

RED RIDING HOOD

by LILY OLTHOFF

Once upon a time there was a young girl who loved her family. She was dutiful and took care of everyone she loved, and people smiled at her everywhere she went. Her mother worried about her, because that's what good mothers do. She knew how young girls could be, so she tried to teach her daughter and warned her of the dangers in the world. And she made her a red cloak.

No. This is not how we're doing this.

The girl's grandmother lived in a cottage in the woods. She was allowed to do so, because she was an old woman—possibly a witch. But who expects a witch with no husband in a nice orderly village? But she had to be visited because the girl was so caring and the grandmother was old, meaning she had to be sick (who else gets sick but old people?), which meant the girl had to leave her home to bring her food. Her mother had sewn her the cloak so that she would always be visible and the girl dutifully put it on, took her basket and went for the road.

Stop. That's not the reason, she wore it because she liked to stand out, she liked not to be invisible anymore.

You stop interrupting me! Her mother, who needs no other name than mother, had given her rules to follow once she left the rules of village life: stay on the path, don't linger or stray from your task, take good care of your grandmother but come back quickly. But the girl, who couldn't help her innocent nature, was so enchanted by her surroundings that she got distracted by the beautiful flowers next to the path.

And what if she chose to step off it? What if she wanted—

So. There's a girl in the wild woods, being pretty and vulnerable with no good man around to protect her. We know who's bound to appear.

*You're quite literally the narrator;
it's your choice to put it there!*

Wolves would be terrifying even if we hadn't spent millennia raising sheep and watching them get slaughtered. Terrifying snarl, gleaming teeth, shaggy fur and they're so fast that you know you'd be dead even when you start running. Right now, no one's running. It's the moment before the slaughter, time frozen in fear, the girl staring at the beast. Is she scared? I was never sure if she was scared in that moment or if she thought he could be nice, if he looked a bit like her pet dog at home. They don't show their malice right away, do they? They appear courteous on the outset and once you let your guard down, they charge.

You and I both know this isn't a story about wolves. He addresses her, very politely and she thinks he's charming and helpful when he offers to show her the way back to the path. And because he has been so nice she doesn't look back and doesn't notice him following her.

You're not the right person to tell stories about girls if you think they're naïve and wouldn't look over their shoulders after meeting a stranger. Have you talked to a single girl in your life?

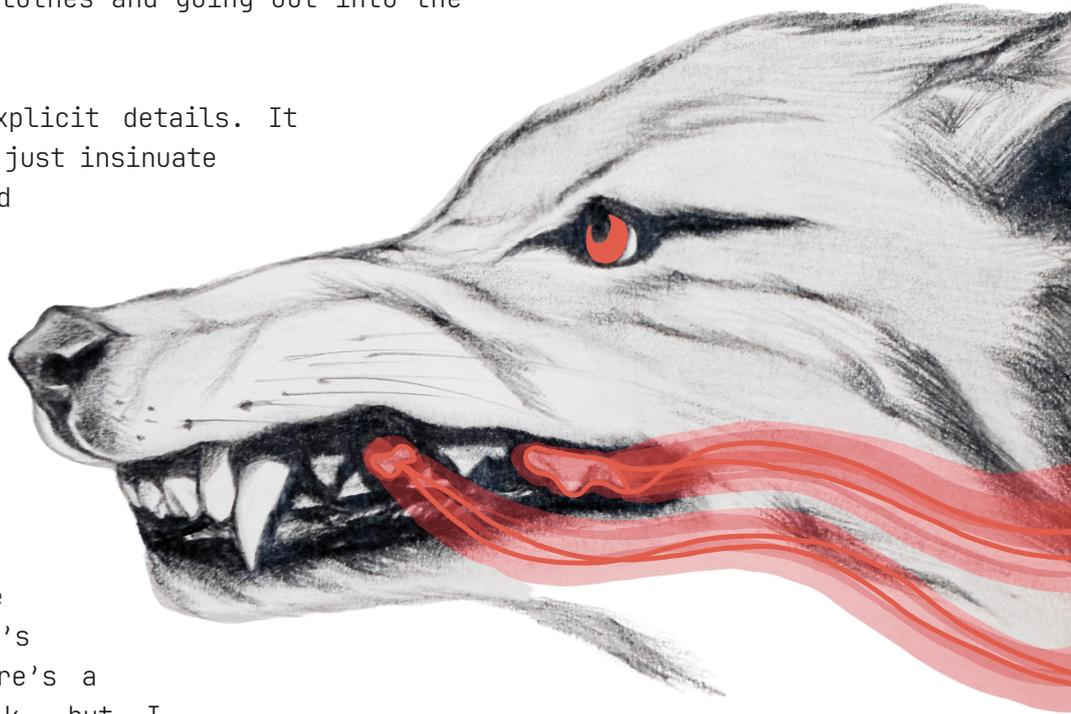
No, no, she's innocent and pure and has never encountered evil in her village. He was friendly and every girl will trust you if you're friendly. She inadvertently shows him the trail off the road to her grandmother's house and he overtakes her and gets there before she does.

And then, something terrible happens.

I don't mean to imply that it's the girl's fault for not listening to her mother and talking to the stranger instead of the nice huntsman. She was naïve, which is why we need to tell this story. She made a mistake—and really, it was a mistake and not a choice. You don't want her to have done this deliberately now, do you?—and the next girl who thinks of putting on bright clothes and going out into the world can learn from this.

I will be leaving out the explicit details. It frightens children more if you just insinuate a lot of blood and entrails and terrible screams and suddenly there's a wolf wearing the skin of an old woman, lying in her bed, a stranger unrecognizable in the middle of a domestic scene.

The girl doesn't notice the difference at first. She's talking to the wolf and there's a few fun details about chalk, but I really want to drive home the point that she is talking to a monster and she has no idea but a vague inkling of unease. Something's wrong. No, not even that. Something's not quite right. He's a wolf, he doesn't know how to behave like a proper civilized human. Try as you might, the strangeness can never be completely hidden. You've met these kinds of people. The outsiders, the ones with no good family to vouch for. Sure, they're accommodating and try to fit in, but there's something that rubs you the wrong way, even if you're not supposed to say so anymore. Or maybe your cousin's gone off to college and at the next family dinner he's a bit different and you don't trust him. Don't you want to scratch that human skin away and find out if it's really him or if someone else is eating your lasagna?



Where was I? Wolf. Girl. Fear. Because this is about fear, obviously. Not the girl's, she hasn't been scared for one moment. And I don't care about the mother, no one cares about mothers until they meddle and become evil, so whose fear is this? This could be a happy tale if not for the tension in your jaw ever since she stepped out of the gates of her home. Who is so scared the moment a girl leaves her house, waiting for the inevitable tragedy? Who keeps looking over her shoulder nervously, looking for a wolf? And we're doing it to protect her! We know very well what big bad people do to cute little girls, don't ask me how.

The girl opens the door. This is how we know it's over. Girls don't open doors; they're held open for them. She sees the wolf, fur visible in the tears of her grandmother's skin, the face not quite convincingly human because it has to fit over a snout and have you ever tried to put the wrapping of a chocolate Santa over something else? Looks terrible. Human skin can be stretched a bit, but as I mentioned, the wolf is huge. Gigantic even. Towers over the tiny frail girl, drooling and grinning with her grandmother's lips. It's bad. It's so bad, I should look away, but I can't. I've been tense the whole time, and now finally the moment's here. The one thing we were warned against, we're supposed to be scared of, but maybe it isn't fear I've been feeling, it's anticipation. This is punishment, the order of things, just how stories go, and just look at her how she trembles now, finally, how her lip wobbles and she turns to flee. She has to, because she didn't earlier and that's the best part when you see someone powerless try to gain back freedom. Futile, of course, she will get a few metres further and then-

Yeah, no. We're not doing this.

You don't really want to turn this into a story where she enjoys it, do you? I was wondering, earlier when you suggested she chose to step off the path.

Enjoys what? To be eaten? Of course not. If you want to tell a story about violence this is not how we're doing it.

But it's not just violence, is it? Consider-

No. Don't even finish that sentence. This is about violence and power and nothing else. And we're not doing it this way.

But this is how it's done! This is what people expect!

I don't care. I'm tired of how you tell it. In fact, I don't think you should tell it at all. Do you know the story where they sew someone's lips shut?

How dare-

Whew. Glad I learned cross-stitch. And I don't even like body horror.

How do I even finish this mess? She's in the yard, the wolf in the skin of her grandmother is running out after her, there's a huntsman somewhere, but I really don't want to involve her with the-nice-man-with-a-gun-who-can-defeat-bad-people-and-gets-rewarded-by-the-girl. The whole setup is ridiculous to begin with. You know what? There. Her grandmother's living alone in the woods, by your logic, wouldn't she have to defend herself against the masses of bad people trying to invade her peace? She must have some means of defending herself around. Oh, look, there's an axe leaning next to the chopping block. The girl's going to pick it up and hit the werewolf on the head with it.

Mmh-mhmm!

You still don't shut up, do you? Not my problem, she got him right in that soft spot at the back of his skull, where he had tried to glue her grandmother's skin together. Didn't want to look at that distorted face, obviously. Look, he's fallen down. Danger defeated. The huntsman doesn't even have to show up. And I don't like the way you conveniently got rid of her grandmother who's supposed to be strong enough to live on her own in the woods. You'd expect her to know how to deal with wolves. But you said she was a witch, right? And a girl, walking out of her village into the woods and defeating a monster, is practically destined to become a witch's apprentice and this is a good initiation. I'm sure she could find a spell of resurrection somewhere in her grandmother's library after she puzzles the body back together, arranging bones and muscles and organs correctly, sewing the skin around it shut.

I know this is not where you imagined her ending up - you saw her next to the huntsman, scared to death every time she must go somewhere on her own because she might run into a monster. Would be more convenient for you, wouldn't it? I don't want her to be that though; I like her more when she's not afraid. And if you insist on an untamed, dangerous forest full of scary things, I think she belongs there rather than your village. You probably wouldn't want her back after that, don't think she's worth saving at this point, might even reconsider who you'll call monstrous and who's the victim now. Maybe this story has more than one kind of monster. And every child growing up will learn eventually that big bad wolves killing your grandmas aren't real; huntsmen are. So really, I think she should learn how to deal with that kind of monster.