

Heart of Hickory

Outside the cabin, the wind howled through the trees, while inside, the old woman's fire was nearly out. She had already stepped into the age of seventy, with cracking joints and wrinkles and white braids, but her soul sang a song of youth so bright she still felt like she was seventeen. She left the socks she was knitting down and went to check the doors and windows, as she always did during the Wooden Friday.

The entirety of her small village community was at the edge of their seat this night, the last Friday of October. The houses were locked tight, the lights were turned off, the people turned quiet and twitchy as the wind mercilessly smashed at the walls of their cabins and houses and turned the trees of the nearby forest into sharp-handed beasts. Everyone knew the legend that persisted for fifty years now, the legend of the Abnabo, or the Hickory Man. Every Wooden Friday, he stalked the forest in a mass of leaves sprouting from human skin and wooden limbs, making a mess of the village, screaming with the atmosphere his anger and pain. Nobody knew what he is, or where he came from, but a few brave young men from the village had seen him and described his grotesque image to the painters.

Old Jessamine knew he was the story that peppered the children dreams, clutched at the superstitious hearts and tore at the feeble minds with his uncanny wooden limbs. But she also knew he was much more than that. To her, the existence of the Abnabo was the knowledge that something terrible happened to her village fifty years ago, and even more, the realisation that she had to kill the Abnabo, or else he would take everything she loved. A peculiar thought, considering he was one of said things.

As the glowing flame in the hearth turned into ashes, and the room absorbed the cold like the ache of an old lover, Old Jessamine removed her rifle from the wall, tied her headscarf into a knot and exited the cabin, into the unknown outside. She was not surprised to hear no sounds of living creatures close to her periphery, as everyone was inside. To occupy herself from the way her body ached with every movement as the cold gnawed at her bones, and the way her heart drummed in her chest fifty years of secrets and hidden pain, she started to whistle, an old folk song about two birds that were making a nest out of useless things people threw on the street. Sometimes she wondered if that is what Abnabo felt like. *Made from the things people threw away.*

The thoughts of course transported her to the age of twenty, when she was bright and tied colourful ribbons in her red braids and danced in the village square, ignoring the whispers that she was crazy. It was a sunny day, the one they heard the carriage, the hooves of the horses cutting off all conversation, as all eyes turned to the carved cubicle. Someone important arrived. It was the town's Count, the whispers of gossip told her as she listened carefully, making her presence unnoticeable. He was coming to gather the taxes.

No, other voices retorted, he was coming to honour their village for paying their taxes on time. Some rebels argued that he came to put even more taxes to them, and that they should have shot his horses when they had the chance. The truth was none of this, though, and she learned it from a quiet cook in town, who was gathering tomatoes from her garden when the carriage pulled up. He was coming to cure his sick son, Roan. The

news shocked the villagers, because what if the Count's son had *the plague*, but the cook assured them she heard the Count himself say to the local medic that Roan had an invisible illness of the body and mind.

She didn't sit to hear the symptoms of this ailment or the way the Count was planning to cure him, but went to gather flowers to bring to the sick boy, like her mama always told her when she was still around. *Be kind to people, Jessamine, especially in times of need. Be like the forest, mysterious but sheltering, maker of dreams.*

She gathered a bouquet of beautiful purple salvias and white daisies, tied with a ribbon black and grey, and brought them to the inn where they were staying. The voice that answered her when she knocked on the door was the one of a natural storyteller, and the face she saw, all warm brown eyes and dark hair and a bright smile was the one of a story itself.

"Are you Roan?" she asked, unsure of why her voice trembled. "I brought you some flowers...They say you're sick in the village...I...I hope it's not contagious."

Something passed from his eyes as she said that, a bright, destructive anger, but his words were calm when he spoke. "No, it's not contagious. Thank you for the flowers. Come in."

She didn't know back there that this would be the bane of all her problems, of all his problems, but also the beginning of a companionship she didn't expect. They started to go out together, as he liked the way she talked about the world, and she loved to hear stories from him. They gathered mushrooms and read books and climbed trees, or experimented with fishing. She taught him to dance, and he taught her to write, and their minds seemed to mirror each other. She didn't realise what the mysterious sickness of his was at first, but she knew that his healing would be achieved in rather...peculiar terms.

"Why do you want to go to the Burning Flame?"

"I don't. It's on the list," he said and showed her the piece of parchment, with the words clear as the morning.

"You're pulling my leg. The Burning Flame is a brothel. There is nothing that can cure your mystery sickness there."

"You're missing valuable information."

"Then fill me in."

"My sickness...it's a queer kind. It has to do with the way I see the world. Specifically, with the way I feel about people. With the fact that I don't feel sparks in my belly at the thought of their bodies."

It took her some time to collect her thoughts and comprehend what he meant. "So you don't feel..."

"No. It doesn't mean I don't like people, or don't like to hold a person's hand and give them a part of my soul. Love comes in many forms. It's just..."

"You don't believe you're sick, do you?"

"It doesn't matter what I believe, as long as my father does, and he has the money. And our world has set its definition of humanity to connection with others."

"So what are you going to do?" Jessamine asked, still avoiding to tell him that this was what she felt too, and her parents loved her for who she was when they were alive.

He smirked, a bit of the gloomy darkness that stalked his face going away. "You'll hear of it." And she did. He went to the Burning Flame during the night, and locked himself in a room with one of the girls there, an old friend of Jessamine called Maeve. The walls trembled, and the bed squeaked, and everyone assumed the first stage went well, but Maeve told her she and Roan jumped on the bed and danced around for hours, until their feet couldn't hold them upright, and then he thanked her for her services and gifted her sweet and sour berry jam.

"I wouldn't mind paying for her actual services," he told Jessamine afterwards. "I do not despise the thought of sexual contact, and I believe it would be quite amusing. I just don't believe it's necessary, since I do not feel that kind of attraction." Discussing these things with him felt like she was understanding things of her own, giving words to feelings and thoughts.

The second thing on the list was leeches, which was a cure-all for everything, and he endured it with her telling him about all sorts of things she could imagine, like flowers that could stop a man's heart, or plants that could disinfect wounds or function like tourniquets. Truth be told, both Jessamine and Roan knew that this situation couldn't go on, so Jessamine told him to lie to his father that they were going to get married, but he retorted that he didn't want his father to assume he was "cured", because he had not been sick in the first place.

And so they decided to run away together. It was the day of her birthday, back there, 31st of October, which happened to be a Friday. She was turning twenty, the age of youth and passion mixed with the slow panic of the whirlpool of adulthood. Their horses were shot down by the police, because they were thought to be bandits in the woods, as they attempted their escape at night. She searched for him in the snow, both Old Jessamine and Young Jessamine *swear* they did, but the blizzard that started was so all-encompassing that she couldn't see anything but herself. She heard him from the sound of his screams, as the pack of jackals attacked him and devoured his limbs, as his blood turned the earth into a red ribbon itself. And then she heard her cries and shrieks as she cursed the world and pleaded with the forest to let him live, as she bargained with the fae and taunted them.

She knew what occurred only when she came back to the village, and fully realised it only next year, the last Friday of October and the first Wooden Friday. He was a creature of the forest now, with hickory limbs and leaves to cover his pale throat and broad chest, his soft cheeks and auburn hair. And he hated them all. Abnabo they called him, their name for the woodpecker in their language. And she was the only one who knew his real name, who remembered he once existed as Roan. The Count forgot he had a son, and the village forgot it had a visitor. They were the only two ones who remembered. To her, it was relief,

knowledge that he was alive, that she could go out and find him. To him, it was terror. If the world was a kinder one, it wouldn't mistreat him, and they wouldn't have to run away.

For fifty years, he was there, every Wooden Friday, knocking on doors and windows, marching into the woods, screaming in wind his pain, demanding to be seen and heard, but the people, who tend to shy away from what they can't understand, locked themselves in their houses and patiently waited until the night was over. The local priest tried to exorcise the forest, but nothing happened, because the Abnabo was not a creature of the Devil, but one made of bark and plant, of utterly natural, peaceful things, that were though swirling with anger. Nobody tried to bargain with the mysterious creature or communicate with it, and instead they all settled for legends and dark tales to make the children sleep at night.

It was a cryptid now, one particular to the village, one that nobody but Old Jessamine remembered, but was afraid to approach. And it would still be the same, if not for a gang of young adults, twenty years old, like Old Jessamine's Young self, who wanted to find the Abnabo and kill it. She did not want them to kill Roan, and she knew when they came close, he would surely kill them. It is why even though she didn't want to do it, the only way she could see out of this was if she killed him first. It would not be out of hands that didn't know the true him, and she would pray for his soul to find peace in the forest, if there was such a thing as peace for him in his current state. These thoughts, along with the pain they brought to her in rising storms, were the ones that kept her going in the rain and snow, as her headscarf protected her from some of the cold wind, and her clattering, weakened body continued on like she was a creature of the night itself.

She knew when she reached the forest, because she saw the torches and heard the voices of the young men, joking to themselves, enjoying a world that might or might have not yet hurt them. She stopped for a moment to pray they would go back and she wouldn't have to carry on her terrifying deed, but they proceeded, their voices now getting louder as they entered deeper into the territory of all things magical. It wasn't too long until she also heard the trees shift, and the heavy steps of the Abnabo, that made her heart clench. It had been fifty years since he saw her. How would he react to the natural concept of her age? How would she react to the unnatural one of his present form?

"He's here!" she heard Malcolm, one of the older ones, shout, as he loaded his rifle and marched on first, the others following. She loaded her rifle too, but went to the opposite direction, letting herself hide between the familiar wooden giants of the trees, in order to be invisible. The shawl was taken away from her shoulders by the wind, but she kept on, holding onto the trunks for support. It is when she saw him.

There was barely a flicker of humanity in him now, as his limbs were bark wrapped in ivy, and the parts of his body that were bare flesh were covered in leaves and flowers that scaled upright and downright, covering him. His eyes that once radiated warmth and desire to explore now were small yellow fires of anger and magic.

He roared as he saw them, and they screamed and started shooting. She doesn't remember when she started running, when she shouted "STOP" to the trees and the snow and the fight that started to form as he tried to tear at the men with his sharp branch-like fingers while they emptied their bullets on him. She remembers that the wind took off her

headscarf and white-grey braids tied with red ribbons fell on her shoulders as she ran and ran.

"Nobody will die today, unless I say so."

She raised her rifle to kill Roan, to destroy her dreams and hopes and memories in one single shot at the head, but she didn't press the trigger in time. Morfran did. She did not remember how she found herself in the middle, or how the shot pierced through her chest.

"Old Jessamine...What is she doing here?" the young man muttered as his teeth clashed together with shock, as his friends gathered him, scared, back to the village.

"You don't look so fine," she told the Abnabo as he leaned over her, his wooden arms cocooning her into an embrace.

"You, though, are looking fine as always," he replied with a voice like the trees themselves. She heard him speak in a language she didn't know, that made the trees shake and the forest awaken, like little will o' the wisps that danced in the darkness. And then the darkness claimed her.

The village is a quiet one. The people come and go, gathering and hunting, selling and creating, into a small community of love and affection, of myth and story, of real and unreal. The villagers are of the happy folk, that love to dance and sing and whisper of things unseen and unbelievable, as they huddle together from the cold and share their meals and knowledge.

There is a special day every year, that makes them wonder, either scared or curious, as they lock themselves in and spend time with their families and friends, their pets and their trades. It is the Wooden Friday, the last Friday of October, when a blizzard takes over the place, and the forest turns into a battlefield of cold, crystalline magic. It is when, according to the tales told, a pair of unknown creatures stalks the periphery, as they sing and dance in the voice of magic, as they walk wooden hand in wooden hand, their shadows making the wind howl in the ears.

Nobody knows what they are, but they call them the Abnabo. What is known is that they want to be seen, heard, acknowledged, remembered. And so they march every Wooden Friday, along with a parade of spirits, in the cold autumn world.