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Breadcrumbs and the Children Who Left Them

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Breadcrumbs and the Children Who Left Them

by

Sarah Steinfeldt

A Creative Work

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St. Cloud State University

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PRELUDE

I am the daughter of birds.

A text of feather and water, the soft archive of a girl who sees the reflection of her hair when she tries to watch the wind weave a fairy tale.

“We will give you a story,” they say, and she climbs down. She will make herself, but they are welcome to craft with her a home with a hole.

ROBIN LITTLE

One day as you are traveling about, you may come upon a quaint little wisp of a village called Frost Glen. There lived quite a pretty young girl named Robin Little, and many of its people agreed that she was truly a creature to behold. Her grandmother, stern Catholic that she was, managed quite a fondness for the rosy cheeked child and made for her a cloak of the deepest red. It suited her so well that most everyone in the village called her Robin Red.

Her hair the color of cornsilk and eyes sapphire blue, Robin wore her beloved cloak everywhere - except to mass, where Father Casey certainly would not permit it.

“What are you doing, you devastated one?” he would quote if she entered donning it. “Why dress yourself in scarlet and put on jewels of gold? Why highlight your eyes with makeup? You adorn yourself in vain. Your lovers despise you; they want to kill you.”

Though Robin could never be mistaken for being in the least bit vain, she surrendered the cloak in mass all the same. What no one knew was that Father Casey simply did not desire for anyone to look upon the girl, for he himself found her quite lovely.

So very, very lovely.

One day, as Robin’s grandmother was doing the baking, she said to her granddaughter, “Please take this bread, and a little slip of butter with it, to Father Casey. I hear he has been ill and it would be so kind to see how he is getting on.”

Robin set out to the parish, which was half a kilometer from their cottage.

As she was going through the wood, who did she meet but Father Casey, who happened to be going to see her grandmother.

“Grandmother sent me with this bread for you,” she said, offering him the basket. “She says you haven’t been well.”

“She is right, I suffered these past days, certainly,” he said. “All the same, I will receive this bread with gratitude, which I will soon thank her for myself.”

“What do you require of her today?” Robin asked.

Father Casey’s blue eyes twinkled, “I thought I might speak to her about you attending confirmation classes. The time is near, as you surely know.”

Robin was only an inch of twelve, and most didn’t begin preparing for their confirmation until nearly a year later. She said so to Father Casey.

“Ah, you are correct,” he said. “However, I think it might be wise for you to begin with this next group.”

He stopped suddenly, clutching the basket. “I see I am still not quite right,” he said. “Would you feel cheated if we stopped for a brief rest?”

“Of course not, Father,” Robin said. “Perhaps under that cluster of trees will do.”

And so it was there that they settled. Father Casey shared with her a bit of the bread and butter, and also some fine yellow cheese Grandmother saw fit to give him as well.

“It is quite a lovely cloak you have,” Father Casey said after some time.

Robin was quite startled. “I thought you find it vain.”

“Not a one would think you vain,” he said.

“Then why would you say so at mass?” she asked.

“I don’t expect you to understand this right away,” he said, “but not everyone is as interested in your protection as I am.”

Robin finished her square of cheese. “What is it, Father, that you believe I need protecting from?”

Father Casey gazed over her milk white skin, so perfect and creamy that one might think they could drink it.

“There are wolves at your door that you know nothing about, Robin Red,” he said. As she had been sitting next to him in the grass, her cloak slid up the slightest bit, so that the flesh of her thigh was exposed. She had noticed none until Father Casey rested a warm hand atop it.

“However, if you let me,” he said softly, “I can keep watch, and fend them off when they come.” He moved his hand further beneath her cloak. She leapt to her feet.

“Grandmother will be wondering after me,” she said, but what she really wanted to tell him is that she no longer wished to walk with him back to her home. She hoped he would not insist, and surprisingly, he did not.

“It’s for the best, I suppose,” he said, finding his feet as well. “All of a sudden I’m afraid I no longer feel up to visiting. I’ll go home now, and continue to rest there. You might take your basket back.” He thrust it at her.

“How did you find Father Casey, my dear?” Grandmother asked pleasantly when Robin returned to the cottage.

“He seems in good health,” she said quietly, deciding she would not reveal meeting him in the woods and what he had done there. “He is coming to speak with you soon, about my starting confirmation classes.

“My word, it never occurred to me that he would think you ready so early,” Grandmother exclaimed. “Though now that you say it, I feel no surprise. When did you say he was to call on us? I should have a feast ready, surely.”

“I’m not certain, Grandmother,” Robin said, and she didn’t feel she was lying at all, for Father Casey had not said when he might try to come again.

“He is a good man,” Grandmother said, “and I hope you feel fortunate that he sees something special in you.”

The night is like her cloak, covering every trace of the day. In the inky stillness, Robin gathers black roses for her basket. Something tells her she must start for home, but the woods will not let her.

“Grandmother will be worried,” she says, but the trees only laugh at her. Or is the dark shape, lurking between them? It comes for her, on all fours to begin with, but slowly rises to its hind legs. As she watches, it begins a little dance, its poison red eyes trained on her, its mouth contorted into something of a smile that shows its razor sharp teeth.

“May I have this ... dance?” it growls at her, extending a paw rather gracefully.

Robin did not want to dance. But she found herself doing the very thing.

“Wolf,” she said, “what big arms you have!”

“All the better to twirl you with, my dear.” It does so.

“Wolf, what big legs you have!”

“All the better to dance with, my child.”

“Wolf, what big ears you have!”

“All the better to hear you with, my child.”

“Wolf, what big teeth you have!”

It falls back to its fours with a hiss and leaps. “All the better to EAT YOU UP WITH, MY DEAR!”

“My dear! Are you ill?”

Robin woke at Grandmother’s gentle urging, sweat trickling from her brow, her normally moon pale skin feverish.

“I’m not ill, Grandmother, I --” Robin collected herself. “I must have been sleeping rather fitfully. Dreams and such, you know.”

“Yes, child, but your breakfast is growing cold, so you really must come now.”

Robin rose dutifully, washing herself before dressing in her red cloak. She returned to her bedroom only to stop at that which lay in the center of her pillow: a fully bloomed, black rose.

Father Casey did manage to arrive around lunch that day, and Grandmother served him her best chicken, along with bread and potatoes with butter. He tucked in quite ravenously, as though he had not eaten in days. It was decided that Robin would begin her confirmation classes that very Sunday, directly after mass.

“I beg your pardon, Grandmother, Father Casey,” Robin said as politely as she could muster, “is it so that I must see through with confirmation?”

Grandmother gasped, truly horrified by her granddaughter’s inquiry. “Why, my dear! How could you utter something so terrible, and in front of Father Casey yet! Of course you know that it is the sacrament by which you shall receive the Holy Spirit! To reject it means ...” Grandmother could not bring herself to finish.

“Now, never mind,” Father Casey consoled her gently. “She is not the first to express doubt in the ritual, like as not due to her youth. This is part of the process.”

“Well, she will certainly partake,” Grandmother said firmly, not at all pleased with her granddaughter. “That is, if you will still have her?”

“I’ll do that and more,” Father Casey said. “It may prove quite useful if we hold some private sessions throughout her preparations, so that we might attempt to assuage any reservations that the devil has sought to embed in our young girl’s mind.”

“Of course, Father,” Grandmother said, calmer now. “You’ll tell me when you want her, and I’ll see her there.”

Robin finished her potatoes rather unhappily as Grandmother and Father Casey planned. Once it was finished, he bid them farewell and went on his way with an abundance of bread and butter.

“Robin Little, you have never in all your years been so insolent!” Grandmother raged at her. “What Father Casey must have thought! And after all he is doing for you. I should have forced you with him now so he could give you the proper penance, but I suppose that will wait until confession. You will remain in your room today without supper, and you might use the time to intercede for your transgression!”

And so it was that Robin went to her room, but there was no intercession, for she found it less and less necessary in more recent days. Of course, she could never reveal this to Grandmother, or Father Casey, for the matter. It seemed odd to Robin that such a practice was required to commune with the Holy Spirit, along with many other matters the Church asked of her. Immediately, Robin felt shame over her thoughts, as though the devil had entrenched himself there. She made herself cease to think of it.

“Robin Red went to bed and slept until the morn. When she awoke, missing her cloak, she looked down to see it worn.”

Robin was not well acquainted with Clara St. Martin, and the reason was clear; Clara was an oddity to Frost Glen. A playful spirit with mischievous dark eyes and wild raven tresses, Clara was a fierce, vibrant presence who loved deeply, questioned everything, and possessed a profound sense of adventure. Their village with its calm, reserved way of going about their business, found Clara far too brash and daring.

Including Grandmother, who thought Clara was not the best company her granddaughter could keep, and saw to it that she did not do so.

So while the two had dwelled all their lives in the village, passing each other with great frequency, the empty chair next to Robin was the most interest Clara had taken in her, other than a knowing smile now and again.

“Care for a sweet?” Clara asked, unearthing a handful of them from under her coat.

“A ... what?” Robin said, flustered, for her grandmother was not keen on her taking sweets.

“Well, don’t act as if you’ve never seen such a thing,” Clara teased. “I’m fond of the lemon drop myself.” She poked one into Robin’s hand.

“Oh, but I don’t think we’re permitted to ...” Robin cast a glance toward the door separating the chapel from the little room in which confirmation preparation was to be held. Father Casey was yet to come through.

“Why do you worry, Robin Red?” Clara asked, a twinkle in her eye. “Afraid the big bad wolf will catch you rotting your teeth?”

“Why do you call him that?” Robin demanded, a bite in her voice.

Clara's jolly demeanor faded slightly. "Well, don't you think those sweeping black robes make him look just *frightful*?" she said. "I've always thought of him like a wolf sniffing out his prey. And I suppose he acts like a right wolf to me whenever he feels I haven't properly measured into a good Catholic girl and all that. Which is almost always, I might add."

Robin calmed herself. "I see," she said, and gave herself pause. "Can I tell you something?"

Clara smiled expectantly.

"Well, I ... don't really fancy being called Robin Red," she confessed quietly.

Clara lifted her eyebrows as though she had just been privy to a fascinating secret. "Is that so? Well." She winked at Robin ever so slowly. "I certainly will remember that."

“I do hope your first session found you more agreeable,” Grandmother said, serving Robin her lunch afterward.

“Yes, I --” What Robin simply could not tell Grandmother was that it was not the class itself that she found so very appealing. “You were quite right, Grandmother - I can’t say where my head was the other day.”

Grandmother patted Robin’s hair. “There, there, dear. I do seem to remember that I showed some reluctance myself, in the beginning. No harm done.”

Robin took in some soup. “It was odd,” she said. “Clara St. Martin spoke to me.”

“That girl!” Grandmother tsked. “If she were my child, I would -- well. Fortunate for both of us, it isn’t so.”

“She doesn’t seem as dreadful as all that,” Robin allowed.

“She is much too free spirited,” Grandmother said, “and her parents have allowed it! Why, I’m absolutely shocked that she’s taking confirmation at all. Now listen to me, Robin.” Grandmother put a spot of bread in front of her. “You must not concern yourself in the least with Clara St. Martin. You are there for a far greater purpose.”

“Yes, Grandmother,” Robin conceded, and ate her bread. All the while, she pretended it was a lemon drop.

“Robin Red went to bed ... went to bed ... went to bed ...”

“I’m not Robin Red,” Robin murmured as the whisper brushed her neck, turning this way and that.

“Went to bed ... went to bed ...”

“Clara,” Robin breathed, kicking her quilt to the end of the bed. Suspended somewhere between consciousness and sleep, she reached down and thought she felt the soft brush of curls between her fingers.

“Robin Red.”

“No!”

Robin lurched forward and suddenly she was awake. Awake and aching in her abdomen. Sensing the stickiness between her thighs, Robin staggered to the toilet and checked her underthings, seeing only red.

“Is something the matter, dear?” Grandmother asked drowsily from the doorway.

“It’s come, I suppose.” They had only spoken of it enough so that Robin would be prepared.

“I’ll get you some things.” Grandmother fetched what Robin needed so that she could tend to herself. “Now, dear, you just look after it. It’s a very private affair, but you’ll manage well enough. We all do.” She kissed her granddaughter at the temple. “Return to your bed, I’ll bring you a hot water bottle.”

And so it was that Robin had gone to bed as a child but awoken a woman.

Robin was just finishing her sausages when a knock came to their door.

“Attend to that, will you, dear,” Grandmother said absently as she removed biscuits from the oven. And who should be standing there but Clara, bright eyed and smiling as the cat who swallowed the canary.

“Clara!” Robin exclaimed. Of course they knew where the other lived, their existences confined to Frost Glen, but Clara had never come to see her, nor she Clara. “Whatever are you doing here?”

“On your way to school?” Clara asked.

“Well, yes.”

“You might walk with me, then,” Clara suggested.

“Yes.” Robin sensed the blush in her cheeks and hoped it wasn’t obvious; but Clara’s grin widened, and it was clear. “Come in for a moment while I gather my satchel.”

Clara followed her to the front room, gazing around the cottage.

“Very cozy,” she observed.

“Grandmother’s doing,” Robin said, and it was with this that Grandmother met them.

“Clara,” she said, clearly taken aback. “What a surprise.”

“Hello,” Clara said. “I do hope you don’t mind me coming in like this.”

“Of course not,” Grandmother said, but it may not have been true, Robin thought. “Something to eat? There’s plenty in the nook.”

“I’m fine, thank you. I just stopped to see if Robin cared to walk with me.”

“That sounds very nice,” Grandmother said vaguely. “Robin, you remember that you are to go straight to the church after school. Father Casey will be waiting to meet you there.”

Robin was glad for the reminder. She straightened her satchel and kissed her grandmother.

“Put your hood up, dear,” Grandmother called after her as the girls left the cottage. “It’s windy.”

“What does the wolf want with you?” Clara asked bluntly as they kicked at the early autumn leaves.

“He promised Grandmother he would hold some private sessions with me,” Robin said, not feeling as though she had to conceal it from Clara. “Study for confirmation, I assume.”

“I’m familiar,” Clara said. “I’ve had my own.”

“For the same purpose?” Robin asked.

“As of late, yes,” Clara said. “He isn’t so certain that I’m taking the commitment seriously. Of course, he’s right. But he’s sought me out on plenty of other occasions, trying to save my soul and such. I’ve got Hail Marys coming out of my skin. But then,” she gazed carefully at Robin, “I don’t expect you’ll need worry about that.”

“I’ve had my share, Clara,” Robin said quietly.

“Perhaps not today,” Clara said brightly. “But, Robin.” Clara stopped her quickly. “You would do well to look after yourself. Anyone can be a wolf.”

“Tell me, my dear,” Father Casey said pleasantly as he poured Robin a tea. “Why are you here?”

Robin blinked at him. “I ... you told Grandmother you’d be pleased to have me for some meetings,” she said.

“Indeed,” Father Casey agreed. “But I asked why *you* are here. Never mind what I told your grandmother.”

“I suppose I’m not certain, Father Casey,” Robin admitted.

“Ah.” Father Casey leaned against his desk. “And therein lies the honest answer.” He chuckled. “Oh, don’t look as though I’ve caught you in something unseemly. It’s quite common, actually.”

Robin sipped her tea uneasily.

“I say, Robin, I had my own reservations as a youth,” he said. “And look now. It isn’t a sin to doubt.” Father Casey took pause, then rested two fingers under her chin and gently tilted her face toward his own. “The sin is in holding on to those doubts. What stops you?”

“It isn’t faith itself,” Robin said. “But if I have it, I want it to be my own.”

“You don’t feel that it is now?”

“It’s the only thing I know,” Robin said. “I don’t know anything else. Are there not other ... ways ... out there? Somewhere?”

“There are,” Father Casey said. “But none that are going to lead you to the doors of the kingdom, Robin, and that is what you must remember.” He sat in the chair closest hers. “However, you are right.”

“I am?”

“One’s faith must always be their own. Never something that feels borrowed. That is not what God intended for us. With this being said, I’m going to take the opportunity to ask something of you.”

“Of me?”

“You know our neighboring village,” he said, “Lilac Bend.”

“Yes?” Robin had been to the poorer village several times with Grandmother, who often baked a surplus of goods and took Robin with her to distribute them to the people there.

“Soon our confirmation group will travel there to serve the villagers, and I would like you to assist me in leadership tasks,” he said.

“Why do you not ask someone else from the parish to come along?” Robin asked. “Grandmother would love to help.”

“I’m certain she would,” Father Casey said, “but this is not about asking someone from the parish. I feel you would truly flourish in the responsibility, and it may allow you the opportunity to examine your own trust and faith in the Lord.”

“Oh, well,” Robin said. “I suppose I could assist you, yes.”

“Wonderful,” Father Casey exclaimed. “I will, of course, speak to your grandmother of it, but I have no doubt she will agree. And ... Robin.” He moved to the chair behind his desk. “I’ve noticed you keeping company with Clara St. Martin.”

“Well, a bit,” she said. “Only because we meet in the classes. I really don’t know her well.”

“You ought to remember that you are very different girls with very different interests,” he said. “I don’t know that Clara can be saved, but you ... you’re on top of the others. I would hate to see that change because you chose to indulge in ... anything foolish.”

“We’re just ... showing kindness,” Robin said.

“Then we have no need to discuss it further,” Father Casey said. He reached over and touched her silky cheek. “Run along, my dear. We’ll meet again soon.”

And as she pulled on her cloak, she happened to see what was sitting on a solitary glass jar on a shelf behind the desk: a long-stemmed black rose.

That night, she dreamed of the wolf again.

The journey to Lilac Bend was but an inch over an hour, not accounting for a pause by the stream to eat the lunch of bread, cheese, chicken, apples, and nuts that Grandmother had prepared for everyone. For the most, Robin was nervous; Clara, as amicable as she was to the group, was making it quite obvious that she preferred to stay close to Robin, and Robin knew for certain that Father Casey had attempted to prevent her from coming on the excursion at all. He hadn't said anything about it as of yet, but Robin knew he was watching them.

Earlier, Robin had confessed to Clara that Father Casey did not like her to be with her.

"Let him not like it," was Clara's succinct response, and Robin was agreeable.

The burden of responsibility Father Casey was bestowing upon her ensured that she would seek further kinship with Clara. He consulted her in all the planning, pushed her to help him make decisions that she felt rather inadequate to have a voice in, and in all of this, ensured that the two of them would spend far more time alone. He got close enough to her that she could feel his breath on her, touched her arm, knee, and almost anything else that she would feel foolish about feeling uncomfortable over later; ran his fingers through her hair and gazed at her often as though he were a wild animal and she was something good for him to eat.

"Is the wolf trying to eat you?" Clara asked her now and again, and Robin wondered if she knew.

The villagers of Lilac Bend were grateful to have them, so much so that several offered to keep them in their homes, in spite of not having much to give. And so Father Casey allowed them to stay by twos with the willing hosts. Robin, purposely, she was sure, was placed in the cottage next to his with a plain, rather unfriendly girl called Alice, far from where Clara was staying with another girl called Philippa.

The first night, Robin and Alice were awoken by a sound near the window.

“It’s just Clara,” Alice said grumpily after looking out, to see Clara throwing pebbles at the cabin. “I expect she wants you.” Alice went back to bed, not thinking anything strange about it because it was exactly the sort of thing Clara would do.

Clutching her nightdress, Robin went to the window.

“What are you doing?” Robin hissed at her. “We’re not supposed to be out!”

“That’s why it’s so perfect,” Clara whispered gleefully. “Come!”

“I won’t,” Robin said fiercely.

“You say that you won’t, but I know you would like to,” Clara returned, and it was the truth. “There’s something I’m keen to show you.”

She helped Robin out of the window, and the two knew that Alice didn’t care enough to report to Father Casey in the morning. They ran in their bare feet, Robin following Clara, to a little stream at the edge of the village where a full moon hung brightly in the sky.

“I haven’t seen one for ages,” Robin breathed. “It’s beautiful.”

“It’s like you,” Clara said, her voice hushed, and she leaned over to brush Robin’s cheek with a kiss. Robin was too surprised to even let out a gasp. She turned slowly toward Clara.

“Was it okay?” Clara asked, worried, but Robin nodded.

Clara moved toward her again, but this time, kissed her petite, red lips.

Robin kissed her back.

They might have gone further if not for the swish of leaves near the outskirts of the forest. A low growl followed.

Robin and Clara looked toward it, terrified, to see a large, long, black shape skulking between the trees.

“Oh, *run!*” Clara cried, and they did. They didn’t even stop to see if anything was following them, and they stopped outside of Robin’s cottage, their breath coming out quick and hard. They clutched one another as a loud howl shattered the night.

“There’s a wolf ... a wolf is out there!” Clara gasped out.

“But there are no wolves in this part of the country,” Robin said.

“That’s what’s queer about it,” Clara said. She kissed Robin fiercely. “I must go.” She disappeared into the darkness, and it was a long time before Robin could go back inside the cottage.

Father Casey summoned Robin to his cottage very early.

“You were out last night.”

His voice betrayed no accusation, no anger, but almost amusement.

“Father?” Robin said.

“I know you were out. I know you were with Clara St. Martin. It will not happen again.”

Still, he sounded pleasant. Robin merely nodded and moved toward the door.

“My dear,” he called after her, and Robin waited.

“If it does, you will most certainly come to regret it.”

Robin found it fortunate that she and Clara worked in different sections of the village that day; even their lunch was taken away from one another. It wasn't Robin who would pay for disobeying Father Casey, she was sure of that; rather, she believed Clara would be the one to suffer.

The test was following supper, when Robin was cleaning the dishes at the well. There was a crinkle at the pocket of her cloak, and all she could see when she looked up was a long shadow entering the forest.

She reached in and retrieved a note that read:

I know that he knows. Return the dishes and meet me in the woods. I haven't gone far. He will not follow.

When Robin brought the dishes back to their supping area, Father Casey was nowhere to be found.

"Where's Father Casey?" Robin asked a boy called Andrew.

"Back at his cottage," Andrew said. "He was feeling poorly and said he needed an early sleep."

"He says you are to do the check in tonight," Alice, who overheard them, added. Father Casey stopped into each host cottage before the families turned in to see that everyone was in the place they were supposed to be.

Robin deliberately went to Father Casey's cottage to be sure that Father Joseph, who was the priest in Lilac Bend, would mention in the morning that Robin had been there; she also needed to ensure that he was truly ill, which Father Joseph confirmed. After a quick visit to the six other

hosts, she hurried to the forest. Clara's family asked after her absence, and she assured them that she was occupied with Father Casey. She didn't think they would discover her falsehood that night.

"Clara?" she whispered as loudly as she dared.

"I did start to think you weren't coming," Clara's voice came back to her softly.

"I had to go to the cottages. Father Casey is ill. But you knew! What did you do to him?"

Robin was part horrified, part delighted.

"It isn't as serious as all that," Clara said. "I put some sleeping draft in his milk. He likely isn't ill, but weary."

"Why do you have sleeping draft?"

"My father brings it to me from the apothecary for nights that I can't calm myself. It happens quite often, and he feared it would while I was away." Clara's parents owned the one apothecary in Frost Glen, though Grandmother had never been a patron. She believed only in natural remedies and the will of God. "I haven't hurt him, dear. I've just seen to it that he has no reason to find us out." Clara waited for Robin to look at her, and then kissed her.

"If I said I wanted to be with you," Clara said, "would that vex you?"

"You are with me," Robin said, confused.

Clara took Robin's hand gently and led her a bit deeper into the forest, bringing her on to a soft patch of grass.

"No," Clara said softly. "*Truly* with you." She began kissing Robin in earnest, and Robin let her.

"What about the wolf?" Robin whispered.

"There is no wolf while we're with the other," Clara said, and gently pulled back the hood on Robin's cloak. Soon the garment lay beside them, under Clara's coat.

They were gentle as they touched and tasted each other, felt their hair and the crevices of their bodies.

“Are you frightened?” Clara asked.

“A bit,” Robin admitted.

“You needn’t. I won’t hurt you.”

“I know.”

A terrible growl pierced the air and suddenly, Clara was away from her.

“Clara!” Robin screamed, on her feet now. A massive creature, fur like the night, had pounced on Clara. Even in the dark, Robin could see its yellowed, razor sharp teeth.

“No!” Robin scrambled frantically on the ground, until her fingers closed over a large stone. With all the strength that could be mustered, she heaved it at the animal. It howled in pain, moving from Clara toward Robin. It seemed about to leap when Clara swung at it with a thick branch, and it fell to its side.

In one movement, Robin and Clara snatched up their coat and cloak. Clara took Robin’s hand and they dashed in the direction of the host cottages.

“We must part,” Clara panted. “You’ll go to yours and I’ll go to mine. If it sees us, it won’t know what to do. Go, now!”

Robin carried on to her cottage, and just as she reached it, Father Casey came from around the corner. His face was set in absolute fury.

Robin shook her head in fierceness and terror and tried to back away from him. He swooped upon her like an overgrown bat, locking his arms around her trembling body.

“Let go!” she cried out, but his robes were pressing heavily over her mouth.

“Keep. Still,” he ordered through gritted teeth, half carrying, half wrenching her through the dirt. Robin gazed hopelessly toward the dark cottages, all having retired for the night. It was unlikely that she would be heard, even if she fought. When she tried to yell again, Father Casey took pause only long enough to strike her with enough vehemence that the pain eclipsed her power to struggle.

Lilac Bend’s chapel was a stone’s throw from the village square, several paces from the host cottages. It was here where Father Casey brought Robin, down the two flights of steps that led to the basement.

“You’ve been out again,” he hissed, throwing her to the floor. “You’ve been out, and you’ve been with Clara St. Martin. Both of which were *forbidden!* Did I not warn you of what would happen should you oppose me? I put my trust in you! And what have you done?” He turned his lip at her in disgust. “I’ll tell you. You’ve been out frolicking in the forest like a dirty *beast!* And that’s what you are, the two of you! Two disgusting abominations to the Lord! Do you see, the doors to heaven have been closed to you! You have allowed the devil to order your path and you’re *walking* it! Your grandmother raised you in faith, Robin, all your life. Look at how you have repaid her. You will kill her.”

Father Casey restrained the small girl, shoving her dress up roughly.

“You will learn how to do this correctly,” he grunted, entering her aggressively. Robin’s mouth fell open as though to scream, but no sound left her. From there, she floated up to the ceiling and sadly watched what was happening to the weeping girl below.

The wolf was upon her again, its hot, wet breath formidable over her flesh. Its fur choked her, a weight that would smother her before very long.

“No ... no!” she cried out, gasping, moaning.

“Robin, Robin,” a gentle voice interrupted her anguish. “Shh. Be still. I’m here.”

Robin mewled softly as a wet cloth was placed gently on her forehead. Her eyes fluttered open to see Clara knelt beside her.

“Robin, what’s he done to you?” Clara said softly.

“He knows ... about us,” Robin whispered, struggling to sit.

“Lie there,” Clara said, cleaning Robin’s face. She was bruised and bloodied, from her face down to her legs, her red cloak in tatters.

“How did you find me?” Robin asked.

“I couldn’t sleep, so I thought I might go to the square,” Clara said. “I saw him coming out of the church and wondered how it could be possible, after what he’d taken. I thought perhaps he had fooled us, knowing we would see each other, but ... I saw something in his face, a monstrous redness in his eyes as he looked at the moon, as though ... he isn’t all the way human.”

“Could such a thing be true?” Robin said.

“It must be,” Clara said, “for after that, he started running toward the forest ... much quicker than any man should be able to ... and then I heard a howl. Something isn’t right. We must leave here now.”

“I ... “ Robin shook her head, as much as the pain there would allow. “I don’t know that I ...”

“We haven’t a choice,” Clara said. “He’ll be back soon enough and what he might do to you next - I can’t bear to think!”

“Or you yet,” Robin said. “He isn’t finished with you, Clara. I must get to the forest.”

“The forest? Why ever do you want to go there?”

“Never mind now. There’s something I need to tend to.”

“It’s not what I had in mind,” Clara said slowly, “but we’ll --”

“No.” Robin sat a bit at a time, testing her legs as she went. “I must go on my own.”

“Robin, you’re hurt! We ought to go for help --”

“There’s none.” Robin sounded resolute. “It will be trying, yes, but I can go, Clara, I’m certain of it. You might help me to the door, but then you must stay here.”

“I --” Clara’s eyes grew weepy.

“Please don’t fret,” Robin said tenderly, reaching up to stroke her cheek. “It will work in the end.”

Once Clara had seen Robin to the door, she kept off the path, going directly into the forest. It took much longer than if Clara had accompanied her, but it was something she need do alone. She reached the center of the forest and came upon a large flat stone, where she lay her broken body and waited.

The rustling of leaves came not long after, and something warm and wet nudged at her hand. In front of her when she rose was a large, black wolf.

Robin was not frightened; the wolf sat calmly, watching her intently. It whined softly, dropping something beside her: a long stemmed black rose. It hoisted itself then so that its upper half rested on her lap. She stroked its dark, coarse fur absently with one hand, slowly opening the other to reveal a cluster of blood red berries she had gathered on the way. She offered them to it, and it licked at them tentatively before swallowing them whole.

All at once, the wolf's red eyes rolled into the back of its head; it began to convulse, foaming at the mouth. It tried to howl, but could only release agonized moans. As Robin watched, it collapsed to the ground and after the quivering ceased, it moved no more.

Robin fell back against the stone, breathing hard. She had known something the wolf didn't: that the berries she had given it were a poison all on their own. A gentle hand pressed into her hair and she jerked sharply at the touch.

"Clara," she said. "I told you. I needed to do this on my own."

"You did do it on your own," Clara said softly. "I but watched."

Father Casey was never again seen after that night. Father Joseph brought them all back to Frost Glen, staying on for a short time to see if there had been word on him, then to wait with the rest of the village, expecting he might return one day. The only two who knew had no intention of telling the tale.

Not inclined to hide themselves, Robin and Clara carried on as they had in Lilac Bend, to the horror of Grandmother, who cast her granddaughter out almost immediately. Robin went on to stay the rest of her childhood days with Clara's family, who welcomed her quite buoyantly. Once those were through, Robin and Clara settled in a cottage close to the woods, and if you go there, you may just see them living happily to this day.

Her

force

(like blood)

is red. At night, my blackness awakens to a feast, but once the dawn
hangs itself I become

your mouth.

Little girl, what have you in your basket

Ah, bread. That will

shiver

and

dance.

You must let me hold it to my heart so it may learn how to breathe

Yes truly

to live.

Where will you go when the trees betray you, woeful fingers of me, your crimson beast!

Catch you, your hair, a waterfall

I should like to

touch you

press the milk of your skin

satiate my tongue - oh, those rabid birds!

Weave your nest on a dusted river

At the end I will meet you.

Soft death only hurts a little!

HOLDEN & GRACE

Some time ago, there lived a poor farmer with his wife and his two children. The boy was called Holden and the girl was called Grace. When Holden and Grace went to bed last night, they were nine, and today, they are ten.

The farm was in such a state that the family had little to eat, and on some days, nothing at all. Father, who doted on his children, went to great lengths to ensure that they ate before even the smallest morsel ever crossed his lips. However, their stepmother was a cruel and bitter woman who longed to be rid of them.

The children were often kept awake while Father and Stepmother quarreled about life with them. Tonight is especially vicious as Stepmother accuses Father of spending the last of their means on a gift each for Holden and Grace, something they only see at their birthdays and at Christmas. Father's tired voice was sheathed in apology.

"We're sure to die within a month's time, what with you frittering about with stuffed toys and wooden tops," she seethed in reference to the bluebird given to Grace and the fine red and yellow top for Holden. "You'll have to sell before winter - of that I'm quite certain!"

"We'll manage, we always do," Father assured her wearily.

"That won't last with four mouths to feed," Stepmother answered. "I do wish that you would at least consider what I --"

"That's enough." Father's tone suddenly took a dangerous turn. "I told you I never wanted you to speak of it again, and I mean it."

"You're a fool, then," she said. "All of us will starve and it will all be for naught. Well, I'll tell you this, something better come from your trip to the city. See how much choice you have if it doesn't!"

The children, for whom sleep had evaded after another supper of nothing much at all, wondered what it was Stepmother was trying to persuade Father to do. They understood both that they had their father's love but also that he could be a weak man, and both supposed that he would agree to what Stepmother wanted before too much longer.

"She would wash her hands of us in a minute if she could!" Grace whispered vehemently to her brother, and he could not dissent.

"Keep quiet, Grace," Holden said. "Let her try. We'll find something to do."

There was a creak in their distressed wooden door, and both children made to appear asleep in their beds. A tall shadow fell over their bed lamps.

"My poor children," Father murmured contritely. "I do feel the most sorry for you."

They did not bid each other a good night even once he had retreated, because there would have been nothing true about it.

Father traveled quite often, as the survival of the farm depended on his being able to sell his goods to the merchants in the city. The children dreaded his time away, for it meant they would be left alone with Stepmother. He kissed their chestnut curls, knowing he would pretend not to see the bruises when he returned.

“Don’t cry, Grace,” Holden said as Father started down the path. “Father promised he would return to us in two days’ time, and he’s never late.”

“That will be quite enough of your snivelling, you disgusting girl,” Stepmother ordered fiercely from behind them. “You’ll both attend to the barn straightaway, and heaven help you if I come out there and find a single thing undone!”

The children with their small, undernourished frames could hardly muck the stalls or milk the cows or collect the eggs as quickly as Father did, and both saw the business end of Father’s belt in the end. They never cried in front of Stepmother, but waited until they were tucked between forgotten hay in the loft, for Holden and Grace were banished to the barn as long as Father was away.

“Don’t cry.”

The children caught their breath, peeking over the hay to see who had spoken.

“Here.”

Their eyes followed the chirp to an overhead beam, where perched a bluebird.

“Don’t cry,” it repeated.

“Our father’s gone and our stepmother cares nothing for us,” Grace cried to it.

“Here is what you must do,” the bluebird intoned. “You must go out to the side of the barn and collect a pocket’s worth of pebbles.”

Holden rubbed his eyes. “Tell us, bluebird, what you expect a pocket’s worth of stones will do for us?”

“Some things are not for you to know now,” the bluebird answered. “Unless you suppose it’s best to lay there and cry.”

Holden and Grace didn’t suppose anything of the sort, so they climbed down the rickety ladder and followed the bluebird to the place it had spoken of.

“There,” the bluebird gestured.

In the moonlight glistened several white pebbles, which the children gathered in a hurry.

“You will be leaving here at sunup,” the bluebird said to them, “and it’s important you keep the pebbles with you. I’ll be with you. You will know what to do. Now sleep.”

The bluebird watched over Holden and Grace as they fell into a fitful slumber.

Just as the bluebird had said, Stepmother woke them long before sunrise. “Get up, you wretched lazybones. We must go and gather supplies for the farm.” She gave them each a piece of bread and a small square of yellow cheese. “Here is something for noon, but you’ll not want to eat it sooner than that, for this is all there is.”

The children each stowed their bread and cheese in the pocket that wasn’t occupied by the pebbles, and followed Stepmother down the worn road. A gentle chirp indicated that the bluebird was not far from them.

They had gone only a little way before Holden felt a nudge at his pocket; he looked down to see the bluebird tapping at the pebbles with its thin, straight beak. Holden grasped one with his fragile, dirty hand and dropped it to the ground. The bluebird trilled its approval and fluttered over to Grace.

Stepmother was not pleased in the slightest to see Holden and Grace fall behind.

“Why do you stop and look back?” she shrieked. “Remember your legs, now!”

“It’s our bluebird,” Holden explained to her. “He wants to bid us good-bye.”

“Idiot boy, that bird doesn’t care an ounce for you,” Stepmother said, noticing it resting on a nearby tree branch.

“Yes, Stepmother,” Holden said. He was doing his best not to look at the bluebird at all. The children released the shiny pebbles from their pockets to the dirt.

Once they reached the village, Stepmother ordered them to sit behind the pyramid of barrels stored away from the mercantile and wait for her to return.

“I will collect what we need and come back to fetch you,” she said. She disappeared around the corner of the old mercantile.

Holden and Grace counted the blades of grass and tried to play songs on them. When the clock tower struck noon, they ate their bread and cheese, sharing their crumbs with the bluebird. The afternoon sun first beat down on their hair and skin before gradually making its descent from the sky. The friendly breeze lulled them into a sound sleep.

“Oh! Oh, Holden! Something dreadful has happened! Please, wake up!”

Holden’s eyes met darkness as he opened them slowly. The wind, which had at one time been so gentle, was now unforgivably bitter, and the children had nothing but Grace’s shawl with which to keep warm.

“Bluebird, dear bluebird, where are you?” the children cried out once it was clear that the earlier vigor of the village had been traded for an abandoned night. They had not traveled often there, and could not find their way home without Father or Stepmother.

“Here I am.” The bluebird rested on Holden’s shoulder.

“Bluebird, how ever shall we get home?” Grace said tearfully.

“You mustn’t be afraid,” the bluebird comforted them. “Wait until the first light of the moon and I shall take you the way you came.”

The bluebird kept its promise, and after the moon had shown itself, it led the children back to the stone trail they had produced before. They walked without trouble until they reached a fork in the path.

“Oh, oh,” Grace said in despair. “The path has scattered and so too have our stones! Which way do we go?”

But Holden and the bluebird did not know.

Then Holden gave a sudden shout, for he saw in the distance a sliver of light bobbing in the air. "Someone is there!" The excited boy took his sister's hand and they began to run. "Come, bluebird!"

"Help us! Help us, please!" the children pleaded as they came closer to the light. The figure holding it, a lantern, as it turned out, came into being and was a lieutenant.

"Please," Holden gasped out. "We want to go home and we've lost our way."

"How did you come to be out so late?" the lieutenant asked them, his eyebrows creased with concern.

The children explained how they had come to the village with their stepmother and she had left them there after dark.

The lieutenant chuckled at this. "There must be an explanation," he said warmly. "Come, children, I'll see you to your door. My carriage is just a little ways down; I was keeping watch before turning in for the night. Just fortunate, the two of you, that I was coming from the village opposite or you may have very well frozen yourselves out!"

The children provided the lieutenant with an apt enough description of their farm so that he could take them there in his carriage. All was quiet as they climbed the broken steps; the lieutenant's sharp rapping on the door sounded like a bullet in the night.

Donned in her dressing gown, Stepmother cracked open the door.

"Who calls at this time of night?" she demanded, holding her gown close.

"It is only but the lieutenant, madame," he responded. "I've come across two children wandering the path who tell me they belong here."

Stepmother opened the door wider, gazing at Holden and Grace as though she never knew them.

“These children don’t live here,” she said clearly. “I’ve never seen them.”

Grace gasped; Holden blinked several times.

“Stepmother--!” Holden implored, but Stepmother failed to acknowledge him at all.

“Poor dears,” she said, her voice softening as she looked at the lieutenant. “They must have gotten confused, and how late it is! I think you had better take care of them right away, lieutenant.”

“She’s telling a falsehood,” Holden insisted to the lieutenant. “This is our home, with Father and Stepmother, this has always been our home!”

Stepmother frowned at him. “You may be lost, boy, but there is certainly no reason to accuse anyone other than yourself of a falsehood! Lieutenant, if you wouldn’t mind, time is passing more quickly by the minute and as you can see, I don’t know these children in the least. I beg you to take them and leave me in peace.”

“My apologies for the trouble,” the lieutenant agreed. “I’ll not bother you again.” He took each child by the arm and escorted them back to the dirt. None of them could see the look of triumph on Stepmother’s face before she slammed the door after them.

“She really is being quite deceiving,” Grace tried. “She’s always wanted to be rid of us, and now --”

The lieutenant did no longer sound quite so gentle. “I understand your distress, children, but tales will not help us at all. You’re merely a bit disconcerted. It really is too late for us to sort this all now. You’ll come with me, I’ll bring you to quite a nice place to sleep, and we’ll find your home tomorrow.”

“That’s our home,” Holden protested. “That--”

“I hardly want to wait for help, children, if you choose not to come with me on your own,” the lieutenant warned.

Holden and Grace's shoulders drooped helplessly. This man would not listen to him, and they did long for a warm place to sleep.

"That's better," he approved as they allowed him to help them into the carriage. He directed his horse back toward the village.

They traveled for many miles so that dawn was just beginning to peek over the horizon by the time they stopped, just on the outskirts of the city. A vast grey building loomed over the carriage, and the lieutenant led them inside.

"Morning, Agnes," he greeted the heavysset woman who met them at the door, and it became clear to the children that he was familiar with the place to which he had brought them.

"Aye," she said. "You're looking for Miss Moss, I suppose? She know you were coming?"

"Naught," he said. "I have a pair for her to look at."

The woman looked past him and grimaced. "Not much to look at, it would seem," she said. "And I should tell you, lieutenant, we're at our seams here."

"Let me see her nonetheless," he persisted. "It would just be for a slip, while I try to sort out what more there is to be done."

The woman hesitated. "Very well," she said, before disappearing to the back. She returned promptly with a tall, stern looking woman. She quite reminded the children of a raven, in her long black dress and matching hair pulled up so that not a single strand was out of place.

"Lieutenant," she said, flashing him a thin smile. "Agnes says you found a few lambs wandering about."

"It so happens I did, Miss Moss," he said. "I was thinking you might take them in for a spell."

“Yes, well --” Miss Moss reached up as if to brush a hair from her face though there was no reason for it. “Agnes has already told you we are quite at capacity.”

“I’m not asking for very much,” he said. “A few days so I might detect where these ones lost their way. If it can’t be done, you’ll do what you see fit.”

She studied Holden and Grace, considering. “I suppose a few additional hands around here won’t harm us,” she said. “But a few days is all that you get, lieutenant. Anything more and I shall make my own arrangements.”

The lieutenant tipped his hat. “Of course,” he conceded, and turned attention on the children. “You best not give them any trouble. There are far worse places for children to be.” He left them then, and the children felt they might not see him again.

“Such a sorry sight,” Margaret remarked. “I can’t imagine you’re very missed, whoever you are. And ... who would that be, exactly?”

Holden cleared his throat. “My ... my name is Holden, ma’am, and this is my sister, Grace,” he said cautiously. “The lieutenant, you see ... he has it all wrong. We have a home. We’ve just come from there. We’ve been misunderstood.”

Miss Moss seemed to smile sympathetically, but it never reached her cold, dark eyes. “I’m sure you imagine such a thing,” she said dryly. “Most of the children here do. Alas, it just isn’t the ... truth, in most cases.”

“Our father is here in the city,” Grace cried out suddenly. “Our stepmother turned us out! Father will find us here, I know he will! And he’ll take us from this horrible place!”

Miss Moss’s expression didn’t change as she reached up and slapped Grace cleanly across the face.

“We find tantrums quite beastly here, Grace,” she said meanly. “And you will find that they have a rather unpleasant way of resolving themselves.” She snatched each of their arms with the speed of a great snake in the midst of striking and threw them toward Agnes. “Agnes, take them right now, for I don’t want to hear another thing from either of them!”

Along with nearly a hundred other orphans, Holden and Grace were made to work far harder than Stepmother had ever done. They ate scraps once a day, or not at all if they were slow in their tasks. They were teased by other children and beaten by caretakers. They wanted Father; they wanted to go home. But neither thing seemed possible.

Days passed, far more than the few that the lieutenant and Miss Moss had spoken of. Holden and Grace had held many hushed discussions about running away, but they didn’t know where they might go without being brought straight back. By the time they were summoned, Holden was working with several other boys on the upkeep of the orphanage under the supervision of a cruel man called Stephen. He had the strap marks to show for it. Grace had been banished to working in the kitchen with Cook, who preferred the help of all girls. He found a particular glee in feeling around under their dirty grey jumpers.

Both children were bathed and dressed in new clothes before being escorted into the small office occupied by Miss Moss. The two chairs that faced her desk had people in them, who stood and faced them when they entered.

“Ah, yes,” Miss Moss said in the more pleasant tone she used during exchanges with prospective guardians, “you see, they’re perfect for what you require. Children, the Andersens have come for a few children your age and I thought you would do quite nicely.”

“Children,” the man said warmly, coming closer to him and his wife followed suit, “how do you do? We’ll not bother with formalities; you’ll call me Christian and my wife is Henrietta.”

“Indeed,” Henrietta agreed with a wide smile, “and my word, Christian, would you look at their eyes? An odder color I never did see.” Did I forget to tell you that the children shared violet blue eyes that were an enigma to anyone who knew them? Not even Father knew where they came from, but marveled that the peculiarity added to the magic of their being. This, of course, had never won any favor with Stepmother.

Christian and Henrietta, Holden and Grace saw right away, were several years older than Father and Stepmother, though both managed to possess quite a youthful energy. They had, however, clothing and a distinguished manner that the children had only heard about when it came to people with money.

“Well, now, children,” Christian said jovially, “what would you say about coming home to stay with us? No harm will come to you there; it’s a very nice place for little ones to run and play. Why, we have a few there already! So you will make friends quickly.”

His dark eyes twinkled as he reached behind each of their ears and produced two large, colorful lollipops. “And more sweets than you’ll know what to do with! I don’t expect you know, children, that we own one of the most successful candy businesses in the world, and we’ll teach you all you need to know. You see, Henrietta and I are at a loss for children of our own, since we like to train just the right ones to take over for us someday. You’ll be very, very rich then,” and at the word “rich,” Holden and Grace were perplexed. They had barely ever a coin to put in their own pocket.

“It sounds just wonderful, doesn’t it?” Miss Moss asked them emphatically, as though she were the one being offered such an opportunity.

Grace was troubled. "Oh, but Miss Moss. What did the lieutenant say?"

Her smile froze. "Lieutenant?"

"Yes, about finding Father and going home," Holden insisted. "Father would have returned from his travels by now and I'm certain he --"

"That will be quite enough," Miss Moss said, though not as dangerously as she might if not for their company. "I'm afraid that the lieutenant was unable to help you, and it is my responsibility to place you to the best of my ability. I believe I am doing that now."

"But --" The children were quite anguished at the sound of it.

"Not another word," Miss Moss threatened.

"Children," Henrietta intervened gently, "if there is truth to what you say, we may be able to do something for you. But for now, we really do think you must come with us. I can't imagine staying here is more appealing."

She was right and the children knew that. It wasn't long before they found themselves once again being helped into another carriage, one much fancier than the one the lieutenant took them in. Before they could take their leave, a shrieking, flailing flash of blue flew inside.

"Bluebird!" the children exclaimed. "Of course, of course, you'll come with us."

But Christian's and Henrietta's eyes had darkened, and they swiped at the bluebird, trying to force its leave.

"Away, beast!" Christian commanded fiercely. "Away from here!"

The bluebird responded with a growl so sharp as a tack, settling itself resolutely between Holden and Grace.

"Children," Christian said, trying to sound nicer, "it seems to be taken with you, and I'll thank you to persuade it to be on its way."

“He is no beast,” Grace said, sounding almost indignant. “He’s just a sweet bluebird who wants to come with us.”

“Did you hear what I said, you wretched girl! Now!” All kindness fell from Christian in the command. “Otherwise I shall have the driver kill it!”

The children trembled, but did as he said. The bluebird watched Christian and Henrietta fiercely, and then flew into the late autumn chill.

“There, now,” Christian said, as if his outburst had never happened. “It’s quite odd, isn’t it, I’ve never seen one so reluctant to leave.”

Holden and Grace would have liked to do as the bluebird and fly away, but the couple were now looking at them then with such softness that they felt foolish about it.

“Bluebird is our friend,” Holden said, and Henrietta chuckled.

“It’s but a bird, dear boy,” she said, “it doesn’t care an ounce for you.”

Holden swallowed hard, his mind recalling where he had heard that before.

Andersen Candy Shop appeared twice the size of the village in which Holden and Grace once lived. White exterior gleaming in the late afternoon sun, enormous letters in candy apple red announcing the business, and gleeful gingerbread children painted in brown and red.

“Are we going in?” Grace’s earlier hesitation was gone, for she truly wanted to see the candy.

“All in good time, darling,” Henrietta said. “First, you must eat - you’re skin and bones, the two of you!”

The Andersen estate was mere miles from the shop. More than a house, more than a mansion, a gingerbread palace! There were gingerbread bricks, royal icing grout, peppermint tiles, candy trimmed windows, and a roof made out of gumdrops the size of trees. Holden and Grace marveled at it while the Andersens led them into the house for a feast of pancakes with maple sugar, bright red apples, creamy milk, and nuts. Holden and Grace ate until they could barely move. They were then taken to a quaint little bedroom, all done in white. Holden and Grace went to sleep in matching twin beds, quite content with the lot they had been given. It never dawned on them to ask why they seemed to be the only children in the house.

But the kindly older couple were not what they seemed, for they were not interested in giving a home to children. They were evil witches, who for centuries had collected lost and unwanted children. They were turned into gingerbread and sold as their most desired good. A spell was put over each gingerbread child that would keep Christian and Henrietta young and nourished when the sweet was consumed. The shop was a means to lure the children in and deceive the patrons, children and adults alike who reveled in the taste of their gingerbread.

Christian and Henrietta - as most witches - almost never slept. The very next morning, they went to look at the children lying so peacefully in their beds. The witches tore each child from

their bed, and to Holden and Grace's horror, Christian and Henrietta transformed right before their eyes. Henrietta's short, grey hair lengthened to her hips and turned dark as night, her eyes transformed into a cat's eye yellow, and her skin deepened into a dead, cracked, greyish blue. When she smiled at them, she revealed rotting teeth and a slippery, purple tongue. Next to her, Christian's hair grew to solid silver, his ears became almost as pointy as his gleaming yellow teeth, and the black pupils in his eyes widened so that the entire iris was black.

"Someone help us! Help us, please!" the children cried as they were whisked away to the dark, deep basement of the candy shop where long tables ran from one end of the room to the other, the tops invisible under a mess of sugars, syrups, and colorings. Crowded at each were frantic, terrified children dressed in red jumpsuits under red and white striped aprons. They screamed when Christian and Henrietta appeared. Up against the walls were several large ovens with children in cages next to them. Christian carried Holden to an empty one and locked him inside. Holden cried in terror, but it was for nothing.

Grace cried too, and was slapped for it by Henrietta. By a wave of her hand, she changed Grace's red nightdress to a jumpsuit and apron that perfectly matched the other children's.

"That will be enough of that, girl," Henrietta hissed at her. "You'll work here with the others making the candy for our merchants. You'll soon find we have strict deadlines. You will bring meals and fatten up the lazybones who don't want to work as hard. If you refuse, we'll take your dear brother away. He will disappear and one day, you will know the same fate!"

Grace joined the children and tried to learn what she was to be doing. She screamed as a burning pain struck her back, and turned to see Henrietta had whipped her.

"Timing is everything, my dear," she cackled. "Best you not waste it."

And so it was out of fear and certainly not out of pleasure that Grace developed the most deft of hands in candy making. She painted stripes on candy canes, pulled taffy, shaped gingerbread cookies, poured sheets of peanut brittle, and kneaded marzipan, all as fast as she could. There were cakes to be baked, licorice to be cut, fudge to be hardened. She worked day and night, to utter exhaustion, and there was little time for rest. In between, she helped cook hearty fares for the caged children, and survived by sneaking crusts of bread or bits of chicken. One night, when Holden refused to eat the sweet rolls she had brought him, Christian held a knife to Grace's throat and slowly brought it across her flesh until he obliged.

“Stick out your finger, boy,” Henrietta growled. “I want to see how fat you have gotten.”

She did this with every child, for a witch's eyesight is very poor. In fact, neither she or Christian could tell just by looking at them. When one was presumed to be ready, they were taken screaming and baked in the oven. Two minutes later, they were gingerbread children, ready to be purchased and eaten. Holden learned quickly, and the other children by his example, to poke a chicken bone between the bars. The witches, mistaking it for a finger, wondered why the children didn't seem to be getting any fatter.

When weeks had passed and Holden, along with the others in their cages were still thin, Christian and Henrietta's patience had waned and they refused to wait any longer. Early one morning, Henrietta shouted to Grace and the other children:

“Hurry up and fetch some water! We'll not wait anymore, and we don't care whether these children are fat or thin. Tomorrow they are to be boiled.”

How Grace sobbed as she went out to the well. “If only we had stayed lost on the path. Even the orphanage would do!” she cried. “We might have died, but we would be together.”

“Your weeping doesn't help you or your brother at all,” said a very young girl called Emily.

“Well, something must,” Grace said, “for tomorrow he will be dead.”

“Tomorrow he will be dead no matter what you do,” an older boy called Samuel said. “I have been here for much longer than any of you. If there was escape, it would have been found by now.”

“Pray tell, why have they kept you like this?” Grace asked.

“I’ve gotten the caramel creams just right,” he said, a hint of a smile flavoring his lips.

The children reached the well and what should sit there but the bluebird! Grace changed from mournful to delighted at once.

“Oh, bluebird!” she shouted. “Have you come to save us?”

“I cannot save you,” it said. “I could not come to you while you were inside. They know I am goodness. This place is cursed by spells to keep anything with a pure soul away. But now I tell you, you must be wise. They won’t cease at cooking your brother. Listen to me carefully. They want to fool you, and you mustn’t allow them. They are the devil’s children, masters of deceit. Albeit, I cannot come with you, I am with you.”

In the eaves of the morning next, Christian and Henrietta ordered Grace to heat the ovens. Grace obeyed, all the while her heart was breaking for the murder that was about to take place.

“First, dear girl, we’ve an order of currant buns to bake, and the customer is in quite a hurry,” Henrietta said. “I’ve already kneaded the dough, so all that’s left is to put them in the fire.”

“We could have done that for you,” Grace said, not to be generous, but to probe why the witch would have gone to the trouble of preparing the dough herself. Grace knew with certainty that Christian and Henrietta depended on the children to do the work.

“Tsk!” Henrietta spat out. “You beasts never get my doughs right; better to do it myself and evade the blunders you lot are so given to.”

But Grace knew it was a falsehood, for she herself had prepared many different doughs in the past. Only once had she been punished for a misstep: a long burn mark that ran from her wrist to the crook of her elbow ensured that she would not do it again.

Henrietta and Christian took Grace to one of the ovens, from which an orange blaze leapt.

“I wonder, my dear,” Christian said, “if you wouldn’t lean forward a bit and see if it’s hot enough to put the buns in.”

A slight movement outside the small, dirty window up near the ceiling took Grace’s attention, and she remembered what the bluebird had said.

“I shan’t know how hot it is supposed to be,” Grace said earnestly.

“Stupid girl!” Henrietta exclaimed. “It isn’t so hard.”

“How far in shall I go?” Grace asked. “Perhaps you might show me?”

“Oh, move over,” Christian ordered, and pushed Grace aside. Grace mustered every strength she had so as to tug the iron door open a bit wider, and before the two witches knew what was happening, an army of hands forced them both into the oven.

The screaming flames rivaled Christian and Henrietta’s frightful howls as their flesh was baked to a crisp. Once the sounds had ceased, Grace turned down the heat and opened the door to reveal two gingerbread witches, which the others helped to heave out of the oven. They cleared the long tables of all the half made confections and lay out the figures. From down the stairwell, the bluebird flew.

“Bluebird!” Grace shouted. “I thought you couldn’t come in!”

“The witches are dead,” the bluebird said. “Their spells are naught. See there.”

The bluebird turned their attention to the cages, which dissolved instantly. It was only by dark magic that they had been held there.

“Holden, Holden, we are saved,” Grace cried, running to him. “You see, the witches are dead!”

The children who had been in cages flew forward in glee as birds trapped for a very long time. How joyful they were! They danced, kissed, and held each other tightly. There was no longer anything to fear.

The enchantment that had kept the children from leaving the cellar had broken, and the children slowly ventured up the stairs into the shop that not one of them had ever seen. The early hour found the shop not yet open for business. The children crept between barrels of penny candy, glass cases of fudge, candied apples, bonbons, and a large wall of gingerbread children.

All at once, the gingerbread children began to break out of their forms, revealing several little boys and girls who were cursed no more.

“What has happened? Where are we?” they kept asking.

“You are free,” the little saviors told them, “the witches are dead.”

They cried and shouted, it was a time of great joy.

“What shall we do with Christian and Henrietta?” one girl asked.

The children looked at one another.

“See if we can’t do exactly what they were doing with us,” a boy said, mirth in his eyes.

And so it was that the children brought the gingerbread witches up to the shop and put them out for purchase.

“I say, look here!” Samuel shouted from behind the counter. The children rushed to him only to see scores of gold and jewels that the witches had kept concealed. There was enough for every child in the shop to take as much as they pleased and be well off for the rest of their days. Grace filled her apron; Holden, his pockets.

“No more poverty,” Grace cried, enraptured.

Many of the children wanted to go home. The bluebird promised to see them there. The others either had no homes to return to at all, or homes they didn’t wish to see again. Those decided that they would stay and look after the shop until the sweets ran out; they had no desire to make any more. Holden and Grace thought they might join them for a time. The bluebird said it would return for them soon.

Holden and Grace kept busy sorting stock and making sales. No one found it odd that a family of children seemed to now be in charge. Any person who inquired were told that the Andersens had gone away on important business, and this was accepted well enough.

One day, a tall, spare man came into the shop with the same curly, chestnut hair as two children there.

“Father!” Holden and Grace shrieked, running from around the front counter and into his arms. The other children looked on with something of a longing and an envy. None who had stayed had fathers that they could go to as Holden and Grace had gone to theirs.

“My children,” he cried out. “I have been looking for you everywhere! Oh, my dears, tell me. Please tell me why you ran.”

“Oh, but Father,” Grace said, “whatever do you mean? We haven’t run anywhere. We were brought here.”

“Your Stepmother told me you ran from home after I left for the city,” Father said. “She thought you might have been trying to find me. She searched quite frantically for you before coming home to meet me and tell me what had happened. I’ve been looking for you ever since!”

“No, Father,” Holden exclaimed, “that isn’t at all what happened. Stepmother left us in the village and when the lieutenant brought us home, she turned us away as though she never knew us! He took us to the orphanage and they placed us here, but the owners are ... away right now.”

“Oh, Holden, for you to say such things!” Father looked disheartened. “Your stepmother would have never shown you out as you claim! Please, my boy - come home with me and we’ll sort it!”

“Stepmother is still at home?” Grace said cautiously.

“Of course she is,” Father said, puzzled. “Where else should she be?”

Holden and Grace spoke with their eyes.

“If we come home with you now, Father, she will only find another way to be rid of us,” Holden said quietly. “She will be quite shocked that you found us at all.”

“She can be quite ... unforgiving at times, I’ll grant you that,” Father said. “But the rest of it - you can’t possibly believe it!”

“You believe it, don’t you?” Grace said gently. “If you think about it, you know.”

Father swallowed hard. The trouble was, he *did* know.

“You won’t come?” he said, the answer already clear.

“We want to be with you, Father,” Grace said, “but as long as she is there, it will never be all right.”

“I need all of you,” he said desperately.

Grace dug into her apron, while Holden felt his pockets. They handed him part of their share of the riches that all the children had divided between them.

Father looked at his children in utter amazement. “What is this?”

“Take this home, to Stepmother,” Holden said. “You’ll not have to go without.”

Father looked as though he might refuse, but in the end, tucked the offering into his traveling pouch.

“My sweet children,” he wept, holding them close, kissing them, touching their faces. “There is no family there without you.” But he knew there was no persuading them, for Holden and Grace were with their family, and would remain there in the days ahead.

When did the forest become trees of cut out boys and cut out girls, forgotten with the wind as they tried to find their home?

You are their teeth, their anguish, a peppermint candy in a broken mouth.

You baked their lips, stitching violets with a poison needle.

The air, a feral symphony.

Fingers

fingers

feel them.

Their bones are for sale.

The children will eat you from their cage.

Envoy

The thing about flying is that your thoughts must weave their own ghost.

The only way that your shadow can dance is if your tongue becomes a sword.

Run. Run. Run through the shipwrecked night, fairies in your mouth. The devil is coming, children, he traded his horns for a hook.

Don't you see? It will hang you by your bones.

The thing about flying is that you must have love for old birds.

Their blood is your life.

Imagine your wings were sown with longing, for your own nest is such a bitter little memory.

If you have them.

Do you?