

The dim bedroom was windowless and odorless. We remedied this by spraying exuberant yellow streams all over the bunks. We jumped from bunk to bunk, spraying. We nosed each other midair, our bodies buckling in kinetic laughter. The nuns watched us from the corner of the bedroom, their tiny faces pinched with displeasure. (1)

“The girls at our facility are *backwoods*,” Sister Josephine whispered to Sister Maria de la Guardia with a beatific smile. “You must be patient with them.” I clamped down on her ankle, straining to close my jaws around the wooly XXL sock. Sister Josephine tasted like sweat and freckles. She smelled easy to kill. (1)

Our mothers and fathers were werewolves. They lived an outsiders' existence in caves at the edge of the forest, threatened by frost and pitchforks. They had been ostracized by the local farmers for eating their silled fruit pies and terrorizing the heifers. They had ostracized the local wolves by having sometimes-thumbs, and regrets, and human children. (Their condition skips a generation.) (2)

Our parents wanted something better for us; they wanted us to get braces, use towels, be fully bilingual. When the nuns showed up, our parents couldn't refuse their offer. The nuns, they said, would make us naturalized citizens of human society. We would go to St. Lucy's to study a better culture. We didn't know at the time that our parents were sending us away for good. Neither did they. (2)

A low granite wall surrounded St. Lucy's, the blue woods humming for miles behind it. There was a stone fountain full of delectable birds. There was a statue of St. Lucy. Her marble skin was colder than our mother's nose, her pupilless eyes rolled heavenward. Doomed squirrels gamboled about her stony toes. (2)

The oldest sister had spent the past hour twitching in her sleep, dreaming of fatty and infirm elk. (The pack used to dream the same dreams back then, as naturally as we drank the same water and slept on the same red scree.) (2)

Our littlest sister had the quickest reflexes. She used her hands to flatten her ears to the side of her head. She backed toward the far corner of the garden, snarling in the most menacing register that an eight-year-old wolf-girl can muster. Then she ran. It took them two hours to pin her down and tag her: HELLO, MY NAME IS MIRABELLA!

“Stage 1,” Sister Maria sighed, taking careful aim with her tranquilizer dart. “It can be a little overstimulating.” (3)

She loved to roam the grounds wagging her invisible tale. (We all had a hard time giving that up. When we got excited, we would fall to the ground and start pumping our backsides. Back in those days, we could pump at rabbit velocities. *Que horror!* Sister Maria frowned, looking more than a little jealous.) (4)



Still, some things remained the same. The main commandment of wolf life is Know Your Place, and that translated perfectly. Being around other humans had awakened a slavish-dog affection in us. An abasing, belly-to-the-ground desire to please. As soon as we realized that others higher up in the food chain were watching us, we wanted only to be pleasing in their sight. Mouth shut, I repeated, shoes on feet. (4)

The pack hated Jeanette. She was the most successful of us, the one furthest removed from her origins. Her real name was GWARR! but she wouldn't respond to this anymore. Jeanette spiffed her penny loafers until her very shoes seemed to gloat. (Linguists have since traced the colloquial origins of "goody toe-shoes" back to our facilities.) She could even growl out a demonic sounding "Pleased to meet you." She'd delicately extend her former paws to visitors, wearing white kid gloves. (4)

“Claudette,” Sister Josephine beamed, “why don’t you and Mirabella take some pumpernickel down to the ducks?”

“Ohhkaaythankyou,” I said. (It took a long time to say anything; first I had to translate it in my head from the Wolf.) It wasn’t fair. They knew Mirabella couldn’t make bread balls yet. She couldn’t even undo the twist tie of the bag. She was sure to eat the birds; Mirabella didn’t even try to curb her desire to kill things – and then who would get blamed for the dark spots of duck blood on our Peter Pan collars? Who would get penalized with negative Skill Points? Exactly. (5)

The nuns were worried about Mirabella too. To correct a failing, you must first be aware of it as a failing. And there was Mirabella, shucking her plaid jumper in full view of the visiting cardinal. Mirabella, battling a raccoon under the dinner table while the rest of us took dainty bites of peas and borscht. Mirabella, doing belly flops into compost. (6)

The purebred girls played checkers with us.

“These girl-girls sure is dumb,” my sister Lavash panted to me between games. “I win it again! Five to none.”

She was right. The purebred girls were making mistakes on purpose, in order to give us an advantage. “King me,” I growled, out of turn. “I SAY KING ME!” and Felicity meekly complied. (7)

On Sundays, the pretending felt almost as natural as nature. The chapel was our favorite place. Long before we could understand what the priest was saying, the music instructed us how to feel. The choir director – aggressively perfumed Mrs. Valuchi, gold necklaces like pineapple rings around her neck – taught us more than the nuns ever did. She showed us how to pattern the old hunger into arias. (8)

The nuns had transformed the rectory into a very scary place. Purple and silver balloons started popping all around us. Black streamers swooped down from the eaves and got stuck in our hair like bats. A full yellow moon smirked outside the window. We were greeted by blasts of a saxophone, and fizzy pink drinks, and the brothers. (9)

The sisters swept our hair back into high, bouffant hairstyles. This made us look more girlish and less inclined to eat people, the way that squirrels are saved from looking like rodents by their poofy tails. I was wearing a white organdy dress with orange polka dots. Jeanette was wearing a mauve organdy dress with blue polka dots. Linette was wearing a red organdy dress with white polka dots. Mirabella was in a dark corner, wearing a muzzle. Her party culottes were duct-taped to her knees. The nuns had tied little bows on the muzzle to make it more festive. (10)



Mirabella had intercepted my eye-cry for help. She'd chewed through her restraints and tackled me from behind, barking at unseen cougars, trying to shield me with her tiny body. "*Caramba!*" Sister Mary squealed, dropping the flashlight. The music ground to a halt. And I have never loved someone so much, before or since, as I loved my littlest sister at that moment. I wanted to roll over and lick her ears; I wanted to kill a dozen spotten fawns and let her eat first. (11)

“You have ruined it!” my sisters panted, circling around us, eager to close ranks. “Mirabella has ruined it!” Every girl was wild-eyed and itching under her polka dots, punch froth dribbling down her chin. The pack had been waiting for this moment for some time. “Mirabella cannot adapt! Back to the woods, back to the woods!” (11)

The cave looked so much smaller than I remembered it. I had to duck my head to enter. Everybody was eating when I walked in. They all looked up from the bull moose at the same time, my aunts and uncles, my sloe-eyed, lolling cousins, the parents. My uncle dropped a thighbone from his mouth. My littlest brother, a cross-eyed wolf-boy who has since been successfully rehabilitated and is now a dour, balding children's book author, started whining in terror. My mother recoiled from me, as if I were a stranger. TRRR? She sniffed me for a long moment. Then she sank her teeth into my ankle, looking proud and sad. (12)

After all the tail wagging and perfunctory barking had died down, the parents sat back on their hind legs. They stared up at me expectantly, panting in the cool gray envelope of the cave, waiting for a display of what I had learned.

“So,” I said, telling my first human lie. “I’m home.” (12)