



Anne Sexton

Red Riding Hood

Many are the deceivers:

The suburban matron,
proper in the supermarket,
list in hand so she won't suddenly fly,
buying her Duz and Chuck Wagon dog food,
meanwhile ascending from earth,
letting her stomach fill up with helium,
letting her arms go loose as kite tails,
getting ready to meet her lover
a mile down Apple Crest Road
in the Congregational Church parking lot.

Two seemingly respectable women
come up to an old Jenny
and show her an envelope
full of money
and promise to share the booty
if she'll give them ten thou
as an act of faith.

Her life savings are under the mattress
covered with rust stains
and counting.

They are as wrinkled as prunes
but negotiable.

The two women take the money and disappear.

Where is the moral?

Not all knives are for
stabbing the exposed belly.

Rock climbs on rock
and it only makes a seashore.
Old Jenny has lost her belief in mattresses
and now she has no wastebasket in which
to keep her youth.
The standup comic
on the "Tonight" show
who imitates the Vice President
and cracks up Johnny Carson
and delays sleep for millions
of bedfellows watching between their feet,
slits his wrist the next morning
in the Algonquin's old-fashioned bathroom,
the razor in his hand like a toothbrush,
wall as anonymous as a urinal,
the shower curtain his slack rubberman audience,
and then the slash
as simple as opening as a letter
and the warm blood breaking out like a rose
upon the bathtub with its claw and ball feet.
And I. I too.
Quite collected at cocktail parties,
meanwhile in my head
I'm undergoing open-heart surgery.
The heart, poor fellow,
pounding on his little tin drum
with a faint death beat,
The heart, that eyeless beetle,
running panicked through his maze,
never stopping one foot after the other
one hour after the other
until he gags on an apple
and it's all over.
And I. I too again.
I built a summer house on Cape Ann.
A simple A-frame and this too was

a deception — nothing haunts a new house.
When I moved in with a bathing suit and tea bags
the ocean rumbled like a train backing up
and at each window secrets came in
like gas. My mother, that departed soul,
sat in my Eames chair and reproached me
for losing her keys to the old cottage.
Even in the electric kitchen there was
the smell of a journey. The ocean
was seeping through its frontiers
and laying me out on its wet rails.
The bed was stale with my childhood
and I could not move to another city
where the worthy make a new life.
Long ago
there was a strange deception:
a wolf dressed in frills,
a kind of transvestite.
But I get ahead of my story.
In the beginning
there was just little Red Riding Hood,
so called because her grandmother
made her a red cape and she was never without it.
It was her Linus blanket, besides
it was red, as red as the Swiss flag,
yes it was red, as red as chicken blood,
But more than she loved her riding hood
she loved her grandmother who lived
far from the city in the big wood.
This one day her mother gave her
a basket of wine and cake
to take to her grandmother
because she was ill.
Wine and cake?
Where's the aspirin? The penicillin?
Where's the fruit juice?

Peter Rabbit got chamomile tea.
But wine and cake it was.
On her way in the big wood
Red Riding Hood met the wolf.
Good day, Mr. Wolf, she said,
thinking him no more dangerous
than a streetcar or a panhandler.
He asked where she was going
and she obligingly told him
There among the roots and trunks
with the mushrooms pulsing inside the moss
he planned how to eat them both,
the grandmother an old carrot
and the child a shy budkin
in a red red hood.
He bade her to look at the bloodroot,
the small bunchberry and the dogtooth
and pick some for her grandmother.
And this she did.
Meanwhile he scampered off
to Grandmother's house and ate her up
as quick as a slap.
Then he put on her nightdress and cap
and snuggled down in to bed.
A deceptive fellow.
Red Riding hood
knocked on the door and entered
with her flowers, her cake, her wine.
Grandmother looked strange,
a dark and hairy disease it seemed.
Oh Grandmother, what big ears you have,
ears, eyes, hands and then the teeth.
The better to eat you with my dear.
So the wolf gobbled Red Riding Hood down
like a gumdrop. Now he was fat.
He appeared to be in his ninth month

and Red Riding Hood and her grandmother
rode like two Jonahs up and down with
his every breath. One pigeon. One partridge.
He was fast asleep,
dreaming in his cap and gown,
wolfless.

Along came a huntsman who heard
the loud contented snores
and knew that was no grandmother.
He opened the door and said,
So it's you, old sinner.
He raised his gun to shoot him
when it occurred to him that maybe
the wolf had eaten up the old lady.
So he took a knife and began cutting open
the sleeping wolf, a kind of caesarian section.

It was a carnal knife that let
Red Riding Hood out like a poppy,
quite alive from the kingdom of the belly.
And grandmother too
still waiting for cakes and wine.

The wolf, they decided, was too mean
to be simply shot so they filled his belly
with large stones and sewed him up.
He was as heavy as a cemetery
and when he woke up and tried to run off
he fell over dead. Killed by his own weight.
Many a deception ends on such a note.

The huntsman and the grandmother and Red Riding Hood
sat down by his corpse and had a meal of wine and cake.
Those two remembering
nothing naked and brutal
from that little death,
that little birth,
from their going down
and their lifting up.

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Analysis (ai): Sexton's poem "Red Riding Hood" offers a dark, satirical take on the classic fairy tale, exploring themes of deceit, loss, and the fragility of innocence. Unlike the original, this version focuses on the vulnerability of the victims and the multifaceted nature of deception.

Compared to Sexton's other works, the poem exhibits her signature blend of confessional poetry and feminist critique. It aligns with her themes of female identity, trauma, and societal expectations. However, it differs in its specific focus on the dangers lurking within seemingly ordinary circumstances.

During the time period in which the poem was written, the 1960s and 70s, there was a growing awareness of social and emotional complexities. Sexton's poem reflects this zeitgeist by exposing the deception and violence hidden beneath the surface of everyday life. It challenges traditional notions of safety and morality, leaving readers with a haunting sense of unease. (hide)

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