



# *Blanche Rider Hood*

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Retold Fairy Tales

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Once upon a time there lived a freckled, red-headed girl named Blanche Rider Hood. Since her hair flamed like fire, most people called her Red.

Okay, enough of that. I'm talking about me and doing it in third person is just too weird. If you want my tale, you will have to listen to it in my voice. And speaking of voices, I hear one, my mother's.

She walks into the kitchen as I take the red hooded cloak from its hook and put it on, getting ready for my weekly trip to Grandma's house.

"Oh Red," she says, her body drooping, "You look so much like your father in that cloak. It makes me so sad." Her voice, filled with the sadness she professes, sounds older than she looks. She appears young enough to be my older sister. Tall, shapely, with long golden hair. Beautiful. I would bet as beautiful as she was the day when she, Wilhelmina Rider, married Jacob Hood. I get my red hair from my father, but otherwise, I am lucky enough to look like her.

I should just finish packing up and leave, but my mouth engages before my brain. "It's warm, it's comfortable. It's red so people can see me in the woods. Not to mention, we can't afford a new one." And then I say the words I know will get a response out of her. "And yeah, it reminds me of dad. It's all I have left of him ever since you made him leave."

"He had to leave, sweetie. You'll understand when you get older," mom sighs.

Yeah, well, that's a line I've heard before. "I'm 14 now mom, how much older do I have to be?"

Mom sighs again, one of those mournful sighs I've gotten used to. She does it morning, noon and night. Sigh. Sigh. Sigh. She says, "You're right. I'll tell you what. When you come back tonight, I'll tell you all. But now you must go." She looks out the window. "You must be back before dark."

I snort. Like I believe that. She'll just tell me another lie. I wrap the loaves of bread mom baked this morning in a towel and place them in the bottom of the basket. I gather the dandelion roots, mushrooms and other greens mom and I had foraged and arrange them atop the bread.

"Don't forget to bring that towel back. We can't supply the whole forest community with our goods." Like I hadn't heard that line before either. "And you know I don't like you visiting your grandmother Hood so late. I've been hearing that howling again." Yet another mournful sigh. "There's a wolf in the woods, or I'm not your mother."

Who knows, I think, maybe she's not my mother. "Mom, she's ill. Without Dad around there's no one to provide for her. If we could just..." but I don't get a chance to finish the sentence as she interrupts.

"She can't live with us, sweetie. It just wouldn't work." Guess what? Yup, another sigh. "Go off if you must but be home before nightfall. I really don't want you in the woods after dark with that wolf loose."

It's only mid-afternoon, later than I meant to leave, but not too late. I am not afraid of the woods, but there do seem to be a lot more, strange creatures when it gets dark. And Mom is not wrong about her second point. It's been a while but it feels like it will happen again soon. Yes, I have heard the wolf too.

I walk out the door, across our small yard, and into the forest. The temperature immediately drops several degrees and it is almost like dark already between the thick trees. I pull up the red hood and as I do, I hear something. And then it stops. I must have imagined it. I keep walking further into the woods.

I know, you're saying, why would I walk into the scary woods? Well, I've been doing it once a week ever since I can remember. Mom met Dad in the middle of the woods. She was foraging, he was chopping wood. He lived on one side, she on the other. We still live on the Rider side of the woods. I'm not sure why Grandma Hood won't come live with us, probably because Mom drove Dad away. So, we still live on opposite sides of the woods.

It is getting even chillier and I pull the cloak around me, being sure not to drop anything from the basket. I really do love Dad's old red cloak. Even after two years, it still holds some of his smell. A smell of earth and sky and yes, woods.

I finally reach Grandma Hood's house. Smoke is coming from the chimney so I know she is staying warm. All is quiet, so I call out. "Grandma! I'm here with food for you!" All I hear is a deep growl in return. No, not a growl. Grandma is clearing her throat

"Come in, Red," she says. "Pull the latch string."

I want to tell her that I know that. I've been pulling that latch string for years, but I don't. I just pull it and let myself in.

Grandma is in the kitchen, cleaning. She only has the food I bring, and she likes to be sure nothing other than herself gets that food. Clean away the bugs. Clean away the spiders. Clean away the mice. Clean away whatever invades her kitchen.

I really do need to go hunting and bring her, and us, some meat. She can't survive on greens, mushrooms and bread. We can't either for that matter. Game is harder to find in winter, but I'm a good hunter with my bow, and can usually find prey. My mind returns to the present and it sinks in that Grandma was ill when I was here last and here she is, up cleaning.

"Grandma," I say. "You shouldn't be up! You should be resting, getting your strength back!"

Grandma laughs in a strange tone, almost wicked. "Don't worry Red. I'll get my energy back soon. Let's have some dinner."

I tell her I've already eaten so that she won't sacrifice any of her food.

We chat a bit, careful to never mention my father. She hasn't seen him since he disappeared either. At least I don't think so. Since we never talk about him, I guess I don't know.

Instead, we talk about the weather, winter is almost over. We talk about the plants I foraged; she educates me on herb-lore. And we talk about the wolf. She says she hasn't heard the wolf in a while but, like me, thinks it will be around again. Maybe tonight. It's funny, she seems amused by the thought.

The time passes more quickly than anticipated, and I suddenly notice the graying sky outside. Grandma follows my gaze and I hear an intake of breath. She says loudly and intense. "Oh! My goodness! We've lost track of time. You must go. You must go now! Remember the wolves!" I pack up quickly and run out the door.

As I head away from the cabin, I yell back over my shoulder, "Don't forget to pull in the latch-string! Remember the wolves!" Wolves? I think to myself. She said wolves, which is why I said wolves. Is there more than one? I don't want to think about it.

The forest is very dark, but I can already see the moon, bright in its fullness, so it will be easy to keep to the path. Then I hear it. First, it sounds like a whimper, like the noise I heard before, but slowly it changes into a full-fledged, yep, you guessed, wolf howl. I can't believe I forgot to leave on time. I walk faster, break into a run, and then I see it. Ahead of me, on the path.

A wolf. Or is it a wolf? Overalls fit tightly over its hind legs, which it's standing on, and it is carrying an axe in a forepaw. I stop in front of it. I don't know what else to do, so I say, "Hello wolf."

Believe it or not, it answers. "Hello Red. What a great cloak you have! What are you doing out in these dangerous woods at night? You know it's dangerous, right?" And then it howled.

I can't answer. My breath is gone. My head feels like it's going to explode. To avoid that, I scream and run. This freaking wolf not only talks, but it knows who I am. And if I'm not mistaken, it just threatened me.

I am much closer to Grandma's than home, and my feet seem to have known that, since they are taking me in that direction. My mind's eye shows me yelling to Grandma to pull in the latchstring. Well, there's no turning back now.

I'm in luck. Grandma left the latchstring out. I pull it and run in, figuring I would lock up and lecture Grandma on leaving the string out. But that doesn't happen. I pull in the string, turn around, and scream again. I'm

going to lose my voice if I keep doing that.

Grandma is not in her bed. A wolf is in her bed. It's wearing Grandma's clothes. Is it the same wolf? I don't think so. As fast as the wolf I saw might be, it couldn't have gotten here, done away with Grandma, dressed in her clothes and gotten into her bed before I got here.

So, there's one talking wolf outside, and one wolf in Grandma's clothes inside. It's even wearing Grandma's glasses. I figure I'll find out if it talks too.

"Oh! Grandma," I say, trying to think of something to say. "What big ears you have!"

"The better to hear you with, dear Red," it replies. In fact, it actually sounds like Grandma. I do a double take and figure I'd better keep the conversation going, if I'm going to avoid getting eaten.

"Grandma, what big eyes you have!" I say. Eyes that are wearing Grandma's glasses. And look rather like Grandma's eyes.

"The better to see you with, sweet Red." That voice again. Almost with a smile in it. It's Grandma. But it can't be.

"But, Grandma, what large hands you have!" I don't know what else to say. What is going on?

"The better to hug you with." Nope. Not going there.

"Oh! But, Grandma, what an amazingly large mouth you have!" And long sharp teeth that look like they're going to eat me.

The wolf sighs and looks sad, "The better to tell you the truth with, my granddaughter."

I knew it. I knew it. It is Grandma! Wolf Grandma. But how? "The truth?"

"I am a werewolf." Wolf Grandma says. "Every full moon I take this shape. I'm so old now that it doesn't affect my mind. I stay myself. But I do need to stay inside my cabin, where everything is familiar, or I may still go wild." With that, she laughs, but it's more of a howl. This is all still far too strange for me to grasp fully, but it starts to fall into place.

“Does that mean? Dad? My father?” This isn’t coming out as coherent as I hear it in my brain. “And me?”

Grandma sighs sadly. “Yes, your father. He is still dangerous at the full moon. You shouldn’t chance meeting him. You must stay here for the night.”

I can’t think that far ahead. “Mom? Know? Left us?” Words are not making it from my brain to my mouth, but I do know what she hasn’t answered. “And me?”

Wolf Grandma nods. “Yes, your mother knows. He told her before they married. But they were in love. Nothing mattered until they conceived you. We were all so worried. When you reached your maidenhood, the time when werewolves tend to manifest, he was afraid his being near you might influence it. So, he left.”

“Where?” My words were still coming out only one at a time, but Grandma, the wolf, knew what I meant.

“He lives as a woodsman, with a cabin not too far to the east. And he keeps watch over your mom, and you.”

“And me?” I ask yet again. And once again Grandma knows what I want to know. And this time she answers.

“Well, it doesn’t seem so. As I said, you likely would have seen some signs by now.” says Wolf Grandma with a toothy smile, showing all of them, long and sharp. The smile fades, making her less scary, but so unhappy. “I’m sorry you had to find out like this. I shouldn’t have let you stay when you came late today.”

“It’s okay, Grandma. I’d rather know everything.” I realize as I say it that I mean it. It’s a relief to know why dad left. Even though I always verbally blamed my mother, I actually wondered if I had done something wrong. And it explains why mom is so sad but still sometimes gives off the feeling she is glad he is gone.

“So, let me take these big hands to hug you now!” Wolf Grandma says and I find myself being hugged by a wolf. Believe me, it’s a weird feeling, but she still smells like Grandma too. It is just like she is wearing a big coat.

Right then, another wolf bursts through the door. I scream yet again. Wolf Grandma looks at it and says, “Jacob. Calm down. Calm down.”

“I am calm Mom,” the wolf, er, oh my god, Dad, says. “I saw through the window and thought you were going to hurt Red.”

“And I was afraid you would hurt her,” Wolf Grandma says. “Are you... yourself?”

“It’s strange,” he says. “When I saw Red, I ran to attack her, but when I got up close, I came to myself. When she ran away, I got wild again. Smelled her. Wanted to attack her again. But when I looked in your window, I came to myself again.”

I gasp. I know! I know! “Maybe,” I say. “Maybe I’m the opposite of a werewolf.” I look at Wolf Dad. “Maybe I un-werewolf you.”

“I think that’s the case, my sweet Red,” Wolf Dad says.

“Does this mean maybe you could come home and live with us?” I know I sound too hopeful, but I have to ask. “I could sit with you at the full moon, so you could stay in your human mind.”

“It might work,” Wolf Dad says. “But I really don’t want to chance it.”

“Chance it?” I laugh “We’re proving it now!”

“What if it doesn’t work every time?” Wolf Dad looks like he’s pondering. “But maybe, maybe we could find a way. Confine me for the full moon with you to watch over me.”

“Confine you? Put you in a cage you mean?”

“Yes. It would have to be strong, just in case. But right now I feel,” and he stretches his front legs out like arms. “more human, less wolf strength.”

I really want him to come home. I think after a few months of it working, and I believe that it will, I can convince him to not make me cage him. “Okay. Let’s go home.”

“I don’t want your mother to see me... this way.”

“Dad,” I really can see he’s Dad. “She won’t care. She’ll be glad to see us both. And I don’t want to worry her any longer. We should go now.”

“Go,” Grandma says. She is still a wolf, still has a wolf smile on her wolf face, but she’s really my grandmother.

“Go and kiss Wilhelmina for me.” She laughs/howls. “Well after you turn human again.”

Dad and I cross the forest quickly. I kept having to break into a run to keep up. Finally, the house is in sight, and Mom is on the porch, pacing back and forth in worry.

When she sees us, her eyes widen, but unlike me, she doesn't scream. I smile at her and say, "I think I know what it was you were going to tell me, Mom."

Dad says, "Hello, Wilhelmina. I think we should talk."

Okay, time to switch back to third person and past tense and end this tale.

And they talked. And Jacob moved back in. And Red sat with her father every full moon. He never did let her do it without a cage. And although it would never be perfect, they loved, which was pretty close to happily ever after.

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