

It Runs in the Family

by Molly N. Moss

Hunger shot through Andria's growling tummy. She finished her fourth plate of scrambled eggs and lifted hopeful eyes to her mama. "Can I have some more?"

On hold on a telephone call, her mama shook her head and gestured at the wall clock. "You best hurry, if you want grandmama to take you to see *X-Men* this afternoon."

It was 11 AM and Andria was still starving after two bowls of Fruit Loops, four plates of scrambled eggs, six strips of bacon, six sausage links, two glasses of milk and a glass of orange juice. "But Mama, I'm so hungry!"

"You must be starting a growth spurt." Mama grinned, showing straight bright white teeth. Andria was glad she had teeth like her mama's. "Get going, girl. You know grandmama is taking you to lunch before the movie."

Groaning, Andria pushed her chair back from the table and went upstairs to her bedroom. She changed her nightgown for a t-shirt, shorts, and sandals. Already the temperature was in the 90s and the humidity was about the same, and the hottest time of day was still hours away. She was sweating a little by the time she returned to the kitchen and kissed her mama goodbye.

"What's that on your chin?" Mama leaned closer and squinted. "Oh, it's a hair. Sorry kiddo, it runs in the family."

"Oh no!" Horror-stricken, Andria turned to the window and positioned herself so she could see her reflection. Sure enough, a black hair had sprouted from her chin. Tears burned in

her eyes. "Mama, get rid of it, please!"

But Mama, still on the phone, waved a hand at the wall clock. "You're already late. Go on. We'll tweezer it when you get home."

"I can't go to the movies like this! What if I see one of the kids from school?"

"Pretend you've got a cough." Mama cupped her hand around her lips, hiding her chin. "That's what I did, at your age."

This was a disaster, and the only thing Andria could do was hurry to grandmama's house and borrow her tweezers. Andria would die if Jackson Thomas saw her with a big black hair sticking out of her chin. Jackson was the cutest boy in Loveless County, or probably all of Georgia.

At the end of their driveway, Andria stopped to think. If she went to Grandmama Hunt's house the way Mama always did, she'd have to run or bicycle to get there on time. No way was she going to get all sweaty doing either one of those. But if she took a shortcut through the woods she could just walk, and it would be cooler in the trees. So she walked along Post Road, the steamy air thick in her nose and sticky on her bare arms and legs.

When she crossed the bridge over Cypress Creek she saw some neighborhood boys fishing. Behind her a scrawny balding guy stopped at the bridge to chat with the boys. Her tummy growled again and she could almost taste catfish flaking sweetly on her tongue.

She struck out through the forest, the shade among the trees heavenly compared to the broiling streets in town. Her progress was slower than she'd imagined, as she struggled to remember the way. She'd never gone through the woods to visit her grandmama all alone, until now. Her older brother Markus had always led the way. Markus said Andria had no head for directions.

That wasn't totally fair of Markus. She knew if she went downhill she'd come to the Bottoms, and eventually to the Okefenokee Swamp. Even if she could see the sun through the treetops, she wouldn't know which way was north, or whatever. But she knew if she kept going uphill, sooner or later she'd come out in town.

So Andria trudged uphill. Insects buzzed, and furtive rustlings in the undergrowth alerted her that the small critters living in the forest were afraid she might hurt them. Her stomach hurt with hunger so bad, they might be right. As she walked along, she fidgeted with the hair sprouting from her chin, trying to pinch it and pull it out.

Without warning something slammed into her back, knocking her face-down in the damp black dirt. A calloused hand clamped over her mouth and her shorts were yanked down to her knees. She squirmed, fighting to get free, but she was pinned under more weight than she could throw off.

“Be still, and don't make a sound, or I'll hurt you bad.”

Andria thought the voice was familiar. Her heart thundered in her chest, louder even than her growling tummy, as she tried to think. Then she realized: the voice belonged to the scrawny balding man who'd followed Andria to the bridge over Cypress Creek.

It wasn't fair. She hadn't talked to him, hadn't gone with him anywhere. Mama always said if she didn't talk to strangers or go anywhere with them, she'd be safe.

Suddenly she noticed her hands. Big black hairs were coming out on them, just like the single ugly hair on her chin. Her fingernails turned into claws, and the sharp tips of her teeth pricked her lips.

And her stomach growled again, so loud the stranger on top of her actually stopped pulling down her panties and whispered, “What was that?”

She was so very hungry. His hand still covered her mouth.

Andria bit his hand. He shrieked and his blood streamed onto her eager questing tongue. She tore a hunk of flesh off his thumb with her fangs. It all tasted delicious.

With a snarl, Andria writhed under the man and shook him off. Then she pounced on him and tore open his throat.

#

She didn't know how much time had passed while she ate her fill of man meat. There was still a lot of flesh left on his legs, and she hadn't touched his head. Under the skin, she'd discovered, human meat looks exactly like beef steak – but it tastes just like pork.

When she loped back to Cypress Creek, the shadows in the forest were darker, and the boys who had been fishing were all gone home. Andria bent down to the water, on her hands and knees, and drank for a long time.

Then she noticed her reflection. She looked like a wolf.

Howling, desperately afraid, she raced home. When she yanked the front door open, she dimly realized the hair on her hands was sinking into her skin, out of sight. Now she couldn't tell her mama the whole story, because she'd look normal again, just an 11-year-old girl and not a wolf at all. But she wanted her mama anyway.

Tears burned in her eyes. “Mama! Mama!”

Her mama came to the top of the stairs. Seeing Andria, she hurried down, taking two steps at a time, and swept her daughter into a fierce hug. “Andria, sweetie, what's wrong?”

She told her mama about the scrawny balding man who followed her into the woods and attacked her. All the while her mama held her tight, rocking her like when she was little. When she finished, her mama stroked her hair and looked her in her eyes, a weird searching look that

seemed to last a long time.

“But something else happened too, didn't it?”

Andria didn't dare talk about that. Her mama had always told her the biggest trouble she could get into would be for telling lies. There wasn't any way she could tell the truth, this time, without it sounding like a lie.

Her mama grinned, and Andria blinked. Mama's straight white teeth looked sharp-tipped.

“You turned into a wolf, and you killed him and ate him. Didn't you?”

“Mama...?”

“I do it too.” Her mama patted her shoulder. “We're werewolves, kiddo. It runs in the family.”

END