

The following short story appeared in the 2022 issue of PANK Magazine, and was previously found online at <https://pankmagazine.com/piece/grandma-big-teeth/>

Grandma What Big Teeth
By Valerie San Filippo

The wolf came to live with us that winter. My parents explained that the government was making her come to stay, which didn't seem right to me. She was a wolf, after all. Wolves aren't supposed to live in houses.

I lay on the bottom bunk. Mom and Dad talked in the kitchen. "What am I supposed to do," Mom said, "let her live on the streets?"

"In the woods," Dad said. "She's a wolf."

"She's my mother," said Mom, and she slammed her bedroom door. I kicked the bottom of my sister Maddie's mattress from underneath.

"What?" Maddie was awake.

"The wolf is coming to stay with us?" The mattress above me creaked. Maddie's face shone blue in the dark, upside-down. Her hair brushed my arm.

"It's not gonna happen," Maddie said. "It won't. I mean, come on. Get real. She's a wolf. She can't live with us."

But, a few days later the wolf curled like a pile of fur on our green carpet, like a pile of fur with *teeth*.

Maddie and I stood in the doorway, heels on the kitchen linoleum, toes on the bedroom carpet. The wolf opened one eye and looked at me. Brown eyes, like mine. Mom squeezed past us carrying a plastic bag. She knelt down and rummaged in it. The wolf watched her with the fur on her neck raised, but the drowsiness in her body fell across the room, and we knew she

wouldn't attack Mom, not then at least. Mom found what she was looking for: a needle. She filled it with clear liquid and stuck it into a pink hairless patch on the wolf's front leg. The wolf's eye shut.

Mom showed us the syringe, the needle long as a dog hair.

"This will make her sleep for now," Mom said. "But she'll wake up soon. And when she does, don't let her bite you. Don't go anywhere near her teeth."

"If she bites us, do we turn into wolves too?" I asked. The thought had never occurred to me before. Grandma had been a wolf for as long as I could remember, but she had been human once. I thought about stories I'd read, about people who turned into wolves and howled and bit and hunted, and the hairs on my neck prickled. Mom shook her head, but she was busy in the plastic bag and wasn't really listening.

"Why can't we just send her back to King's Park?" Maddie asked. Before, the wolf had stayed in a big brick building in King's Park Asylum along with other people who turned into animals. They ran around the grounds and sniffed and growled. They had activities to help everyone remember their human hands. Mostly they did gardening, clay sculpture, things like that. Paws in dirt, claws in clay. Mom said the program was designed to help Grandma find her way back to her human self. I wasn't so sure about that. She looked like a pretty real wolf to me.

I remember seeing her sniff at the chain link gates as we were leaving, her ears flattened back. Sometimes, she would howl.

"She liked it at King's Park, didn't she?" I asked.

"They can't take her back," Mom said. "They're closing. No one will pay for her to go somewhere else."

"But, she's a *wolf*," Maddie said.

When Mom left and Maddie went to go watch TV, I snuck inside the room. I brought some Christmas cookies, because whenever we visited King's Park Mom baked.

"Grandma has a sweet tooth," Mom had always explained. I'd thought for a while that sweet tooth meant an actual tooth, like one of the teeth on the side of her mouth, yellow at the top but white on the bottom. Sometimes when we visited King's Park and the wolf was asleep in her room I would sneak up close to the edge of her hospital bed and look inside her mouth for the sweet tooth.

Anyway, turns out that's just an expression.

In my room, I knelt on the carpet in front of the wolf. She seemed to be asleep still. Her breathing rushed through a nose like black leather. As I crept closer, I could feel her breath on my hand. It felt humid and hot, like people breath.

When I put the cookies down in front of her nose, her breathing hitched. Her eyes opened, cloudy with medicine and sleep.

Once a nurse told me I looked like the wolf. "It's the eyes," she said. "You have the same eyes." Mom said when the wolf was human she had been an artist. She'd worn red lipstick, and laughed with her teeth out. Now her eyes looked like a wolf's eyes, nothing like a person. To be honest, I didn't know how a wolf could be my grandma at all. This was just the way it was.

A long pink tongue lolled out of the wolf's mouth. It found the cookies. Her muzzle nudged over, and she lapped the cookies up into her mouth. She crunched. She swallowed. Then, her lips curled back from her mouth. Her weight shifted, and she pushed herself up onto her paws, her nails pushing into the carpet. She was bigger than I remembered, and I stepped back, ready to run, something deep in my belly reminding me of a time before humans had houses,

when you either fought a wolf or it got you and ate that feeling right out of your guts. I crossed my arms over my face.

A human laugh echoed through the cave of her teeth.

“Grandma?” I called toward the front of the mouth.

A thought occurred to me then: Maybe my grandma had been eaten. Maybe, small and damp, she camped out somewhere at the back of the wolf’s throat, or on an island in the inside of its stomach. Maybe she’d been there all along. Maybe the wolf ate her years ago, and she needed someone to cut open his stomach and rescue her. I imagined grabbing the axe from outside and swinging it around, cutting into the wolf’s belly, Grandma falling out onto the carpet with all the wolf’s red guts like sausage links.

But the wolf looked at me, and her eyes cleared. Her tail wagged and brushed against the wall. And for a second, with the fur below her eyes bunching up like little hills, I thought I could see how we were related.

The wolf groaned and nestled her head back into the fur of her front leg. I reached out. I pressed my hand into the top of the thick soft fur by her neck. She felt just like a Husky. I found the warm skin underneath all that hair.

Then her growl rolled up through my fingers. I sprinted for the door.

Mom was surrounded by piles of papers at the kitchen table. I poked her arm.

“How did Grandma become a wolf?” I asked.

Mom pressed her fingers between her eyebrows.

“Sometimes people get sick,” she said. “She was already a wolf when I was a kid.”

“But why didn’t she get better?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes people don’t get better. I have to focus on this.” She flipped through a folder, looking for something. She forgot I was there.

For the next few days Maddie and I avoided our room completely. We slept on the couch in the living room. We still had the Christmas tree up, and the color lights rainbowed everything at night. That made it easier to forget there was a wolf living in the house. We wore our pajamas all day and ate leftover holiday sandwiches.

But then Dad took the tree down, and the living room got darker. Headlights from passing cars swelled in through the front window, climbing the walls. I didn’t like it. Finally, one night after Mom and Dad went to bed, Maddie and I decided we would reclaim our bedroom. Maddie said the wolf slept all the time anyway. We could return to our room and both share the top bunk for sleeping, since, we reasoned, wolves can’t climb ladders.

When we pushed open the door, wood splintered.

“Wait,” Maddie said. She ran into the hallway, sliding on her socks. She grabbed the Maglite from the pantry and switched it on. The light cast rings like bug eyes. She shined it into the crack of the door.

“Maybe we shouldn’t,” I said. “Maddie, maybe we shouldn’t.”

“You’ll wake Mom.” Maddie leaned in, listening. “I think it’s asleep.”

“But--” she opened the door.

The circle of light drifted over the remains of a blanket, a chapter book torn at the spine. The floor was scattered with chunks of wood and white wall dust.

And the carpet, the carpet had grown. It sprouted like grass growing up into the back corners of the room, its fluffy fibers bloomed at the tips, thistledown. Vines crept along the white walls like veins in a wrist.

“Where is she?” I whispered. I stepped forward, placed one foot into the carpet. It felt cool and leafy, like the backyard grass in the spring before it got cut.

“It’s ruining everything,” Maddie said.

Something snarled. Hard fingers closed around my arm and yanked me back. I was on the linoleum, on the other side of the door the wolf growled, tearing at the door, raking with its claws, and the flashlight seemed to bleach Mom’s slippers, the ones lined with fur. I could barely see Mom’s face in the dark. She didn’t say anything, but she didn’t seem pleased with anyone, much less her mother.

The next day Mom made lots of phone calls. I kept looking at the door. The wolf had ripped at it like she wanted to escape. If she really was the wolf, then I knew she just wanted out. Wolves don’t belong in bedrooms. They belong outside.

I wasn’t about to be the one to let her out though. Once we had a stray dog in the neighborhood. He was bony and scared and at first I thought he was a rat he was so skinny. Someone came by with a net and caught him, and dragged him over the asphalt into the back of a van. He cried the whole time and almost bit the dogcatcher. I wished we lived somewhere foresty, where we could just let the wolf run. But also, she had laughed. So, she was still a person, somewhere in there. I kept thinking about the gardening classes at King’s Park. I wanted to remind the wolf that she was a grandma. A person. People belonged in houses.

Out in the yard I found a metal bucket where Mom planted flowers sometimes. The flowers were crunchy dead, and the dirt was dark from melting snow. I grabbed the bucket by its wire handle and dragged it inside. It kept smacking my shins. Mom was still busy arguing with the phone people. She didn’t see me drag the bucket toward the bedroom.

My room was dark like an old forest. A silver window light painting everything blue-grey. Black vines thick as my arms crawled over the window, covering everything in a web of shadows. It smelled stinging-bitter, like dog pee, but with that sweet pepper cleanness of leaves underneath it all. The carpet had sprouted taller overnight, and in some places the grass grew tall as my shoulders. I stepped toward the back of the room.

“Grandma?” I called. I whistled low, the way Dad had taught me to whistle when I want a dog to like me. “Grandma?”

Something rustled behind me. She was curled in a nest of broken things on my bottom bunk. Pillow stuffing. A pink blanket. She didn’t get up. The top bunk hung thick with leaves like a canopy bed.

“Hi Grandma.” I took a step. The hair on her back went up. “I brought you something you might like.”

I stepped again. Her lips twitched up. Her long tooth hung out over the pink of her lips.

I looked toward the door. She was closer to it than I was.

“Here,” I said. I put the bucket in front of me. “See?”

I kicked it over with my foot. The dirt spilled onto the carpet. In the dim light of the room it looked like I’d poured shadow onto the floor. I took from my pocket a seed packet I’d swiped from Mom’s gardening box. I ripped that open and shook the seeds over the dirt. Bluebonnets. Then, I pulled some leftover Christmas cookies from my pocket. I dropped those into the dirt too. I heard Dad say once that a dog would do anything for food. Maybe she would garden for cookies.

The wolf rose up onto her paws and leapt from the bed in an arch. She landed silently, crouched down, stuck her nose to the dirt and sniffed. I backed up. She wasn’t big for a wolf, but

I felt a lot smaller with her up close. Her mouth closed around the cookies and the crumbs sprayed out, mixing with the seeds. She stretched her paw in front of her and swiped at the dirt.

“Do you like it?”

She glared at me. I shut my mouth. I backed up. I should’ve brought more cookies, I realized. Two cookies filled me up, but she wouldn’t be satisfied with that.

I found myself by my bookshelf. Most of the stuff was pulled off it, all the books, my jewelry box, our dolls, but at the bottom a box of art supplies hid in a corner. A cup of PlayDoh sat on the top. I grabbed it, pulled the lid off. Purple. It wasn’t too dry. I smushed the crusty parts into the middle, rolled it between my palms until it got soft.

I crept up to the wolf through the grass, my hand outstretched. I could see the crest of her back over the fringed grasses. She snuffed in the dirt, her white muzzle covered in little specks of dark. When she noticed I’d moved closer to her, she bared her teeth.

“This is for you,” I said. I showed her the PlayDoh, and crushed it between my people fingers. “See? Clay. You remember clay?”

I put it on the bucket. She sniffed, then sniffed some more, sniffed it like crazy, and then I watched her try to nip at it, like it was food.

“No! Don’t eat it!” I said. “Not like that--”

A growl boiled up out of her throat.

I moved quick, ducking around her, running for the door. I made it there, pulled on the knob, but even as I got out I felt a tug, a cutting, sharp digging in deep like a knife, her teeth biting my leg.

I don’t know how I got my foot back. I don’t know how I got the door shut. Mom stood over me again, shouting. She still had the phone in one hand, muffled voices frantic on the other

line. My leg was bleeding, blood dripping in lines down to my ankle. The blood fell onto the floor in red spots.

In the bathroom, I sat on the edge of the pink tub and Maddie helped me clean the bite.

“You’re stupid,” she said. “You’re so stupid, why did you even do that?”

“I don’t see you trying to help,” I said. Maddie took a bottle of Bactine and squirted it over the wound. It stung, then went warm and numb. She unrolled some tape and made my leg into a mummy.

I said, “she’s our grandma, you know.”

“She’s a wolf.”

“But she’s family.” Still, as I said it, it felt like something was breaking apart. Grandmas don’t bite their granddaughters, and she’d bitten me, even when I tried to help.

“You’re such an idiot.” Maddie said. She got up, leaving me to clean up all the gauze wrappers and bloody tissues she’d left around.

The next day Mom announced that the government would take the wolf as a ward of the state. When the nurse people came, they shot a tranquilizer dart through the gap in the door and dragged the wolf’s grey body out in a net. She looked just like the way she’d come to us: a breathing pile of fur. Her paw draped out over the netting, nails stiff as twigs.

Even after she left, our room stayed a forest. Maddie and I did our best to fight off the vines, weed them back. Dad brought in the hedge trimmers and cut everything, hauled it out in garbage bags, but it always grew back faster than before. Eventually, we let the room go wild.

The grass made the room feel bigger, like a better place to hide. The carpet turned to meadow, and in the spring it bloomed with wildflowers that frayed like thread. One night, snooping around in the closet, I found a box of the wolf’s old things. An old pink dress. A

painting of a tree. An old photograph. I thought it was a picture of me. It was one of those old pictures though, the ones that don't start out in color, but instead get painted over. In the picture, I looked a little older. I had on a red dress with a big skirt and a little red shawl on my shoulders. I grinned at the camera, but my fingers bent crooked, yanking at the corsage around my wrist. White flowers. My nails were glinting, long and polished. There wasn't one bit of fur.

I hid the photo away and curled up in the tall grass, suddenly afraid of falling nets and flying needles. I dreamed about my fingers turning into paws, about my paws turning back to fingers. I woke up and clawed my fingers in the dirt.