



THE GINGERBREAD HOUSE

Once upon a time, there was a little house on the edge of a deep, dark forest. In that house lived a very poor family. Papa was a lumberjack, Mama was a seamstress and their two children were named Hansel and Gretel. Papa wasn't home very often, because he had to go to the king's forest to chop down trees so the king could build bridges, and chopping down enough trees to build a proper bridge can take a very long time. To save money, he would sleep on the forest ground, but the forest at night was very dark and he had to be very brave. Luckily he was a lumberjack, and they can be very brave indeed. Every evening, he would make a big fire to scare away the wild animals, but even the firelight and the sound of crackling wood couldn't help him sleep when he heard a pack of hungry, howling wolves. As payment for his hard work, the lords let him take as much wood from the forest as he needed so that his family wouldn't freeze during the winter and could have enough heat to cook their dinner.

While Papa was away, Mama would make clothes for rich people. She was an excellent seamstress, but because they couldn't afford to buy a sewing machine, she had to sew by hand. Her fingers were full of needle pricks because she often had to sew through the night, by the dim light of a lamp. The light was so weak that sometimes she couldn't see properly and the needle would slip and

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prick her finger. During the day, Mama would take care of the family, and when Papa was in the forest she had to do everything by herself. The rich people paid her very little money for the beautiful clothes she made, but they would give her leftovers from feasts, and so the family had food.

Because their parents worked so hard, Hansel and Gretel helped their parents with anything that needed to be done. Hansel mended old cooking pots with holes because they couldn't afford to buy new ones. Someday, he wanted to walk to every town and village he could reach on foot, mending pots. He would travel the world, he decided, and maybe even make some money to bring back home. Gretel cleaned a lot and helped Mama in the kitchen. She dreamed of making cakes and pies one day to sell at the fair, but she was still too young. Sometimes, when the children finished their chores, they had time to play in the meadow by the forest. They played hide-and-seek and tag, and when the sun set, they would hear the familiar hooting of an owl that watched them every day from her favorite tree.

One day, Papa got very sick. He couldn't get out of bed for a whole week. When they started to run out of firewood, it got cold in the house and they couldn't cook. Hansel saw how sad and worried his parents were, not knowing what might happen in the future.

One morning he said, "I'm going to go to the forest to collect wood so we don't all freeze to death." Mama wouldn't hear of it. Hansel could get lost, she said, and never find his way back home. It was too dangerous! Papa agreed: Hansel was not old enough to go into the forest alone.

Gretel didn't hesitate and quickly said, "If Hansel goes, I'll go with him. Together, we'll be safer, and I can pick some forest berries and mushrooms. We can dry them and eat them through the winter!"

After a long conversation, they persuaded their parents to let them go into the forest.

"Don't worry, Mama, we'll be back home by sunset," Hansel said, hugging his mother. Then, he and Gretel walked down the path into the dark forest. As they walked, they could hear crickets happily chirping in the grass. When they got

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into the forest, Hansel began looking for wood and Gretel started to pick the wild strawberries that were growing right by the path. There were so many of them, but the further they grew from the path, the bigger they were, so Gretel had to leave the path to collect them. Suddenly, she was all alone in the deep wood and very scared.

“Hanseeel, Hanseeel!” she screamed.

Hansel could hear Gretel calling him from far away. He immediately dropped all the wood from his back onto the ground and ran to find his sister. The sound of crickets started to fade. Not even crickets dare to go that deep into the forest. Then, as if on purpose, the sun disappeared behind the clouds and it got darker and started raining heavily.

“Hansel? Hansel!” he could hear her voice deep in the forest, desperately calling him.

Hansel looked for Gretel for a long time in the dark wood. When the rain finally stopped, there was a round moon in the sky where the sun had been, and by the time he found Gretel the sky was completely dark. Luckily, there was just enough moonlight shining through the trees so they could see their feet. They were tired and hungry, and they wandered through the forest, trying to find the way back home.

Suddenly, they saw a blinking light far off in the distance. It looked exactly like the little lamp they had in their kitchen back home! Excited, they ran toward the light, but when they got close they saw that this was not their house, but a strange little cottage covered in gingerbread. They could smell the sweetness all around and they were so hungry that they reached out and started breaking off pieces and eating them. After a few moments, they heard the sound of the door squeaking open.

A sweet little old lady came out and said, “My dear little children, you look lost! How would you like to come in and rest for a bit?”

“Thank you, but we can’t,” said Hansel. “We need to get home as fast as possible. Our mama and papa must be so worried about us.”

“But where would you go in the middle of the night? Why don’t you get some

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sleep here and set off in the morning?” The old lady smiled and waved them into the house. Hansel and Gretel were very tired, so they agreed and followed the old lady into the cottage. As soon as they lay down in bed, they fell fast asleep.

But when Hansel woke up in the morning, he saw that he wasn't in a bed. He was locked in a cage! Through a small hole in the cage, he could see Gretel cleaning. The sweet old lady wasn't sweet, after all, but a mean old witch. Hansel heard her scream at Gretel to sweep faster and better, and after a few minutes told her to bring Hansel food.

When Gretel got close to the cage, she whispered, “Hansel, it's even worse than you think. I heard the witch mutter to herself that she wants to fatten you up and then throw you in her oven and roast you and eat you. And I'm supposed to serve her and do everything she orders me to do.”

Hansel tried rattling the door of the cage, desperate to get out as fast as possible. However, the cage was too strong and he couldn't move the door even a little bit. “I have to go,” Gretel whispered through the cage. “But when the witch comes back, she'll want you to stick out a finger to see if you're fat yet. Stick out this bone I brought you instead.”

And that is exactly what happened. Soon the witch came to the cage and told Hansel to stick out his finger. Hansel held out the thin bone. The witch pinched it, shook her head, and ordered Gretel to bring him more cakes. For weeks and weeks, Hansel ate plenty but only showed the witch the little bone he got from his sister. The witch didn't notice because the cage was in a dark chamber, so she never realized that Hansel was fooling her.

One day, the witch lost her patience and ordered Gretel to make a strong fire in the oven.

Gretel was sure she knew what was going to happen, so she ran to her brother. “Oh, Hansel, this is very bad indeed!” she whispered. “The witch wants to roast you and eat you today!”

“Don't be afraid, Gretel. I'll think of something,” Hansel said. When the oven was burning hot, the witch came into the chamber and opened the door of Hansel's cage.

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“Hello, Hansel, dear. Why don’t you come with me so I can show you something,” she said, sweetly.

Hansel obeyed her and climbed out. There was already a crackling fire in the oven and there was some kind of sauce bubbling in a pot on the stove.

“Hansel, my sweet, why don’t you climb up and put some more wood in the stove so we can warm the room up a little,” she said, slyly.

Hansel tried to climb up to the door several times, but each time he slipped and fell on purpose.

“I can’t seem to do it,” he said to the witch. “Can you show me how to climb up there?”

The witch grumbled something to herself, took a log, climbed up to the door, and then, right when she was about to throw it on the fire, Hansel and Gretel pushed her into the oven. The oven banged and rumbled, flames shot out of the chimney, and, with a loud popping sound, the witch disappeared along with her magic.

The happy children whooped and jumped on the old wooden floor. Suddenly Hansel broke an old board and his leg got stuck.

“Wait, I’ll get you out,” Gretel said, and started pulling on Hansel’s leg as hard as she could.

Once they managed to free his leg, they noticed a hideout under the floor. They tore off even more boards, which were quite loose already, and then they saw it. The witch had a secret cellar under the floor and there was a chest hidden in it! It was very heavy, but together they managed to pull it out, and when they opened it, the whole cottage lit up from the glittering and gleaming jewels inside. The children had never seen such beauty in their lives. Gold coins, pearls, rings, and all kinds of treasure. They took as much as they could carry and left to find their way home. When they saw their old friend, the owl, hopping from tree to tree, as if showing them the way, they decided to follow.

“The wise old owl is bound to know where home is,” the children thought. And they were right. After a while, Hansel thought the forest looked familiar. Then they saw their own house and ran to it as fast as they could. They hugged their parents over and over.

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“Mama, can you bring a bowl from the kitchen?” Hansel asked.

His mother didn't understand why he would need an empty bowl. But she went to the kitchen, took a bowl and put it on the table. The children walked to the table, smiling, and poured all the treasure they had found in the witch's lair into the bowl.

Mama and Papa were shocked, but after Hansel and Gretel told their parents the whole story, they all knew that their family was extremely lucky. Hansel and Gretel had saved themselves by beating the witch with their smarts, and saved the family with the found treasure to boot!