

Woman of the Woods

Isolated on the farthest edge of the Winding Woods, a woman stared through her window to watch the approaching storm.

‘The rain cannot hide that blinding olde moon,’ she murmured almost lyrically, rolling a piece of rabbit jerky between her tongue and teeth. ‘Sailing over the trees for another long night. Froalla will grow my crops strong tonight, and the wild grasses will glisten wet, like glass.’

A sentimental pause.

She glanced down at the pumpkin sitting on the floor beside her feet and swallowed the slimy piece of jerky. ‘Let me tell you something ridiculous, Mr Pumpkin, about those common folk in their cities and towns and villages. They’ll say that the moon has a sharper glow than anywhere else when it hovers over these woods. They’ll say that you can *hear* its glow as a slicing sound across the sky, like two cleavers sliding against one another’s surface, carving the night into pieces. They’ll say that these woods make it so.’ And the woman began to laugh so lifelessly that she did not even make a sound.

The huge pumpkin did not reply, it just seemed to stare at her. It looked alive as the crackling fire reflected a wave of orange ripples across the room.

Meanwhile, thin particles of water danced lightly upon the wind outside, floating, as if lost.

She sometimes felt lost.

Such rain was called *froalla* to those who lived in the woods. Froalla meant wispy.

The water made a delicate sound as it tickled the window and roof above, audible only because her homestead was so quiet and still. Sometimes the rain was heavy and fuller: *invierno*. Or it could be that kind of rain that was angry and unrelenting: *olvido*.

Though, no matter how it rained, it was always somehow quiet. For everything was quiet out past the woods – nobody wanted to live on that side of the trees. In that terrible badness.

‘This is no place for moons to be watching over,’ the woman went on. ‘I tell that pasty dome every evening to go somewhere else. The night is a home for shadows. A home for death.’

She sought out and flicked one particularly sinewy piece of jerky from her jar and into the fire. She then used two fat fingers to fiddle with a needle and thread. The needle forced its head through the piece of material between her hands, which created a slow stitch. The material was almost too coarse.

She sat upon a crimson suede armchair as she worked, jammed in like a mushroom in a teacup. Her creation was taking shape now; a long coat for one of the new scarecrows to wear, made from the skin of a man who came wandering too close. The woman could tell, even now when the scarecrow was not assembled, that this was going to be a feisty one. ‘Albie’ had been that wandering man’s name, as far as the woman had understood. It was the only piece of information she’d acquired from the stranger before lacing a bowl of pumpkin soup with poison and serving it to him. A clean way to go out.

Last week’s news.

If Albie had showed up on her doorstep *this* week, the woman might just have been tired enough to simply give him the directions he sought back to Dainmerry. She probably would have sent him on his way and grumbled to herself about how useless people are from Dainmerry – because if one is going to live in the Winding Woods, one ought to know more about them.

The fire suddenly blazed brightly, as if stoked.

‘Hush!’ the woman hissed.

In the ensuing lull, she reminisced about everything that was going on in the world; circumstances playing out here and afar – she believed

it would take *many* years for this dreadful mess to sort itself out. *Oh yes.* She shook her head.

The woman tied her thread into a knot. The pumpkin was silent but attentive (pumpkins are the smartest of vegetables, after all).

‘A little girl, I think,’ the woman mumbled. ‘The child will be a girl, Mr Pumpkin.’ She stroked the pumpkin and brought it up into her lap, twirling her forefinger around and growing long black claws from her nailbeds. Green spirals of magic departed her claws and circled in front of her face like a river of incandescent pea soup. ‘Oh, but the girl will grow up,’ the woman added. ‘And she will learn of this world, that is for sure.’

Seeing poorly through her bloodshot eyes of emerald green, the woman looked at the steep hill outside of her lounge room window, towards the trees. Somewhere on the other side of the vast woodland, near a bustling village perhaps, a baby was taking its first strange breaths.

The woman clutched the pumpkin between her fingers, creating green veins beneath the vegetable’s skin that throbbed brightly.

‘I’ll be here little one,’ she whispered towards the icy window. ‘Grow your webs and woes. I’ll be here still, wondering how this all will end.’



The Troll from Manjarta

Winter ice was not far away. Frost was curling its long powdery fingers around flowers and insects, and birds had fled the naked grey skies. An eerie wind made the few orange leaves left turn into brittle sheets that would soon disintegrate from their perches and become parchment upon the earth. All of life was awaiting some warmth to grace another autumn morning in the lagoon.

Sleeping in the centre of such wildness, snoring and farting in her own graceless slumber, was a creature who looked the same as a common human girl. Although this child was, in fact, quite different; she was only really *half* a girl, on account of the strange condition affecting her. For her own beating heart had grown outside of her body.

This girl's name was Faerydae Nóvalie.

Faerydae yawned herself awake, just like she did every morning, inhaling without any difficulty into her hollow chest. The wooden boards beneath her feet rocked and the nearby sea sang a melodic tune as she licked the sleepy morning film off of her lips.

Faerydae's bed of straw clung to her sides as she lifted herself up to sitting. She heard some movement as she rubbed her eyelids: Euphraxia, Faerydae's dear mother, was twisting over and moaning from somewhere in the soft shadows of morning, still deep in slumber, dreaming up a storm. Faerydae scratched her rear and yawned again as Euphraxia murmured sweet nothings into the dark.

Euphraxia Nóvalie had always tried to be a good mother, in her own

special way. At the very least, she had not been upset that her daughter was born so... *unique*.

At Faerydae's birth, all alone despite the cockroaches surrounding her, Euphraxia had carried her child's beating organ like a hot pie and stowed it inside a crystallite jar. She balanced the jar on top of a barrel of malt whisky where it was to stay for four monotonous years.

The little heart gave lively beats day in and day out as alcohol sloshed around inside the barrel to the rhythm of the rocking ship the two lived upon.

The heart gave a strong beat. And yet, anybody could see, it was all so utterly wrong: to birth a child with her heart separate to her body. Any parent would worry about the future of such a child. However, Euphraxia, strange and whimsical herself, did not find it at all that compelling. How could she, when so much strangeness had befallen her already?

Euphraxia Nóvalie had endured more than most women of thirty years old; the gruesome death of her husband had been awful, and she swore she'd never marry again. When her parents were eaten alive by serpent monsters on a doomed voyage across the sea, she cried for many days. When a devious illness consumed her mind and turned her quite mad... well, she didn't think much of anything after that.

But the bad luck would not let up.

Four years after Faerydae's birth, the poor girl's bottled-up heart was stolen from their ship in the delusion of night-time, without any evidence to suggest that somebody had even come or gone. Worse still, Euphraxia had become so mad by that point that she merely laughed and laughed and laughed about it.

Faerydae had not laughed along with her, old enough by that point to understand loss.

The child was, firstly, saddened that her heart had been taken away by a stranger (saddened also that her mother should find it so hilarious) but then optimistic that the heart might actually be somewhere even safer, most likely, she thought, in the protection of heavenly angels who sung gentle lullabies to it every night.

Euphraxia began to snore, painting over the sounds of the ocean with a thick, cloggy brush.

Cocooned by willows, boulders and a small pine forest on one side, the Nóvalie's dilapidated Herring Buss floated stoically. It was frozen in a long-lost time of simplicity, a time of modest fishermen. Nowadays, the only blemish upon the lagoon was the ship itself, steadily sinking and decaying evermore since its prime, lodged forever by a sunken anchor deep below.

A precarious wooden boardwalk stretched out from the bank and into the centre of the lagoon where the ship lingered. Through the huge broken boards in the ship's flank, and within the vast cabin inside, Faerydae and Euphraxia slept soundly apart from one another every night, hearing all those forest sounds and monster calls one might imagine from the dark.



The pair had lived there, just like that, for all of Faerydae's thirteen years of life.

Euphraxia's sleepy voice came out in a croak. 'You look filthy,' she said and waggled a bony finger. Faerydae could see frail sunlight creeping in through the deck above and shining over her mama's pallid face. 'You look filthy and rotten. Are you sick, little girl?'

If Faerydae looked sick, then Euphraxia looked even worse. Perhaps Euphraxia was referring to what the girl was wearing rather than the dirt caking it. It was a messy assortment of found garments: a loose button-down shirt with frills near the buttons, too large for her, of course. A man's shirt, a sailor's shirt. The sheer material showed the slightest hint of her tiny nipples, and Faerydae wondered if she should be more curious about that. Her pants were brown and covered in sewn patches, but at least they fit her better than the shirt. They were actually becoming slightly too small by now. They were a child's set of pants. And Faerydae would not be a child for much longer.

She dragged her body out of the straw and stretched.

She was a scrawny girl with long black hair as thick as the night. Her eyes were a deep brown hue and her skin was like dark honeycomb,

both the same as Euphraxia's – although Euphraxia's skin had lost its radiant glow some time ago. They did not look much more alike than that though. Euphraxia had a long crooked nose, narrow oval face and gaunt cheeks.

'I'm not sick, Mama,' Faerydae said, dusting herself off. 'I'm just the same as I always am. Perhaps my heart is sick. Perhaps it is lonely.'

Her mama rolled her eyes then threw straw from her bed back onto

Faerydae's clothes and into the air like confetti.

'Please.' Faerydae gritted her teeth. 'Please stop. Don't – Mama! I need to make a start for breakfast.'

Euphraxia stopped at the suggestion of food.

Breakfast would consist of raw fish, as per usual, which needed to be caught first. And if Faerydae could not snare a lizard or plump jubilee toad during this late autumn time, it would be fish again for lunch and dinner too. How the poor Nóvalie's did hate fish after so much of it.

Faerydae's mama patted the straw poking out from underneath her bottom, beckoning the child to come and sit with her for a moment.

When Faerydae plopped down beside her, Euphraxia started to brush through the girl's hair with her fingertips, yanking the thick strands in any other direction but down. As they sat together in silence, Faerydae craned her head from the grooming to see the possessions her mother kept close by her bedside. There was not much. Three items: a strand of Faerydae's matted black hair; a voodoo doll that Euphraxia had been given by her late parents that used to sit in her baby cot; and a featherbone slipper made from the feathers of a rare silver peasparrow – only *one* slipper though, not a pair.



Faerydae had always liked that silver shoe. It was so silky that she often enjoyed stroking it and imagining it was a wisp of fallen cloud or a sleeping fairy. *Where did you get it?* Faerydae would ask her mama, and Euphraxia would always say the same thing: *When I kissed the fire omen, he made me a beautiful gown, braided my long hair and prepared a carriage made of glass. And on my feet, he knitted me two gorgeous slippers out of peasparrow featherbones. That is how I got those shoes, Ferrihead.*

Shoe, Faerydae corrected her. *Yes*, Mama would reply, *shoe*.

But that was years ago.

‘My precious little pumpkin,’ Euphraxia whispered into Faerydae’s ear. ‘Let me tell you a story about that heart of yours. I’ll tell you about how it disappeared.’

Faerydae peered over her shoulder at the woman. ‘You won’t tell me the truth though, Mama. I’m getting too old for stories.’

‘You don’t know what is truth and what is not, young lady.’

Faerydae shrugged.

‘A hideous bitch stole it!’ Euphraxia growled, proving Faerydae’s point immediately. Faerydae rolled her eyes. ‘An evil woman with a bounty on her head! Your father gathered up thousands and thousands of young boys to hunt down the vile hag and bring back her skull!’ Euphraxia was flailing her arms around crazily at this point. ‘*Bring back that bitch*, he said! Such dangerous things those little boys faced for you, Ferrihead, following the bitch’s trail deep into the perils of the Western Province, where the Winding Woods seduced them all. None succeeded.’

Euphraxia suddenly slapped Faerydae’s back, making the poor girl jolt upright.

‘Murderers lurk in those woods,’ Euphraxia went on. ‘And all manner of unnatural things take place, cannibalism, necrophilia, *murder*. Many boys lost their lives in that treacherous quest, but how they longed to marry the little, heartless girl. They wanted to be your husband, Ferrihead! They wanted to marry you and have ten daughters and seventeen sons.’

‘Those are all lies,’ Faerydae laughed. ‘All of it. Papa was just a fisherman; he could never have rallied up a thousand little boys. He was... he was dead then, Mama. Remember?’

‘Yes, that is true. A fisherman of the deep blue. That man was a

wonderful fool,' Euphraxia sang. 'A fool to be so drunk! Dancing up and down the boardwalk like a whore until he fell right into the lagoon – deserved it, if you ask me. A rock split his head open like a coconut, turning my afternoon all red.' She let go of Faerydae's hair and pushed the girl away with so much force that she stumbled. 'That's the end of the story, little girl. No questions.'

Faerydae pondered about her papa's dire fate for a moment; the reason why this lagoon was abandoned when it used to bustle so vibrantly with merchants and sea pirates. It had been said, years ago, before Faerydae's time, a man was pulled into the water by the *bad* will of the lagoon and drowned. Some folks said that the water had gripped him around the throat like a noose, whereas others told of the man's drunkenness. Either way, the only ship remaining now was that which Faerydae and Euphraxia lived on – her papa's olde ship, filled with darkness and bad luck no doubt.

'You are safe with me, Mama, you *know* that,' Faerydae mumbled. 'I love you.'

She reached over to hug Euphraxia for no other reason than it seemed the right thing to do. Faerydae Nóvalie had a strange feeling that perhaps she did not know what love was yet.