Talulla Demetriou, you have been a Very (pause) Bad (pause) Girl.

My mother always said this with a glimmer of delight in her eyes. She was a Very Bad Girl herself. What she hated above all was weakness. Especially in women. She’d rather pure evil. She was pure evil, when she had to be. She acknowledged an elite: our family, a handful of friends, certain celebrities. The rest of the world was made up of idiots and mediocrities. The Humans, she called them.

(God being dead, irony still rollickingly alive…)

Later, courtesy of my psycho-terrorist Catholic Aunt Theresa, I discovered I was also a Dirty Little Girl. A Dirty, Filthy Little Girl, to be precise. When I was eight she caught me and Toby Greely in the basement examining each other’s private parts. One minute Toby and I were alone, watched by the room’s stunned miscellany – cardboard boxes and a broken ping-pong table and some rolled-up sunshades – the next the silence shifted and I knew someone else was there. Aunt Theresa stood on the bottom step. Her face was always moist from Pond’s Cold Cream but right then it shone with what looked like newly minted divinity. My face, when I turned it to her, was hot and overfull. I had a rich soft feeling because of my pants round my ankles and Toby on his knees and the silence that had cocooned us while
he’d taken his long, careful — and indeed tender — look. I’d been close to some big revelation, I believed, and along with horror at being discovered was queenly annoyance at being interrupted. Even then I was thinking Toby and I would have to get back to this, soon.

‘Talulla Demetriou,’ Aunt Theresa said, ‘you are a dirty little girl.’ And then, since that didn’t quite cover it: ‘A dirty, filthy little girl.’

The Dirty Filthy Little Girl was pretty and liked bad things. In Tenth Grade she was friends with Lauren Miller, who was also pretty and also liked bad things. For example there was a drippy and permanently cold-sored girl they tormented and nicknamed NODOR (No Danger of Rape). One day the Dirty Filthy Little Girl was sitting on Jason Wells’s lap at recess and Lauren called out something awful to NODOR as she went by and you could see from NODOR’s face it really hurt her, hurt her in her heart, and at the same time Jason’s hard-on was pressing against the Dirty Filthy Little Girl’s ass and the Dirty Filthy Little Girl got the rich soft feeling again and knew there was a connection. It was like the Devil putting his arms around you from behind and you leaning back into it and enjoying the lovely surprising warmth.

At college the Very Bad Dirty Filthy Little Girl knew once and for all she was an agent for the forces of darkness. She was the worst kind of young woman: one who recognised the pro-actively politicised female she ought to become, then didn’t become it, but instead carried on being attracted to evil guys and having the wrong kind of sexual fantasies and making herself look as attractive as possible and ultimately accepting that she was too selfish and good-looking and lazy and perverted to ever live the kind of life she knew she ought to. By the end of her sophomore year she was openly reading the wrong authors and
no longer going through Gethsemane every time she wore a sexy dress or a pair of politically bankrupt shoes or let a guy fuck her in the ass, which, to be fair to her, was a privilege she granted very (pause) very (pause) selectively, and often with mixed feelings or when completely hammered.

Finally, the Very Bad Dirty Filthy Little Girl capped her career of moral slippage by dropping out of her Masters in Literature and becoming a businesswoman. A servant of Mammon! With no great surprise – in fact with loose-limbed satisfaction – she discovered she had a penchant for what a later lover (the lover to end all lovers) would call ‘the smut and savvy of American Trade’. Her mother was both disappointed and sufficiently vain to be flattered by how much like her her daughter had turned out.

Given the Very Bad Dirty Filthy Little Girl’s record, it was astonishing that when her marriage collapsed it wasn’t because she was cheating on her husband, but because he was cheating on her. She enjoyed a brief sojourn on the moral high ground. ‘Brief’ being the operative word. No sooner had she got used to the toothsome satisfaction of being all sorts of lousy things but at least I’m not a fucking liar you miserable fuck than she got bitten by a werewolf one night in the Arizona desert, and was forced to say goodbye to the moral high ground for ever. She discovered that not only could she kill and eat people once a month, but she could kill and eat people once a month and love it.

Until she found out she was pregnant. Then a whole new species of trouble began.
PART ONE

NATIVITY
‘Whatever else is unsure in this stinking dunghill of a world a mother’s love is not.’

James Joyce – *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*
‘Oh, mon Dieu,’ Cloquet said, when he opened the lodge door and saw me on the floor. ‘Fuck.’

I was on my side, knees drawn up, face wet with sweat. Pregnancy and the hunger didn’t get along. Hated each other, in fact. I pictured the baby pressing werewolf fingernails against my womb, five bits of broken glass on the skin of a balloon. And only myself to blame: when I could’ve got rid of it I didn’t want to. Now that I wanted to it was too late. Conscience from the old life said: Serves you right. I’d fired conscience months back, but it was still hanging around, miserable, unshaven, nowhere else to go.

‘Did you get it?’ I gasped. Behind Cloquet the open door showed deep snow, the edge of the pine forest, frail constellations. Beauty mauled me even in this state. Aesthetic hypersensitivity was a by-product of slaughter. Life was full of these amoral relations, it turned out.

Cloquet rushed to my side, tugging off his thermal gloves. ‘Lie still,’ he said. ‘Don’t try to speak.’ He smelled of outdoors, dense evergreens and the far north air like something purified by the flight of angels. ‘You have a temperature. Did you drink enough water?’

For the umpteenth time I wished my mother were alive. For the umpteenth time I thought how unspeakably happy I’d be if
she and Jake walked in the door right now, grinning, the pair of them. My mother would dump her purse on the table in a puff of Chanel and say, For God’s sake, Lulu, look at your hair — and the weight would lift and everything would be all right. Jake wouldn’t have to say anything. He’d look at me and it would be there in his eyes, that he was for me, always, always — and the nightmare would reduce to a handful of solvable problems. (I’d expected their ghosts, naturally. I’d demanded their ghosts. I got nothing. The universe, it also turned out, was no more interested in werewolf demands than it was in human ones.)

‘Talulla?’

Pain thickened under my toenails, warmed my eyeballs. Wulf smirked and kicked and cajoled in my blood. Come on, what’s a few hours between friends? Let me out. Let me out. Every month the same delirious bullying, the same pointless impatience. I closed my eyes.

Bad idea. The footage ran, immediately: Delilah Snow’s room, the wardrobe door swinging open, its long mirror introducing me to myself in all my grotesque glory, what I was, what I could do, the full range of my options. Monster. Murderer. Mother-to-be.

I opened my eyes.

‘Let me get you some water,’ Cloquet said.

‘No, stay here.’

I had hold of his coat and was twisting it. My dead moaned and throbbed. My dead. My restless tenants. My forced family of thirteen. Those ghosts, yes, of course, as many as you like. The only way to be sure of never losing the ones you love. The Dahmer Method. Extreme, but effective.

‘Breathe, chérie, breathe.’

Chérie. Mon ange. Ma belle. Lovers’ endearments, though we weren’t, and never would be, lovers.
One by one the broken-glass fingernails withdrew. The pain furled shut, like time-lapse film of a flower closing. By degrees, with Cloquet’s help, I made it to the armchair. Wulf smiled. The prisoner’s smile at the guard, knowing the breakout gang’s already on its way.

‘Did you get it?’ I asked again, when I’d caught my breath. ‘At least tell me you got it.’

Cloquet shook his head. ‘There was a screw-up. It’s stuck in freight clearing at Anchorage. It’ll be in Fairbanks Saturday morning. There’s more snow coming, though. I’ll have to take the Ski-Doo and trailer.’

I didn’t say anything. I was remembering an artwork I saw once at MOMA: a foetus made entirely of barbed wire. Lauren and I had just stood there looking at it, silenced.

‘Don’t worry,’ Cloquet said. ‘It’s two days. You’re not due for six weeks. I’ll go back to Fairbanks Saturday first-thing. They promise it’ll be there. It has to be.’

‘It’ was a consignment of obstetrics equipment, including oxygen machine, forceps, foetal and adult stethoscopes, heart monitor, PCA pump, sphygmomanometer and sutures. ‘Fairbanks’ was Fairbanks, Alaska. Necessary obscurity: WOCOP – World Organization for the Control of Occult Phenomena (think CIA meets Keystone Kops meets Spanish Inquisition, Jake had said) – knew I’d survived Jake’s death and was carrying his child. Its hunters wanted my head and its scientists wanted me strapped down in a lab. It didn’t stop there. Having found a correlation between survived werewolf bites and increased sunlight tolerance, vampires were after – what else? – my blood. More than all that, my straw-clutching subconscious had seen the snow as a sterile environment, a natural hospital. Conventional medicine was out of the question – Well, Miss Demetriou, as you can see on the monitor, here’s the umbilicus, and here’s a very healthy-looking
placenta, and of course here’s the—JESUS FUCKING CHRIST WHAT IS THAT? — so Cloquet had found the converted hunting lodge, with its exposed beams and wood-burning stove and wardrobes that smelled of camphor. Three thousand dollars a week, no other residents within fifteen miles, no phone reception, a half-mile of dirt road through the Christmas trees’ thrilled hush to the highway, from which Fairbanks was a ninety-minute drive southwest. I could scream as loud as I liked. No one would hear. I had a recurring vision of myself lying on the dining table in a pool of blood, screaming as loud as I liked. I had a lot of recurring visions.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ I said. ‘This thing’s going to kill me anyway.’ Gratuitous. Post-Delilah Snow I was full of random cruelties. I knew how the fear of me dying gnawed him now he was an accessory to murder. Murders, plural. Looking after a werewolf uniquely disqualified you from doing anything else. As Jake’s poor minder Harley could have confirmed, if he hadn’t had his head cut off. That Cloquet had become my minder still occasionally mesmerised me, the giant absurdity of the fact. Yet I remembered the feeling of dreamy inevitability that night in the forest five months before, when I’d put out my hand — my changed hand, clawed, wet and heavy with blood — and he, after a cracked laugh, had taken it. What had happened moments before — carnage, death, vengeance, loss — had left the two of us with a raw permissive consciousness, and into it this new relationship insinuated itself. Expect the absurd, Jake had warned me. Expect the risible twist, the ludicrous denouement. Expect the perverse. It’s the werewolf’s lot.

Cloquet shut the door, took out a big white hanky and blew his nose. The cold had given him a look of surprised innocence. Sometimes I saw him like this, humanly, the mangled person and the road back to his childhood strewn with wrong turns
and ugly coincidences. Long ago he’d been a little boy, side-parted hair and a volatile world of loved toys and stormy adults. Now, as he snuffled and swiped, nostrils raw, eyebrows raised, I had an image of this dark-eyed child standing alone on a jetty looking out over black water, waiting for the reunion that would never come. Tenderness stirred in me – and like an awkward reflex the new force obscured it, said it didn’t fit the grammar, wasn’t the done thing. There was too much else going on in me to argue, but I’d already made it known I didn’t like rules. God only knows to whom I’d made it known. Some vague werewolf scheme of things I didn’t even believe in.

‘How is it?’ he asked.

‘Better.’

‘I wish you’d take the drugs.’

Just say no. So far I had. Acetaminophen, pseudoephedrine, codeine, Demerol, morphine. All with potential side-effects my imagination made certainties. Administration of this drug during the first trimester can cause behavioural abnormalities in the infant.

Behavioural abnormalities. Jake and I would’ve exchanged a look. But ironies were like secrets: unshared they died. Jake and I would’ve. Jake and I. Jake. I. There were these moments when there was nothing between me and the reality of his death, when the future without him yawned, a vast space of sheer drops and wrong perspectives. There’d be more and more of these moments, I knew, until eventually they wouldn’t be moments at all, just the continuous, crushing way things were. The way things were that having our child was supposed to alleviate.

‘Save the drugs for when I really need them,’ I said.

We both knew I really needed them already, what with wulf jamming the room with its stink and the cattle-wire shocks in my fingernails and ringing iron in my eye-teeth and outside
whispering the dirty talk of the wild. Transformation was less than twenty-four hours away.

‘You don’t have to be brave, you know,’ he said.

‘I’m not. I’m just thinking ahead.’ I didn’t want to think ahead. (I didn’t want to think back, either. There was horror in both directions.) Rufus, my fish supplier for the Brooklyn diners, had described watching his wife having their baby. *I want to tell you it was beautiful*, he said, *but basically it looked like someone had taken a twelve-gauge to her pussy*. This image kept coming back, as did the Sex Ed video they showed us in high school, yellowed footage of a big-thighed woman sweatily giving birth. Unanimous teen revulsion. Lauren had said to me: Fuck the miracle of life, where do I sign up for a hysterectomy?

‘I’ll go and check downstairs,’ Cloquet said.

‘No, I’ll go.’

‘You should rest.’

‘I need to move. *Ow. Fuck.* The baby shimmied, scraped something in me. It sent these violent communiqués. The same communiqué, every time: *I saw you. In the mirror. You and Delilah Snow.* Mother.

I waited for the pain to fold itself away again.

‘You sure you don’t want something?’ Cloquet asked.

I shook my head, no. Then held out my hand to him. ‘But I don’t think I can get out of this chair by myself.’
One minute you’re little Lula, eight years old, sitting on the counter in the Tenth Street diner drinking a vanilla shake under the pink Coors neon – the next this, the stink of liver under your fingernails and the water in the shower running red around your feet. In the thought experiment you commit suicide. *I wouldn’t do it. I’d kill myself.* In reality you don’t. In reality you kill and eat someone else. You start at one end of the experience, go through it, come out the other side. You’ve killed and eaten a human being. Blood winks on your fingers, mats the hair on your arms and snout. The gobbled life flails and struggles in what it touchingly mistakes for a bad dream. The moon sets. The next day you wake up in sheets that smell of fabric conditioner. There is CNN. There is coffee. There is weather. There is your human face in the mirror. The world, you discover, is a place of appalling continuity. *I ate his heart.* It seems incredible the words don’t refuse, don’t revolt. But why should they? *You* didn’t. There’s your horror, yes. But your horror’s a tide going out: every wave stops a little further away. Eventually the tide doesn’t come in any more. Eventually there’s just the sighing delta, the new you, the werewolf. The last werewolf, as it happens.

Jake had thought he was the last. He’d thought he was ready to go, too. *One by one I’ve exhausted the modes,* he wrote:
hedonism, asceticism, spontaneity, reflection, everything from miserable Socrates to the happy pig. My mechanism’s worn out. I don’t have what it takes. I still have feelings but I’m sick of having them. Which is another feeling I’m sick of having. I just . . . I just don’t want any more life.

Then he’d met me. Courtesy of the risible twist, the ludicrous coincidence. *Love has come*, he wrote.

*Full, incendiary, unarguable with. Love has come, and with it the renewed pricelessness of time. I think of an hour with her – then of my hundreds of thousands of hours before knowing her was possible, wasted hours, by definition. The life we could’ve had if she’d been around a century ago (or fifty years, or ten, or Jesus Christ five) is an obscenity in my imagination. The bigger obscenity, of course, is the question of how much life we’ve got. There’s no God but I know his style: he wouldn’t teach you the value of time unless you had fuck-all time left . . .*

He was right. We had two months. *Careful what you wish for*, he’d sent me, dying, in my arms. Before we’d met he’d wished for death. Death had listened. Death had made a note. Unerasable, it turned out.

A century and a half of loneliness coda’d by sixty days and nights of love. Not much of an equation. Reversed, it looked a lot worse: sixty days and nights of love followed by hundreds of years of loneliness. No wonder I missed every abortion appointment I made.

I had three recurring daydreams. One was of me with a twelve-year-old daughter living in a Los Angeles villa. Turquoise pool, cactus garden, sunlight, Cloquet in a straw hat and white bermudas teaching us French.
Another was of a little werewolf boy in a shredded school uniform covered in blood, a leftover eyeball in his lunchbox, a human tongue flopping out of his blazer pocket. Of course it was darkly hilarious. Dark hilarity’s always an option, if there’s no God.

I said three recurring daydreams.

I know.

Not yet.

Halfway down the basement stairs my legs buckled. I grabbed the banister, slid to my knees and vomited. Bile and water, since I hadn’t had solid food in twelve days. It hadn’t always been this way. I’d swanned through the first eighteen weeks of pregnancy symptom-free. Then, without warning, everything had changed. Cramps, vomiting, night sweats, visual disturbances, nosebleeds, back ache, diarrhoea, breathtaking uterine pains. Overnight, biology made me its punchbag. If I was lucky I got about a week’s grace post-transformation, when the bodily violence subsided, but when the moon hit first quarter it started up again, and the fiercer the hunger, the more maternity beat the shit out of me.

A curse on top of the Curse: you’re starving, but your appetite makes you sick. (My last victim, an onion-and-whiskey-flavoured pimp in Mexico City, had brought on x-rated vomiting less than an hour after I’d eaten him. A pointless death. Now he was an oddity among my dead, confused and wraithy from having not been taken in properly – or from having been taken in and then half forced out again.) For a while I’d clung to a moral theory, that motherhood abhorred murder. But things had happened. Things had happened, and the theory had gone.

‘It’s okay,’ I croaked down to Kaitlyn. ‘It’s just me.’

The stuff you come out with: It’s just me. Your other kidnapper.
How reassuring. Kaitlyn didn’t reply. She was on her feet by the camp-bed, holding the restraining cable. Twenty-three, according to her driver’s licence. Pale skin, greasy blonde hair, slightly bulbous blue eyes and a blow-up dollish mouth. Overall a look of not being quite clean (I imagined a grimy navel and a bedroom like the site of a poltergeist freak-out) but slim and pretty enough not to have suspected anything worse than a one-night stand when Cloquet picked her up in Fairbanks. She’d resigned early into the belief that sex was the only thing she had to offer, spent a lot of time dociely doing things in bed she really didn’t want to do, but hey, you know, that was guys, that was the world. There were millions of young women just like her all over America. I’d never been one of them. Because as a child I’d had love and winter nights with my dad talking me through the constellations. Because I’d had catastrophic drunk uncles who’d blearily sought my eight-year-old opinion and sharp aunts (Theresa excluded) who’d marched against the war in Vietnam. Because I’d had *The Iliad* and Emily Dickinson and the fabulous spectacle of my mother’s ego, her outrageous sense of entitlement.

‘It’s a lie about the ransom, isn’t it?’ Kaitlyn said, when I reached the bottom step. ‘I mean I’m not stupid. No one who gives a shit about me’s got any money.’ She was through the crying phase. She was through all the dramatic phases: shock, terror, rage, grief. It had taken seventy-two hours. Now there was mechanical misery. If we held her long enough it would become boredom. Eventually acceptance. But of course we weren’t going to hold her long enough. Why do you keep going down there? Cloquet wanted to know. You don’t have to have contact with her. Why don’t you let me deal with it?

‘It’s bullshit,’ Kaitlyn said. ‘I know it is. There’s no fucking ransom.’

The ransom story had been a kindness. To fill the hole. Which
would otherwise have filled with terrible things. Though never in a hundred years the correct terrible thing. I felt sorry for her. The Curse didn’t purge empathy. It waited for transformation to alchemise it into cruelty. That was why I kept coming down here, to measure how much of my human remained. Too much. Always too much. That was the genius of lycanthropy: species divorce was never finalised. No matter what you did to humans their claim on your feelings endured. (Wulf rolled its eyes. Of course their claim on your feelings endures. If it didn’t, killing and eating them wouldn’t feel so unbelievably good, would it?)

‘Tell me,’ Kaitlyn pleaded.

Her jeans smelled appetisingly sour. My hands were full of busy weakness. Three months back I’d eaten a twenty-four-year-old hiker in the Alleghenies. He was covered in russet fuzz and full of startling supple strength, the way a rabbit or a goose is when you grab it. He hadn’t ever been in love. He had a lot of love, waiting, undischarged. Courtesy of the dark hilarity, I thought Kaitlyn would be good for him. They’d be good for each other. When they met. In me. Talulla the matchmaker. This was the thing with dark hilarity: once you started, there was no end to it.

‘Don’t,’ she said, when I took a step closer. Without warning wulf had flared and bulged, pressed on her intuition like a thumb on a bruise. Fresh fear opened her pores, released fraught pheromones, a mouth-watering mix with the acrid denim. The animal moved in my jaws, rippled, swelled, for a second seemed to have torn through – that familiar trick, so convincing I put my hand up to where the giant muzzle should be. Nothing. Of course. Not yet.

‘Tell me why you’re doing this,’ Kaitlyn wailed, at the edge of tears.

I didn’t answer, but I knew when I raised my head the monster was looking out from behind my eyes. Kaitlyn’s face crimped and trembled. The low room suddenly obvious and me like no
woman she’d ever met. She put her hand up to cover her throat, where her skin was as pale as the flesh of an apple. The ghost claws tugged the nerves under my nails. They knew the body’s soft tensions and the joy of rupture. For a moment she sensed what was coming off me and thought *not human* — but nausea mugged me again and I turned away, heaved-up more bile. My fingers and toes strained in their sockets. My canines needled. A wall went up in Kaitlyn against what she’d thought because *not human* was, after all, crazy.

‘How can you do this?’ she said, not quite knowing what she meant. ‘I mean you’re fucking pregnant.’

I’d thought she was going to say: I mean you’re a fucking *woman*. Technically I wasn’t a woman, but even I, dirty, *filthy* little girl that I was, had wondered if the Curse wasn’t an opportunity to offer the Sisterhood some belated help, by taking male victims only. *Asshole* male victims, wherever possible. But *wulf’s* tastes were aggressively catholic, demanded the good, the bad, the ugly, the beautiful — and everything in between. Jake had tried it, the forced diet of villains (he once ate five murderers on the trot) but the monster had backlashed, pushed him into a reactive run of innocents. *Wulf’s* got God’s appetite, Lu, he’d said. Or literature’s. It wants the full human range, from saints to psychos. You try to weight the scales, trust me, the fucker won’t have it. He’d had the dark hilarity. Dark hilarity had been his MO — but it wasn’t enough on its own. He’d needed a purpose, too. That was the werewolf survival kit, dark hilarity plus purpose. For a hundred and sixty-seven years his purpose had been penance. Then he met me — and his purpose was love.

‘Did you hear me?’ Kaitlyn said.

I straightened, wiped my mouth, waited for the sickness to subside. ‘It’ll be over soon,’ I said. ‘I just came to see if you needed anything. He’ll bring you some food down in a little while.’
Richard, my ex-husband, once said: I hate that smug look a woman gets when she’s pregnant, as if her cunt’s gone on to the higher calling. It was the sort of thing he came out with to offend the po-faced, but deep down we both knew he meant it. I’d seen it in pregnant women myself, the new centre of gravity, the benign autism. Then, when I’d started to show, I’d seen people seeing it in me: a woman rich or dumb with certainty, glowing with inane self-containment. Even grief couldn’t touch it. I’d be lying curled-up on a hotel bathroom floor, face a mess of tears and snot because my idiot heart couldn’t stop reaching into the emptiness where Jake should have been – but a part of me always remained sealed, inviolate, wrapped like a force field around the new life I carried.

Until the night I met Delilah Snow. After that the force field pretty much unravelled.

By the time I got upstairs to my room the cramps were so bad I couldn’t make it to the bed. My face was a neuralgic map. My teeth chattered. I got down slowly onto my hands and knees and forehead. The thin Inupiat rug had a friendly smell of dust and patchouli and mould. Thanks to pain I’d rediscovered the humble
rewards of lying down in unlikely places. I could hear Cloquet weapons-checking downstairs. It was what he did to reassure himself. We had hardware stashed all over the lodge. Machine gun in the laundry hamper. Flamethrower under the sink. Crossbows in the closets. A dozen grenades. Tucked beneath my pillow were four wooden stakes and a Glock nine-millimetre. (Glocks, Colts, Springfields, Walthers, Tri-Stars, Magnums, Berettas. Until the Curse I’d been no more likely to own a gun than I would’ve been to own an elephant. Now I could’ve opened my own store.)

It took me a long time to crawl to the en suite and begin running a bath. (I’d taken a lot of baths, less for physical relief than psychological comfort: they reminded me of my teenage self, the little white bathroom on the third floor of the Park Slope house, where I’d go and soak and read and brood and scheme and take stock of my body and jerk-off.) Undressing was a dreamlike ordeal. For a moment, I knelt in front of the mirror. Stone breasts webbed with veins I’d never seen before. Belly as big as a cauldron. Navel sticking out like a lewd gesture. It’s disgusting, Lauren had said of her sister’s enormous pregnancy. She used to be pretty. Now she’s just this fat, shambling cow. Lauren would rather not have had a body. As far as she was concerned her body was engaged in a full-time campaign to gross her out or embarrass her in public. I remember the way she reacted when I told her — a while before either of us had begun it — what menstruation was. What do you mean you bleed an egg out? An egg? Jesus Christ, Lu, that is so repugnant. Why do you make this stuff up? But even while she was objecting I knew she knew I wasn’t making it up. I missed her. She’d ended up siliconed and divorced from a Los Angeles gangster. It had been years since we’d caught up, and now, no matter how long we talked, we’d never really catch up again.
I hauled myself onto the toilet and slumped there, exhausted. *I never saw a wild thing sorry for itself*, my mother used to quote, lifting my chin with her fingertips, drying my tears with her sleeve. *A small bird will drop frozen from a bough without ever having felt sorry for itself.* It worked every time, until one day when I was seventeen and hungover and heartbroken and I turned on her and said that wild things were incapable, by fucking definition, of feeling sorry for themselves and it was a stupid bogus poem and D.H. Lawrence was an asshole. And she’d said, Oh, I didn’t know you’d become so literal. I guess you’ve joined The Humans. That’s too bad.

A single big cramp dragged something out of me. I got, trembling, to my feet, and looked into the toilet bowl.

Blood. Mine. A lot. For a moment I thought I’d had a miscarriage. Relief, panic, excitement, anger – then the realisation that of course I hadn’t, that a seven-and-a-half-month foetus couldn’t just slip out like that, that there were no limits to the sort of moron I could be. Meanwhile the toilet held my blood with a kind of pathos, something sad and ugly it was condemned to show me. Standing there looking down at it I felt sorry for the little girl I used to be, who’d had no idea of the terrible changes to be visited on her.

*I never saw a wild thing sorry*... My mother said it one last time, between morphine fugues in hospital on her final day. My dad had gone to the bathroom. I was alone with her. I took her hand.

What’s that, Ma?

The disease and the drugs had given her a traumatized version of her beauty. When I was small one of my favourite things was watching her getting ready to go out, which she always did ironically, as if it was beneath her, until the very last moment, when she was ready and would give me a look of female collusion, woman to woman, in the mirror. I loved that look.
You’re like me, she said.

We stared at each other. For a distended moment it was as if we’d become one person. She said: I don’t want to go. Then the drug descended again and her eyes closed. It was the last time she spoke. Four hours later she was dead.

I flushed the blood away. Goosefleshed, scalp aching, I stepped into the tub, lowered myself, eased my shoulders under the water. The heat took the edge off the pain, and the change in temperature surprised the baby into stillness. I thought of Kaitlyn saying, How can you do this? I mean you’re fucking pregnant.

Then something heavy and alive passed across the roof, very close, travelling fast.
OCOP. Vampires. Didn’t matter which. They’d found us.

Adrenalin zero to sixty – instantly. (And a flash of surprising relief: they’ll kill me and it’ll all be over and I’ll be dead and with Jake or at least with Mom. I had a vision of the three of us in a beautiful Roman forum version of the afterlife, olive trees, blue sky, me carrying the baby, laughing.)

I slipped getting out of the tub and chipped a bone in my knee. Ignored it. Dressed quickly, grabbed the Glock and a stake and went downstairs to wake Cloquet.

‘Did you see anything?’ he whispered. His face was pouchy from drunk sleep and his breath rotten with Jack Daniels but he had the Cobra’s safety off and was waking up fast.

‘Felt,’ I said. ‘Didn’t see.’ He understood: this close to transformation wulf made big inroads.

‘Here,’ he said, ‘take this.’ A crossbow and quiver of wooden bolts pulled from the drinks cabinet. ‘Anyone comes through the door, you know what to do.’

‘You need me with you,’ I said. He started to protest, but I cut him off. ‘If it’s a vampire you’ll need my nose. I’m not asking.’

He knew I was right. ‘Okay,’ he said, ‘but please stay close.’

We opened the door and stepped outside. Cold assaulted us.
Moonlit snow scintillated as if with delight. The drive, cleared by Cloquet days earlier, ran straight to the dirt road beneath the trees thirty yards away. At right-angles to the house was a stone outbuilding housing Ski-Doos, snowcat, mini-plough, emergency generator and miscellaneous tools. The Cherokee was dug-out and snow-tyred, ready to go. I put my hand on its flank as we passed, the way a girl would casually reaffirm the bond with her horse. We scanned the roof’s edge in silence. Cloquet looked at me. Is it still here? I nodded. Yes, but not close. Vampire? I couldn’t be sure. We don’t get on with vampires, Jake had warned me. Mutually assured revulsion. We’re inimical to boochies at the genetic level. Genetic or not, we couldn’t stand the smell of each other. If there was one nearby the reek would soon have me reeling. My dead pins-and-needled in my arms and legs. Cloquet mouthed, emphatically: You stay here.

I mouthed back: No fucking way.

It must have taken us fifteen or twenty minutes to go around the lodge, stopping, listening. In places the snow was so deep we had to wade. There was frantic cellular activity in my chipped knee. Cloquet used night-vision binoculars for a sweep of the trees. Nothing. Nevertheless the ether trembled. Whatever it was it was still here, moving as we moved, preserving the distance between us, an odour or vibe maddeningly just out of range.

We made it back to the driveway, exhausted, without incident. Cloquet’s face looked scrubbed awake. A dewdrop hung from the tip of his nose. I knew what he was thinking: if I’d sensed a vampire then a vampire had sensed me. Our cover was gone. We’d have to move. Right now. That thought – flight, again, the energy it would demand – filled me with fervent weakness. I tried to see myself rushing upstairs and throwing essentials into a bag. The image drained me. I closed my eyes and rested my head gently against the Cherokee’s passenger window. I wanted
to sleep. For ever. Lie down in the snow and go out. Go out, go out beyond all doubt—

Then the scent hit me full force, and I knew what it was.

I opened my mouth to tell Cloquet – didn’t need to: a wolf, lean and dark and silent, dropped like a long dollop of molasses from the roof to the pitched porch, sprang from there onto the bonnet of the Jeep, paused, didn’t look at me, then leaped down and took off along the drive.

We watched without a word until it disappeared into the trees.

Smiling, I realised it was the first time I’d smiled in days, maybe weeks. I’d got one glimpse of his green mineral eyes and a big pulse of his alert masculine allegiance. I’d felt myself extending into him, seeing through his eyes and (paradox like a zen koan) my own, simultaneously. An invisible nervous system stretched through and beyond him to an unseen wolf pack. They were with him, with me, we were part of the same tense consciousness.

‘Is that why we’re out here?’ Cloquet whispered.

‘Yes.’

‘Mon Dieu, he was big.’

‘You won’t believe this,’ I said, ‘but I’ve never seen one in real life before. Not even in a zoo.’

‘How did it feel?’

With the smile a few tears had welled, fallen, stopped. Not sentiment. Just the effect of respite from the pain, which, now the animal had gone, was returning. I blinked. It was a deep reassurance that he hadn’t really looked at me. He hadn’t needed to. His will had dissolved into mine, then out again.

‘I wasn’t quick enough,’ I said. ‘It’s like something going past in a fast-flowing stream.’

‘What?’
'I could have controlled him.'
'Really?'
'Yes.'

The baby, who’d gone quiet, now kicked again. I jammed my jaws together, closed my eyes, rode it out. Cloquet was still looking at the place in the trees where the wolf had disappeared.
‘Do me a favour, chérie,’ he said. ‘Make sure he knows I’m on your side, okay?’
There was a TV ad for diapers I’d kept seeing. A succession of ludicrously cute babies laughing or gurgling or crawling or lying on their backs kicking and flailing to a soundtrack of fruity clarinets. The last frame dissolved to a pretty young mother, blonde and fabulously wholesome in pale blue cardigan and white blouse, holding her freshly diapered infant in her arms, while the clarinets harmonised on a surprising, tender, intense note, to signify the bond of love between madonna and child, who stared into each other’s eyes, sacrosanct and eternal. There was no doubt this healthy young woman full of American calcium would kill to protect her baby, nor that she’d be greeted with a righteous species cheer if she did. I’d kept seeing this ad, couldn’t get away from it. Every time I heard those first clarinet notes fear surged from my scalp to my fingertips and the baby inside me took on ominous mass. But there was no changing channels. I was compelled to watch, even in the days before I met Delilah Snow – though it was only after I met her that I understood why.

Two hours before full moonrise I sat with a stack of Jake’s diaries in my bedroom window seat, wrapped in a blanket, sweating and shivering and being casually picked up then dropped by pain.
and wondering how much worse than this giving birth could possibly be. *My cousin Janine said it’s like taking a rock-hard shit the size of a baby*, Lauren had claimed. *Imagine that. And it could be a huge baby. I looked it up. In 1879 a woman had a baby that weighed twenty-three pounds. That’s like twelve bags of sugar all stuck together in a lump...* As kids Lauren and I had loved our dolls. But we’d pulled their arms and legs off too, or stuck pins in their eyes, fascinated by their trapped sentience, their utter paralysis in the face of our will. And when we’d tired of torture we went back to caring for them as if the abuses had never happened.

*Wulf* adjusted its position, squeezed my spine, momentarily split my elbows. My teeth chattered, then stopped. I took one of Jake’s diaries from the pile next to me.

*Meanwhile Bloomingdale’s and Desperate Housewives and Christmas and the government carried on*, I read.

*She was carrying on herself, in extraordinary fusion. I could see it in her tense shoulders and flushed face and the care with which she’d applied her make-up. It hurt my heart, the unrewarded courage of it, the particular degree of her determination not to fold in spite of everything. In spite of becoming a monster. It hurt my heart (oh, the heart was awake now, the heart was bolt upright) that she’d had to be brave all alone.*

But she never believed she *was* all alone. She was enough of a romantic to suppose she couldn’t be.

And she wasn’t.

Now she is.

I had all the journals. Six weeks after Jake’s death my dad had called to tell me there was a letter marked private addressed to me at the restaurant. *(My dad. The necessary lies. Obviously I couldn’t stay with him. Anyone close to me was in danger. So*
I told him I was going back to school at UCLA to finish my Masters. Sweetened it by giving him the job of finding a third restaurant, of which he’d be in sole charge. But the money, Lu, for Christ’s sake, where’s the money coming from? Two friends in Palm Springs looking to invest. What, those two gay guys? No, not them. You don’t know these two. I was at college with them… And so on, an ever-expanding fiction struggling to cover the mad truth that would otherwise kill him: Nikolai, your daughter’s a werewolf. Hair, claws, fangs, the whole B-movie deal. Twelve victims. You don’t want to know. Little Lula whose diapers you changed and whose rapt face listening to *Facts About the Planets or Tales of Ancient Greece* was one of your purest pleasures. Oh, yeah, and she’s got a bun in the oven. The father was a werewolf too, but he’s dead. He left her rich, mind you. That’s where the dough’s coming from…) The letter, which I sent Cloquet to pick up, was from Miles Porter, President of the Coralton-Verne International Private Bank on Fifth Avenue and 45th Street. Jake had left instructions: if, after a certain date, the bank had received no further instruction, Mr Porter was to contact me. I’d been authorised to access the safe deposit box held in Jake’s name. I had Porter’s direct line and, as per Jake’s instruction, ‘should call when I had the six-digit security code.’

Which I didn’t have. Which I had no clue how to get.

A vampire ruse? A WOCOP trap? During our first week in Manhattan together Jake had told me he’d made arrangements aside from the twenty million, but the subject was so morbid we never went into details. Now he was gone and I didn’t know what to do.

I called Miles Porter and told him I was travelling (in fact I was at a small overpriced hotel with too much dark wood in Cold Spring, having let my apartment go) but that I’d be in touch when I got back to the city. Then I hired a private
detective to make sure ‘Miles Porter’ was who he said he was. He checked out. Unfortunately this guaranteed nothing. WOCOP used civilians and vampires used familiars. In any case, I didn’t have the six-digit code.

A week passed. I rang the new tenant of my old apartment to see if there were messages or mail as yet unforwarded. Nothing. Then Ambidextrous Alison called. St Mark’s Bookshop had telephoned the restaurant. My copy of Heart of Darkness was ready for collection. Ask for Stevie.

I hadn’t ordered any books.

Heart of Darkness.

Marlowe.

Jake.

Conrad, not Chandler. Literary snob to the end. I sneaked back into Manhattan in a blonde wig and red-framed sunglasses. Stevie was a pudgy young guy with bleached hair and rosacea and a stare that said whatever your particular brand of assholery he’d seen it a thousand times before. He wore a Pearl Jam t-shirt and a white nose-stud I mistook at first for an enormous zit. Customer paid for this five months back and told us to call you on the specified date. As in yesterday. Didn’t leave a name but said you’d know.

Pages three, eight, fourteen and seventy with corners turned down and digits circled. 3, 8, 14, 70.

A big risk, but I took it.

Alone in one of the bank’s secure rooms I opened the metal case. Fifty-three journals, crammed with Jake’s tiny italic handwriting. Little black Moleskines in the recent years, further back calfskin or cloth bindings, half a dozen with broken jackets bound together with elastic or string, two or three water-buckled and freckled with mould. Some entries dated, others not. Long periods – decades, sometimes – when he gave up writing altogether.
There was a sealed envelope placed to be the first thing I’d see on opening the box. On the envelope it said:

In case we didn’t have enough time.

Love you.

Jake.

Inside were instructions on how to access six Security Code Only bank accounts in Switzerland, plus a list of half a dozen names, phone numbers and services, headed: People You Can Trust. I didn’t recognise any of them.

In case we didn’t have enough time.

Love you.

Jake.

Until that moment I’d been in bereavement’s phase of smiling idiocy: I’d see him again and we could laugh about all this together. Now, suddenly, it was over. I sat down on the floor of the booth with a feeling of fracture in my chest. Life tolerated weeks, months, years of your denial – then snapped out of it and turned on you with contempt: You dumb shit. He’s gone. You’re never going to see him again. You think there’s a reward for not crying? You think if you hold grief in long enough death’ll be moved to let him back in to life? Wake up, sister. Last werewolf or not he was one more scrap of paper on its way to the furnace – and so are you. So shed the tears and get up and stop kidding yourself that death – or life, for that matter – gives a fuck.

It was a bleak, detailed time in there under the fluorescents, inhaling the chemical smell of the carpet and the sad old odour of the books. Jake had made life bearable. Jake was gone. Draw the obvious conclusion.

Every time I thought, Right, get up, stupid, I found I couldn’t, but instead closed my eyes and wrapped my arms around myself again.
Eventually, I did get up. I had to, or wet myself where I sat. Biology’s indifferent to your big moments. Knocked-up biology doubly so. I had nothing to carry the journals in. Had to put them back and return with a wheelie case to collect them. (Silver-suited Miles Porter reacted to all these manoeuvres with barely restrained delight at their sanity.) You’d think I would have locked myself away and read the lot chronologically, but somehow I couldn’t. Going from start to finish would confirm that I’d had all of him there was to have. Instead, over the months, I’d dipped in at random. More like having a conversation. More like having him there with me.

*I keep thinking I should give Harley sex before I go*, I read.

*I have, after all, had sex with men. Two hundred years, you get around to it, along with everything else you get around to. By the end of the 1800s I’d done what I could to render myself completely AC/DC (Oscar Wilde was in the dock, so my buggery acquired political credentials) and I pride myself as few men can on having given it the old college try. But by the dawn of the twentieth century I was forced to concede, nobly elastic of anus though I was, that I had an abiding soft spot, which is to say hard spot, for the girls...*

Until the second trimester turned my body into a war zone it had been sexual business as usual. A dirty business of diminishing returns. There was no arguing with Curse libido (really, *no* arguing with it) but most of the time it was like drinking when you couldn’t get any more drunk. I got sick of come-stains and the loveless smell of condoms and curtains drawn in the afternoon and guys who either didn’t know what to say or couldn’t shut up. Aunt Theresa’s pronouncement nudged me like a dog who didn’t understand I wasn’t its owner any more. Even as a
child of the post-moral age I felt slutty and miserable a lot of the time, visited at moments — face twisted on the pillow, ass in the air, mouth slurring fuck me...fuck me...fuck me — by a vision of my doe-eyed dad (never my mom) standing in the corner shaking his head in sad disbelief. As a substitute, presumably, for him standing there shaking his head in sad disbelief when I yanked someone’s kidneys out and swallowed them like vol-au-vents. It didn’t take long for me to start relying on escorts, who at least didn’t expect smalltalk and left when they were told; but even that wasn’t straightforward. For one thing I didn’t have Jake’s knack of getting turned on by someone I thought was a moron. For another, the male nastiness that used to get me guiltily wet lost its erotic clout when I pictured these men meeting me in my other form. It was tough to take a guy’s cock-swagger seriously when you knew just the whimpering baby you could reduce him to come next full moon. Along with fear of what excessive screwing might do to my baby all this meant I ended up masturbating. A lot. Enough for a black comedy, if it hadn’t made me so lonely and miserable. At least, I told myself, when I could dredge up wryness, I wasn’t in any danger of falling in love.

Jake never slept with Harley, as I knew now I wouldn’t with Cloquet. I’d found out the hard way, caught by Curse lust one evening only a couple of weeks after Jake’s death. Cloquet was taking a shower and the bathroom door was ajar. I was passing. I stopped. I looked. He stood in profile with his palms against the cubicle wall, head bowed, eyes closed, water pounding his back. Tall, pale, thinly muscled body, a tattoo I couldn’t decipher on his left hip. His cock (circumcised) wasn’t erect, but it wasn’t fully flaccid either. Wulf grinned and licked her lips. I pictured myself walking in, opening the cubicle door, his face, surprised, the moment of mutual visibility, my hand reaching through the steam and him rising, rising for me—
No.

Verboten.

I knew it intuitively, and, since these were the days before Delilah Snow, I took it as evidence of a werewolf scheme of things, an unspoken catechism. A werewolf shall not enjoy carnal relations with her familiar. The bond had to be unequal, maybe specifically required unrequited—

Just at that moment Cloquet looked up and saw me.

We didn’t speak. He didn’t turn or try to conceal himself, but I knew from his look – part sadness for what was dead in himself, part relief to be free of it – that werewolf Commandments or not, he wasn’t going to be my lover. Someone had killed or broken the sexual man in him, though not, I knew, the need to submit to something he believed bigger than himself. (I knew who ‘someone’ was, too: Jacqueline Delon, gamine billionaire occultist femme fatale who’d stopped at nothing to get what she wanted. What she wanted was immortality. The non-figurative kind. She wanted to live forever and never look a day older. To which end she snared (and bedded) Jake Marlowe with a view to turning him and his prized sunlight-resistant blood over to the vampires, in exchange for their brand of eternal life. Cloquet had been her unhinged lover. He knew if she got what she wanted he’d lose her. So he’d tried to kill Jake. Twice, with farcical results. He needn’t have bothered. Jacqueline’s deal with the vamps never went down. Mid-transaction at her Biarritz retreat, WOCOP, who’d been tracking proceedings, launched an assault. Madame’s corpse was last seen playing human shield to one of her Undead business partners. From then on Cloquet stopped trying to kill Jake and started trying to kill the man responsible for Jacqueline’s death, WOCOP werewolf hunter, Eric Grainer. Life’s generally artless, Jake wrote, but it does get these occasional hard-ons for plot. It connects things, nefariously, behind your back, and before you know it
you’re in the final act of a lousy movie. A lousy horror movie, usually…

Cloquet did kill Grainer – but not before Grainer killed Jake. On a night of full moon, five months ago, in a Welsh forest, where, when the carnage and death and vengeance and loss had done their thing to us, I offered him my hand . . .

I turned from the bathroom doorway and walked away, embarrassed. Phoned an escort agency and selected a guy who received in-call clients and took a cab to his apartment (we were in San Francisco at the time) and had two hours of depressing muscudually efficient professional sex, sans conversation. The next morning I went to Cloquet’s room. He was up and dressed, standing by the window, apparently doing nothing, apparently waiting for me. I said: I’m sorry. He looked at the floor and said: I’m your friend. It’s a great thing in my life, to have a friend. Then he looked up at me and suddenly he seemed the saddest, gentlest man I’d ever seen. There was a suspended moment in which we both knew this was a chance to separate as well as a chance to continue, then the awkwardness dissolved between us and we knew we were past what had happened. I said: I’m glad we’re friends. I understand. Now let’s go have coffee.

After that I’d got organised, brought to libido the same management skills I’d applied to the restaurants and delis – until pregnancy and the Hunger started their war and my sex-drive died, albeit with the warning that it wouldn’t stay dead for ever.

Two hundred years, you get around to it… Would I? I’d never had sex with a woman, though it worked often enough as a fantasy. Women together in porn turned me on too, although in the desperate days jellyfish together would have turned me on. (I knew what was wrong with pornography. But the part of me that knew was weaker than the part of me that didn’t care as long as it worked. Of course it was depressing – and responsible
for making the question every twenty-first century female was sooner or later faced with *Will you put in your mouth something that’s just been in your ass?* Back when I might have wanted the cheap thrill of a guy’s contempt or the dreary high of self-degradation, maybe; but since the Curse I found I wanted different things... But when you needed to get yourself off it was hard to take the long view. Harder still when the long view in question was four hundred years.) I might have slept with a woman already if ubiquitous male coercion hadn’t put me off. (Richard, my ex-husband, made a monotonous art of it, allegedly mitigated by what he thought of as glamorously brutal honesty: I don’t want you to want to do it, for God’s sake. I want you to go down on a woman in spite of not wanting to. Jesus, where’s the fun in it for me if you want to? I thought everyone knew that.) Jake would’ve added his share, if he’d lived. He was *wulf,* but sufficiently *wer* so that he’d soon enough have been angling for a two-girl-one-guy fuckkilleat if my being the only female lycanthrope on earth hadn’t made it impossible.

Fuckkilleat.

I don’t just like it, I’d confessed to Jake. I don’t just like it. I love it. (And his hand between my legs had rewarded me. We’d exchanged horrors like wedding vows. Love and a shared nature could make any ugliness beautiful. Which left what was left when your lover was dead.) That was the inconvenient truth: killing and eating a victim felt very (pause) very (pause) good. And killing and eating a victim with someone you loved? It was as the heroin addicts said of their drug: if God made anything better, He kept it for Himself. The memory of the kill with Jake at Big Sur bubbled stickily around everything else in my head, caramelizing my brain. It had been bliss. That was the word: bliss. You don’t forget bliss. Especially when you know you’ll never have it again. Even if I got my appetite back it wouldn’t be the same.
The Curse insisted there was no solo route to heaven. You needed a partner in crime. Better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. Really? It didn’t feel like it facing four centuries of never draining the filthy Grail again. My mother once told me she thought hell would be nothing more than being given a glimpse of God – then having it taken away, for ever.

Which thought led me back to the question I’d forbidden myself from asking, and which I couldn’t stop asking, and which I’d been asking since the first days after Jake’s death: Couldn’t I make myself a companion?

Werewolves don’t reproduce sexually, the journal said:

Howler girls are eggless, howler boys dud of spunk. If you haven’t had kids by the time you’re turned you’re not having any, get used to it. Lycanthropic reproduction is via infection: survive the bite and the Curse is yours.

But here’s the thing, the old news, the stale headline: no one is surviving the bite any more.

Thanks to a virus. For which WOCOP had found a cure. A cure they’d shot into me the night I was bitten. (The organisation had had an internal crisis: with werewolves at the brink of extinction the Hunt had all but cancelled its own paycheck; the guys who did their job so well they did themselves out of a job. Certain members had realised this and resolved on getting monster numbers back up. The World Organisation for the Control of Occult Phenomena found itself facing an insurgent offspring, the World Organisation for the Creation of Occult Phenomena. The ideologues and old-schoolers, horrified, reacted by coming down hard on the rebel faction, but in the interim I’d been darted – accidentally – with what turned out to be an efficacious version of the anti-virus. I was bitten, I didn’t die, I changed.)
So if any of my victims survived, wouldn’t they become were-wolves too, the old-fashioned way? In theory it was as simple as finding a guy I liked then taking him for a moonlit stroll at that time of the month. *If you go down in the woods today…* Except of course for the minor snag of how his feelings towards me would change once he realised that every full moon he’d have to transform into a monster and rip someone to pieces and eat them. *I know you hate me for doing this to you, but trust me, once you’ve experienced fuckkilleat you’ll be glad I did…* Not a good start to a relationship. But what was the alternative? My libido was dead now but resurrection was only a matter of time. There was no kidding myself I was going to make it through the next four hundred years effectively – by werewolf standards – celibate.

That isn’t going to be the problem, Lulu, I imagined my mother saying. The problem is going to be finding a man worth Turning…

I was shivering so badly now I couldn’t hold the journal steady. I set it aside and crawled onto the bed, hands swollen, body jabbering with cramps. Random memories detonated: lying with my face on the Brooklyn stoop watching a bee sipping a puddle of spilled Pepsi; my mother laughing at something grown-up; my first period, that warm trickle like a big teardrop but I put my fingers there and it was blood and Mrs Herschel saying in a smokey sisterly way you’re a young lady now Talulla, which just made me think of Lady Diana and creepy big-eared Prince Charles.

‘It’s time,’ Cloquet said from the doorway.

‘I know.’

‘As we decided?’

‘Yes.’

*As we decided.* We hadn’t decided anything. We’d made hypothetical observations. *Outside would be easier to deal with. We shouldn’t forget we have sedatives. It would be better if I went out first.*
Behind these were bald specifics: Cloquet would give her a sedative. I would go into the forest. He would bring her out and tie her up. I would come out of the dark and take her life, quickly. Or as quickly as the hunger’s tastes allowed.

At the thought of which *wulf* gave me a jolt of demand that nearly threw me from the bed.

‘You better go,’ I said. My watch showed 16.42. Moonrise was 17.11. Twenty-nine minutes. I wondered if Kaitlyn was awake. What sort of life she’d be leaving behind. No one who gives a shit about me’s got any money. The sour-smelling jeans and the chipped nail polish and the trying not to see the contempt the guys had for her even when they were holding her head and going Oh yeah baby, that’s it, just like that, you could still tell it was contempt just beneath – but the hunger interrupted with a flash of her midriff punctured and the soft white meat opening with helpless obedience (the word ‘flensing’ suggested itself, though I wasn’t even sure I knew what it meant) and I couldn’t lie still any longer but got up and staggered with unstrung knees downstairs and watched Cloquet draw the sedative into the syringe and we couldn’t quite look each other in the eye.

‘Are you okay?’ he asked. I stood in the doorway, flesh heavy with the sordid basics of my needs. My old voice inside still sometimes objected: You can’t do this. It’s the worst thing. You have to stop. My old voice was a machine that didn’t realise its own obsolescence. Because while it went on the new voice eloquently didn’t say anything, knew it didn’t have to, knew the argument was already won. And in any case, this wasn’t the worst thing, killing Kaitlyn. I knew what the *real* worst thing was. I’d known since the night I met Delilah Snow.

‘I’m fine,’ I said. He’d left me blankets on the couch. So I’d have something between me and the cold when I stripped. Practicalities, like biology, endured.
‘I’ll go downstairs now,’ he said. Gentle. For my benefit. So I’d be kind to myself and not mind the murder.

When I change I change fast. The moon drags the whatever-it-is up from the earth and it goes through me with crazy wriggling impatience. I picture it as an electrical discharge, entering at my soles and racing upwards in haywire detonations that shock the bones and explode the neurons. The magic’s dark red, violent, compressed. I get random flashes of mundane memory – pushing a shopping cart around Met Foods; opening my apartment window; standing on a subway platform; saying to someone, No, that’s carbohydrates in the evenings – intercut with images of the kills: a white male body on an oil-stained warehouse floor; a solitary trailer with a storm lamp burning; a female thigh releasing a dark arc of blood; my clawed hand scooping out a still-hot heart. This is the Curse’s neatest trick: one type of memory doesn’t destroy the other. It’s still you. It’s still all you. You wouldn’t think you were built to bear such opposites, but you are. You’d think the system would crash, but it doesn’t.

Meanwhile, the freak biology show. My lungs expand, threaten to burst against the ribs – but never do. My spine elongates in three, four, five spasms and the claws come all at once, like speeded-up film of shoots sprouting. I’m twisted, torn, churned, throttled – then rushed through a blind chicane into ludicrous power. Muscular and skeletal wrongness at an elusive stroke put right. A heel settles. A last canine hurries through. A shoulder blade pops. The woman is a werewolf.

And she’s starving.

I stood, transformed (jaws open, tongue as thick as a baby’s arm, breath going up in signals of dreadful life), half a dozen trees back from the edge of the drive. Moments ago I hadn’t wanted this.
Now I wanted nothing else. Same every time: you forgot the Curse was an exchange, took your speech and your mercy but gave you in return the planet’s dumb throb and your own share in it. Lilac shadows on the snow, the fine-tuned trees, the Eucharist moon and the victim’s heart like a song calling you home.

Kaitlyn wouldn’t see me waiting here. She wouldn’t see me until the last moment, but in all the moments before the last moment she’d know what she didn’t want to know, that the worst thing had come to her. The worst thing was a simple thing, an old thing, an ordinary thing – and here it was. She’d look for God, guardian angels, miraculous intervention – and get nothing. Just the trees and the snow and the moon – nothing from them either. She’d get the real universe, once, before the end.

The two of them emerged from the front doorway, Kaitlyn tranquillised, Cloquet struggling to hold her up. He’d dressed her warmly, hat, gloves, fleece. Reflex kindness. Or else he didn’t want the cold to undermine the sedative. A few steps past the Cherokee her left knee buckled and she went down, crookedly. I could see him considering fireman’s-lifting her, the effort it would take to carry her all the way to the trees. He settled for uncuffing her and taking her arm over his shoulder, wrapping his other arm around her waist, her head lolling. As they staggered towards me, I thought, Like a guy and his drunk girlfriend.

A voice with a weird accent said: ‘Twenty thousand years, you think you’ve seen it all.’

I jumped. It was right behind me (how the fuck?) – but when I turned there was no one there.

For a moment I stood still, breath moist and warm around my muzzle.

Then my waters broke.