



# *The Woodcutter's Wife*

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Magic

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Once upon a time, in a forest far away, there lived a woodcutter. He was tall and he was strong, but handsome he was not. Thick patches of curly red hair covered him from head to toe. His beard was unruly and hung down to his middle. Try as he might to keep it trim, nothing worked. It had a mind of its own and grew at an astonishing rate.

Hard labor and long days left the woodcutter little time for grooming, and even less time for courting. In his youth, he dreamed of a wife and family. When he realized that all the young women gave him a wide berth and averted their eyes whenever he passed, the woodcutter gave up any hope of a familial life. The snickers and whispers that landed on his ears left him confused and disheartened. Poor, solitary, and disheveled, he was not marriage material.

The woodcutter accepted his lot without bitterness. Instead, he turned with renewed attention to his quiet life cutting trees in the deep, dense forest. He passed many, many years alone in the woods this way. He was never seen in town, and every now and again the townspeople wondered, “Is he even still alive?” But then they would receive a new supply of hewn logs delivered by a peasant boy on a cart. The boy would give the same report as every boy before, “He chops, he eats, he sleeps. His beard is longer than ever.”

It happened one evening, as the woodcutter’s tea kettle began to sputter and spit on the stove, that he heard an unfamiliar sound at his door—the rap-tap-tapping of a visitor.

“Odd,” he thought and slowly rose. The woodsman opened the heavy door and looked into the dark, a candle lifted in his hand.

“Hello?” he said to the night. No answer.

“Hmm, I’m hearing things.”

He shut the door and went back to his kettle. A rap-tap-tap! Not again! He moved quickly to the door this time and opened it wide.

“Who’s there?” he asked.

He heard a sound like wind blowing over harp strings somewhere far away. He shook his head and wiggled a thumb in his ear.

“I’m goin’ plum mad,” he muttered and closed the door again.

The tired woodsman was about to return to his table, when the knock came again. This time he flung the door fast and wide open to catch the wily culprit. But again he saw nothing.

Then he felt something brush against his leg. He looked down and saw a small woman tugging on his trousers.

“It’s me! It’s me!” she cried from below, “Your wife!”

“My eyes astound me, but not as much as my ears!” the woodsman gasped. “You say you are my wife, but I have no wife. Who are you then really?”

The woodcutter scooped the little woman up into his hands. He may have been hairy and strong, but that did not make him gruff or rough by nature. The woodcutter gently cupped the woman in his palms and eyed her curiously in the light of his waning candle.

She was no bigger than the first knuckle of his thumb, but her smile was as wide as the crescent moon. Her black braided hair hung over her shoulder and fell to her hips. She wore a white, linen dress covered in rich embroidery—bright blue, red, green, and yellow threads told the story of wild birds in exotic jungles. The woodcutter gazed in awe at this small wonder of a woman.

“How do you do?” she began. “It’s true, I’m not your wife...yet, but I will be if you’ll have me. I know I’m small,

but I'm a hard worker and a fine artisan. And what's more, no one else will have you, so why not me? What do you say?"

"What do I say?" puzzled the hermit, "I have no reason to say no, but why would you want to live in this lonely wood with me? And what will you do for company all day when I am away in the forest chopping wood?"

"That's simple—I'll go with you. I will be very cozy in the middle of your beard or in the collar of your shirt. You won't mind me at all. And, I will gather the berries I need to dye my threads to stitch my gowns, and knit my scarves, and make you fine napkins."

"Napkins! What need have I for napkins?"

"Well, tish-tosh. Everyone needs a good napkin. The point is, I want to stay and I want to be your wife. You needn't ask so many questions. I won't be a bother to you at all, and in time you may find that I bring you good fortune. But for now, let's go in from the cold."

The astounded woodsman carried the miniature bride across the threshold of his door. The ancient rules of hospitality weighed on the woodcutter's mind. He knew enough about forest magic to know one ought never turn away a small and vulnerable creature from their door. Still, he had doubts about whether she really would bring him good fortune.

He made her a bed in a tea cup filled with goose down, and placed it on his night table. He brought her an acorn crown filled with three drops of warm milk to drink. Then he wished her a "Fair sleep," and she wished him, "Sweet dreams," and that was that. The woodcutter shut his weary eyes and fell asleep to the sound of her soft singing.

In the morning when he rose, the woodcutter found his table already set for breakfast and a pot of steaming porridge ready on the stove. How she accomplished this large task he couldn't fathom! But, he took his seat and gave a grateful nod and word of thanks to the wondrous creature in his kitchen. His wife smiled a sweet smile and joined him at the table. She ate just one crumb to his crumpet, one teaspoon to his bowl full. The woodcutter found he was quite glad for the company, and understood just how lonely his life had been. She raised the spirits of his stale home, and the woodcutter felt like how he imagined his purple crocuses feel each spring when they finally break through the soil and gaze upon the sun for the first time.

After breakfast, the little wife stretched to her full height of precisely one inch and placed her hands on her

hips.

“Now,” she exclaimed, “How do you like what I’ve done to your beard?”

“My beard?” the woodcutter panicked. “What have you done to my beard?” He reached for the bedraggled mass and let out a sigh of relief to find it still there. Something was different about it though. It felt less fuzzy, more firm, and smooth.

“I’ve braided it! I did it while you slept. Isn’t it lovely?” His little wife clapped her hands in delight.

“You have such a fine beard. I made at least five hundred braids and knots,” she said with pride.

The woodcutter picked up the kettle to catch his hazy reflection. He hardly recognized himself. He’d never seen such a finely braided beard.

“You look very handsome this way and it won’t get in the way of your chopping.”

The woodcutter’s head swirled with all the recent changes: a wife, a hot breakfast, and now braids in his beard. What was the world coming to? It was a lot to take in. All the same, he was a man mindful of manners and thanked his new wife kindly, praising her skills.

After breakfast he packed them each a lunch and put on a flannel shirt and boots. He scooped up his wife and held her to his beard. She had created an opening, like a cave, in the center of his beard and braided a small swing into it. This was where she would sit. It was enormously clever of her.

The woodcutter slung his ax over his shoulder and took off whistling through the forest. He noticed her small, sweet voice accompanying his tune. He smiled. The woodcutter could not remember a more beautiful morning. How fresh the snow was, how crisp the air, how lovely the horizon.

And so this was how their days continued. Each morning the little wife braided his beard into fine fishtails, French or Dutch braids, micro braids with beads, Icelandic knots, and Tahitian twists. She knew ever so many styles and no beard was ever the same from day to day. With her able hands, she conditioned his beard with oils and spices until it glowed like the rich red earth under a setting sun. The clever woman even used the berries she collected in the forest to dye parts of his beard. When the dyed strands were woven together, elaborate patterns appeared—fractal and mesmerizing.

Under such tender care and loving attention, the homely woodcutter changed into a handsome, happy man.

The little wife always made him breakfast, and he always made her lunch. For dinner, they cooked together while she shared stories of her travels around the world, the books she'd read, and the strange animals she'd met. He regaled her tales of his encounters with fairies, gnomes, and will 'o the wisps. Together they laughed and passed many of fine evening , content in their quiet ways.

When finally a young boy came again to collect logs,he gasped at the sight of the woodcutter's beard.

"By Jupiter!" said the lad. "You're...you're..."

"Quite a vision? Yes, I know!" laughed the woodcutter.

The boy raced back to town with plenty of news to fill the hungry ears of gossips. At first, the men and women laughed at the boy and said he made it all up.

"A tiny wife who braids his beard? Absurd!"

However, as more and more lads from villages on the other side of the wood passed through with similar stories, the people began to believe. Finally, they could not contain their curiosity. They simply had to see for themselves.

With arms loaded with fruits and jams, skirt pockets with carved beads and feather pens, bags with books and pastries, they set off. And well, why not? They wanted to gawk at a man's beard—utterly impolite ! They couldn't just arrive at his front door step and expect entry. No, that would break every rule of hospitality. So, the villagers gifts were an excuse to "just drop by" and a good token of neighborliness. Neighborliness—a thing that none had shown the poor woodsman in all his years.

So, much to the surprise of the Woodsman, and much to the delight of his wife, their home soon swelled with gifts: pretty watercolors on the wall, fine dried herbs to hang in the windows, sweet-smelling candles, and special treats like figs, chocolate, and macaroons. They welcomed the villagers with open hearts, and shared their homemade dandelion tea and wild mushroom bread over merry conversation.

People came from near and far to gaze upon the woodcutter's beard. And the further they traveled, the more exotic their gifts. Despite the woodcutter's remonstrations, they insisted on leaving him with gold pieces, small gemstones, silkworms, and spices. They counted it all joy for his beard was more fabulous than they imagined. It was a piece of art, and worth the journey.

"May I touch it?" small children asked.

"Think my beard'll do that too?" older men wondered.

"Smells wonderful!" the women exclaimed scheming over the possibilities for their own husbands' beards.

The woodcutter was very good-natured about everything, and always praised the talents of his fine wife. If people were surprised by his beard, they were even more surprised to meet his dainty wife!

"The tiniest woman I ever saw!"

"Such an odd match, but they seem happy."

"I do love her dandelion tea!"

From a quiet, solitary life to one of frequent laughter and chatter, the woodcutter thoroughly enjoyed the change in scene. The people found the woodcutter to be a wise soul. All his years spent out of doors attuned him to the movements and habits of the forest and all its creatures. They learned the safest routes through the woods to avoid bandits, where to forage for wild asparagus, and how to identify a wizard's pool.

"Well what do you know!" they all discussed in town. "That woodcutter is a right fine, smart fellow and so lovely to behold. Not to mention his newfound riches! Why didn't we marry our daughters to him when we had the chance?"

The townspeople lamented their unwed daughters and their foolish behavior in years gone by. They chided themselves for ever believing the homely woodcutter was not a worthy match.

And that's how the conniving began.

"Why shouldn't one of our daughters still wed the woodcutter?"

“His wife is so small that she’s no wife at all.”

“The woodcutter needs a wife strong enough to haul water and dig vegetable gardens. That’s what I say!”

“And to bear him sons to help with the timber and daughters to make him soup when he’s old!”

Seeing as they clearly knew what was best for the woodcutter, and the kind of life he should lead, the townspeople decided to present their three fairest maidens to the woodcutter as a superior substitute for the wife he currently kept.

It was a sunny winter day exactly one year from the time the woodcutter’s wife first knocked on his door. The wife busied herself cracking and roasting hazelnuts and brewing mead in the cabin. It was nearly the winter solstice so preparations were in order. The woodcutter went off to gather ferns to make a wreath for their door. His pleasure was immense—what a year it had been! He mulled over the sweet delights of a warm wife, warm friends, a warm home. He was picking pine cones and berries to adorn the wreath when he heard the sleigh bells.

A vision of beauty caught his eye. Three young maidens in thick fur caps, capes, and muffs entered his yard in a magnificent sleigh driven by a very fat, but altogether dignified driver.

“Welcome, friends,” greeted the Woodcutter as the maidens stepped down from the sleigh. “What brings you through this wood on such a wintry day?”

The eldest among them curtsied slightly and spoke first.

“Dearest Sir, we three were chosen, by the village you yourself grew up, to present ourselves to you as brides. Any one of us would be honored to be your wife, and we have come so that you may choose whoever you find fairest and most able.”

The youngest spoke next.

“We have heard it said that you already have a wife. But we have also heard that she is small, too small to bear you sons and daughters, and too small fulfill the duties of a good wife. We are strong of heart and hand and beautiful as well.”

The middle maiden interjected, “We come with fine dowries as well! Goats, sheep, chickens, pigs, a fine steed,

200 gold coins, three rolls of silk, five bundles of hemp, and a dozen ruby rings. You will be a rich man and never need to cut wood for the rest of your life.”

The woodcutter did not know what to say.

The eldest pressed him, “So then, dear woodcutter...which of us will you have?”

The three maidens would have dazzled the woodcutter in his youth. It was true his wife was too small to hold and caress; a warm body beside his in the bed would be nice. But then again, did she not warm his very heart and soul? And is that not so much dearer in this uncertain world?

The Woodcutter considered his words. It's not every day such a proposition is made. Indeed, it's not everyday a woman shows up at your door asking to be your wife, and yet it certainly seemed to be happening quite often these days!

“Dear maidens, it is I who am honored. Any man would count himself fortunate to wed any one of you lovely lasses. However, I fear I must turn you all down. I do not wish to marry anyone other than the little wife who has already made my house a home.”

The girls gasped. The fat driver gasped. In fact, even the horses gasped.

“Fool!” spat the youngest.

“Arrogant, prideful, fool!” rebuffed the eldest.

“You'll regret it!” cursed the middle.

“All that you say may be true. But here is something that is most certainly true: More good has come into my life in the past year than all my years combined, and that thanks to one small woman, my wife. If I can make her life even one half as cozy and happy as she has made mine this past year then that is how I wish to spend the rest of my days. It is she who taught me how to love and loved me when no one else did; therefore, she is the only one to whom my heart belongs. Good day madams.”

And with that the woodcutter turned back toward his home.

The driver hastened the maidens back into the sleigh and drove off in a hurry. He too had a wife he wouldn't trade for a thousand Arabian horses, and he wished to tell her so as soon as possible.

The woodcutter hung the wreath on the door and stepped back to admire it. He heard a strong, confident voice singing inside. It was his wife's voice, he knew that, but it wasn't the light, tinkling sound of chimes anymore. It sounded clearer and closer, like a bubbling brook. He turned the door handle and stepped inside.

His wife was singing and stirring the great bucket of mead. When she heard him enter, she turned and ran to embrace him.

"My darling, you really love me. You really, truly love me as I love you, don't you?" spoke his wife, her warm breath in his ear, her hands on his shoulders.

"I do! I do!" said the Woodcutter. (He had accepted by this point that life was full of surprises.)

"You broke the spell placed on me five years ago by an evil witch! Only true love could break the spell and restore me to my full stature."

The woodcutter took a step back to gaze at his beloved wife then gently cupped her small face in his palms and kissed her mouth.

They lived happily ever after.

Fin

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