

Red

You are sitting at a bus stop. You have missed your bus. Next to you, a boy with honey-dark hair is leaning against the graffitied plastic wall, his pale hands restless around a long, thin white cane. His body is tired, slumped against the wall as if he would fall without it. You are bored. You ask if he is okay. When he turns to you, smiling sadly, you see that he has no eyes. He asks if you would like to hear a story, to pass the time. You check your phone. You have an hour till the next bus. He is sitting down before you can say yes, please, as if he knew it were coming. His voice is soft and sweetly accented. He begins:

—

Many years ago, I knew a girl with hair as red as brick. Although she was not always a girl, her hair remained red forever.

The girl was not slim, or pretty, or at all like any of the other girls in the village. She bound her breasts, and knotted her hair. She bared her teeth at anyone who dared to tell her that she could not.

Nothing interested the girl, not needlework or reading or lumbering, but she did admire her father. It was a terrible admiration, as he was a terrible man, all furrowed brow and raised voice and far too much taste for hard liquor. The girl did not mind. Whenever her father became intoxicated and decided that his girl was responsible for his poisonous anger, she only glared at him and screamed back. Raised voices and shining teeth and claws and knuckles. She was not breathing unless she was fighting something.

The girl's eyes were strange, toxic yellow and glaring. She kept herself half-lidded at all times, because she couldn't bear the brightness of the world. She had an owl's eyes, or perhaps a wolf's, so full and round that light seared into her skull horribly.

The girl's father did not like her eyes, or in fact any of the features which made her so strange. To him, she was unloveable. Her nose was too big, freckled, and strange smells hurt her. Teeth; the girl had far too many, and they gnashed together in her small mouth whenever she spoke, which was not often. She was a strange thing, this girl, as wild a creature as any dog.

Her mother did not like to look at her, for she still grieved her son. The girl did not mind. She knew that the son was safe inside her, settled and content beneath the skin of a monster. The girl knew she was a monster, but she did not mind so much. She loved her wickedness, and it loved her back. It was everyone else's problem if they could not see that.

The girl had a thrilling laugh, and it rang more frequently than any spoken word. It thrashed against her ragged throat, slipped between her crashing teeth, and tore the silent morning air. She laughed and danced, strange bare feet kicking up clods of dew-wet grass, claws digging furrows into rock and soil.

Her footsteps were violence, a shrieking prance across a hillside, for she had been cast out of her mother's house and would not belong in any other in the village. She did not much mind. Four dull walls and a floor made for clean feet did not suit this cackling creature. Her little heart grew soaring over rolling plains, as she kicked and shrilled and let her body be taken back by the vines and roots and dirt.

The girl might have said that she was happy, then, but she did not know that the word she meant was *free*. She had never before felt *free*.

She knew a great many words, for she soaked them up as conversations circled around her, town gossip and her mother's weeping and her father's venom. She knew well enough the power of words to hurt, to hide feelings, and feelings were all that really mattered to the girl. So she stayed abstract.

She was a terror on the schoolmaster, stirring up her mates into raucous rounds of chatter and destruction, prompting chalks to be thrown and desks to be stood upon. Soon half the school was half as mad as her, and angry parents stormed down in dozens to scold and bemoan and complain. The schoolmaster was overwhelmed, and left the school, and the new schoolmaster was a lady and a proper one at that. The girl did not like the lady schoolmaster, and so she removed herself from classes and took to the hills again.

Dandelions and wild clovers were better playmates for the girl than her sticky, stuffy classmates had ever been, and with their guidance she grew wilder. Her hair, ragged and tumbled, flew past her waist even after she knotted it up into seven heavy strands. Fur grew prickly on her forearms and her legs, and in it stuck seeds and roots that began, slowly, to bloom. She became nocturnal, drifting away from her daylight frolics to join a coven of foxes and sprites that whispered sacrilege after dusk. She was wild, wooded, and lonesome, but never lonely.

The girl grew hungry, and began to sample fruits and leaves, but they had no taste, or far too much of the wrong kind. She took mouthfuls of the foxes' foods, and found that that was sweeter than nectar. When she demanded, in a toothy sort of way, to know what it was, the foxes and their sprites shared sly grins. The girl did not mind, despite her boisterous questions, because she had no morals and therefore did not care to know what she was eating, only that it tasted good and that she might have some more.

The girl began to grow rich and fat on the foxes' food, and as her body grew so did her claws, and her teeth, and her wild mane of hair. The girl was no giant, but as she ate and played and grew wild, her crown began to catch in the branches of trees that she had not been able to touch before. Her hands grew thick and leathery, fur sprouting on the backs and calluses cracking on the pads. Something within her was coming alive, sprouting and igniting as she consumed.

The girl was slowly forgetting the days of her father's drunken slumps, her mother's wailing laments. She was forgetting, even, what it meant to be a girl who had lived in a village. Her face twisted forwards and flattened, and her shoulders and hips did too, until she was more animal than child. She loped along, claws burying into the ground, and she snuffled her strange nose into wet flowers and turned soil, always searching for food.

There came a day when the foxes turned the girl away from their meal. They had become afraid of her, The monster that was emerging from the forest inside her.

They had watched from afar as she twisted and grew more monstrous, and they had taken counsel with their sprites to decide her fate. The sly council had deemed her too hungry, for she had taken more than her fair share from the foxes' food, and was taking more each day. So they stood against the girl, wild eyes rolling in fear as they faced her in a pack, slight sprites and rusty fur all swarming together as they stumbled against her glowing gaze.

She took them kindly, baying back as they delivered their sentence, and the boy that lived under her skin whispered,

"Be polite. Be good. You are greater than them, and you must show it here."

So she obeyed, and she loped away on her strange legs. She was still hungry.

The girl went away to a hollow in a mossy tree, all grown over with mould and damp, and there she curled up and wept great fat tears of joy. She was free again, and she did not need the foxes or their sprites to feed her. She would sate herself, and eat as much as she pleased instead of only what the foxes could spare her. The moon sat above her and she wept for that, too, and it brought her calm deep inside her belly where the hunger lay and thrashed. She wailed for it, for its beauty. She sat up tall and cried, and the sound fell from between her shining teeth with a breath that shook the earth.

Down in the village, the doomsday trumpets blared, as the watchmen heard the girl's cry and remembered.

The girl cried once more, and the trumpets answered.

She thought, *there must be food.*

She took herself, her great furred red body, all grown through with plants and claws and bone, and she bounded across the night-washed hills to a village that the boy inside her remembered well. The girl allowed the boy to poke his mottled face out her mouth, so he might see his old home. She did not remember where she had come from, but she knew the boy did, and his longing for it seeped into her bones and made a home there.

The girl stumbled into firelight, torches and lamps and braziers each searing at her great grim eyes, and she felt the old need to half-close them again. The boy stared from between her clashing teeth in wonderment.

There! The village marshal, and there! His fine guard, all mounted on stocky ponies, brandishing all manner of iron tools that made the girl laugh deep and growly in her throat. Her boy laughed too, sweet and joyous on the night air, and the guards watched in horror as the monster with two voices pranced and snarled in front of them. The girl stood up, up, up, on her two strange legs, and she danced around their horses and took bites out of their flanks.

One frightened guard, braver or more stupid than the rest, took his iron hammer and swung it at the girl's face. She screamed in rage, and a single too-big tooth fell from her maw and clattered to the cobbles. She lunged.

The frightened ponies kicked at once, a dance of primal terror zapping through their spindly legs. They whickered and screamed, tossing their riders to the cobbles as they bolted from the wild gnashing girl. Inside her, the boy laughed again, and the girl shrieked along with him as blood trickled from her maw. Two voices into one horrible song.

Their father was striding towards them now, stomping down the street in a half-drunken stupor. The girl grinned at the father, wickedness taking her to meet him. She was larger than him now, towering on her two legs and twice as wide, a beast unmatched.

"Your mother is dead, girl," the father bellowed, and tears wept down his crinkled cheeks. "You killed her when you left. You broke her heart, and now you have broken mine, too."

The girl gnashed at him and dropped her strange hands to the ground. The boy inside her poked his head out of her mouth, and then his arms and his body and finally his legs. He slipped onto the cobbles, weak and wild from the skin of the girl-beast's insides, and he groped at his father's shoes.

"I did not break you," he cried, his voice thin and high and wonderful. "I did not break your heart."

"You did not want me, father, and you did not love me as a son. You were not there when the monster came, when it took me and changed me into something wicked. So I will not be there when it takes you in return."

The boy curled up, tired and cold outside of his warm, wild home in the girl's belly. The girl laughed, high and sharp, *hee hee hee*. She lunged for the father and tore at his throat, and finally, finally, she was sated.

The food was hot and sweeter than nectar. It dripped from her grinning maw and stained her brick-red fur scarlet. She shrieked with delight, baying again as she tramped her massive paws against the stones. The boy joined her, beating his atrophied fists and laughing in one long, loud, soaring cry. The townsfolk watched, transfixed by the murder playing out, two joyful beasts tearing the quiet night air as one.

Once the girl had finished her feast, she leaned down by the boy. He took great fistfuls of the fur that grew thick and long on her shoulders, and heaved himself along her great ridged back. The girl gave a cry, and as soon as she felt the boy settle, she took off. The wild girl bounded through the village, great padded hands and feet taking grip in the rutted cobblestones and springing off with power into the midnight.

Between the hills, there roams a beast with fur as red as blood. She wasn't always a beast, but her fur has always been red. If you ever happen to find her, you will see her mouth, full of too many teeth, and her eyes, wide and so yellow they hurt to look into. Perhaps strangest of all, though, is the sweet young thing she keeps with her, perhaps as a pet or playmate; a boy so scrawny and so wild that he is hardly a boy anymore, with a mouth full of too many teeth and hands that are slightly strange.

—

The boy's hands have stilled around his cane. He looks sadder, now, as if his story was something more than just that.

You tell him that he is a wonderful storyteller, and he hesitates, as if he is considering something. He opens his hands. Between them lies a large tooth, too large for a human and not at all like a wolf's. He asks if you can keep a secret, but he is smiling like he already knows the answer. He presses the tooth into your hand, and it smells sweet, like nectar. He tells you that your bus is about to come. When it does- ten minutes early, how could he have known? - he does not board. You find a window seat and glance back at the graffitied plastic walls of the bus stop. There is nobody there. You smile sadly to yourself as the bus pulls away from the curb. The too-big tooth presses into the palm of your closed hand.