

Red Riding Hood

“Grandma!” shouted Red Riding Hood through the letter-box, “Grandma! Are you there?” Hearing no reply, she put her eyes to the letter-box and squinted in. There was a light on inside, and a trail of abandoned post and newspapers scattered along the floor of the hallway. From somewhere, there came the sound of a radio, a monotonous drone interspersed with tinny laughter.

“Grandma!” she shouted one more time, simultaneously pressing the bell and knocking on the door. The noise brought old Mr Wood to life in the flat opposite. He opened the door a crack, careful to keep it on the chain, and peered out.

“What do you want, you wee vandal, making all that noise?” he demanded shrilly. “I’ve called the police, they’re on their way, ken, you’d better be off! Skedaddle!”

Red Riding Hood stood up and went over to his door. “It’s me, Red Riding Hood, Mr Wood. You know, Mrs Hood’s grand-daughter.”

He peered at her suspiciously, then relented. “Aye well, don’t make so much noise, or I’ll get the constable.” With which helpful words, he slammed the door and could be heard muttering to himself as he went back to sit in front of the tv racing from Catterick.

Red Riding Hood decided it was time to go in. She lifted the door-mat, pulled out the key that was hidden there for security reasons, and unlocked the door, all the while calling out to her grandmother - she didn’t want to give her a heart-attack.

The air in the flat was almost unbreathable. The central heating was on full-blast, despite the fact that it was a hot summer’s day outside, and - in case of chills - a huge fan-heater was pumping out a Saharan blast of warm dry air. Red Riding Hood looked first in the kitchen, where the radio was playing. As usual, an unappetising pile of dirty dishes, half-empty cat-food tins and half-full bottles of milk cluttered every available space, while a couple of bluebottles zipped about, feeling that they’d died and gone to heaven. The fridge-door stood ajar, and in the sink the cold tap dripped steadily into an overflowing pot of chip-fat. Amidst this scene of abandonment, the radio chattered on inanely; the girl sighed and switched it off. She peered next door into the living-room, where Grandma’s vile cat Gordon - also known as Gorgon - stared at her with an eye of evil, drew back its lips in a silent snarl, then tested its claws on the frayed carpet. No sign of Grandma there.

That only left the bathroom or the bedroom. Bedroom first - finding her grandmother in the bathroom did not even bear thinking about. Quietly calling out a warning, Red Riding Hood gently pushed back the door and poked her head round. And then pulled it back very quickly indeed.

In that one brief second, she had glimpsed an intimate scene. Grandmother Hood was in bed, snoring noisily. The curtains were half-drawn, letting the afternoon light cast a beam upon her wrinkled old face. Also in the bed was a very hairy individual, also sleeping the sleep of the just, his naked torso and legs draped unceremoniously across Grandma’s sleeping form. Fortunately, the middle part of his body was half-covered by a sheet, which had come detached from the rest of the bedclothes and had coiled itself around the two sleepers. Grandma had always favoured lime green sheets and orange blankets: the effect was startling.

At first, Red Riding Hood thought the very worst - here was her grandmother attacked by a wolf and eaten - you heard about these things. She was reaching for her mobile to make that emergency call, when she remembered that there was a big smile on Grandma’s lips, and that there was no sign of blood. She put her head round the door again, very cautiously. Yes, Grandma was smiling in her sleep, and

what's more, her left hand was gently tousling the prodigious mane of the young man - for young man it was, not a wolf at all. On the bedside cabinet was a candle still flickering weakly, a teaspoon that looked as if it had been too close to the candle, and a few small plastic sachets, all empty. On the floor, two empty bottles of rum.

This was not good. "Grandma," said Red Riding Hood loudly and sharply. There was no reaction, so she said it again, more loudly and sharply. Her grandmother's good eye opened and fixed itself upon the girl. There was a pause, then: "Wha?" she enquired.

"Grandma, it's me, Red Riding Hood," whispered the girl as clearly as she dared, not wanting to wake up the other figure in the bed. "Are you all right?"

Grandma stirred a bit, smiled, then closed her eye again. "Whatever," was her sole comment.

Shocked, the girl entered the room and went to sit on the chair beside the bed, the one on which Grandma's most intimate articles of clothing - some of considerable antiquity, others of considerable girth - had clearly been thrown very carelessly indeed. She shook her grandmother's shoulder gently. "Grandma, grandma," she called. "Wake up!"

At this disturbance, the young man stirred and opened his eyes; seeing Red Riding Hood, he yawned, sat up, grabbed the stray sheet, and shimmied off into the bathroom, where he could be heard almost immediately retching and coughing violently.

Crossly, Grandma sat up and scowled at her youngest grand-daughter. "What do you want?" she demanded. "Where are my spectacles?"

"It's Sunday, Grandma, you remember?"

"Sunday, yeah - duh. Well, I know it's Sunday, what of it?"

"Sunday's when I come and visit you and we have a nice cup of tea together. Look, I've brought some home-made cake, you always like that."

"Well, not today, sucker," said Grandma rudely. "I've got a visitor already, and do I want any of your cake? Not!"

"Who is that man?" asked Red Riding Hood, in a low voice, pointing in the direction of the bathroom, where the coughing and gagging had given way to the sound of Grandma's power shower, the one she needed because her hip was so bad, and that the Council had put in at great expense.

A dreamy look appeared on her grandmother's face. "That's Wolfgang," she said, "my German Man of Steel. We found each other down at Aldi. Our eyes met over the Multi-Purpose Fatless Chicken Fryers at only £14.99 - it was just one of those moments. He was - you know, like, you know. I was - like - you know. German Steel, yeah"

"You mean you've been ... asleep with that man?" whispered Red Riding Hood, scandalised.

"Well - duh!" was Grandma's pithy comment.

The girl looked at her grandmother, then at the shambles of the bedroom. "And you've been drinking and doing drugs, haven't you?"

"Duh!" was once again Grandma's only response.

"But he's far too young for you!"

"Whatever."

There was a long pause. In the bathroom, against the throbbing background of the shower, Wolfgang the German Steel was singing some banal ditty about *Die Liebe*, at the sound of which Grandma closed her eyes and swayed about on the pillows in time to the song, joining in on the chorus - "*Ach die Liebe...* Here," she said

suddenly, without bothering to open her eyes, “you haven’t got any E, have you? Or some uppers or something?”

“No, Grandma,” said Red Riding Hood bitterly, “just a nice banana and date cake. Which I made myself, specially for you.”

“Like I’m grateful - not!” remarked Grandma, pursing her lips.

Red Riding Hood made up her mind. “He’s got to go, Grandma,” she said. “I can’t let him stay here. He’ll take all your money, and then clear off.”

“Well - duh!” said Grandma contemptuously, “Wolfgang can do anything he wants.” She hugged herself at some memory, doubtless vile and lacking in propriety. “I told him that, and that’s just what he did.”

“Does he know how old you are, and how little money you’ve got?” demanded her grand-daughter, a little too rudely.

Grandma opened her eyes and peered at the girl. “What a nasty little girl, you are,” she said in a shocked tone. “I’m a seventy-six year old widow, and you sit there shouting at me and telling me off.” A whine crept into her voice. “Do you know how difficult it is for me to get out and about these days? I never see anyone from one day to the next, except down at the Lunch Club on Thursdays. You’d deny me this one little pleasure?” A tear or two coursed down her cheek.

Red Riding Hood was unmoved. “This month it’s Wolfgang, two months ago it was that Italian - what was his name?”

“Lupino,” said Grandma with a sigh of remembrance. “The Italian Stallion”

“The time before that - Christmas, wasn’t it - it was that nasty bloke with the pointy ears - what was his name?”

“Can’t even remember his name,” said Grandma nonchalantly.

“Luc Garou, that was it, the little French guy,” remembered the girl.

“Not so little,” recalled Grandma *à propos* of nothing.

“And who was that first one, last year - the one my dad had to chase off?”

“Oh!” exclaimed Grandma, clutching at her bosom, “Oh, he was a nasty piece of work, I’ll tell you. Wasn’t even Spanish, like he’d said - he came from Kilmarnock. Made off with your grandad’s medals - all of them, left me with nothing.”

“Yes, but they’re all the same, Grandma,” said Red Riding Hood in exasperation. “You pick them up at Lidl -”

“Aldi,” corrected her grandmother.

“- at Aldi -”

“Or Asda sometimes,” interjected Mrs Hood in a self-satisfied manner. “When I can afford it.”

“- and bring them home, and they make off with your pension and anything else they can lay their paws on.”

“Not all of them,” muttered Grandma. She brightened up. “Look, here’s Wolfgang coming back! *Willkommen, Wolfgang!*” she exclaimed, opening her arms wide, and showing more of her bosom than a grand-daughter could possibly cope with. In the doorway, steaming and hollow-eyed, stood the German. He bowed in formal manner towards Red Riding Hood, who glared at him; then he made his way gracefully to the bed where he sat, his brown and hairy limbs showing, cutting a line of cocaine on Grandma’s hand-held mirror. In a flash, Grandma cuddled up to him and soon the two were lost again in their own world.

Red Riding Hood pulled out her mobile, and called her dad. In fifteen minutes he was there, in his 4x4 Forestry truck. As was usual on these occasions, he brought his axe.