

Without A Peep

She placed her foot into the mud and the slimy grey sludge oozed upwards, around her sandals and squished between her toes. She never wanted to venture into this forest, but Bo Peep was one sheep short and had to find it before nightfall, before the next storm cell burst.

The last one had left the landscape awash—the flock scurried in every direction when lightning struck their peaceful paddock. A mother sheep bellowed out for its baby and Bo Peep had to leave the safety of the grasslands to go and look for it.

There were always stories about children disappearing in those woods. Twins Douglas and Tim had followed three blind mice along the same winding path ten years ago. Two years ago, red-headed Beth went into the woods to collect pocketfuls of posies. None of them were seen again.

‘I’ll be alright,’ Bo Peep said reassuringly, lifting her eyes from the narrow path before her. ‘I’m nineteen. I’m an adult. *He* doesn’t like adults.’

It’s true. *He’s* never had an appetite for them, but Bo Peep was small for her age. In the dwindling light of the forest, *little* Bo Peep could easily pass for a child.

Struggling to find firm footholds on the wet, mossy roots of the Fig Trees, she slipped and put her hand out to stop her fall. It disappeared into a pool of muddy water and her face and hair landed in the mud beside it. She let out a scream as her elbow hit against the nub of a root.

Bo Peep heard the echo and quickly covered her mouth with a muddy hand, ‘Oh Bo! Don’t do that, *he’ll* hear you.’

Rain poured down and washed the silt from her matted hair and face to her soaked cotton dress. It clung to her body when she stood—lightning momentarily revealing her feminine shape, thunder thumping through the forest as if to applaud.

The rain intensified, obscuring the path ahead. When lightning flashed, it lit the thousands of raindrops in mid-air so brightly it produced a blinding whiteout—and a blackened world immediately after.

It would’ve been better to stay in one place than to try and navigate the forest now, but Bo Peep’s instinct to return the frail lamb to its worried mother was paramount. She should’ve been paying better attention to herself.

From out of the abyss, a muscular arm reached towards her and a large hand clasped around her throat. She struggled out a scream just as the face of a man materialized at the other end of it.

‘That won’t make a difference,’ he said, pressing his nose to hers. ‘It never has before.’

Her eyes widened and she screamed again. Water streamed around his grimy, unshaven face, along the tip of his nose and onto her chin. She could smell his putrid breath and feel its heat settle upon her lips. She held onto his wrist with both hands and tried to pry free from his grip.

‘I’ll make you deal, your life for his.’

He stepped back and raised his other arm. Cradled in it was tiny ball of creamy wool. It moved, bleated, and wriggled about.

‘Well? How about it?’ he asked, giving her neck an extra squeeze. ‘Want to see him go home, wagging his tail behind him?’

She stood silently, unable to utter a word.

‘His mother must be worried sick. The poor thing looks frightened.’

She shook uncontrollably as her eyes flicked between his and that of the lamb’s.

‘I guess it’s up me to make a choice for you instead.’

He gently dropped the tiny bundle and it scurried away into the rain, bleating until it couldn’t be heard anymore. He leant in again and placed his other hand around the back of her neck, ‘He’s going home. You are not.’

His grip tightened and she found it difficult to breathe. He moved in closer and pressed his body against hers. She felt a hard lump push on her stomach. Bo Peep sucked in air and made a bow with her lips, but she couldn’t make a peep.

‘I’ll give you one minute,’ he said whispering into her ear.

He slid his hands to the top of her chest and then ripped the dress’s flimsy neckline. He spun her around and peeled it from her until she was stripped bare—she fell, the mud sloshing about her knees and legs. Before she’d realized what’d happened, he’d disappeared.

Calling out from beyond the abyss, ‘Your time starts now.’