

The Truth about Little Red Riding Hood

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As an historian of disability issues, I have been researching references to disabilities in children's stories. Curiosity led me to the tale of *Little Red Riding Hood*, wondering what infirmity Red's grandmother might have had. What I uncovered truly was mind boggling. My research revealed that the story is a classic insofar as disability is concerned. Not only was the grandmother quite ill and disabled, but the person on whose life the character "Red" was based was a teenager who had a severe disability. What's more, the original manuscript, parts of which have been preserved by the author's family, was based on real people and reflects a tale more fitting for the *Inquirer* than children's books. It must have taken decades of political correction to transform it into the children's story familiar to most of us. When pieced together, the original story's hallmarks are violence, sex, and profanity, making it more suited to late night television than to kindergarten.

First, I discovered that the real person whose name is reflected in the story title was part Native American, which is where "Red" originated. Investigating further, medical records were found suggesting that she had a congenital disease known as osteogenesis imperfecta, often referred to as brittle bone disease by the laypublic. The bones of persons with this condition fracture easily, making ordinary tasks like walking hazardous. Often these persons are small, not reaching a height of three feet. Red, in fact, was small in stature and used a wheelchair in which to get around. This was the likely basis for the "Little" and "Riding" parts of her name.

It took considerable digging, however, to uncover the origin of the "Hood" part of her name. Going through her neighbor's diary, I eventually discovered that Little Red had a hard life growing up. She had been rejected by her parents, especially her father, who was ashamed of her. To complicate matters, her father was Caucasian and her mother, a Native American. From the moment of Little Red's birth, they had conflicted views about virtually everything surrounding her rearing

and appeared never to have bridged their cultural differences. Under the circumstances, Little Red never came to accept her condition, blaming everyone, near and far, for her disability-related problems. Consequently, she was extremely bitter and was the terror of the small rural community in which the family resided. On numerous occasions, she was seen shoplifting, writing graffiti on buildings, and committing other acts of vandalism. Of course, the townspeople felt sorry for her and just turned their heads. Red was aware of that fact, and took advantage of it. As a result, she became referred to as that "little hood" [hoodlum] by angry shop owners and others who were the victims of her antics. These tags all got strung together by the story's author, giving us the well known moniker and story title, "Little Red Riding Hood." The reconstructed original story follows:

It was a bright and sunny day when Little Red Riding Hood began her usual weekly trek to visit her elderly grandmother. As she drew near the edge of the town, an occasional bystander smiled as she passed by. In turn, Little Red gave a quick salute with the stiffened middle finger of her left hand. If their eyes lingered, she'd make some biting comment like, "What are you staring at? Look in a mirror and you'll see worse!" Nonetheless, despite her malicious behavior, many of the townspeople clung to the belief that Little Red had a soft spot in her heart because of her kindness to her grandmother. That really was not the case. It was true that Little Red was taking cookies and sweet buns to her grandmother, but what the townspeople didn't realize was that her grandmother was diabetic. In fact, she was nearly totally bedridden because of her ulcerated legs and congestive heart failure. Her condition was typical of an elderly person with poorly controlled diabetes.

Little Red was quite intelligent and fully understood what she was doing. Undermining her grandmother's diabetic regimen was part of a well thought out plan that came to light. Initially her intent was to befriend her grandmother who lived alone in a remote cabin. Once trusted, Red would be able to wander about freely to lift jewelry and other valuables. Red's intentions changed, however, when she hit a bonanza beyond her wildest imagination. Her grandmother was so taken by

the feigned affection that she took Little Red into her confidence. "Little Red, " she said one afternoon, "you have given me great pleasure and joy. You are the only one who seems to give a tinker's damn about me anymore. Even my own daughter has not been back to visit me since she ran off with that white trash father of yours to become civilized. I have had a will drawn up and made you the sole heir to my meager holdings. I don't have much, but I want you know that it is a gift from the heart."

"Meager" hardly was descriptive of grandmother's massive estate in the forest. The government originally had deeded the property to her late husband, a chief, as part of a treaty with Native Americans decades earlier. [Actually, it was a payoff by the government for selling out his tribe, but that's another story.] The estate extended from the edge of town for a distance that took two days to walk and probably constituted several hundred thousand acres. Understandably, because the trees and land had been so plentiful, Little Red's grandmother never ascribed much value to them. From her standpoint, the primary value of the woodlands was that they shielded her from the town, which seemed so out of touch with nature. And she certainly didn't realize that the town was feeling growing pains and desperate to extend its boundaries into her holdings.

Red couldn't wait to get her hands on the woodlands so she could begin selling off parcels to elevate her lifestyle to a more suitable level. Initially, she considered outright murdering her grandmother. But then, she was smart and realized that she quickly would become the number one suspect because of her reputation and trips to the cabin. She knew that because her grandmother was elderly and ailing, time would take its toll. As fate would have it, however, Red eventually learned about diabetes and was determined to speed up the development of complications by undermining her grandmother's diet. After all, she was just performing acts of kindness by taking grandmother the baked goods and other sweets, things her grandmother truly seemed to appreciate. In the end, grandmother would be determined to have died from "natural causes" and Little Red would be in the

clear with the estate.

Red proceeded to wheel over the unpaved path through the forest. The trip was quite a struggle, sometimes taking her more than two hours to reach the cabin. That fact probably underpinned the moments of admiration felt by the townspeople. Visions of living a life of luxury helped sustain her during the ordeal. As you might know, however, luck, at least good luck, was not with Little Red this day. About an hour into the forest, she encountered a large pine tree which had fallen across the path during a severe thunderstorm the evening before. Red was undaunted. Hardly hesitating, she sized up the situation, determined that the best detour was around the top end of the tree, and continued on her adjusted route. As she neared the top of the tree, her wheelchair suddenly tilted to one side and stopped. Little Red nearly somersaulted out of the chair, but as experienced as she was with such incidents, she quickly regained her composure and managed to reposition herself. Methodically she assessed the situation, reaching down to brush away some pine straw from the wheels. She had wheeled right into a muddy spot hidden by the debris.

For several minutes Red struggled, first tugging at one wheel and then the other. She then tried rocking the chair, but the chair would not budge an inch. Her actions were hampered by her need to be careful that she not stress her bones too much. Finally, an exhausted Red realized that she was totally stuck. At that point, she sucked in all the air her little lungs would hold and let out with a string of profanity that would make *Hustler* readers blush. As the four-letter words echoed through the forest, birds in the nearby tree branches were startled and fluttered off, fearing for their lives. Then an eerie silence fell on the forest. Tears glistened as they began to streak down Little Red's cheeks, lit by the lone sunbeam that penetrated the tree branches above. It was too much to bear.

Little Red did not fully appreciate how desperate her situation was. Less than a hundred yards away was a wolf _ in search of food. Now the wolf was in equally desperate straights. Hard times had fallen on his like. The trees in the forest had grown tall and their thick branches shut out

most of the sunlight. As a result, there was little undergrowth to support rabbits, deer, and other animals that were the mainstay of a wolf's diet. He had been a true loner and did not move off with the rest of his pack when they left in search of better pickings. Now he had nowhere to go. At this time, he was subsisting on an occasional chipmunk or mouthful of berries from one of the scattered bushes still struggling to survive in the ever dimming sunlight. There were weeks when the only thing he had to fill his belly was water from the creek that flowed through the woodlands. He had been turned into an emaciated cage of bones held together by a tattered hide sprinkled with patches of gnarled fur. Looking anorexic would have been an improvement.

When the wolf heard Little Red's tirade beginning, his ears stiffened. Muscles, which once could hold him perfectly still for an hour or more while stalking a rabbit, quivered. Instinctively, he honed in on the shrill voice with the precision of a geophysical positioning device. He immediately recognized the voice as that of a human. Ordinarily he avoided humans because of his wolfpack's experience with the townspeople. At onetime, the wolves casually strode into town at night and raided garbage cans and snacked on dogs and cats that were a bit too venturesome for their own good. Then, the townspeople began arming themselves to the hilt, and the pack quickly learned about the lethality of guns. In short order, people became a species to fear. But something was different about this voice, and he attended to every nuance of the torrent of four-letter words as they poured forth. Suddenly it hit him...he was hearing the same shrillness that arose from wolf pups in distress. "Oh my, a little one," he thought, and saliva began to drip from his quivering lower lip.

The wolf carefully inched along toward Little Red, using every precaution in the *Wolf Ways Manual* so as to not frighten his prey off. He maneuvered around to her back and held his breath as he began the final approach. Thoughts of a full stomach floated in his mind. Then, when less than 10 yards away, he sprung forth with all the strength his weakened body could muster, taking a gulp of fresh air to ease his pained lungs at the same moment. He landed just right and in an instant his paws

were around Little Red's arms and torso. He had her and there was no way she could escape!

Well of course, Little Red about wet herself. Moreover, it wasn't even a contest for the wolf because she literally had cried herself to sleep. As her stupor dissipated, her eyes first leveled on the paws. Ever so carefully she raised her head and glanced back. Their noses almost touched. "I think I got me a little crippled girl," the wolf whispered. At that, Little Red's hair almost stood on end. "You mangy son-of-a-bitch, don't you be calling me no girl," she shrieked. "I'm Ms. Red to you, and get your fuckin paws off me. And as for calling me a cripple, you got a lot of nerve. You're nothing but a despicable predator on a fast track to the endangered species list, if not outright extinction. To you, I am a young woman who just happens to have a disability and a proud Native American heritage."

Although the wolf had no previous direct contact with a human, he had prepared well and remained cool. "I can't wait to wrap my lips around you and eat you," he said, anticipating the feast he was about to have. Momentarily, Little Red relaxed and her eyes even sparkled a bit. "I'll be damned!" she exclaimed. "You are a real wolf. You sure do know how to pick a spot. This place is romantic, as if that's important. Try to be real careful so I don't get no bones broke. No big "O"s for me. Just lots of little ones." That caught the wolf off guard and startled him. He hadn't thought about sex for months because of his preoccupation with hunger. In the end, however, Red's inviting words couldn't compete with his hunger pangs. Now shaking with excitement, he said firmly, "I am going to eat you, bones and all," and began drooling. A drop of his hot saliva hit the back of Little Red's neck, and she fully grasped her intended fate.

Understand she did, but she was not ready to give up. Above all, Little Red was a survivor. She had escaped many so-called "terminal predicaments" during her short life. Rather than going numb like most folks would, her mind began running fast enough to leave a Cray super computer in the dust. "I need time," she thought, "keep him talking and keep thinking." In an instant, she had the wolf engaged in conversation. "I can't get away. You probably realize I can't run. So I'm yours, I

guess. Can I ask a small favor?" "What's that?" the wolf asked. "I know I'm a goner," Red convincingly whimpered, "all I'm askin is that you bite my head off first so I don't have to suffer. Even a wolf like you must have some compassion." The wolf seemed moved. "Okay, I'll do that," he muttered. "Head first, feet first, makes no difference...you're going to fill my belly."

Suddenly, lightning struck within Little Red's brain and she excitedly cried out, "I'm surprised you didn't look in my basket," nodding down toward the side of her chair where she had placed it. The wolf hadn't noticed it sitting next to the wheel. With one paw, he carefully reached for the basket and drew it near him. He slipped the cloth cover away, and when he realized what the contents were, he momentarily let go of Little Red. He quickly lifted the basket to his mouth, and nearly inhaled the goodies. He was smacking his lips as his paws again slipped around Little Red. "Quite an appetizer. I hope you didn't think that was going to keep me from the main course," he chortled. "No," Little Red replied, "get on with it. Remember, my head first. You promised."

The wolf began lifting Little Red from her chair, and she began speaking again. "I'm glad you didn't ask what I was going to do with that basket of food," she said in an amazingly calm voice for someone staring death in the face. "I wouldn't have told you I was taking it to my old grandmother who lives not far from here. You can torture me and I won't tell you that she lives just off to the right of the path where the lone oak tree is. I wouldn't tell you because she is laying in bed helpless and can't protect herself. She even has to leave the door unlatched because she can't get up to let me in. You'd get her in a minute. Not that you'd want to eat her, though. She's real fat from all the sweet rolls and candy I've been taking her. I never told her, but actually she's so fat she's kind of repulsive."

The wolf couldn't believe what he was hearing. "These humans are really stupid," he thought. By now, the wolf was actually slobbering all over himself. He slowly eased Little Red back down into the wheelchair. "What you waiting for? Don't be playin. Get it over," she pleaded. With

visions of sugar plums dancing in his head, the wolf began speaking in a more sinister tone of voice. "I have something urgent to do. I'll be back in a short while. A wolf has got to do what a wolf has got to do." He was thinking, "yes, I'll be back for dessert. Entree, here I come!"

As I'm sure you guessed by now, Little Red was not being stupid. Not only did she buy herself a bunch of time, she was disposing of her grandmother much more quickly than her original plan was taking. If a wolf did in her grandmother, there was no way that she could be implicated. She would be home free with the estate as soon as the few legal details were handled. But, of course, Red was not in the clear yet. She was still stuck in the mud. Immediately, she began re-assessing the situation.

It didn't take the wolf long to find his way to the cabin. He carefully approached the door and put an ear to a knothole. Not a sound. Ever so slowly he pushed the heavy plank door til the opening was just wide enough to slip through. He paused to listen for a moment, and as luck was with him, he heard snoring. It only took a quick glance to find Little Red's grandmother lying sound asleep in a corner of the room. What happened next was not pleasant.

Meanwhile, back at the tree, Red brainstormed. "If only I could get a hold of a branch or something, I could pull myself out of this hell-hole." Then, a flash of brilliance occurred. She twisted her small torso and pulled up the leather purse which was hanging on the back of her chair. She unbuckled the strap from one side of the purse and found it to be nearly four feet long. She carefully knotted the loose end of the strap to the arm of her wheelchair. She then clutched the small purse in her hands like a basketball and took aim at the "Y" in a branch sticking up from the fallen tree top. On the first toss, the purse hit the branch below the target and fell to the ground. Little Red uttered through gritted teeth, "I can make this shot." She grasped the strap, retrieved the purse, and set up again. With a delicate heave, the purse left her hands again, flying in a small rainbow-like trajectory. This time it sailed over the "Y" and dangled downward on the opposite side. Adrenalin poured into

Little Red's bloodstream. Again, she seized the strap near the knot and began tugging ever so gently. The purse twisted crosswise in the "Y" and Little Red pulled the strap taut. The purse had become wedged and would not slip back over. With the purse strap she now was able to pull the limb toward her until she could grasp it. She leaned back in the chair as far as she could to take the weight off the front wheel that had become mired in the mud. Steadily, she began pulling at the limb. Then, just as suddenly as her problem began, she felt a slight jar. The struggle was over.

Little Red paused to catch her breath. At the same time, her mind was running at a feverish pace. "He should be finished with his dirty work by now and is probably on his way back," she muttered aloud, "and I better get my little ass moving." She hesitated as the thought struck her that she might run right into the wolf on the path. Quickly she decided she would take the risk. "He'll have his bearing and take the shortest way back, not the path," she concluded.

You'd think that Little Red would have beat it back to town. However, as you know, patience was not one of her qualities. She wanted to be able to report her grandmother's death as soon as possible and had to make certain that the wolf had done her in. Thus, she continued down the path toward the cabin. Finally, she came within sight of the rustic building and saw that the door was ajar. "Yes!" she exclaimed loudly. Red hurriedly wheeled up to the door. She pulled it open wide enough so her wheelchair could get in. As she entered the room, an uneasy feeling gripped her. Something was wrong, but what? Then she heard it. Snoring was coming from grandmother's bed in the corner. "Aw, he fucked up," she thought, "I gave the idiot a road map and he still didn't find the place. That's a male, for you." What Little Red didn't realize was that the wolf, in fact, had done the job. But after having pigged out on the grandmother, he was so full he could hardly move. Besides, he was exhausted because he had limited physical reserve, being near starvation and all. He had decided to take a short nap before he went back to get Little Red. She wasn't going anywhere...or so he had thought.

A distraught Little Red decided to make the most of the ill-fated trip and visit with her grandmother for a while. Moreover, she was tired from her ordeal and needed to rest before she began the trip back to town. It wasn't unusual for her grandmother to be napping when she arrived, so without thinking, Red wheeled over to the bed to awaken her. She reached out, grasped the blanket with her small hand, and began pulling it back. As soon as her startle reflex subsided, Red made a 180 degree turn with her wheelchair and headed back toward the door. Unfortunately, a wheel creaked as she strained to escape, and that brought the wolf to his feet. In two strides, he had her in his grasp again. "I don't know what the hell is going on," he said, "but it looks like my dessert has been delivered to me." "Shit, here we go again," Little Red muttered in disgust.

"It ain't over, til it's over," Red thought. Her mind sparked. Then she began, "Wolf, you can eat me if you want, but if you do, you'll be trashing the opportunity of a lifetime." "What are you talking about?" the wolf asked. "Well, you see, I am the sole heir to my grandmother's estate which includes most of this forest," she responded. "That probably don't make a whole lot of sense to you, but it means that I will be able to sell it off and make a fortune. Then, when I get a whole lot of money, I can buy things. I could even buy a butcher shop." The wolf's ears perked up. From his puppyhood visits into town, he knew what a butcher shop was. Little Red went on, "I was thinking, maybe we could become partners. I could buy a butcher shop so you could have hams and steaks and sausages anytime you wanted, and you could protect me." The wolf thought for a minute. He sensed a thread of sincerity in her words. "Ms. Red," he said in a somewhat respectful tone, "you are not going to be easy to work with. You got a foul mouth and a nasty disposition." "I know," she replied apologetically. "I'll try to restrain myself a little when I'm around you. If I start getting too far out of line, you just feel free to give me a good tongue lashing." "My pleasure," he replied, giving Little Red a suggestive wink.

The End