

Hen of the Woods

by

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“When you’re out seeking mushrooms, look only for the Hen of the Woods, just like I showed you,” said the old woman. Her wrinkled hands held tight the young girl’s shoulder and matted hair fell across her blind eyes. “Trust no other mushrooms under those dark trees and mind you stray not far from the path, lest the fairies get you!”

The girl’s nose wrinkled, and she longed desperately to be away. The sour smell of kraut hung heavy in the air and the old kitchen was stuffy and foul. A black pot bubbled on the stove and water hissed and popped as it fell on the hot, sooty top. In her young mind, it might well have been a stew pot for children, like in the fairy tales.

She squirmed under the old crone’s eyes: balls of white staring milky and unseeing, faintly glistening in the grey light of morning as she patted the table, searching. Finally, her blind hands fell upon an old basket, its dry wicker creaking in protest.

“Don’t trip and break it,” she warned. “Or I’ll send you to the Trading Post at the Indian camp and they’ll snatch you away and take you to live with the savages!”

“Yes, Sister Catherine.” The girl said, meekly.

Her tiny hands shook as she held the basket tight to her blue dress. Old stories raced through her head: her brothers scaring her in the dim light of the dying fire. *The red man will get you!* She didn’t believe in it. She didn’t believe any ‘red’ man could be worse than Sister Catherine, but she was frightened just the same.

She fidgeted, eyes straying to the open door as a shadow passed the grass outside, and she jumped as a chubby face suddenly appeared. The old, balding brother shuffled into the room and dropped dry wood by the stove, thumping and thudding on the roughhewn floor. His brown robes bulged around his belly and a broad smile spread on his red lips.

“Oh Catherine, let Adeline be,” he said laughing. “The poor child. You know you wouldn’t be here helping in the kitchen at all, if Brother Winfried hadn’t wandered off. Don’t make me regret asking you.”

“Meinhard.” Catherine scowled. “Small children should know what to look for in the dark woods. They’ve been known to go missing, you know, when they don’t seek the right mushrooms. Don’t you want fresh spring mushrooms for evening soup? The girl best be careful, or we’ll have a missing child and missing mushrooms, besides. Then I’ll have to pick them myself.”

“Twenty years ago, you might have been able to.” He chuckled, fat hands on his round belly. “No need to trouble yourself about it now! And no need for only Hen of the Woods. There’s plenty of all sorts about. And I’m sure no one has ever gone missing because they looked for the wrong mushrooms.” He winked at the girl.

“No,” the old woman said. “It must be Hen of the Woods. Stay away from the red-capped toadstools. The gnomes live there. Don’t disturb their houses. And stay away from the *Hexenkreis* - the witches’ circles - the mushrooms that grow in rings, great and small, in the hidden places of the forest. These open to the realms of the fairies and they may snatch you or trick you to coming to their land. Only look for the Hen of the Woods on old fallen oaks in the hills. Stay away from the ones in the swamps, their spirits are dark, as their feet are in such mucky earth.”

“Yes, sister Catherine,” said Adeline.

“Yes indeed!” she said. “Or you’ll be lost in the woods. The wolves will chase you, or the fairies will steal you, or worse, you’ll wind up in something’s belly.”

“Catherine, don’t tease the girl so.” Father Meinhard shook his head. He smiled apologetically and the young girl giggled as the old priest’s fat finger rose to his temple, turning round and round as he mouthed, *She’s crazy*.

Catherine turned to the stove. Wrinkled hands grasped the old spoon, knuckled and boney, as they stirred. The blubb and splupp of bubbling stew popped and splashed as steam rose, gamey and oily. “I simply don’t understand what Winfried was feeding you,” she said. “You need more meat.”

She paused and sniffed the air, grey hair falling across her wrinkled brow. “Are you still here, child? Get going! And don’t come back empty handed!”



The dirt road grew quiet as Adeline neared the edge of town, her small feet pattering in the dust of the two-track. Purple thistle grew wild on the edges and stoops of a ramshackle house, its spiked stalks growing through cracks in the floorboards of the porch and leaning in a tangle against the worn and weathered gray of old wooden steps. The house was boarded up now. Slivers of black window peeked behind old boards, hastily nailed against the sash. The cobbler

and his family used to live there, before they took ill. Their daughter Anna used to watch her the summer before: the summer before she drowned herself. She had such golden hair. It shimmered white in the light, blown wild by the summer wind. And then she was just gone. Papa said they were cursed. She didn't know what curses were, but her skin prickled in goosebumps and she shivered as she hurried past.

Shadows lengthened in the briar and bramble that crept from the foot of the forest. Here and there grasses lay trampled or matted as the rabbits and raccoons made their spring paths. Or maybe, they were made by the fairies. Papa said there was no such thing as fairies, but she didn't believe him. She crouched on all fours, knees in the dirt, careful not to muddy her dress. The tiny road wound here and there around the vines and past the sumac. She pictured their little feet walking the road: elves and gnomes going about their secret lives. Maybe they saw her now, staring from behind the leaves?

An old ash guarded the entry to the forest, his mighty arms thrust towards the cloudy sky like a giant sentinel warding off all who dared to enter the black secrets within. His gnarled face glared down upon her, rough and covered in craggy bark. He always had a scowl and Adeline was careful to treat him with respect; Sister Catherine said that he wouldn't block the way, so long as she asked if she could enter the wood politely. For some reason, her mother could never see him. She didn't know his name was Hieronymus Hubertus Ashman, and she never asked permission to enter. Hieronymus didn't like that. Not at all.

"Mr. Ashman," she called, curtsying low. "May I please enter your forest? I am sent to go hunt mushrooms."

Gray clouds passed above as she stared at his gnarled face, and a warm, spring wind rustled his leaves, blowing scents, soft and sweet.

"I *know* it is not your forest," she said. "But I don't know who else's it would be. And anyway, it is your road. May I please enter? It's for Sister Catherine."

Sparrows chattered in the boughs, chittering away as they flickered here and there, and tiny robins poked their naked heads from their nests as their parents stared at the girl, scolding angrily.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I know you don't like Sister Catherine." She stepped up on her tiptoes and cupped her hands to whisper in his ear, "I don't like her either."

The old ash stared silently, its face unmoving. Hieronymus was always like this. He always scowled. Not once had she ever seen him smile.

“I’ll be careful,” she promised. “I won’t go missing like the others. Thank you for your concern!”



The road south was squishy and waterlogged. Black earth was torn up in great furrows where the horses had skidded the logs back to town. Bits of bark lay strewn, torn by the dragging chains like old bones on a battlefield, and the ferns and mayapples were trampled and crushed. The fairies won’t be happy about this, she thought. She sat on a stump wondering what to do, the basket creaking as she held it tight. “Why does Hieronymus let the bad men into the woods?” she said aloud.

Soft rain fell about the forest, pattering in the green leaves above, while white fog rose from the thickets and hollows all around.

“It’s a perfect day for gnomes!” she said, looking up suddenly.

All about, toadstools grew from the rich earth, spreading like a tiny town whose roofs were red and spotted white. Glistening drops fell from their caps and trickled down their sides. She crept among them, careful not to brush or damage, and peered underneath, her face almost pressed against the musty ground. White gills traced the underside, in delicate patterns, and she imagined what it must feel like to touch their softness with a tiny gnome hand.

“Mr. Gnome,” she said. “I wonder if you can tell me what I should do? You see, I am supposed to search for mushrooms today, away in the hills where the oaks are. But the road south is logged and torn. I think the fairies must be angry to see such a thing. I don’t want to trespass against them when they’re cross. Do you know what mood they are in?”

She patiently waited for a reply, as the mist hung heavy in the air and her dress stuck, chilly, against her skin.

“I see,” she said. “I’m sorry to hear that. I don’t know why the grownups do what they do. You’re right. I think I should leave the fairies alone today. But where will I look for Hen of the Woods?”

She paused, listening.

“Sister Catherine said not to go into the marshes!” the girl protested. “But I suppose I fear *her* more than the fairies. In fact, I don’t really fear the fairies at all, it’s just that she always warns about them. But maybe you’re right. Maybe the fairies just don’t like *her*.”

She drew an old crust of bread from her pocket, hard and brittle between her fingers and set it beneath the toadstool.

“Thank you for your help!” she said. “That is a wonderful idea! I will go ask Mr. Crow if he knows where to look.”

Her little legs skipped through the forest as she smiled, happy to be on her way, and soon the soggy leaves of last autumn gave way to the soft brown of a carpet of old pine needles. The air was sweet and lemony beneath the giant trees above her and she poked the clear drops of sap, sticky beneath her fingers as they clung in pearls to the rough bark. Long locks of red her were soon matted and wet, stuck to her upturned face as she stared into the trees. Somewhere, Mr. Crow. would be sheltered in the boughs of his favorite pine.



Craw! Caw! Craw!

A flutter of black rustled above. The old crow blinked against the drops falling in his eyes as peered from high above. Black feathers ruffled and puffed as he shook the water from his back.

“Mr. Crow!” the young girl called. “Hello Mr. Crow! I was looking for you!”

Craw! It grumbled.

“Don’t be cross,” she said. “I’m sorry that you’re cold and wet. It’s not a very fun day to be out of doors, is it?”

Craw!

“I know,” she said. “But I have a gift for you. I have an old crust of bread I saved from breakfast. Sister Catherine would be angry at me for not eating it, but she’s blind. So, I don’t think she saw.”

Craw!

“I know...” she said. “I don’t like her either. But don’t tell her I said so! Anyway, she has sent me to find mushrooms. Specifically, Hen of the Woods. She told me I could only look for the Hen of the Woods.”

Crow!

"I don't know. It is her favorite, I think. She said the brothers don't get enough meat. But they cannot have meat on Friday. So, she said mushrooms are the next best thing."

Crow!

"I don't know what happened to them." Her face grew sad, tears blending with the rain. Her white cheeks blushed red against the wet chill and she wiped eyes. "Emma and Leyna and Serila... My friends have gone missing. They wandered away in the forest and now they cannot find their way out and no one can find them. Papa says they must surely be eaten or died from the weather. Two months are two long for them to not return and they were lost in the coldest part of march. But I think they must be alive still. I can still feel them. At least I hope I feel them. Papa says I have an active imagination-"

Crow! Crow!

"Mr. Crow, please don't interrupt. It isn't polite," she said.

Crow!

"That's what the gnome said. But I'm afraid to go into those dark parts, even if that is the only other place there is Hen of the Woods."

Crow!

"I know. And thank you, I will be careful, I promise."

She placed the hard crust on the soggy ground, but the old crow looked away, uninterested.



The shadows lengthened. Old spirits whispered all around her. She couldn't see them, but she could hear their voices. The gloom was filled with such things in the deeper parts of the forest; things that didn't want to be disturbed.

Shapes, like men or strange beasts, moved in the distance, darting behind giant and gnarled trees or hiding in the hollows of old logs. The further that one went in the forest, the faces of the trees changed, as well. Closer to the sunlit glades they were sleepy and content. Only Hieronymus ever spoke to her. But farther into the darkness, their faces grew glum and grumpy. Some were even brooding and angry. Ripples of rough bark bunched in great frowns and whispered grumbling murmured amongst them. The mushrooms became strange,

as well. Yellows and purples and reds grew one over the other, sprouting from dead stumps and fallen logs and the air was filled with the must and spores of so much decay.

She had only been in the deep forest with her father. Papa didn't listen to the trees and he laughed at her fears. Now, alone, her heart pattered and she looked here and there, terrified of losing her way.

Had Emma and Leyna and Serila ventured so far out? Is that why they couldn't find their way home? Memories flashed in her mind: smiles amongst the autumn apples and happy voices singing nursery rhymes. Familiar feelings rose in her heart, as if they were near.

Fairy circles opened on the ground, just like Sister Catherine had warned, white and brown mushrooms spreading in rings among the leaf litter, their centers perfectly bare and open. She walked nervously, peering over her shoulders. She had said that she wasn't afraid of the fairies, not as much as she was of Sister Catherine. But now it seemed she was right in their home! She didn't know what to do. She feared staying too long, but she couldn't come back to Sister Catherine empty handed, her knuckles were still sore from the last scolding!

"I wish the fairies would simply tell me if I could be here," she said aloud. But they were silent.

She looked around, glumly. Her hazel eyes turned shades of green in the forest gloom and her skin was pale white against the shadows. The forest was oddly quiet. Only the unhappy mumblings of the trees in the distance rumbled quietly. "What shall I do?" she asked the fairy rings.

They were silent, but as she looked, she saw suddenly all about her feet soft brown bunches here and there spreading out into the distance. Clusters of Hen of the Woods! It must be a sign!

The water was chill on her fingers as she placed them delicately in her basket. She gathered them quickly, careful not to damage their fragile frills. But though she worked as fast as she could, the clusters were small and her basket filled too slowly. It would be forever before she was done and dark before she could make her way back. She would be lost in the woods like her friends!

"Where are they?" she asked aloud. "Where could they all have gotten lost?"

Her throat tightened to a lump as she thought of them. She swore she could feel them near. Or maybe it was just her overactive imagination, as papa said. She sat miserably on a wet stump and soon her bottom was soaked and cold.

Old logs, rotten and wet, stretched into the distance as ferns and mayapples and trilliums and bloodroot covered them in their own tiny forest, so far below the treetops above. Her eyes wandered among them, lost in the dark hollows: the shadows under their roof-like leaves, the thick moss of dark green that covered in all directions. There must be fairies there now, watching her, waiting to see what she would do.

Suddenly, her eyes fell upon a giant clump of brown frills: a Hen of the Woods bigger than she had ever seen, feathery, just like an old mother hen. It looked almost too big for her to wrap her arms around, and all about, tiny clusters of smaller mushrooms spread out in rings around it.

"This can't be a fairy circle," she said. "It looks somehow different. The center is not open, there is a big mushroom in the middle. And the rings are not perfect. What could this be?"

She walked slowly towards the giant clump of mushroom in the distance, tiny feet squishing the soft bed of spongy moss, and her heart pattered quickly as she stood well outside the circle.

"Is this a fairy circle?" she asked. "I don't think it is. But I don't want to trespass. I'm sorry for what the grownups did to the trees. I don't understand and I don't like it either. I only need to pick some Hen of the Woods for dinner. You see, sister Catherine has sent me out and she has forbidden me to return until my basket is full. If I don't fill it soon, it shall become dark and I fear I will be lost in the woods like my friends. Would you mind terribly if I picked that mushroom? I would be quick and gone before you knew it."

Heavy silence hung on the forest; the fairies didn't speak.

"All right then," she said. "I think I have to try. I will leave you this last crust of bread from breakfast. I know it isn't much and I know it isn't a saucer of milk. But I hope it's enough. I couldn't bring any more."

She placed the last hard crust on the wet moss at her feet and stepped forward. The circle neared and her feet seemed to bring her closer, almost against her will, and her skin prickled in goosebumps. Emma and Leyna and Serila seemed so close. She could almost touch them. She felt their tiny hands in hers - their hair blowing against her face - and she turned about, confused. There was no one, only tiny mushrooms spreading here and there.

She had no choice but to go forward and the Hen of the Woods grew monstrous as she neared. It was so much bigger than she first thought. It was bigger than any mushroom she had ever seen! Everything seemed bigger, in fact. The giant trees towered above, reaching high into the sky, so high their tops were lost in the rainy clouds. The may apples grew giant, mixed with towering ferns shaking, slightly, from the drops of rain that fell, as big as her hand. Soon, she realized she was walking underneath them. The mushroom in the middle that seemed so close, was now so far away and her legs grew tired just looking at the distance.

“How has everything grown to be so big, just by me entering the circle?” she asked. But turning here and there she realized that it was not everything else growing bigger. She was growing smaller.

She looked about, suddenly fearful. How could this be? The smaller clumps of mushrooms were now suddenly her size. She looked at them, amazed, and as she stared, they suddenly seemed so familiar. They seemed no longer like mushrooms; their frills and wavy edges took shape into arms and legs and faces turned blissfully up to the sky. They were not mushrooms, but children in the shape of mushrooms.

There was Emma! Her golden hair now frozen in a wave of fungal frill. Her eyes were closed and a smile spread on her sleeping face.

“Emma!” she cried. But the girl would not wake up.

Leyna was there, too, nearby, and Serila, also. But they were all asleep. Gentle smiles spread across their faces, frozen as mushrooms; not dead, just sleeping and unable to wake.

She reached out to touch them, a tear running down her cheek. Her hand brushed Leyna’s soft chin, cold and wet from the rain above. Her face still felt like skin, like Adeline was touching her own hand. But looking, she gasped, for it was not that Leyna’s soft cheek was skin beneath her hands, but her own hands were now mushy and strange, like Leyna.

Adeline felt a hollowness inside of her, as she opened and closed her hand in disbelief. It was as if her warm blood was gone, replaced by strange fungal airiness and she opened her mouth to scream, but no words would come.

Suddenly, a heavy thumping shook in the distance, drawing near, as a giant lumbering form rose, towering above the ferns as it hummed an old tune. She turned to look, but her body was so slow, resisting her will. Her feet seemed stuck to the ground and when she struggled to lift them, bits of dirt clung to her toes

and growing from her feet were strange roots, white and feathery, desperately seeking the dark soil below.

The giant lumbered into view: an old woman in a grey dress and shawl, towering above the mushrooms below. She stopped at the immense mushroom in the center, her back turned and bowing as she drew a pitcher from her basket. Soon, white milk ran down the mushroom's sides, pooling onto the black earth and green moss as she hummed to herself. Or did she hum to the mushroom? Adeline couldn't tell.

"How are my children doing today?" the old voice asked, with a cackle.

Wrinkled hands reached down and plucked the tiny mushrooms all around, tossing them into her basket. Milky, wet eyes stared blindly as she sniffed the air, searching here and there with her hands, long nails black with dirt.

The giant hand grasped Emma, the girl's face still smiling as she was plucked and placed in the basket. Serila was next.

"Come to me, my little chickees. Come. Come. Your mother calls," the old woman crooned. "For I am the Hen of the Woods."

Adeline screamed, but no air left her lungs. She struggled desperately against the pull of the earth, her tiny legs fighting the ground and themselves and the airiness where her bones and blood should have been. She turned one last time to see Leyna plucked away and saw the old woman sniff, listening as she ran as fast as her tiny mushroom legs could go.

Green and black shadow flew as she raced through the forest. The leaves soaked her face and branches snagged her dress and she realized she was no longer small. She looked at her hands and they seemed almost like flesh, but they felt still hollow and weak and filled with mushroomy air and water.

Mr. Crow cawed above, scolding. But she didn't wait to hear what he had to say. She crashed through the toadstools, falling about them, but oddly, they didn't break under her weight.

"I'm sorry Mr. Gnome!" she cried.

Hieronymus only sighed as she raced past and would say nothing.

The town grew close, old wooden buildings rising in the distance. Her home was near! The smell of the barnyard greeted her: sour manure and sweet hay, mixed with spring blossoms. The door to the house heaved open, heavy wood on rusted hinges, creaking as she strained against its weight, and she fell into the room.

"I am turned into a mushroom!" she cried.

Her mother sighed as she pounded the dough of next day's bread with her thick hands, and fine flour puffed in the air, covering her dingy apron.

"Get you gone, girl. Unless you plan to make yourself useful for once," she said, rolling her eyes. "You're not a mushroom. You're the same annoying little brat as you were this morning, head always in the clouds. Now, get to the abbey and leave me in peace."

She ran to the barn to find her father. Bits of dry straw fluttered in the air as he tossed bedding into the stables and the horse grunted and stomped, ears twitching and nose fluttering as it sniffed the fresh stalks.

"For the love of Christ, girl, quit your nonsense," he bellowed when she told him, "Or I'll tan your hide!"

"But I found them!" she cried, "Emma and Leyna and Serila! They were all mushrooms! And I was turned into a mushroom, too! You always talk about the savages. But the old woman is the real savage!"

Her father turned in anger and the wooden handle of the pitchfork clacked against the barn beams as he threw it. His giant boots struggled against the slippery straw chaff as he made his way towards her, his face bright red.

In a panic, she ran away into the fields, her father cursing after her. Why couldn't they tell? She hid in the orchard, waiting for the long hours to pass. The steeple and cross of the abbey in the distance loomed black against the gray sky. Soon, it would be supper. She knew she must make it back or she would get a spanking, or worse.

Slowly, she opened the old kitchen door creaking on its rusted hinges. A cauldron bubbled on the stove, steaming rich scents, thick and earthy, as Sister Catherine stirred with her boney hands, clacking the giant spoon against the rim of the cauldron, with a thud before turning.

"There you are!" she said. Her milky eyes searched in vain for the young girl. "You're lucky... I went into the woods myself and picked what was needed. I knew I couldn't count on you. The brothers are wasting away and you know they can't eat meat on Friday."

Adeline was silent, trembling, as the old crone sniffed the air, nostrils flaring.

"Is that you girl?" she said. "I smell fresh mushroom."