

## Hunger

by Rachael Llewellyn

I wanted her fine red cloak. I deserved it. I was made to wear red, but she was only ordinary.

I know something of ordinary. I was born in an ordinary village, filled with ordinary people who lived ordinary lives. My father was an orphan who made his fortune working down in the mines that ran deep through the valley. The mine bought my father a fine house and rich man's daughter to be his wife. But my family were just ordinary really.

A house for a happy family. A father and mother. Grandfather and Grandmother. Two children.

There was always a warm fire in the hearth and plenty of food to eat. We weren't like other families, who struggled to make ends meet. My parents didn't go to bed hungry so their children wouldn't starve. Our story would be ordinary too if I hadn't been born wrong.

It's not my fault. I was born with it inside me. I was born with a hunger.

Though my grandparents smiled and my father fussed over the food my mother made, how my sister would beg and plead for a second helping, mealtimes were hardest for me. Hungry as I was, the buttered potatoes and moist chicken tasted of dirt and ash on my tongue. Fish tasted of brine and salt and vegetables of unwashed earth.

I never knew life without it. Nights lying in bed, eyes sleeplessly sore, stomach growling, too hungry to sleep. Sweating under the warmth of the family hearth, sat at my father's side, fighting the urge to gag as I swallowed chunks of meat and veg whole to try and fight the ache in my jaws, the throbbing in my stomach.

I tried berries from the trees in the woods, the berries my sister called so sweet tasted of bark and leaves. Waiting until my father's watchful eyes were turned so I could try the forbidden fruit I could reach on tiptoe. It tasted old and wooden and made me vomit on my Sunday best.

Then one day as we walked to the schoolhouse, Billy, the baker's son tripped and fell, cracking his skull on a rock, splattering the path with blood. My sister covered and cried. I did too. The smell was divine. I had to wait for the school mistress to take Billy away, for the other children to leave so I could cradle a blood splattered rock in my petticoat and lap sweet coppery sauce from it.

One drop on my tongue and my world was made of stars. The world was light and bright. With the hunger gone, I could see all the colours of the sky. I could hear every sound in the stream and the rush of the wind through the wood. But then the light faded and I could see that the world around me was just ordinary.

The villagers, my grandparents, my sister and my parents. They weren't made of stars. They were just people. They didn't know hunger or colour or light. They just trudged through their day eating their salty fish and their earthen vegetables. They didn't notice the dirt and ash on their tongues as they shovelled fresh helpings down their throats.

I sucked the rock dry of the baker's boy's blood. I swallowed the rock whole to try and keep the world bright and wept as the hunger returned and my throat ached as my mother passed me a plate of steamed carrots and dry lamb.

I was no better. Made of worms and dirt and smoke, but so hungry that it made me thrash in my bed at night.

For what came next, I had no choice. Once I started to feed, after so long of being starving, there was no way to stop.

I devoured my sister, grandmother and grandfather. I ate my mother and the left arm of my father. He told the villagers it was a wolf who killed his in-laws, his wife and children. He said a wolf broke in during the night and tore his family to pieces. I don't know if he recognised me. Red and slick with blood. Hair scraped back and nails sharp. How insignificant the bindings of my clothes became when the world was bright with stars.

They searched the woods that became my home. The men with guns and torches. Searched high and low for the wolf that killed the mine-owner's family to little success. They come back every now and then. Some strayed too far in the dark. Some had torches were blown out by the wind. One slipped and fell and cracked his head. It would have been a tragedy to let him go to waste.

The wives whisper to their daughters not to stray from the path when they journey through the wood. I let them be. Normally. But today I saw a girl in a fine red cloak and I wanted it. She was just ordinary. A simple, smiling, freckle-faced creature. Old enough to be my sister's daughter if she had ever grown old enough to rear a child.

"Hello there," I called to her and let her see me before I asked, "And where might you be going on this fine day?"