

## Hansel and Gretel Were No Angels

Once upon a time, there was a quiet old woman who lived alone in a vast forest. A widow, her children now grown, she lived a life of solitude and loneliness. Her sole friend was a prized pig that she called Fritz.

Life in the forest was peaceful. Birds tweeted each morning to lift her head from her pillow. Stars twinkled between the leafy branches high above her house before she doused her lamp.

Her four children took turns visiting and bringing supplies each season. Oh, how she looked forward to these visits. The laughter of her grandchildren melted her heart.

As time went on, famine plagued the land. The family she had raised left to find work and food wherever possible, saying goodbyes before moving. The old woman, having amassed a supply of jewels smuggled from the mines by her late husband, tucked a few of the gemstones into each family's bags before they left.

A year came and went. Certainly, the woman enjoyed the serenity of her life, but she was feeling lonelier than ever. Also, she found herself becoming fearful of the smallest things. Jumping at shadows, she rarely left home, even to enjoy the forest sounds.

One chilly autumn day, as she arranged sticks for a fire to warm herself, she began hearing voices. The wood clattered to the floor, her skirt billowing behind her as she ran to the door. She peered out the small window, one eye just cresting the sill, but saw nothing.

Returning to her stove, the old woman stacked and lit the fire. She pulled her

chair close and was just sitting down with her blanket when she heard the twinkling of little voices again. Children.

The voices grew louder but still she could not see anything from within her house. Soon the chatter was replaced with a scraping noise. Something was trying to tear a hole in her roof. Something was trying to get into her house! Heart racing and breath caught in her throat, she worked up the courage to say something.

“Nibble, nibble like a mouse,” she said, her voice faint and shaky, “Who is nibbling at my house?”

“It's only the wind,” voices responded. But she would not be fooled. More scratching and tearing noises came from just outside her door.

The woman could not let these creatures, creatures that spoke in the voice of children, destroy the house that her dear husband had built with his own hands. She tied her sweater and bonnet about her, leaning onto a length of oak, worn smooth by the weight of many walks, and nudged open the door. What she saw nearly broke her heart.

Two children, a boy no more than seven and a feather of a girl, froze-- their eyes glued to her as she stepped out into the fading light of dusk. Clothed in torn rags and in desperate need of a bath, they shivered as they feasted. When she took a step closer she could see upon what they dined.

The boy had broken off a square section of the house's roof and had taken several bites while the girl had found a handful of moss growing on the windows and was licking the green fuzz.

“Do come in,” she said. “You must be very hungry and tired, for you look as if

you've come a long way.”

The kids exchanged glances, seeming to be just as nervous to stay as they were to return to the woods.

“Hansel?” the girl asked, looking to her brother for his leadership.

“Come on, Gretel!” the boy told his sister and held her close.

Leading them into the house, the woman placed her hand on the boy's neck and shivered. He was colder than winter well water. Exposed to the elements and starving, they must have imagined her house was a delicacy. Oh what poor dears! She dropped her crutch and hugged them both before showing them inside.

Their eyes fell upon the fire and were transfixed by the flickering orange tongues. The woman ushered the children into her large chair, covering them with the blanket as she quickly gathered a full meal for her guests. The meal was prepared and the children were biting, chewing, and swallowing as soon as they were an arm's length away from the table. She had to help them to their seats or they might have just crawled right up into the bowl.

When they had had their fill, they returned to the fire. The two cuddled together beneath the blanket, while the woman smiled, a tear sneaking down her cheek. Their eyes drooped as she sang to them and soon they were fast asleep. The woman carried the little one – Gretel – to a soft bed that belonged to her own daughter many years earlier and tucked her in. Hansel was a bit heavier, though now warm to the touch. She draped a blanket over his body and left him to sleep.

The woman woke with the sun and found the children still sleeping peacefully. The fire had gone out and Hansel's blanket was now on the floor, his skin again chilled.

As she adjusted the covering back across his body he stirred.

With his eyes still closed he mumbled, "...get her...told you we'd find the house...I'll kill that witch."

She gasped. Had she made a mistake? Stories from her childhood filled her mind about demons that could wear the skin of men. Could they take on the visage of an innocent child? She had to make a decision. If only she could have known that the boy was simply having a nightmare about his wicked stepmother.

Gretel was still sleeping in the bed so the woman snuck out the door, moving so swiftly she nearly lost a slipper on the threshold. A heavy wooden crib, abandoned by family who couldn't transport it, slid out the shed without considerable effort. She dragged it across the yard and into the house.

The boy required more exertion but she managed to get him into a corner and upend the crib, trapping him before he fully roused from his stupor. Upon realizing his situation he howled a feral cry and shook the slats.

Guilty and scared, the woman shoved food between the bars to appease him. He didn't refuse it but only ceased his protests when he exhausted himself. In the meantime, her muscles and joints were set aflame and even standing for any amount of time caused her considerable discomfort. No doubt punishment for the physical toll her body had paid that day.

She turned to find a teary-eyed Gretel now awake, the girl's eyes locked on her imprisoned brother. Hoping first to rebuild the fire and finish a few other chores, the woman enlisted her help. When Gretel tried to use the woman's adult-sized broom to sweep the floor, it was as comical as it was cute.

“I could just eat you up!” she told the child, failing to notice the girl's body stiffen – frozen with fear.

When they had arrived, the girl had shown a bit of baby fat still. However, Hansel had looked emaciated and gaunt. The old woman kept checking on him throughout the day, but each time the boy would stick out a bone through the rusty bars of the make-shift cage. Confused, the woman at first tried to take the bone but Hansel wouldn't release it from his grip. She took it as a sign he wanted more meat and fed him again.

There was no sign of life outside the house all day. No mothers, no fathers. It was possible they were orphans. Even so, she wasn't going to be able to just throw them out of her house, not without somewhere to go.

Her heart warmed at the prospect of a family for the winter. Then she remembered that half of her new family was incarcerated. She resolved to release him that day, but first she would prepare a surprise for them. The woman instructed Gretel to build a large fire in the oven and fill the kettle as she went outside.

The pig didn't seem worried as she approached with the axe. Oh how they would enjoy this feast!

She groaned as she carried the pork back to her door, calling out to Gretel.

“Gretel, dear, could you crawl over to the oven and see if it is hot enough,” she yelled. Sweat began to drip from her brow. Her back, which had just started to feel better, was wrenched even worse. It would be worth it to see the looks on the children's faces as they savored the succulent pig meat.

“I don't know how to do it,” Gretel replied from inside.

Just then the woman's foot found the walking stick she had previously dropped

and she lost her balance.

“Stupid!” she said, scolding herself for being so careless. She responded to Gretel, “Just lean in the door a tad and see how warm it is.”

She crossed the threshold with the pig but saw no Gretel. The woman set their dinner-to-be upon the table and checked the fire herself. A shuffling noise startled her and she spun. Innocent little Gretel advanced toward her with outstretched arms. The woman's smile faded but she took too long to react and was pushed through the door of the oven. She screamed.

Gretel slammed the door of the oven, apparently locking it as well, as the woman couldn't open it no matter how hard she pounded her fists on the blackened surface. Her hearing muffled by her prison, she could hear wood cracking, feet scampering, and the front door slamming.

Fortunately, Gretel lacked the ability to make a good fire and the old woman was able to stomp the embers into sparks, only scorching the fringe of her dress. The smoke flowed out the dark, soot-filled chimney, keeping her from suffocating.

It was hard to judge time in the oven, but it could have been days before the brilliant white light exploded all around her as the heavy door was pulled open. Disoriented, the woman shielded her eyes from the light. A beautiful, golden-haired girl peered into the darkness.

“Who are you?” the woman asked, finally free.

“My name is Goldilocks. Are you hiding from bears too?”

The End