

# The Old Wood

By Logan Z. Hill

## I

Isabel lived near the edge of the Old Wood, in the last cottage of the village, with her mother, father, and two younger brothers. She had lived all her life in the village, never daring, never thinking, of entering the place where the trees grew tall and dark and thick together. Yet near her parent's house there was a small pond which, at its far end, sat against the first of the Old Wood's wide girthed oaks.

As soon as the sun had returned to melt away the snows of a particularly dark winter, Isabel could be seen running around the near side of the pond, usually with her brothers in tow. The mornings were especially sacred to the young girl, as this was the only sure time that her mother would let her out to play. Isabel's afternoons were set aside to help her mother around the cottage. Her younger brothers, still too young to be of use to their father in the village fields, were allowed to continue to play outside until the shadows of the Old Wood merged with the shadow of the world.

One morning, while the spring was still new and just becoming aware that it had a job to do, Isabel found herself out next to the pond. Her brothers had stayed near the front of the house to look for worms, her mother was busy in the house, and her father was out tilling the fields with the other men of the village. She stood at the bank, where the grass was still wet and soft from the winter thaw, and watched her reflection in the dark waters. Now and then she would toss a pebble in; creating rings that spread out across the surface.

Isabel was busy counting all the reflections of herself that she could find in the rings when she saw something else cast a reflection in the water. She looked up and saw that a white stallion had come up to drink at the water on the other side where the Old Wood and the far field met. She stood very still as it drank. She wasn't sure whether it had come from the Old Wood or if it was one of the villager's horses that had wandered off. It didn't have any markings. The horse drank very slowly, its mouth was nearly submerged, and slow ripples began to undulate away from it. Over the stallion's shoulder

Isabel saw a white mare approaching slowly. She had appeared at the top of a hill that was divided in half by the field and the Old Wood and Isabel was still unsure as to where the horses were from. The mare approached slowly, her head swaying back and forth. The mare came within reach of the stallion and stopped. The mare waited for a long time and Isabel had come to realize that her hands were clenched together. The mare finally took a step towards the pond but the stallion turned on her and reared. The stallion let out a sound that brought Isabel's hands over her mouth. The mare backed up, but the stallion continued its display. He reared again, his hooves flailing in front of him. The mare turned and ran back up the hill. She stopped at the top and turn back around, but the stallion had gone back to drinking from the pond.

Within moments a second mare appeared at the top of the hill in a playful run. Where the first was as white as the stallion, the new horse was pitch black and had mud caked on her legs. The black mare passed the first as if unseen, and ran straight down to the pond. She approached quickly and as she stepped up to the bank, the stallion side stepped away from her without taking his mouth from the water.

Isabel watched the two drink in silence, while the white mare stood on the hill watching as well. Isabel began to cry. She dropped down on the wet bank as if her sobs had pushed her to the earth. She couldn't stop crying even though she could no longer see the horses through the reeds.

"Isabel!" she heard her mother yell. Isabel turned to see her mother running towards her. Her mother knelt down and put her arms around her, "Are you alright, dear? Did you fall in?"

"No, mama." Isabel sniffed and her mother pulled away to look at her daughter, "The horses, they were being very mean to each other. It was terrible."

Her mother looked confused, "what horses, dear." Isabel stood up to show her mother, but the horses were gone. Her mother smiled, "there aren't any horse on this side of the village. Are you sure you saw them there?"

"Yes, mama, I did."

"Well, maybe they escaped. What markings did they have?"

"They didn't have any, I looked, but none of them had any."

"Are you sure you saw horses and not playing one of your games?"

Isabel frowned and looked at the mud clinging to her dress, “No, mama. I saw them. I’m sure I did.”

“Well, we’ll ask your father if any of the men are missing any horses when he gets home tonight.”

Isabel nodded, still looking at the mud.

“Now run inside and clean up. I have lunch ready and your other dress is clean and on your bed.”

Isabel did as her mother asked, but she couldn’t stop looking over at the hill as they headed inside.

## II

Isabel’s father came home late that night. One of the men in the fields had an accident, his leg had got caught under a plow while the oxen were moving. Several of the men, her father included, had taken the man home to his wife. Everyone was very quiet at dinner, but Isabel’s mother finally spoke, “Isabel said she saw some horses down by the pond.”

“Oh?” Her father looked up from his plate. His mouth was full of buttered bread. “What did they look like?” he asked around the side of his mouth.

“There was a stallion and two mares,” Isabel said, her voice was excited but she tried to control herself in front of her family, “the stallion and one of the mares were white,” her father began shaking his head as he swallowed his bread, “the other mare was all black,” she said, but as she watched her father shake his head the excitement in her voice had fallen.

“No,” her father said with the last of the bread down his throat, “nobody owns horses like that. You must have imagined them.”

“No, papa, I didn’t. I saw them,” Isabel’s voice had become tight.

“Well, there haven’t been any wild horses around here for years. And nobody owns horses like that here.”

Isabel didn’t say anything after that. She helped her mother wash up after dinner then went to her room and got ready for bed.

She crawled under the covers, the night air had yet to warm to spring, and she pulled the blankets close around her neck. In the dark she could see the horses in her mind, but then she heard her parents, muffled and far away, through the walls.

“What else is wrong?” she heard her mother ask.

Her father replied, but he was speaking quietly and couldn't make out what he had said.

“What?!” her mother said excitedly, but Isabel couldn't decide whether her mother was worried or happy. After that her parents began to whisper and Isabel couldn't understand what was being said.

Isabel fell back to thinking about the horses but she was soon asleep. Yet in sleep, she continued to see the horses. This time the white mare approached the stallion, but when the stallion turned it actually hit the mare. Over and over again the hooves fell upon the mare and blood began to flow from the wounds, but the mare didn't run. The white mare just stood there, under the assault of the stallion, until bone began to show through the wounds. Again and again the stallion struck, and soon the white coat of the mare was stripped away to reveal a white skeleton. The stallion flailed one last time and punctured what was left of the mare's belly. Isabel screamed and sat up in the dark.

Isabel's parents rushed into the room with a lamp lighting the way before them. Her father stood at the door while her mother sat down beside her, “are you alright, dear?” Isabel nodded as her mother put the lamp down and leaned on the bed in front of her. Her mother's hand pressed down into the bed and she recoiled back, “Dear God,” her mother whispered. She looked at Isabel, then down at the bed, then back at Isabel. She pulled the covers back and Isabel screamed. There was a dark stain on Isabel's nightgown that had bled through to the sheets. Her mother threw her arms around Isabel and said loudly, “My daughter's a woman. Oh, good tidings on such a night. Oh my dear, you are blessed.”

“What...what do you mean, mama?” Isabel was shaking in her mother's embrace but she was not cold.

Her mother pulled away and looked at Isabel, then looked to her husband standing darkly in the doorway, “You should tell her.”

Isabel's father stepped forward, but the lamp was on the floor. The light did not reach him through the bed. Isabel couldn't see his face but thought that he was smiling as he said, "I've arranged your marriage, just today. Now that you are a woman, you will be married at the harvest festival."

"No," Isabel blurted but her mother interrupted.

"It'll be alright, dear. You are very lucky."

But all Isabel could think was, "no," over and over again as she slowly shook her head. Her father took a step back, hesitated for a moment, then left the room. Isabel's mother stayed. She brought her a clean nightgown, a rag, and clean sheets, and held her daughter as she tried to fall back asleep. Isabel felt numb. She couldn't feel the clean nightgown or her mother, only the rag.

### III

Isabel awoke before dawn. She had barely slept during the night. Her mother had gone. The house was very still. She sat up slowly and rubbed her eyes. When she had finished, her eyes were clear and she could just make out the edge of her bed in the gloom. She began to lay herself back down but she shot up straight, her eyes wide and her breathing slow and quite. She had heard something. Patiently she waited for it to come again. The moment of silence grew longer. Isabel could hear her heart beating.

It happened again. The sound of a horse. "It's the white mare," Isabel whispered and threw the covers off her legs, "she's come back to drink." She got out of bed. Something fell to the floor but she didn't notice. Slowly Isabel opened her door. Everything in the house was still quite. She had never tried to sneak out of the house before and she was becoming painfully aware every creaking floorboard. With each step she would cringe, and stop, waiting to hear her parents or her brother's door open. But each creak seemed to go unheard by everyone save Isabel. Finally she made it to the kitchen, where there weren't any floor boards, just cold, packed, earth. Isabel was too nervous to notice the chill on her bare feet.

Slowly she opened the back door. When it was just an eye length open, Isabel peeked through. She could see the left side of the pond first, near where she had been when the horses appeared. It was dark and still. There was no wind blowing. Slowly she

opened the door wider. She could see the middle of the pond. The trees of the Old Wood at the far side looked darker than the night. Isabel froze, her breath caught in her throat. A long, slow, ripple moved across the pond, from right to left. Then another. Isabel's fingers shook with excitement as she tried hard to open the door as slowly as possible.

Finally she could see the origin of the ripples. The white mare was taking careful drinks from the water. Isabel slipped through the door and did her best to move to the pond unseen. The mare paid no attention to her as she ducked behind tall reeds. Isabel began moving along the bank. The hem of her nightgown was picking up mud as she made her way closer. She pulled her self close to a patch of reeds and leaned in. With her hands she pulled the long thin plants to the side. The mare was there, almost close enough to touch. The creature's eyes glanced over at the young woman then returned its attention back to the water.

Isabel leaned in further, her hand reaching out. Slowly she brought herself closer to the mare until she was through the reeds and kneeling on the other side. Her hand continued to slowly reach out. The mare glanced at her again, but did not move. Isabel made the final move and her hand rested on the soft coat of the mare. Quietly Isabel began to stroke its neck. Isabel smiled. She took no notice of the cold mud that was seeping between her toes and on her knee. She was content, kneeling there, and brushing her hand through the horse's mane.

The mare reared. A flock of sleeping birds took to the sky from the edge of the Old Wood. Isabel screamed and slipped. She slid back into the pond up to her waist. The mare came down hard, spraying mud onto Isabel's face. The horse reared again then turned and ran towards the darkness of the trees. Isabel scrambled and pulled herself up the bank and out of the pond. Just as she stood, she looked up and the stallion reared in front of her. Isabel froze. Her second scream couldn't escape her throat. The stallion's hooves flailed inches from her face. Finally the terror surged through her and she started to run towards the house but the stallion landed across her path. The wild horse turned on her and reared again. Isabel stopped but she slipped again and fell backwards. She hit the ground hard, but the mud on the bank was soft. Immediately she flipped on her stomach and began to scramble along the bank until she could regain her footing. She stood, but the stallion was still behind her. She took off running and the horse bolted after her. Up

the far side of the bank she ran, she tried to turn to her left, to run around the far side of the pond, but the horse blocked her again. She switched her course and found herself running through the trees of the Old Wood. It had instantly become darker under the ancient canopy. As she ran, Isabel stumbled and tripped over the exposed roots of the trees but she was able to catch herself from falling by holding on to the trunks. The stallion was still after her and Isabel kept running, tears streaming from her eyes and into her ears. Muffled, she could hear the horse's hooves splitting the same roots she stumbled over. She ran as hard as she could. Her breathing became labored sobs seeking air. She rounded a tree and turned her head to look back. But at that moment she tripped hard and fell. Her head struck a thick root. Everything became black for Isabel. She couldn't feel her body, but she could hear the heavy hooves approaching fast. Then everything fell silent.

## IV

Isabel coughed. Her eyes flashed opened. A black beetle crawled on the earth under her eye. It stopped as it felt the hot breath of the young woman. Its antennae waved in the air for a moment then it turned and began to crawl away. Isabel laid there for a long time. She was afraid to turn around. She listened carefully but even the birds were silent. Finally Isabel sat up and leaned against the nearest tree. She looked around. There was no sign of the stallion.

Isabel felt cold. Mud was caked on her feet, legs and half her face. Her nightgown was still wet. From her waist down it was dark with wet mud. She sat there, her knees pulled up close to her chest. As she picked mud from her forehead and cheeks she began to cry. Finally she gave up on the mud and let her head rest on her knees, sobbing.

Then she heard the mare again. It sounded like it was far away. Isabel stood up, her back pressed against the tree. She began to look around, listening intently for the mare. Softly she circled the tree.

The mare's voice came to her again, but she still couldn't be sure as to where it was coming from. When she had come back around the tree she started to breathe quickly. She looked back and forth wildly, then took a step away from the tree, then stepped back against it again. Isabel didn't know from which way she had come. She

looked at the sky, but it was obscured by the thick canopy. It seemed lighter, but not like the sun was up, it was as if there was a full moon out and she was in a pasture. The trees all seemed to shine with a silvery glow. But this made the places between the trees seem darker, shadowy, miles apart. Isabel looked down at the ground but she couldn't see any of her footprints. She stepped away from the tree again and she saw hoof prints. She froze. When no stallion appeared, she took another step forward and then another until she was standing over the hoof prints. "These must be the stallions," she whispered and then froze again. Even with a whisper, she had broken the stillness that surrounded her and she felt exposed. She looked back at the tracks and studied them. She decided that the stallion had headed off to her right, so she began to follow the tracks back to her left. As she walked, she angled further and further to her left until finally she stopped cold. There next to the tracks were her own naked footprints. *This is where I must have fallen*, she thought, not daring to speak aloud again. She took a few steps next to her own tracks and then stopped again. Her footprints were facing the same way that she was walking, against the direction of the horse's tracks. Isabel began to shake. She looked around and saw her own footprints leading back against a tree. Her breathing quickened and she started following both tracks again, this time watching to see where if the horse's tracks left the circle. She made it back around again, where now there were two sets of footprints against the horse's tracks. She had found no deviation of the horse's circle, as if it had been born, walked once around a strange circumference, and then flew away.

Isabel fell on her knees, crying, and pulled at the soft earth where the horse's tracks lay. Against the sobs she began to growl. She started throwing the earth violently away when once again she heard the mare's call. This time it was closer and Isabel thought it was coming from straight ahead. She stood up and began to hurry forward. She was careful of the roots and rocks, but the strange lighting of the Old Wood allowed her to move quickly. She pushed her way through low branches, and over fallen logs. The dark trees began to thin out slightly and she found herself climbing a steep hill. Soon the only trees were pine. They all grew out of the side of the hill at an angle, only to bend sharply towards the dark sky halfway up their trunks. The smell of the trees filled her senses and as she climbed the last few feet of the hill she was smiling.

Isabel stood at the top of the hill and looked ahead. The trees clouded her view, but she could make out the face of a cliff not far off. She turned around and looked out over the forest. There was no end to the trees. There was only tree after tree under a starlit sky.

Behind her she heard the mare. She turned and thought she could see its white coat near the cliff. She ran forward and found herself pushing through thick ferns. Fireflies alighted around her and seemed to be growing more numerous until at last she found herself standing at the edge of a glade. From the cliff a waterfall fell into a clear pond and she could see her reflection in the water despite the ripples from the waterfall. She thought she looked older, her hair longer and falling around a woman's form.

Isabel started to laugh but caught herself. At the far side of the pool the mare stood drinking. Behind the horse was a young man, whose hand was stroking the back of the mare. She could only see his bare broad shoulders and head from behind the horse. His hair was dark and long, almost green, and seemed to melt against the moss climbing up the grey granite cliff. His eyes were dark, black as night. He had a slight grin on his clean shaven face that seemed to cast away the darkness of his eyes.

"Hello," the man said, his voice deep and rich as if it was from the same source as the waterfall falling on the rocks below. Without otherwise moving, he lifted his hand from the back of the mare, "are you hungry?" he pointed to his left, "Please, sit."

Isabel looked to her right. At the far side of the pool there was a low table of dark oak. Its legs were carved as rearing horses, their necks bent to hold the table. From the earth, around the table, there were seven lichen covered boulders, each carefully carved to form seats. The seat at the head of the table was flat and long, and it was covered with an immense black hide.

She looked back at the man, who was still smiling, then back at the table. She hesitated. Isabel couldn't decide whether to run or to accept the offer.

"Please," the man said with a slight shrug of his powerful shoulders. The mare stamped her hoof at the edge of the water. The man smiled wide, and began stroking the horse again, though he didn't take his gaze off Isabel. "I will not hurt you."

Isabel nodded, then quietly took a step, then another, then quickly hurried to the table. As she drew up to the table she noticed several large Lilly pads on top. Each bore

fruit of a wide variety. There were peeled oranges, nectarines, strawberries, blackberries, and more. All glistened in the ambient light as if perspiring their essence, begging to be consumed. In the center there was a long loaf of bread, heat and steam rising from its cut slices, as if it had just been pulled from the kiln.

Isabel stopped short of sitting down. Across from her she could see the hide hanging on the flat rock. Facing the table, near the earth, was the head of the hide. It was a giant bear, its maw hung open as if to draw in the whole of the table.

The temptation of the fruit was too much. Isabel sat down, opposite the hide chair, and was glad that the bear's head disappeared below the table. She reached out and grabbed an orange. She bit through it, without separating the slices, and then stopped. She turned to look at the man, who was still with the mare, leaving the orange in her open mouth. The juice from the orange began to run down her chin.

"It's okay. Please, eat," the man said. With that he slapped the thigh of the mare and moved towards Isabel. Isabel watched him and as he moved away from the cliff the orange dropped from her mouth and into her lap. From under the man's hair, two horns, like that of a ram's and grey like the granite, she could now see. She didn't know what to do. The juices from the orange began to seep through her nightgown and down the inside of her thighs.

As if only just aware of his appearance the man smiled and said again, "Do not worry, I mean you no harm." Isabel couldn't speak. His legs were just as strange. They were covered with a thick fur, like that of the bear's skin, and as he walked away from the mare, his legs bent like those of a horse, but slowly, almost unperceivable, they began to move as a man's. His feet were cloven hooves. As the shock of the man's alien appearance began to subside Isabel realized that he was naked. She blushed even though his fur covered most of his masculinity.

She stared at the orange between her legs, but through her long eyelashes she kept the man in sight with quick glances. The man sat down, his legs straddling the bear's head, and he reached for an apple. He began to eat and as he did calm overtook Isabel. She reached down, taking the orange up, and finished her meal. She was no longer cold, as if some deep cavern of heat beneath the earth warmed the rock upon which she sat. As

she finished the last bites of her orange she could still not look directly at the man, though she was sure he was watching her.

Finally she gained the courage to speak, "Tell me sir, what is your name?"

He laughed a deep rich laugh like rolling thunder on the planes. "Oh, I go by many names. Names are not important here, though I know yours to be Isabel."

"How...how do you know my name, sir?"

"I know many things, especially what concerns the spring."

Isabel jumped. From behind her she heard a woman, or several women giggling. She turned to look but there was no one to be seen.

"Do not worry. You are safe here. It is good that I found you. So many these days forget me and more still are not allowed to meet me. I don't know what's worse; a friend that you've forgotten or a friend that you'll never meet."

"If you are a friend, then do you know my father?"

"I know those who knew him. He has forgotten them. He half remembers them in dreams, but no more. I know your mother. She and I met a long time ago and I believe that she still remembers me, though in sleep my memory is much stronger. Now your grandmother..."

"You knew my grandmother?" Isabel blurted and stared at him. She blushed at her outburst, fell silent, and averted her gaze.

"Oh, yes. I knew your namesake well. She remembered me until the day she passed. She was one of the last of your village to remember me like that. Even when her hair was a hoary white she would come and visit me." Isabel looked up at him. He was smiling and gazing up at the stars. He seemed huge; his back was arched, his legs extending below the table. His head was thrown back, as if his horns were pulling him backwards, and as he spoke Isabel could see his Adam's apple undulating slowly, up and down. "She was a good woman, beautiful in every respect," as if realizing that her gaze was upon him he pulled his head up and looked her in the eyes, "like yourself, Isabel."

It made her tremble when he spoke her name.

"I will teach you something while you are here." Again, Isabel thought she heard women's laughter behind her, but she couldn't turn away from him.

There was a long moment of silence with the both of them staring at each other. Then finally Isabel asked, “What are you going to teach me.”

“Ahh, nothing so grand,” he said directing his gaze over her shoulder with a look of both reprimand and mirth. “Just something simple. But very important. It will help to ensure your happiness.”

Laughter again broke out behind her, though muffled. Isabel turned to look but again there was no one there, only the mare lying by the water. When she turned back to the man she saw that he had produced two large goblets and had set them down on the table. The one nearest her was like a long thin leaf, delicate and thin, and made of gold. The other one, nearly between the man’s legs, was of silver and shaped like an immense tulip.

“I will teach you how to drink from another’s cup. It is wisdom for one who is betrothed.”

Isabel sat up, fear began to squeeze in on her, but it was less intense than before.

“Do not worry,” he smiled, “your husband-to-be is a good man. Young and strong and he has been to this glade before. You are lucky.

“Let’s begin,” he laughed and pulled a large jug from under the bear’s skin. He leaned over and filled her cup first, then his, and then put the jug back. The liquid that he poured out smelled sweet but was as clear as water. Isabel reached out for her cup but he stopped her, “no, no, my dear. Drink not from your cup, but from your companions. That is how this works best.” Isabel stopped. She thought for a second then stood up. She blushed at her stained gown, but she forced herself to the side of the table. She reached out to take his tall goblet but again he stopped her, “no. You must never drink from his cup first. To do that will ensure that he does not drink from yours. But never let him take from yours without you first giving it to him, whether to drink or eat or anything else. You must first willingly give, to do otherwise spells disaster.”

Isabel looked at him, blushing, then looked back at the cups at the table. She gently leaned over and lifted her goblet from the table. The contents rolled softly from side to side as if in unison with the sensation in her stomach. She handed him the cup. His large hands briefly touched hers and she felt faint. She let go and, feeling dizzy, she sat back down. She found that the rock was now almost hot to the touch and sent warm chills

through her legs. The man stared hard at her. Though uncomfortable she found she could not look away. He continued his stare as he lifted the cup to his lips. The contents began to spill through the thin opening. At first the man only let a small stream through, but soon he began to tilt the goblet up higher and higher and the liquid began to spill down his chin and onto his legs. As the drink was consumed the rock under Isabel became warmer and warmer until the heat was unbearable. But it was a different heat than like that of a fire. It warmed her throughout, made her ache until she let out a whispered moan to the night sky.

He smiled as he licked the last of the drink from his lips. “Now it is your turn.” He stood up and took up his cup in one hand. He walked over to Isabel and set it in front of her. “Always remember,” he said, “even if he drinks of yours you are not bound to drink his, ever.” The goblet was nearly half as tall as she was. As the man sat back down, she took the cup in both hands and began to tilt it towards her lips. She rested the edge against her chin, and then she turned it so that the contents would pour nicely into her mouth. Slowly she put her lips to the cup. “Perfect,” the man whispered. Isabel leaned back and brought the cup with her. But the cup was not as full as hers had been so she had to continue to lean back, slowly, until the first drops spilled against her tongue. It tasted salty, unlike how it had smelled when he poured it. She tried to push it away, but the weight of it was too awkward and soon it spilled into her mouth in a rush. She choked, and coughed and finally it was light enough for her to push it back.

Isabel felt tired, her arms ached. The man looked at her through half-closed eyes and smiled, “excellent. It’s always difficult the first time, and you may never get used to it.” The giggling in the glade broke out again. “You must be tired,” he said and Isabel nodded, “here,” he stood and patted the bear skin. Isabel got up. Her legs felt weak and she could barely bring herself to walk the length of the table. Finally she made it and lay down. The man covered her with the other half of the skin and bent down to whisper in her ear, “You’ll visit me again?”

“When,” she yawned, “when I’m ready.”

“Of course,” he said and Isabel fell into a deep sleep.

Isabel awoke on the hard ground. The sun was shining through the canopy. She looked up and the white mare nuzzled her face. Isabel sat up and slid her hand along the horse's face.

There was a thunderous sound around her. The mare whipped her neck up, took a step back from Isabel, then fled into the deep wood.

"Here!" she heard a man shout. She stood up and looked around. There was a man approaching her, a burnt out torch in his hand, "Here!" he shouted again.

Soon other men came crashing through the trees. Finally a man pushed through the others.

"Father," Isabel called

Isabel's father threw his arms around his daughter, cradled her in his arms, and began to carry her back. As they walked along, she noticed a young man walking just to the right of them. He was handsome and had long hair. He smiled at Isabel and winked. She smiled back with a blush. She looked up at her father's face. He looked down at her and smiled.

"I can walk, father," she said. His smile faded, but then he nodded and set her down.