

My Mother Tried To Warn Me

By Elizabeth DeVido

Growing up, my mother told me people-eater stories. My earliest memory is her face over my crib, and she'd speak in a voice low enough so my father couldn't hear. She told me about wolves who ate girls, queens who ate princesses, and witches who ate children. I got used to thinking of them as just that: people-eater stories. It wouldn't be until I was older that I learned most people call them fairy tales.

My mother never spared me the effects of these stories. My bedroom became a place of danger. A place of faces in the windows, growls under the bed. If I asked my mother if there was a monster hiding in my closet, her answer would have most likely been, "Probably."

So when my mother died, the stories were what she left me. My inheritance was a childhood full of visions of people with blood dripping down their lips, and the promise that they were for my own good.

My mother didn't have a lot of friends. Her interactions with others could best be described as minimal. She was polite, laughed when she was supposed to, frowned when she was supposed to, but she was distant and disinterested in most people. Her funeral consisted of me, my father, and Stepmother.

My father had met Stepmother in the later years of my mother's illness, the days when her death became more certain. Stepmother wept as they lowered the casket into the ground. She pressed a tissue to her nose, as if she personally knew the woman who garnered a funeral of three. As the morticians started throwing dirt on my mother, Stepmother wrapped an arm around my shoulders.

“I’m so sorry, sweetheart,” she said. “I promise, I’ll protect you as much as she would have wanted you to be protected.”

I nodded, because that’s how one is supposed to respond when comforted. But as we left the cemetery, Stepmother’s hand tucked delicately under my father’s arm, I remembered that this is how people-eater stories started: A daughter is separated from her mother. Mothers are always the first to die in these kinds of stories. A dead mother means the child will one day be devoured.

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Stepmother promised she would protect me as my mother did. But she was determined to be as unlike my mother as possible, starting with the stories she told me. When she asked me what kind of stories my mother read to me as a child, I told her the people-eater stories. I started with the one about the queen who tried to eat her stepdaughter’s organs; her heart, lungs, and liver to be exact, and was killed by being forced to dance in a pair of hot iron shoes. Stepmother’s eyes grew wider with each new development.

“Those stories are not appropriate for children,” she said of the people-eater stories. “Let’s think of something more appropriate for a girl.”

So she gave me the versions of the people-eater stories most children read. The ones where people are rescued, or escape, or don’t stay eaten for long. I was thirteen, and already knew these versions from schoolmates, but Stepmother insisted on telling me them anyway. As if she could undo whatever my mother had inflicted upon me by telling me such nasty tales. I guess this was part of her protection promise.

She also didn’t like that I acted like my mother. I’d inherited my mother’s distance and disinterest in people, and she was determined to correct this. She blamed my mother’s stories, accused them of punishing young heroines for just being nice. She worried this message would

leave me alone and bitter. So instead, she told me stories of girls who were rewarded for their compliance. The girls in her stories did not die, because they were good, and even if their niceness brought them to bite into a stranger's poison apple, it would all work out in the end. Because they were good, and good things happened to girls who were nice.

Stepmother didn't realize what my mother's stories were for. And I couldn't argue with her, because I wasn't sure myself. Even as I got older, I kept fumbling for what she was trying to teach me. I tried to find a lesson in the bloody teeth and dead daughters. All the while I did as Stepmother instructed me. I did not shy away from people, even the ones whose eyes took their time down my body. I responded to anyone who prompted me, no matter the question. I was nice to the boy in my class who dropped chewed gum down my shirt. I did not resist when my step uncle pulled me into a hug and patted me on my lower back. If I was nice like Stepmother said, everything would be fine.

You'd think children would have more to gain from bedtime stories. But I wouldn't understand my mother's intentions until I was an adult. The understanding that Stepmother's fairy tales prettied the truth, covered it with flora and fauna, and would do me no good when I left childhood behind.

And like every good people-eater story, it started with a girl and a hungry mouth.

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One of the lies fairy tales tell us is that there's always a huntsman. No matter what stomach you end up in, there will always be a strong hand to pull you out. In my mother's telling of the story, there was no huntsman. When Red Riding Hood arrived at Grandmother's house, the Wolf ordered her to remove her clothes and get into bed with him. She did as she was told, throwing her red cloak into the fireplace then crawling into bed, where the Wolf proceeded to

devour her. Stepmother told me the version everyone else knew, the version my schoolmates told me before. The one where a huntsman arrives and cuts open the Wolf's stomach, allowing Red and Grandmother to crawl out. No less gruesome, but happier I guess.

I tried to ask my mother about this once, why she never mentioned a huntsman. It was years before the diagnosis, years before Stepmother. I remember we were in the kitchen. She was chopping meat for dinner.

“Because Little Red Riding Hood was a stupid little girl.” She pointed the tip of her kitchen knife to my forehead. “And you will not be a stupid little girl.”

I didn't understand what she meant until I found myself in the exact kind of trouble she knew I would wander into. This trouble came when I was a college freshman with an undeclared major and three roommates who decided that finishing our midterms was a cause for celebration. I wasn't much into parties, but I promised Stepmother I would make friends, and accepting their invitation to go out seemed like the only way to do it. There was a sorority house on the other side of campus that had a similar idea, and I found myself on a Friday night with an unopened beer in my hand in a room full of people I'd seen around campus.

I sat with my roommates on the couch while they mingled with anyone around. Across the living room, a group of boys cheered as two of them arm-wrestled over the table. They did several rounds, and each time the loser had to take a shot of Bacardi. They'd done over a dozen rounds and their arms were getting shakier. I could hear all of them chanting over the noise while a laptop in the corner played rap music off someone's Spotify. The boys howled with their tongues out and saliva glistening from their teeth.

“They're cheating, you know.”

One of the guys my roommates had invited over was speaking to me now. I recognized him from environmental science class. Years of Stepmother's conditioning kicked in, and I snapped my head to the voice that demanded my attention. I turned to see him watching me watch the arm-wrestlers.

"Are they?" I asked.

The Huntsman nodded.

"Those Bacardi bottles are full of water," he said. "One of those guys is only acting hammered so no one will know."

Across the room, the same guy who won the last few rounds snapped his opponent's hand down and the whole pack cheered.

"So it looks," I said.

"They only give Bacardi to the girls. Loosen them up so they can get laid faster."

I glanced down at the beer in my hand and was grateful my roommates had brought our own drinks instead. I noticed a girl in the corner chair with a red solo cup in her hand and a doozy look in her eye. One of the boys by the table had been eyeing at her all night.

"You don't strike me as the kind of person who comes to these kinds of things," the Huntsman said. "I'm certainly not. I'm only here because a friend dragged me."

I noticed he didn't have a drink in his hand. All I had seen him do all night was talk to anyone passing by, watching the action but never getting involved. He was still waiting for me to respond.

"I guess not," I said. "Maybe every now and then."

"Well, if you ever get nervous at one of these things, just come hang out with me. I'm not one of those assholes who would do that to a girl."

He eyed back at the girl in the chair. The guy from the table had lost interest in the arm-wrestling contest and was now bent over her, asking if she was okay. My roommates had dispersed, wandered off to different parts of the house, having forgotten about me. I saw one of them down the hall. A boy pressed her against the wall, teeth to her neck.

“I think I’ll just go now,” I said.

I stood up from the couch, and the Huntsman stood up with me.

“I’ll walk you home,” he said, then gave me a boyish smile. Maybe it was the lack of lightning or the secondhand smoke coming from the other room, but he was cute. Light brown curls and dimples.

Stepmother’s voice purred into my ears. *He’s such a nice young man. He’s so nice to walk you home safe. It would be rude to turn him away.* I kept picturing her scowling face if I refused, so I ignored the prickling on my neck and agreed.

He followed me out of the house onto the path that led from one side of campus to the next. Despite it being Friday night, all midterms completed, no one else seemed out. The quad was dark and cool and one of the walkway lights flickered.

The Huntsman kept the conversation going. He asked me about my classes, my major, where I was from. Everything you could ask someone in college.

“Undecided,” I said. I admitted I didn’t have a path.

“I’m taking a class on literature and folklore in the nineteenth century,” he said. “Right now we’ve made it to the Brothers Grimm.”

Our feet crunched on a scattering of leaves on the sidewalk, and I could hear crickets in the bushes and frogs in nearby puddles. There were no other students to be found anywhere. For a place so empty everything felt so loud.

“You know,” The Huntsman said to me. “The original fairy tales were pretty fucked up. They weren’t sweet and innocent like in Disney movies.”

I was tired and ready to go to bed, so I mumbled, “That’s neat.”

“It’s brutal. In the original Cinderella, the stepsisters cut their toes off to fit their feet into the glass slipper. And then a bunch of crows peck their eyes out. As punishment for being vain and deceitful. Pretty fucked up, right?”

He told me all these stories the rest of the way to my dorm. He stopped right outside my door and gave me a look while I searched for my room key.

“You know, it’s only twelve-o-seven,” he said. “Just because we left the party early doesn’t mean we have to go home. My dorm’s on the next floor. My roommate’s still back at the party, probably getting drunk off his ass.”

I became aware of how quiet the dorms were. Everyone in our dormitory must have been out partying that night, or locked away in their rooms with their headphones on, or fast asleep. Like they were all aware of some danger that I wasn’t. Like they left or hid from whatever was doomed to happen tonight.

There was only one voice in the dorm that night. Stepmother was still pestering in my ear, and there were no other sounds to drown her out. She told me to go with him. He did something nice for me, and I would be ungrateful to turn him down, wouldn’t I?

My eyes glanced down at the doorknob, and I felt the key in my back pocket. Something was itching in the soles of my feet.

“I think I’m fine,” I said. “Thank you.”

There was something that passed across the Huntsman’s face. A drop of the eyebrows, a dimming in his eyes.

“I promise, it’s no inconvenience,” he said. “I don’t get company over that much. Usually, it’s my roommate who brings friends and girls over. Not being by my lonesome sounds pretty nice. Especially with a pretty girl.”

Even in the dim light, his face was teddy bear-like and he sounded like a golden retriever begging for a treat. But the itching in my foot wouldn’t leave. The prickling in my neck was needle-sharp.

“Maybe later,” I said. I reached towards my pocket for the key, and the Huntsman grabbed my arm.

“When will ‘later’ be?” he asked.

He said it like such a sincere question. His eyes were round and shimmering, but his fingers were tight enough on my arm to feel my heartbeat.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Why would you walk home alone with me if you were just going to leave?”

“You said you would walk me home.”

“So you just left with some random guy you barely know? Why would you do something that dangerous if you didn’t want something out of it?”

“I’m just tired—”

“I swear I’m not like the guys back there. I didn’t put anything in your drink, I didn’t try to do anything bad, so why are you acting like I’m the bad guy here?”

There was something cold in his voice, and I didn’t know where it came from. The dorm was too loud and there was no one there.

I tried to pull away, and he pulled me to his chest. He grabbed my chin and pointed my face up to his. If someone walked by, they might think this was a love confession. The ones where the man can't contain himself anymore and pulls the girl into a kiss.

"I see you every day in class," he said. "You act so distant, like you think you're better than everyone else. But I know you're no different than any other tease on this whole campus. Stringing along anyone who shows you any decency."

To confuse matters more, he ran his fingers along my lips. He looked into the dark of my mouth then pushed two fingers in. His fingers were thin and pale. You could see blue veins running the length of his slender wrist and pulsing up his fingers. Veins of red cushioned under flesh with skin stretched over top.

The tip of his middle finger reached the back of my throat, and I snapped my front teeth through his bones. He realized what happened before I did. A screech tore down the empty hall. I could still feel two fingers in my mouth while he stumbled back against the wall.

"You fucking bitch!" he cried.

His eyes were wide as his whole arm shined crimson in the light. I knew if no one was coming for me, no one was coming for him either. No one rushes into the woods to stop a huntsman from hunting, so they never see him when he's devoured.

I grabbed my fist in his curls and did what I'd seen the boys at the party do to all the girls they invited over. I pushed his head to the side, and bit my teeth into his neck.

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It seemed like my roommates were spending the night elsewhere. They were still gone when I finished bleaching and scrubbing the red from the hallway carpet. It was long past midnight and the sun was starting to creep over the horizon. I dragged the Huntsman into my

room by his shoulders and spent the early hours of the morning gnawing at whatever was left of him. The coppery taste was fuzzy on my tongue. By the time I was done, I was half-asleep and my stomach was a dead weight threatening to drop me to the floor.

I shut the door to my bathroom and looked down at myself. I would need to wash the dress before I gave it back to my roommate. I wondered for a second if this is what Red and her grandmother looked like crawling out of the Wolf's stomach. If they dripped with blood and fluid and oily purple meat.

I looked in the mirror. I expected to see Stepmother there, to see her face hovering over my shoulder, scowling me for being so unfair to someone just trying to be nice. Telling me if I had just turned him down gently, he would have let me go. But instead, I only saw my mother in her place, her eyes on the round protruding of my belly, with a look of *I told you so* on her face.

As I watched the blood trickle down the shower drain, I realized why my mother never told me about the huntsman: A world of wolves makes hunters of girls.