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Out of the Dark: short fiction - works in progress

Ruthie Carroll

Western Washington University

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Out of the Dark

short fiction - works in progress

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an honors capstone project by Ruthie Carroll
advised by Elizabeth Colen

June 2021

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Introduction

I've had a hard time explaining this project to my satisfaction when people asked me what I was doing for my senior capstone. Now that it's finished, it looks pretty straightforward: I wrote two short stories. However, I didn't start either one this year, and I didn't write either one with the intention of them being part of something larger. I'm hesitant to call this a collection, because there's only two pieces, but referring to them as a pair implies that they're meant to be explicitly linked, which they aren't.

To be honest, when I was brainstorming ideas for my project, I didn't want to start over with a new story. I had just finished writing *Recipe for Disaster* during fall quarter, and I had begun to notice a pattern of similar themes in the pieces I'd written for other classes during my creative writing degree. I often wrote about characters who are lonely, and about the ugly way that loneliness can feel when you aren't actually alone. My protagonists are usually young women, who inevitably end up having strong but complicated relationships with their mothers. And there's almost always at least one scene where food plays a central role.

Although I have other stories where similar themes show up, these two in particular I wrote during the pandemic, which I can only say has exacerbated my urge to write about loneliness. That's what the title of the project means, basically: these stories came out of the pandemic, which has been a dark time in many ways. I've always found writing fiction to be time consuming and mentally exhausting, but it was a particular challenge for me this year when I was already exhausted trying to deal with everything else.

The "works in progress" is a reminder—mostly for myself, but for you as well—that these stories are still changing, and will continue changing until or unless they find a publisher. The versions archived here are probably not the final versions.

An additional reminder: these stories are fiction. They are not about me, my family, or anyone else I know in the non-fiction world.

Recipe for Disaster

Chicken Paprikash - Paprikás Csirke

Red onion

Hungarian sweet paprika

Chicken

Garlic

Salt

Pepper

Tomato

Chicken stock

2 Tbsp flour

1 C sour cream

Egg noodles

I finish laying ingredients on the counter just as a massive crash shakes the kitchen walls. My head snaps up, and the lights flicker once before going out. For a minute, I'm frozen in the dim September light, but when the power doesn't return my gaze drops back to the recipe card in front of me. Even as my eyes adjust, my mother's thin handwriting remains obscure.

The front door bursts open, but it's just Jamie, not the relentless wind trying to bully its way into the apartment. They slam the door and lock the deadbolt for good measure.

"Did you hear that?" Jamie turns to face me, keeping their body against the door as though the extra weight will keep the wind at bay.

"The crash? Was that you?"

"Look."

I step towards the window where they're pointing. A tree lies across the middle of the street below, fractured limbs surrounding Jamie's car.

"Took my parking spot, too."

"Did it hit a powerline?"

Jamie shrugs. "There's other trees falling all over the city."

"It better be back on soon." I turn to face the kitchen.

"What are you cooking?"

"Hungarian stew. Or I was going to." I glance at the illegible recipe again, although I know the steps by heart.

"Oh. The stove is out too?"

"The gas should still turn on with a match." I hesitate. I want Hungarian food, but I crave the way we used to make it in my mother's kitchen, with yellow curtains on the windows and my siblings sat around the table. "It's just harder to cook in the dark, I guess. I'll make it tomorrow."

Jamie slips away to their bedroom, and I begin putting my ingredients back in the cabinet. Outside, wind shrieks against the windows like a kettle reaching its boil.

*

In the morning, my alarm rings as usual. I plugged my phone in out of habit, and maybe optimism, but it hasn't charged. I don't need to open my curtains to feel the storm still pounding against the walls.

I stumble to the kitchen and flick the light switch a few times, but the shadows remain stubborn. The tree's crooked shape still looms just out the window. The bus won't be able to make its usual route, and I realize I'll have to leave soon to walk to work when my phone buzzes with a text from my boss:

Streets blocked off downtown. Don't come in today.

The kitchen tile feels icy even through my socks, and I gratefully tread back to my carpeted room. With my laptop leeching data off my phone, I scan through headlines and pictures of damaged buildings. *Freak windstorm breaks records. Cold spells sweep the nation.* The weather forecast for my parents' town, halfway across the country, already brims with snowflakes.

I'm not sure how long I've zoned out when my stomach rumbles loud enough to pull me back to reality. It's late afternoon, and my laptop battery is low. As I stand up from the warm bed, a shiver runs down my spine.

In the kitchen, I grab a mug and almost fill the hotpot before I remember it won't work. The box of matches sits by the stove. It takes a few tries to strike a flame with my stiff fingers, and the burner ticks impatiently before igniting the gas with a *whoosh*. While water for tea boils in a pot, I call my parents' house.

"Lucia?" The sound of my sister's voice makes me smile.

"Hi, Nora," I say. "How are you?"

"Guess what? It's snowing here already. Isn't that crazy? Mom said they might even cancel school if it keeps storming so much."

"It's stormy? Are you all okay?"

"Yeah, Dad let us have hot cocoa when me and Jacob got home from school." I hear the clatter of dishes in the background, and my mother's voice giving orders. It's two hours ahead for them, almost dinner time. "I have to help Mom, though. We're gonna eat soon."

My mother's voice gets closer. "Is that Lucia? Let me talk to her, honey."

"Hi, Mom," I say as the phone transfers hands. "What are you making?"

"We've got a big pot of noodle soup almost ready. Should we save you some?"

"No thanks, I—" I almost say I have paprikash. "I wish, Mom."

"Are you doing okay?" She asks. "Sounds like you're getting some bad weather on the West Coast."

"I'm fine," I say. As if to argue, the wind grows so loud I'm afraid the windows might shatter, and I hold my breath until it dies down. "I didn't go into work today. They're having trouble getting the power back on, I think."

"Well, you just make sure—" She breaks off and pulls the phone away. "Jacob! Not before dinner—help your sister set the table." I recognize the scrape of a full pot coming off the stove.

"You sure you're okay?" She returns to my ear.

"Yeah." I hesitate. "I wish I was home with you all."

"Oh, honey." Her voice softens. "We miss you too, you know. You just take care of yourself. Make some hot cocoa, and read a good book while there's light. Is it still light out where you are?"

"Not really." There's a ray of pale grey near the window, but I can't picture myself taking a front-row seat to the storm outside.

"Well, maybe in the morning," Mom says.

"Yeah, maybe."

"I have to put dinner on the table, honey. I'll call you tomorrow. Take care."

"Bye, Mom. Love you."

She hangs up first. I dig around in the cabinets, pushing aside the tea bags in search of cocoa powder, but I don't find any. I glance over the package of egg noodles, and the oversized jar of sweet paprika from a specialty import store. The chicken will go bad soon in the lifeless refrigerator. My mouth waters for the taste of meat and fat and spice, but my stomach clenches at the thought. *I'll wait until tomorrow, I promise, when there's power again.*

Instead, I open the fridge and rifle through the shelves for cheese and sliced ham, trying not to let the air escape into the only slightly-warmer kitchen. A door creaks down the hall, and I hear Jamie's carpeted footsteps behind me.

"Have you seen the news today?" They ask.

"Yeah, it's looking rough all over the place." I turn around, bread in hand. "Hopefully things start to clear up tomorrow."

Jamie says nothing, but grabs a can of soup from the cabinet.

"This yours?" My pot of water is still on the stove, boiling hard.

"Shit. Yeah. You can use that burner, though."

They slide the water closer to me, but I no longer want it.

"Maybe we should figure out how long this can last us." Jamie reaches back into the cabinet, examining our remaining cans of soup and beans.

"We don't need to worry about that yet, don't you think?" I alternate layers of ham and cheese, and cut the finished sandwich diagonally.

"I don't know. I've heard some pretty bad predictions for the next couple weeks."

"Well, they always make it sound worse than it is. We can go to the store once the city gets the trees cleared." I clutch the plate with my sandwich in both hands, and retreat to my bedroom before Jamie has a chance to reply.

*

My laptop is dead by the next afternoon. I try not to use my phone, but I can't stop scrolling for headlines to keep my dwindling optimism afloat. Finally, the screen goes black and I can't even see my reflection in the dark glass. The curtains on my window remain closed; the slivers of light underneath them barely penetrate the thicket of shadows shrouding the rest of the room.

Sounds of movement in the kitchen reach me through the darkness. I grope towards the door handle, keeping a hand against the wall as I creep down the hallway. Jamie has a fuzzy blanket wrapped around their shoulders. All the cabinets hang open, their contents sprawled across our small counter space.

"Beans for dinner?" I straighten the cans into a row.

"There's one more can of split pea soup." Jamie sticks their tongue out, and I manage a laugh.

"Ew. Did I buy that?"

"I don't even remember how long it's been in here." They ease the cabinet closed. "There's a storm warning out as far as they can predict. The city won't clear the trees until it's safe to drive again."

I nod, thinking of how many times my mother will try to call before I can charge my phone.

"We're not going anywhere, Lucia. We need to make this stuff last." Jamie looks to the array on the counter: triscuits, honey nut cheerios, a jar of peanut butter, half a loaf of bread, kidney beans, split pea soup, canned tomato, chicken stock, and egg noodles.

"Well, these are mine, for paprikash," I say, pushing the last three into a separate pile.

Jamie raises an eyebrow. "Are you still going to make it?"

"Yeah, I will. I'm just— waiting for a good time." I know how dumb it sounds as soon as the words leave my mouth, and I see it in Jamie's frown. "I'll use them."

Jamie looks like they want to push it, but instead they open the fridge as I return my ingredients to the cabinet. They pull out a sad-looking collection: carrots, pre-sliced mushrooms, a box of wilting spinach, and a red onion. I put the onion in the cabinet too.

"This'll make soup for a couple days, at least." The tension in their voice leaves little room for argument.

We put away the peanut butter, bread, and cheerios, but leave the triscuits out to keep us hungry. Jamie chops carrots while I fidget with the gas. I splash oil in the pan, and listen for the carrots' familiar sizzle as they touch the heat, but the constant howl from outside overpowers the sound.

The light from the window recedes as we cook, and I feel blind as I pick through the spinach, removing leaves that feel slimy or limp or anything I don't like, leaving fewer than I probably should. We have to squint to read spice jars, and I'm only half-sure it's oregano until the earthy smell blooms up from the pot.

Instead of stock, we cover the vegetables and beans with water, and let them simmer. We hover on opposite sides of the stove, eyes drawn down like moths to the blue flame of the burner. I don't think I've cooked with someone else since moving here for university.

When everything's ready, Jamie spoons soup into two bowls and places them on the table. I take one in my hands, leaning against wall instead of taking the empty chair next to them. The vegetables are well cooked, but the taste is thin.

"For emergency soup, that's not bad, right?"

"It's salty, but still kind of bland," I say. "I don't know. Something's missing." Like chicken stock, or an onion. But something else, too, that no amount of fat or flavor could fix.

"Well, we didn't exactly have a full pantry to work with. You're welcome to the split peas." They've let their blanket slip onto the chair behind them. "At least it's hot."

I slurp from my bowl in bitter submission. The broth scalds my tongue, but I swallow another mouthful as heat radiates from my stomach to the rest of my body.

*

The leftover soup fills a medium tupperware. Jamie works at it over the next few days, while I eat ham and cheese—and eventually, peanut butter—sandwiches.

I try to read by the light of the front window, but the view of the storm pulls my focus away before I finish a page. The street below swells like a river of branches and debris, gutters overflowing with rain. I end up back in my dark bedroom, dead phone clutched tight. I picture my siblings' worried faces, asking my mother for news. My father holding mugs of hot chocolate. My mother making noodle soup. *Should we save you some?* My parents' kitchen, always stocked full of the right ingredients. My mother's paprikash, the way we made it together, with sunlight streaming in through yellow curtains. She showed me how to dice the onion quickly so my eyes wouldn't water. When the purple skin grows translucent in the pan, smother it with paprika powder. Keep stirring. Don't let the sweet smell turn bitter and burned. Add salt, pepper, crushed garlic, tomatoes from a home-canned pint jar or fresh from the garden in the summer.

Instead of egg noodles from a package, we would make galuska dumplings while the chicken cooks. The egg-and-flour dough sticks to our hands as we feed it through my mother's dumpling-maker into boiling water. When they float to the top, scoop them out with a slotted spoon and drizzle them in oil.

Thicken the stew with sour cream and flour, mixed into a seamless white blend. Take the pot off the heat, and don't let the dairy split—add one spoonful at a time. The result will be rich orange, opaque with fat. My mother would take two spoons, one for me and one for her. Dip into the sauce and taste. No need to adjust the salt. I reach for the flavor in my memory: sweet, spicy, juicy, tender, warm, happy. My whole body craves it.

This room is too dark, even as I push open the curtains. It must be late at night. I have no way to tell.

I move through the apartment in shadow, knowing the kitchen when my feet feel cold tile, finding the ingredients where I left them. My fingers guide a knife through the onion, but they don't move quickly. The raw sting swells up to my eyes, so I shut them tight, picturing yellow curtains instead. The first match slips through my fingers, but I manage to strike the second.

The smell of paprika soon overpowers the onion as they cook together, and I stir feverishly. Tomatoes and chicken fill the pot. I don't check the quality; there is no spoiled food in my parents' kitchen. In another pot, I boil noodles, envisioning galuska in front of me as though I can will it into existence. I pull the tub of sour cream from the fridge and heap in flour, trusting the measurements, blending them until the lumps must be gone. Add the thickener one spoonful at a time. There. The perfect orange color almost glows through the dark. I take two spoons from the drawer, and dip one deep into the stew. My taste buds ache. This spoon carries everything they need, I'm sure of it. My tongue reaches out to taste—

Something's not quite right. Almost. The flavors muddle together, and the paprika doesn't come through. It's the onion cut too slow. It's the tomato from a tin can, instead of my mother's garden. It's the darkness, the wrong curtains, and the wrong weather outside. I throw the dirty spoon into the sink and listen to the clatter of metal against metal. The flavor lingers in my mouth, dissatisfied.

"What's going on?" Jamie's voice comes out of the darkness. "Did something break?" I squint to see the outline of their figure stepping towards me. I can't speak, so I press the second spoon into their fumbling hand. They reach unsteadily towards the pot on the stove, dip the spoon in, and bring it to their lips. They gag.

"It's spoiled." Jamie scrambles to fill a mug with water. "Did you used that sour cream? And the chicken? It must've gone bad days ago."

"It's not the way I made it at home." My eyes well up as though the onions are still raw. "The noodles aren't even right—they're from a package." I drag the pot that should hold galuska off the stove and heave it towards the sink, but Jamie takes a noodle and puts it in their mouth before I can protest.

"There's nothing wrong with these. They're good. *Stop—*"

"They're not galuska—" I tip the pot into the sink but I can't see my aim, and the noodles spill onto the floor, landing in a hot, gummy pile around my feet.

"It doesn't matter." Jamie's voice breaks. "It's food. You can't survive on something that only exists in your memory."

The hot tears on my cheeks begin to turn cold, evaporating into the darkness along with the heat of the noodles around my ankles. I reach down blindly, and pop one in my mouth before I

realize what I'm doing. It's still warm. My stomach rumbles at the taste of carbs, and I bend down, reaching for more.

"Don't. The floor is filthy."

I shake my head, willing the tears to stop. "I wasted everything else."

"Yeah, you did." Their hands find mine, and they pull me back to standing. "Actually—" The cabinet creaks open and Jamie pushes a light cardboard box into my arms. "There's still a few triscuits."

A bubble of laughter chokes at the back of my throat, and comes out as a hiccup instead. Shivering, I clutch the box to my chest. Another, quieter smile begins to pull at the corner of my mouth.

"And one more can of split pea soup."

Jamie makes a dramatic retching sound, and digs their hand into the triscuits. They fish out two, and hand one to me. We crunch the last crumbs together, letting the salty taste linger on our tongues.

Divisible

When my mother is lonely she turns into wolves. There are usually two, a boy and a girl. They don't get along. They'll run to opposite ends of the room and snarl, pale eyes narrow behind the back of the sofa or under the kitchen table. On rare mornings I find dried blood and clumps of grey fur matted into the green carpet.

More often, they fight passively. When I came down for a glass of water before bed, the boy was marking his territory around the living room. He didn't stop when I hovered in the doorway and shook my head, but instead turned his gaze towards mine, as though I was the one he was trying to scare away. My eyes darted down to the glass in my hand and I scurried back to my room, telling myself, *It's a school night. I can't deal with this right now.*

Later, though, I was back downstairs, drawn by the sound of their whining and growling. I tried to coax them into my mother's bedroom, but eventually I gave up and sat on the bottom steps, silently mediating their standoff until I couldn't keep my own eyes open.

*

I like to think my mother wasn't lonely when I was born. That she took one look at me and had never felt more human, would never have reason to feel lonely again.

Before I was born, she had been afraid that wolves might eat their young, she told me.

Of course, wolves don't eat their young. She laughs when she tells me the story again. *Of course I wasn't lonely when I saw you, Lottie.*

I believe her.

In my earliest memory, I am alone in my crib, unhappy. It's dark, past dinnertime, and there's howling coming from somewhere in the house. I'm crying too.

A grey wolf noses through the open door and circles the crib. She gets low on her haunches, springs over the barred sides and lands next to me. I'm so surprised for a moment that I forget my tears. From the dark again comes a howl, and the wolf next to me snarls. Not wanting to be left out, I resume my sobbing. The boy wolf pushes his way into the room, yellow eyes shining through the dark right in front of me. In my memory, his two eyes together are as big as my whole head.

We fell asleep like that, one wolf curled up in the crib around me, the other lying underneath. In the morning, my mother awoke with a terrible backache, squeezed into the baby-sized bed.

*

Because of my late-summer birthday, I could have started kindergarten when I was four, but my mother kept me in half-day preschool an extra year. Sometimes, when she had to work late, my grandmother would pick me up, but I always hoped mom would be the one standing among the other parents. She looked so relieved to see me those afternoons. If she didn't have to work, she would have tried homeschooling me. I was nervous to start school, but mostly, I remember, I was worried for her.

Mom picked me up as often as she could, but by the fourth grade I had a latchkey around my neck. She worked longer hours and came home exhausted. She would kick off her pumps, open a ginger ale, and turn on the radio in the kitchen. In the evening it was always the local Chinese station.

I sat on my bed doing math homework, until I heard familiar sounds from downstairs: the front door slamming shut, the fridge creaking open, the radio host announcing the top of the hour in Mandarin. I slipped down to the kitchen to find her leaning over the table with her head in her hands. She looked up when I put my arms around her.

"How are you?" I asked.

"Hungry." She sighed. "What should we do for dinner?"

"There's rice in the fridge from yesterday, remember?"

I pulled out ingredients and began to carefully chop a fistful of spring onions. Mom finished her ginger ale and lit a flame under the pan. I poured two eggs into the sizzling oil as she stood by, ready to scramble them. We traded the spatula back and forth, stirring in the rice and a bag of frozen vegetables.

"How about you?" Mom said finally. "How was your day?"

"It was fine."

"How's the homework going?"

It was my turn to sigh. "I hate fractions. And math. I hate *all* of it."

"It takes practice, baby. You only just started fractions. Nobody likes to do something they haven't practiced."

"Do you remember how to do it?"

"I guess I used to, but I don't think I've done fractions on paper since junior high."

"How old were you when you started junior high?"

"Hmm. Eleven, I think? Two years older than you." She added soy sauce and white pepper to the pan.

"How old were you when you first felt like wolves?"

She took more time to think about this. "Twelve, or thirteen, maybe."

I took the spatula from her and began to break up the rice where it was still stuck together in clumps.

"Why do you ask?" I shook my head, unsure. "Are you afraid of feeling like that?"

"I don't feel that way." My voice was sharper than I meant it to be. She held out a hand offering to take over the stir-fry, but I ignored it, suddenly intent on breaking apart each individual grain of rice.

She turned away to set the table. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched her hands moving from the cupboard to the table and back again, laying two of everything side by side.

I looked down at my own hands, beige knuckles pale as I gripped the spatula too hard, and imagined them shrinking into stubby paws, complete with fur and leathery pads. *What if I could only whine and howl? My throat felt as dry as the rice. How would she come back from the wolves if I couldn't talk to them? Who would take care of us if I couldn't stand on two feet? I didn't ask. I didn't want to worry her. How could we both feel lonely at the same time?*

As I lay in my bedroom later, waiting to fall asleep, I listened to my mother's snores from the next room. I couldn't decide if they sounded human or canine, singular or plural. I had to resist the urge to crawl out of bed and check. I pictured the wolves sleeping as far apart as possible, one in the bed, and one below it.

If one person is divided into two wolves, is there half of her in each one? A quarter behind each yellow eye? I fell asleep counting fractions.

*

For my tenth birthday, I wanted to throw a real party. My mother bought streamers to put on the ceiling and helped me make a cake. I spent the morning piping little designs across the sides with red icing. By the time my friends arrived, the chocolate layers were almost completely hidden underneath sloppy flowers and hearts and swirls.

Micah and Yun were friends I played with at school, but this was their first time at my house. They set presents on the table, and I showed them the games I had arranged in the living room. My mother hovered over us from a distance. When she brought in snacks, her face was pinched, and I thought her eyes looked red.

"Do you kids mind if I turn on the radio in the other room?" she asked.

"Do you want to play with us, mom?" I looked up at her. Yun giggled and whispered in Micah's ear, which I pretended not to notice.

"I'm fine." She made her mouth into a smile. "You don't want any grown-ups intruding on your fun." She retreated to the kitchen, and the radio began faintly a few moments later.

Micah won *Chutes and Ladders* while we ate peeled grapes and nectarine slices, and he picked hide-and-seek to play next. Yun and I crept out of the room while he counted. I pointed her to the closet at the end of the hall and was about to squeeze myself behind the coat rack when a loud yelp sounded from the kitchen, followed by the clatter of something large falling to the floor. I only froze for a second before rushing to the room to find the chairs overturned. Under the table was a lone wolf. She paced between the table legs, agitated like it was a trap. Her eyes narrowed at my approach. The radio was still on, playing an English news segment.

I bent down the level of the table, eye to eye with the wolf. Her body shook with nervous energy.

"Found you."

Micah stood in the doorway pointing a finger at me. As his gaze drifted, I watched his expression fall from glee to shock.

“What—” He took a step into the room. In the same instant, the wolf bolted from her haunches, startling Micah off his feet. Without thinking, I lunged at the wolf, hugging her to the ground as Micah sputtered, and scrambled out of the room.

“Shh,” I whispered into her fur. “Please. Don’t scare them.” She struggled against my arms, twisting around so I couldn’t see her face. “It’s my birthday.”

I held on until her whimpers stopped, and her heavy panting began to match my slow breaths. Suddenly, her jaw snapped and I jumped back, letting her run out of the room. Micah shrieked as she darted down the hallway and disappeared up the stairs. Yun was sitting next to him, recovered from her hiding place. Micah was crying, Yun glaring at me. She put an arm around him.

“I’m really sorry—”

“We want to go home,” she said.

“There’s cake,” I said. “If you want to stay a little longer.”

“Where’s your phone?”

I showed her the landline in the kitchen and waited while she called her parents, then Micah called his, still in tears. I was desperate to run upstairs and make sure my mother was okay, but I heard her voice in my head chiding me, *They are your guests. You have to take care of them.* But I had to take care of the wolves too.

After Micah and Yun left, I cut two red slices of cake and carried them upstairs on a single plate. Outside my mother’s bedroom, I paused, listening. The noise coming from inside wasn’t like a wolf. It was soft, muffled sobbing. A human sound.

I almost called out to her, but the greeting died in my throat. The wolf was already gone. *She doesn’t need you now.* I tried to banish the thought from my mind, but it stuck there, like a wedge. I sat down as silently as I could, leaning against the wall that separated us, and ate my cake in slow forkfuls. When I finished, I left the remaining piece outside her door.

*

On worst days, the wolves would multiply. One night, a pack of five circled around the living room table, sizing each other up for a challenge. My mother had told me never to intervene; she didn’t want to hurt me. Instead, I crouched outside the door to watch.

It didn't take them long to decide who was the weak link: one boy was slightly smaller. As the other four closed in, he crouched in submission with his tail tucked between his legs, gaze down. As soon as he raised his eyes, they lunged. One for his neck, others for his back and legs. They tumbled around the room, breaking up every so often to regroup and circle the boy again before jumping back on him. I watched from my distance until suddenly the little wolf was thrown against the doorway. I reached out to touch his fur where it was momentarily shoved through the crack, and when he fell away I thought I saw him turn to look at me with a plea in his eyes. His attention snapped back to his attackers just as quickly.

They chased him to the far side of the room and again slammed his body against the wall, this time so hard that the house seemed to shake, and a picture frame fell off its hook and shattered on the carpet. When they circled him, the little wolf whimpered.

The others lunged, tackling him on top of the broken glass. I didn't hesitate. In one instant, I was rushing into the pack to pull him out, and in the next, I had been pulled into the chaos myself, a blur of grey in every direction. There could have been a hundred wolves for all I saw.

A sharp pain pinched at the back of my neck, and my vision began to clear. One of the larger wolves had dragged me away from the pack. It was only the collar of my shirt that had been torn. My neck didn't feel injured, but when I drew my hand back I found blood there. I hadn't noticed my palms sliced on the glass. The wolf and I both stared as the blood began to drip onto the carpet. As our eyes met, the tension building in her body released and she sprang towards me, yapping as I stumbled out of the room.

My own tension came out in gasps as I stood just on the other side of the hall. With each breath, new tears poured from my eyes. I couldn't think what I was supposed to do. I needed to stop the blood. I needed to stop the wolves. There was nothing in between. The large wolf loomed in the doorway, approaching me with ears flat against her head, and I could tell I didn't have a choice.

In the bathroom upstairs, I held my hands under the faucet until the water ran almost clear, and found band-aids to awkwardly cover the cuts. The wolves still crashed around downstairs, shaking the walls every so often. My stomach dropped each time.

I should be down there with them, I thought, but my hands were stiff with pain, and my neck sore. It was my fault. I shouldn't have run at them when they were so upset. I should have been the calm one. Instead, I'd made it worse. Hadn't my mother said she didn't want to see me get hurt?

By the time the house fell silent, I didn't know how long I'd been in the bathroom, only that it was dark outside as I made my way downstairs. My mother was there in the living room, sitting on the table with her back to the door.

"Mom, I'm—"

She turned around suddenly. A swath of new bruises covered her chin on one side down to the collarbone and disappeared under her shirt. Her cheek was stained with blood.

"Are you okay?" I asked. I took a step into the room and she shot up from the table.

"Please— not right now, Lottie." She looked down at something in her hands. "There's still glass in here."

She was holding the photo that had fallen off the wall. It was a picture of us together from when I was a baby. The corners were bent, and part of it had been ripped.

"We can tape it back together," I said.

She put the photo in my bandaged hand and ushered me out of the room, closing the door behind us.

"I need to clean up," she said. She retreated upstairs as I stayed rooted to the spot in the hallway, running my hands over the crumpled edges of the photograph.

In the morning, I woke up before my mother. I had just enough time to knock on her door and arrange her work bag and shoes in the entryway, but not enough time to change the bandages on my hand or finish the math worksheet I'd abandoned the night before. My teacher was unimpressed when I told them I had forgotten again. I got off the bus with a make-up assignment and a note for my mother to sign. I was debating whether I should just forge her signature, to save her from the unnecessary worry I knew it would create.

I always checked whether the front door was unlocked before reaching for my key. If the handle turned, my mother was home early from work. The door swung open easily that day to reveal her bag exactly how I'd left it, her pumps knocked to the side. I set them back upright, running my fingers over the teeth marks that I was pretty sure hadn't been there that morning.

I held my backpack in front of me as I moved through the rest of the house in silence, glancing behind each piece of furniture just in case. The bowl of water we kept on the kitchen floor had been spilled, but the room was empty. I wiped it up before tiptoeing upstairs.

On the top stair, I heard them. A low, rumbling growl came from my mother's bedroom. The sound was steady, as though giving warning to an attacker. I crept towards the open door.

"Mom?" I whispered.

The growls continued, long and drawn out with each breath.

I hugged my backpack and pushed my way into the room, flicking on the light to see what mess the wolves had made, but all I found was my mother huffing out one last snore and squinting as she scrambled up in bed.

"Lottie? What—"

"I'm so sorry." I almost tripped over myself stepping backwards. "I'm sorry, I thought— I didn't realize you were asleep."

"It's okay, baby, I shouldn't be sleeping anyway. I forgot to look at the clock."

I stepped closer to the bed and took off my backpack. "You're home early."

"I didn't go in today, actually." Mom looked down at her hands.

"Are you okay?" I asked. "Do you need anything?"

She shook her head. "I'm fine. It's just the wolves—you know."

I nodded. I knew enough, I thought. "Did you eat today? I can bring you something, or a glass of water."

"That's okay, really. I'll wait until dinner."

"I can bring you ginger ale," I offered.

"You should do your schoolwork. I'll take care of myself."

I crossed to the other side of the room and opened the window a crack to let the stale air out. "Do you want the curtain open?"

"Just leave it how it is, Lottie."

I turned around. The bruising on her neck was visible from this side, now a muddy violet color. She had a long scratch under her chin that definitely hadn't been there the night before.

"Does it hurt?" I reached out, and she flinched as my bandage brushed her skin.

"It's nothing to worry about."

"Did you clean it right?"

"Please go work on school for an hour, okay? You don't need to take care of me."

"Are you sure you don't want anything?"

"Baby—"

"I can stay in here—"

"Lottie!" My tongue snapped back at her tone. "What part of *no* do you not understand? I can take care of it. I'm your mother."

My face flushed so hot my throat felt numb. When I opened my mouth the words came without warning. "I know you're my mother. Since when does that mean you take care of anything? I'm not the one who needs taking care of." Her face was already as red as mine, but I couldn't control the words as they spilled. "I'm not the one who stays home because I have a bad day. I'm not the one who got us cut on that glass last night. I'm not the one who scared my friends away on my birthday. I'm not the one who forgets to eat, or who needs the radio on, or who drinks from a bowl on the floor. I'm not the one who feels *lonely* even though her own daughter lives in the same house." My voice shook. I couldn't look at her. I reached down into my backpack. "You want to take care of me? Why don't you sign this stupid note from my teacher—I was gonna do it for you, but I guess you'd rather make everything harder than it has to be!"

"What?" Mom snapped out of her spell and snatched the crumpled note from my hand. "Why did your teacher give you a note—you haven't been turning in homework?"

"I haven't— I've had other things to worry about. Like *you* and your *wolves*. How am I supposed to figure out math problems when I can't figure out how to make you feel better?" My voice almost broke, but I held it back.

"How long has this been going on? Lottie—it's not your job to fix anything. Right now, *this* is your job." She waved the note in front of me.

I shook my head. "But you're my mom."

"That doesn't mean you can solve all my problems." Her eyes were glassy.

"But I've always helped you," I argued. "You're the one who came to sleep in my room. I can make you less lonely, can't I?"

"It's not that simple, baby." She was quiet for a long time, running a hand over her face. Slow tears leaked from her eyes as she looked at me again. "You can't make the wolves go away. But that's not your fault."

I climbed onto the bed and sat right in front of her. I reached up to wipe a tear from her chin, but she was quicker; her thumb gently brushed the corner of my eye where I hadn't noticed my own tears begin to pool.

"Even when I'm lonely," she said, "I still love you."

I nodded. I wanted to believe her, even if I didn't understand.

"Where's that worksheet they sent you home with?"

"In my backpack."

"Well, go get it. Let's take a look."

I hesitated, trying to read her eyes. She gave a tired sigh, but smiled.

"Let me help you. I'm your mom."

We went down to the kitchen together. She turned the radio on low and cut an apple into four imperfect quarters before sitting down next to me, bent over my worksheet.

When we were finished, every blank line was full of my carefully written numbers, and only seeds were left on the plate.

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*

Ruthie Carroll is from Seattle, Washington, and graduated from Western Washington University in spring 2021 with a BA in creative writing, a minor in linguistics, and a certificate in web content development. When not glued to a laptop or a notebook, she can be found playing her fiddle, making quesadillas, and memorizing poetry. Her writing has been published in [Jeopardy](#) magazine (2018 and 2021) and [22 Under 22](#), an anthology of young writers.