



Nice Girls Walk With Wolves

S. E. Rickards
Retold Fairy Tales

Granny kept sending wolves my way. She said: ‘When I was your age, I wasn’t afraid to stray. Just a little. It’d do you good. Never did me any harm. Don’t swaddle yourself in that ugly old cloak, you’ve got a good figure. Why do you let that hood hang over your face?’

I came to see her often, all the same. Mother sent me with cake and wine to keep her sweet. It wouldn’t do to let it get about that we neglected her, even though she insisted on living alone in the woods, rather than joining us in the neat, bright village where the light plays no tricks and you can always see the path. I liked Granny’s house better. Distant and quiet as if it were the first house ever thought of in the world.

‘One day,’ my mother told me, ‘One day soon I should say, that little house of hers will be yours.’ Granny said the same, but she was digging for pity (for her age) or gratitude (for giving me what she couldn’t take with her), and I didn’t gratify her clumsy openings. I just kept quiet. ‘Funny little thing,’ she’d say, displeased.

I thought that might be why she’d started on the wolves. To try and draw me out a bit. On my way to visit her I’d meet them, loitering, apparently absorbed in the flight of a bird, a gurgling stream, or the hints of blue sky between the branches. Then with a snap of the heavy, grizzled head, yellow eyes rested on me. ‘Oh, fancy meeting you here. Going to Granny’s? It just so happens that’s my path too. I know somewhere we could stop off, if you don’t mind going a little out of your way...’

I’d walk with them a while out of politeness, make no diversions, and excuse myself as soon as I could. When I reached the cottage I’d see her looking out the window, to see how things were going. If she caught my eye she’d pretend to be drying the dishes. But she hardly tried to conceal her disappointment. ‘You didn’t meet anyone interesting on the way, did you?’

I understood what she was trying to say to me: 'Little one, your eyes straight ahead, your cloak drawn tight about you. The woods and the walk are wasted on you.' She made me feel sorry I had disappointed her, and it became clear to me that while trouble may come to girls who meet with wolves, there's no fun in a girl who's no trouble at all.

Just when I thought I was getting used to her interference, and getting quite good at small talk about local prey populations and the difficulties of a hunters moon, she came up with her worst specimen. A great, grey emaciated thing with teeth as yellow as its rheumy, hungry eyes. She must have been running out of options. 'Your granny said I might find you here.' He stuck to me despite all my hints, and when I broke into a run he simply smiled and extended his easy stride.

The forest belongs to the wolves. You've got to give something to the wolves, or they'll take it. Your loss is the same, but giving is less embarrassing. Granny had been out here long enough to know that. With the horribly unhurried fall of his paws thundering in my head, I wondered that I'd never checked her for a tail poking out behind her apron, or pointed ears under her cap. You don't live among wolves without learning their ways. You always have to cede something of what you are to where you are. Granny, it seemed, was happy, even eager, to cede me.

When I reached the cottage I found he had got hold of the end of my cloak. Though I shook it off, it caught in the door so that it wouldn't shut, and he easily pushed it wide again. He seemed larger than ever in the little kitchen. I noticed the chair legs looked like matchsticks compared to his. Granny was expecting us. She stood from her seat by the fire and tried to smile, as if that would make my ragged breathing and frightened face all routine.

'Pick up your cloak then, dear. Our guest...'

'Make him leave.' I tried to shout, I hissed instead. My throat hurt from breathing too hard.

'Now, I've only just gotten here.' He slid a great claw against my throat in the manner of one offering an endearment.

At that, Granny's smile faltered. She said, 'I think you should let my granddaughter be,' with none of her false cheeriness. His grin only widened, and he pressed the claw closer to my flesh. He didn't see the kitchen knife coming, perhaps because he couldn't imagine such a thing of her.

We buried him just outside Granny's fence, where the wood's domain began. She told me she was sorry, and all I could say was 'Well, at least you got me out of it.' After that, whenever I came to visit I'd look out for a stone

on my way- as heavy a one as I could carry- and pile it on top of his burial plot as I passed. To keep him down. Granny told me that what comforts you, can't be foolish.

Before she died, she pressed her papery hand to my rosy cheek. 'Little one. I just didn't want to leave you all alone out here...'

'Without a guard dog?' I enquired.

Her old, ill laugh was painful to hear, but it still felt bright in a house that would soon be silent. 'You could put it that way'.

'I don't want one. I just want to be left here in peace.'

She sighed. 'You'd be wiser if you were otherwise.'

'But you don't have a wolf about the place, do you?' The sadness that filled her eyes was something I'd never understand now. I felt her last, strained breaths in the back of my own throat.

Of course, I didn't bury her near our wolf. It was clear where she was meant to go: next to another mound in the garden, marked with a nameless stone, of which I'd never asked the origin. My grandfather was buried respectably in the shadow of the village church.

I still think she was wrong, but Granny was going on what she knew. In her day, you let wolves play. If they bit, you bit back to show you were just as tough, their flesh just as sweet. 'The youth of today,' I can imagine her saying, if she had (had she?) anyone but me to talk to, 'don't have the spirit we did'. She was frightened of what would happen to me if I made no concessions.

Down that path, the only one she believed existed, and that existed to be strayed from, she looked back at her days as me. The tender young flesh the wolves would go for. And I hurried towards my time as her: the harmless old woman, quiet and alone, long since exhausted in the eyes of the world- and, seemingly, of the wolves, unless she could offer up a less bony appetiser.

I stand before the door and feel, as she must have, the weight of a forest full of wolves pressing against it, and myself alone. Still I'm hopeful. They don't know all the paths either, any more than she did.

Read more fairy tales on Fairytalez.com