hold your tongue

by lesbianophelia

Summary

Peeta's mother always said he wasn't good at keeping his mouth shut, but she was wrong.

Mom used to tell me that I couldn’t hold my tongue to save my life. Well. Mom used to tell me a lot of things about myself that didn’t end up being true. But that was, once. I used to say shit that would get me in trouble constantly. She taught me how to stay quiet about things, especially things that really mattered. Taught me what it felt like to have a hand pop against your mouth so hard your lips got cut on your teeth. Taught me what it felt like to be pinched under the arm, where it’s sensitive and where nobody will ever see the bruise. Taught me how to smile, nod, and not say something that I think might offend somebody.

So I know how to keep a secret. I know how to busy myself by pressing my tongue to the roof of my mouth, when there’s something I’d like to say that won’t do anybody any good. I know how to smile blankly and count backwards from one hundred until the urge to interrupt someone who’s saying something stupid passes. I know how to convince somebody beyond a shadow of a doubt that I didn’t mean the thing I said that they didn’t like.

Mom didn’t teach me a lot, but she did teach me that much. I don’t think about her often. I think I probably ought to. The therapist told me a few weeks ago that I lost my mother very young. He meant when I was seventeen. When the bombs hit the bakery, when the arrow hit the forcefield. I think I lost my mother before that.

They tried to only target the memories that had to with Katniss, during the hijacking. But some other things got lost, too. Or scrambled, shiny, fuzzy. Mom died three years ago. I left her house four years ago, to live in the Victor’s Village. She didn’t want to move with me. I didn’t argue. I didn’t really want her there. If I had put up more of a fight, maybe she would have survived the
bombings. But probably not. I don’t think she would have had an easy time letting Gale Hawthorne lead her to the safety of District Thirteen.

Anyway. Maybe I lost my mother then. Maybe I lost her before that. After the Reaping, when she told me that Katniss was a survivor. Before? Maybe when I was a teenager and she seemed to decide that she hated me. If my memories are to be trusted, my mother was never particularly fond of me. Not the way she was with my oldest brother, who inherited the bakery and married a proper Town girl and could do absolutely nothing wrong. Even my middle brother, though he did catch her hand a few times, seemed at least to be able to make her smile, sometimes.

Not me.

Maybe I never had a mother to begin with.

Mom has been dead for three years. Out of my life, mostly, for four.

I’ve been trying since the war ended to come up with a single good memory with her, and I haven’t managed to dig one up. Even Delly Cartwright, who thinks the best of every person she’s ever met, who spent countless hours convincing me why Katniss wasn’t my enemy in District Thirteen, just smiled at me sadly when I mentioned wishing I could think one good thing about my mother.

Anyway. Thanks to my mother, I can hold my tongue.

I hold my tongue when the thought first enters my mind, and I am watching Katniss through the hazy morning light, through the curtains in the kitchen, and she is tucking into the stack of waffles I made for her birthday like she hasn’t eaten in days.

“What?” she asks, self conscious for a rare moment, moving her braid back over her shoulder. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Nothing,” I say, shaking my head.

She rolls her eyes. “Well,” she says, and though her plate isn’t nearly empty yet, her eyes are on my stack. “You’d better eat those, or I’m going to take them.”

“Are you now?” I ask, shifting the plate a little closer to my chest.

“It’s my birthday, Peeta,” she says. “I think I can do whatever I want.”

And then I hold my tongue again.

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Weeks later, Katniss comes into the bathroom while I’m soaking in the tub. She practically bullied me up here, because I mentioned that my leg hurt. I can feel the pressure changes, sometimes. She imagines it must hurt worse than it really does. So she forced me to come upstairs and get into the tub and then fussed to make sure the water temperature was right, and I was hoping that my reward for playing along would be that she would soak with me, but she didn’t.

“What?” she asks around her toothbrush, leaning back against the sink and staring at me.
“Nothing,” I say, adjusting in the water. “Are you gonna make me sit in here alone all night, or can I get out eventually?”

She sputters. “I swear, Peeta,” she says, spitting in the sink and then rinsing her mouth out. “Nobody ever complains about being taken care of the way you do.”

“Maybe you ought to learn your lesson, then,” I kid. “And stop trying.”

She rolls her eyes. “You’d love that,” she says. And then she laughs. “No, you wouldn’t.”

“I wouldn’t,” I agree, resting my head on the porcelain side of the tub. “You gonna come in here with me?”


“Of course,” I say. Like she doesn’t shower in the mornings. Like there isn’t something else I’d rather say.

It’s my birthday.

She learned a little less than a year ago that I’ve never had a birthday cake, before. That I almost baked one for myself, the year between the games and the Quell, but that it seemed so stupid that I never got around to it.

It’s my birthday, and Katniss Everdeen has made me a cake. It’s a dense cake, a little heavier than what we would make at the bakery. One of the recipes that she makes that I immediately can tell was immediately written to be made with tesserae rations. She frosted it with orange frosting in a tub that I know she had to send away for.

“I know it’s not the right orange,” she tells me when she cuts the first -- huge -- slice. “But they only had the one.”

The right orange. My favorite color. Technically, if you mixed just a little white and just a little yellow in with this color, you could get close. She doesn’t need to know that. “It’s perfect,” I say.

She rolls her eyes, but I can tell she’s thrilled with the praise. “It’s a cake, at least,” she says, and I kiss her and taste the frosting on her lips. She tried it earlier, when I was banned from the kitchen.

“It’s perfect,” I insist.

“You haven’t even tasted it yet,” she protests, though she’s laughing.

“Don’t need to,” I say.

“But you will,” she says, a little stern. As if Katniss Everdeen is going to bake me a birthday cake
and I’m not going to eat it.

I open my mouth to say something else, but what comes out is, “Of course I will.”

Haymitch comes over for dinner and makes some crack at my shirt, which I hadn’t realized before I came to the table was stained with paint from my day up in the studio. I laugh, but Katniss doesn’t think it’s funny.

“You can barely get dressed,” she snaps. “Don’t make fun of him.”

“Katniss,” I say, but she isn’t paying attention to me.

“You think I don’t remember you wearing that shirt yesterday?” she asks.

“Down, girl,” Haymitch laughs. “It’s fine. The boy thinks it’s funny.”

Katniss’s eyes meet mine and it’s like nothing is funny. Like everything is funny. Like the world is going to stop spinning and throw me out of its orbit entirely. Like I am so in love with her that I am going to develop an ulcer from how many times I have swallowed it back.

“Well,” she says, raising her chin. “If Peeta thinks it’s funny.”

She comes home from the woods in the middle of a rainstorm and takes her clothes off, right in the middle of the hall, just to see my reaction. Piece by piece with a look on her face that isn’t quite scowl and isn’t quite determination. And then she asks me if I’m planning on just standing there all night, and --

And I love her. I love her, I love her, I love her. Enough that I know she’ll be terrified if I say it. Enough that I know that keeping it inside is a kindness. Enough that I feel as if my heart will burst to contain it every night. Every morning.

I bring her a plate of cheese buns before they’re cool from the oven. I warn her about the heat, but she doesn’t care. She’s never cared about getting burned, I think. She takes a bite and tips her head back and lets a little dreamy moan escape her.

“It’s not too hot?” I ask.

“I love you,” she says, and then her eyes widen, as if that isn’t what she meant to say. I nearly drop
the plate of cheese buns. I wait for her to correct herself, to say what she really meant: she loves my baking. She loves when I bring her food. She loves getting to eat what I make so fresh from the oven. But she doesn’t correct herself, she just shakes her head, only a very little bit.

Like it’s a little amusing. Like she can’t believe she let that slip.

“You said it first,” I croak, disbelieving.

Katniss reaches for another cheese bun. Rolls her eyes. “You had time to beat me to it,” she says. “I waited long enough.”

Fuck you, Mom. I can keep a secret.

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