

Vulpine

By Terri Mullholland

Marion wakes early in the morning, before dawn, to the sound of foxes screaming. Her colleague, Alison, told her that January is fox mating season. It is also wolf mating season. Marion thinks this is strange. There's snow on the ground; wouldn't it be better to wait until spring, to warm sunshine on your flanks, to the smell of flowers. But why be like all the other animals?

She always knew she was different.

The first sign that things might not be right was at nursery school. Marion had been playing a ball game and, in her excitement, had somehow nipped the hand of one of the other children. Quite a nasty nip. His parents said he needed a tetanus shot.

The other children kept away from her after that, kept their taunting to a safe distance. She would find anonymous notes on her desk, telling her she was ugly, ginger, she smelled like a dirty dog.

Then there was Marion's interest in the raw meat hanging in the window of the butcher's shop. She could often be found there, staring into the window. When she had pocket money, she would go in after school and buy a small piece of raw steak or chicken to devour while her friends were gorging on barley sugar and lemon sherbet from the sweet shop next door.

The butcher must have known. As time went on, he'd often save her some of the offcuts. And, after seeing her watching him, eyes glinting, as he pulled out the entrails, heart, and kidneys from a dead lamb, he packaged them up for her. Told her not to tell her parents.

From an early age, Marion was in love with the butcher. He always smelled of raw meat. She would watch him wipe his blood-stained hands on the front of his white apron. She dreamed of sucking his fingers one by one, perhaps popping one off with her sharp teeth. She craved meat at blood temperature rather than the chilled cuts with which she had to make do. It was like eating ice cream in winter.

In the woods, she started finding small creatures, mice, rats, and, on one occasion, a juicy pigeon. She was fast and her teeth were sharp. They didn't stand a chance. Marion never took her prey home. Just like she never took the butcher's meat home. They would have smelled it on her. Instead, she ate outdoors and then came home and ate a dainty meal of cooked meat and vegetables. Her parents said she ate like a bird.

After school, she got a job working in a library. A quiet job. No animals, nothing to tempt her. She spent her days dusting spines and stacking books, smiling at the general public and trying not to bite people when they said stupid things about books.

When puberty hit, Marion became increasingly bristly, a soft down growing over her body and face that she would shave off daily. It was copper red, like the hair on her head. She overheard one of her colleagues calling her the bearded lady. She started taking a razor to work to deal with the amber shadow that would creep across her face towards the end of the day.

She moved out of her parents' house and into a cheap bedsit above the butcher's shop. Her bedroom window looked out onto a dark alleyway, full of overflowing bins and rotting flesh. It was patrolled nightly by feral cats and urban foxes, scavengers, fighting over the tastiest morsels.

Sometimes she would go down in the early evening, after the shops had shut and before the night animals appeared, and rifle through the bins herself. They had a better selection than any supermarket.

She often watched the butcher, packing up the shop for the day. She would have liked to invite him up to her lair, but she knew he had a wife and children. She wasn't a homewrecker.

The noise of the foxes outside her window is getting louder, there is an urgency to it that she has never noticed before. Marion gets up on all fours and crawls across the bed to the window on her hands and knees. She opens the window wide. The sound and scent of fox fills the room. Her ears twitch and her nose sniffs the cold air. It comes again, a deep scream that fills the room. She feels her body tense with excitement and before she can stop it, a noise is coming up from the depths of her being and she is uttering a long howling shriek in return.

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