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The Woman in the Wood

Written by Lesley Pearse

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The Woman in the Wood

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To my beautiful new granddaughter,
Alicia Rose McDonald, born 30 December 2016,
a little sister for Harley and Sienna.

I

West London, 1960

Maisy was woken by a piercing scream. Startled, she sat up in bed, assuming the sound was coming from the street. But then she heard the cry for a second time and realized it was coming from inside the house. It was her mother.

She rushed to her bedroom door and out on to the landing, then paused when she heard her father's voice travelling up from the floor below.

'Be quiet, Lily. You'll wake the twins and frighten them. I'm doing this for your own good.'

Maisy's twin brother Duncan came out of his room and joined her at the top of the stairs. 'What's going on?' he whispered.

Maisy put a finger to her lips to silence him and held his arm so he wouldn't run down the stairs. Their father, Alastair Mitcham, was a stern man who didn't take kindly to any interference.

'I don't want to go there! I'll get better here in my own home,' Lily Mitcham cried out. 'Don't make me go, Alastair!'

The pitiful pleading brought tears to both Maisy and Duncan's eyes, but they were only fifteen and a little afraid of their father, and they simply didn't know what to do.

'How many times have I tried to get professional help

for you? Each time you act the same way,' Alastair said, and the children heard the weariness and resignation in his voice and exchanged anxious looks. 'You aren't getting better; year by year you get worse. When did you last agree to go out of the house? I think that was two summers ago. You haven't even been downstairs for over a year.'

'But my back and legs . . .' she protested.

Alastair cut her short. 'There is nothing wrong with your back *or* legs, and well you know it. You can't hide behind a riding accident from some twelve years ago any longer. I'm sick of this, Lily. The only way I know to get you to face up to what really ails you is to take you to this place. Now, calm down, or I'll get the nurse who's waiting outside in the ambulance to come in and give you a shot of something.'

Maisy had heard enough. Despite her fear of her father and reluctance to drag her brother into trouble with her, she caught hold of his hand and pulled him to the stairs. Encouraged by her bravery, Duncan didn't try to pull back.

'Why are you sending Mother away?' Maisy asked when she was just a few steps above the first-floor landing.

Her father wheeled round. He was fully dressed in a suit and clearly hadn't heard them coming on their bare feet.

'This is nothing to do with you,' he snapped. 'Get back to bed, both of you.'

'She's our mother, so it has everything to do with us,' Maisy retorted. 'Where are you sending her? And why in the middle of the night? So the neighbours won't know? Or did you hope we wouldn't wake and you could make out she'd gone to stay with a relative for a holiday?'

It was the first time Maisy had ever stood up to her father. While he wasn't a violent man, he was so stern and forbidding that she and Duncan always did as he said. Her heart was racing and she was trembling, but even so she was determined to stick up for her mother.

'Don't let him send me away to an asylum,' their mother whimpered. 'It's cruel and horrible. I want to stay here.'

Shocked as she was to hear of her father's plans, when Maisy looked at her mother she realized why he was resorting to such drastic measures. Since she hadn't seen her mother's face clearly for many weeks, she hadn't been aware how much worse she had become. Her eyes were almost popping out of her head, and she was now so thin that the yellowish skin on her face appeared to be stretched over her cheekbones, with blue veins standing out on her forehead like thick crayon marks. Her brown hair was lank and greasy and her nightgown was very grubby. It was absolutely clear she needed help.

Right from when they were small children the twins had grown used to their mother being in bed most of the time. They had always been taken to school by someone else and she never took them for a day at the seaside, a picnic or even a visit to a park. It was all they knew and so they had accepted her claim that it was due to a riding accident.

'Father, don't do this,' Duncan said.

Still holding their mother's arm tightly, he turned to face them. 'I have to. She is ill. I never wanted you to know this, but she has been steadily getting worse and I'm afraid of what she will do. Just a few days ago she tried to drink some poison. Thankfully, Betty caught her just as she was

about to swallow it and saved her life. But it doesn't bear thinking about what might have happened.'

Their mother tried to escape from her husband's grip, the expression on her face like a savage animal, teeth bared. Maisy instinctively took a step back, and Duncan took her hand.

'OK, Father,' he said, looking fearfully at his mother. 'But shall I go out and ask the nurse to come in to help?'

'Thank you, son, that would be best. Maisy, will you get your mother's dressing gown and slippers? She was struggling too much for me to hold them.'

A few minutes later the twins watched as the stout, middle-aged nurse, who had been waiting outside in the private ambulance, injected their mother with a sedative.

The effect was almost instantaneous. Lily stopped struggling and relaxed, and a vacant look came to her face. Alastair helped his wife into her dressing gown and put the slippers on her feet. 'That's better,' he said, kissing her cheek, a gesture that reassured the twins he really did have their mother's best interests at heart. 'Now, children, why don't you say goodbye to your mother and go back to bed? Whatever she may have said, she will be looked after properly, I assure you. It's a private home offering the best care available. Now I'm going to follow the ambulance in my car, and it will probably be a few hours before I get back. But don't worry, Betty will be in at breakfast time as usual.'

They watched from the sitting room window as the nurse helped their mother into the back of the ambulance. Their father started up his car and waited for the ambulance to move.

For a moment the twins said nothing, just stood at the window in the dark room like two statues.

Although no one had ever said openly that their mother was mentally ill, of late the twins had suspected there was something more to her mysterious illness than a riding accident from long ago. Everything about their home was different to other people's. Their parents slept in separate rooms, their mother had all her meals in hers, and sometimes they heard the sound of breaking plates and shouting. Betty the housekeeper always claimed their mother had dropped something, just as she always covered any strange noises by saying it was because she was in pain. Now it was all falling into place.

'That was horrible,' Duncan said eventually, his voice trembling. 'Not just for Mother, but for Father too. Still, I'm sure it's for the best. Shall we make some hot milk and then go back to bed? It's only half past two.'

'I never knew she was that bad,' Maisy said as they went down to the kitchen. 'I mean, I know she's always been poorly and a bit strange too, but I never thought she was . . .' She paused.

'Mad?' Duncan said. 'Neither did I, but then we've never known any different, have we? I'm sure they'll make her better; everything will be all right.'

Maisy poured some milk into a saucepan and lit the gas under it. Her brother was always the optimistic one, she thought to herself. She tended to be the opposite.

They looked alike, inasmuch as both had thick blond hair and deep blue eyes. But Duncan was taller than her, probably five feet six, while she was five three. He had a square face and a strong jaw, while Maisy's face was heart-shaped,

with a dimple in her chin. She tanned easily to a golden brown while her brother was prone to freckles.

Their large, semi-detached home was in London's Holland Park. It had four floors, including the basement. It had last been decorated in Edwardian times, and though it must have been lovely then, it had grown very shabby over the years, and after the war decorating materials were hard to come by. Betty had told Maisy she'd overheard their father saying he wanted to sell it as it was too big and expensive to run. Betty thought it would be best converted into flats as so many other big houses in the area had been. The housekeeper had an opinion about everything, including that their mother was an attention seeker.

Because of the way things were at home, neither Duncan nor Maisy ever attempted to bring school friends back. They knew it would be embarrassing with a mother in bed all the time and a father who, when he was there, shut himself up in his study. Consequently they rarely got invited to anyone else's home. Their world was a very small one. A private school just the other side of the park, visits to the library and an occasional treat of the cinema. Fortunately they were close friends, and didn't think they needed anyone else.

They just had one close relative, Violet Mitcham, their paternal grandmother. She was a widow and lived in the New Forest, and she was as chilly as her only son. She only came to London to see them all once every couple of years. According to Betty she had never approved of Lily because she was so 'weak'.

The twins had very good memories of Grandmother Goldney, Lily's mother. They had been born in January

1945 in her house in Tenterden in Kent, where their mother had been living on and off for much of the war. Betty came from the town as well, and when they all returned to their London home Betty came with them as housekeeper. They went back to Tenterden for a month every August, but when they were eight Grandmother Goldie, as they had called her, died of pneumonia.

Their father had worked for the Foreign Office all his life. It was a reserved occupation during the war, so he didn't have to join up, but it took him away from home a great deal, which was why their mother spent so much time in Kent and the twins were born there. He never talked about what his job entailed, and though Duncan liked to pretend he was a spy, Betty pooh-poohed that notion and said he just did clerical work.

'What will happen now, do you suppose?' Duncan asked, bringing Maisy back to the present by pointing to the milk which was almost boiling. 'Do you think we'll just carry on the same?'

'Why would it be any different?' Maisy asked. She didn't want to be mean about their mother, but it wasn't as if she had ever done anything for them. 'For weeks now she's been asleep every time we went into her room. Looking back, I wonder if she was pretending to sleep because she didn't want to talk to us.'

'But why? And if it's true, how do you suppose she got like that?'

'I think if I was married to a man like Father I'd hide away,' Maisy said, semi-seriously. 'Let's face it, he's no fun. Have you ever heard him laugh? Whistle a tune, dance, crack a joke?'

‘Now you mention it, I haven’t. But let’s go back to bed now. We’ve still got to go to school tomorrow.’

‘Why don’t we play truant for once?’ Maisy suggested. ‘We could go up to the West End and look in the shops, even go to the pictures in the afternoon to see something Father wouldn’t approve of.’

‘He said he was coming back here after taking Mother to that place. He might not go to work afterwards. I don’t think we’d better.’

Maisy pouted. ‘You’re such a goody-goody. Watch out or you might end up like him.’

‘So he actually took her to that place, then?’ Betty said at breakfast later that morning. The twins hadn’t needed to tell her; Father had left her a note explaining. ‘I’ve been telling him for months that she needed real help, but he wouldn’t listen until that business with the poison.’

The twins had mixed views on Betty. She was an attractive woman in her early forties with rich auburn hair and a voluptuous figure. She had a clear complexion and not even a trace of wrinkles around her eyes. As she’d been a big part of their lives since as far back as they could remember, they saw her like an aunt rather than a housekeeper, but in the last couple of years they had got the idea she saw herself as mistress of the house. She took liberties. They’d seen her wearing clothes that belonged to their mother, she ordered Maisy and Duncan about as if she were one of their parents, and she was far too familiar with their father. It crossed Maisy’s mind she might have designs on him and that was why she seemed pleased he’d finally put their

mother in this home, but she wasn't going to tell Duncan what she thought. It would upset him.

Still, she couldn't resist a sly dig at Betty. 'You'll have a lot less to do now, won't you? Though judging by the state Mother was in earlier today, maybe you haven't been checking on her much lately?'

'You cheeky little baggage,' Betty retorted. 'This is a big house to look after, and just cooking and doing the washing and ironing for you two kids and Mr Mitcham is a full-time job. I can't force your mother to eat or wash herself and change her nightdress. You have no idea how difficult she can be.'

'Then it's as well she's gone somewhere where the staff are used to such problems,' Maisy said airily. 'By the way, isn't that one of Mother's cardigans you're wearing?'

She left the kitchen without waiting for Betty's reply. She thought she would mention it to her father in the evening. He must have gone straight to his office that morning as he hadn't been home. But first she thought she'd just nip upstairs and have one more go at persuading Duncan to play truant today.

In the days that followed, everything seemed slightly off centre to the twins. There was a calmer atmosphere and Father was more attentive to them, inasmuch as he quizzed them daily about their schoolwork. Betty was more cheerful, making them special meals and not complaining about anything for a change. But it was worrying, as if something bad was expected any day.

On the Friday afternoon two weeks later, the twins arrived home from school to find their father already

there, talking on the telephone in his study, two suitcases standing in the hall.

‘Yes, they’re here now. We’ll leave just as soon as they’ve changed out of their school uniforms and had some tea. I should be there by eight at the latest,’ they heard him say.

Next week was the start of the Easter holidays, and they looked at one another in surprise. It seemed their father was taking them away somewhere.

He put down the receiver and came out into the hall. ‘I expect you heard what I was saying on the telephone. I’m taking you down to Nightingales and you need to get a move on. Go to it.’

The twins didn’t rush. They weren’t thrilled to be going to Nightingales, Grandmother Mitcham’s home. Maisy and Duncan hadn’t been there since they were five or six, and the only image of it which had stayed in their minds was of the grumpy old lady who didn’t really want to see them.

‘It might be better now we’re older,’ said Duncan, ever the optimist.

‘Pigs might fly,’ Maisy said. ‘Why two suitcases, though, if we’re only going for a short visit?’

‘Perhaps it’s forever,’ Duncan said and grinned maliciously.

It wasn’t until they were in the back of the car and out of London that their father spoke to them again.

‘I have decided that you must stay with your grandmother on a semi-permanent basis. I’m not impressed with your school in Holland Park, so I plan to find somewhere better local to your grandmother. That will take a

little time, so for now you'll be having a holiday. On top of the question of your education, I'm thinking of selling the house and buying something smaller. If I can find the right school with good teachers, you two will go on to university.'

The twins exchanged horrified glances. It sounded as if they were being shipped off in the same way as their mother.

'I'm aware my mother isn't used to children, and maybe you think this will be awful for you,' he added, his voice softer now, as if he'd picked up on their horror. 'But it won't be. You'll be in the care of Janice the housekeeper, who I assure you is a good, kind woman. Also, Nightingales is beautiful and you'll be able to explore the New Forest and meet other young people. I think you can be very much happier there than you have been in London.'

When the twins didn't respond, he spoke again. 'I know it was a nasty shock about your mother and now this is a second one. But I really am trying to do the best for you, so please give it a try.'

'Yes, Father,' the twins said dutifully in unison, without conviction.

It began to rain soon after that and the sky grew dark. The twins dozed a little and only woke up properly when the car bumped on uneven ground. It was too dark to see where they were.

'Are we there?' Duncan asked.

'Yes, this is the lane to your grandmother's house. It's high time it was asphalted. There's no street light either.'

The car headlights picked up the sign 'Nightingales' on a wooden gate set in a picket fence. Some twenty or thirty

yards back from the gate was the house, but all they could see of it in the dark was a well-lit porch and the two windows on either side.

‘Well, here we are,’ Father said. ‘Now don’t mind your grandmother if she’s a bit brusque. And be polite, please, and do as you’re told.’

Maisy’s first impression as they were ushered by her father into a large, comfortable sitting room was that her grandmother was very rude. There was no attempt to get out of her chair to greet them, or to give them a smile, or even request that they come nearer so she could see them better. Maisy knew from Betty she was only seventy, not a great age which might excuse her. She was well dressed in a dusky pink knitted two-piece with pearls at her neck.

‘Well, Mother, I expect you’ll find them very much grown up since you last saw them?’ Father said.

Maisy looked at him, surprised by his almost fawning tone.

‘Oh Alastair, children do grow, that’s expected,’ she said. ‘I hope you’ve warned them that I will not stand for any insolence, mischief or noise. They will eat in the kitchen with Janice, and only come in here when I summon them.’

Maisy’s heart sank. She glanced at Duncan and saw that he looked equally dismayed.

The old lady picked up a small handbell and rang it. Within seconds a brown-haired woman of about forty with a pleasant, open face came in and beamed at the children.

‘Bring tea for myself and my son, Janice,’ Grandmother

said. 'Take the children with you, give them some supper and show them to their rooms.'

Janice looked enquiringly at their father. 'Would you like a sandwich, soup or some cold cuts, Mr Mitcham? You've had a long drive and as I understand it you're going back tonight?'

'Yes, I am, Janice. A sandwich would be most appreciated, and a piece of your memorable fruit cake too, if there is any.'

'I made one just yesterday,' she smiled. 'A ham sandwich?'

He nodded, then moved towards the children, patting each of them awkwardly on the shoulder. 'I'll say goodbye now. Be good for Grandmother and write to me each week.'

Janice led the twins out across the wide, flagstoned hall, past a huge, ancient trunk carved of dark wood and a grandfather clock with a very loud tick.

'Wait till it chimes,' Janice said with a little chuckle. 'Enough to make you jump out of your skin.'

'Don't you remember the house?' she asked as they went into the kitchen at the back of the house. 'I know you were only about six when you last came, but children usually remember something.'

'I seem to remember a pond with goldfish,' Duncan said.

Janice smiled. 'Well, you're right about that. I expect you'll remember the garden when you see it again – on your last visit you were out there most of the time.'

The scrubbed wooden table in the middle of the room

was already laid for supper, the fruit cake on one plate, a Victoria sandwich on another. 'I whipped the sponge up when I heard you were coming,' Janice said. 'Not all children like fruit cake.'

'We eat anything,' Duncan said. 'Betty our housekeeper says we're human dustbins.'

Janice laughed and reached out to pat his cheek affectionately. 'I'm liking you both already. Now, I thought a bowl of vegetable soup first, so sit down, and while you eat it I'll make the tea for Mrs Mitcham and your father.'

They heard him leave about an hour later. He didn't come into the kitchen to say goodbye, and a few minutes later they heard Grandmother go up the front stairs to bed.

But Janice's warmth and jollity more than made up for being ignored. After delicious soup, ham sandwiches and cake, she took them up the back stairs just off the kitchen and showed them their rooms.

They were both a bit shabby. Janice said that during the war various officers had come to stay there, but the twins weren't bothered by that. They were just delighted to know that they were sleeping at the opposite end of the house to Grandmother, and that they had their own staircase so they never needed to go anywhere near the old lady.

Janice claimed she wasn't as fierce and cold as she liked to make out, and that she'd actually said, 'It might be nice to have children in the house to brighten it up.' However, Maisy suspected she'd made that bit up to be kind. But both she and Duncan really liked Janice. She had a gentle, motherly quality about her, she laughed easily and she seemed genuinely pleased to have them to take care of.

‘I love to cook but it’s not much fun for just one elderly lady who eats like a bird,’ she said. ‘When old Mr Mitcham was alive he was poorly and needed a great deal of help – sometimes I never got a moment to myself – but since then I’ve had too much time on my hands and it gets a bit boring.’

She told them there were a couple of bicycles in the shed and she would get Mr Pike the gardener to clean them up so they could use them. They could catch a bus to Lyndhurst, or further afield to Southampton or Bournemouth if they wanted to, and she was sure some of the young people in the village would want to make friends with them.

‘We’ve even got a real live witch in the village,’ she said. ‘She’s called Sybil Leek. She’s really famous cos she writes books about witchcraft, and she’s on the wireless too. You’ll see her when you go into Burley – she walks about in a long black cloak with a jackdaw called Hotfoot Jackson on her shoulder.’

The twins stared open-mouthed in astonishment. Janice laughed. ‘It’s true. I’m not making it up, I promise. I think there’s something about the forest that attracts odd people. Actually, there’s another woman who there are dozens of stories about, much more fascinating than the ones about Sybil. She’s called Grace Deville and she lives in a very remote spot in a little shack. You’ll hear people refer to her as the “Woman in the Wood”. She always wears men’s trousers and she doesn’t like visitors. When people stumble upon her place by accident, she sees them off with her shotgun. The things they say about her! Everything from being mad to killing her own baby and

poisoning people. It's probably all rumour. But then people don't like Sybil much, either, because she attracts weird, witch-loving people to the village.'

'Oh my goodness,' Maisy gasped. 'To think we thought all the drama happened in London!'

'Tomorrow you can start checking it all out,' Janice said. 'Now, it's time you went to bed. I've put hot-water bottles in them.' She kissed them both on the cheeks. 'Sleep tight.'