenant showed up with a search warrant. One of his men pulled an old credenza away from the garage wall and found a hammer behind it. A carpentry tool. Dried blood and old hair were still clearly visible on it. It was bagged up and carried out to the yard. The profile of its head exactly matched the hole punched through the skull they had found in the ground.

At that point Mary Lovell was arrested for the murder of her husband.

Then science took over. Dental, blood, and DNA tests proved the remains to be those of the husband. No question about that. It was the husband's blood and hair on the hammer too. No question about that either. Mary's fingerprints were on the hammer's

handle. Twenty-three points of similarity, more than enough for the locals, the state police, and the FBI all put together.

Then lawyers took over. The county DA loved the case to bits. To put a middle-class white woman away would prove his impartial evenhandedness. Mary got a lawyer, the friend of a friend. He was good, but overmatched. Not by the DA. By the weight of evidence. Mary wanted to plead not guilty, but he persuaded her to say yes to manslaughter. Emotional turmoil, temporary loss of reason, everlasting regret and remorse. So one day in late spring Wolfe sat in the courtroom and watched her go down for a minimum of ten years. She looked at him only once during the whole proceeding.

Then Wolfe went back to her house.

He lived there alone for many years. He kept on working and did his own invoices. He grew to really love the solitude and the silence. Sometimes he drove down to the stadium, but when parking hit twenty bucks he figured his Bronx days were over. He bought a big-screen TV. Did his own cable work, of course. Watched the games at home. Sometimes after the last out he would sit in the dark and review the case in his head. Cops, lawyers, dozens of them. They had done a pretty thorough job between them.

But they had missed two vital questions.

One: With her pale, delicate hands, how was Mary Lovell accustomed to handling hammers and shovels? Why did the local cops right at the beginning not see angry red blisters all over her palms? And two; How did Wolfe know exactly where to start digging the hole for that damn Christmas tree? Right after the fight? Aren't cops supposed to hate coincidences?

But all in all, Wolfe figured he was safe enough.

(2006)

DA (district at'torney)
offentlig anklager

love to bits vild med

put away bringe af vejen

im'partial neutral

even'handedness upar-

tiskhed

plead not guilty nægte

sig skyldig

manslaughter uoverlagt

manddrab

turmoil kaos

re'morse samvittigheds-

nag

go down blive sat i fang-

sel

pro'ceeding proces

solitude ensomhed

out tur

ac'customed to vant til

blister vabel