

A Backwards Birthday

She was sitting on the edge of the bed in a black dress, her back as straight as a board. It's not like she had a choice, otherwise the dress was too tight. The black patent leather shoes on her feet were like mirrors in which she could see her room reflected. Her mother was crying in the bath.

The party had just ended. Her mother always held something of an annual remembrance: so they didn't forget her father – hip, hip, hurray – dead another year. A backwards birthday so to speak. Wolfie called it death-day. It wasn't festive, there were no streamers, no music, the curtains were half drawn and all the rooms condemned to semi-darkness. The house was filled with people dressed in black whose names she couldn't remember. They watched her furtively, from the corners of their eyes. If Wolfie returned their glances, heads quickly turned in the other direction. Now and then, someone tried engaging her in conversation. But she didn't feel like talking to people who felt sorry for her. Anyway, it was always only about her father. Wolfie was very young when he died so she remembered little if anything about him. And the stories she did know, she'd already heard a hundred times before. She was unable to cry like her mother. Luckily, with every year that passed, less and less guests showed up. If this continued, soon there would be nobody and they could finally skip this miserable party.

As hard as she tried, she couldn't reach the zipper on her back. 'Who even makes a dress you can't take off yourself?' she exclaimed aloud. She hated dresses: not only were they uncomfortable, there was always a draft by your legs. Her mother said you get used to it and that it feels good in the summertime. Wolfie pulled her pants on under the dress and put on her coat. She kicked the black patent leather shoes into a corner. Her favourite sneakers were waiting under the bed. She took a quick whiff before putting them on. So what if they stank like French cheese, they were very comfortable. She snuck past the bathroom on tiptoe, headed outdoors, and closed the front door gently behind her.

Outside, everything was business as usual. Nobody knew about death-day. Everywhere she looked, the curtains were wide open. She headed toward the centre of town, to a busy street filled with stores and people and cars and with lots going on, and gazed in the shop windows. She zigzagged through the crowd listening to snatches of conversations. She was bored by what she heard. It was all about TV shows or teabags and dog food, but it was good to walk... just to be able to walk.

Out of the blue, above the street noise, she heard a woman's voice. It reminded Wolfie of a balloon letting out air. The singing was loud and off key. Wolfie couldn't make out the words but the song was very cheerful. With her ears pricked, she followed the sound and tried to catch a glimpse of who was singing in-between

the backs blocking her way. There was a woman with matted hair in a bright pink dress sitting on a piece of carpet in front of a shop window. She sang with her mouth wide open. Wolfie was shocked because the woman had no teeth. She saw Wolfie staring and sang even louder and more cheerfully.

Wolfie was fascinated by the black hole formed by her mouth. She couldn't stop staring at this cavern where there had once been teeth. The woman stood up and held out a cupped hand.

Wolfie kept her eyes on the hand, so she didn't have to look directly in the hole. The cupped hand came closer, the voice grew louder and louder. Wolfie had no money, so she couldn't give the woman anything. She took a few steps backward, turned and ran off.

'Hey girly, don't go, the show's not over yet!'

Wolfie ran faster and faster, afraid that the woman might follow her. Only when she was a safe distance away did she dare to turn around. The toothless woman was still on her rug. She hadn't moved from her spot. She started singing again, as if nothing had happened. How sad, Wolfie thought. Really sad... I should go back there right now and say something nice. But Wolfie kept walking, focused on the sound her sneakers were making: *shh-shh-shh-shh-shh*.

It had started getting dark.

Oh, I've forgotten the time, Wolfie thought. She was at one of her favourite spots: a round plaza with a large gnarled tree in the middle, lots of cafes, a flower shop and a book store filled with dusty old volumes. The shops were already closed, but lights were burning behind the café windows. The bookstore belonged to the mother of Hildegard, a girl in Wolfie's class. Nearly every time Wolfie went into this shop, her eyes burned and sometimes she had to cough. She pressed her nose against the window and peered at the books on display. There was a large atlas that looked as if it had been washed up on shore somewhere. She had stared at it often enough. There were always new books in the window, but the atlas had been there for as long as she could remember. The cover was brownish-green and covered in a thick layer of dust. You could just about make out the gilded letters underneath.

'Pretty, huh?' she heard a raspy voice say behind. She was afraid to turn around. 'I want to buy it,' the man said, 'every day I want to buy it, but what can I...'

She tried standing perfectly still.

'If you give me money now...'

'Then I'd rather buy it myself,' Wolfie blurted out.

'It's enormous, what are you going to do with it?'

Wolfie didn't respond.

'Why does a girl like you need such a big book? Give the money to me and I'll give it a good home.'

'But I DON'T have any money!'

Wolfie spun around. She had to glance up because the man was a giant. She was met by a wild beard. A row of teeth appeared from

behind the beard.

'Don't be afraid, I don't rob little girls. Besides, I don't need anything. Nothing. From nobody.'

The man turned and trudged away. Wolfie gazed at his back. He was big with broad shoulders. His hair was a mess.

He resembled a pirate, but without an eye patch or a wooden leg.

Wolfie found him a bit scary, but she was also

curious. She followed him at a safe distance, keeping pace with his walk. Left... right... left... right. There was a narrow alleyway next

to the bookstore partially covered by a makeshift tin roof. A thick mattress was lying on the ground completely blocking the

street. The man went and laid down on the bed with his feet facing

her. Wolfie kept watching, waiting for him to move. She hadn't

seen him around the plaza before. Never, in her life, had she

seen such a strange man. He began to snore. She hoped he was

faking, but he wasn't. He was sound asleep.

'Where were you?

Her mother was bent over the kitchen table drinking something out of a shot glass. The house was theirs again.

'You have any idea what time it is?'

Wolfie shrugged apologetically. She glanced at the clock and held her breath. It was later than she thought.

'Sorry, I forgot about the time,' she tried explaining. Her mother looked annoyed and noisily blew her nose in a tissue.

'Mum...?'

'Yes?'

They gazed at each other for a long time. Wolf went and sat down across from her mother.

'Can't we skip the party next year?'

'I don't think so.'

Wolfie sighed.

'Is it so terrible?' her mother asked. 'It's also for you, so you don't forget your dad.'

'I forgot him a long time ago.'

Her mother gave her a tired smile.

'Maybe we should go to bed... I've spent the whole day talking and listening.'

And crying, Wolfie thought, but she didn't say it.

Her mother finished her drink, slammed the glass on

the table and looked at Wolfie sternly: 'And where were you tonight?'

'I just took a walk... and met a pirate.'

'What?'

'A pirate without a ship...'

Her mother smiled. 'C'mon, let's go to bed.'

'Will you help me with this zipper?'

'Of course.'

'Dresses are stupid.'

'Well, sometimes you just have to wear a dress.'

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Wolfie
Author Claudia Jong
With illustrations by Kees de Boer

ages 7 and up

Wolfie's mother thinks that she is old enough to buy a new coat all by herself. The little one agrees with her. However, how could her mother have known that she would befriend Red, a vagabond, who spins out beautiful stories and who is always thirsty. And red wine is certainly not cheap. Wolfie did not dare tell her mother that the money she'd been given for the new coat had vanished. Fortunately, Red has devised a plan to earn money. The plan went off smoothly, that is, until Wolfie's mother finds out what they are up to. To put it mildly: she was far from happy about it. However, when she gets to know Red better and finds that he is a great help to Wolfie getting over the loss of her father, she forgets about being angry.

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