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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Once upon a time in a deep pine forest dwelled a solitary wisp - a creature no higher than tansy or thistle - who hovered and wandered between the trees as moths do in quiet, unobtrusive flutters. She flew without shadow in a world entirely of shade, and she flew wingless, trailing sheens of gossamer - rising on the slightest breeze as dandelion and milkweed seeds fluff away in the meadows beyond forests."

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Anna Crimson And The Dryad

By Joan Henson

Once upon a time in a deep pine forest dwelled a solitary wisp — a creature no higher than tansy or thistle — who hovered and wandered between the trees as moths do in quiet, unobtrusive flutters. She flew without shadow in a world entirely of shade, and she flew wingless, trailing sheens of gossamer — rising on the slightest breeze as dandelion and milkweed seeds fluff away in the meadows beyond forests.

Her hair was richest, russet auburn, the essence of loam, threaded with gold and flickering fire. Its latent glory crowned her head with an aura more like leaves than pine needles. And so it was the younger pines along the forest edge witnessed all the maples flaming in autumn who named her Anna Crimson.

Every year, when the fields grew brown and tall with seed and the maples flamed, the younger pines would call her while she flitted and played above their rooted feet. They chanted “Anna Crimson, Anna Crimson, why do you burn?” But Anna Crimson would not answer. Sometimes she only smiled, coiling long strands of her hair around her wrist. Sometimes she vanished into thickets of fern.

Soon the first frost hushed the trees and transformed the fields — all the tan-

Joan Henson, a Nazareth student, is married, the mother of four, and plans a career as a novelist and poet.

gled, bent grasses and empty pods — into a hoary tableau of dying. Fragile cups of Queen Ann’s lace and fuzzy burdock stiffened and glazed alike in the cold mornings. But in the forest, Anna Crimson prepared for hibernation. She escaped wind and snow by burrowing underground into a rabbit hole until spring.

While the pine tops howled and ice-heavy snow cracked branches, she curled against the roots in her dark and narrow tunnel. She slept and dreamed and made long journeys into herself — a labyrinth of pastel lights and vague faces. It inevitably happened that just when she could perceive a radiance caught somewhere in the periphery of her vision and trying to break out like sun from a cloud, she woke up. The dirt sides of her tunnel would be soft and almost black with moisture, and she would emerge with relief from the earth, like a luminous mushroom, free from the frightening light of her sleep.

New-tipped trees opened their cones and seeds drifted, spinning to the ground. Everywhere the forest floor brought forth violets and trillium and lady slippers, lulling her with a delicate, tranquil awakening. In the meadow, mice scurried, hosts of worms ploughed the soil. Tiny green shoots struggled for light while Anna Crimson lay beside her favorite bed of ferns, contemplating the tight fronds unwinding.

But when it rained, she walked, so she could feel the pleasurable density of water-soaked moss and needles with her toes. She walked as if she and the moss and the pine needles and the rain were an entity penetrating the forest, nourishing and cushioning it. She became different in the rain, with an overwhelming need to touch and meld with things.

She found me in the spring. I remember her far off, weaving between the trees as if she were the random rain. I remember that as she came closer, the raindrops slipped down her auburn hair, deepening its color. Still closer. I ached for a form like hers, unlike hers, complementary to hers. What I had been before. Closer. She stopped directly beneath me and looked up into my high branches. I thought, am I greener, broader, more symmetrical than the others? Or can you sense me, Anna Crimson?

She peeled away a piece of bark and turned it in her hands. Bark is beautiful when wet. Gray-brown becomes rich brown within browns striated with myriad colors, and what was dry and rough becomes texture comfortable and wonderful to fingertips. How like me you are, Anna Crimson! How awed I was at trees!

She leaned against me, tearing the filmy stuff of her gown.

I spoke.

"Anna Crimson."

From the very first, she knew where I was. No startled pushing away at the sound of my voice. No nervous searching behind my trunk to find me. She *knew*. Had her mother or father told her stories about dryads when she was small?

I was surprised when she slid down to my roots, murmuring, "I had no idea I was so lonely."

"Comes of hiding, Anna Crimson."

"I have been by here many times, and you never spoke to me. Why today?"

"Because today I have been touched free. You stripped me of skin and brushed my pitch. See, your hand is sticky with me. You have released me. We all need to be touched free, Anna Crimson, even you." And so it started, in the rain, her wet body next to mine.

In the summer she brought me an acorn some squirrel left behind, and we talked about oak trees.

"Do you remember the shape of oak trees, Anna Crimson?"

"Do you?"

"I asked first."

"Well, the leaves look like puddles, or two spirits leaving each other.

"Or two coming back."

She pressed her shoulders to my broken, shaggy skin and smiled. "Or two coming back. Oak trees — huge, oval and dense — are magnificent. We had picnics under an oak tree when I was a child. My mother loved trees."

"Yes, she did."

She cocked her head. "What do you know of my mother?"

"She often came into the forest."

"Did you ever speak to her?"

"No, she never touched me. And she never stayed long. She was always worried about you. I could hear her fretting as she went by, 'My daughter, my daughter,' and soon she was gone again."

Anna Crimson picked up a bundle of needles and snapped them into bits. "She was foolish to leave."

And I watched a new layer like cambium build and cover her thinly and surely and safely from memory and me. In an instant she gathered herself and fled.

The days piled for us in numberless clusters like sheathed cones growing

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and falling until one unusually fine autumn day. The air above was cool and sharp, cleansed of heat and the fragrance of late summer flowers. It smelled of apples.

Anna Crimson came through the trees to me, holding her hands over her ears and trembling. The pine trees were calling — "Anna Crimson, Anna Crimson, why do you burn?" Their rustling sifted down past the lower bare branches and she seemed annoyed to hear something she had not allowed before. Her fingers burrowed into the pine needles as if some secret lay hidden in their depth, a collective serenity born of deep-green dropping for years past counting and changing to pale sienna. Did she notice how much the smooth needles resembled faded hair?

Suddenly, I was intensely weary. The weight of what she was feeling constricted me. I could not breathe. I wanted to run between bushes and fly above clover into blue sky. To take Anna Crimson in my arms.

She spoke without looking at me.

"Dryad, it is time. I woke up this morning and saw the sun. I remember Timothy, and his voice is calling, too. He is waiting out there.

Our time — over. She had been touched free.

"Yes, it is time."

She looked up, then, bit her knuckle and groaned.

"I will come back to see you.

"No."

"No?"

"No."

"But you will miss me!"

I would not answer.

"Say something. Me, Anna Crimson, I am leaving!"

"Goodbye."

Her face blanched with rage.

"You dumb, dead — TREE!"

I stood perfectly still, willing my branches steady and my roots hard, thinking no arms any more, no legs. I am a tree and dead.

She turned her head and shot off, ripples of her hair glinting like dark water, diminishing to starpoint and finally disappearing altogether.

Anna Crimson went home to her own. Milkweed pods filled with honey were brought to her, circles of children sang and there was jubilant dancing

late into the moonlight because she had returned.

Timothy had indeed waited. A wedding was planned as though she had never been away. But Anna Crimson was not the same. Much as she loved her people — the vague faces once again in focus — and sunsets, and wandering with Timothy by brooks and over hills, the open sky always aroused longing for someone who really knew her, someone who in a moment guessed her mood, someone able to engage her without body or words, who followed and shared the eerie terrain of her mind and the infinite roamings of her soul. That someone was not Timothy. That someone did not exist in the fields. Many times, especially when she was surrounded by relatives and friends, she remembered the first words she had said to the dryad: "I had no idea I was so lonely."

But the pine forest was dark, a forever night, and she had eyes to see the day.

She married Timothy.

A baby girl was born in the spring, and Timothy believed that Anna Crimson had totally returned. He did not hear his wife cry when she saw her child, "I am my mother now."

Flowers and bees took over the fields. Anna Crimson and Timothy and their baby revelled in blue and green summer days, moving among profusions of fragrance and rainbow blendings of blooms. Anna Crimson was golden. She could feel her whole body embracing field and sun and the teeming earth, and now she and Timothy and their baby were entity fulfilling and nurturing each other. She felt her body whole, yet yearned to see the dryad. She fought an ache to drop white days at his roots and baskets of flowers and berries. Anna Crimson was golden and overflowing.

"Go away," she begged his presence in her mind. "Go away." She swallowed hard and picked up her child.

But Anna Crimson could not forget him, imprisoned in evergreen. When it rained, she plucked daisy petals, thinking of bark, and then, autumn, when all the leaves turned, was her undoing. The maples, more than flaming, raged. Ghosts of pine trees taunted her: "Anna Crimson, Anna Crimson, why do you burn?" She stared into the high, blazing

faces and knew why. For the sound of his voice in its seasons. The leap of her being into his. Desire flared to obsession. She went back.

She ripped her gown hugging my bark, heedless, laughing and crying all at once, stretching and leaning back again, feckless with joy.

"Did you miss me, dryad?"

I remained silent.

"Never mind. I missed you. Always. You never leave me. Do you know that? Let me tell you where we have been, you and I. I have a baby. Oh, it is good to sit on smooth ground and not have to travel through wild raspberry and poison ivy. I must watch the baby constantly. She is crawling now. If I were smart, I would scoop her up and bring her here."

I chuckled. "You sound like your mother."

Her eyes burned, but she was very quiet. I realized how long it had been since she left and how foolish it is to try to escape pain. Her eyes closed, and I knew she was not asleep, but inchoate. We were together. The stars moved.

Finally, she nodded. A moment later, she was standing and carefully peeling a flake of bark.

"It is past dawn. I must go."

"I know."

Her fist clenched bloodless around the scrap of bark.

"Say my name before I go."

"Anna Crimson. Goodbye."

I heard her withdrawing, but crystal visions of her lingered, clarified and brilliant in the dark.

Anna Crimson flew into new daylight. The sky was aster blue and blinding. She squinted and rubbed her eyes. The field looked lush, tawny with weeds, and the trees were glorious in the sun. Wind caught at her hair and whipped it across her eyes, and the sun set it afire. She sank to her knees and cried. She cried for a long time. When she rose, her eyes glittered with purpose, and she began searching the field for a sharp stone. Finding what she wanted, she crouched on a rock, holding handfuls of hair away from her, and cut until her head was shards of color, and the ground shimmered with dusky flame. She gathered her hair in her arms and reentered the woods.

She stood before the dryad, wordless, tears streaming, and dropped her hair. Resin escaped from the tree. A dead branch let go beside her, and the

top needles whistled like keening in the wind.

She screamed high and long, and suddenly the light left her eyes. The trunk shuddered with receiving, enfolding, becoming Anna Crimson. The creature below them dissolved like a dream, and left only her auburn hair, softly shining.

Anna Crimson was gone. In the field, her baby woke up restless with hunger, and Timothy called and called.

"I see you lost in yourself within my deep pine forest. Listen to the younger pines telling you that the maples are flaming now. Instinctively, they sway and chant a ritual of words, passed at once by uppermost branches till the older pines nod with knowing, feeling a green deep stirring in their roots. Now on the ground the heaped pine needles darken for moments and glow fire. And the high, high rustling is in your ears.

"You must run and run out of the darkness, through the younger pines into the fields and sun.

"Run.

"Before you break my bark.

"Before I speak.

"Before you fall to the ground forever, you, beautiful hair, and we are one."

