

Little Red Riding Hood



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Once upon a time there lived a little girl named Emily. She was fair-haired and bright-eyed despite the rather lonely life she had grown accustomed to. You see, Emily was an orphan. She never knew her father for he died when she was but an infant. She was raised by her mother, alone, for as long as she could remember and had no other relations except for a grandmother who lived deep in the forest. Emily and her mother visited Grandma's house many times when she was a child, but that was a long time ago. That was before the giants came.

All across the kingdom the stings of poverty and famine were felt, and that was when the giants were happy. When they were upset things only went from bad to worse and they wreaked untold destruction. One day, while Emily was out picking berries she returned home to find that her house had been crushed by an angry giant's temper tantrum.

Soon afterward a hero in the kingdom would do away with the giants for good, but it was already too late for little Emily who, now without a mother as well as a father, had become alone in the world. Her grandmother, living so far away from the rest of the kingdom, knew nothing of this and patiently awaited her daughter and granddaughter's next visit. The kindly old woman was oblivious to the fact that Emily was now living in a home for orphaned children.

Though Emily was treated well by those who cared for her, she knew she did not belong there. She was not like the other children because, unlike them, she still had family. Somewhere her grandmother was waiting for her, wondering why she had not visited in so long. But the way was far and there were none who would brave the unknown depths of the forest.

Since the evil things in the world had recently swelled in power, the woods had become a place of terrible danger and fearsome creatures roamed its twisting pathways. Grandma feared even to venture farther than her own garden and, so, could not travel to the city to see Emily and her mother. Every day, the little girl begged her caretakers to escort her through the woods but there were no adventurers among them. All the warriors in the kingdom had gone to war against the giants and no one could be spared. She had no choice but to remain in the orphanage. There, she wept for her departed mother and father and for her poor, lonely grandmother.

The only comfort to her was the red hooded cloak that Grandma had given her on her last visit. This she always wore during the day and used as a blanket at night, and would not be parted from it. Emily was so attached to it that the other children ceased calling her by her right name, altogether, and had instead taken to calling her Red Riding Hood.

A year flitted by and Emily was now eleven. She would often overhear the adults talk of the war and of the many battles that had been won and lost. A young man named

Jack had slain the giant general Cormoran on the slopes of Mount Brugan and, supposedly, the tide of the war had been turned against the monstrous brutes. But still the conflict raged on, and no one could be spared to escort a little girl to her grandmother's house.

"I must go, myself, then," she decided one day.

"You can't do that, Red," said Peter, one of the other children. "There are monsters in the forest."

"I don't believe in monsters."

"What about giants? Wasn't your mother killed by one?"

"I believe in *them* but there are no giants in the woods," she responded, lacing up her boots. "If there were, we would be able to see them sticking out of the trees!"

"There are worse things than giants in those woods," Peter warned.

"Like what?"

"I've heard stories that the Black Fairy has a pet living in that forest."

"What kind of a pet?" she asked, trying not to let the fear show in her eyes.

"It's a horrible creature with sharp teeth and claws and, supposedly it can make itself look like anything or anyone it wants. It could be a man or a woman like any other and then, suddenly, it can become a beast again!" Emily was troubled by what Peter said, even though she didn't fully believe it. "You should wait a while, Red. The war can't last much longer and, after that, we can find someone brave to help you."

So she waited and waited and waited. But the war raged on as it always had. The dwarves were embroiled in their own conflict with the kingdom of New Brangomar and its queen Bruma and, without their aid, the campaign against the giants stretched on interminably. It seemed, still, there was no one to help little Red Riding Hood.

One evening she decided she could wait no longer, despite Peter's warnings. Donning her red cloak and packing a basket of food and some medicine, Emily climbed out the window of her room in the dead silence of night.

"Good luck, Red Riding Hood," Peter whispered to her as she began her long journey into the woods.

As bold as was her resolve to venture alone through a place so feared, bolder still was her decision to do so in the middle of the night. Everyone knew that evil was stronger in the dark and the paths Emily now trod were enveloped all around by shadows that deepened with each step. Between the chill air probing its skeletal fingers underneath the folds of her cloak and the eerie moonlight overhead, it wasn't long before Emily found herself regretting the venture. Peering backward she could still see the lighted windows of the orphanage beyond the city wall and wondered if it wouldn't be prudent to return.

"I could spend the night in my own bed," she thought, longing for the warmth and comfort of her room. "and leave, instead, in the morning." She peered into the endless thicket of blackness before her. "I'm sure the way would be clearer and less frightening in

the daylight.” But then she realized that her departure couldn’t possibly go unnoticed by day. “They would never let me leave. Even if I just waited here until sunrise, they would notice I was gone, first thing in the morning, and come looking for me.” She took a deep breath and pushed forward. “I can’t let anything stop me.” Emily, therefore, sought to put as much distance as she could between herself and the city before resting for the night.

She pulled her scarlet cloak tighter around her body while, all around her, the sounds of nocturnal beasts and birds sounded warnings to the little girl. She had not believed many of Peter’s stories about the dangers of the forest. After all, the boy had cried wolf to her on enough occasions to bring his honesty seriously into question. But even she had to admit she could not shake the dreadful feeling that she was lost in a place she never should have been at all. The moon offered her little aid to light her way and, every so often, the fell shadow of some night creature would flutter across its white face and fill her with renewed terror.

Finally she could go no further and crawled into the hollow of a dead tree, though she feared it may already be home to creatures of a still nastier sort. Once she concluded that it was safe, though, she nestled herself inside and had a cookie from her basket. She wasn’t sure how long her journey would be, so it was of the utmost importance to maintain control of her rations, hungry though she was. A cookie would be enough to tide her over until morning, she thought, bleakly. She took one more look at the wild black thicket around her and the slivers of moonlight above the treetops. The beasts continued to howl and chirp and hoot and little Emily could only cry herself to sleep and hope that her way would be less dreary by daylight.

Nightmares of wolves and fierce yellow eyes were chased away by the bright face of her mother, growing ever brighter by the moment. She could smell the ginger from Grandma’s cookies as Mother held her close. The fire was warm and the air sweet; the light from the dancing flames swelling until Emily could look at it no more. She opened her eyes and beams of sunlight fell down upon her; specks of pollen and leaves dancing from one golden ray to the next. The cruel sounds of owls and nocturnal predators had been replaced by the gentle birdsongs of morning.

Crawling out of the hollow she felt the cold dew against her palms but the air was warm and comforting. As she had hoped, the forest had been transformed by day and shed its grim atmosphere. Now she could see the lush green flora and the pretty flowers that had been all but invisible to her in the fearsome dark of night. She sat down on the soft grass and indulged herself in a piece of honey cake for breakfast, washing it down with some milk. “I mustn’t eat too much,” she thought aloud. “This basket has to last the whole way.” So, feeling she’d had enough, she started on her way.

Though it had been some time since she last visited her Grandmother, she still remembered part of the way and felt confident she could find it now by daylight. There was a path up ahead that seemed familiar to her; the way the trees leaned and the colors of the mushrooms littering the wayside had all been painted into her memory. In the midst of such beautiful surroundings innocent Emily was certain the dangers had fled with the passing of night; that Peter’s tall tales about monsters were just that.

But the Wolf had awoken hungry, as well, that morning and he stalked the paths of the woods in search of a meal. This creature was among the Black Fairy, Carabosse's, most favored pets. It was born and raised in the demon kingdom of Wak-Wak and it was no ordinary wolf, for it had terrible power. It would be difficult to accurately describe the beast to you, since one of its great talents was that of altering its appearance. It could make itself as charming and harmless as can be but, in its true form, it was a monster of fearsome size; with black fur and blazing yellow eyes.

Like all of Carabosse's servants, the Wolf disliked the daylight. But food was difficult to find at night, as all the other creatures hid themselves during the dark hours, and the Wolf's hunger was immense. Supposedly this fiend was in the habit of swallowing his prey whole; so enormous was he. Although his eyes were bright and his coat dark, the Wolf was all but invisible even during the day. If not for the sound of his paws crushing dry leaves and sticks underfoot, his presence would be entirely undetectable. He had searched fruitlessly for a meal all morning but halted now as his keen ears picked up a strange sound; a small voice, singing.

With such a task ahead of her, Emily's songs were a way of keeping her spirits up. She knew she would never find her way if she was too afraid to go on. And so she whistled, imitating the warbling and chirping of the birds. "Oh dear," she muttered to herself as she stopped, setting herself down on the trunk of a felled tree. All at once, none of her surroundings looked even vaguely familiar. "Which way do I go now?" She turned back, but the paths behind her had become equally foreign.

Turning her attention ahead again, she was startled by a pair of amber eyes moving toward her from the shadows. A great shaggy head loomed behind them and a sleek, gray body. The Wolf strode nearer and, though he seemed fierce, Emily's dread was dispelled swiftly enough. "This is a strange place for a little girl to be," the Wolf said in a friendly voice. His once terrible yellow eyes seemed soft and kind now and Emily was put at ease. "I am very hungry," he said with a piteous tone. "Would you happen to have anything in that basket which you might be willing to share?"

Emily, who was kind to all animals, withdrew an apple without hesitation and handed it to the Wolf. The creature eyed it, and her, intently and the thought of snatching the girl's hand *with* it passed through his mind. But he remembered the days when his mistress fed him and she taught him when *not* to bite. So he banished the notion, entirely, and harmlessly lapped the apple into his mouth with his pink tongue. He chewed happily, pretending to be sated by such a trivial bit of nourishment, and smiled gratefully. "Thank you very much."

"You are very welcome, Mr. Wolf." She petted and caressed him behind his ears.

"What is your name, my child, and where are you going to?"

"My name is Emily, but everyone calls me Red Riding Hood. I am traveling to my Grandmother's house."

"Alone?" the Wolf inquired, curiously peering from side to side.

"Yes, and I'm afraid I've somewhat lost my way."

"Then you are in luck, my dear, for I know the way to Grandma's house."

“I once knew the way, as well,” she replied, struggling to piece the memory together. “I remember going over a river and through the woods some more... and past a woodcutter’s cottage.”

The Wolf’s pleasant demeanor turned sour now, for the woodcutter’s axe had kept him from many a meal, and he preferred to stay clear of that part of the forest altogether. But he bared his fangs now in a beaming smile. “You don’t want to go that way, my Little Red Riding Hood, for it is a long and hazardous trek. The bridge has since fallen into the river leaving no way to cross, and I know of a much easier and quicker path.”

At first Emily thought the Wolf’s advice both sound and fortuitous for her. But, despite the animal’s gracious disposition, she couldn’t help but call to mind Peter’s warnings.

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“What does it look like?” Emily asked, filling her basket with all the things she might need for her journey. Her room was dark, for she feared awakening the adults and the other children.

“It can look like anything,” Peter replied with round and pale eyes. “but it especially likes to appear as a wolf.”

“You’re pulling my leg again, aren’t you? You and your wolves! George has scolded you enough times for your pranks and I don’t appreciate your mischief now!”

“But it truly is.” He climbed up on a chair and held his hand as high over his head as he could. “It’s this big; bigger, even, than I can reach!”

“Quiet,” Emily scolded. “If you wake them up, I’ll never be able to get away.”

“I’m sorry, but I really am telling the truth. It’s a gigantic monster, but it can be as small as a regular wolf if it likes. And don’t let it fool you.”

“What do you mean, fool me?” She ceased her packing now and turned all her attention to Peter.

“I told you. It can look like anything it wants; *anyone*.”

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“Are you all right, my dear?” the Wolf asked with feigned concern.

“Quite all right, Mr. Wolf,” Emily replied, staring into the beast’s glaring eyes.

“Then why don’t you follow me and I shall show you the safest way to Grandma’s house?” He grinned again, his sleek ivory fangs jutting out from blood-red gums. He knew this girl was hardly more than a morsel, but there was something sweet about her; something that told him she would be kind to his taste buds. But he could not eat her here, so near to the woodcutter’s home. “Come with me, Little Red Riding Hood, and I shan’t lead you astray.”

At last, Emily had to trust her instincts and would not follow behind the Wolf, though he begged her.

“Please, Little Red Riding Hood. I am very lonely and I would so appreciate some company in my travels.” But even despite the way the creature’s sad and lonesome eyes appealed to her heart, she could not bring herself to trust him.

“I am very sorry, Mr. Wolf, but I think it would be best if I continued on alone.”

“But you do not know the way,” he countered with a sly smirk.

“It’s coming back to me, somewhat,” she lied. “All I need do is go in that direction and I shall be on the path to the woodcutter’s house.” The Wolf grimaced, for little Emily was very lucky. Though she had only been guessing to disguise her ignorance, the direction she chose did, indeed, lead to the woodcutter’s house. A place the Wolf did not care to go at all. It seemed he could not lure the girl away so easily and had to accept defeat for the time being.

“As you wish, sweet one,” the Wolf replied, doing his utmost to conceal his anger. “You must do as you see fit, of course. I wish you the very best of luck.” With that, he slunk back into the shadows of the underbrush; his bushy gray tail swaying like a wily serpent and becoming blacker until it disappeared entirely into the darkness.

“Well,” Emily murmured once the creature was gone. “if *that* was Peter’s terrible monster wolf, then it seems I don’t have anything to worry about after all.” She stepped carefully across a network of tightly woven roots, for the trees here were grown so close together, and the previously hidden road opened up before her once again. “That certainly was a lucky thing.” She pulled her hood back and her golden brown hair caught the fleeting sunbeams, causing her scarlet cloak to almost glow like hot coals on the hearth. She looked around at the verdant treetops and wondered if, perhaps, someone was guiding her steps through those dense woods. “Thank you, Mama,” she said quietly as she continued down the path.

She had been walking for some time now and morning had long since passed into afternoon. Afternoon was becoming evening ever more swiftly and Emily was beginning to worry about the coming night. Even the path ahead of her was slowly sinking into shadow; the once clear edges blending more and more into the darkening grass with each moment. She was not quite certain how she would pass the night as there seemed to be very little in the way of shelter this time.

“Are you lost?” came a voice from the trees. Emily spun around; her cloak twirling about her legs like the folding petals of a rose. A man emerged from the darkness with a walking stick clutched in his hand. His clothing marked him as a person from the city; a green cloak draped over an embroidered leather vest and black boots with gold buckles. His hair was dark and his face was rather youthful and cleanly shaven.

The girl was more than a little relieved to meet another human being. “Good Heavens,” she said, shaking her head. “For a moment, I thought you were that Wolf.”

“The Wolf?” the man echoed with a curious look in his eyes. “Don’t tell me you’ve run into that monster.”

“He is hardly a monster, but I would rather not meet him again if I can help it.”

“You had best not,” he cautioned. “That beast is very dangerous. Might I ask what a little girl is doing out in the woods, all alone? Especially at this time of day?”

“I am traveling to my grandmother’s house.”

“Is it very far?” the young man inquired.

Emily thought for a moment and a troubled look overtook her. “I’m not quite certain anymore.”

“Don’t despair. I can accompany you and see to it that the Wolf does not bother you.” Emily was happy to have some company. Though she had only been on her own for

a little over a day, she felt like it had been ages since she had seen another person. “This way,” the man called, waving his golden-headed cane forward.

Together they walked for a while. “I am Charles. I live in the city and I am also on my way to visit family. What is your name, little girl?”

“Red Riding Hood.”

“Well then, Little Red Riding Hood, I shall see to it that you reach your grandmother’s house safely.” Charles seemed a friendly sort of person and Emily felt secure under his watchful eye. But there *was* something odd about those eyes. They were large, much larger than any eyes the girl had ever seen before. And, when the waning sunlight happened to catch them at just the right angle, they were nearly as yellow as a piece of amber. “Be cautious where you step, little one,” he warned her. “It is growing darker now and there are many twisting roots that you might catch your foot beneath.”

“Why have we strayed so far from the path?” Emily asked with an uneasy tremble. “The Woodcutter’s cottage is that way,” she pointed. “Surely we should rest there until morning. The Woodcutter is a very nice man,” she implored. “I’m certain he wouldn’t mind us passing the night there.”

“No, my dear. I don’t think that is a wise idea. The way between here and the path is treacherous.” He offered his hand to guide her along the way but she recoiled upon grasping it. She could feel that his palm was covered in coarse and wiry hair. She peered upward at his face again and those big, yellow eyes of his pierced the darkness like lanterns.

“You are no traveler,” she whispered. “You are the Wolf.” She tried to wrench her hand out of his but he was much stronger than she was. She swung her basket around and struck him in the head, fruit and cookies falling to the ground, but the crafty Wolf would not release her. She swung again and a piece of silverware was thrown from the basket and, upon touching his hand, caused the villain’s skin to burn. He howled in pain and Emily pulled herself away from him and ran as fast as her little legs could take her in the direction of the path. She didn’t care how treacherous the way was. She could not let the Wolf catch her again.

She could still hear the monster’s snarls in the darkness behind her as she fled, ignoring all other sights or sounds that rose up around her. Whatever terror she had felt the previous night was nothing compared to what she was enduring now. Her legs were aching and she could feel her cloak catching on the writhing branches to the left and right of her, all of which were swiftly becoming more and more difficult to see.

“Wait Red Riding Hood,” the Wolf called after her, forsaking his human form for the sleek shape he was more accustomed to. “I will not harm you! I promise!” But Emily did not pause for even a moment. She could see yellow lights in the distance and, for a second, she feared it was the Wolf’s eyes ahead of her. But they were the windows of the Woodcutter’s house and tears of joy welled up in her eyes. She hurried toward them with all haste and the Wolf, also seeing that the Woodcutter’s home was nearby, slackened his pace and ultimately gave up altogether. He would not risk a confrontation with his old enemy tonight. So, with his feral jaws empty and sneering, the Wolf turned and vanished into the woods.

Emily had no idea her pursuer had abandoned his chase and kept going until she could go no further at all. She tripped and fell, face first, upon the ground in front of the cottage door.

“Papa,” she heard a shout from inside. “I heard a noise.” It was a little girl’s voice.

“What is it?” came a man’s voice next.

There was a rustle at the window and a little boy shouted, “It’s a child! I think it’s a girl!”

Heavy footsteps approached the door and Emily’s prostrate body was bathed in yellow light as the Woodcutter appeared and lifted her into his arms, shouting, “Hansel, fetch some hot water from the stove! Gretel, prepare a bed for this little one.” Emily could feel herself being carried from the cool night air into the warmth of the house. But her eyes were closed and she saw nothing as she slipped off to sleep.

When the sun rose the previous morning there was cause for jubilation in the capital city of King Cole. Joyous news spread throughout the kingdom that Princess Hinda had been rescued from the land of the giants and their evil leader, Galligantua, had been destroyed. The war had come to an end and all of Cole’s soldiers would be returning home.

“Did you hear?” the children at the orphanage all asked one another. “Now someone can help guide Red Riding Hood through the forest!” But, though they searched all day and all night, not one of them could find little Emily.

“Where is Emily?” they all asked; the children and the adults, alike. “Peter, where is Emily?”

When she finally opened her eyes, Emily was in a small house with the savory aroma of hot broth in the air. She rested comfortably upon a soft mattress and she could see a yellow-haired little girl bustling about the room beside her.

“Awake at last, are we?” said the girl, bringing over a steaming bowl of soup. “We weren’t sure you would ever wake up.”

“Is this the Woodcutter’s house?” Emily asked timidly.

“The Woodcutter is our father,” the girl answered with a smile. “I’m Gretel and that is my brother, Hansel.” Hansel was fast asleep on the other side of the room. Emily’s eyes now fell upon the door as it creaked open and the Woodcutter entered, holding a silver axe at his side; gleaming in the firelight. He was a tall and burly man with dark hair and a thick, grizzled beard.

“No sign of the Wolf anywhere nearby,” he announced, hanging his furry coat upon the wall and placing the axe in a storage box. “He wouldn’t dare show his face around here, I’ll warrant.” All at once he realized that his little guest was awake and knelt by her bedside. “Hello little one. Glad to see you’re all right, you gave us quite a scare.” He placed a large but gentle hand on her head and stroked her hair. “What is your name, little one?”

“My name is Emily, but everyone calls me Red Riding Hood. I was on my way to my grandmother’s house.”

A cloudiness in the Woodcutter’s gaze steadily cleared and he said, “Yes, now I remember you. I have seen you and your mother on many a trip to Grandma’s. My how you have grown. But I must ask,” he added with concern. “Where *is* your mother?”

Tears welled up in the girl’s eyes and, before she could even tell the sad story, she fell into the Woodcutter’s arms, weeping. “It’s all right, Little Red Riding Hood, you’re safe now. There’s nothing to worry about.”

Once she’d had a good cry Emily told the kind Woodcutter about her family and the Wolf and her quest to reach Grandma’s house alone. “The woods are a dangerous place for a little girl to be all alone,” he warned. “I should like it if you would stay here until I can safely escort you.” Emily was about to sit up but the Woodcutter eased her down again. “You should at least rest until morning. You’ve had a trying day.” The girl nodded in agreement, a smile on her face and, warm and nourished, she fell into a sound sleep.

She awoke to the sound of the Woodcutter retrieving his axe and donning his coat again. Sunlight streamed into the little house as the large man opened the door, saying, “The Wolf’s been sighted near the city, Hansel, and I must go. Keep the door locked and look after your sister and Emily until I return.” Then he kissed both of his children on the foreheads and went off to assess these Wolf claims, himself, armed with his silver axe.

Emily rose from her bed while Hansel and Gretel both fetched some breakfast for her. She ate quickly and accepted some provisions for her basket, ready to resume her journey.

“You can’t go now!” Hansel protested. “It isn’t safe on your own and I’m to look after you.”

“You heard your father,” Emily returned. “The Wolf is near the city so I shan’t have any trouble from him if I leave now.”

“He *may* be near the city. You do not know for sure.” Emily thought about it for a while. Peter always used to warn her that the Wolf was near the orphanage windows and laugh at her frightful jumps. Maybe he was up to his old tricks again.

“You should wait until Father returns,” Gretel added. “The Wolf would never harm you while you were in *his* company.”

“You don’t understand,” she replied. “I’ve been waiting so long already and there isn’t much farther to go. If I have a chance of getting there today, I must take it.” The two siblings cast wary glances at one another and nodded reluctantly.

“Very well,” Hansel said. “If you must. But there are some things to remember about the Wolf in case you do meet him. As long as you are indoors, you’re safe. He cannot enter a home unless he’s invited first.” He rummaged through her basket and pulled out a spoon. “Keep this with you at all times. The Wolf hates all things made of silver.”

Then Gretel brought over a jar and spread its powdery contents over a loaf of bread. “Do not eat this bread, but keep it with you for protection. I’ve sprinkled it with Mothdust. It’s a very strong herb that will put the Wolf to sleep if he eats it and,

fortunately, he is always hungry.” Emily thanked her new friends and, pulling the hood up over her head, started on the road again. She hurried now, as she sought to reach Grandma’s house by the end of the day and, if she kept a good pace, she felt she could do just that.

Before long she came to the river and, contrary to what the Wolf had told her, the bridge had not collapsed. Things there were just as she remembered and our Little Red Riding Hood was quite confident of her way now. The path through the forest was clear and open and her spirits were high. It was just past noon when she emerged from the thicket to where the trees were much sparser. Rolling fields opened before her and she found three small houses by the roadside.

The first house was made of yellow straw and the edges of the roof fluttered in the wind. It did not look very sturdy but it had a certain charm that made Emily giggle. The second house was built out of sticks from a gorse shrub. They were all arranged neatly in vertical and horizontal rows, but the sticks themselves seemed rather too flimsy to be proper building material for a house. The third house, however, was made out of brick and mortar and seemed expertly built to weather the elements. It had a solidly formed door and little windows with quaint wooden shutters.

Emily was not particularly tall for her age but even she had to stoop a little to peer into the windows of the straw house. Inside, she saw a tiny bed, and a little table with a chair. There was no fireplace, which seemed to her to be a wise thing. There was, however, no one in the house at all. So she moved on to the house of sticks and peered into that window as well. Like the straw house, this one had much the same furnishings, was without a fireplace and, likewise, without an occupant.

Then she heard music and singing emanating from the third house. This was the one built of brick and, looking in the window, Emily could see a much different interior. This house had, not only a fireplace and a chimney, but also a kitchen, a large armchair and three occupants; three little pigs, to be exact. They danced in a circle while they played tiny instruments; one with a trumpet, one with a fiddle and one with a flute. Emily was so delighted by their tune that, when they had finally stopped, she began to clap furiously. The sound frightened the pigs and, seeing her at the window, they became very wary.

“Who are you?” came a sharp little voice from within the house.

The girl was taken aback, somewhat, afraid she had insulted her new friends before even being properly introduced. “My name is Emily,” she stammered. “though everyone calls me Red Riding Hood. I am just on my way to visit my Grandmother.” She could hear some discussion amongst the little pigs and one of them approached the window, throwing a scrutinizing eye over the little girl.

Much of what they said to each other was indistinct to her, though she did catch some talk about how small her eyes were. Finally the door was opened and the pigs invited her into the house. She had to bend just slightly to get through the doorway and, though the house was small, she found that it was much more spacious within than it seemed from the outside. The three pigs now welcomed her warmly and begged her to

make herself comfortable. She sat herself within the armchair which, large for the pigs, just about suited her.

“My name is Cornroot,” said the pig with the trumpet. “and these are my brothers. The one with the fiddle is Beansprout and the one with the flute is Peapod.” All three of them bowed politely. “We apologize for seeming unwelcoming but we cannot take too many chances with strangers. Not while the Wolf is about.” The pig brought her a bowl of fruit and a glass of fresh juice.

“This house seems very fine protection from the Wolf,” Emily offered after enjoying a few rosy grapes. “But if he is so dangerous, why are your other two houses so flimsy? Surely he would just knock the door down!”

“Oh who’s afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?!” the other two exclaimed in unison.

“My brothers don’t think there’s any cause to worry about the Wolf,” said Cornroot.

“He can’t even come in unless he’s invited!” said Beansprout.

“Right! He can’t even step through the door unless we allow him!” said Peapod.

“That may be true,” answered Cornroot. “but he’s crafty and nasty and, mark my words, he can fool you yet.” The other pigs did not seem daunted by their brother’s words but Emily agreed with Cornroot and began to wish she had stayed at the Woodcutter’s cottage or even here, with the little pigs. However, she knew it was not much farther to Grandmother’s house and did not want to be an undue burden on her new friends.

“Are you sure you won’t stay with us?” they begged in their little piggy voices.

“It is still early,” Emily responded with a smile. “and I’m so eager to see Grandma. But I’ll return to visit soon,” she promised. So the pigs bid her goodbye, for a time, and good luck on her journey. She loved the little pigs so and could hardly wait to see them again but she was determined to reach home before dark. ‘Home,’ she thought. At last she would have a real home again, and real family. She imagined being nestled into her little bed with a cozy home-stitched quilt tucked up beneath her chin; safe and warm while, outside, the cold winds may howl like wolves. She would help Grandma with the cleaning and cooking and bake cakes and cookies with her. Soon enough she would be home safe.

Emily skipped along the path into the little wooded thicket as the ground began to rise somewhat. Then, in just a couple of hours, she was coming out of the woods and could see the still and sparkling little lake where Mother and Grandma used to bathe her as a baby. Ahead was the gently rolling hill and the colorful flower garden and the short white fence surrounding the house she had been dreaming about all year. It was blue; a deep and brilliant blue, with white window frames and a black roof with a white brick chimney. Daffodils, violets, daisies, and tulips littered the sides of the walkway as Emily eagerly approached the door.

The sun was still rather high and beamed down on her; soft upon her skin. She threw back her hood and basked in its rays as the sweet scent of the garden filled the air. She was finally home and tiny tears came into her eyes as she put all the sadness in her life behind her at last. She dried her cheeks with the hem of her cloak, saying, “I mustn’t

let Grandma see me in such a state.” Then, with a smile and a breath of happy relief, she knocked upon the door.

“Who is it?” came Grandma’s voice from within.

“It’s Emily,” she cried giddily.

“Oh, good gracious! Come in! Come in!” Emily turned the brass knob, briefly noticing a trio of scrapes in the wood beside it, and opened the door with a burst of energy. “My dear little Emily,” Grandma said from across the room. “Come closer. I’m not feeling well enough to venture out of bed today. Come closer.”

It was another false alarm that summoned the Woodcutter to the city’s edge as he now trudged home with axe in hand, neither hearing nor seeing any sign of the Wolf. The beast was dangerous, there are no doubts, but more dangerous still were the rumors that flew this way and that of the monsters whereabouts, for few of them were grounded in fact. Thus the creature was given the power to be, or seem to be, in many places at once.

The Woodcutter opened the little gate to his property, the hinges squeaking lightly, and marched up the stone flags to the cabin. But a distant sound arrested him for a moment. The wind was high that day and the leaves were rustling fiercely in the treetops. A whistling gale came sweeping by behind him and several heavy crunches followed. He turned about but could discern nothing but the sights of the forest he was so accustomed to. Shaking his head, he made his way toward the door when another thunderous sound diverted his attention from the house and he saw the great black figure of the Wolf bounding over the fence and barreling toward him.

With snarling jaws the beast came ripping through the enclosure, pinning the Woodcutter against a tree; eyes blazing like torchlight. With one thick arm tucked under the monster’s jaw the man struggled to keep the vast, snapping mouth at bay. But the Wolf was so large and so powerful that he knew he hadn’t the strength to keep him back for much longer. Lowering himself quickly to the ground, the Woodcutter dove beneath the Wolf as the fiend smashed through the tree, overrunning it like a juggernaut.

When he realized the Woodcutter had not been crushed the Wolf turned angrily, but his enemy had already risen and drew his axe. The Woodcutter had been overtaken by shock at this turn, for never had the Wolf dared to encroach upon his property. He and the beast had clashed several times but, always, the creature avoided him and the silver axe he bore. Staring into the monster’s feral grimace, the man could tell that he was full of a rage that left him blind to either fear or reason.

Then, leveling his piercing yellow eyes at the Woodcutter, the Wolf spoke in a nearly gentle voice that belied the seething hatred in his appearance, “Where is the girl?” No response was forthcoming so, with a violent spray, the beast’s jaws snapped open and the great fiend lunged at his enemy. The hulking shadow was answered by a quick flash of silver and a smoking wound now appeared on the monster’s side. Another flash and his left ear was cleft away.

So filled with hatred was the Wolf that the hideous, sizzling injuries went fairly unnoticed and, within moments, they were healing themselves. The gash closed up and the ear began to regenerate the way some lizards are known to grow new tails. The

Woodcutter watched in abject horror as his evil and immortal enemy approached; his massive paws echoing upon the ground like peals of thunder. With a cavernous growl the Wolf spoke again, "Give me the girl."

Though he feared he could not destroy the monster, the Woodcutter was prepared to give his own life in defense of his children and little Emily. But the Wolf's attention was soon caught by something within the cabin. Though the man heard nothing, the creature's ears perked up as he stared intently at the front door. Then, without a word or a howl, the Wolf turned and bolted away, leaping over the fence and vanishing into the woods.

Taken by surprise by the beast's retreat, the Woodcutter breathed a sigh of relief. But another thought worried him. What had he heard in the house that made him flee? The man hurried into the cottage and embraced his children. "What have you been doing in here?" he inquired.

"We were only talking about Emily," said Gretel.

The Woodcutter looked around the room, his eyes darting to and fro. "Where is Emily?" He dropped to his knees and looked the children straight in the eyes. "Where is Emily?"

"That's what we were talking about," said Hansel. "We think we may have made a mistake."

"*What* were you talking about, Hansel?" The Woodcutter returned uneasily to his feet, gripping the handle of his axe tighter now as he began to realize why the Wolf, with his keen sense of hearing, had suddenly become so interested in the cabin.

"We were talking about how, perhaps, we shouldn't have let her go on her own."

Shortly after Emily had left them, the Three Little Pigs decided to retire to their own houses for the remainder of the evening. "You should spend the night here," Cornroot said to his brothers. "I don't trust those fragile houses of yours to keep that Wolf out."

"We'll be fine," said Peapod, shutting and locking the door of his stick house.

"Indeed," concurred Beansprout, entering the straw house and locking his door as well. The little pig had just set his fiddle down and was about to change into his bedclothes when there was a knock at the door. Puzzled, he inquired who it was, since it was not his brothers' habit to knock before entering.

"It's Little Red Riding Hood," came the girl's voice.

"Emily? What on earth are you doing back so soon?" Beansprout asked. "Have you forgotten the way?" There was no response so the pig scurried over to the window. Sure enough, the little girl was standing before the door in her red cloak, though she hadn't her basket. Beansprout was about to open the door when the girl turned her head toward him and he noticed, for the first time, how large her eyes were. They were not the same as they had been when he first met her and he knew something was wrong.

"Little pig," she pleaded. "Little pig. Let me in."

“Not by the hair on my chinny-chin-chin!” Beansprout knew now that it was not little Emily entreating him, but the Wolf in a most devious disguise. But, as long as the house stood, the demon could not enter.

“Then I’ll huff...” the beast replied, still in the girl’s voice. “and I’ll puff...” he took in a great breath. “and I’ll blow your house in!”

Beansprout could feel the whole house rock as it was caught up in a violent gale and watched the walls of straw fall apart and disappear with the wind. The door, windows, roof, and furniture all were gone and all that remained was the first little pig cringing before the big Wolf. With one great yawn, the dark gray monster snatched Beansprout into his mouth and swallowed him whole.

It appeared that the first pig did not know where the little girl was, but perhaps the second pig did. So the Wolf slunk over to the stick house and knocked on the door.

“Who is it?” asked Peapod.

“It’s your brother, Beansprout,” came the reply. “I want to ask you something.” Since it was his brother’s voice, Peapod was about to open the door. But something told him he had best be careful so he went over to the window to get a better look at his visitor. It was Beansprout alright, though his ears looked rather bigger than usual. “Little pig, little pig. Let me come in.” Though his voice and his body seemed the same, Peapod knew his brother up and down and this pig at the door was not him.

“Not by the hair on my chinny-chin-chin!”

“Then I’ll huff... and I’ll puff... and I’ll blow your house in!” Peapod was thrown upon his back as the sticks that made up his walls and his floor and his roof all came tumbling down and were caught up by a tremendous burst of air. He covered his little ears from the deafening howls and, when the storm had finally subsided, nothing remained where his house once stood. Nothing but him and the big, bad Wolf. With one lunge the beast caught the pig up in his mouth and, like Beansprout, Peapod was swallowed whole.

It seemed little Emily was neither with the first nor second pigs, but perhaps she was with the third. So the Wolf strode over to the brick house and knocked rapidly upon the door. “Who is it?” asked Cornroot.

“It is your brothers, Beansprout and Peapod!” came the excited responses. “The Wolf has destroyed our homes and we fear for our lives!”

“I told you those houses would do you no good,” Cornroot scolded as he moved to let them in. But he caught sight of his brothers through the little window in the door and noticed something strange. Their eyes and ears were unusually large and they had a strange look about them.

“Is Red Riding Hood in there with you?” they asked.

“Of course not!” Something, he thought, was not right.

“Little pig,” they pleaded. “Little pig, let me come in.”

Something was definitely not right, and they were not his brothers. “Not by the hair on my chinny-chin-chin!” he shouted.

“Then I’ll huff...” the Wolf filled his lungs with air. “and I’ll puff...” He shed his disguise and drew himself up so as to blot the sun from the sky. “and I’ll blow your house

in!” A great rush issued from his mouth and battered the sides of the house but, to his dismay, the brick walls could not even be shaken. He tried again but, again, his efforts failed to damage the sturdy house. He beat his paws upon the door and windows as Cornroot trembled within but both knew that the beast could not enter the home uninvited and, as long as the structure stood, the pig was safe.

With a snarl, the Wolf turned from the house and bounded up the pathway. He was still hungry but he knew that little Emily was not in any of the pig’s houses and, therefore, must have been ahead. He followed the path through the woods, but kept to the darkness and moved quickly for it was within his power to glide as swiftly and silently as the shadows. Up ahead his wolf ears could hear the sound of the little girl’s voice and his keen wolf eyes could see her red cloak.

He rose up behind her and was about to devour the girl, when he realized it may not be safe there after all. The Woodcutter would be on his way and it would not be long before the remains of the pigs’ houses were found. He failed to catch her once before and, if the girl managed to get away from him again, he might not have another chance at all. So he resisted the urge and, without a sound, sped ahead of little Emily and raced up the pathway and out of the woods.

The lake and the hill and Grandmother’s house were ahead so, like a soundless and faceless fear the Wolf crept up the hill to the little blue house, stepping lightly over the fence without a sound. His claws dug into the door as he knocked.

“Who is it?” came the old woman’s voice from within.

“It’s your granddaughter, little Red Riding Hood.” Grandma thought it a strange thing for Emily to call herself, but she knew the girl loved that cloak very dearly and the woman was so overjoyed to see her grandchild that she thought nothing of it.

“Goodness gracious, child,” She exclaimed as she drew her shawl about her and opened the door. There upon the stoop stood little Emily in her red hood and cape; her eyes large with a queer anticipation. Grandma was somewhat shocked by the girl’s strange look and asked, “It’s been so long since I’ve seen you, child. Where is Mama?”

“She wasn’t feeling well,” the girl replied with a smile.

“And she sent you here alone? Are you playing tricks on me, little one?”

“No, indeed.” She paused for a while as if she were awaiting something and finally said, “May I come in?”

“Well of course you can! Come in, come in!”

The little girl rushed inside without another word and, as Grandma shut the door, the light in the house seemed to diminish. When the old woman turned, all she could see was a great red tongue and a cavernous throat and, with one motion, the Wolf had swallowed her whole, just like the little pigs. Now it came upon the Wolf to wait inside the house for Emily’s arrival. He crawled into the old woman’s bed and rested for a while until there came a knock at the door.

“Who is it?” the Wolf asked in Grandma’s voice.

“It’s Emily,” came the little girl’s reply.

“Oh, good gracious! Come in! Come in!” The Wolf squinted his large yellow eyes as light flooded into the dim little house and Emily’s silhouette appeared in the doorway.

“My dear little Emily,” he called from where he lay. “Come closer. I’m not feeling well enough to venture out of bed today. Come closer.”

The little girl happily approached the bed and sat down in a little chair beside her Grandmother, resting her basket upon her lap. She was so overjoyed to be with Grandma once again but was troubled by the way the old woman looked. She did, indeed, appear unwell and very tired. Her skin was pale and her eyes appeared large and yellowed behind her spectacles. She was once a spry and spirited old woman but perhaps, Emily feared, her dear Grandmother had lost much of that health and vigor since their last meeting.

“What is wrong, Grandma?” she asked, placing a kiss on her cheek and a hand on the edge of her quilt. “You look different than I remember.”

“Do I?” asked her Grandmother.

“Surely. What big eyes you have, Grandma.”

“The better to see you with,” she responded, adjusting her glasses.

“But your ears; what big ears you have.”

“The better to hear you with,” she said with a grin; an unpleasant grin, Emily noticed.

“What big teeth you have, Grandma.”

“All the better to eat you with.”

Emily backed against the wall as the huge black shape of the Wolf rose out of the bed and up, almost, to the ceiling. A great hairy paw came at her and, grabbing a handful of silverware from her basket, the girl threw the spoons and knives at the monster. As agonizing howls sprung up, she dashed toward the door, reaching for the knob. But the huge beast sprung in front of her and barred her way; burns sizzling from his fur and a mouthful of razor teeth bared frightfully at her. Emily tried to flee but she could not escape the snatching and grasping claws of the Wolf and, before long, she found herself sliding down the monster’s gullet and into the darkness.

The creature could feel some burning silver items from the girl’s basket and these; a fork and a little ring, he spat fumingly upon the floor. Fierce as the Wolf’s hunger was, he was feeling somewhat sated and tired all of a sudden. He could not understand why but he was wearier now than he had been in centuries and could not fight off sleep. He had hoped to return to his lair in the woods but had scarcely gotten out of the old woman’s yard when his tremendous form collapsed to the ground and the beast was in a deep slumber. It was just this way that the Woodcutter and Cornroot found him; a heaving black shape against the light and verdant hill.

At first they feared they were too late to save the little girl but Cornroot could hear several voices calling from within the monster’s stomach. Smelling mothdust on the Wolf’s breath, the Woodcutter surmised that they had some time yet before the creature awakened and, warning the little pig to stand back, carefully sliced the monster’s belly open with the silver head of his axe. To their pleasant surprise, Emily emerged safely, followed by her Grandmother and the two pigs, Beansprout and Peapod.

“Thank Heavens you’re safe,” the Woodcutter said. “but it is only for now. As long as the Wolf exists none of us are safe and I can think of but one way to destroy him.”

Since the demon could recover even from wounds of silver, the Woodcutter devised a plan that might rid them of the fiend forever. He held open the sides of the Wolf's stomach and bid his companions to gather many large stones from the yard and from the banks of the lake, and these were placed inside so that, when he awoke, he might not realize his prey had escaped. The wound closed up by itself while the beast slept soundly and the Woodcutter ushered Emily and her friends into the house to rest for the night while he, himself, kept watch.

As the morning sun was rising over the treetops the Wolf opened his huge yellow eyes and struggled to stand. He found, however, that the load in his stomach was more of a burden than he had anticipated. Whatever else he had eaten the previous day, whatever had made him so very tired, also left him with a savage thirst and he dragged his hulking body to the lakeside for a drink of water. This sluggishness was a thing he was unused to and it bothered him so he thought perhaps some exercise would make him feel better. He stepped lightly into the water to have a short swim but the weight of his belly caused the sand beneath his paws to give way until he was sinking beneath the surface.

The Woodcutter approached the lake's edge and, though he hated to be cruel, he could think of no way of destroying such a demon other than by drowning him. But Emily ran up behind him and, hearing the Wolf's pitiable whimpering as he struggled to keep his snout above the water, she pleaded with the Woodcutter to spare the animal's life. Though the man insisted that the Wolf was, himself, without mercy, Emily could not bear to be party to such a horrible thing.

"If you promise to behave yourself," she called to the drowning creature. "We will save you." Such a vow was unlikely to come easily and, when it finally did come; sputtering and hoarse; it held little value. But Emily was convinced and the Woodcutter threw a rope into the midst of the lake and tied it off upon a large rock. Slowly but surely the Wolf had pulled himself to the safety of the shore and promised, once again, to behave himself if the stones would be removed from his stomach. Again the Woodcutter was reluctant to acquiesce to such a fiend but little Emily ultimately won him over.

With the stones gone and his cut healing, the Wolf was again prepared for the moment when he might eat the little girl and her protector, if he could, but the sun was climbing high now and something disturbed the beast. He could feel that somewhere, far away, his mistress was in trouble. As he heard the chirping of the morning birds a sense of terror came over him such as he had never felt before. His already large eyes grew like wells of molten gold and he shrank upon his hindquarters like one of the frightened little woodland animals he was so fond of menacing.

Now he knew it. His mistress' power was waning and, soon enough, it had disappeared forever. He could feel her no longer and any will or malice that was once in him seemed to drain away. Somehow he knew that his evil magical powers were disappearing as well; all the things that made him so feared throughout the land, not the least of which was his immortality. He was broken, weakened and vulnerable and, looking between Emily's sweet and trusting face and the Woodcutter's silver axe, the Wolf now realized that he had no choice but to consign himself to surrender.

This change in the Wolf's demeanor was not lost on little Emily for, though she was young, she was a very intuitive girl. With a beaming smile she held her hand out to pet the black and savage beast, despite the Woodcutter's best efforts to stop her. The monster's eyes still blazed hotly and his teeth shone like a wall of jagged ivory knives but Emily was not afraid. She placed a hand upon the Wolf's wet snout and gently stroked him until the rage in his gaze dimmed and she knew, then, that the once fearsome creature would cause trouble no longer. The Woodcutter was astonished by his little companion's bravery and, when Grandma and the three pigs slowly emerged from the house they, too, were amazed by how the little girl's love had brought the Wolf low.

A collar and a silver chain were placed around his thick neck and, thus, was he tamed for, with Carabosse's evil influence lifting from the forest, he no longer had any place there. The Woodcutter made a pet of him for a time and kept him in the yard where he and the children fed and cared for him and, though he was rebellious at first, he gradually grew accustomed to such a life. Emily came often to visit and caress the now docile Wolf, scratching him behind his big ears. And he, who once burned with a desire to eat this little girl, had now grown quite protective of her. In years to come, the beast became restless so he was brought to the city and instated as the royal guard dog of King Cole's kingdom. There he was treated, not as an animal, but as captain of the guard, whose ferocity was made known to any enemies of the kingdom though, in truth, he never had cause to attack anyone ever again.

As for Emily and her Grandmother they lived happily together in the cottage by the lake. With the evil spirits of the forest gone they were free to come and go as they pleased and saw their friends, the Three Little Pigs often, as well as Hansel and Gretel and their father the Woodcutter. She even invited Peter to visit from the orphanage and, even after he had found a good home, they still remained the closest of friends. Certain painful memories would come back to her from time to time; nightmares of loneliness; of being abandoned in the cold city or lost in a forest of ravenous teeth, without a mother or a father to protect her. But this happened only seldom and, each time, she awoke in her own soft and comfortable bed with Grandma in the rocking chair beside her.

"What is it, child?" the woman would ask, placing a wrinkled but tender hand on the girl's golden head.

"Just a bad dream, Grandma," she would respond happily. "I'm all right now." A glass of warm milk and a loving kiss upon the forehead and little Emily would turn over beneath her cozy blanket, hug her red cloak tightly and say, "Everything's all right now."

THE END