

Excerpt from *The Fur* by Maren Wurster

Translated from German by Lucy Jones

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When Vic went into the bathroom the following morning, Lotta followed her, stopping at the door, where she hopped from one bare foot to the other, playing with the handle. Vic squeezed toothpaste onto her brush. Lotta came up alongside her by the sink, stood on a stool, took her own toothbrush with a silver star and copied her. They stood side by side brushing their teeth together. In the mirror, Vic saw the way the girl chewed on her toothbrush and studied her from the side. Vic spat into the sink; Lotta spat into the sink. A large and a small blotch of toothpaste and saliva ran slimily towards the plughole. Vic let the water run into her palms and wiped the residue away from the sink with her fingers.

“Why don’t you have a baby?” Lotta asked.

Vic shrugged.

The child rubbed her eyes. “I have to go to the loo.”

“Shall I go out?”

The girl nodded.

On the return journey, they stopped at a supermarket. Karl went shopping while Vic stayed in the car with Lotta. She watched Karl as he strolled over the car park to the entrance of the shop, his jeans hanging low. Because of the curve in his back, his behind swayed back and forth a little at every step. Lotta clambered between the seats and sat on Vic’s lap, putting her hands on the steering wheel.

“Where are we going?” Vic asked.

“To Grandma Inge and Grandpa Jürgen.”

Lotta turned the steering wheel. Vic felt the little girl’s bones digging into her thighs. The girl’s hair smelled of chewing gum. She showed Lotta how to turn on the indicator, spray water on the windscreen, use the wiper and press the warning light switch. Beeping the horn was the girl’s favourite thing. A man was walking past the car with shopping bags, and he flinched and

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looked at them in surprise when the horn sounded.

“His face!” Lotta tugged excitedly at Vic’s top. Whenever someone passed the car, Lotta beeped the horn and squeaked with joy. Vic laughed along with the child and at the shocked, angry or laughing faces of the passers-by. Lotta scratched at her neck in excitement. Two women leaning on their shopping carts were talking and pointing at them with their fingers.

“Louder!” Vic shouted and the child honked and bounced about on her lap as she did so.

All of a sudden, Karl was there in front of the car, taking a photo of Vic and Lotta, who waved back at him.

“They’re even talking about you in the supermarket,” he said as he sat down on the passenger seat. “Berliners, a woman said, and the other one nodded like this. They think we’re house squatters, some kind of hippy parents.” He laughed.

“But we don’t even have a house,” Lotta said.

“Exactly,” said Karl and stroked the little girl’s head, “and now off you go, to the back, where you belong.”

Under her message to Karl there are two blue ticks. She reads her text aloud several times. She feels the damp warmth of her breath under the covers, then rolls over onto the other side. Sticking her head out, she goes back to staring at the wall. Her jacket hangs on one of the hooks, the sleeves dangling limply. She breathes jerkily in and out, feeling the air coming in spasms through her corded-up throat. The unease in her chest has grown hard. She lurches up and goes to sit down on the step in front of the hut. Between the terrace and the wall there is a spider’s web, its threads hung with droplets of water like pearls on a chain. A sigh from the neighbouring hut makes her ears prick up. It is silent, then she hears the soothing noise again, and the sound of slapping skin. There is a brief delay in the pace and then the rhythm picks up again. She cups

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one of her breasts and re-opens her phone messages. Karl is online. Quickly, she closes the app and nervously combs her fingers through her hair. It's still early in the morning and Karl is online. And so is she for a change. Karl and Vic are online. Nothing else happens.

She stumbles over a tent rope and the peg rips itself out of the ground, chunks of dirt stuck in the notches. She pushes it back into the hole. The metal stake no longer finds a hold in the ground; it sits slackly and the rope sags, making the flysheet stick to the lining, which reveals something round underneath. She carries on to the shower rooms.

As she soaps her back, she feels the hairs under her foamy hands. And suddenly her heartbeat, pumping through her torso and up into her throat, staccato-like in her ears. Agitatedly, she feels her skin with her fingers, brushing her back upwards. Stubble stands on end under her fingertips, feeling prickly, and bristly hair lies on her skin. She rinses off her back and hands, then feels it again: it is growing from her shoulder blades across her back towards her flanks and the hollow above her coccyx. At the sides, her skin feels like it usually does, albeit with goose bumps, but it is a feeling that she knows. In between, however, there is something that she has never felt before. In her head, a buzzing noise starts up, an unpleasant frequency. She tears the shower curtain aside, runs to the sinks and looks over her shoulder in the mirror. Light-coloured, short hairs are sticking out of her skin and swelling in small protrusions. They grow downwards, except for along her spine where they part on either side. She tries to grab one of them with her nails, her fingers trembling. She pulls, and the hair sticks to her fingertips. It is short, thick and firm, with an oily secretion clinging to the roots. Her legs give way and she crouches on the floor. Her fingers, with the hair still stuck to it, smell of shower gel. She reaches her arms over her shoulders and under her armpits, tries to grasp individual hairs, scratching and scraping with her nails. It hurts. She stops, examines the skin under her nails, and the single stubble of hair. A woman enters the washroom. Vic rushes back into the shower, her legs

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strange and wobbly. Her body shakes and her jaw is tense. She hears the woman pushing open the curtain to the cabin next door. Plastic rings hit each other. The woman strips off her clothes and throws a coin into the machine. The shower jet starts. Vic steadies herself with one hand against the wall, touching her back with the other. When the shower next to her switches off, she bites into the back of her hand. There is shampoo stuck to her hair. She feels it when she tries to run her fingers through her hair. The woman rubs herself with a towel. A dragging sound ensues, and water splashes onto the floor. A lid is unscrewed, liquid is tapped out of a container and the woman hums. Fabric rustles; the woman goes to the sink, brushes her teeth, gurgles and spits out; the tap runs, then a hair dryer hums. A while later, shoes slap across the floor; then all is silent. Vic holds her head under the tap and foam flows into the sink. She looks at her back in the mirror again. Between the hairs, there is a pattern of criss-cross marks. Then she looks into her eyes, which are swollen and wide-open in shock.

Blades of grass are stuck to the soles of Morten's shoes. His shoelaces are pulled out of their upper eyelets; the tongue is pulled forwards; two socks are resting on the shoes and the fabric is worn through at the heel and the ball of the foot. Next to it there is a glass in which the butts of rollies, soggy cigarette papers and lumps of tobacco float in a dark brown liquid. On the canopy of the tent lies a crumpled towel. "Morten?" she says. Several times, gradually louder.

She touches the zipper of the tent but does not dare to pull it down. Instead, she places two cigarettes on the mat in front of the tent so that the tips touch.

She stands on the side of the street and pushes her hand under her top. Then she gets on her bike and cycles off. Stops and tugs at her shirt. When she sits by the edge of the road, the fabric rubs on the stubble; her curved back pulls apart the hairs and scratched-open patches. She

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stares at the grey, grainy road surface. Two cyclists come pedalling along the road, which cuts a straight line through the flat landscape: meadows, fields, the occasional tree, and next to the asphalt road, a gravel lay-by. She hides in the grass behind a tree. Its bark is cracked and bumpy, while covering a reddish, gnarled trunk. With her hand on a slit in the bark, she waits. One cyclist is sitting straight up and is riding with his arms out to the sides, as if he had wings. The other looks at her bike.

A neon tube in the sign flickers. Her phone screen reflects the green cross going on and off. She is looking at a website showing a woodcut of a woman whose body is covered in hair. Semi-circular, thick swirls form a curly coat. The woman sits with her legs spread, and her vulva is also covered in fur. A nipple peeps out between the curls. She is leaning to one side with raised hands, as if she wants to grasp something. Her face is smooth and graceful, her expression thoughtful, reflective. Vic carries on scrolling down. One painting shows a hairy face, dark eyes and a heart-shaped mouth. Her neck is framed by a white ruff, which has pearls dangling from it. The next picture shows a woman with a goatee beard, her forehead flattening steeply towards her skull, giving her a crude appearance, like an early human. Her ample breasts and narrow waist do not quite go with her face. Next, a girl with long, fluffy hair in her face. A large liver spot on her thigh with black bristles. Vic skims articles about congenital or genetically induced hair growth, hormonal disorders that lead to beards and pubic hair growth and the consequences of malnutrition and anorexia. She blows smoke through her nose. The pharmacy is unlocked from the inside; Vic starts and turns around, and a woman looks down on her from above.

“Unbelievable,” she says.

“Excuse me?”

“Your cigarettes all over the place.”

Vic stands up.

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“People come in here, patients.”

Vic grinds the half-smoked cigarette under her shoe and goes over to her bike.

“Young lady,” the pharmacist calls after her, and then adds: “Outrageous.”

“Whatever,” says Vic. Her lips tremble as she opens her mouth again, then she closes it and gets onto her bike. Beside her, a bus stops, sinks sideways to the ground, the hydraulics hissing, and people get out. The shutter bars of a shop slide apart with a loud clatter and are pulled upwards. A pigeon flies close by her front wheel. She cycles along a brick wall, then an archway and, behind it, a car park, which she turns into and pedals up to a bench, where she sits down.

As she picks splinters from the wooden slats, she calls her family doctor. He is on vacation, says the voice on the answering machine. She opens Karl’s contact details, gently strokes the number a few times, then presses it and holds the phone to her ear. A feeble sound comes from her throat. She hears it ringing, then there is an engaged tone. Her breathing is laboured. She repeats the procedure, and so does Karl, rejecting her call. The third time, Karl’s voice says, “Hi, this is Karl. Sorry, I’m not available right now.”

She stares at the phone. Then puts it aside. She drags her hand across the bench and feels the splinters digging into her skin. She gets up, pulls out the splinters, walks a few steps, sits down again, looks at the palm of her hand, stands up again. Out of her backpack, she takes a stone and hurls it as far as she can onto a patch of grass. Lips tightly pressed together, a fitful sound rises from her throat and pushes out through her nose. She feels the material of her shirt chafing against the hairs. The stone makes a dull sound as it lands. In long strides, she walks over to the stone, which has torn up the turf. She steps onto the spot and throws again, measuring the distance once more, grabs the stone and picks some blades of grass before throwing it again. This is the way she moves through the park: flinging the stone, walking over, picking it up. An old woman stops and watches her. Once the stone bounces off a branch, a dog

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flinches and barks. At first, the distance she throws gets longer and she manages over sixteen paces, then her strength ebbs; the abrupt movements start to make her arms ache, and the distances become shorter.

She scratches the earth away from the stone and looks around. She thinks she recognises a tree, walks until she sees the bench with her bike next to it. Her telephone is on the seat. She picks it up and types with trembling fingers: *If you're not already cracked, you will be soon. Perhaps your forehead will be. If I aim well.*

As soon as she has sent the message, heat rises in her, searing upwards from her neck, via her ears to her face. Thoughts form so quickly and fade again, as if someone were frantically scrawling letters on a blackboard, erasing and rewriting them, as if she were sitting there and were not able to follow. She feels sick; spit collects in her mouth, so she bends forward and spits mucus onto the earthy ground.

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Vic stands in front of the garden house, slightly at a loss. Touching the door latch to the cottage, she pushes it down; the padlock squeaks; she freezes mid-motion, then slowly pulls open the door. It smells of wilted leaves. The curtains are drawn; the room is bathed in orange light. On the left is a narrow bed by the wall, on it a neatly folded, light-coloured, thin blanket. There are photos on the wall and a chest of drawers in the corner. On a small table are three overturned stools. On the right is a simple sink with a hotplate, and above it a cupboard. The PVC floor has an imitation woodgrain pattern. She sits down on the bed, feeling the unyielding surface that the mattress is resting on. Through a lengthways gap between the curtain and the window, she looks next door. The pane is refracted towards the wooden frame, making it seem as if the house is shifting into the air, or the tree is lifting its leaves, depending on the way Vic tilts her head. She runs her hand over the blanket and the pillow, which are slightly damp. Sinking down onto it,

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the cover smells musty, and underneath, there is a something resinous. With her teeth, she tears away a piece of fabric, making a few feathers fly up. She looks around the room. By the skirting board of the lower cupboard, a ball of dust flicks its way across the floor. She turns onto her back. Her gaze falls on the photographs. A wedding photo in an oval wooden frame. The bride sits on an imposing chair, a bouquet of flowers in her lap; the groom stands behind the chair, resting his forearm on its back as he bends slightly forward. She is beautiful, very beautiful. A wide sensual mouth, the upper row of her teeth visible. Her hair is pinned up. She has a high forehead and delicately curved eyebrows. A petite body beneath the white dress. His glasses are large, wire-framed and with slightly tinted lenses. His nose is an elongated hook in his narrow face. His hair, which is neatly cut, merges into sideburns. Interesting – striking, even. She wonders whether his hand is touching her back; in the photograph, it is hard to tell. Perhaps he rubbed his thumb across the fabric until he touched her skin, and then he stroked her in-between the shoulder blades while the photographer pressed the shutter. Her eyes might betray it; their gaze seems to be turned inward, focused perhaps on making a sensual impression. The second photograph shows him at sixty, perhaps even seventy years old. His nose seems even bigger and his ears seem to have grown. He is sitting on a plastic chair in the garden and smiling. His skin is like emery paper – definitely a smoker –, and his grey hair is spikily standing on end. His expression seems vulnerable and natural, his eyes joyful; he seems to like the photographer – most probably a woman, but in any case, it must be a small person, who is only able to look down at him from a slightly raised position. In the background stands a dog with a woolly coat, his head sniffing towards the ground. And the wooden slats of the shed, entwined with climbing roses.

Vic looks back at the house. Did they both have enough room on the narrow mattress, turning over together in their sleep, or did they lie quite still, snuggled together? But perhaps he had

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been alone for a long time, spending the night on his own in the garden house. No, they were both still here; her pleasant smell lingered in the air. Karl walks through the garden. Vic leans back to be able to see through the window at a narrow angle. His straight shoulders, the curve of his back and his slightly swaying gait.

She leans her forehead against the wall. The wood under the wallpaper warms her skin. Some paper is jammed between the bed and wall. It is pressed by the frame at a slight angle into the dusty floor. She pushes the bed away from the wall. The letter is yellowed and rippled on one side, probably having got damp and dried again, and the yellowish discoloured part is frayed towards the edges. She blows the dust off. "For H." is written in faded ink on the envelope, in fine, forward-sloping handwriting. The flap is glued and it doesn't contain much; just a page, no more. The paper smells of sliced potato. She holds the letter against the light and can see narrowly spaced handwriting, running in places in the opposite direction due to the folds in the paper. The letters are freestanding, spread evenly along an imaginary line. "You would never admit, your ...is too fine", and "not with you, my heart becomes heavy, a stone" and "nothing more than that some day, you forgi--," was all she could decipher.

Only when the house has been in darkness for a long time – without her phone she no longer has a clock, but she suspects that it is already past midnight – does she climb over the garden-house fence into the garden of the house. A wire catches in her top, tugging it away from her, then it snaps back and her T-shirt lies flat on her skin again. She can poke her little finger into the hole on the shoulder where threads are sticking out. She sits down by the tree, the fabric of her clothes rustling to the beat of her heart. Her fur is bristling, the hairs standing up from her body and lifting her shirt slightly. Between the tops of the trees she can see the starry sky; the garden hums and chirps. A rabbit rustles among the leaves. At last she rouses herself with a shake and stands up. The movement pumps heat and clarity through her body. She creeps over

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to the side window on all fours. Some time ago, Annika had lowered the blinds while Karl was smoking a cigarette in the garden. Each time he took a drag, the tip glowed brightly, lighting up his face. His face looked worn in the red glow, and she could not decipher his expression. She leans against the wall underneath the window, the hairs of her fur softly brushing together. In her hand, the stone: cool, heavy, dark. In the house, something makes a steady humming noise, like a refrigerator or air conditioning. She kneels and stretches her head up above the window sill. Slats; grey, shiny overlapping slats. That is all she sees. No view inside, into the bedroom, which she suspects is behind it. She pulls her head back. There is a distant whimper: she jumps, Lotta is crying. She presses herself against the wall of the house. A light is clicked on, falling in thin strips in front of her on the grass and onto her feet and knees, which she pulls closer in, wrapping her arms around them. Her fur stiffens against the wall. It hurts as the hairs pull her skin. Someone gets up: there are footsteps; the crying gets louder, then quieter. Someone else gets up. There is the sound of flushing, then water running for some time afterwards; the sound gets steadily louder then stops abruptly. The terrace door opens and Vic turns her head towards it. A chair scrapes. A rustling noise. A lighter clicking. Karl exhales. She can see the expelled smoke rising around the corner of the house into the darkness. The chair scrapes again; Karl takes a few steps. She hears the bare skin of his soles sticking and unpeeling from the stone tiles. She stays put by the wall.

“She’s calmed down again. Had a bad dream or something.” Annika’s voice is heavy, still half asleep. “Maybe about jellyfish.” Karl is smiling – Vic can hear it in his voice.

“Can you brush your teeth when you ...?” Annika leaves the “you” hanging in the air.

“You know what, I’ll sleep on the couch.” Karl is no longer smiling.

“If it makes you happy. We’ve been through this already.”

“Oh, Nika.” Karl sighs.

“Oh, Nika,” Annika says, aping him.

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Vic hears Annika going into the house and Karl lets out a long breath. Then his cigarette butt flies in a high arch onto the lawn, a firefly that carries on glowing in the grass. Vic is wide awake, her body buzzing and whirring. Before she even knows what she is doing, she leaves her sheltered corner and crawls into Karl's field of vision towards the cigarette on both knees and one arm. In the other hand, she is still holding the stone. She reaches for the butt. On her knees she spins towards Karl, who stands motionless on the terrace. His silhouette stands out against the terrace door, his shirt sleeves moving in the wind. Karl looks at her with dilated eyes. Vic recognises this despite the darkness and his shadowy eye sockets. She squats on her heels, takes a drag, tastes moist grass, then gets up. Takes a step towards Karl. Cigarette in her left, stone in her right. Karl takes a step back, swaying for a moment, as if the stone slab he is standing on is shaky. Although she is standing ten to twelve feet away from him, she can smell his scent. That bitter smell of his: nicotine, wine, dinner with garlic, shower gel and, sharply under his armpits and being secreted right at this moment: fear. This confuses her, churning up something inside that she finds hard to put her finger on. Even his gaze, with his slightly milky iris – unfamiliar, uncertain, as if he did not recognise her. Karl's upper body shifts forward a little but his legs do not move. Suddenly she feels the ember of the cigarette on her finger, and flings away the stub. Karl flinches, pulls his shoulders and biceps towards his body with a jolt. She raises her arm – the hand with the stone. Karl waves his arms around, wiggles his fingers and goes “gssss gsss”. How helpless he looks. Clumsy. Vic cocks her head. Karl takes a step back, his arms now stretched up over his head. He keeps throwing them forward; the hissing sounds become increasingly vehement. His sweat is becoming more pungent. That provokes Vic. She squats down, her fingers brushing the grass. Karl glances towards the door. Vic puts the stone in her back pocket, where it presses into her flesh, the fabric stretched tight across her buttocks. The way Karl is looking at her. Almost ridiculous. She falls down onto all fours and crawls away.

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Only later does she smell the blood, taste it too, as she sits in the garden house and licks it from a scratch in the corner of her mouth. She massages her cold fingers with dirt under the nails, breathing violently in and out. Closes her eyes. Her scalp tingles. The fur is lying softly on her back. Only where her bra strap pushes the hairs aside does it tickle when her chest goes up and down. She breathes in deeply to increase the pleasant effect: her entire torso seems to fill up with air. It's muggy in the room. And quiet. She exhales a long, drawn-out breath, opens her eyes. Smiles, feels a laugh coming, and laughs.

She kicks the shoes off her feet, takes off her top and flings it into the room; it sails onto the floor, and after flying briefly through the air, her trousers get caught on one of the legs of the stool. She lies down on the hard bed, her body pulsating. She stares at the ceiling, then into the room. Sits up again. Her gaze falls on the letter.

She gets up, dresses and opens the drawer to the table.

Inside, next to a dice cup, there is a notepad and a ballpoint pen. She tears off a leaf, kneads at her lower lip, then writes. She places the note on the floor by the entrance, weighted by the stone. Pushes the letter into the side pocket of her backpack. She leaves the garden house. The backpack, slightly askew on the bike rack, makes her bike lean to the right. She takes the path through the garden resort to the beach.