

A photograph of a forest path with tall trees and ferns. The path is made of dark gravel and leads into a dense forest of tall, thin trees. The ground is covered with lush green ferns and other vegetation. The lighting is soft and natural, creating a serene atmosphere.

Howl

A Journey of Transformation
A short Story & Guided Journal

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About

Howl includes a short horror-ish story. It's about one person's journey to becoming their whole self instead of being what society dictates they must be.

There are journaling prompts and space to write at the end.

Howl

I paused on the threshold, letting the basket of food swing and knock against the door. The forest spread out before me, dark, green and endless as it always had been. I was taking supplies to grandma's house like I had done many times before, but today was different. Today would be the last time. The last time I saw grandma or my parents or anything familiar to me.

Only I didn't know that yet. Or maybe I did. Somewhere deep inside I did and that's why I paused. Lingered on the threshold, the in-between place of the doorway. Not quite part of the life I knew. Not quite part of the one that waited. I took a deep breath, a quick glance at my mom, and launched myself out the door and into the forest.

My story is probably one you've heard many times, but you probably haven't heard me tell it. It's time to get a few things straight, because the wolf and I seemed to have gotten the short end of the stick. Forever to be treated like a couple of trophies for the mantle piece.

My name is Holly, but everyone knows me as Red. This is a story of resurrection. Not because I was dead, but because before I left the cottage on that last day, I'd never fully lived. This is the resurrection of parts of myself that had been felled like tall pines by the Wood Cutter's axe.

The sun streamed through the trees glinting off dust, bugs and leaves. The trail cut a narrow twisting path around rocks and roots. The air tasted of earth, moss and change. I had walked this path so many times I no longer bothered to watch where I was going. I could walk it with my eyes closed, In away I always had. I didn't see the wild flowers, birds nests or rabbits. I kept me head down and hurried through the woods.

The woods were a dangerous place. My parents reminded me about the dangers each time I went to grandma's house. Keep safe. Stick to the path. Beware of wolves.

I ran through the woods as if wolves were nipping at my heels. Basket banging harshly against my thigh. Red cloak streaming behind me. I ran. Huffing and puffing straight into a woman kneeling at the edge of the path. Cloak tangled. Basket spilled. Head throbbing.

“Let me help you.” She pulled the basket toward her and began picking up the spilled contents. “Are you alright?”

“What were you doing in kneeling in the path?” I touched my forehead. No bumps. No blood. “I guess I’m fine.”

“Collecting flowers. Do you always run like that?”

“The woods are dangerous.”

“No. Not the woods, but sometimes the things in them are.”

I frowned. It seemed like a strange thing to say. “I need to get going.” I picked up the basket and checked that nothing was missing. “My grandma is waiting for me.”

“I bet she would like some flowers. There are some lovely blue ones just over there.” She pointed into the trees.

“I’m not supposed to leave the path.” I looked at the flowers she was holding and imagined grandma’s smile.

“It’s fine as long as you can still see the path.” She moved toward the flowers.

Was she right? Was there a difference in being on the path or off if you could still see it? I couldn't get lost if I could see the path. Still I hesitated. Disobeying, even in a small way, felt huge. Rebellious. A kind of danger of it's own.

"Your grandma will love these ones." she called from the flower patch. She watched me carefully. When I didn't move she added. "The wolves don't care if you're on the path."

It was one of those obvious truths that you never thought about until someone smacked you with it, then you wondered why you never realized it before. There was nothing along the path to stop wolves. It was just dirt. So I picked flowers.

Wild flowers draped over the edge of my basket and scented the air around me and I continued to grandma's house. I didn't run. I kept my eyes open, scanning the woods, noticing things I'd never noticed before.

The woman's words echoed through my head as I reached the deepest darkest part of the forest. There was no magic barrier keeping wolves from the path. The path could only keep me from getting lost on my way to grandma's house. Had I ever seen a wolf in the woods? The only wolves I'd ever seen were draped across the back of a hunter's horse. It hadn't looked dangerous at all.

The familiar thwack of the wood cutter's axe filled the air. He had been cutting wood along this stretch of the path all season leaving a bright sunlit hole in the middle of the forest. He paused his work and smiled when he saw me. A smile that stretched across his lined face and tangled around me. I smiled back even though the sight of him didn't make me feel like smiling. Smiling was normal. Smiling was expected. He was my entire future. One I had never questioned before.

Movement at the edge of the clearing caught my attention and I picked up my pace. Was it a wolf? Did it matter? For the moment I could put a little space between myself and the future that had been laid out for me. I stepped into the cool shadow of the uncut wood and left that future toiling in the sun.

"He seems like a nice man." The woman emerged from the shadow of a hemlock.

I shrugged in response. "How did you get ahead of me?"

“This path isn’t the only way through the woods. This path isn’t even the quickest way to your grandma’s house.”

“I don’t know of any other paths.” I had been traveling this path for as long as grandma had lived deep in the woods. “This is the path my mother taught me and her mother taught her.”

“Yes. It’s a good path. A safe one as far as winding paths through dark woods go. But that doesn’t make it the only path.”

We walked in silence for a few moments as I thought about this. Surely if there were a faster way to grandma’s someone would’ve told me. Wouldn’t it be better for me to get supplies to her as quickly as I could. She lived so far into the wood. Which come to think of it was a strange place for an old women to live alone.

“If we cut through the woods here, there is a pond perfect for swimming.”

“I don’t have time for swimming. I’ve got to get this basket to grandma and be home before dark.”

“Your grandma’s cottage is a short distance on the other side of the pond.”

“How do you know where her cottage is?”

“I have been there many times and this is the shortest way. If you trust yourself enough to leave that path.” She walked off through the trees without looking back.

“How could someone I’d never seen before know these woods better than I did? I grew up in this forest. I looked down at the path stretching before me. I grew up on this path. This narrow strip of bare earth wound through a forest like a binding thread. The wolves could walk the path just as easily as I did. How many times had I been told I couldn’t do something because it was dangerous or inappropriate? Too many times.

Stick to the path. Keep to your place. I leaped off the path and hurried to catch up with the woman.

The pond was smooth and clear like glass. We sat at the edge of the water and peeled our shoes and stockings off. The cool water wrapped itself around my calves. I should’ve been doing this all summer I thought. Neither of us spoke. There was no need. Words would muddy the water.

Too soon the sun began to sink and I knew I should be going. I felt a moment of sadness as I put my shoes back on. Only a moments worth, because I knew this pond now and I could come back again.

“The cottage is just through the trees there.” The woman pointed. She made no move to get up and I envied her. Her time must have been her own. My time belonged to everyone, but me. I thanked her and set out again feeling refreshed. Pulsing with this new way of seeing.

“Grandma!” I called pushing through the cottage door. Fading sun trickled in through the small windows leaving most of the room in shadow. “I brought bread and jam.”

“In here dear.” Grandma’s soft voice floated from the darkness of her bedroom.

“Have you eaten today?” I took the food from the basket, sliced the bread and spread a thick layer of jam on the slices.

I placed the slices on a plate and carried them into the bedroom. The room was dark and smelled of decay. I dug matches out of my pocket and lit a small candle. The soft light pushed back the shadows and gently illuminated my grandma. She looked strange in the dim light, formed mostly of shadow and worn blankets.

“Come closer dear.” She whispered. I picked up the candle and moved closer to the bed. The light fell across her revealing a hollow shrunken face.

“Grandma, you don’t look well.” I set the candle on the night stand. A thin bony hand shot out from under the blankets grabbing me by the wrist.

“Come closer child.” She rasped pulling me down toward her.

“What big eyes you have.” Her eyes seemed to grow impossibly wide. The whites tinted yellow with age and sickness. She continued to pull me toward her. Her mouth gaping open as she struggled to breath. “What big teeth you have.” I tried to pull away.

“Don’t resist.” She panted. Breath smelling of rot and decay. “We always end this way.”

I saw my life reflected in her dimming eyes. From childhood to old age. One stage flowing uneventfully into the other arriving at the moment I would be cast aside in a forgotten cottage deep in the woods.

I ripped my arm away from her in horror. This couldn’t be the life that waited for me. Could it? I thought of my mother and knew this was the future waiting for her. It was the only path for women in the village. How many grandmother huts littered the forest? I didn’t know. Didn’t want to know.

There was a knock at the door. I thought about the woman I met. I flung the door open hoping to find help standing there. It wasn't her. Instead the Wood Cutter filled the doorway his axe resting on his shoulder.

"Hello Holly. I heard howling in the woods and came to walk you back to the village." He smiled warmly.

While I didn't relish the idea of him walking me home, it reminded me of our betrothal, I was glad he was here now. "I think there's something wrong with my grandma." I stepped back and let him in.

"Your grandma?" He leaned his axe against the wall. "What do you mean?"

"She is acting strangely. She tried to hurt me."

"Holly, your grandma is gone. Gone with all the other grandmas."

"No. She is in her bed." I rushed into my grandma's room certain she would be tucked in bed. The bed was neatly made and empty. "I don't understand."

“Come with me back to the village. It isn't your time to be here yet.” His eyebrows furrowed with concern. “Let me take you home. A nice cup of your mother's tea and you'll feel like yourself again.”

His words swirled through my head. I wasn't the one acting strangely. Was I? I opened my mouth to tell him so as a loud howl cut me off. The wolves were right outside the door.

The Wood Cutter looked at me and then shook his head. I followed his gaze to my hand hovering in the air inches from the door. Stared at it as if it was some strange thing and not a well known part of me. With a will not my own, I flung the door open. No wolf stood there. No terrible flash of teeth. Only the woman I had met on my walk.

Entering the cabin with a smile sharper than any teeth I had ever seen, she placed herself between the Wood Cutter and his axe. As she stood there smiling, eyes never looking away from him, something rippled underneath her skin. Bones cracked. I watched, unblinking, in horror or amazement. I can not tell you which as the woman's body reformed itself into a large wolf.

“Is this what you want?” The Wood Cutter’s voice was cold. “To stay cursed like her? Kill her and be free of this wildness. Return to the village with me and live a proper life.”

His words washed over me like the empty promises they were. The reason for the resistance I had felt at marrying, the sadness that hung at my mother’s throat, became crystal clear. Everything in our lives was about controlling us. About keeping the wild beast within at bay. That was no life, but what was freedom like? Did I dare to find out?

I stepped closer to the wolf. The smell of fresh turned earth and wild flowers drifted from her silky fur. It tugged at some longing deep inside me. Did I wish to wait until I had grown old and useless to know myself?

My decision was instant and bone deep. With it came the shedding of my skin and a look of shock on the Wood Cutter’s face as I sank my new sharp teeth into his throat. Tasting his blood before he could ever taste mine.

Journeys of Transformation

We stand on the threshold of something new over and over again in life. New journeys and new paths. New forests to navigate.

We exist in a constant state of transformation, even when it seems like nothing is happening at all. Some transformations are under the surface.

The rest of this book is for journaling. Use the journaling prompts or brain dump anything that came up for you while reading this short story or while knitting.

Prompts

The following prompts, activities, questions and journaling space is only a jumping off point.

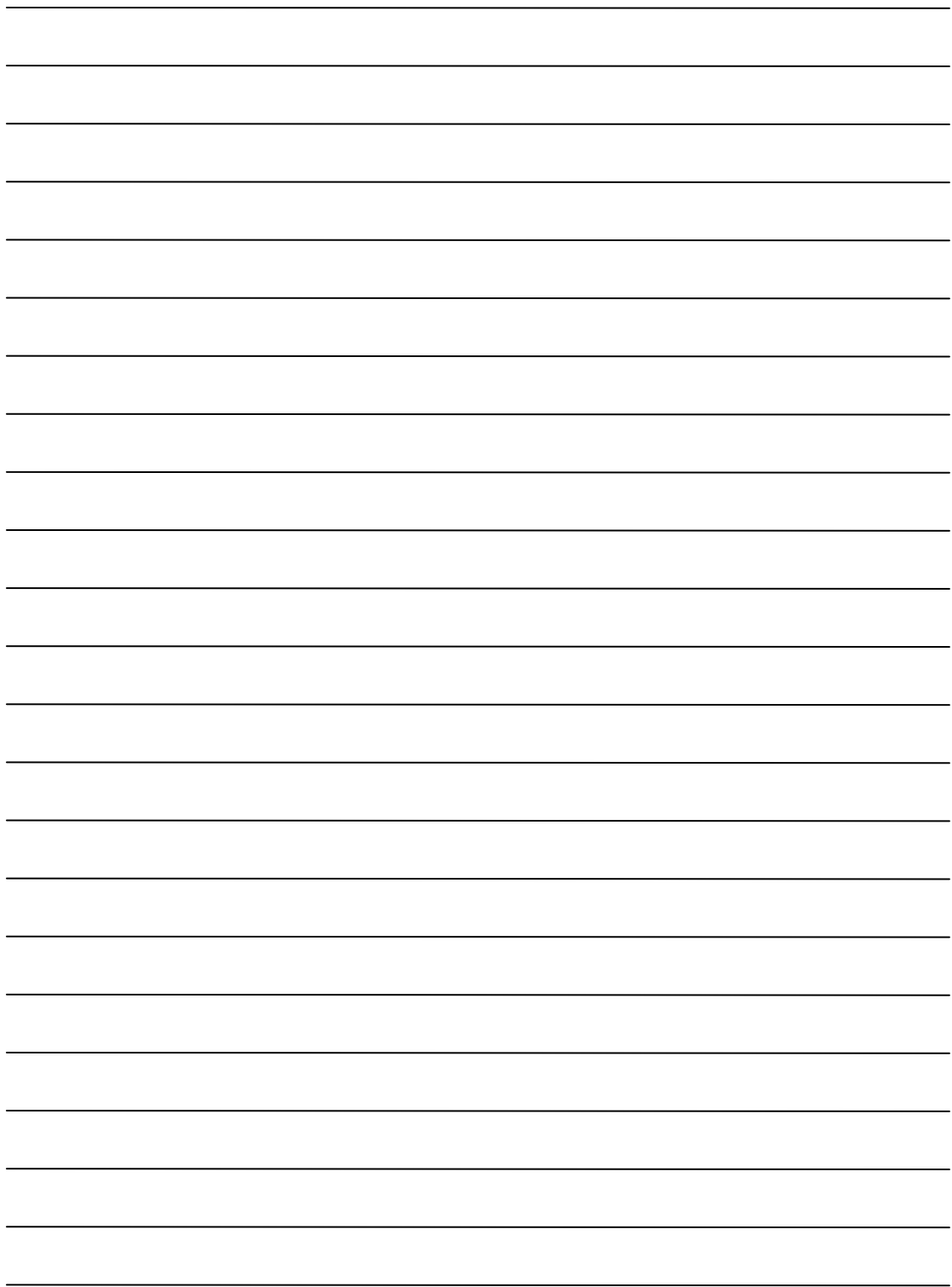
Write your own questions. Write about anything that popped into your head while reading this short story. Write about any point in your life you stood at the threshold of something.

Map your Inner Forest

Draw or collage your own symbolic “forest”—the inner terrain you must travel. Label the fears, obstacles, and guides you find there.

Go outside and howl. Literally. Or speak a truth you've been hiding, even if it's just whispered.

Create a playlist. Write down the lyrics. Journal about why you chose them.



Go on a walk and look for symbols that remind you of Red, the Wolf, the forest, or your own transformation. Photograph, sketch write about them. *(you don't have to be an artist for this. be messy. be imperfect.)*

