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In the Deep Wood

Abstract

There were once twin sisters, Nyx and Hydra, who lived in a sylvan cottage in the deep, deep wood. Both were fair and lovely, with soft blond curls and pale blue eyes, hands as delicate as angels' wings, and skin so pure and blemishless that even the alabaster Venus cut off her arms in shame. As fairy tales would have it, their good mother, Chandra, as fair as her daughters, died horribly in childbirth with a stillborn son, and their stepmother, who shall remain nameless, was ugly and cruel...

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In the Deep Wood

by Cynthia Reeves

There were once twin sisters, Nyx and Hydra, who lived in a sylvan cottage in the deep, deep wood. Both were fair and lovely, with soft blond curls and pale blue eyes, hands as delicate as angels' wings, and skin so pure and blemishless that even the alabaster Venus cut off her arms in shame. As fairy tales would have it, their good mother, Chandra, as fair as her daughters, died horribly in childbirth with a stillborn son, and their stepmother, who shall remain nameless, was ugly and cruel.

Wicked Stepmother took great pleasure in reminding her stepdaughters (whispering so her husband could not hear), "Someday the sun will ripen you both to prunes."

Their father, because he had not read Freud, was as clueless about women as a man can be and could not for the life of him understand why his new wife and fair daughters fought constantly. So every night, he retreated to the refuge of a particularly exquisite birch whose thick trunk supported him and slender arms caressed him as tenderly as his first wife's. And there every night he puffed on his pipe and pondered how his once-upon-a-time life had become so complicated. He pondered this all his days until the day he died.

Fortunately, Wicked Stepmother died soon after, struck down by a runaway buggy whose reins some say were guided by the hands of God. Alas, they had not read Nietzsche. If they had, they would have known that the buggy was driven by the twins themselves, but revenge is a tale best told cold and sweet and is much too familiar to trouble with here.

Left alone, the two fair sisters shut themselves up in their sylvan cottage, determined to outwit Time's (and Wicked Stepmother's) untimely prognostication. Thus their fair skin never saw the sun. By day, on their rare ventures out into the world, they shrouded themselves from head to toe in heavy cloaks of dazzling white to reflect every trace of color and light. Only at night, and every night, did they walk together uncloaked through the deep, deep wood. If anyone had chanced to pass them in this nightly constitutional, he might have thought for a moment that the twin moons of Pluto had fallen to Earth for a spell. All was whiteness and beauty, with no cold dark as yet to spoil the fairy tale within which the two young women lived.

Nyx and Hydra had a number of suitors who made their way into the wood to plead their troth solely on the basis of the sisters' fabled beauty, because no one but the dead had seen their faces or flesh for many years. The suitors' undying devotion died, of course, killed by the twins' indifference to love. Neither sister thought any of the lovesick men a match for her beauty, and so they remained alone together in the woods, unblemished by sun or son.

A hundred years passed, and all who knew the sisters passed as well.

And their names were forgotten, except as names in legends . . .

But to each other, they were as real as you and I.

And so it came to pass that the inevitable darkness that stalks each one of us arrived at the doorstep of the sylvan cottage in the deep wood. Hydra took ill with fever, which flushed her alabaster cheeks to an alarming crimson. And though Nyx nursed her sick twin for days and days with bark beer and mouse-ear and other herbals she collected in her nightly ramble, Hydra continued to languish in her bed.

"Dear Nyx," she finally urged, "you must go to the village and find me a medicine to cure my fever, else I shall perish."

Although she had never left Hydra's side in all the years they had been on Earth, Nyx was determined to make her sick sister well. So she donned her white cloak, taking care to pull the hood full over her fair face, and embarked alone on the long journey to the village where she hoped the apothecary would have some medicine to cure her sister's sickness.

After a grueling morning's slog along the vine-laden path, she met a fruit peddler, a wise and wizened crone whose basket burst with ripe and juicy plums, each one a

distinctively deep and vibrant purple streaked with veins of rose and gold. She did not stop to think from whence these plums had come, for she blindly trusted science to someday account for the miracle of such curiosities.

“May I?” she asked the crone, for she had never tasted a plum. Before the crone could answer, the butterfly’s hand reached out from within the folds of the white cloak to pick the plummiest from the peck of plump plums.

“Be careful what you reach for,” the old crone replied, eyeing the twin’s delicate and faultless hand. “For not all plums are the same.”

The twin clucked her tongue and laughed. The crone’s platitudes reminded her of Wicked Stepmother’s, whose dreadful prune prophecy so dominated her life but never did come true. Distracted by these thoughts, she did not notice that the skin of each plum was unique and beautiful in its particular pattern of light and dark, purple, rose, and gold. She took a bite of the plum in hand and found to her delight that it was even sweeter and juicier than she had imagined, and she took another bite and another, suddenly ravenous for the taste of plum. Perhaps if the first had not been so unexpectedly sweet, she might have paid the crone for that one particular plum and continued on her way. Instead she ate and ate until all the plums were devoured.

The crone held out her hand for compensation, and Nyx discovered to her dismay that she had just enough to pay the woman and no more. Distressed by her thoughtlessness—for what had she now to offer the apothecary in exchange for his patents?—she determined to puzzle it out as she went.

“How could I have allowed sweet plums to unsettle my careful life?” she berated herself aloud, but no one heard, for there was no one on the path to hear. This new and curious uncertainty felt at once anxious and thrilling.

On and on she went, fretting and wondering, until finally in mid-afternoon she reached the edge of the village. Consumed with concern over her profligate lust for plums and its implications for her sister’s health, she forgot to consider that it had been more than one hundred years since she had last been to the village with her beautiful mother, and that things might have changed. And now before her was a maze of winding streets and stone buildings that had not been there so many years ago. Circumnavigating the village, she marveled at how strange it all seemed, so many criss-cross streets paved with rough stones and not the hard-packed earth she remembered from her childhood. Not one recognizable face appeared to guide her. After wandering lost for quite some time, she heard familiar sounds—a rush-crash of

water and two singsong voices rising above the tumult—and she remembered that in the village center lay a fountain whose spring was a constant pulsing through the years of change. She followed the sounds and soon found herself in the village square, which was actually round, the shops being arrayed around the circular fountain from which gushed the sweetest, purest water the Earth had ever seen. Or so the villagers claimed. Who can prove such things?—for, as everyone knows, polls are fraught with statistical anomalies. And there in the fountain were two bronzed girls, innocent as their laughter, stripped to their slips and splashing in the whirlpools swirling at the base of the waterfall.



Momentarily distracted by the sight of such happiness, Nyx did not realize she had come to the very apothecary's shop she sought. She drew a deep breath as if summoning courage for battle and entered the claustrophobic shop whose wooden shelves were crammed with amber bottles and sleeves of powder all carefully labeled in flowing black script. A young apprentice knelt in the center of the shop grinding herbs with the largest mortar she had ever seen, and two funny little men in ruffled collars and velvet tights eyed her up and down. Undeterred, she strode to the counter where the men stood, one a customer like herself and the other the apothecary. He stood poised in his peaked and cockèd hat, waiting for her to speak.

“My twin is ill,” she said, her voice emanating in fluted notes from the dark cave of her hood. “Her alabaster cheeks have turned an alarming shade of crimson, and I need a patent to cure her terrible fever.”

The apothecary paused to look inside the dark from whence the girl's voice came. Discerning nothing, he turned to his shelves and from the highest one procured the needed potion.

“Three didrachm,” he said, and held out for her inspection a tiny amber bottle filled with milky liquid.

She uncumbered her hand from her sleeve and reached for the bottle, and in the dark shop, her hand fairly glowed in the corroded light from the dust-mottled window.

“You see...sir,” she said, trying to quell the stammer in her voice. “I have no money.”

“Well, well,” he said, placing the bottle on the counter between them, just out of her reach. “But since you have come all this way . . .”

And because he had heard the strange legend of two beautiful and ancient twins who lived in the deep, deep woods, he said, “Perhaps you would be so kind as to take down your hood and let me see the face that belongs to such a dulcet voice.”

“I will do as you ask,” she said, thinking it a small request for such a monumental gift, “but first you must draw the drapes, for even by this scant light my skin has never been touched.”

“As you wish,” he said, and drew the velvet drapes across the stenciled letters

APOTHECARY

while the apprentice paused his mortar in its grinding and the sole other customer drummed his fingers impatiently upon the counter.

The apothecary was old enough to be her father—or rather, the father of her memory, so many years ago it was he died that she could hardly remember anything of him but a wreath of smoke around his head. And not having had the benefit of proper mothering, she could not see the harm in satisfying this strange man’s small desire. She pushed back her hood in one swift motion. The customer’s tapping ceased, and the apprentice dropped his mortar into the wooden well of his pestle.

At the sight of her, the apothecary lost his powers of speech. With his sulfur-stained hands, he fingered first her golden curls, each one a perfect spool of purest silk, and then her alabaster cheeks, unmarred by even the slightest crease or crinkle of Time, and finally her rose-colored lips, still sticky from the juice of her plum feast. His fingers lingered on her lips, and her cheeks colored with two spots of blood-red blush. She stood transfixed (and strangely thrilled) by the apothecary’s greedy touch.

The customer strode toward her then and urgently whispered in her ear, “Haven’t you read Freud?”

She gasped as he roughly drew the cloak-hood over her head and handed her the small, corked amber glass.

“Go!” he said. And without a word, she stole quickly away.

Again she found herself in the rounded square. She felt an odd, unsettled warmth settle upon her lips and then spread slowly down through the core of her body, as if a lighted match were fluttering down her throat. She told herself that the apothecary's coarse, yellowed fingers were but a necessary means to restore her sister's health. And yet, the feeling lingered as his hands upon her face. Her own hands still trembled ever so slightly, and she reached up to touch her lips, surprised by the sweet and sour taste of her experience, forgetting for a moment the bottle in her hand. The bottle slipped and shattered in shards on the cobblestones.

Small drops of the milky liquid splashed the hem of her white cloak, but she did not even notice as they penetrated the fabric, threading their way up its warp and weft. She did not notice because the sun was warm and sweet like honeyed tea, and her only thoughts were to wash her lips and cool the fever that had settled over her. And lo, the fountain called, its bursting, thrusting water as enticing as siren song. The two little girls still laughed and splashed in the refreshing water. Their slips clung transparent to their lithe bodies, and their arms and faces glistened golden-brown like buttered toast. They were not alone. Their mother sat knitting a long black shawl in a slanting pool of sunlight, oblivious to the wisdom of long-dead Wicked Stepmother, whose own skin, Nyx imagined, now stretched taut and dark over her skeleton like the tanned and desiccated hide of a skinned goat.

The girls' laughter spoke to Nyx as longing. How could it be, she wondered, that she had only now just noticed the timbre of their joy? She wanted suddenly to dip her feet in the spring (for she was heat-stroked from her long journey) and to lift her face to the sun and feel it there, its warmth a touch she imagined not unlike the apothecary's touch. The girls looked at her, a strange vision in white, her arms covered by wings of cloth, and they thought an angel had touched down for their pleasure.

"A fallen angel," one whispered into the ear of the other.

They giggled and plotted and then held out their hands to the angel. "Come!" they said in unison, and splashed her white cloak with clear water.

The water looked delicious as the plums. As if in a trance, Nyx slipped the robe from her head and shoulders, and the heavy garment fell to the ground. The sun, touching her face for the first time, felt like a hundred hands caressing her. She stroked her cheeks, expecting to find the creases and crevasses of Time working instant mischief, but no. Her skin felt smooth, and she saw that her arms, too, remained white and pure. Wicked Stepmother had been wrong.

All those years, she thought, and sighed, and stepped into the eternal spring.

Again she sighed, for never before had her foot felt as it felt then, like mint dissolving on the tongue, her foot so light she did not notice it was no longer there. All she wanted was this sensation, mint and light, over and over, and so she placed her other foot in the spring, and the girls splashed her again, and her skin speckled as if the water were acid. And yet, it did not hurt even as the flesh dissolved. It felt instead like bubbles frothing, dancing lightly over her skin.

Horrified and dumbstruck in the face of the angel's terrible disfiguration, the girls' mother dropped her black knitting. But her daughters only laughed and splashed all the harder because they believed in fairies, in angels, in all things marvelous. They believed with all their hearts that this was one of their stories, charmed into life. Why should it not be so? Their angel's ecstatic face confirmed the wisdom of their youthful vision. She sank and sank, down, down, down into the water as her legs dissolved and her wings melted and all that was left was head and shoulders bobbing on the fountain waves.

Was she not an angel? they wondered.

But they did not have long to wonder, for the angel looked at the stumps where her arms had been and smiled violently and nodded at them as if to say thank you, and then her shoulders disappeared. Her head felt light, light as love, and she tipped it back, and her smile became a laugh as all of the sensations of the world concentrated into one exquisite climax. She laughed and laughed as her blond curls dissolved and then her ears and her cheeks and finally all that was left was the smile upon her lips, and that, too, dissolved.

The little girls clapped as their angel disappeared, but their mother could barely manage to shake her head in mute astonishment.

"The horror," the mother finally whispered as she blinked away the memory, blinked until she could convince herself that it was only the fatigue of her eyes from the blinding sun and the knit-one, purl-two endless rows of black stitching. To be safe, however, the mother gathered her wet little charges into a large white sheet and bundled them off to home.

But the girls held onto the vision in white. "The angel," they said in unison, kicking their mother and pointing to the place in the pool where now remained just a white froth of bubbles.

“Silly girls,” the mother said, “you have had too much of the sun. Nothing is there but water.”

But the girls did not believe her. Late at night for years afterward, under the cover of their blankets, they spoke of the angel’s visitation and what it meant. With each telling, the tale became embroidered with fact and fancy until neither one could distinguish truth from fiction...

...and meantime, of course, Hydra slept on in the deep, deep woods, waiting in vain for her twin to return with her medicine and perhaps a loaf of fresh-baked bread. But the days passed into weeks, and weeks to years. Too weak to move from her bed, she covered herself with a white coverlet and fell into a deeper sleep.

Twenty years passed, and the village became a town, and the town’s edges stole into the woods in what would one day be called suburban sprawl, so that what was once dark and deep became light and sun-dappled. The two fountain nymphs became women, and each married a handsome man on the same wedding day, and each of the handsome men built a home in the woods on the farthest verge of the town.

As it would happen, on the fifth anniversary of their marriages, the sisters decided to cook for their husbands a special truffle soup. The elder of the two young wives stayed home to prepare the broth and knead the bread and set a special table, while the younger donned her red and hooded cloak and set out for the primeval woods to gather the truffles from the moist earth. She had with her a basket into which she placed the choicest truffles, the ones that lay deep in the rich humus by the oldest trees along the path.

In the course of her gathering, she happened upon an ancient birch with a particularly rich store of smoky truffles. The tree’s curved trunk, its tangled halo of vines, and its single fallen limb impaled in the earth—together these reminded her of a hobbled woman pausing to rest on a walking stick. Curious, she crept closer to the tree and glimpsed the edges of a cottage peeking through the crevices of branches and vines. High up on the north wall, she noticed a small window into which, standing on tiptoes, she could peer. The window was covered inside by a dark velvet drape, and through a tiny slit in the drape, she spied what appeared to be a figure lying upon a bed, shrouded in white. Taking a deep breath for courage, she knocked on the window, but the shroud did not stir.

She circled the cottage and found a door; it, too, was covered in thick vines. She knock-knock-knocked three times, and each time she pressed her ear to the wood and listened for some sound of life. Hearing nothing, she looked about for a tool with which to cut through the vines and found a rusting ax sunk fast into the stump of an old oak. Her first thought was of the tale of the woodcutter who rescued the little red-hooded girl. She shuddered briefly, considering her own crimson and hooded cloak, for it seemed to her at that instant that fairy tales could come true. What would she find inside the cottage that might not be better left undisturbed?

Curiosity overcame caution, and so she spent the better part of the afternoon clearing the vines from the door, forgetting about truffles and truffle soup, hoping her sister would forgive her this small indiscretion. For would not her sister have indulged her own curiosity upon finding a forgotten cottage in the woods?

At last, the door yielded to her ministrations, and the first taste she had of what awaited her was the thick and dusty air of many undisturbed years escaping from the dark interior with a perceptible whoosh. From the doorway, she called once more, and once more heard no sound from the prone figure on the bed. Inching cautiously across the room, she cleared the cobwebs that draped from ceiling to floor and wall to wall, until finally she reached the bed. Taking another deep breath, she peeled back the white shroud and found to her surprise neither wolf nor sickly grandmother, but rather the most beautiful woman she had ever seen, an exquisite corpse with blond curls and blue eyes open to the world. Touching this woman, cold as marble, she knew that this was no fairy tale. This woman was real, and she was dead.

And though she knew this dead woman could not harm her by word or deed, yet the young woman dropped her basket of truffles and gasped in horror. What frightened her was not looking squarely at the face of death, for she had already seen the reaper's stark truth. Her own mother had died soon after that long-ago afternoon by the fountain and was laid to rest in the very shawl she had been knitting by the fountain. The young woman knew, had always known, or thought she knew, that her mother's death was caused by her insistence on the impossibility of angels.

The daughter recalled her mother's voice that afternoon, her gasped exclamation of horror, as she pondered the odd beauty of the lifeless woman before her, perfectly preserved in every detail. She tried in vain to place the terror she felt as her hand touched the dead woman's face. What frightened her, she finally realized, was the strange resemblance of this woman to the very angel whose visitation brought death to her beloved mother. She rubbed her eyes, not wanting to believe that somehow she

had crossed the threshold of the dream of heaven where last she thought this angel dwelt.

Surely her eyes deceived her. But then she remembered why that long-ago angel had not made her tremble as this dead woman did. That long-ago angel had disappeared laughing with a violent smile upon her lips. But this angel's still-ripe red lips were pursed, not with the untrammelled joy of having lived, but with the everlasting sadness of a small and soundless O.

Leaving her basket behind, the young woman fled the sylvan cottage to make her way home. Alas, she had not left a trail of truffles to mark her way back from the deep, deep woods. You may find her there still, wandering alone, trying to make sense of the vine-strewn, twining paths.

Cynthia Reeves is a fiction writer and poet. Her work has appeared in a number of journals and anthologies, most recently in *Wreckage of Reason II*, an anthology of experimental prose by women writers. *Badlands* (2008), her first book, won Miami University Press's 2006 Novella Contest. She earned her MFA from Warren Wilson College and currently teaches in Bryn Mawr College's undergraduate Creative Writing program and Rosemont College's MFA program.