

1985

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Recommended Citation

Wright, Greg (1985) "A Grim Tale," *Calliope (1954-2001)*: Vol. 1985 , Article 20.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/calliope/vol1985/iss1/20>

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A GRIM TALE

Once upon a time...

In a land not so very far away, an imaginative little girl with strawberry red curls and wide blue eyes sat straight up in bed, and screamed hysterically at the darkness that seemed ready to engulf her.

When her mother came running and flicked on the light switch, the little girl stared at her as if she were a stranger. The girl's small body shook with uncontrollable shivers and her knuckles had turned white from the tenacious grip she had on the flower-print bed sheets.

Her mother held her for a long time, rocking her with soothing words of comfort and reassurance. "Only a dream," she repeated over and over, in a calming tone of voice. "Those are just stories, Ally, they aren't real. They can't hurt you. They're only in books, baby."

But it was hours before Ally finally fell back into a fitful sleep and her mother managed to disentangle herself from clutching limbs. On her way out of the room, Ally's mother nearly tripped over the book of fairy tales she'd been reading to her daughter earlier that night. The book lay open on the floor, and an illustration of a red-caped little girl running from a monstrous wolf through a dark forest stared up at her. For a moment the picture seemed accusing, but then the woman dismissed the idea as ridiculous. Seconds later the room was once more slithering with darkness.

Years passed and the little girl grew into a young woman. As she matured, Ally stopped believing in fairy tales. She stopped being afraid of the dark. She forgot the made-up terrors prevalent during childhood, and focused her mind on sensible things. Things she could see, and touch, and not fear.

And when Ally's grandmother phoned her at Ally's apartment to tell her how ill she felt, and lonely, and frightened, Ally listened to all the old woman had to say, then asked:

"What are you frightened of, Grandma?"

"I'm frightened of the woods," her grandmother answered breathlessly. "At night I lay awake and listen to the woods. I hear things, Ally. I hear strange sounds. Like dogs, only...oh, I know I sound like a foolish old woman, but can't you please come and visit soon? It's so quiet out here now that Papa's gone."

Ally loved her grandmother very much, and agreed to visit her that very night. She told the elderly woman she'd bring her some medicine from the pharmacy for her rheumatism and arthritis. She'd also bring along something from town that she'd cook for dinner, for the two of them. It was the least she could do.

The night air was cold and brisk and brought with it patches of dense fog. Ally kept the windows of her Plymouth rolled up and the doors firmly locked. She'd never liked fog. For some reason it reminded her of graveyards, and the putrid, visible breath of corpses clawing their way up from the rotting earth. At times the fog seemed almost alive, its drifting white tendrils caressing her speeding car like a blanket of unseen spiders.

On either side of her, dark branches beckoned like the coarse black tentacles of giant insects; or the loving embraces of the dead.

Ally shook her head irritably, forcing all ghoulish thoughts from her mind. "It's only fog," she heard herself whispering aloud. "It's not alive. It can't hurt me."

Something moved, shifted, in the snowy white blanket that covered the road ahead of her. Ally squinted, but could not see. The car drew nearer. Ally slowed, and soon she saw.

"Oh my God," she said without thinking. "I don't believe it. Oh dear God, oh my..." her voice faltered, died away. Her hands clutched the wheel in a vise-like grip.

In the road ahead of her, something huge and dark and menacing crouched. The headlights caught its eyes, turned them a burning amber. Long, powerful jaws yawned wide, revealing rows of yellowish-tinged fangs. Saliva dripped from fleshy black lips. Behind the beast, a furry tail swung back and forth.

The wolf sauntered toward the idling automobile, unafraid.

Ally's foot began to assert pressure on the gas pedal. The wolf lunged into the trees, disappeared. Ally realized she was still trembling, and the fact that she'd been on the verge of screaming frightened her almost as much as the animal itself had. She remembered her grandmother's feeble words of uncertainty and fear, and the speedometer jumped past the sixty mark.

Minutes later, Ally pulled into the driveway leading up to her grandmother's cottage. Built onto the side was her grandfather's wood shed. In the shadows, the shed was a dark growth sprouting from the small house; a tumor.

But Ally had no time for that. She must see her grandmother. She had to make sure the woman was safe. Only the sight of her Grandma smiling and welcoming her with eagerly awaiting arms could end the panic growing inside Ally like a malignancy.

She felt caught in some cruel childhood fairy tale, where there was no nearby woodsman to hear her cries and rescue her with the swing of an axe. The memory of the wolf chased her to the front door, laden with a paper sack full of groceries. She knocked at the door, called out shrilly for her Grandma.

There was no answer.

Ally turned the knob with her free hand, and quickly ducked inside away from the fog and the dark and the sight of the hulking black wolf burned permanently into her memory.

"Grandma," she called, setting the groceries on the kitchen table. "I'm here." She moved hesitantly down the hall toward her grandmother's bedroom. "Are you in there, Grandma? Ally's here...Grandma?"

She could have imagined it, but Ally thought she heard a soft moaning sound from within the room. Tentatively, she opened the door. She stepped inside.

There was no wolf in her grandmother's clothing lying in wait for her on the bed. The figure beneath the red blankets was in fact Ally's grandma. Or rather, what was left of her. Ally saw what had been done and slumped against the wall for support. She opened her mouth to scream but this time no sound came out.

The blankets weren't red after all. They'd once been white.

Something had ripped the old woman apart. From her throat down to her stomach, she'd been flayed open like a fish. The wound was raw and wide, and Ally could see that parts of her flesh had been eaten away.

The cruellest joke of all, however, was that her grandmother was still alive.

When the older woman turned her head towards Ally, the girl could see the lacerated veins and muscles working in her neck. Blood pumped in slow spurts from the horrible mutilated gash.

"Ally..." her dying grandmother groaned, "run, Ally...run."

Sobbing uncontrollably, Ally raced out of the room, out of the house. Her legs were gelatin; the air was like thick mud she had to struggle through.

Half-way between the cottage and her car, Ally came to an abrupt halt. She felt the threat of unconsciousness bearing down on her like a heavy wool blanket.

The black wolf stood on the hood of her car, growling.

Ally spun around and dashed for the wood-shed. She heard the wolf leap onto the ground, sensed it gaining on her, ready to lunge for her throat.

She saw an axe resting against the door of the wood-shed. She was reaching for it when the wolf sprang onto her back and forced her to the ground. Claws tore madly into her shoulders, shredding her blouse. Ally felt the beast's nasty breath on her throat. Frantically, her arm flailed for the axe.

Twin sets of jagged fangs peirced her neck as her hand closed around the handle of the axe. She pulled the weapon to her, twisting around and unbalancing the wild animal as she did so. Teeth raked her thigh.

The wolf rolled away from her, scrambled to its feet, and lunged once more. Screaming, Ally swung the blade with all the strength she could muster. The edge disappeared into the wolf's skull, above and between its glaring eyes. There was the sound of bone crushing beneath the impact, and the cry of the fatally wounded animal as it fell back away from her; then the night was silent but for her hoarse, ragged breathing.

She stared at the dead wolf for a long time: she was in a state of shock. She tried to stand up; couldn't. She began to crawl towards the car.

She tried not to listen to the howling all around her. She tried not to think about what would happen if the wolves out there got to her before she got to her car.

She had left the car door open, and that helped her pull herself up to the front seat. She was almost inside the Plymouth, ready to slam shut the door and roar safely away, when she looked in the rear-view mirror --- and realized the car was full of smiling wolves.

Greg Wright