

Magenta Presents...  
The Woodwose  
by Lindsay Sharman

Magenta and Bernard framing  
Written by Lindsay Sharman

A Long Cat Media Production

(CREAKING DOOR)

M - Greetings, fans of the esoteric...

(LIGHTNING CRACK)

and welcome to...

(MAGENTA PRESENTS STING)

Whispered voice – Magenta Presents.

M - This episode, we are thrilled to present a new and slightly horrifying tale: The Woodwose.

B – *Slightly* horrifying?

M – Yes. Maybe now is a good time to talk about how Magenta Presents straddles the full spectrum of horror. Imagine, Bernard, if you will, a particularly wide horse, and on that horse is me. On one side of the horse my foot is resting in a truly unsettling stirrup, with strange symbols carved into the metal, symbols that writhe and shriek, and the stirrup is dripping gore, and my foot is finding the whole thing a bit *too* exciting. And on the other side of the horse, the stirrup is... well, it's fine, just a bit weird. Maybe it's got a five legged cat carved into it or something like that.

B – That makes a lot of sense.

M – Yes.

B – So today's short story is a five legged cat?

M – That's right. Our second short story of the series is the tale of The Woodwose. And Bernard, it's written by the same person who wrote Ghosted.

B – You mean Lindsay Sharman? Do you mean to say that Lindsay Sharman is right here, somewhere in the mansion, ready to read a story to us?

M – She is, she is! She arrived a short while ago, you must have missed her, Bernard. Poor lass, her car had broken down on a winding country lane so the poor girl had to walk the rest of the way in the thundering rain, so when she arrived I sent her to one of the haunted bathrooms just to freshen up. She should be down soon enough.

B – Oh I'm so looking forward to seeing her again. Such a fascinating woman.

M – Isn't she!

B - Such dewy skin.

M – Amazing skin. With bright sparkling eyes, and she smells beautiful.

B – Doesn't she!

M -Should we give her a little introduction before she arrives?

M – Oh yes, good idea, let's do that. But what can one say about Lindsay? A woman of many faces. A writer, a fighter, a go-go dancer. Bernard and I first met her – and her husband – many years ago, at a key party.

(A distant SCREAM, general horror weirdness.)

M – Oh, that didn't sound good.

B – Was that... Lindsay?

M – It did sound like her, didn't it. It's alright. Maybe she's just tripped over some fallen masonry or something.

(more screams and horror).

Lindsay – (distant) I'm changing!!

B – Oh that didn't sound good at all, did it. Maybe one of us should go and check she's alright.

M – (sighs) I'll do it. I'll be right back.

B – Alright.

(RATTLES the door handle.)

M – The door's locked. Bernard, I can't get out.

(More nightmarish noises from afar)

B – But the key's right there, in the lock, can't you just...

M – I know it is, I'm turning it, but the door won't open! See? Here. You try!

Lindsay – (distant) Get it off me!

B – (ominous creeping dread voice. Grunts) It's not... (pushes, grunts)

M – Harder, Bernard.

B – I'm doing my best. It's like there's a force on the other side, keeping it shut. Oh no. Oh God no. Do you think... do you think the ghosts are playing silly buggers again?

M – Course they bloody are. Oh why did we buy a haunted mansion on a bleak windswept moor?

B – Because it was cheap.

M - Ugh, because it was cheap. (calls, knocks on door) Oi! Ghosts! You let us out right now! And stop doing whatever it is you're doing to Lindsay!

(Bernard tries the door again. Lindsay screams.)

B – Nope. Still won't open.

M – Oh for pete's sake. You're going to have to do it.

B – Do what?

M – Record the story. I mean, let's face it, whatever they're doing to Lindsay, she's not going to be in a fit state to read her story afterwards, is she? So you might as well do it.

B – Oh, yes, alright, yes.

M – Oh I've got an idea; you could do it in your Gerald of Riverdale voice.

B – (Geralt voice) You mean, this one? Fuck.

M – Yes. That's the one.

B – It's a bit hard on the throat, my dear. How about the John Hurt storyteller voice instead.

M – Oh yes, yes.

B - But a sort of John Hurt lite, diet John Hurt, because I don't think I can sustain that voice for a whole story either.

M – Good idea. And so, dear listeners...

B – Magenta Presents...

M – a short story by Lindsay Sharman. The tale of the Woodwose...

(Music)

## (THE TALE OF THE WOODWOSE)

B - This land once had wolves. And wild boar, and lynx, and creatures with names we barely even recognise anymore. Wyvern and hobgoblins, barguest and black shuck, Nelly Longarms, shellycoats... all gone now. But once...

It was simply a fact that they lived alongside us. By 'us', I mean 'humans', of course; apologies to anyone listening who doesn't fall into that category.

It was simply a fact that they lived alongside us, not often in sight, but irrefutably 'there', like the neighbour you rarely see but who you suspect of stealing Amazon packages from off your doorstep.

Along with the wolf and wild boar and the lynx, the villagers agreed that the simple fact of these creatures' proximity meant that one had to exercise a certain level of vigilance, of caution. There were certain things one did not do.

For instance, perhaps you imagine that, if you had lived back then, you would enjoy a stroll in the lush woods that bordered the village; a dip in the clear waters of the lake; a nap beneath the willow by the side of the brook. But really, if you HAD lived back then, you would not do that, lest you returned from your stroll, from your dip, from your nap, quite *changed*...

So one day a woman gave birth to a very hairy baby.

Yes, I'm getting on with the story now.

A woman gave birth to a very hairy baby who she called Juliana. The baby was quite extraordinarily hairy, with a fine cap of yellow hair that extended down from her scalp all the way to her perfect little hairy toes.

Sadly, within minutes of her birth, it became apparent that blondes do not always have more fun because the woman's husband – who was bald as an egg - took one look at the baby and accused his wife of having an affair. Not just any affair, either. An affair with a woodwose.

A woodwhat? A woodwose: a wild man - or woman - of the woods. A sort of East Anglian yeti. A very tall, humanoid creature covered from head to toe in thick hair. The people in Juliana's village were very conflicted about the woodwose; on the one hand, they were depicted – in church decorations no less! - they were depicted, club in hand, fighting wyverns and demons. The woodwose, it seemed, protected good, honest God-fearing folk. But on the other hand... I mean, look at them. So big, so hairy. No trousers! And you know what that means. Fornicators! *Seducers* of good honest God-fearing folk. And they eat children too, you know. Oh yes. My cousin in the next village, she said the butcher's brother – who travels a lot so he's seen everything – he was told by a hedge priest that the Ludham woodwose ate the mayor's baby. It's true!

Everyone agreed, as long as the creatures stayed in the woods, out of sight, away from good honest God-fearing folk... that was acceptable. Although obviously everyone would prefer it if the woodwose and the wolves and the boar and the hobgoblins and the lynx weren't there at all. Lurking, threatening, eating our children. And you know what, if they weren't there, then we could clear the woods and build nice neat rows of houses on the land ooh wouldn't that be nice yes that'd

be lovely.

So anyway. The hairy baby. Her mother denied the affair, of course. She swore that Juliana was her husband's progeny, but he wouldn't have it. He snatched the babe and strode from the room, leaving Juliana's mother lying in bed, still covered in the sweat and viscera of birth.

“Where are you taking her??” she screamed. She struggled to rise, to follow him, but the midwife grabbed her arm. 'Let him,' she said, her eyes flint with judgement.

The man took Juliana to the edge of the woods and left her there, to be eaten by wolves. Within the hour, she was gone.

Together with the midwife, he made it known that his wife had suffered a miscarriage. And before the year was out, his wife had borne another child, a child with a very normal amount of hair, and the man had convinced himself that Juliana had never even existed. His *wife*, on the other hand...

Oh, I haven't told you her name. Juliana's mother was called Sarah. And her husband was right, she had indeed had an affair with a woodwose. Not just any affair, either: a love affair.

You see, one summer evening, shortly after she was wed, Sarah had gone for a stroll in the woods with the intention of being eaten by a wolf, and had instead met someone tall, dark and strangely erotic. The next morning, Sarah returned to the village uneaten (by wolves at any rate) and with a spring in her step, and thenceforth became a regular visitor to the woods.

Of course, when Sarah fell pregnant, she knew there was a chance that... you know... but rather than DO anything about it, she crossed her fingers and hoped for the best. Maybe the babe would look human, she thought, before clanging the mental gates shut and never turning her mind to the subject again. Of course, when the baby arrived, when the best did not happen, when Sarah's husband – who I shan't name – left Juliana to be eaten by wolves, Sarah looked at her options and once again chose hope over action. But this time, thank goodness, the best *did* happen, for Sarah's hirsute lover caught the distinct scent of newborn woodwose and found his child at the edge of the woods. And thus it came to pass that Sarah gained a second, secret family who she visited whenever she could with a freshly baked pie.

It was the pie that was Juliana's undoing.

Let me tell you about Juliana; half human, half woodwose, she had an eclectic childhood. Her father – I shan't name him, as the woodwose don't like humans knowing that sort of thing – her father taught his daughter the traditional ways; how to communicate with the creatures of the forest, how to swing a club, the vulnerable parts of a demon, how to look after the woods and maintain the natural balance that humanity constantly sought to disrupt. And of course, he told her never to go to the village, or indeed any human settlement (although crucially, he never taught her 'why'). From Sarah, Juliana learned human language and music and stories, and about the many different types of pie.

Juliana's father never ate the pies that Sarah brought; his woodwose stomach couldn't tolerate cooked food. Whereas half-human Juliana *loved* the pies, and struggled with the raw meat and plants that constituted her everyday diet. Which is the reason why, when Juliana was sixteen, and

she was dealing once again with stomach cramps and intestinal worms, she decided to go and live in the human world.

But first she needed to do something about the hair. So she went to the river, broke the ice with her club, and with a sharp piece of flint, she shaved. It took a very long time. And then she walked to her mother's house on the edge of the village and knocked on the door.

Of course, Sarah did not recognise her bare-faced daughter. Who was this stranger? This extremely tall blonde girl. This extremely tall blonde girl holding a thick length of wood, wearing what looked like a dress made of... what is that, silk? Fur? who said with a voice rusty from lack of use -

“Mother, it's me, Juliana. I've come to stay.”

Sarah gasped, ushered her in before the neighbours saw, and shut all the curtains.

“Juliana! You shouldn't be here!” she cried.

What on earth had possessed her to come to the village? It wasn't safe! Juliana was too tall, she spoke funny, she was a stranger! People had been accused of devilry and witchcraft for less.

“What will your father say?”

“He doesn't know. He's hibernating,” shrugged Juliana, “Don't worry, I'll return before he wakes in Spring.”

“Spring??” Sarah said, “But that's months away! Absolutely not. Back to the woods with you, right this second!”

Alas, at that moment, Sarah's husband returned... and was immediately entranced by the girl.

“Who's this?” he leered, before spotting the family resemblance. “A relative?”

“That's right, I'm Sarah's cousin,” said Juliana, while her mother's mouth gaped open and closed like a fish, “I've come to... uh... to ask if Sarah needs any help around the house.”

“What? No, no,” Sarah quavered, having found her voice.

“Help? Well, now!” cried her husband, eyes gleaming. “God knows my wife needs it, look at the state of this place.” He gestured around the spotless cottage. “And she's been lonely since the children flew the nest. How long will you stay, cousin?”

Before Juliana could speak, Sarah interjected. “We can't afford to feed another mouth any longer than a week or two. Juliana, you must leave by Hocktide. Isn't that right, husband?”

He nodded, barely listening, gazing as he was at the girl's lips, her shape, her beautiful cascading hair (which was the exact colour and lustre as the unusual dress she wore).

“Mmmm, Hocktide,” he murmured, drinking her in with his eyes.

Juliana was delighted. Two whole weeks of pies! She would eat them all! She clapped her hands in glee, oblivious to her mother's fear and her stepfather's unsavory interest.

You see, Juliana was unaccustomed to humans. She had not yet learned to be vigilant, and wary, to exercise caution around such creatures. And as her woodwose father was the strong, silent type, and her mother preferred not to speak of unpleasant things, there was a great deal Juliana did not know. Such as how her stepfather had left her at the edge of the woods to be eaten by wolves.

The first few days of her stay, everything was fine. Juliana revelled in the food and the warmth of the hearth. Her stepfather seemed nice enough; always there with a smile and a warm hand on the small of her back. And Sarah was so thrilled to have her daughter in her own home that she once again pushed her fears aside and hoped for the best. Although she did insist that Juliana wear an old dress of hers, lest anyone look too closely.

But look too closely they did. The villagers were aflame with curiosity, the village alive with gossip. A cousin, you say? Sarah's cousin? But where from? The girl looked like a Norse goddess, for goodness sake. Why was she so tall; no-one in East Anglia was tall. East Anglians were a particularly stumpy people. Can someone so tall be trusted?

Juliana knew nothing of this. The only problem Juliana had, as far as Juliana was concerned, was the itching. She hadn't taken the flint to her whole body, thank the Lord, but the parts she had shaved, yee Gods. It was enough to drive one wild. And indeed, when it became too much, Juliana would run into the woods, rip off her clothes and plunge into the nearest body of water for relief.

As the days passed, the itch grew and her skin became red and irritated. By the end of the first week, Sarah's husband had grown less fond of the girl.

"Is she unwell?" he hissed at his wife as she made bread, while outside Juliana plunged her red-raw face into the icy waters of the horse trough.

"Unwell?" Sarah said.

"Her skin! Is it plague?? If you've brought plague into this house..!"

"Of course it's not plague. It's just a rash."

The villagers had noticed it too. Those who had felt rather irritated by Juliana's good looks were *most* pleased, and in scandalised whispers they spoke of the rashes that are borne of venereal disease. No doubt the strumpet had lain with someone out of wedlock and been punished by God for her sins.

God-fearing villagers are obsessed with other people's sex lives, have you noticed?

"She brings shame on the family," hissed Sarah's husband, having heard the rumours. "I'm going to the pub. She best be gone by the time I'm back."

Sarah found her daughter tending to their herb garden (which had grown wild and lush since

Juliana's arrival), and told her she needed to leave right away or incite her stepfather's wrath.

“Leave? Have I done something wrong? Is he upset with me?”

“It's your skin,” said her mother, “he thinks it's contagious. That you'll make him ill.”

“Oh! Well, then, I'll just tell him the truth. So he knows there's nothing to be scared of.”

Sarah's eyes went wide at her daughter's words. If her husband learned that Juliana was half-woodwise, he would quickly deduce who she truly was. He'd set the whole village on the pair of them.

Or maybe he wouldn't? Maybe it would be fine, Sarah thought to herself. Yes. There was no need to invite drama, not when the whole thing would blow over with careful, sensitive handling. Which is why she said to Juliana, “you cannot tell him. My husband despises the woodwise.”

Juliana was stunned.

“What do you mean?” she exclaimed. “Why would he hate us? Ohhh, wait... is it because you're one of my father's mates?”

“Don't use such language,” replied her mother, wincing. “And what do you mean, 'one of'? Never mind. Look, it's a simple fact: you cannot stay here. If anyone found out there was a woodwise in the village...”

Her mother lapsed into a troubled silence. “What?” prompted Juliana. “What would they do?”

“Nothing good. Let me go fetch a pie from the larder. You can take it with you when you leave.”

And with that, Sarah scuttled off, and Juliana slumped to the ground, crushing a patch of sage. None of it made sense. The villagers didn't like the woodwise? But most of them had never even met one before. And didn't they know all the good the woodwise did? That they were caretakers of the forest? That they were the first line of defence against wyverns and demons?

Ahh, that must be it: they didn't know!

Juliana would educate them. And then everything would be fine!

Hmmm... but how could she do it? Well, Juliana's father had taught her the ways of the woodwise by showing, not telling, so that is what she would do for the villagers. A practical demonstration.

And luckily, that very day, Juliana had caught the scent of a wyvern on the breeze. Perhaps she could lure it to the village!

Wyverns, in case you are unaware, are fire-breathing, winged, two legged dragons with the poisonous tail of a viper, approximately the height of a thatched cottage. Generally, wyvern stayed away from humans, but once in a while, a wyvern would be driven from its home... by humans, in fact... and would cause general mayhem and destruction elsewhere. And thus people came to fear

the wyvern. Even though they were the reason it ever caused any problems.

Woodwose could communicate with most creatures, so they were normally the ones to reason with distressed, lost wyvern. Sometimes reasoning didn't work because the creature was too frightened to listen, and the woodwose would have to drive it off with its club. If the villagers saw Juliana do such a thing, why, they would raise her aloft on their shoulders, throw her a banquet, chisel her likeness into a church font! More importantly, she would be allowed to stay.

And so that very evening, Juliana left her mother's house as if to return to the forest, but instead snuck into a nearby field and used her flint to slit the throat of a sheep. She waited until all the villagers were abed before she dragged the carcass into the middle of the village and whispered an invitation into the wind. The blood-tinged summons reached the wyvern in a valley fifty miles hence.

By morning, it had arrived to dine on the sheep.

The people of the village caught sight of the wyvern and immediately retreated to their cottages for safety... which was no good at all. Juliana needed everyone present to witness what she was about to do, and so she walked through the village shouting her intentions.

"I am woodwose!" she declared, "I will be your champion against the wyvern!"

Curtains were twitched aside, and a few brave folk came out for a closer look..

The wyvern was finishing his meal as Juliana approached. He looked up at her. Blood dripped from his jaws. Two plumes of smoke billowed from his nostrils as he cooked the sheep to mutton in his stomach.

"Thank you for the sheep," he said to Juliana. "I was hungry."

"My pleasure," said Juliana, in the tongue of the Wyvern.

"She can speak to it," the watching villagers whispered, horrified.

"But why have you lured me into a den of humans?" the wyvern asked. "To kill me?"

"No," Juliana said. "You're safe. I'll protect you from them. In return, I would ask a favour"

The wyvern cocked it's head, curious.

"I would like us to fight. Not a real one: a play-fight. I will swing my club and you will breathe fire over my head. And then I will swing again, and you will stagger as if hurt, and take flight."

"Take flight?" said the wyvern, bitterly. "And go where? They destroyed my home."

"There are mountains in the far north, and islands where few live. You would be safe there."

During this fairly lengthy exchange, a small contingent of villagers had been organising their own

defence against the wyvern. Scythes and pitchforks, ropes and axes were passed out amongst eight men of the village.

“Do you agree to the fight?” asked Juliana. The wyvern nodded. And so Juliana attacked, swinging her club against the creature's side. The wyvern trumpeted in irritation, and swept his poisonous tail along the ground to take Juliana's feet out from under her. She hopped over it just in time.

“No tail!” she shouted in wyvern, alarmed.

“No contact!” roared the wyvern. Juliana grimaced in apology and swung her club again, this time missing by a mile.

“Better,” growled the wyvern.

Juliana continued to make a show of thrusts and feints, waiting for the moment to duck. Juliana knew what to watch for: her father had taught her that wyverns spread their wings as a counterbalance just before they release a jet of fire.

But then, the villagers struck. The plan was to make as much noise as possible and strike a couple of glancing blows on the hide of the wyvern before scuttling back beyond the reach of his tail. Wyverns typically flew away when faced with loud, angry groups of men, so they felt reasonably confident this would suffice.

But their timing was shocking. For this wyvern had been brewing a bellyful of fire and would need to release before he could fly. Not to mention, he wasn't feeling particularly well-disposed towards humans. And so release he did, turning his head this way and that to ensure an even spread, destroying his attackers where they stood. And then he flew away.

Leaving Juliana surrounded by charred corpses and distraught, furious villagers.

They took her to an old barn and left her there, hog-tied, while they decided what to do about her. Or rather, exactly *how* to dispose of her.

When no-one was watching, Sarah snuck in to talk to her daughter.

“Mother! I fought the wyvern. I protected them. They all saw,” Juliana said through swollen lips (for the villagers had beaten her soundly). She strained against her bonds. “So why have they done this?”

“They saw you speak to the wyvern. They think you brought it here,” Sarah whispered. “Oh, oh, why didn't you leave when I told you to!”

“What will they do to me?” Sarah wouldn't speak. “Mother? Tell me!”

“I can't,” she finally said, twisting her apron in her hands, unable to meet Juliana's eye.

“But you'll help me escape?” Juliana begged. “Please, mother.”

“Help you? How can *I* help you??” cried her mother, furious at her daughter for creating such a mess, furious that it brought Sarah face-to-face with her own cowardice. “They already think I had something to do with this. And if my husband... if he realises who you are... no. I cannot help, Juliana. You have brought this upon yourself.”

And Sarah turned and fled the barn.

Sixteen year old Juliana wept, alone in the darkness. She thought of the fairytales her mother had told her as a child... how they never ended well for creatures like her. And with a sudden blast of insight, Juliana foresaw that her story was a beginning, not an end. Her woodwose father would awake in the Spring and learn of her death. He would seek restitution. In return, the humans would decimate the homes of the woodwose, of the wolf, the lynx, the hobgoblin, the grim. It would not stop until the forests were levelled, the balance destroyed, the humans triumphant in their stale dead world.

Juliana keened aloud and strained at her bonds. Like ink dropped into water, she could feel the desperation and fear inexorably spread, seizing her breath, shaking her limbs. She had to change the ending. She had to! She had to contain the story.

In the darkness of the barn, Juliana pressed her fingernails into the palms of her hands, until the blood ran down her fingers and dripped onto the floor. Closing her eyes, she whispered a summons into a small current of air that ran under the barn door. A summons that invited the wolf, the lynx, the hobgoblin, the grim, the fae, every last bogeyman in the area. An invite to steal, bewitch, to eat or transform the babies and children and adults of the village. To do with them what they would, as long as every last villager disappeared without trace.

It wasn't a deal any creature wanted to take. To be left alone, that's all they desired, to live their lives as they always had done. This world was hard enough. But Juliana told them of the path she saw ahead. The destruction of all... even the humans in the end. And they saw the truth in it.

Some hours hence, just as the villagers were lowering a bound Juliana into the waters of the river, the creatures came. They swarmed into the village from all sides, as quietly and neatly as they could. Some of them rather enjoyed fulfilling the deal – there's always a few – but most did not. And all felt the stain it left behind.

By morning, the village was empty.

It would be discovered fairly quickly: a travelling salesman raised the alert. Before the week was out, the whole village had been sealed, just in case what happened was somehow contagious. Some spoke of sending a search party into the woods to look for the missing. But none did. Nothing really happened. Not immediately, anyway. Instead, because people do not like to speak of unpleasant things directly, stories sprang up, fairytales told by firelight to frighten children (and adults) before bed. Some enjoyed them as nothing more than silliness, others were able to see the truth at the heart of these stories, and many more saw the truth they wanted to see. And *those* people, while they didn't straight away set out to hunt down every last woodwose, wolf, lynx, hobgoblin, grim... they ensured it still happened, slowly, over time.

But what of Juliana? Well, she was half human you know. And her summons had been very clear:

no humans to be left in the village. Had she remembered she was half human when she stipulated this? That, I'm afraid, is lost to the wind.

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(Magenta Presents music)

M – Well done Bernard.

B – Thank you.

M – You didn't stumble over any of the words.

B – I didn't, did I?

M – No, you did a very good job. So clever. And so, good listeners, thank you for once again tuning in to Magenta Presents. Do follow us on the socials, or if you'd like to support the series, do head over to our ko-fi shop (that's k.o – f.i, it's a bit like Patreon) shop to bung us a small donation. That's [www.ko-fi.com/longcatmedia](http://www.ko-fi.com/longcatmedia) . We also sell Magenta tea-towels, by the way, a wonderful gift that may or may not be cursed. Tune in next time to Magenta Presents for another horrifying tale! See you soon, fans of the esoteric!

Whispered voice – Magenta Presents.