



The Lumberjack

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Retold Fairy Tales

In a forest in a distant land, there lived a lumberjack. The lumberjack spent his days cutting down the trees that stood in that near-endless span of woodland, and truth be told, he would sometimes dream of a different life. He grew tired of spending hours chopping down one tree, only to find a new one next to its stump on the following day. He yearned for a life of love and adventure. But something – perhaps some dark, mysterious force – seemed to tether him to the forest, ensuring his dreams remained only dreams. There was magic at work in that green and tangled space, and not all of it was good. Of that he was sure.

One day, when he heard the distant sound of a girl crying out, his fears about the dangers of the forest were confirmed in his mind. His axe in hand, he endeavoured to find the source of the commotion. As he drew closer, voices became discernible, and they filled him with trepidation.

“I’m going to eat you!” he heard, and it was said in a deep, raspy tone. A lighter, softer voice followed, which said, “Stop it! Get off me!”

Expecting to find some fearsome, bloodthirsty beast, he unravelled himself out of a dark huddle of shrubbery, and finally set his eyes upon the dreaded sight. But he found that it was not dreadful at all. The voices belonged to a girl and a boy. What the lumberjack thought desperate cries for help were actually the sound of the girl’s laughter. The boy had been pretending to eat her.

The girl and the boy froze in fear when they saw the lumberjack watching them. Embarrassed, he apologised, and scurried out of sight.

The lumberjack was upset, as he knew the girl well. Indeed, he was deeply in love with her, and had been for some time. Everyday, on the way to her grandmother's cottage, she would walk past him as he worked, and each time he was struck by her prettiness. He soon felt a longing for the girl brewing deep inside. One day, he summoned the courage to talk to her. He did more than talk, in fact. He gave her a gift: a little wooden figurine that he had carved himself. She was delighted. But when the lumberjack asked for a kiss – a deserved act of gratitude, in his eyes – she became agitated. He pleaded some more, but she ran off.

She was with a boy called Charles Wolfe, the son of a wealthy farmer. He was the same age as the lumberjack, but far more handsome and charming. A twinge of jealousy shot inside him when he first saw the two together, hand in hand and relishing each other's company. Mostly, he feared for the girl. He believed that Charles Wolfe was a nasty boy. Someone who only cared about his own ravenous desires. Someone who would chew the girl up and spit her back out.

Charles Wolfe won the girl over when he presented her with a gift of his own. It was far more lavish and pleasing to the eye than the lumberjack's gift, which was puny and pathetic in comparison. He simply could not compete. He imagined the girl mocking his wooden sculpture and destroying it.

Hidden amidst the murky shadows of the forest, the lumberjack watched her react to the boy's offering with giddy happiness. He sneered.

The gift was a red cloak. It was plain, undecorated, but its silky and supple look, as well as its vibrant colour, made it enchanting. It also had a hood. When the girl put it on, it lent her an aura of mystery. The lumberjack, overcome by anger he would not outrightly acknowledge, gave her a derisive nickname. "Little Red Riding Hood," he sniggered, receding into the shadows. "And her precious, precious wolf."

The lumberjack didn't want to hate the girl. But now, after seeing them playing together, so happy and content, he could not contain his envy any longer.

He began the journey to the grandmother's cottage, where he would wait for Little Red Riding Hood's return.

He eyed the blade of his axe, its metal shimmering and dancing as it moved against the sunlight. With a strained, twitching smile on his face, he embarked on the journey, which would take him deep into the forest.

About half-way through his journey, as daylight was beginning to fade, he encountered a hare stood in the middle of a path. Auburn leaves blanketed the forest floor, and he kicked some of them towards it. But to his surprise, it remained still. The lumberjack was even more surprised to hear it speak.

“Go back, boy,” it said, its voice austere and reverent. “No good can come of actions born out of poisonous jealousy. Stop, before desire consumes you!!”

But the lumberjack took no heed of the hare. He would certainly not allow himself to be dictated to by such a small animal. And so he caught the hare, cooked it, and ate it. Replenished, he continued his journey.

The cottage was small and inconspicuous. Noticing an open window, he approached it stealthily. He could hear no sound inside, meaning the girl and the boy were not yet back. Just as planned, he thought, his face twitching. Trying to ignore a niggling sensation – a faint, queasy uneasiness – whirling within himself, he squeezed into the cottage.

It was warm and cosy and neat. The sweet aroma of baking swelled inside his nostrils. Cinnamon, ginger, pastry, apples – they all greeted him with a kind embrace. He was so taken aback that he nearly forgot why he was there. That is, until he heard the shocked voice of the girl’s grandmother.

He turned around and their eyes locked briefly, but before he could do anything, she was hitting him in the face, over and over. A dull pain bore down on his mouth as she struck the area. Gaining his senses, though, the lumberjack lashed out at the old woman’s hands like a wild animal. Then, remembering his superior strength, he shoved her into the kitchen pantry and locked the door.

Now, I’ll just wait for the wretched couple to return, he thought. Fondling the axe in his hand, he stood in the hallway staring at the cottage’s door, which he had left open in order to draw them inside. A crazed, convulsing grin was etched on the lumberjack’s face.

Before long, the young couple came to the cottage.

“Grandmother?” the girl said, confused. “Are you OK?”

But she soon saw the lumberjack, and she and Charles Wolfe, as they had earlier that day, froze like sighted prey at his appearance. The girl’s red cloak beamed in the evening’s semi-darkness. The lumberjack, if not for the faint glimmer of his axe, would have been totally shrouded.

“You didn’t expect to find me here, did you?” the lumberjack said.

The girl demanded to know what he was doing there, and what he had done with her grandmother. He told her he was there for revenge.

“Your voice,” she said. “It’s changed. You’re not the same sweet boy who gave me that lovely gift. You sound frightening.”

The lumberjack scowled. “Why do you call me sweet, when your heart is not with me?” He took a step closer. “You ran away from me that day, when I gave you that gift, only to fall in the clutches of this...this wolf!”

Charles offered nothing in return, but the girl felt compelled to reply.

“I ran because you were scaring me,” she said. “I thought you were going to hurt me. I’m sorry if I upset you.”

She saw the lumberjack’s eyes bulging, and though she did not want to look at the axe, she couldn’t help but notice it shaking in his large hands. It was then that she noticed something alarming.

“Oh my goodness,” she said. “What’s happened to your teeth?”

The lumberjack shot a hand to his mouth to find that it was bloody. The old woman must have knocked one of his teeth out. It made him feel even weaker – as if he had been humiliated once more. He would never be worthy of Charles Wolfe, who even in his silent fear looked dashing and smart.

He heaved his axe behind his shoulder.

“Don’t worry about my teeth,” he snarled. “Worry about your precious lover, who will now feel my wrath. If he tries to run, I’ll hunt him down! I’ll will give him a red cloak of his own, since you so adore that colour!”

What the lumberjack did not know was that the girl's grandmother, still trapped in her pantry, was a conjurer of great magic. It would be unfair to call her a witch, since she was loving and kind, and had no maliciousness in her heart. It was her power that lay over the forest – her magic that would replace the trees that the lumberjack would cut down, that would replenish the streams and save the wildlife from human cruelty. The animals of the forest answered to her.

And so, unbeknownst to the lumberjack, a pack of wolves were making for the cottage, bidden by their master. Incensed by the old woman's command, they approached with ferocious speed. Just as the lumberjack readied himself to swing his axe at the boy, the wolves burst through the door. Before he had time to think, they swarmed the lumberjack. As he fell on his back, he managed to steal a glimpse at the numberless sets of razor white teeth shining in the darkness before they bit at his clothes, and the skin beneath. Charles covered the girl's eyes.

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The lumberjack survived. He was badly scarred and permanently deformed. But worse than the physical reminder of his folly was the deep, interior heaviness that now weighed down on his person. He would carry this guilt with him for the remainder of his days – a guilt that burdened him like a set of stones permanently dragging down on his heart.

The girl, meanwhile, lived a happy life with Charles Wolfe, though she could not help but feel a great pity for the lumberjack. There was goodness in him, she knew, but it had been swallowed by the gaping jaws of his greedy jealousy. And like a lamb in a wolf's belly, his pure gentleness had deteriorated. Only mad anger could act on his behalf, since the kind-heartedness that lurked somewhere inside was made impotent. If only he could have resisted his envy, she thought. Envy is so deceptive and self-serving.

The memory of the lumberjack would remain within the girl forever. In fleeting moments, it seemed to be absent, but alas it was always there, lingering in the shadows and biding its time.

She would only have to see the colour red, and she would be reminded.

She would always be his Little Red Riding Hood.

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