Gretel

Gretchen Ingersoll

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I was hungry. The cottage leaned into the night wind. The triple groan of my family’s slumber shook my bed. I curled onto my side, sucking my knuckles, gnawing the tips of my hair. I dreamt, eyes open: bread, milk, honey. My hands passed over my body, naming my bones, shaping the skeleton beneath the meat of me: collarbone harness, hipbone cage. I waited in that narrow bed for morning, watched my brother’s bony face turn grey to white with the lightening sky.

At dawn, our mother unlocked the cabinet, shaved us both a slice of bread. She locked us out of the house with our portions. We let the bread dissolve on our tongues and drank long at the well; our stomachs gurgled and sloshed, the liquid rose in our throats. We thought of eating stones.

We stood in the yard. We were quiet. I was thinking of the whole loaf, our mother and father feeding each other across the wooden table. Perhaps a fingerful of honey, a mouthful of milk. Who knows what they shared? I leaned into my brother’s shoulder, and he leaned into me. We held hands. It was winter then, and the world was black and white and very, very still.

My brother and I had the same summer birthday. My brother and I had the same quiet voice. My brother and I had the same pale face. My brother and I were the same except I was a girl and he was a boy.

I followed my father into the woods. My brother followed me. My fingers burned in the morning chill. We stumbled in a bleary row, hungry. Once every few steps, my brother stepped on the back of my shoe. We were too familiar for spoken apology; I knew what he was thinking.

We settled into the nest of branches and snow from which
you could see the clearing. Last winter, our father had killed a massive buck from this hiding spot. I could still taste the pungent meat, feel the fat softening my lips. We had eaten from that deer until summer.

I sat to the side, unarmed. My father and my brother watched the clearing. I watched their faces. I saw in the set of my brother’s jaw that he believed today was to be the day that he would will the deer into the open, that his kill would feed us all. I saw in the set of my father’s mouth that he no longer believed in deer. I did not know what I believed.

I followed my father out of the forest. My brother followed me. On each of our backs was a load of wood, split and tied hastily in the falling dusk. Our house was always warm. But, of course, you cannot eat wood.

Our mother grew fat that winter. Her belly brushed against the table as she ate. The fabric of her dress moved as she swallowed, and she kept one hand always on her stomach. Each night she leaned back from the table and challenged our father with her eyes. Each night he met her gaze and handed her the last of the bread on his plate.

In bed at night I tried to think it through. Always it had been like this: my father got the most food, because men did the hardest work. My brother got the next most, because he was a growing boy. I got the same amount as my mother, but she would give the choicest bits to me.

But all that winter, my mother ate what she could. She did not smile at me. She locked me out of the house with my brother at sunrise. Sometimes we could hear her screaming through the walls, before my father emerged from his breakfast to lead us into the woods.

My brother and I held hands across the space that separated our beds. Each night he fell asleep first, and the weight of his sleep dragged his hand away from me. The walls of the cottage shifted in the wind, and I felt my ribs with my fingers, pressed hard into my stomach. I could hear my mother whispering in the dark to my father, and sometimes it sounded like she was laughing, and sometimes it sounded like she was crying.

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I followed my father into the woods. My brother followed me. I licked a crumb of bread from my back teeth, stared into the rough cloth that covered my father's back. The trees lined our corridor, spare and black; the sky was grey and then white; the sun cloaked by unfallen snow.

My father carried his gun in his hands, and carried my brother's on his back. I carried the coils of rope to drag the deer or bundle the wood. My brother followed me, carrying the axe for the wood and the knife for the deer, wrapped in the blanket we would sit on when we got to the blind.

When we got to the nest of branches and snow from which you could see the clearing, my father paused and looked up into the sky. He cleared his throat; spit into the snow.

Today we will hunt a different place, he said. And he walked through the clearing and into the woods on the other side. I followed my father, and my brother followed me.

I had not been beyond the clearing before, and I knew my brother had not also. The trees were as black as the ones we knew, and the sky as blank and white. Still, it was strange to see the trees flying past as we moved so quickly by, and the pattern of them not at all familiar. My father said that we had to hurry, and we walked behind him faster and faster.

It was a long time before we stopped to rest. We had not come to a clearing yet, and the sky had turned back towards grey. I slid down against a tree and my brother did the same. My knees and feet were aching; my tongue was swollen with thirst. I ate some snow from the ground. My brother rubbed his eyes. We set our packs on the ground.

My father said, Wait here, and he walked a little away from us to relieve himself, leaning his gun against a tree. I was too exhausted to get up. I felt for my brother's hand beside me, and then I heard the snap, a fat squirrel breaking the branch it was running across.

Father, we yelled, but he already had his gun up. He took two quick shots at the squirrel as it ran. The woods split with the crack of his gun.

I watched the squirrel's tall bob away in the treetops, my fin-
gers plugging my ears. My father took another shot, although the animal by now was safely away. I turned toward him and saw his face, the anger and shame that he wore as he lowered his gun.

And then I saw him set his mouth and raise his gun to me.

We ran. I ran as fast and as hard as I could, and I could hear that my brother was following me. His breathing and my heartbeat and our footfalls were loud in my ears as I crashed through the trees, stumbling, scrambling up, falling, running, running. I tripped on a log, fell down a hill and kept running. The air echoed with the thunder of my father's gun and my body was numb with fear and I wondered if I was shot and dead and a ghost hurtling past these trees in the growing dusk. But the snow began to sting my face and I could feel my thighs lifting and falling through air that was heavy like water and I heard myself crying and I knew that I was alive. The gun began to sound a little farther away after a while, and then a little farther, and when it sounded far enough away we slowed a little, but we kept moving.

Maybe he wanted us to get away.

We held each other's hands in the forest and tried to hold our breath to listen for sounds other than our feet falling on the snow, our hearts drumming blood through our ears. We held hands and walked this way: one hand in the other's, one hand stretched before us, pushing our way through the black, black night. Finally we had to stop. At dawn we curled into each other, curled into the snow. We tucked our heads into the other's belly, listened to the gnawings of hunger or fear, dreamt of bread.

When I woke, the noon sun dove down to where we lay, crackling into my eyes in thin bright needles. All else was the same as before: thick trees black as absence, snow pale as death. I uncurled and rose, sleepwalking awake, stumbled away from our tracks, away from the way we had come. My brother followed me.

I saw my brother's face for the first time since our flight. Passing in and out of deep shadow, he did not wince when the
sudden light stabbed across his face. He watched only the ground where he stepped, even when I called him by his name. I reached back and caught his hand; it slipped heavy from my grasp.

The second night I dreamt of a feast. I hid in the corner and watched as people ate from a table laid heavily with food that I had never seen: rich sauces over exotic animals, tender off the bone. Crusts of pastries forked open to release the fragrant steam of succulent fruits. Vegetables, fresh and bright, swept with butter: peas sweet with spring, carrots baked with brown sugar. Bread as warm as a blanket. More milk than you could ever drink, warm and frothy or cold as ice.

My brother ate the snow I handed him, and no more. My brother watched his feet when we walked, and did not say a word. I walked on through the forest, and my brother followed me.

On the third night, I ate at the table. Food filled my mouth as soon as I sat on the cushioned chair; fingers held my glass to my lips, wiped the stew from my chin as I reached with both hands for more, more. My stomach creaked wider than it had all year, ballooned with food. I could not stop. It was delicious. I was so hungry. Soft hands renewed my plate and patted my hair. She said that I was a very good girl.

In the morning, I had to push my brother ahead of me, a good shove every few steps. His mouth leaked constantly down his chin; his trousers were frozen with piss. He went only as far as I shoved him, empty and strange as a stupid animal. I looked at the back of his bare neck as he stalled before me for the hundredth time, and my fingers itched to pinch his blank pink skin.

I hesitated, fingers in the air, and then clamped down. I peered around his body at his face. Nothing.

I let my fingernails sink beneath his skin, watching his color, listening to the dumb regular pace of his breath. Nothing.

When I took my hand away, there was crimson blood washing his throat and four piles of scraped flesh beneath my claws. The woods were silent. I pushed him then, and he moved forward. The light before us shifted, and we came into a clearing.

It was then that I saw the house.
At first, it appeared so small that I believed it was just an abandoned hunter’s shed. Any shelter from the woods was a blessing, and I left my brother at the edge of the woods and ran ahead through the unmarked snow.

Two things stopped me at less than ten paces: the house suddenly seemed to loom and sprawl, inflated by, I thought wildly, imagination? Breath?

And also, the smell of food surrounded me so completely, so luxuriously, that I pinched my thigh through my dress, sure I still lay sleeping.

The shutters of the house flew open, and the smell of the feast grew stronger still. My thigh throbbed where I had pinched it. I looked back at my brother and saw his features shift and then again grow still.

I ran to the heavy door and pounded with both fists. It swung open at the first blow. Someone within said, Can I help you, child?

I screamed: Feed him!
And I fell to the floor, and I slept.

As I woke, I reached for my brother, but I was alone. I stretched in a wide, bright bed, the sun of an early hour striping the quilts. There were two plump pillows tucked under my head, and an extra blanket folded at the end of the bed. I sat up and discovered that someone had been in with a tray: five golden circles of egg, ten slabs of bread, lightly toasted. No fork; no matter—I ate it all, sucking my fingers, before my feet touched the floor. I took the glass of milk off the night-stand and drank it down as I walked to the window.

The glass dropped from my hand and shattered at my feet as I looked out. How long had I lay sleeping? The snow had disappeared from the yard, and in its place were grass and gardens, lush greenery filling the space to the foot of the woods. A rabbit nibbled on a head of lettuce, and tomatoes hung heavy from staked vines; corn grew high and green in cozy, nodding rows. Surrounding the vegetable plots were rows of thriving flowers, swaying slightly in the breeze. It must be spring.