



Little Hood in the Wood

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Retold Fairy Tales

Once upon a time, there was a girl. She had a soft smile, a caring heart, and a laugh every bit as lively and captivating as her wit. In life, she more than likely wore a sun faded, hand-me-down dress, threadbare, thrice-mended stockings, a strawberry-stained apron, and some sort of riding cloak. But the make and shape and shade of her clothing were not the sorts of details our little heroine concerned herself with, and nor shall I. What most occupied this young girl's mind was the sunshine of an early morning in the garden, the rush of wind across her flushed, freckled cheeks as she scampered to the very highest reaches of the mightiest trees, the taste of strawberries secretly swiped from her mother's kitchen, and the deep, heavy, rhythmic footfalls of her favorite horse.

Well, it so happened one bright, breezy, buzzing spring morning- the first of its kind that year- that the girl's mother decided it was time for her daughter to venture out on her own; free from the mother's nurturing, ever-watchful gaze. The mother knew well that, if the girl was ever to fully become herself, she must first discover and know herself, away and apart from the influence and surveillance of even those who loved her best.

Though her family would always be standing by for advice and support, it was high time the girl equipped herself for the throes and joys of womanhood, and do so in her own way.

And it was with this wisdom in mind that the mother sent her daughter on a momentous journey- however banal and trivial it first appeared to the girl- from home, on the edge of the wood, all way to her grandmother's cottage, deep in the heart of the forest. So the girl left, cloak dawned and stallion mounted, with a touch of suspicion as well as a gnawing hunger for adventure that drowned out any trace of apprehension. At the start of her journey, still in view of her home, the girl merely trotted down the lane slowly and pensively, no faster

than the steady, monotonous pace her mother had always restricted her to. However, once the old cottage was safely out of sight and the hooves of her steed well out of earshot, a fancy struck the girl to ride a little faster, a little more daringly, than she had ever ventured to do before. Summoning for the first time every ounce of strength and skill she could muster as a budding horsewoman, the girl led her stallion from a careful trot to a brisk, though somewhat uncertain canter. Initially the girl could only cling to the beast for dear life, unfamiliar and afraid of its sheer, unrelenting power. But little by little, the girl regained her faculties, her control, and utilized every muscle in her legs and every method in her mind to direct, collaborate with, and command her animal; eventually settling into an unhesitating, self-assured gallop.

However much the girl enjoyed the vigor and energy of the ride- not to mention the newfound independence that came with it- the young rider was eventually forced to slow down, and as she did so, happened upon a small pond, bordered on all sides by patches of temptingly red berries.

The strawberries were the ripest she'd ever seen, rotund and rouged and practically bursting with sweetness, so that the girl felt compelled to dismount and immediately pop one in between her lips. As she bit lightly into the supple, fragrant flesh, it dawned on her that this was the first strawberry she had ever picked for herself- off the vine rather than out of the cupored- and the fruit was all the sweeter, richer, and more alluring for it. And so the girl felt no hesitation or remorse as plucked and ate, plucked and ate, to her heart's content. After all, neither mother nor grandmother was near enough to admonish her for her gluttony or chide her for her indiscretion. Yet, left to her own devices, she did not overindulge, and when she'd had her fill, she stretched out on the cool, yielding grass, satiated and sleepy, softly sucking the last remnants of fruit from her fingertips.

On any other occasion, she might have been reprimanded for staining her skirts, for openly and unapologetically languishing on the bare earth. But in that luxurious moment of solitude, she reclined, limbs splayed, with ample skin left exposed, flushing, and freckling under the sun. All was quiet, save the deep, unfaltering, baritone hum of bees. They sung and soared and swayed above her, going about their secret business with the flowers. The girl gazed wonderingly at them while she- who had until this moment always been frightened or irritated to tears by the creatures- appreciated for the first time their steadfast dedication to their work, their somehow delicate attentiveness to the flowers, and the soft fur on their slight, shivering bodies.

The more at peace she felt, the more utterly contented she became with the world and her place in it, the

heavier her eyelids grew. She had almost drifted off to the land of dreams, intoxicated by the music of bees, the scent of strawberry blossoms, and a faint, inexplicably gratifying ache in her body; the kind that often accompanies unfamiliar and strange, but no less pleasing, forms of exercise. A sigh, at once breathy and breathless, escaped her slightly parted lips, rendered now quite red and unmistakably sweet by berries. The girl, though quite alone, was quite at her leisure.

Or had been, until the piercing, frantic whinny of her horse brought her quickly to her feet. The girl sprinted out of the berry patch just in time to see her prized stallion- the only soul she had ever trusted to be eternally loyal to her- racing at top speed in the direction of home. Contemplating whether she felt more betrayed, hurt, or annoyed, the girl cautiously scanned the clearing her beloved beast had just vacated, wondering at what could've spooked such a powerful animal, when out of the brush came her answer.

A furry, muscular, growling shadow of a creature prowled forth, every bit as terrifying as it was magnificent. The wolf bared its teeth and flattened its ears as a rumbling, spine-tingling growl ripped from its chest, onyx eyes and ink-black coat glinting in the light of the now setting sun. The girl was petrified and unnerved to say the least, but though she was held to the spot by the icy grip of terror, the inner workings of her mind sped at thrice their usual speed, furiously formulating her next move. However, amidst the brambles of half-formed, panic-stricken thoughts, one truth stood out stubbornly in the girl's mind; that wolves were not particularly aggressive beings unless threatened or provoked. Her own form- ungainly, lanky, and awkward- was hardly the source of this creature's hostility.

At that moment, something small, furry, and dark scampered at full speed out of the strawberry patch, promptly coming to rest behind the crouching, growling frame of its mother. It was only then that the girl realized she'd mistaken malevolence for motherhood, and her thoughts darted briefly to the state her own mother would be in when and if the girl ever returned home. She gazed admiringly at the mother wolf and cub, and even in the fading light of dusk, she could make out stray bits of strawberry clinging stubbornly to the pup's coat and muzzle.

Drawing a deep breath, the girl determined to complete the journey to her grandmother's house, and as she turned to leave, the wolf hastened to her, piercing her with a deep, knowing stare. Without exchanging any words, the shewolf offered a kind of protection only a mother has the capacity to offer, and the girl understood that the wolf would from now on follow closely behind her; not in the way a predator stalks a victim, but in the way a guardian oversees a ward, ensuring that the girl made it safely to her destination.

And so it was. The girl ventured bravely on into the heart of the quickly darkening forest as the shewolf and cub followed silently and encouragingly behind, until the moment grandmother opened her door and took the girl lovingly into her arms. The girl was becoming a woman, strong, bold, and shrewd, but protected all the same. And it was an inexpressible comfort that she could mature, peaceful and fortified, in the forest of her foremothers.

Such is the happy fantasy of fairytales.

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