



WOLFSKIN

by Sharon Blackie

SAY YOU GO alone into the woods. It's winter, and you're hungry. So you take up your rifle, put on your deerskin jacket and your boots lined with rabbit fur. Off you trot.

Say it's dawn, and the light in the woods is thin. Air clear, and snow on the ground to give the game away. Crow calling your name; ready-to-roost owl hooting its warning into fire-filled sky. Fledgling morning, Orion no more than a glimmer now, Hunter hanging over hunter.

But say you don't think much of all that. You're there to kill your dinner, not to admire the scenery.

Say you're tired; you were up late the night before. Slim pickings in the woods, and on you walk. Say you're tired as evening falls; the rabbit is still warm. A long way back home, and the mill house which takes you by surprise invites you in. So you go inside to spend the night. Tomorrow there might be hind. Make a fire in the parlour, skin and cook the rabbit. You climb into the loft to sleep. Leave the fire burning in the grate; hot air rises. Leave broth and bones in the pan for breakfast.

Say you hear the door open just as you're falling asleep. Door creaks, like all the best stories say. Say a wolf comes in.

FOXFIRE, WOLFSKIN

Sniffs; smells something tasty. Say she goes to the fire; raises herself up on her hind legs, shouts, *Skin down! Skin down!* Sure enough, down comes her skin. Slips out of it, and out slips a woman. The mill house is her home. Hangs the skin up on a peg behind the door, goes back to the fire, gnaws bones, drinks warm broth, falls asleep on the rush mat.

Say you watch this from a hole in the loft's wooden floor. Say you creep down the ladder and snatch away the wolf-woman's skin. Nail it to the mill wheel, tight and true. Walk over to the fire and nudge the wolf-woman with your foot. Say she screams, *Skin on me! Skin on me!* but it's the mill wheel the skin is on.

The wolf-woman cries.

Say you laugh.

Ha ha ha.

You know the rest. Wolf-woman has to marry man, because man has her skin. Man moves into enchanted mill; wolf-woman cleans and cooks. Same old story. Say you tell her you like stories; make her tell you stories each night before bed. Wolf-stories; they make you laugh. Promise to give her skin back if she tells you a story you really like.

But say you actually decide to sell the skin; it'll fetch a pretty price. Didn't even have to skin the wolf; it came ready made for sale. Say the wolf-woman sees that her skin is gone, and cries.

Say you laugh.

Ha ha ha.

Say the wolf-woman begins pregnant with hope, but ends up pregnant with a man-child. Say the man-child kills his brother Hope in the womb.

Don't you like this story? Say you do. You don't seem to be laughing now.

Well then: say the man-child hears people whisper that his mother is really a wolf. *Mama!* he says. *Are you a wolf?*

What nonsense, says the mother, and turns away.

Say the man-child asks his father whether his mother is a wolf. Father says yes. Man-child asks father where his mother's skin is. Father says he sold it.

Say the man-child starts to wonder whether he is a wolf too. Asks his mother how to find his wolf-skin. Say she tells him only his mother can show him how to discover his skin, and only when she's a wolf. The boy cries.

Say you laugh for the third time.

Ha ha ha.

Say the father sends the man-child over to the preacher's house. Takes a fresh buckskin and a basket of buns. Man-child smells his mother there, but mother is at home. Man-child sniffs; follows his nose. Follows his wolf-nose to the wolf-skin thrown on the seat of the preacher-man's wooden bench. Say he goes home and says to his mother, *Mama, Mama! I know where your skin is!*

Say the wolf-woman has lost her skin, but still has a wolf's bones. Say the wolf-woman has lost her skin, but still has a wolf's heart. Say the wolf-woman has lost her skin, but still has a wolf's eyes. Say the wolf-woman creeps out in the dark while her husband is away hunting, and steals through the window of the preacher's house. *Skin on me!* she says. And on the skin comes. Skin reaches for her, clamps around her, tightens. Caresses her like a lover, and she shudders. Skin

FOXFIRE, WOLFSKIN

flows all over her, down her back, around her thighs. Skin wraps itself softly around her throat, loosens her hurt heart.

Say the hunter comes home to find his wife gone and a wolf sitting in the kitchen. The cub is alongside. Say the wolf growls and bares its teeth. Say you never see it coming.

Say the wolf gets the last laugh.

Ha ha ha.