

MY MOTHER WAS A WOLF. That was the first secret I kept for her. At night she would jimmy open my door with her muzzle and swagger into my bedroom, her blunt claws clicking like tarts' heels on the floor, her panting rigid and dependable. Her thick, wiry pelt was heavy and as smothering as coal gas.

During the day she hid her grey wolfishness under a human costume. I played at being a hairdresser and brushed her human hair looking for gaps in her pretend skin where wiry fur might poke through. She was very thorough. I never found a thing. When I woke before her alarm went off I sneaked into her room to try and catch her as she snapped and crunched her bones, flattening the long wolfy snout, before cramming it into a flat-face human mask. I was always too late; when I got there she was drawing her lipstick on her mouth, smoothing her skirt over her bottom.

But every night the same thing: in she'd come, *tap, tap, tap*, snuffling under the covers, her stinking breath hot on my skin, and she'd eat all my belly flesh from rib to hip, tearing and ripping, chewing with her mouth open, eaten dry, nothing left of me just leg, leg, arms and a head. All the while I watched her, mesmerised. I didn't feel a thing except sleepy, so sleepy, and by morning I was whole again, like myself only newer and weaker. That was the first of many secrets.

The secrets lived at the back of my mouth and if I wasn't careful would leap out and fly in the face of people close by and scare them or worse – much, much worse – make Mum so angry she filled the air around me with thuds and “donchewcommitwivmeyouililbleeder” noises, and my cowardly ears would lie flat against my thick skull and the secrets would grow in size closing off my throat. It was best not to talk. My head rattled and buzzed with the fidgeting secrets. Always they twitched and unfurled, threatening escape. By the time I was six no one talked about me being dumb any more, there were no more visits to the doctor, no special school. Mostly they just left me alone. I learned to read and write, though no one really noticed.

Except my dad; he tried to coax me with promises of treats. Like the old cure for tapeworms, he would dangle a sugar-bright chew all red and gleaming in front of my open mouth in the hope of tempting out my voice. Baffled because I had spoken till I was four, he couldn't understand my silence, he said I'd been a right chatterbox, even when the telly was on.

Mostly I hid behind a shabby lavender bush; it squatted in the corner of our garden where the privet hedge jutted out into the street, forming a triangle. I stayed there, safe in the dusty, old-lady smell of lavender. I watched people go by, peeking out under the hedge, identified only by their shoes, and listened to their voices through the leaves. Sometimes I would find bright crisp packets or a sticky drink can full of ants right there in my hiding place, so I poked them through the

hedge back to the street, which seemed to have misplaced them. No one knew I was there except the ants and woodlice; not even the sun could find me. I was safe.

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WHEN I WAKE, PANICKED, damp with sweat from the same nightmares, I reach out, the dark space around me explained by fingertips. A pack of ghosts linger from my sleep. Whispering. They aren't supposed to stay here, it's against the rules, but the night nurses turn a blind eye; better the ghosts here than me alone and screaming.

I was a girl, sometimes I was four-and-a-half, mostly I was seven, depending on the bus driver and the smile he smeared on my mum's legs and how much money she had in her purse that day and whether I had too many sweets or any trouble had taken place. Other ages have slipped through the holes in my memory, leaving me stuck between two places in time. Then and now. My name was Nicola and sometimes it was Poppet or Nicky, but mostly it was Nicola, I was so many things and all of them were invisible, none of them good enough.

I try and unpick the secrets, remember the time before I was sent to the home. I try to remember the bad things I did, so that I can love her. So that I can move on. It's important the doctors say. Because she wasn't a wolf, they say. I have made that up, to protect myself.

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ON THE BUS BACK FROM THE SHOPS Mum had to pay for my ticket and she was fuming about the price to the lady in the seat behind; we didn't know this woman but part of the wolf's skill was to mesmerise people, even strangers. You can make anyone believe anything you want when you can mesmerise, especially if you have a child assistant nodding and smiling, pretty face forwards, ape-like and innocent. You don't have to have any knowledge of them or their life, just to be able

to watch their every twitch and spasm, every flicker of thought or feeling, then you know when they are with you and when you have to change your tack. You can make them believe anything. I had the window seat, my sweaty legs gummed to the plastic cover where my dress had hitched up, stars in the flesh on the back of my hands. I knew exactly where we were going, all the streets we passed and the rows of pubs, sweet shops, chip shops and paper shop. I knew which pub had a children's room and the pubs that were best avoided. I knew the people; they were as familiar as my own toes. I saw them from my lavender bush, heard the burble as they walked past, the vibrations of their feet in the hedge. I knew the houses with their cruel, scratchy-hair-catchy-pebble-dashed coats and the wrecked cars in the front garden, balancing on bricks not wheels, the windows with their acid-white nets and the milk bottles ready for fights or the milkman, whichever came first.

Mother said "Nicola is the youngest child ever to have taken this exam, ever, and you know, she is suffering from a brain tumour, the doctor gives her a year. We're hoping to make the most of what time she has left." She smiled at me and the lady smiled at me, the way people do when they have no idea what to say. I swallowed the secret quickly, playing my part of the act. I wasn't taking any exam and I was sure I wasn't dying, because I hadn't died the last time, but you learn to accept anything when apprenticed to someone like mother. She was the best in the business, no trace of a growl or a howl in her lady voice, no slip or mistake.

"What a clever girl!" The lady was impressed by my huge achievement. Her voice undulated; it swelled and subsided, moved in circles. The secret burrowed into my throat, so I went back to staring out of the window as it stared back, blank like a retard. I didn't know why Mother told lies – probably because I was not a good girl. What was there to be proud of? I had my father's dry hair and his likelihood

to run to fat. But if I was silent for long enough, maybe I would fade away like my voice, or perhaps I'd grow big enough to fit my mother's hole for me.

I needed to pee, my bladder swelled, an urgent nag. I tugged at the wolf's sleeve while she talked to the lady and wriggled on my seat. She ignored me. I held on and then, I can't remember why, I just let go, the pee hot and nice-feeling as it soaked my pants and ran down my leg to make a puddle on the floor.

"Oh my goodness," said the woman, twisting in her seat and moving her feet away from the piss.

"Are you alright?" asked the wolf.

"I think your little girl has wet herself," she said.

My mother looked at me, and pulled up my skirt to feel between my legs.

"Oh for God's sake, Nick!" Her nice lady act slipped. "Couldn't you have waited?"

"Bless her." The woman smiled at me. "Is this because of her condition, perhaps?"

My mother growled back, "Probably."

She pulled me off the bus and we walked the rest of the way home. As we walked, she told me not to tell anyone about weeing. I nodded and of course she knew I wouldn't tell. Silence was my only means of making amends.

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I WATCH A MAN FEEDING the ducks and coots in the park. The lake like liquid metal sending light back to the sky. Sometimes I stand next to him as he dips his hand into the plastic bag and throws scraps of old bread into the water. We don't speak, but I like him. The nurses tease me, say I'm in love. Memory tricks us into believing we have had a full life, that we've done enough, but I prefer the memories