

W.H. Beard (William Holbrook, 1824-1900),
'Red-Ridinghood and the Wolf'.



Red and Wolfe

Denisha Naidoo

“**Y**ou forget that you murdered my grandma,” says Red without looking up from filing her nails.

“Why do you always come back to that?” Wolfe throws his arms in the air and stomps around the cabin.

Red stops filing. “Seriously? This again?”

“Yes, this again!” He stops pacing to face her. “I want to leave the cabin.”

Red lets out a sigh and shakes her head, knowing he couldn’t leave if he tried. The spell she cast over him years ago remains strong. “Do you want to go to prison? Is that what you want?”

“No.” He can feel his heart beating faster and his face getting hot. He clenches and unclenches his paws to calm down. “But that was decades ago.”

Red gets up from her chair, walks over to Wolfe and strokes his fur, scratching her fingers deep into his scruff just the way he likes. It always amazes her that he never asks about what happened to Grandma that night. “I can’t risk losing you too, Wolfie boo.” She takes his head in her hands, leaning her forehead against his. “With grandma gone, you’re all I have left in this world.”

Wolfe doesn’t want to leave Red alone, abandon her. She was the only one who ever cared about him, loved him. But it was so long ago; does anyone still care about that?

“You don’t know what it’s like out there,” Red says, stroking his fur, her fingers working their magic. “Everyone has guns now. You don’t have a chance.”

Outside the window, not far in the distance, Wolfe can see tall condo buildings. Not much forest left. He used to run freely for miles, his fur was thick and plush, his muscles taut and powerful. After decades of being locked in the cabin like a dog, he has gotten fat, his fur dull and falling out in patches. And the collar, he hates the collar, especially when she uses it to tie him to the stake in the yard, or worse, puts him in the cage in the basement when she goes into town. But then, she doesn’t always make him wear the collar, like today. And without Red, where would he go? How would he live?

A knock on the door interrupts his thoughts. No one ever comes to the cabin. Red pushes him into a dark corner with an expression that tells him to stay quiet and hidden.

“Hallo,” Wolfe hears a man’s voice with a German accent, “I am Hans, ja? And this, this is my sister Gretel.”

“Hello?” Red says, through the half-opened door.

“Um, ja,” Hans clears his throat, “so we are neighbours, ja?”

Red does not reply. She inspects the couple carefully trying to remember where she has seen them before. They are both blond and plump with startling blue eyes. Hans is dressed in Lederhosen and Gretel in a dirndl as though they are off to a German Oktoberfest festival, even though it is spring.

She takes in Gretel's stout figure and strong arms, her hair neat and tidy, the apron of her dirndl pressed. Hans is equally coiffed.

"Ja," says Gretel. "We used to live a few miles," she turns to point off into the forest, "that way, the ginger house. You know it?"

Red is quiet. Wolfe can see her slow nod of recognition.

"You know we got it from the witch after she die. Estate sale. Cheap," Hans says.

"Nobody wants a house with a dead witch," Gretel says.

"Oh, yes." Red taps her chin. "Now I remember. That old witch just up and died, choked to death on a chicken bone or was it a fire? Very sudden."

"Ja, ja," Hans chimes in, "I mean, we didn't know her, just got a deal on the house ... no one wants a house a witch died in."

"Lucky for us," Gretel says.

Red looks Hans over. "You fixed the house after the fire?"

"Ja, ja, I fix things nice. And Gretel, she keeps it clean and makes a good strudel!"

Red considers this. A handyman and housekeeper would be useful. Wolfe is good company and a good guard dog but other than that he is of limited use. Red reminds herself that Hans and Gretel have killed one witch already. She will have to be more careful with them.

Crouched in the corner, out of sight, Wolfe feels a leg cramp coming on.

"Oh, come now, we know about the wolf," Gretel says and shrugs her shoulders, giving Red a conspiratorial wink. "Who are we to judge?"

At this Wolfe goes to the door, slicking back his fur with his paws. It's been years since he's seen anyone but Red. "Wolfe." He holds out a paw. "Man, am I glad to see you folks. I've been cooped up in this cabin forever!"

Hans and Gretel back up. Wolfe snaps his mouth shut, realising the impact of his big toothy grin.

Red puts a hand on her hip, her expression conveying the unspoken words, *I told you so.*

"No, no," Hans reaches out and gives Wolfe's paw a shake. "We're neighbours. We're sorry we didn't come before but there was the incident with The Pigs."

Red raises her eyebrows.

"The Pigs, the three real estate pigs," Hans says. "Snapping up cheap housing, claiming it gets blown over in a strong wind or whatever and then building condos." He pauses to pull up his lederhosen. "Good money in condos, renting and selling."

Red throws Wolfe a sideways glance. Wolfe averts his eyes toward the floor and shrugs; how did he know blowing on a straw house would make it fall down? Of course, just like Red to use that against him, another reason to go to prison, she told him.

"We caught The Pigs eating the house before the deal went through. Nearly destroyed the roof!" Hans says. "But Gretel is good with the gingerbread baking, and I am good with the fixing."

Red and Wolfe both nod.

"Where are my manners." Red opens the door and gestures inside. "Come in, have a seat."

"Can I get you folks a beverage?" Wolfe asks, skittering about in excitement. "Tea, coffee? Homebrew? Make it myself." Wolfe says, catching himself before giving another one of his toothy grins.

"Do you have any gingerbread cookies?" Gretl asks.

"Yes, we do," Red says careful to conceal her excitement. "Wolfe, give them the special cookies, the ones I make just for you, the ones that look like the gingerbread people."

"Those are my favourite!" Wolfe's mouth waters remembering the day Red first gave him one of her special gingerbread cookies from her basket. He licks his chops before realising everyone is looking at him. Wolfe lets out a nervous laugh before disappearing into the kitchen. Hans, Gretel, and Red sit down in the living room.

Red feels her face flush as her guests look around the cabin, no doubt taking in the depressions in the sofa that they have sunk into, the scratches on the floor and walls from Wolfe's claws, the tattered curtains, the faint musky smell of wet wolf. She smiles at Hans. He would be a useful addition to fix the damage Wolfe has made. And Gretel, she can clean and maybe make new curtains. Once they eat the gingerbread cookies, casting the right spell will be easy.

"Gretel, are you good at sewing?"

"Oh yes, I am good with the sewing and the cooking and the cleaning," Gretel says.

"Lovely," Red says, working to conceal her excitement.

"Ja, ja, I'm good with the fixing and Gretel is good with the other things for the home. That's why we're here, for The Pigs."

"I thought you didn't like The Pigs?"

Hans waves a hand in the air. "Oh that, bygones."

"Bygones," Gretel pipes in.

"Ja, ja, they give us a good price for the ginger house. They build a condo, we are the property managers," Hans says. "The Pigs don't like dealing with the peoples."

Gretel nods in agreement.

Hans continues. "We", he puts a hand on Gretel's knee, "are good with the peoples."

"And keeping everything nice and working good, ja?" Gretel says putting her hand on Hans' hand and giving it a squeeze.

Red leans in. "You're a —"

"We don't like labels, ja? It's a long time alone in the woods." He turns to wink at Gretel, who blows him a kiss.

In the kitchen, Wolfe can be heard clattering about and muttering.

"He's excited," Red says, "we don't get visitors, ever ... after grandma died."

"Grandma?" Hans leans in.

"She died suddenly. Unexpected."

"Oh ja," Hans sits back. "Just like the witch."

Gretel winks.

Wolfe starts washing some glasses, searching for ones that he hasn't broken over the years, when he sees The Pigs standing around grandma's grave site. That can't be good, he thinks to himself. He peeks into the living room to see Hans's hand on Gretel's knee. What the ... ? They are deep in conversation. He goes back to the kitchen and quietly opens the back door. He can hear The Pigs deep in conversation.

They are in the process of surveying the property. Breath held; he watches The Pigs stumble across a human skeleton that has emerged from a shallow grave like a flower. They stop and smile at each other.

"This'll bring the property price down real good," one fat pig says.

"What about the wolf?" the second big pig asks.

The third pig, who is considerably smaller and thinner than the other two, replies, "He could be a problem." He pokes a stick at the grave. "Single gunshot to the back of the head. Small caliber. Derringer maybe." He meets the eyes of the other two pigs, who are nodding. "Could also be some type of magic." He leans on his stick, thinking. "But not the work of a wolf."

Wolfe quietly sneaks out the back door and into the nearby shrubs to get a closer view. Gunshot? He didn't shoot anybody, that he can remember ... he remembers finding the cabin, going inside, seeing this old gal in bed, a basket full of gingerbread cookies beside her and the rest is blank. Then he remembers being on the floor and seeing Red's face asking if he's ok. There was blood everywhere. "You killed her."

He remembers her saying that and then giving him some water – he had been so thirsty – and burying the body. But it's all a blur. His reverie is broken by The Pigs' voices.

"Boys, I don't think that wolf did this. I'm guessing that Red's a witch," the little pig says.

"Brick, straw and stick, the best way to catch a witch," the first fat pig says.

The little pig nods. "Exactly."

Wolfe hears the word 'witch' and runs. He runs like the wind. His body feels old and tight. His breath comes in ragged gasps, he can feel the adrenaline coursing through his veins, pushing him onward. Brush and brambles pull at his fur, and he is grateful that Red left him without the collar. He can smell the earth, the trees and his freedom. He keeps running.

Red notices that the cabin has become quiet. She smiles at her guests and holds up a hand gesturing toward the kitchen. "Let me just go check on Wolfe."

Hans and Gretel lean back into the sofa.

Red's heart starts to pound with a slow determined anger. The kitchen is empty. She glances out the window and sees The Pigs. They have managed to erect a shack of straw, brick, and sticks over the site of her grandma's grave. She flies out the back door red with rage. The Pigs glance up to see her charging at them. The two large pigs rush forward, grab her arms and slingshot her into the shed. The small pig slams the door shut behind her.

Red, furious, hits the back wall of the shed, turns around and throws herself at the door. She bounces off it before she even makes contact. Magic. She starts chanting spells and flings them at the door with her fingertips, but nothing happens. She reaches into her mind to find Wolfe but remembers that she took his collar off that morning. She can't reach him. Furious, she screams. The walls of the shed reverberate, but no sound escapes.

The Pigs smile and fist-bump each other. The little pig gives the order for the two big pigs to stay by the shed while he goes back into the cabin where Hans and Gretel are waiting.

"Well, that was easier than expected," the little pig says.

"Witch?" Hans asks.

The little Pig nods. "Witch."

Gretel gestures to the pocket of her dirndl. "We brought chicken bones".

"We contained her in a shed. She may be of use." The little pig surveys the cabin. "For now, let's get the deed to this place and tear it down. I have a good idea for a multi-unit condominium complex."

"And we can manage it, ja?" Hans puts his hand on Gretel's arm.

"Of course. You, G and we three will be rich."

Gretel surveys the cabin with the scratch marks and tattered curtains. "And the wolf?"

"Poor bastard's gone. Can't imagine what it was like living with that witch."

And with that The Pigs tear down the cabin and cut down more of the forest to build a multi-unit condominium complex managed by Hans and Gretel – or H and G, as they prefer to call themselves. Wolfe never returns. On occasion, he can be seen in the background of pictures from remote northern locations that travellers post on Instagram. Red remains alive in the shed built of brick, straw and stick with the remains of her grandma.

Now the eight-by-eight shed is embedded in the cement foundation of the condo complex. Occupants of the new condo complex move in but never move out. Some claim to hear faint screams late at night, but everyone knows that brand-new buildings can't be haunted or built by pigs.

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