

The So White Woods

by Alison Wells

The Huntsman takes the girl into the woods. The silver birch shivers, its lovely cascade of pale green leaves, spilling, wind in the ears, between rushes, in a conch shell. If she stood in a sea cave with that whoosh, whooshing in. This rush and abating, this swoosh and elating. Her clothes are tight, the bodice tied close to the chest. Her friends envied her for the natural rouge of her lips, plum stained, spilt blood. Her friend joked with her on the paleness of her skin, 'total block,' they said. 'Do you use that on the boys too?' They crossed their legs in parody, then threw their arms around themselves and caressed in mock passion, this fashion to turn discomfort into fun.

Her hair was black, jet black. She had it cut severe, she was a Goth. Died at the hands of the Sisters of Mercy in the pitch of her teenage bedroom. The blackout blinds chosen by her parents extinguished cosy street lights.

The base electronica beat beat, trip down the stairs, down, down, that minor key heartbeat. Screams off the street on a Saturday night, what were you doing alone? Despair is the counterpoint to ecstasy, silence is the anti-twin of throb, and joyful isolation the antidote to the mob.

She would lie on her back in the evening, her fingers with each other entwined, no, not for anyone keening, both sets of these fingers are mine. She lifted them up and made castles, digits leaning cathedral-like, high, and the thumbs were the drawbridge for people, to exit that tower in the sky. She drummed on her chestbone the rhythm, the music was marrow in bones, sweated down to become like a treacle, but rolling together like stones, on the shore in the dawn with no coming, where the clouds hit the ground and then spew, and the waves run their bile on the long seafront mile, where we walked long before when we knew.

But the wish that you hear right now, darling, is the wind in the birch, can you see? That the sun threads its beams through the crosshatch and alights on first you and then me.

He is holding her hand as if she is cherished. She knows it all already. The panting in their eyes, dark orbs spinning, lost planets, desire at the event horizon. She loved one more than all the others. But she never told him. She had seen it all before, the physical arrow, no dalliance with romance. She laughed at all the boys because she could see through them. But it would have been the same whoever it was. She told her sister Vera she should never let a boy get the better of her and she only meant in the mind, their hands were another matter.

'You were the one with all the dolls,' said Vera. 'You were the one who cried when the boys tore off the limbs and stuck the heads on sticks. You think you stride, ride like a Valkerie, you are a little bewildered girl in the woods, you wanted everything to be right.'

There was one she loved more than all the others. He took her face in his hands. He kissed along the bone of her cheek very slowly, kiss by careful kiss, he kissed her eyelids and she felt his breath on her face and the press of his hands against her shoulders. She was spinning.

The Huntsman sits her down on a picnic mat by a tent. They bought the gear when they went to the Electric Picnic festival for two days in June. Electric Picnics. Victoriana Steampunk. Christopher Reeve with his fob watch helping him travel through time. He lays out a basket, a wicker one, the proper kind. She leans against the silver birch with her hand against the bleached bark watching him. He takes out a flagon of cider, some fig rolls and a plate of apples. The apples roll against each other.

The sun becomes hot. She removes her skirt. She is left with a black bodice, with white laces, leggings underneath and a pair of twelve hole Doc Martens.

Boots. She remembers the Carousel, being with her Dad. He set her on the yellow horse with the wide teeth and the great snarling mouth. And he took a photograph on his old Kodak as she spun

round and round clinging on and her feet in her little black boots didn't quite reach the pedestal.

She drinks the cider. It is what the afternoon sun tastes like. She likes the tangy residue on her tongue. She is feeling woozy. Sunstroke. He strokes her arms where she had the tattoos done one Sunday afternoon when there was nothing else to do. *Make love not war*; some four syllable sentence or other, every word a foray into torture. Or 'My name is ? Fill in the blanks later.

So white, snow white this bark, and the sunlight turns it into metal shimmer, like Sol ski slopes against designer sun glasses.

The sun is so hot despite the shade, she feels woozy. She doesn't know that he put rohipnol in her black Russian in the bar earlier. The taste of recent cider makes her tongue thick. She would have made love to him anyway she thinks as he takes hold of her and she passes out. He is blameless. When she wakes everything is just the same but there is a bite out of the apple. 'Nipples, I mean nibbles' she thinks. Was he the one she loved more than the rest. She can't remember.

Only as she lies there under the softly moving canopy of birch swish swish does she notice the security cameras. 'What are they doing there?' she murmurs. The huntsman is having a sandwich, it looks like cucumber. He talks through mouthfuls.

'You are a celebrity, you are everything,' he says. 'I followed you into the wood because you're famous. It's a reality show. *Celebrity get me out of the White Woods*. You have millions of viewers world wide all wondering what you are going to do next.'

'What am I going to do next?' she wonders.

She looks at the place where he caressed her tattoos.

'So you don't love me then?' she says.

'Yes I love you,' he says his mouth full of white bread. She would have preferred the love of her life to have table manners.. 'We all love you'.

'Oh no,' she says remembering now — how did she remember the most unusual of details and then forget the names of her....? There

was that movie with Jim Carrey where they had filmed his whole life, or his whole life was a reality show. What was that again?

Somehow the Huntsman has acquired ginger beer, he sips from a long bottle, a thick one that reminded her of the 1970s when you were paid for bringing your bottles back. They had the right idea back then....Ideas should be recycled.

'The Truman Show,' answers the Huntsman.

'Sometimes I feel like my life is a movie,' she says.

'We all do,' says the Huntsman.

Was there never a sentiment in the singular?

The Huntsman takes off his cloak and with a few choice nimble steps climbs the tree and throws his coat over the camera.

'Reality's gone crazy,' he says. 'They're pushing it and pushing it. Some people even suggested I take you into the woods and pretend to kill you. That's about the only thing that hasn't happened on reality TV yet.'

She isn't sure he's right. Everything has already happened.

She puts his hand on his arm because she really wants to feel him, skin to skin, her bones ache.

'You could have pretended. We would have come clean later,' she says softly.

'There were ethical considerations. Watersheds,' he tells her.

'Would you love me if this wasn't a reality TV show?'

He looks at his fingernails. She wonders if there is another camera whirling in the undergrowth. Poignant scene of unrequited love.

'At first it was just a job,' he says. 'But after a while I couldn't wait to get up in the mornings and come into work.'

The pristine girl just stares.

'You don't know how unusual that is for me,' he said. 'I couldn't wait to see you.'

What is it with fingernails? She wonders. Are fingernails the window of the soul?

'I can't do it,' he says. 'I can't kill you or pretend to kill you or whatever they want me to do.'

He goes silent. He swallows. She is tracing the hairs on his arm and the smooth skin on the inside of his wrist.

'I know,' he says, 'I'll quit. I'll just go home and watch you from there'

'Surely there isn't much of the series left?' she says.

'Am I the only one or were there others?' He doesn't answer. He wants to be straight. He wants to be crooked, by hook or by crook, a crook, stealing her cherry.

'Surely I've won by now?' she says.

'I don't know,' he says, losing sense of time. He moves his arm away, replaces it with armour.

He remembers, finally 'There's two weeks left and there's only you now. They do the whole thing, that 'Mirror Mirror on the wall, don't look now it's Davina McCall.'

'My life isn't reality,' she says.

'Well is it right now,' he says.

'Do I have to eat live bugs?' she says 'or just gather berries and frolick about with rabbits?'

'I'm not sure,' he searches his pockets. 'I think there was a script somewhere.'

Improvise says a voice.

'There must be other cameras,' says the girl. 'Perhaps you are the bonus housemate,' she continues. 'They've planted you here. Perhaps we have to stay in here together for the next two weeks.' Love's young dream.

He cuts off his fingernails with his dagger.

Why is he the only one with a weapon?

She has no pockets, not in her bodice of course, not in her leggings. There is a black drawstring bag on the picnic mat. She picks it up and looks into it. There is a sewing kit. Great, she can needle him until his love dies.

'It's not all about me,' she says.

Aha! he says.

'You've done it,' he says, you've won the prize!

They all come out then, camera operators, boom operators, the key grips and the producer.

'You've said the magic words,' they tell her.

'What's the prize?' she asks.

'A red apple,' they say, 'now you're ready and cleared for takeoff.'

In the hubbub she loses the Huntsman, she thinks she sees him slinking out of the forest like a wolf.

She sits down among the picnic things, observes a wasp in the apple, takes a sip of the warm cider. It tastes of the Huntsman. Her tattoos itch.

A shadow fall over her; the evil stepmother straight from casting.

'May I?' says the evil stepmother, taking one of the triangular cucumber sandwiches and demolishing it with one bite.

'I found your performance really moving. It had us captivated for weeks,' she tells the girl 'but all these things have their season I suppose. Reality is dead in the water now they say. This is the last series.'

The girl looks glum, her plum lips pouting.

'What will you do now?' the stepmother asks her.

'Whatever I was doing before.'

'I doubt that very much,' replies the stepmother, lending a touch of the soap opera to the script. All they need now is a teenage pregnancy, a misunderstanding, a murder and an explosion at the pub. She wonders when real life is really going to begin. She wishes the Huntsman had made love to her but she guesses there will be time for all of that in due course.

'Do you think I will ever see him again?' The girl asks the evil stepmother.

'I doubt that very much,' she says again. Perhaps she's only paid for the one line.

The stepmother steps away. She purloins the sewing kit. She plans to make a voodoo doll to use in conjunction with her 3D-HD 46 inch LCD screen mirror.

The girl eats the apple, all of it, even the wasp. She feels his sting inside her chest and his voice reverbrates round the caverns of her

lungs. 'Revenge! Revenge! She is puzzled because she feels only love. Love with a bite.

The woods are empty now, soundless, soundbiteless. The TV crew have gone, late for a production meeting for the next big thing.

The girl-woman strides back out of the woods in her Doc Martens. Time too runs backwards, always nostalgia, like the discarded film strip kisses in Cinema Paradiso. The TV crew have gathered the real reel moments from the forest floor. She wonders if the Huntsman will remember, whether he will miss her. But he needn't, she will search for him and put her lips on his so he can take away the sting. But she will miss the woods, now that she can never return. What she will remember most of all isn't the rose red kisses or the cider or the apples, it is the white bark, the stripped clean gleaming of the silver birch, the soft continual rustling of leaves.

