



The Lady in Red

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Retold Fairy Tales

5 min read

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The drive up from Devon had been a long one. Just short of seven hours to reach Glasgow, and Matt Wolfenden was tired. With still a few miles to go before he reached his destination, he sighed. Had this really been such a good idea? His sister-in-law's words echoed around his head.

“It will do you good. You need to get away, and spend some time alone, to just think, and digest what happened. Who knows, you may get your writing mojo back”. Clair had said, fighting back her own tears.

He, Matt Wolfenden, or “Woolfy” as he was known in the literature world, was a best selling author, creator of the most terrifying tales which awarded him the title of “Big Bad Wolf”. Yet he felt the antithesis of his character. Glancing in the rear view mirror, he saw tired eyes, and the pale, grief stricken face of a heartbroken man.

It had only been two months, or eight weeks, whichever way it was put, it really was no time at all, since the accident in which the car he had been driving was hit, head on, along a notorious bend in the local woods near their home. The vehicle careered into a tree . He escaped with a cut to the head. Jennifer, his wife, was killed on impact.

The guilt was profound. He should be the one buried in the cemetery, not her, his beautiful Jenny, with her chestnut curls and sparkly blue eyes, always so full of life and laughter. They had been returning from a book

festival in Exeter, and it had been a great night. She was looking stunning, as always, in a red dress, her favourite colour, which offset her colouring to perfection. He couldn't bear to listen to a certain song now if it came on the radio. Yet he could not cry and so far, had not shed a single tear.

Finally, he pulled up outside Greenmount, the magnificent looking house, which was to be his home for the next ten days or so. It wasn't a retreat exactly, but Clair had insisted when she booked it, that it would give him the much needed space, and peace and quiet, just as the doctor had ordered, and maybe some clarity. He was in the middle of his latest novel and it had all but dried up. Matt did not care if he ever wrote a single word again in his life. There were no children to carry on for. Nothing mattered anymore. His beloved Jenny was gone.

As he entered the Georgian building, which, according to Google, was surrounded by a walled garden abundant with lovely plants, a shiver ran over him, the familiar somebody stepping on his grave scenario. His writer's mind was always active, and though there had been nothing for weeks, since the crash, this was his first glimmer of hope that all was not lost. Perhaps Clair was right.

Having checked in and been shown to his room, he lay down on the bed and contemplated the rest of his stay. He might go crazy here. It would be ideal if he was intending to write, but given that he couldn't, in the circumstances, he pondered what he would be doing. Walking, trying to relax, sitting on the terrace in the October sunshine. Autumn was definitely in the air, the trees were turning golden. How he wished Jenny was with him. She loved that time of year.

As the evening began to draw in, and once he had unpacked, he decided to explore the hotel. It really was a splendid building, the decor was luxurious, and ornate. It didn't have modern facilities like some of the spa hotels, with gyms and swimming pools but it had an old library which pleased him, and a small bar, and the Concierge informed him there was a pub in the village down the road. "The Cloak and Dagger" apparently did a nice Scottish malt. Not that he could drink too much, with his medication. Maybe he wouldn't need it, if this place was to be his saviour.

After changing for dinner, he joined the other guests in the dining room, not that there were many. There were a few brief nods, and exchanges and he imagined some must recognise him. He settled to his meal to find he was surprisingly hungry. The Scottish air was already working its' magic.

After some small talk with one or two people, he refused their requests to join them at the bar, and headed up

to his room. The maid had lit a fire in the grate which he was glad of as there was a real chill in the room. Looking out of the window into the night, it was pitch black. He hated the thought of the long Winter nights ahead, without his love. They had never been apart for one night during their marriage. He had watched one of the couples at the bar, Harry and Josie, in their early forties, a few years older than him, laugh and share a few intimate moments, and his heart pounded. He would never have that now. He was about to draw the curtains and shut out the night when he noticed the window was open. As he reached to close it, something caught the corner of his eye, out in the darkness. It looked like the figure of a girl, dressed in a red coat with the hood up. Probably one of the maids leaving for the night, although it seemed a bit of a lonely walk back to the village. A dog barked, and he thought he glimpsed the shadow of a hound. At least she had that for company, and protection. Switching on the television, he flicked through the channels, mindlessly watching anything until he found a light hearted comedy show from the eighties. It was only when the programme played a snippet from "Top of the Pops", and the haunting voice of the male singer came on, that he realised his face was wet. The floodgates had opened and turning off the TV, sobbed his heart out before falling into a deep sleep.

The next morning heralded the start of one of those glorious Autumn days, and after a hearty Scottish breakfast which included the best porridge he had ever tasted, and a read of the papers, Matt decided he would venture into the village, or at least have a walk in the gardens. He had no desire to drive back to Glasgow. It had taken all his strength to make the journey up North.

The village consisted of a few cottages, a post office, a small convenience store, the church, and the pub, a traditional black and white building with some wilting hanging baskets, the flowers long dead. There were a few local residents daytime drinking. Matt decided to order a pint of ale, despite doctor's orders, and sat down in a corner with his newspaper. It was a quaint place, and tranquil without noisy chatter and blasting music. He felt himself start to relax for the first time in a while, and ordered another pint along with an excellent Ploughman's lunch. An hour or two passed and he decided to chance one of the recommended malts. As he felt the golden liquid slide down his throat, he relaxed back in his seat. A few more of these, and another week of this and maybe he would start to calm down. He had been so reluctant to come yet already he did not want to return home to an empty house. Maybe he would get a dog.

As if on cue, the sound of howling came from outside the window. He glanced out and saw a large black dog tied to a post across the road. A girl appeared, wearing a red hooded raincoat, and it was evident she must have been in the shop. She untied the dog and glancing across at the pub, gave him a wave before walking in the

direction of Greenmount. There were specks of rain on the window and the sky had clouded over. Swilling back the last of his drink, Matt left the pub and started walking briskly back to the hotel. He didn't want to get caught in the inclement weather, following the girl. She was obviously the maid he had seen the previous evening. Maybe he could chat to her. It would be nice having a friendly face around during his stay.

He walked briskly along the path through the woods, which he immediately regretted as it reminded him of home, and Bovey Valley Woods where the accident had happened. He had avoided passing the spot all these weeks, just as he had avoided doing any writing. The words would not flow. His publishers, although sympathetic and understanding, still wanted a completed book, and he had a deadline to fulfil. Maybe he would scrap it and start another, yet his mind was blank. He spotted the girl and dog, a scruffy looking Irish wolfhound, upon the road ahead and quickened his pace. She looked like Little Red Riding Hood in such fairytale surroundings and he smiled to himself, pleased that his creative mind was still working a little. A bird soared overhead, and he saw it was an eagle. It made him want to visit more of Scotland and its' wonders. A few more spots of rain landed on his face and when he turned, the girl, and dog had vanished. She must know a short-cut to the hotel. He would make a point of talking to her when he saw her next. Perhaps she would serve him at dinner, he thought as the rain started to pelt down. By the time he reached his residence he was soaked to the skin, so ran a hot bath and relaxed for the rest of the afternoon. There was no sign of the girl, or the dog. He would look for her later, or enquire discreetly at the desk. Later that evening, he succumbed to fits of sneezing no doubt as a result of getting caught in the rain, and against his better judgement, purchased a bottle of Glenfiddich and retired to his room. Some of the guests had gone on a coach trip to Inverness so wouldn't be back till late and he had dined alone.

The next few days consisted of typical October weather, rain and gales, and he decided to stay confined to the hotel, still feeling a little under the weather, and although the whisky helped he knew he shouldn't be taking it along with his medication but it helped numb the pain. He gave Clair a quick ring before the alcohol took effect, but ignored all other messages including his agent. They could wait. By Friday the winds had died down and the weather was a little more settled but the forecast was for more storms. He was sitting in the library when one of the young porters came in to use the photocopier that was tucked away in the corner.

"I have read all your books, Mr Wolfenden. They are amazing. I cannae wait for the next one It's a pleasure to have you staying here."

Matt smiled

“Thanks”. Then added

“Although I am not sure when the next one will be ready, if at all”.

“Of course. I understand. We were all so sorry to hear your news....” The porter trailed off and, quickly changing the subject, waved a poster at him.

“Maybe you would like to join in this, on Sunday, with your interest in the paranormal and all. It’s for Halloween. We are having a Fancy Dress party here at the hotel, locals, and guests. The village shop stocks up with a few costumes and it’s always such a fun night, along with Bonfire Night of course. In fact it’s perfect, with the setting and the things that go on around here....”

Matt’s ears pricked up.

“Things?”

“Och, Robbie, there you are. “

Mrs. Sanders, the housekeeper, popped her head around the door.

“Don’t you be disturbing our guest now with ghostly tales. I am sure he has enough of his own. There’s a couple of new guests need checking-in in reception”.

The days were passing too quickly and Matt almost thought of extending his stay. He had felt himself winding down, reading, drinking and drowning his sorrows, and although he knew it wasn’t the answer, it helped. Friday and Saturday evening he decided to stay downstairs in the bar with the other residents. It was quite full now with the extra guests that had arrived for the Halloween event and there was excitement in the air. Maybe he would come up with some ideas, it certainly was a magical setting.

On Sunday morning he walked into the village again, to get a few snacks for his journey home, on Bonfire Night. He had decided to travel early evening, and through the night hoping the traffic would be quieter with people out at firework events. He would be sorry to miss the one at Greenmount as it seemed like a well organised display in the grounds. Still, there was the Halloween Party later. In a surprisingly lighter mood he decided to pop into the pub again. It may be his last chance as the weather forecast for the rest of the week was

dire, and any firework celebrations might be a wash-out . As he sipped his drink he considered that Clair had been right. This short break had been just what he needed, a change of scene, but he dreaded going back. It was almost 3 o'clock after another sumptuous lunch of local fayre, and a few more drinks, before he headed back. The nights were already drawing in and the clocks had gone back the previous evening. It was the end of British Summertime. He tried to imagine where he would be this time next year, and struggled.

“Be careful with the all the trick and treaters on your way back” The Landlord said, laughing.

“Cheeky little mites some of them”.

Matt laughed. “ They don't bother me”

“I don't suppose they will, not with what you write about and all.” The Landlord continued.

Matt realised he had quite a lot of followers, even in such a small place. He felt a twinge of guilt. He really hoped his mojo would come back. He hated letting fans down.

“It's not the kids you need to be frightened of”. This came from an old woman sitting in the corner, nursing a pint of milk stout.

“It's her, that Missy”.

“Who?” Matt looked puzzled.

“Enough, June. “

The landlord turned to Matt.

“ I expect you have plenty of ideas already for your next book. You don't want to know about the goings-on up here, it's just the stuff of fairytales”

On his way back to the hotel, Matt's thoughts were on the conversation. What did they mean, and who were they referring to as Missy?

He ran into a few ghosties and ghoulies along the way, mainly tots out with their mothers and luckily, he had had the hindsight to get a bag of sweets at the shop. He found himself actually looking forward to the party, the surroundings were perfect, a large gothic house in the middle of the woods, and stormy weather. He had even

got himself a mask so he could take part in the dressing up. Jenny would laugh. She loved fancy dress but he never did. This would be his first time.

There was a buzzing atmosphere as he came down for dinner and the event. The main dining room was full and the small hall adjacent had been opened up for the evening. This was usually reserved for wedding parties and celebrations. The menu was spookily themed with tomato soup, a delicious roast followed by Pumpkin pie and Devil's Food Cake. There were cocktails available with crazy names such as "The Devil Rides Out", "Bloody Mary", "Grave Digger" and "Witchheart" amongst others and Matt was pleased to see everyone had made such an effort with some great costumes. The theme was based around Fairytale characters (and due to the shop being a bit limited in supplies) but there were ghoulish Alice in Wonderlands, and an evil looking Snow White, and some cute zombies, dwarfs and hobbits were being entertained by the DJ in the hall, all doing the Monster Mash. He placed his own mask over his face, and glancing in the mirror almost frightened himself as the Werewolf stared back at him. Living up to his name, the Big Bad Wolf. It was as he took a Bloody Mary from the waiter's tray he saw her, briefly, through the french doors, on the lawn. Her back to him, hood up. In a blink she had vanished. He thought he might be going a little crazy, shaking his head. He mingled amongst the guests enjoying the evening, watching the children play bob apple and after a few more drinks he found himself in front of the open fire, lights out with the candles lit, whilst he narrated some of his own spooky tales, the harrowing bits edited for the little ones' ears. He felt he was home, almost, and it felt good.

As the clock chimed half eleven, candles were snuffed out. Time for the guests to leave or retreat to their respective rooms, the kiddies had long gone. The Witching Hour was approaching.

"Don't forget to place your shoes in the shape of a T hoping this night your true love to see " ,
Robbie called after everyone, as they all headed to bed in jovial moods.

Matt, feeling a little peckish, slipped into the dining room to see if there was any food left for a midnight snack, and snatching up some vol au vents and a piece of quiche, wrapped them in a serviette. Stuffing a cheesy bite in his mouth he knew he might regret it especially if it gave him nightmares.

She was there. Before him, at the end of the table, facing him. The hood was down, and her dark hair flowed around her shoulders. A look passed between them, and as Matt made his way up the staircase to his room, he turned to see she was following him, in silence. He opened the bedroom door, and let her simply walk through. Once inside, it was like an animal overtook him, the Big Bad Wolf, as the woman in red, slipped off her cloak

letting it fall to the floor, naked underneath. A heady combination of booze, tablets and a whole range of pent up emotions flooded through his veins as she moved towards him.

“My, what big eyes you have,” she whispered, running her fingers through his hair. His dark brown eyes gazed back at hers, icy blue, and piecing. He felt she could see his very soul.

“And what lovely lips you have” . She caressed them gently before pressing her own red mouth to his.

“Bite me!” She said, softly, and it was a command he could not refuse. It was almost midnight on Halloween, and as he glanced in the gilt edged mirror on the wall, and saw their reflection, he saw Jenny’s face, and he was powerless.

Before he knew what was happening, he was on the bed, with this wanton red woman over him, wanting, needing, pawing at his body, and in his drunken haze, he was accommodating and accepting. All the weeks of pent up emotions and grief flooded out of him as this woman, some kind of witch, seduced him. He had no control, lips, fingers, flesh everywhere. He had come across such women in his research. Was she a She-Devil?

By morning, she was gone. There was no red cloak. No evidence she had even been there until he looked in the mirror and saw a scratch above his eye along with some claw marks on his back. So he hadn’t imagined it. It wasn’t the drink and drugs or a dream. It was real.

All Souls Day, as always felt a little strange and quiet. In his fantasy world, the Day of the Dead had passed ,the souls had crossed over, and all was peaceful in that eerie way.

Swallowing some painkillers for his headache, he went downstairs for breakfast, all evidence of the night before cleared away, and in readiness for the Guy Fawkes celebrations. A few of the guests were a little noisy at breakfast, their laughter getting on his nerves and he retreated into the library for some peace and quiet. . A strange mood had swept over him, and he felt uncomfortable. He wanted to go home. For the first time in his stay, and thankfully he only had a few days left. Whatever had happened last night had unnerved him. Had he imagined it? He knew what an incubus was, Lord knows he wrote about the otherworld all the time. Was he going mad. It was insane.

He pulled a couple of local history books from the shelf and settled in a chair to read. They were old and leatherbound, and full of local folklore. He flicked through, maybe he would find some ideas for his novel. He was beginning to feel ready to write again. He understood he had to go through all the stages of grief and that

there was no time limit but he knew in his heart he had to move on. Last night had changed him. He felt guilty, being with a woman, so soon after losing his beloved wife, but it happened all the time. The bereaved seek comfort and solace from grief in so many ways.

Sipping his coffee, he turned a page and something caught his eye. It was the drawing of a young woman and a dog. He saw the words "Greenmount", and spectre and started to read. The tale of a local haunting, in these very grounds, and in fact this very hotel. "The lady in red is mainly seen in the dining room, and the gardens, with her black dog by her side. Sometimes, she is also accompanied by a small child. She is rumoured to have....."

He got no further. Matt felt sick to the stomach. It could not be possible. What he had felt last night was real. He had the marks to prove it. A phantom could not do that surely. He re-read the paragraphs and slammed the book shut. He was clearly going insane. Jenny's death had affected him so badly he was losing his mind. He needed to get away from this place as fast as he could. He would ring Clair. She would probably say he needed some counselling, or a stronger prescription from his G.P.

He was dashing along the hallway when he collided into Robbie who was waving something red.

"Mrs. Sanders, can you let Marissa know she left her Little Red Riding Hood outfit behind".

Matt stopped in his tracks.

"Och, she's a right floosie that one." Mrs Sanders remarked.

"Aye, and I bet she's left her knickers in somebody's bedroom" remarked Jeannie the young receptionist.

"Jeannie, don't be vulgar especially in front of guests". The housekeeper chided.

Matt stared at them all blankly. Marissa. She had a name. So she was real. Flesh and blood.

Robbie turned to him.

"Marissa, she's a nice enough girl, but a bit loose, the local tart. She likes men, if you know what I mean" he winked at Matt before continuing,

"Aye, likes to have her way and leave, like one of them Black Widow Spiders".

Later, Matt sat on the bed, his head in his hands, thanking God. Marissa must be the “Missy” he had heard about in the pub. He wasn’t going mad. Although last night had been a moment of madness, and weakness, a release had come and he did feel so much better in a strange way.

Matt Wolfenden, the Big Bad Wolf and Little Red Riding Hood! It was laughable. He felt the inklings of a story, thinking in a bizarre way, perhaps it was meant to be, to get him back on the road to recovery.

The next three days were spent relaxing and reading more about the folklore, making a few notes. He eased up on the whisky, but he was keen to dream of Jenny. It hadn’t happened yet and he so wanted to see her. They say they come to you in dreams, especially when at peace. He had really thought it was her on Halloween, but all he could see was the wanton Marissa every time he closed his eyes.

November 5th arrived along with boxes of fireworks. The gardeners were busy sweeping away leaves and putting the finishing touches to the huge bonfire in the grounds. By late afternoon the dining room was awash with jack-o-lanterns, toffee apples, treacle toffee and jacket potatoes.

There was a hot pot supper too, and soon after that Matt would be leaving.

As the guests gathered round the bonfire wrapped in warm clothes Mr. Macdonald, the hotel manager stopped Matt as he made his way through the foyer, with his luggage, ready to check-out.

“We hope you have enjoyed your stay, Mr Wolfenden. We wondered, would you be so kind to do the honours of lighting the bonfire before you leave?”

As Matt took the lighter to ignite the flame he couldn’t help but make parallels with his own life, That too, had gone up in flames, a life extinguished. Yet during his stay here his own flames of passion had been ignited and his zest for writing slowly rekindled.

As he was driving away from the house towards the village he saw the sky light up in celebration of Guy Fawkes, and of a new life, his life which had to carry on for the sake of his wife. He owed it to her. He would make a success of his and he was going to write again. He was thinking this just as he felt a thud against the car. He braked, beads of sweat spreading across his brow, and got out, praying it wasn’t a child or an animal. It was dark, and he had no torch. He thought he heard a yelp and saw a shadow running off towards the woods. Maybe it was a fox. Poor thing. He hoped it wasn’t badly hurt, and decided it couldn’t have been to disappear

with such speed.

Returning to the car, he slowly started to drive away, a little shaken, and then he saw her. The red cloak flowing in the night. She had come to say goodbye, after their night of passion, but as he watched her wave to him, he stared in horror, for Marissa had long dark hair not unlike Jenny's. This girl had golden curls, under her hood, surrounding her face, like an angel.

It was some nine months later, on a hot July day, when Matt was driving back from his book launch that he noticed it. The doctor had confirmed that he wasn't indeed going mad, and it was all part of the normal grief process, the rollercoaster of feelings and emotions. Life went on, in a mysterious way. He had got on with writing his book and finished it in record time. It went straight to the top of the book chart, and he was happy with it. Now, was his first time driving through Bovey Valley Woods. It was something he had to do. It was time to face it. As he pulled to the side of the road near the fateful tree, he saw something red flapping in the breeze. It was only tiny but it was enough. The piece of cloth, clinging to the branch, was dirty-looking and tatty, with frayed edges but he knew what it was. It was a piece of Jenny's red dress. He snatched it from the branch and held it to his face, hoping to smell her scent, but knowing after being there for too many months that was impossible, but he smiled, because he knew she was there, by his side, his lady, dressed in red. The title of his book by a similar name, was number one. Life was moving on.

His mind wandered back to his visit to Scotland. Would he ever go back one day for another visit, as he had promised himself? Perhaps he would see the ghost of the Red Lady, and her phantom dog. It was all just probably his writer's imagination, and nothing but a fairytale.

Unknown to him, he would also see the girl in the red coat, walking around the village with her limping dog, and pushing a pram with a bonny wee baby inside, which all the locals cooed over.

"My, what big brown eyes your baby has, Marissa".

THE END

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