

HISTORY OF WOLVES

A Novel

Emily Fridlund



Atlantic Monthly Press
New York

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First Grove Atlantic hardcover edition: January 2017

Printed in the United States of America

FIRST EDITION

ISBN 978-0-8021-2587-3

eISBN 978-0-8021-8977-6

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Fridlund, Emily, author.

Title: History of wolves : a novel / Emily Fridlund.

Description: First edition. | New York, NY : Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016027800 (print) | LCCN 2016034333 (ebook) | ISBN 9780802125873 (hardback) | ISBN 9780802189776 (eBook)

Subjects: LCSH: Teenage girls—Fiction. | Belonging (Social psychology)—Fiction. | Choice (Psychology)—Fiction. | Secrecy—Fiction. | Christian Scientists—Fiction. | Minnesota—Fiction. | Psychological fiction. | BISAC: FICTION / Literary.

Classification: LCC PS3606.R536 H57 2016 (print) | LCC PS3606.R536 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016027800>

Atlantic Monthly Press
an imprint of Grove Atlantic
154 West 14th Street
New York, NY 10011

Distributed by Publishers Group West

groveatlantic.com

17 18 19 20 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

1

IT'S NOT THAT I NEVER THINK ABOUT PAUL. He comes to me occasionally before I'm fully awake, though I almost never remember what he said, or what I did or didn't do to him. In my mind, the kid just plops down into my lap. Boom. That's how I know it's him: there's no interest in me, no hesitation. We're sitting in the Nature Center on a late afternoon like any other, and his body moves automatically toward mine—not out of love or respect, but simply because he hasn't yet learned the etiquette of minding where his body stops and another begins. He's four, he's got an owl puzzle to do, don't talk to him. I don't. Outside the window, an avalanche of poplar fluff floats by, silent and weightless as air. The sunlight shifts, the puzzle cleaves into an owl and comes apart again, I prod Paul to standing. Time to go. It's time. But in the second before we rise, before he whines out his protest and asks to stay a little longer, he leans back against my chest, yawning. And my throat cinches closed. Because it's strange, you know? It's marvelous, and sad too, how good it can feel to have your body taken for granted.

* * *

Before Paul, I'd known just one person who'd gone from living to dead. He was Mr. Adler, my eighth-grade history teacher. He wore brown corduroy suits and white tennis shoes, and though his subject was America he preferred to talk about czars. He once showed us a photograph of Russia's last emperor, and that's how I think of him now—black bearded, tassel shouldered—though in fact Mr. Adler was always clean shaven and plodding. I was in English class when his fourth-period student burst in saying Mr. Adler had fallen. We crowded across the hall and there he lay facedown on the floor, eyes closed, blue lips suctioning the carpet. "Does he have epilepsy?" someone asked. "Does he have pills?" We were all repulsed. The Boy Scouts argued over proper CPR techniques, while the gifted and talented kids reviewed his symptoms in hysterical whispers. I had to force myself to go to him. I crouched down and took Mr. Adler's dry-meat hand. It was early November. He was darkening the carpet with drool, gasping in air between longer and longer intervals, and I remember a distant bonfire scent. Someone was burning garbage in plastic bags, some janitor getting rid of leaves and pumpkin rinds before the first big snow.

When the paramedics finally loaded Mr. Adler's body onto a stretcher, the Boy Scouts trailed behind like puppies, hoping for an assignment. They wanted a door to open, something heavy to lift. In the hallway, girls stood sniffing in clumps. A few teachers held their palms to their chests, uncertain what to say or do next.

"That a Doors song?" one of the paramedics asked. He'd stayed behind to pass out packets of saltines to light-headed students. I shrugged. I must have been humming out loud. He gave me orange Gatorade in a Dixie Cup, saying—as if I were the one he'd come to save, as if his duty were to root out

sickness in whatever living thing he could find—“Drink slow now. Do it in sips.”

The Walleye Capital of the World we were called back then. There was a sign to this effect out on Route 10 and a mural of three mohawked fish on the side of the diner. Those guys were always waving a finny hello—grins and eyebrows, teeth and gums—but no one came from out of town to fish, or do much at all, once the big lakes froze up in November. We didn't have the resort in those days, only a seedy motel. Downtown went: diner, hardware, bait and tackle, bank. The most impressive place in Loose River back then was the old timber mill, I think, and that was because it was half burned down, charred black planks towering over the banks of the river. Almost everything official, the hospital and DMV and Burger King and police station, were twenty-plus miles down the road in Whitewood.

The day the Whitewood paramedics took Mr. Adler away they tooted the ambulance horn as they left the school parking lot. We all stood at the windows and watched, even the hockey players in their yellowed caps, even the cheerleaders with their static-charged bangs. Snow was coming down by then, hard. As the ambulance slid around the corner, its headlights raked crazily through the flurries gusting across the road. “Shouldn't there be sirens?” someone asked, and I thought—measuring the last swallow of Gatorade in my little waxed cup—*how stupid can people be?*

Mr. Adler's replacement was Mr. Grierson, and he arrived a month before Christmas with a deep, otherworldly tan. He wore

one gold hoop earring and a brilliant white shirt with pearly buttons. We learned later that he'd come from California, from a private girls' school on the sea. No one knew what brought him all the way to northern Minnesota, midwinter, but after the first week of class, he took down Mr. Adler's maps of the Russian Empire and replaced them with enlarged copies of the US Constitution. He announced he'd double majored in theater in college, which explained why he stood in front of the class one day with his arms outstretched reciting the whole Declaration of Independence by heart. Not just the soaring parts about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, but the needling, wretched list of tyrannies against the colonies. I could see how badly he wanted to be liked. "What does it mean?" Mr. Grierson asked when he got to the part about mutually pledging our sacred honor.

The hockey players slept innocently on folded hands. Even the gifted and talented kids were unmoved, clicking their mechanical pencils until the lead protruded obscenely, like hospital needles. They jostled each other across the aisles. "En garde!" they hissed, contemptuously.

Mr. Grierson sat down on Mr. Adler's desk. He was breathless from his recitation, and I realized—in an odd flash, like a too-bright light passing over him—he was middle-aged. I could see sweat on his face, his pulse pounding under gray neck stubble. "People. *Guys*. What does it mean that the rights of man are *self-evident*? Come on. You know this."

I saw his eyes rest on Lily Holburn, who had sleek black hair and was wearing, despite the cold, a sheer crimson sweater. He seemed to think her beauty could rescue him, that she would be, because she was prettier than the rest of us, kind. Lily had

big brown eyes, dyslexia, no pencil, a boyfriend. Her face slowly reddened under Mr. Grierson's gaze.

She blinked. He nodded at her, promising implicitly that, whatever she said, he'd agree. She gave a deer-like lick of her lips.

I don't know why I raised my hand. It wasn't that I felt sorry for her exactly. Or him. It was just that the tension became unbearable for a moment, out of all proportion to the occasion. "It means some things don't have to be proven," I offered. "Some things are simply true. There's no changing them."

"That's right!" he said, grateful—I knew—not to me in particular, but to some hoop of luck he felt he'd stumbled into. I could do that. Give people what they wanted without them knowing it came from me. Without saying a word, Lily could make people feel encouraged, blessed. She had dimples on her cheeks, nipples that flashed like signs from God through her sweater. I was flat chested, plain as a banister. I made people feel judged.

Winter collapsed on us that year. It knelt down, exhausted, and stayed. In the middle of December so much snow fell the gym roof buckled and school was canceled for a week. With school out, the hockey players went ice fishing. The Boy Scouts played hockey on the ponds. Then came Christmas with its strings of colored lights up and down Main Street, and the competing nativity scenes at the Lutheran and Catholic churches—one with painted sandbags standing in as sheep, and the other with baby Jesus sculpted out of a lump of ice. New Year's brought another serious storm. By the time school started again in January, Mr. Grierson's crisp white shirts had been replaced with nondescript

sweaters, his hoop earring with a stud. Someone must have taught him to use the Scantron machine, because after a week's worth of lectures on Lewis and Clark, he gave his first test. While we hunched at our desks filling tiny circles, he walked up and down the aisles, clicking a ballpoint pen.

The next day, Mr. Grierson asked me to stay after class. He sat behind his desk and touched his lips, which were chapped and flaking off beneath his fingers. "You didn't do very well on your exam," he told me.

He was waiting for an explanation and I lifted my shoulders defensively. But before I could say a word, he added, "Look, I'm sorry." He twisted the stud—delicate, difficult screw—in his ear. "I'm still working out the kinks in my lesson plans. What were you studying before I arrived?"

"Russia."

"Ah." A look of scorn passed over his face, followed immediately by pleasure. "The Cold War lingers in the backcountry."

I defended Mr. Adler. "It wasn't the Soviet Union we were talking about. It was *czars*."

"Oh, Mattie." No one ever called me that. It was like being tapped on the shoulder from behind. My name was Madeline, but at school I was called Linda, or Commie, or Freak. I pulled my hands into balls in my sleeves. Mr. Grierson went on. "No one cared about the *czars* before Stalin and the bomb. They were puppets on a faraway stage, utterly insignificant. Then all the Mr. Adlers went to college in 1961 and there was general nostalgia for the old Russian toys, the inbred princesses from another century. Their ineffectuality made them interesting. You understand?" He smiled then, closing his eyes a little. His front teeth were white, his canines yellow. "But you're thirteen."

"Fourteen."

“I just wanted to say I’m sorry if this has started off badly. We’ll get on better footing soon.”

The next week he asked me to drop by his classroom after school. This time, he’d taken the stud out of his ear and set it on his desk. Very tenderly, with his forefinger and thumb, he was probing the flesh around his earlobe.

“Mattie,” he said, straightening up.

He had me sit in a blue plastic chair beside his desk. He set a stack of glossy brochures in my lap, made a tepee of his fingers. “Do me a favor? But don’t blame me for having to ask. That’s my job.” He squirmed.

That’s when he asked me to be the school’s representative in History Odyssey.

“This will be great,” he said, unconvincingly. “What you do is make a poster. Then you give a speech about Vietnam War registers, border crossings to Canada, etcetera. Or maybe you do the desecration of the Ojibwa peoples? Or those back-to-the-land folks that settled up here. Something local, something ethically ambiguous. Something with constitutional implications.”

“I want to do wolves,” I told him.

“What, a history of wolves?” He was puzzled. Then he shook his head and grinned. “Right. You’re a fourteen-year-old girl.” The skin bunched up around his eyes. “You all have a thing for horses and wolves. I love that. I love that. That’s so weird. What is that *about*?”

Because my parents didn’t own a car, this is how I got home when I missed the bus. I walked three miles down the plowed edge of

Route 10 and then turned right on Still Lake Road. In another mile the road forked. The left side traced the lake northward and the right side turned into an unplowed hill. That's where I stopped, stuffed my jeans into my socks, and readjusted the cuffs on my woolen mittens. In winter, the trees against the orange sky looked like veins. The sky between the branches looked like sunburn. It was twenty minutes through snow and sumac before the dogs heard me and started braying against their chains.

By the time I got home, it was dark. When I opened the door, I saw my mom bent over the sink, arms elbow-deep in inky water. Long straight hair curtained her face and neck, which tended to give her a cagey look. But her voice was all midwestern vowels, all wide-open Kansas. "Is there a prayer for clogged drains?" she asked without turning around.

I set my mittens on the woodstove, where they would stiffen and no longer fit my hands just right in the morning. I left my jacket on, though. It was cold inside.

My mom, her own jacket damp with sink water, sat down heavily at the table. But she kept her greasy hands in the air like they were something precious—something wiggling and still alive—that she'd snatched from a pond. Something she might feed us on, a pretty little pair of perch. "We need Drano. Crap." She looked up into the air, then very slowly wiped her palms on her canvas pockets. "Please help. God of infinite pity for the pathetic farce that is human living."

She was only half kidding. I knew that. I knew from stories how my parents had ridden in a stolen van to Loose River in the early eighties, how my father had stockpiled rifles and pot, and how, when the commune fell apart, my mother had traded

whatever hippie fanaticism she had left for Christianity. For as long as I could remember she went to church three times a week—Wednesday, Saturday, and Sunday—because she held out hope that penance worked, that some of the past could be reversed, slowly and over years.

My mother believed in God, but grudgingly, like a grounded daughter.

“Do you think you could take one of the dogs with you and go back?”

“Back into town?” I was still shivering. The thought made me furious for a second, wiped clean of everything. I couldn’t feel my fingers.

“Or not.” She swung her long hair back and swiped her nose with her wrist. “No, not. It’s probably below zero out there. I’m sorry. I’ll go get another bucket.” She didn’t move from her chair, though. She was waiting for something. “I’m *sorry* I asked. You can’t be mad at me for asking.” She clasped her greasy hands together. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

For each *sorry*, her voice rose a half step.

I waited a second before I spoke. “It’s okay,” I said.

Here’s the thing about Mr. Grierson. I’d seen how he crouched down next to Lily’s desk. I’d seen how he said, “You’re doing fine,” and put his hand very carefully, like a paperweight, on her spine. How he lifted his fingertips and gave her a little pat. I saw how curious and frightened he was of the Karens, the cheerleaders, who sometimes pulled off their wool leg warmers and revealed bare winter skin, white and nubbed in gooseflesh. Their legwarmers gave them a rash, which they scratched until their scabs had to be dabbed with buds of toilet paper. I saw

how he addressed every question in class to one of them—to the Karens or to Lily Holburn—saying, “Anyone? Anyone home?” Then, making a phone of his hand, he’d lower his voice and growl, “Hello, Holburn residence, is Lily available?” Blushing, Lily would do a closed-mouth smile into the lip of her sleeve.

When I met with him after school, Mr. Grierson shook his head. “That was a stupid thing to do with the phone, right?” He was embarrassed. He wanted reassurance that everything was okay, that he was a good teacher. He wanted to be forgiven for all his little mistakes, and he seemed to think—because I crossed my arms and did poorly on tests—that my mediocrity was deliberate, personal. “Here,” he said, sheepishly, sliding a narrow blue can across his desk. I took a few sips of his energy drink, something so sweet and caffeinated it made my heart pound almost instantly. After several more gulps I was trembling in my chair. I had to clench my teeth to keep them from chattering.

“Did Mr. Adler ever show movies?” he wanted to know.

I’m not sure why I played his game. I don’t know why I coddled him. “You show so many more movies than him,” I said.

He smiled with satisfaction. “How’s the project going, then?”

I didn’t answer that. Instead I took another sip of his energy drink, uninvited. I wanted him to know that I saw how he looked at Lily Holburn, that I comprehended that look better than she did, that, though I did not like him at all—though I found his phone joke creepy and his earring sad—I understood him. But the can was empty. I had to put my lips on metal and pretend to gulp. Outside the window, sleet was shellacking every snowdrift, turning the whole world hard as rock. It would be dark in an hour, less. The dogs would be pacing the

far orbit of their chains, waiting. Mr. Grierson was putting on his jacket. “Shall we?” He never—never once—asked how I got home.

Mr. Grierson treated History Odyssey like we both knew it was a chore. Secretly, I wanted to win. I was determined to see a wolf. Nights, I went out in mukluks, a ski mask, and my father’s down jacket, which was redolent with his scents, with tobacco and mildew and bitter coffee. It was like wearing his body while he slept, like earning a right to his presence and silence and bulk. I sat on an old ice bucket near the furthest fish house and sipped boiled water from a thermos. But it was rare for a wolf to be spotted here so late in winter—all I ever saw were distant logs squirming with crows. In the end I had to settle for a dead one. Saturdays, I snowshoed to the Forest Service Nature Center, where I studied the stuffed bitch in the lobby, with her glass eyes and coral nails, her sunken black cheeks pulled back in what looked like a smile. Peg, the naturalist there, pouted when she saw me try to touch the wolf’s tail. “Uh *uh*,” she scolded. She gave me gummy bears and taxidermy techniques, told me how to sculpt eyelids from clay and muscles from polyurethane foam. “Iron the skin, iron the skin,” she warned me.

On the morning of the History Odyssey tournament, I sawed a branch from the old pine behind our house. Needles poured in little *whik-whik* propellers onto the snow. I took the casino bus to Whitewood after school, lugging my wolf poster and branch past the old people from the retirement home, who frowned at me but didn’t say anything. In the Whitewood High School auditorium, I propped the branch against the lectern to create the crucial atmosphere. I played a tape of howling wolves

on repeat. Though my mouth was dry when I began my speech, I didn't have to use my notes and I didn't rock back and forth like the boy who went before me. I was focused, calm. I pointed to diagrams of pups in different displays of submission, and quoting from a book I said, "But the term *alpha*—evolved to describe captive animals—is still misleading. An alpha animal may be alpha only at certain times for a specific reason." Those words always made me feel I was drinking something cool and sweet, something forbidden. I thought of the black bitch at the Nature Center, fixed in her posture of doggy friendliness, and I recited that part of my speech over again, slowly this time, like it was an amendment to the Constitution.

Afterward, one of the judges poked his pencil in the air. "But—I have to intervene here. There's something you haven't explained very well. What do wolves have to do with *human* history?"

It was then that I saw Mr. Grierson by the door. He had his jacket in his arms like he'd just come in, and I watched as he caught the eye of the judge and shrugged. It was the subtlest shift of his shoulders, as if to say, *What can you do with kids? What can you do with these teenage girls?* I took a deep breath and glared at both of them. "Wolves have nothing at all to do with humans, actually. If they can help it, they avoid them."

They gave me the Originality Prize, which was a bouquet of carnations dyed green for Saint Patrick's Day. Afterward, Mr. Grierson wanted to know if we should load the pine branch in his car with the poster to drive back to school. I was depressed and shook my head. The winner, a seventh-grade girl in a pantsuit, was getting her picture taken with her watercolor rendering of

the sinking of the SS *Edmund Fitzgerald*. I buttoned my coat, then followed Mr. Grierson as he dragged the drooping branch out a side exit. He javelined it upright into a grainy bank of snow. “It’s like *A Charlie Brown Christmas*,” he said, laughing. “I want to hang tinsel from it. It’s cute.”

He bent down to brush stray needles from his slacks, and on impulse I thrust out a hand and brushed as well—*swish, swish*—against his thigh. He stepped back, did a little shake of his pants, laughed awkwardly. Men can be so ungainly when it comes to sex. I learned that later. But at the time, what I’d done didn’t feel sexual. Let me be clear about that. It felt like grooming. Or like coaxing a dog to you, watching its hackles rise and fall, and then you have a pet.

I licked my lips, Lily Holburn-style, deer-like, innocent as anything. I said, “Mr. Grierson, would you mind driving me home?”

Before we left Whitewood High, Mr. Grierson went back inside for a wet paper towel to wrap around the stems of the carnations. Then he set the bouquet in my arms, cautiously, as if it were some kind of bracken baby. As we drove the twenty-six miles from Whitewood to my parents’ house, we watched a storm blow ice in monstrous crusts off the limbs of trees—so that was part of it, too, the slow-motion sense of catastrophe. Mr. Grierson’s defrosting fan didn’t work very well, and I swiped at the windshield with my jacket’s dirty cuff.

“This where we turn?” he asked, as he drove down Still Lake Road. He was pulling little bits of skin from his lips with his incisors. Even in the near dark, I could see a crack in his lip, bloody but not yet bleeding. That pleased me for some reason.

It felt like something I had done to him myself—with my wolf presentation, with my pine needles.

The turnoff to my parents' road was unplowed, as usual. Mr. Grierson pulled to a stop at the intersection and we both leaned forward to peer out the windshield and up the steep, dark hill. When I glanced at him across the car, his throat looked as wide and soft as a belly exposed, so I stretched out and kissed him there. Quickly, quickly.

He flinched.

"This way then?" he said, pulling up the zipper of his coat and tucking his neck back in his collar. Up on the hill sat my parents' lit cabin, and I could tell he had fixed his attention there because it was the first thing in sight. "Um, that's that excellent place, isn't it? I heard some strange stuff about them. They neighbors of yours?"

He was only making small talk of course—still I gripped my carnations. I felt myself split open, like kindling. "They keep to themselves."

"Yeah?" His mind was somewhere else.

Sleet popped against the windshield, but I couldn't see it because the glass was getting all fogged up again.

"Let's get you home," he said, cranking the gearshift and turning the wheel, and I could sense how tired he was of being responsible for me.

"I can walk from here," I told him.

I thought if I slammed the door hard enough, Mr. Grierson might come after me. That's what it's like to be fourteen. I thought if I took a few running steps off the road into the snow that maybe he'd follow me—to assuage his guilt, to make sure I got home all right, to push his chalky history hands under my jacket, whatever. I headed for the lake instead of going uphill. I

darted out onto the ice in the prickly sleet, but when I looked back, his car with its brights was turning around, doing a meticulous U-turn in the trees.

The Grierson scandal broke a few months after I started high school the next fall. I overheard the gossip while I was pouring someone's coffee, working as a part-time waitress at the diner in town. He had been accused of pedophilia and sex crimes at his previous school and was promptly fired at ours—a stack of dirty pictures had been confiscated from some former apartment of his in California. That day after work, I took my tips to the bar down the street and bought my first full pack of cigarettes from the machine in the vestibule. I knew from the few I'd stolen at home not to inhale fully when lighting up. But as I ducked into the wet bushes behind the parking lot, my eyes started watering and I coughed, an ugly fury thumping at my heart. More than anything else I felt deceived. I felt I'd perceived some seed in Mr. Grierson's nature, and that he'd lied to me, profoundly, by ignoring what I did to him in his car, pretending to be better than he was. A regular teacher. I thought about Mr. Grierson zipping his wide, warm neck back inside his jacket collar. I thought of his rank scent when I got close, as if he'd sweated through his clothes and dried out in the winter air. I thought about all that, and what I felt for him, finally, was an uncomfortable rush of pity. It seemed unfair to me that people couldn't be something else just by working at it hard, by saying it over and over.

When I was six or seven, my mom sat me down in the bath basin in my underwear. It was midmorning, midsummer. A shaft

of light caught her face. She dribbled water on my head from a measuring cup. “I wish I believed in this shit,” she told me.

“What’s supposed to happen?” I shivered.

“Good question,” she said. “You’re a new pot of rice, baby. I’m starting you all over from scratch.”

I didn’t want to go home the night Mr. Grierson dropped me off. I thought—with pleasure, feeling a necklace of hooks in my throat as I swallowed—how I might break through the brittle lake ice and just go down. My parents wouldn’t worry for a long time, maybe not till morning. My mother nodded off each night sewing quilts for prison inmates. My dad spent his evenings scavenging wood from the cleared property that was for sale across the lake. I never even knew for sure if they were my real parents, or if they were simply the people who stayed around after everyone else went back to college or office jobs in the Twin Cities. They were more like stepsiblings than parents, though they were good to me, always—which was worse than anything in a way. Worse than buying cereal with dimes and quarters, worse than accepting hand-me-downs from neighbors, worse than being called Commie, Freak. My dad hung a swing when I was ten from a giant cottonwood; my mom cut cockleburrs from my hair. Even so, the night Mr. Grierson dropped me off, I kept thinking, viciously, waiting for my body to plunge through ice: *There goes the rice, Mom. There goes the whole pot.*

After I went to community college and dropped out, after I had been temping in the Cities for some time, I found a national database online into which you could type any sex offender’s

name and track them around the country. You can watch someone's little red trail on a map of each state as they go from city to city, as they go from Arkansas to Montana, as they search for bad apartments, as they enter prison and come out again. You can watch them try to give new names and get called out, a flurry of angry posts erupting online every time this happens. You can watch the moral indignation. You can watch them try again. You can follow them to southern Florida, to the marshes, where, among the mangroves, they set up a little out-of-the-way antique shop, selling whatever, selling junk. Hawking rusty lanterns and stuffed ducks, fake shark teeth, cheap gold earrings. You can see everything they sell because people update their posts and give all the details. There are so many people watching. People are updating all the time. "Should I buy a map from a convicted sex offender?" people write, and it seems an ethically ambiguous question. "Don't I have a constitutional right to tell him I don't want him here, selling his postcards at half price?" People write, "Don't I have a right to tell him to his fucking face?" People write, "Who does he think he is?"