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DINNER WITH THE LYNX

FOR MY FIRST TRICK I'll send a solicitation from the North's loamy soils. I'll send it over fritzing Wi-Fi to her Highness, a bite-sized enchantment. In short, I'll tweet the Queen—or rather the royal henchmen handling her Twitter account.

I message Buckingham Palace before she begins her tour—her last one, they say. She's visited Toronto, Ottawa, and Victoria many times before, but it's her first stop up here in the clammy tree-lined enclaves of Yellowknife, its name already too menacing.

This trick, like all tricks, seems unfathomable until the finale when the magic seeps out—a reply for old @JackwiththeHat and his big idea. The Queen? No, but an email from some sort of Buckingham digitized knight. He tells me her Highness is seeking to visit the *true* North, and what better backdrop for Mother Nature than my plot of land? The mayor of Yellowknife vouches for me, as I performed at his last birthday party and used dry ice to create politically tasteful caricatures of the Arctic Caucus. *Voilà*. The act is set.

The premise is this: I will pull not a downy snow hare out of thin air but its sworn predator, the lynx. It will emerge for her Highness, grace our supper with its savage glory, and then disappear back into the ether. The feat will be photographed and uploaded to several news sites under the heading “Queen Gets Up Close with Canadiana.” If she would prefer, I type graciously, we can switch it to afternoon tea. The reply comes quickly: supper, they say, will be perfect.

I must comply with all security measures and sign verbose waivers, of course. Modernity and monarchy are strange illusions. The Queen can't start a hashtag to save her life or exit the Palace without a bodyguard. I have ten thousand followers on Twitter and walk Wiley Road unbothered, save for the locals' hellos. For now. Somehow, I feel it's in the cards.

A Canadian lynx looks like a jaguar crossed with a joker. The ears have pointed tufts like a jester's cap. Of course it's furrier and paler than a jaguar—a cat in an Abominable Snowman costume with a wide, clownish-striped ruff. Its tail is truncated severely, a black bob of coal on the rump. Its paws are like snowshoes, big as a man's face.

I set out raw chicken on my back porch and lure nothing but squirrels. I shove pet-store mice into cages and curse David Copperfield when the raccoons chew through the wire. Finally, I smoke half a joint, filled up with my fifty-year-old exhaustion and enough rye, and I see a face. For a second I mistake it for a woman meeting my eyes through the trees.

There's a reason they call Mother Nature a cruel mistress up here. The shape-shifting *aurora borealis* is named after a Roman goddess, playing tricks with the sky in a manner that could drive a grown man insane. And *lynx* means *to shine* in Greek, eyes sparkling like diamonds. I've never been married, but for some reason I think of the feminine when I see something powerful in the wild. This sense of awe provokes a slight animal hackling of my hair.

As the lynx steps slowly forward, I meet her gemstone gaze and name her Pretty Woman (after the Roy Orbison song, not the Julia Roberts film). "Here, kitty-kitty," I whisper.

The midsummer sky illuminates her. She slips through the gate, her mammoth footsteps soundless. As she wraps her lips around rotted chicken bones I consider changing my Twitter handle to something more serious like @KingoftheWild.

It's all about placement, like the position of an innocent card angled to appear out of thin air or the finesse of fitting a coin indecipherably in your palm. So I choose my plot carefully, shoving a spade in the earth to dig up twined roots.

I know about perimeters. My yard is lined with a three-metre fence to ward off wayward bears. Pretty Woman, despite her clownish paws, is about the size of a Labrador Retriever. I tack chicken wire to the wood so she can't dig her claws in, and I let her roam. She stays near the border at first, ears flattened, but slinks closer after a couple of hungry days. I throw her chicken livers.

She's a young one, I can tell. Jumpy, swiping at the gray jays clumsily; I doubt she's kitted yet. Skinny, too. Lucky that I've caught her—we're

in a low lull of the lynx-rabbit cycle. When the population of snow hares increases, the lynx breed and grow large, glossy-haired. Then the rabbits run their course, and the lynx turn lean and sparse. It goes by decade, they tell me. I've called these outskirts of Great Slave Lake home for nearly ten years, and I can see that what was once spawning is now slowing. The orbit of birds, black flies, and even tamarack trees is gradually stalling. Nature shuffles the deck with all fairness, I suppose.

The hole I'm digging is my Yellowknife homage to Harry Houdini. It's firm earth, but I've got a miner's muscle memory. And sweating is beneficial—Pretty Woman becomes accustomed to my scent, and as long as her stomach's full I'm an ally. Her trust will be integral to the act.

I love to watch her as she tunes to a frequency I can't pick up, such as the syncopated pulse of ants' footsteps or far-off avian wings. Her musculature tenses and her eyes strain, though the world remains unchanged and placid to me.

I've barely tasted my coffee before the chatter starts. "We've heard about your trick, Jack."

Breakfast at the Wildcat means a drive through Old Town, but today I'm the talk of its log house, a crowd gathering around my long table. A few tourists pick at their bannock and remain uninterested. Though I've been here for nearly a decade, I'm still no born-and-bred-here type, so my tricks can elicit suspicion. But it's fresh conversation at least.

"Why a lynx?" Pat wants to know. "A wolf, a wood bison, yeah, just head over to the Mackenzie. But a lynx? How are you gonna get yourself one of those?"

I used to work at the Giant Mine with Pat, and I know his penchant for methodology. "Well," I reply wryly, "magic, of course."

They hoot and holler. "Maybe your magic can pay our tab," says Anak.

Of course the lynx is elusive, its snowy fur evading even expert hunters. It's as rare as Houdini's elephant, and people believed that its tusks and folded trunk were lost forever after he vanished it.

"You gonna answer that thing?" Their eyes linger on my phone, its body buzzing face down on the table every few minutes. Most men my age stick to bare-bones Facebook, but I've learned how to make myself seen.

"I've got to match the momentum," I explain. "Word is spreading fast, and I need to capitalize on the attention—gain more followers, answer my

emails. I might upload some photos of the lynx soon.”

They exchange looks. “You’ve actually trapped one?”

“Careful, Jack,” says Bo, a net over her hair like a raven’s nest. “You mind what you mess with.”

I shrug as she pours more coffee, but we both know the land can play tricks right back. I’ve picked up on the cautiousness here, which dates back to the ‘50s when the Dené children died eating arsenic-laced snow. We learned techniques of careful extraction in the mines, rules created after that comeuppance. I’ve tried to incorporate these tactics into my dealings with the lynx, but her sheer magnificence seems to suggest that our meeting was fated.

We’re getting closer, me and Pretty Woman. I learn that her meow is as high-pitched as a bird’s song. I learn that her favourite toys are rolls of paper towel, easily shredded. She play fights with me now, and I spray her with cinnamon water when she gets too rough.

I have her practice jumping in and out of the hole on command. There will be a trap door, sliding horizontally, to work around, but it’s this—appearing and disappearing silently—that she must master. She’s a quick learner, figuring things out on her own. She’s adaptable, like me. Maybe we smell it in each other.

When midsummer stretches to maximum daylight, she starts getting restless. She stalks the perimeter of the yard, panting. She catches crows and leaves them mangled and bloody, half-breathing. I’m no expert, but I think she’s in heat.

“How are you today?” I ask her one morning, and she snaps at me in reply—her big canines shining, all fang.

“No,” I hiss. I learned dominance from the internet. Never delete a tweet, never acquiesce to a troll. This defense feels like it was born out of primal intuition, so I think it’ll work in the wild.

I’m often struck by our similarities. We both rely on eye contact, twitch in our dreams. She preens like a lady, while I take photographs. “Pretty, pretty, pretty,” I can’t help cooing, but she loses patience with the camera and my photos come out blurry, the colours hazed like a season in flux.

I’m late to meet the mayor at the Gold Range. Running up 50th Street to the bar, I notice a few heads turning and even some unfamiliar faces whis-

pering. It seems that my act is gaining offline momentum.

I find the mayor under mounted antlers at a knife-etched table, looking a tad out-of-place in my choice venue. I breathe in the welcome scent of old smoke, and he hits me with all this talk of tactics.

“So,” he rambles on, “we’re putting a bunch of baseball bleachers along your fence for the crowd. And the bathrooms: a row of porta-potties, naturally. Catering is all set up for our private dinner with the Queen. The crowd will be permitted entry afterwards, in the evening. Oh, yes, security. Aside from her guards, we’ll get that sorted. Also, we’ve hired a decorator, some kind of landscape *artiste* to jazz up your yard. What are your thoughts on a red carpet? I was thinking...”

“Hey,” I haven’t had enough to drink for this, “let me know who to talk to and I’ll figure out how to arrange it, but right now I just need to focus on the act—and the lynx.”

“Right,” the mayor fixes his eyes on me. “That’s all going as planned? I have to confess, I’m a tad nervous...a wild animal, after all...how are you going to do it?”

“A magician never reveals his secrets,” I grin.

The mayor raises an eyebrow and summons the bartender. This is how I get people to buy my drinks.

We sip Wild Turkey. Welder’s Daughter starts up a country instrumental, slow and winding, and I lean closer.

“I’m not telling you the whole deal,” I begin, “but first of all, you should know that Houdini was a methodical planner. He controlled everything. Got it? Audience perspective, lighting, maybe even mirrors. This time of year, the light gives us a certain advantage. Picture a lynx stepping calmly on command, the crowd hushing, then the curtain is pulled aside and the big cat vanishes. The crowd gasps. Look at the Queen! She’s fanning herself. Now, I’ve got acreage to work with...”

It happens slowly—the dim sensation of pressure, a growing awareness that something is wrong. I pass out atop the covers after coming home from the bar, and when I open my eyes to the dawn *Pretty Woman* is on my chest.

I can smell her first. Something primal, like flesh and sex and all the seasons. With her monster paws upon me I can barely breathe, and she stiffens the push of my ribs, the white of her ruff against my face.

It would take two seconds for her teeth to reach my neck. This is a moment that requires extreme fastidiousness, yet all I can think about is Or-bison singing “don’t let the wild life hurt you” on a scratchy Pioneer. So I don’t—I go as limp as possible, while the lynx sinks her claws into my chest, the tips puncturing my skin.

“No,” I cough. “Bad girl!”

Her breath is so close I can smell it. She growls. Or is it a purr? I can’t tell if the tone is murderous or maternal.

I inch one hand toward the bedside table, making for my old .45. There’s too much crap in the way—cigarettes, junk mail, chargers—but I manage to grip it, tilt my hand, and shoot the ceiling. Chunks of drywall fall like moon-scape. Pretty Woman jumps clean out of the room. Blood comingles with my chest hair, and I press the bedsheet against it to stem the flow.

When I make it to the kitchen, she’s covered the floor in toppled, shattered houseplants, aloe and cacti uprooted in a mess of dirt. I pick up a handful of earth and throw it at her. Dominance.

“We are not,” I say, “fucking around anymore.”

She blinks at me with the indifference only a cat can muster.

I retreat into the bathroom to pour the dregs of Canadian Club onto the wounds. In the toothpaste-splattered mirror my hair is gray, sunspots graze my face, and her paws have dug what look like clovers on my chest, one beneath each collarbone—a bloodied imitation of flora.

Over the next few weeks I take care to create the illusion of absolute control. Making Pretty Woman appear is easy—she loves jumping out of the earth, paws splayed proudly—but getting her to disappear again is much harder. She fights it. Sometimes I have to abandon my hand signal and swing at her with my steel-toed boots to get her to jump. She’ll make a funny sound, a kind of keening deep in the throat.

I’ve also been told to take a course on courtly etiquette. A panicked Buckingham official reiterates the terms over webcam. “No personal comments,” she gasps when I make a crack about the Queen dressing in Northern plaid.

I practice the correct addresses on Pretty Woman. When the lynx meets my eyes I bow from the neck, always maintaining eye contact. I do not offer a hand to shake unless she offers up a paw first. She doesn’t.

“Your Majesty,” I say, surprised at how much it comes out like a growl.

Pretty Woman is becoming an online star. Her followers demand fresh photos, updates, and videos of her methodically shredding a yoga mat. Another cat ruling the internet despite a lack of opposable thumbs.

I keep getting tweets. The suspicious critics say, “He’s a crock moron lol there is no way the queen will be watchin this #bullshit.” The bleeding hearts say, “He probably drugged the poor beast.” Well, let them crow. I’ve done my research, and it’s mostly a matter of primal confidence—mastery. I’ve always wanted to be called a master of something. The study of history built it up in me: dynasties, legacies, glorified kings. I can tell from the micro-management of the mayor and the Palace that they’re suspicious of my capabilities, but they needn’t worry. I can pull this kind of awe from anyone’s deadened eyes. Sleight of hand is like slivers in ice, cracks forming deep and unseen in the floes until they split with the sound of gunpowder, the grate of subarctic diamonds.

On the day of the royal arrival I wake up at five a.m., shave, sweep the dirt from under my nails, slip into my suit, and begin scheduling posts. Pretty Woman tears apart her morning chicken hearts as I chain smoke.

My yard has been transformed into a rustic wonderland: cedar boughs artfully manipulated, mason jars atop painted farmhouse tables. The first of our exclusive dinner party guests appear for aesthetic approval—the mayor, council members, and a few people from the school board and federal offices. We’re all edgy and overdressed, as though attending a funeral. “Looking good, Jack,” Blais from the Arctic Caucus heckles, though I feel the sweat on his palm during our handshake. “Dressed up like you’ve got a hot date.”

Finally, the car pulls up—a silver monster with four-wheel drive. A procession of guards emerges, and the Queen follows in their wake. She looks small and stooped against the open sky. I watch them walk silently down the rose-strewn path and take their seats, cameras flashing.

It’s time. Beneath a birch arch and all summer’s brightness I find my place on the ground and brandish the curtain. “Ladies, gentlemen, Your Highness,” I bow, “allow me to introduce our Northern glory, a rare piece of the wild Muskwa woods: Pretty Woman!”

The lynx jumps out. The small crowd murmurs, moves back a fraction. Pretty Woman looks apprehensive, but keeps her distance.

“I’ve trained her well,” I say. “You don’t bother her and she won’t bother you.”

“Here, girl, *tsk-tsk-tsk*,” calls the photographer, rubbing his fingers. She stares at him for a few seconds and then turns in the opposite direction, training her eyes on the trees. “Just like my Mittens,” he sighs. People laugh.

I understand her reaction. I remember the feeling of surfacing from stale mineshafts to cutting sunlight. The last thing you want is to reach for another human being; no, you need time to steady your eyes, inhale that strange half-freedom.

The plates are set for dinner, and food is carted out on silver trays. “Now for an intimate supper,” the mayor beckons, sliding out a chair at the table’s head for the Queen. “I hope you enjoy the fruits of the land.” We are served wild bison and grouse, heirloom carrots and chard. Something classical plays thinly; it sounds like it’s evaporating in all the open space. We sip ice wine and drink in the sight of the lynx, her eyes meeting ours warily from the perimeter.

The Queen begins the conversation. Her voice is higher than I expected and slightly shaky. “What a beautiful piece of land. Quite a ways from the city centre, though. Is that a far drive for you?”

I remember my manners. “I suppose that’s why I like it, Your Majesty.”

“I see. And what first brought you to Yellowknife, Mr...”

“Jack,” I grin. “Just call me Jack.” Her good breeding shows, as she fails to flinch when she spies my neglected teeth. “Mining, ma’am,” I explain. “I got to know the territory quite well working at the diamond mines at Snap Lake, East Island, Giant Mine—until they shut it down.”

“Quite a pronounced change—miner to magician. What inspired you?”

“Oh, you know,” I shrug. “I suppose I’ve always liked making things appear from nowhere.” I deftly slip a quarter from her unsmiling guard’s ear.

The mayor blanches, but it earns a soft laugh from the Queen. Her guard remains stoic as I finger the quarter. The Queen’s cameo glitters on one side, the caribou’s outline on the other. They may believe in straight divides, I think, but they don’t have my magic. Mastery is what sways the odds.

“I was informed that mining doesn’t provide the city with much revenue presently,” she continues. “You focus more on government services now?”

“True,” the mayor interjects, “but let’s not focus on negatives. This change means we’re fostering a different kind of community. Take Jack for instance: the most popular Canadian magician on social media! Who

would've thought?"

The ice wine makes me comfortable enough to laugh. "Sure, some people think it's just dumb luck, but anyone who knows how to play cards or dig things up knows that there's something more than luck happening behind the scenes. If you focus hard enough, you can *feel* when something's under the surface."

"I was under the impression that most magicians stumble upon the trade by chance." The mayor's tone indicates that I'm rambling.

"And Your Majesty?" I ask, despite a kick under the table. "What do you think of Yellowknife so far?"

"Endless sky, so many trees." She delicately slices her bison. "You're very hospitable. One feels as though it's another world, here."

I can't help but be enchanted by the pale, frail-boned woman. A fox-fur stole sits round her shoulders, and her sprinklings of jewels catch the sun.

"Did you hunt that yourself?" I joke, gesturing to the stole.

"Jack," the mayor coughs, "you're awfully inquisitive. Pardon me, Your Majesty."

But the Queen answers me. "Oh, no," she adjusts the stole. "I inherited it, but it was caught at the Windsor Estate." The fox's tiny eyes flash in the light, as though jeeringly animated.

"Quite a change from Buckingham Palace," Blais interjects. "I'm assuming those guards aren't used to scaring off bears."

The Queen smiles. "Our grounds are impressively manicured," she says, "but now, I must admit, I fancy seeing the wildflowers grow over."

It's such a strange sight: the Queen and the lynx at opposite ends of my vision, like keepers of their own sovereignty. I've often wondered if Pretty Woman can pick up on what lies under the soil—a trillion particles of arsenic trioxide, frozen golden poison. The Queen, despite her demure appearance, seems to understand more than she lets on, but I don't know if she is aware of this or of anything besides frigid winters and shining lights. Still, she and the lynx seem similar in their stillness, as if contemplating a silent hierarchy, a bleeding season, an invisible spell.

My nerves start up again when the tables are cleared and the crowd begins to fill the bleachers. It looks like all of Yellowknife has arrived, people snapping photos and filming videos behind the barricade. The sound of jays makes me hope that someone is live-tweeting the event.

I put leftovers into my palm and use them to coax Pretty Woman back under the birch arch. “Come,” I demand. The crowd hushes as we arrive, silhouetted in sunlight. I think we must look small against the vastness of the land. My ramshackle house sits over to their right, while the boreal forest sways at the left and circles around, meeting the mouth of the lake somewhere beyond us.

“Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls,” I announce. “Allow me to introduce our wild card.”

Pretty Woman lets out a sudden hiss, as though pricked by the anticipation of the crowd. The first-row spectators shrink back.

I laugh grandly. “Don’t worry, folks. She’s perfectly under my control.” They laugh back, somewhat.

“What you’re about to witness is the vanishing of a completely wild Canadian lynx,” I continue. “I will magic her away, then draw her back from the wild blue yonder from which all things are made.”

The Queen, in the front row, claps her white-gloved hands politely.

The lynx is pacing before the crowd, ears back, that strange noise coming from her throat again. She’s not getting into position. “Ahem,” I say, “she’s a tad temperamental. Just like an ex-girlfriend.” A few nervous titters.

When Pretty Woman finally slips her bobtail behind the curtain, I seize the opportunity. “At last! The vanishing act.”

The Queen’s guards are frowning. I can’t focus on them. I only have eyes for Pretty Woman, her stare fixed, far too close to me than we’d practiced. It’s too late; the show must go on. I have no aces up my sleeve.

“Abracadabra!” I cry, our key word amplified. The lynx leaps, and a red-and-white playing card flutters down upon the earth where she was standing—a Jack of Hearts, my paper-milled likeness. It’s perfect, just as I imagined it: the gasps, the silent awe, and Pretty Woman spun into nothingness.

“Bravo!” someone shouts.

The crowd is murmuring and nudging one another. It’s amazing how generations after Houdini the disappearing act still never fails to captivate. I flourish the curtain and watch all the eyes follow it. Back and forth and back again.

“And now for the beast’s return.” My voice rings out. “Like a bear after hibernation or a drunk after an alley nap, she’s coming back!”

I toss the card up and watch it flutter downward. The earth opens, it falls in, and I wait for *Pretty Woman* to leap out.

Nothing happens.

“Ah,” I attempt to continue the old joke. “She’s still putting her face on.”

I’m fighting panic, though. If there’s one thing *Pretty Woman* loves, it’s soaring out as soon as possible.

The crowd is beginning to murmur.

I crane my neck as far as possible. Nothing is surfacing—no paws, no bobtail, no purr.

I feel the sweat collecting on my neck. Is she flat out refusing? Is she clawing through the dirt? When I look forward I find nonplussed faces. The Queen stares at me with a stony, unreadable expression.

“She’s not there.” I forget my magician’s voice as the realization hits me.

“What?” The mayor is rising. “Jack, are *you* tricking us?” He addresses the crowd in the tenor of spectacle, taking on the role of the showman, gesturing for me to play along.

But I can’t. I fall to my knees so I can see deeper into the earth. Nothing. She has simply vanished. No claw marks. No grand finale.

In the end, the whole thing goes viral. The internet soaks it up—the missing lynx, the crowd left hanging, my confounded face. Some think it’s a stupid gag, some say it’s a subtle Canadian form of environmental protest. A few are adamant that the lynx’s disappearance was purposeful—an ending intended to make you scratch your head.

It’s unsettling to see yourself everywhere, to lose track of all the places you are. It’s like the Jack in that video has gone wild, slipped out of my grasp, and spread outward.

I have two million followers on Twitter now, but I can’t plan any new illusions. I relive the trick so often that it seeps into my dreams. Those nights everything appears dazzlingly alive. I see the Queen tottering across my lawn while the fox around her neck tightens its grip, laughing maniacally as her cheeks turn lake-blue. Half-eaten bison and grouse leap up from serving trays, their grotesque cooked forms flapping. The jays swarm, pulling apart the birch arch, spitting pieces into screaming mouths. Every blade of grass stands at attention, sharp as knives. Those mornings I wake up clawing at myself.

I research online, sifting through every possible explanation for disappearances: dimensional shifts, poltergeists, the luminous language of stars. I can't make heads or tails of any of it. People argue through pages and pages of forums, and I begin to think that curiosity is a kind of death in itself.

Every time I take a woman home I ask her to place her teeth, porcelain-sharp, against my neck.

Somehow, things carry on. I play solitaire on my porch and talk to myself like this, narrating grandly with a magician's timbre until my thoughts begin to take shape. I tell everything to the trees, and sometimes I think I see a face behind them whose eyes shine with the land and the sky and the sun—eyes that are watching me.