



Predator and Prey

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Retold Fairy Tales

Predator and Prey.

Imagine a girl walking all alone. You know the type, the kind that skips along the street, head held high. She's seventeen, eighteen maybe and she moves through the sunlight without a care in the world. When you picture her, it is always morning in your mind, a gentle light radiating warmth across the world. That carefree walk, moving lightly, is like a dance across the unworthy ground.

This is the story of that girl.

But I am insulting your intelligence. You already know what I am going to tell you. You have learnt every detail by heart and deep down you know how it ends. How it has to end.

Still, you can indulge me just a minute can't you? A favour for an old friend, or at least one who was never your enemy? I know how busy your life is, with the job, the family, and your Dad's dodgy heart. Still, you can spare me just a short while. For old time's sake if nothing else.

Good. Then close your eyes a moment. Just relax and let the world fade away. Its ok, the deadline will still be there when you come around and it won't take more than a moment. I promise. If you just relax and allow it, you can see her still. Go on; just close your eyes a moment. Shut out the world and be with her, it won't hurt anything I swear.

There, you have it. I knew you would. Did you notice the blonde hair braided in two neat plaits? She is always blonde and always wears her hair that way, although I could not tell you why. There are things even I cannot know for sure.

On the other hand, perhaps you didn't notice her hair. Perhaps her hood was up and you only saw her as she

was walking away from you, silhouetted against the unforgiving glare of the sun. That is how I see her when I close my eyes. She is always walking away from me and always haloed by the morning light.

I'm told others see her differently. They see her pretty face with a half-smile chasing an unspoken jest across her perfect lips. I'm told her eyes are still the blue of depthless water and seem just as unspoiled as those cool depths. If that is the truth, then her gaze belies her soul, even now.

Still, I can never know what the others see, the ones who are not like me I mean. That is not my gift.

Instead, let us turn back to what you see behind your eyes. You cannot fail to have noted her coat. That fountain of cloth is unfailingly the rich, wild red that calls to mind the first strawberries of spring closing out the harsh famine of winter. Yes, you see that, I know it; I see it in your body language.

She sings you say. Of course. Why would you be surprised by that?

She sings as she walks. She is happy so why should she not sing. Her high-pitched voice is sweet and light like a sea breeze on a still evening. That is part of her appeal of course, part of what makes her so hypnotic. But don't be fooled, she is not the innocent you presume. At least, not any more.

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This whole area used to be forest a few centuries ago. Although I understand that is hard to believe now.

Concrete has replaced the soft ground and the trees have been cast in unforgiving steel instead of warm, living wood.

Once, when she first came here, the track ran through a clearing where now the factory stands. Back then, birds called from the trees, filling the air with beautiful song rather than the distant scream of sirens echoing between the grey towers from somewhere far off. Then, several lifetimes ago, the river ran blue and reflected silver in the moonlight while now it runs inky black and reflects every colour from the oily rainbow that sits upon the surface.

No, I know you cannot imagine this as anything but urban blight. It was once pretty but that was so long ago, before your grandparent's time at least. Back then, there was still green space between the villages. Now everything is connected, an unbroken run of glass and neon from one end of the world to the other. People call that progress and claim that they can walk home safely at night.

People are often wrong.

See, the shadows never change. It matters little whether the branches of rotten trees or the rusting beams of

skyscrapers cast them. They still crawl over the floor, shifting with the fading light of the sun as it sets and night settles in. They lurk in alleys now, the undergrowth replaced by broken bottles and the sharp metallic edges of cans stand in for poisonous snakes. Yet do not be fooled. The shadows are the same.

She must still walk through them to reach her destination. She always had to and always will. Now that the sun has started to set and the heat of the day is fading, look how deep the pools of shadow have become and notice how her appearance changes as she steps between them.

Her golden hair turns to silver robbed of the warmth of the sun and the coat that was once so bright darkens to the colour of congealed blood as she steps on to the darker path. See how she stops singing and how her head drops low.

She is in the woods now, although there are no trees to tell her so. Yet see how her pale skin rises in goose bumps to welcome the new chill of darkness. You are right to suspect she shivers, but rest assured it is only from the cold. There is a memory deeper than her own experience. She knows she has stepped off the path and like a sheep amongst the wolves, understands that the things that live in the shadows are hunting her but that is not anything she fears.

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Will I join the hunt?

Oh that I could. Once, many years ago now, I tried. I almost succeeded as well. I lay in wait for her at journey's end, sure that once she passed from the shadow and felt safe she would be easy pickings for one as young and vital as me.

I was overconfident back then.

Look, things move in the shadows. Even as she steps forward, one stride at a time, they stir and rise to action. See, that one waits beneath the arch of the overpass. She has seen him but what can she do? The only path to her destination lies that way, so she must push on. Their paths will cross eventually, but not now. Not tonight. Do you note the second, sliding out from the door of the bar, bottle of whisky lost in his hand? See, he arrived on the street at the perfect moment to catch her approach. It is her scent of course, drawing him from his watering hole, but he wouldn't be able to tell you that. She is crossing the road to avoid passing directly by him, walking quickly through the darkness between the light poles and lingering close to the lamps, seemingly determined to keep her distance from them all.

No, I don't blame her either, but it won't make any difference. Look, the man sat on the bench with a burger eyes her flesh more hungrily than the grilled meat in his hand. He is awaiting her arrival later on her journey. Another, this one with briefcase and tie comes walking towards her down the road. He approaches directly, convinced his uniform will allow him to get safely within striking range. Another gets off the bus that just stopped two blocks ahead and lingers beside the road, and there are more, always more lurking in every shadow, just waiting. Waiting for her.

Yet she moves forward, and now she sees them for what they are. She allows her gaze to dart from shadow to shadow, assessing each threat on its own terms.

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Suddenly, she stops on the edge of one of the last pools of sunlight, the black patent leather of her shoes glistening at her heel and her toes bathed in shadow. The things in the shadow all turn to look, to see what it is she plans. We cannot see her face from here, that much is true, but rest assured that beneath that hood she is smiling. She always smiles.

You don't believe me? Then just watch a while longer. You will soon have your proof. She is acting out of instinct. This is all preordained. There is no avoiding it, not that she would want to.

Not that the things in the shadows would want to.

She moves again, arms slowly rising as she pushes her hood back, removing it from her head, looking around the alley at the things that lurk in the shadow. See how she removes the bands that hold her hair and shakes it loose, silver cascading down her back.

The sun has set now but still, you can see her face. It seems so delicate in the moonlight. Take a moment and look at her, really see her for once. Do you notice how thin her skin seems over her delicate throat, like paper around a sweet?

Oh, what big eyes she has. All the better to lose yourself in.

She slowly removes her coat, sliding out first one hand and then the other, laying it on the ground beside her. You cannot help but notice what long legs she has. All the better to catch you with.

The shadow-man with the bottle of whisky is walking closer now, the drink making him bold, or stupid. Either way, he is determined to get to her before the one in the suit. Neither will shout nor raise their voice, the moment too delicate to risk such a thing. This is her show, the cone of yellow from a streetlamp her spotlight.

It would be rude of them to steal it.

She turns to face the drunkard, her body armoured only in a black leather vest and wine-red skirt. What was that you said? Don't mutter man. Well, yes, they are large as well now you mention it. All the better to tempt you with. Look, the thing from the shadows has noticed too. See how openly he approaches, offering the bottle to her. She will reach out to take it, she always does. Someone here is oblivious to the danger.

The man in the suit approaches shortly after she takes her first swig of the liquor. He smiles at her, offering her an escape from the whisky breath of the other shadow creature. Watch his body language, do you see how he tries to position himself between her and his rival, asserting dominance, taking her attention away from the drunk?

Oh, she is a smart one, no doubt about it. See how she plays them off, one against the other. A half smile given one way and a backhanded compliment the other. She walks a tightrope between the two, maintaining the most fragile of balances. After all, neither will harm her as long as the other is there to witness it. She knows the light and the company offer protection.

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Which one is the wolf and which the woodsman?

You ask a logical question but I am afraid you already know the answer. There are no woodsmen anymore. No man with a true heart and a strong axe exists to protect the damsel from the slathering fangs of the pack.

You've heard the story a hundred times and you never noticed that detail was out of place, now did you? Wolves don't hunt alone. They never have and never will. The big, bad wolf was the alpha of his pack, but there is no way old 'Red' would have faced him alone. That does not mean the story is false of course, just simplified. It has changed, evolved, over the hundreds of years and the thousands of retellings since it first occurred.

So, here she is, surrounded by the entire slathering pack and with no loyal hero to rescue her. Poor thing, and yet even now she doesn't shiver or draw back in fear. Instead, she moves closer to the man in the suit, holding him close to her, sharing the warmth of her body with him. The others draw back slightly, knowing their place, retreating towards the shadows. The girl has made her choice and they accept it instinctually for now.

See how she has isolated the man from his peers, how skilfully she has separated him from his pack. He thinks he has just received everything he wanted, which in a way he has. Look at him savouring the thought of her, enjoying his moment.

Except the moment doesn't belong to him.

It is hers; she made it.

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Did you really have to be sick all over my shoes? These are real sheepskin. I'm never going to get the damn smell out.

It is shocking, I know. You didn't realise a human being had so much blood inside them, did you? But it always had to end this way. It always does, every night in every town throughout human history.

I know you see how carefully she puts her coat back on, keeping the contents of her hand away from it for fear of staining the material. However, the coat doesn't fit the same way anymore and it can no longer hide her true form. She has found herself at last, discovered the power that has always lay dormant within her.

See, that is the thing about Fairy Tales, they are written to convey a moral and morals never reflect reality.

Red Riding Hood never did think the wolf was Grandma. No man ever rushed selflessly in to danger to protect a maiden from harm. We just want to believe that girls are stupid and power virtuous so we craft a tale to reassure us that the world works that way, even though deep down we know it doesn't.

The truth is this girl and the thousands of millions who will walk this path after her in their turn, all hunt the night as skilfully as any wolf. She is the predator that hides her fangs in a welcoming smile. The truth is so much more complex and far darker than those who write fairy tales want to admit.

The truth is that on this night, the poor sheep never stood a chance.

So, what is it she holds so tightly in her hand as she walks away from the carcass of the thing from the shadows? What is it that she clings to as she senses the new dawn about to break?

The wolves heart of course. It is warm in her hand and the metallic, iron smell of it pleases her. The gentle swell of it comforts her nerves as it continues to beat, futilely trying to pump life in to a ruined husk.

It is her prize and the first of many she will collect. Whole packs will perish by her hand until the remaining wolves learn to keep their distance.

Except the truth is, some wolves never will. Her type can always find prey when they need to feed.

How do I know all this you ask? Well, I told you, it always ends the same way and some things can survive a very long time without a heart.

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