

## The Lonely Little Girl

Once upon a year gone by, in a land far away across the dreamboat skies, lived a little girl in a little cottage in the woods. The little girl had lived in the little cottage in the woods for as long as she could remember and had never ventured outside. The cottage was only small, just big enough for the little girl, and she lived there alone with only the plants and the animals for company. Each morning she would wake and go down through the woods to the nearby stream to bathe and to say 'Good morning' to the fishes, and every evening she would light a small fire in her little cottage and open all the windows and doors so all the creatures of the woodlands could come and warm themselves with her.

The little girl's life was full of simplicity and routine, she had never known any other kind of life and it did not occur to her to think that she might live any other way. She had a little garden at the back of her little cottage where she grew herbs and fruit and vegetables to eat, there was a stream nearby where she could bathe and collect fresh water and she spent her time tending her garden or walking through the woods singing to the animals as she went. The animals of the woods were all her friends, they loved the little girl dearly and would happily stay and spend all day listening to her sing as she went about her business. For the little girl sang the most beautiful songs that any of the animals had ever heard, her soft musical voice filled them with joy and peace, and each note was like a small sliver of magic slipping delicately into their ears. The animals of the woods would travel for miles sometimes to come and spend time with the little girl and to sit and hear her sing.

As time passed the little girl grew, she grew taller and her hair grew longer and the shapes that mapped out her face grew ever more distinct. Her friends the animals watched her grow with interest and saw to their delight how she became more lovely every day, until one day the little girl was no longer a little girl, she had transformed into a beautiful young woman.

The beautiful young woman was very happy with her life, she loved the peace and the quiet of her little cottage in the woods and she loved the contented company of the animals that were her friends. Every day she spent time tending the plants in her little garden and walking through the woods singing of the beautiful things around her and the happiness that she found within herself. When she had time to spare she would sit at the little table in the kitchen of her little cottage and stitch new clothes or bake wonderful smelling pies full of an array of sweet tasting berries and all the while she would hum lilting melodies to herself as she worked. The beautiful young lady's cottage was a lovely place to be, nestled in amongst the trees, simple and homely, with a fire dancing happily in the grate every evening and the sound of the young woman's singing on the breeze.

One day the young woman was kneeling in her herb garden tending her plants, her long golden hair had fallen across her face and she was humming as she worked, when a voice called out to her;

'Hello, is anyone home?'

Unaccustomed to the strange guttural sound of human language the young woman was confused, she stopped and frowned slightly as she turned towards the sound and caught sight of another young woman standing in front of her front door and looking in the other direction. The other young woman called out again, slightly louder this time;

'Hello, is anyone home?'

Slowly, from somewhere within the depths of her mind the beautiful young woman remembered the language and found she could understand the words. She opened her mouth and spoke in return;

'Hello? Can I help you at all, you must be tired from your journey, would you like to come in for a nice cup of warm cordial and a bite to eat?'

As she spoke she moved forwards and the other woman turned and saw her and smiled a warm smile.

'That would be lovely thank you, if it's not too much trouble, I have been walking for a very long time and I am in need of some refreshment.'

The beautiful young woman smiled as she came towards the newcomer and opened the door to her little cottage so as to let her in. Once inside she warmed up some cordial for the young woman and gave her a bowl of hot broth and a chunk of freshly baked bread to go with it. When the newcomer had finished her meal the young woman cleared away her plate and then said to the woman;

'It is a pleasure to receive such an unexpected visit from you dear friend, but pray tell me, what brings you through the woods to my door?'

The woman smiled and said in return;

'Thank you for your hospitality, you are a most gracious host. I must admit I am on a journey, I am a player and I seek to visit all of the towns and villages near here so that I can play my music for all of the people who live there.'

The beautiful young woman thought that that was the most wonderful thing she had ever heard and begged that the player tell her more. The player smiled and as she removed a lute from the pack that she carried she said;

'I can do better than tell you my dear, would you like to hear a song?'

'Yes please!' cried the young woman, and her eyes shone with excitement, for she had never heard a real song before.

As the player strummed at her lute and began to sing the young woman thought that she had never heard anything so beautiful in all of her life and she sat silently, enraptured by the lilting notes of the music.

When the player had finished the young woman praised her highly and as she got up to get them both some more cordial they fell to chattering about the player's experiences travelling through the nearby towns and villages.

All evening the two women sat and talked, stopping only briefly to indulge in a dinner of hot meat pie, before carrying on and talking into the night. The young woman found herself listening with wonder to the stories the player told her of all the people she had met, the places she had been and the adventures she had lived. So enthralled was the young woman by the player's stories that she let her imagination run away with her and for the first time in her life she pictured beautiful girls going to balls wearing satin gowns, the chatter of many people laughing and enjoying themselves whilst sipping glasses of sweet wine and listening to flowing music like that of the player. She imagined handsome men wearing well cut suits asking her to dance, spinning her around a ballroom, making her feel light and elegant and beautiful. Listening to the player's words she pictured things she had never thought of; a warm noisy room in a pub, meeting friends to go on walks about the town, having company whilst she did her sewing in the mornings, laughing with someone whilst she cooked dinner in the afternoon and gossiping over sweet wine and a hot fire in the evening. For as long as she could remember the young woman's life had involved only herself and her little cottage and the surrounding woods and she had always been perfectly happy with that, she had never felt the need to venture any further afield.

Eventually the sky outside the little cottage began to lighten and the player ran out of stories. With a huge yawn she proclaimed herself to be 'all tired out from so much talking' and the young woman - not wanting to seem impolite to such a wonderful guest - began to bustle about and quickly made up a simple bed on the floor. As there was only one real bed and the young woman did not want to seem impolite she offered her own bed to the player, who gratefully accepted the offer, and then saying goodnight they both turned in for the night.

The player was soon sound asleep, her small snores echoing through the little cottage, but the young woman found that try as she might sleep would not come to her. Her mind was awake, for what felt like the first time in her life, full of images of happy laughing people and pictures of town life. The young woman felt a strange happiness inside of her, like a small flame of excitement, and realised that she had enjoyed the company of the player during the evening and that she hoped she would stay longer, maybe for another night, and tell more of her stories. Eventually she slipped into a sleep full of vivid dreams of happy smiling people and beautiful dresses.

The young woman slept in late the next morning and woke with a start on the kitchen floor of her little cottage with the sun streaming in through the little windows. For a moment she was confused and wondered why she was on the floor, until she remembered the unexpected visit from the player the night before. Full of excitement

to talk again to her guest the young woman jumped up and out of her makeshift bed on the floor and rushed to the door of her bedroom where the player had slept last night. She peeked quietly round the doorframe so as not to wake the player, but to her surprise the bed was neatly made and there was no sign of her. The young woman took a step back and thought for a moment, then headed back out through the kitchen and into her little garden where she stopped again and looked around for the player, but she was nowhere to be found. Feeling slightly dispirited the young woman made her way back inside to the kitchen to clear away her bed from the night before and as she did she noticed a small note tacked to the front of the door. The note read;

‘Dear Friend

Thank you for your hospitality last night, I was so tired from travelling through the woods and it was a pleasure to spend the evening dining and talking with you. Thank you also for the use of your bed, I slept very well and your cottage is very beautiful.

I wish you well, you are very lucky to have such a lovely home.

Goodbye.’

The young woman read the note through twice more before taking it down from the door and placing it on the kitchen table. Slowly she turned and walked outside and went into the woods to sit. As she sat in the quiet a strange wave of disappointment washed over her and she found herself quietly crying although she could not work out why.

From the trees surrounding the young woman all the animals who were her friends watched as she cried, they had never seen her shed a tear before and did not know what to do. After a time the young woman’s tears dried up and she sat quietly, she did not sing. Slowly the animals came towards her and sat next to her, enclosing her in a ring of friendship. But for the first time in her life the young woman could not feel the warmth of the animals’ friendship and the magic of the woods was cut off to her, as if she were no longer a part of it.

As the days wore on the young woman settled back into her routines and she began to somewhat enjoy the company of the animals and the plants again. She found comfort in looking after her garden and a small amount of joy at walking through the woods, but no matter how she tried she could not shake the sadness that had descended upon her after the player had left, all the daily tasks that she had loved before now seemed plain and dull. As time marched forward and the seasons changed the young woman carried on as she always had, she bathed and sewed and cooked and gardened and sang to the animals, but all the time she felt a quiet loneliness in her heart and at the back of her mind was the joy she had felt sitting talking to the player and the excitement of the stories about the villages and towns.

One day while she was out walking in the woods the young woman found herself thinking about the people in all the towns and villages again and wondering what would happen if she kept walking and found them. She pushed the thought from her mind, then stopped and wondered why. The more she thought about it the more she realised she was no longer content, although she loved her life and had always been happy in the woods, since the player had come she had not been able to stop thinking about meeting other people and going to a town, just for a little while, so she decided she would go. She was sure that it would be just like the players stories and everyone would be beautiful. There would be balls and laughter and sweet wine and everyone she met would be perfectly lovely and friendly. She was sure that if she travelled to the town the people there would fill the strange loneliness that she kept inside her heart.

Having made up her mind the young woman turned around and started back to her cottage, excited for her adventure and already thinking about what she would pack into her small bag to take with her. She walked fast and as she walked she did not sing, and the animals followed her, worried about her decision.

Back in her little cottage the young woman packed some spare clothes and some food for her journey into her small bag, she did not have many other belongings so she could travel light. Grinning to herself in excitement the young woman pulled on her walking boots, slung her pack onto her back and strode out of her front door, closing it firmly behind her. Once she was through the door however, she stopped dead, in front of her all the animals of the woods had gathered and she could not get past. For the first time in her life the young woman found that she was annoyed by the animals, she looked down at them and spoke;

‘What are you doing friends? Please kindly move over and let me be on my way, I am going on an adventure to find my heart's desire.’

There was a silence and then the owl spoke out;

‘Dear one, we cannot let you go, you do not realise what it is you are doing. If you leave, it will never be the same.’

‘You speak in riddles’ said the young woman; ‘please explain, of course I can leave, and come back whenever I like. What is it that will never be the same?’

This time the fox answered;

‘You have always been here, you are the lady of the woods, this is where you belong, this is your birthright. If you leave you will no longer be the lady of the woods and you will forsake your birthright.’

Confused and annoyed the young woman turned to the fox;

‘I have made my decision fox, since the player came I can feel the loneliness in my heart and I wish to seek out other people and see how they live. Of course I will come back, I will not be gone forever.’

There was a short pause, then the stag spoke up;

'If you really wish to go my lady then of course you shall go, but although you may not stay away forever, the damage that is done will be eternal. You cannot reclaim a forsaken birthright.'

Now the young woman was beginning to feel angry, she was fed up with these animals standing in her way speaking in riddles when she had finally made up her mind. She had better things to do and say than stand on her doorstep listening to some animals. In a hurry she said;

'I have made up my mind and I am leaving now.'

With those final words the young woman strode through the animals and true to their word they did not stop her. Only one voice rang out after her as she walked away through the woods.

'You will not find what it is you seek on the other side of the woods. It is not there that happiness lies. When you realise this you will come back, but by then it will be too late and all you love will be gone, you will no longer be able to find happiness here. Goodbye, Lady of the Woods, you shall be sorely missed.'

The young woman did not look back so she did not see who the owner of the voice was, but for a moment she felt the power of the words and she doubted herself.

Then she thought again of the stories told by the player and knew that she was missing out and that she would never be happy again until she left the woods.

Spurred on by these thoughts she quickened her pace and hurried through the woods, leaving her old life, the little cottage and all the animals behind her.

It took the young woman three days and nights to reach the edge of the forest and when she did was cold and tired but pleased that she had kept her resolve and made it all the way there. At the edge of the forest she stopped and looked out, night was beginning to lift and she could just about make out the twinkling lights of a town in the distance, not too far away. Taking a deep breath to try and curb both her excitement and her nerves, she stepped out from the edge of the forest and immediately felt the strangest feeling, as if she had shed a skin, or as if a part of herself had fallen away. For a moment she paused, worry briefly crossing her mind, then she shook her head, decided it must just have been the wind and started walking across the field and towards the lights of the town in the distance. As the young woman looked towards the lights she could not help but think that they looked slightly dimmer than they had just now.

It took longer to reach the town than the young woman thought it would and by the time she got there it was nearly midday and the village was full of people bustling around and going about their business. The young woman stopped in the street and looked about her, drinking in all the activity. There were people all around her, some were running, some were walking and talking and some were standing behind tables covered in things and yelling out at the other people. As she was standing there the young woman heard a loud shout behind her, she turned and just caught sight of the

horse and cart before it careened into her and sent her flying into the muddy ground. Somewhere above her a man's gruff voice shouted; 'Mind out where ya walkin' nex' time! Stay outta the way or else you'll get yourself run over proper!'

The man did not stop to help her, and neither did anyone passing by. The young woman lay on the floor with her face in the mud and watched the feet walk past her, slightly dazed from her fall. After a short while she picked herself off and brushed herself down, then looked around her and decided to head further down the grey and muddy high street.

By the end of the day the young woman was fed up and feeling thoroughly dejected, she had spent all day trying to talk to people, trying to make friends and trying to get involved in village life, but had not succeeded even once. The people in this town were grey and mean and heartless, with a small anguished moan the young woman slumped down onto a small grassy mound just outside the village and began to weep. She did not know how long she wept for but when she was done night was beginning to fall again and so she picked herself up and began to make her way back across the fields and towards the woods. She had thought about staying a night in the town but after the horrible experiences of the day she just wanted to leave the place as far behind her as possible and go back to her own little cottage in the woods.

As she walked the young woman thought of all the people she had spoken to that day; first there was the angry man with the horse and cart who had knocked her down, then there had been the old woman behind the stall who had shouted at her angrily when she had picked up a small glass jar to look at, after that she had tried to start a conversation with a lady who was walking up the street but the lady had been very rude and told the young woman to leave her alone without even trying to make friends, then other people in a funny house where there were lots of strange drinks got very angry at her when she helped herself to one of the drinks in order to refresh herself - they took the drink away from her and chased her out of the house! The young woman could not understand why all the people in the village were so unkind and not at all like the people that the player had described. She felt dismayed and upset, all her hopes of meeting other people and finding happiness had been torn away from her and there was nothing to do now except to head home and try to forget the whole horrid ordeal.

It took the young woman three days and nights to walk back through the woods to her own little cottage, and when she got there it did not quite look as she remembered it. Although she had not been away that long it looked as if she had been gone for years. The little cottage was sad and alone in between the tall trees, it did not look welcoming at all, instead it looked almost spooky, as if it were haunted. At the back of the house the young woman could see her herb garden was all

tangled and overgrown, the herbs and vegetables all mixing with each other in a big mess of stems and leaves. The young woman looked up, it seemed darker there than it usually did, the trees seemed to stretch up forever into the sky and their branches and leaves seemed to blot out nearly all of the sun. She shivered and realised she was cold. She walked round to the front of her little cottage and pushed open the wooden door, it swung loosely in and creaked as it did so. Inside the little cottage was dark and all the furniture was covered in a thick layer of dust, there were cobwebs in the corners and the air smelt of damp. The young woman felt despair at the sight of her beautiful home in such a ruin after all she had been through and she ran through the little cottage, throwing all the doors and windows open in the hope that it would let some light and air in and when she was done she collapsed down into a chair, tired from her long journey home from the village. As she sat a cold breeze like none that she had ever known while she had lived there slipped in through the window and wound itself around her small body, she shivered and wished that her animal friends were here to help her. Filled with a sudden longing to see her friends, the only family she had ever known, and she ran outside and stood in front of the little cottage and shouted at the top of her voice; 'Hello! Hello my friends! Fox! Stag! Otter! Owl! Mouse! Hello! Hello! Can you hear me? Where are you all? If you can hear me please come to me!?' Hello!

The young woman stopped shouting and waited, but the woods were empty, and very very silent. No living thing moved near her, no animal called back to her or came running out of the woods to comfort her, she was alone.

As the young woman stood alone in a small clearing outside of a worn down little cottage the words of the fox returned to her; 'You have always been here, you are the lady of the woods, this is where you belong, this is your birthright. If you leave you will no longer be the lady of the woods and you will forsake your birthright.'

With a shudder of horror and remorse the young woman finally understood the words the fox had spoken, the words that she had discarded in all her hurry. Never again would the woods be her true home and never again would the animals talk to her or come to listen to her singing.

She had left behind her all that made her who she was and all that made her happy, she had deserted it and gone chasing after a dream that could never be real. Instead of looking to the towns and to strangers for happiness she need only have looked inside of her and at all that surrounded her and she would have found her happiness was there all along.

She sank slowly to the floor and wept bitter tears into the cold earthy ground.

The young woman continued to live in the little cottage in the woods, but from that day on it never regained it's light. No matter how hard she tried the young woman could not make it feel like home again, even the fire that burned in the grate gave off

only a small amount of heat, and no creatures came when she left the windows open, only cold draughts and unwelcome snowflakes.

Time marched on and seasons came and went and the little cottage stood in its small clearing between the trees and it alone watched as the young woman aged. Slowly the sadness that weighed so heavy in her heart began to etch itself on to her body, her back became bent and sharp lines appeared snaking their way across her face, her long golden hair turned a dull grey colour and she no longer sang. Even the birds did not sing in the woods around the little cottage any more.

Many years later a traveller came by the little cottage in the woods and stopped to knock on the door. There was no answer so he waited a while before knocking again but in the quiet and still of the woods there was still no answer. Before journeying onwards the traveller stood on the doorstep for a moment and looked around, the place had a strange feeling to it, not horrible, just sad, as if once there had been something beautiful there but it had died long ago.