

The Belly of the Beast

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Once upon a time, a young farm boy named Av was strolling around the nearby woods in order to enjoy his day off from milking the cows, arranging the hay, and protecting the herds from potential predators such as the dreaded wolf. On days like these, Av was reminded of his dream: to be a Flower Arranger. Not just any arranger, but *the* go-to Arranger of all the land. His passionate admiration of the intricacies of each individual flower set him apart, in his eyes, from all the rest. Av knew everything there was to know about flowers and on this sunny day, Av found himself lost in the uniqueness of his favorite blossom: the rare blue Aster. One moment he sat admiring the flowers sprinkled around the forest floor as they glimmered in the afternoon sun amidst the surrounding oak trees. The next moment: a growl, a shock, complete darkness.

Thump. The fall onto a slimy surface brought Av back to his senses. He felt around his radius trying to make out exactly where he was or better yet-what he was in.

Av's surroundings were in complete darkness. All that could be heard was the faint sound of breathing accompanied by a simultaneous inhale and exhale movement from the habitat he now found himself in. As his eyes began to adjust, Av got up and approached the nearest wall. He reached out to feel it and stroked gooey circular folds all across a ten-foot range. Av began to fear the worst.

At that moment, he heard muffled voices. He could hear them coming from atop the circular folds. Seeing this as a potential to escape, Av began to climb up the slimy folds. The higher he got, the clearer the voices became. After some climbing, Av was halted by a sudden obstacle that smacked his head signaling the end of the line. Yet, there was a small hole from which he was able to listen through and could now make out one of the muffled voices quite perfectly.

“-she is ill and weak, and they will do her good. Set out before it gets hot, and when you are going, walk nicely and quietly and do not run off the path, or you may fall and break the bottle, and then your grandmother will get nothing. And when you go into her room, don't forget to say, good-morning, and don't peep into every corner before you do it.”

“I will take great care”, said a different voice than the first. This second voice came from a young girl as opposed to the first which had been clearly that of an adult woman-most probably this girl's mother, thought Av.

At that moment, Av's surroundings shook completely as if a sudden earthquake had struck, he was thrown off balance, and back into the slimy abyss he found himself in earlier. The whole environment was shaking leading Av to be tossed and turned in every possible direction. Calm finally settled and Av was now a bit more certain of where he found himself in, but still couldn't believe it. He needed more proof.

Muffled voices echoed around the gooey arena as Av shot for the clammy folds 'staircase' and reached back up towards the 'listening hole'. He reached the ceiling, felt for the hole, and stuck his left ear directly inside.

“-house stands under the three large oak-trees, the nut-trees are just below. You surely must know it”, said the voice of the little girl he had heard earlier.

All was quiet for a bit until a bellowing voice came not from the outside through the listening hole, but through the listening hole itself.

“See little red-cap, how pretty the flowers are about here. Why do you not look round? I believe, too, that you do not hear how sweetly the little birds are singing-”

This was a voice he knew quite well. A voice that he heard every so often while attending the herds. This was the voice of the wolf.

At that instance, the vibrations from the voice entering through the open listening hole were so strong that Av was once again knocked off his balance and back into the abyss.

Now, the certainty of Av's worst fears regarding his current location were all but confirmed. As dread began to rush through his very core, the gooey earthquake had returned and Av was tossed left and right for a good five minutes until calm finally resumed. Av took a deep breath in as he coughed out bits of tissue and what tasted like blood. Was it his blood? He didn't feel any pain in the mouth so clearly this blood had a different source.

Muffled voices rang around his clammy prison, but this time Av chose to seek shelter before the next quake would hit. Either way, if he was where he thought he was, Av knew he didn't have much time left anyways. The digestion process would soon commence and he would be nothing but dung on the side of the road. He would never become the Arranger he always wanted to be. He would never finish his treasured collection of exotic flowers and plants. Worse yet, he would never see another flower again. Av crouched down in a fetal position and closed his eyes as the muffled voices grew louder. A tear trickled down his cheek and simmered on to the slimy surface underneath him.

In that very moment, a shining light appeared from above. Av looked up and saw that the 'listening hole' had expanded into a massive gap where a bright shining light came pouring down. Without a second to process what was happening, the shape of a full sized body appeared from the source of the light. Within three seconds Av felt a loud thump near him. The gaping hole light persisted for a moment to allow Av to get a good glimpse of who had just joined him: a butt-naked, shrieking, elderly woman.

"Ah! Ah! Oh my god oh my god. He ate me. He ate me. Oh my god".

The old woman was in complete and utter shock as her screaming echoed around the intestinal chambers louder than any rumble, muffled voice, or bodily ringing that Av had heard until now.

"Oh my god oh my god oh my god!", continued the woman.

“Will you settle down ma’am?!” , shouted Av, as her screaming had become quite irritant.

Until then, she had no clue that she was not alone inside the wolf’s belly.

Shocked and gasping for air, she responded, “What? Who’s there?”

“Av. My name is Av.”

Still attempting to catch her breath, the elderly woman said, “Av, do you have any idea where we are right now?”

Calm and composed, Av responded, “Of course, in the belly of the beast.”

At which point the woman let out yet another shriek that forced Av to approach her vicinity to silence her. Yet, when he put his hand over her mouth, she reacted immediately and bit down on his hand.

“Ow! That hurt, you bit me!”

“Well, don’t touch me!”

Holding on to his hand, he could feel the blood begin to flow, Av pressed it down on his shirt and said, “Listen, this is a very unfortunate situation we both find ourselves in, but gnawing and snapping at each other will do nothing to improve it.”

“Well, then what will?”, asked the woman.

“Perhaps if we introduce ourselves formally. Let’s start there”, said Av.

There was a short pause as Av tried to make out the woman’s face in the darkness, to no avail.

“Okay, my name is Granny Rose. I have a daughter that lives in the nearby village and a beautiful granddaughter who goes by the name Little Red Cap”

“You’re Red Cap’s grandmother? She’s one of my good friends. We go out looking for flowers in the woods all the time.”

“Well isn’t that nice. I am sorry, what was your name again?”

“Av.”

“Av. What a strange name that is.”

“I know.”

A long pause followed. The intestinal surroundings they found themselves in maintained the rhythmic breathing movements accompanied by the low murmur of what sounded like a snore.

“Av?”, said Granny, breaking the silence.

“Yeah?”

“Do you think we will make it out of here alive?”

Av did not answer immediately.

“Av?”

“Granny, it’s unlikely.”

A long pause followed which was only interrupted by an increase in volume of muffled voices from above. Av looked up towards the ‘listening hole’ which he knew now to be the wolf’s esophagus.

“What’s that?”, asked Granny who had now heard the muffled voices.

Av, now knowing his way around the intestine, ran towards the folds and began to climb his way up towards the hole to find out what was happening.

“-big eyes you have”

“The better to see you with, my dear”

“But, grandmother, what large hands you have.”

“The better to hug you with.”

“Oh, but, grandmother, what a terrible mouth you have.”

“The better to eat you with.”

As soon as Av heard this, he knew what was about to occur, so he quickly climbed down the folds to the base and yelled,

“Get down, Granny!”

The listening hole opened up wide again, the beaming light shone through, and a small girl wearing a red cap came tumbling down to join Av and Granny.

“Ah! Ah! Oh my god oh my god!”

“Red Cap? Is that you?!”, shrieked Granny.

“Granny?!”

Little Red Cap had yet to adjust to the darkness of the wolf’s intestine, better yet to the new reality she now found herself in.

“Honey, yes its me. Follow my voice so I can give you a hug!”

“Oh Granny, but I can’t see anything!”

“Just come towards my voice, doll”

“Granny, it’s so slimy and gooey. What is going on? Where are we?!”

The young girl was evidently in shock. Granny who now realized the tragedy that had befallen both of them began to cry hysterically as the muffled sound of snoring rang around their dark surroundings.

Seeing an opportunity to present himself, Av chimed in.

“Red? It’s me, Av.”

“Av?! What are you doing here? Wait, where are we?”

“Red, what is the last thing you remember before you appeared here?”

“I came to visit my granny. I had brought her a cake and a bottle of wine to help her feel better. When I got to her house, I was surprised to find the front door open so I just let myself in. Then, I saw her laying in bed with her cap pulled over her face, and looking very strange.”

“Red, that wasn’t your grandmother in bed.”, said Av.

“That was the wolf.”, added Granny.

“Oh my god. So that means tha-”

“Yep. The wolf devoured you. He devoured all of us and now we are stuck here until his digestion process begins, at which point we will all be dead”

Upon hearing this, Little Red Cap let out a loud screech that threw both Av and Granny off their balance and face-first into the slimy surface beneath them.

“Red! For the love of God calm down! Screaming will do nothing but torture us while we are still here.”, yelled Av.

Little Red Cap then crouched down, bent her knees, and began to rock back and forth mumbling the same phrase repeatedly,

“This can’t be happening. This can’t be happening. This can’t be happening.”

Granny located Red within the intestine and hugged her tightly, attempting to comfort the distraught young girl.

Av, not wanting to deal with the unnecessary drama and stress, got up, and sat in an opposite corner of the innards. At this point, he had essentially accepted his fate. He closed his eyes and began to picture some of his favorite flowers: He saw purple irises, red anemones, multi colored hydrangeas, white lilies, yellow marigolds, and of course his blue asters. Av closed his eyes a bit tighter. He could now feel the warmth of the sun glistening on his skin, a cool easterly breeze rushing in through the majestic oak trees, and the sound of the blue jays chirping away as they floated freely about.

Faintly, these images were suddenly interrupted.

“-Av! Av! Where are you?!”

Av was starkly brought back to reality.

“What?! I am here! I am right here, relax!”

“Okay, thank god. We thought we had lost you.”, responded Granny.

“What difference does it make? We’re all lost.”, said Av.

“Well, there is still a chance we make it out of here. We just have to hope that someone finds the wolf in my house, opens up his belly, and lets us free.”

“Granny, you don’t think I had already thought of that? How can we even be sure that the he didn’t already leave your house and is out looking for another meal right now?”, said Av.

“Do you hear that?”, asked Granny.

Silence ensued as Av tried listening for something. As always, the wolf’s breathing could be felt, but he was able to make out an increased muffled snore.

“Okay, so he’s sleeping.”, said Av.

“Exactly, he’s sleeping. Which means he is most likely still in my house and there is a higher chance of someone coming by to check up on me or Little Red Cap.”

Av hadn’t thought of this possibility as he pondered the likelihood that they could actually survive this situation. Yet, unbeknownst to Av, his likelihood of escape was now at zero percent. As Granny finished proposing her theory, the surface underneath Av began to sink as he felt himself descending into a gap in the intestine.

“Oh oh. Help! Granny! Red! I am sinking!”

Granny and Little Red Cap immediately rushed towards Av’s voice, but it was too late.

“Help! Help! I’m being digest-”

Av’s voice was cut off as the hole he had capsized into sealed itself shut.

Almost simultaneously, a muffled voice could be heard from the outside along with the measured snoring. Ten seconds later, the sound of snipping scissors was heard and a bright light pierced through the opposite intestine wall that Av had learned so well to climb.

The huntsman had cut open the wolf’s stomach and freed both Red Cap and Granny.

Little Red Cap sprang out crying,

“Ah, how frightened I have been. How dark it was inside the wolf”

As the huntsman sliced up the wolf’s skin, he took the body outside of Granny’s cottage. The beast’s sudden death led him to emit a fragment of droppings on the left side of the path leading to Granny’s cottage. Coincidentally, Little Red Cap dropped some of the flowers and seeds she had collected in the same area where the dung lay.

They never spoke of Av to anyone else-fearing that they might be blamed for not doing enough to save him until the huntsman had arrived. To this day, on the left side of the path leading into Granny’s cottage, there is a blooming shrub of bright blue asters unlike any seen anywhere else in the world.