



Lost in the Woods
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Until the wolf, Hansel and Gretel agreed, everything had happened exactly as it was supposed to. The first day, they followed home the white pebbles Hansel had dropped one by one as they trudged after their distracted father deep into the woods. The second day, the Stepmother stopped Hansel from collecting a new pocketful of pebbles, so Gretel used buttons from her sewing kit. The third day, the two children had nothing to mark their way home but breadcrumbs. Once their father left them behind, patting them on their golden heads one last time, they looked for the trail of crumbs and found birds had pecked it away.

Hansel clapped his hands together in a satisfied way. 'That's that,' he said. 'Now we're properly lost. We find the gingerbread house, get rid of the witch and discover her treasure hoard, Dad comes to get us, the wicked stepmother conveniently goes away – Happy Ever After.'

Gretel was not so pleased. She quite liked their stepmother, who was not really wicked, and hadn't really wanted to insist that her two new stepchildren be abandoned in the deep dark woods. She had just done it because that's what happened in the story. And now they had to eat a poor old woman's gingerbread house, and push her into her own oven, and steal all the coins and jewels she had been putting aside for her retirement, because that was also what happened in the story. Gretel was a little worried about that.

What didn't happen in the story, however, was a big hairy slavering wolf. He was propped up against a tree by the side of the path, tapping one big hairy foot and looking impatiently at his wristwatch. Which was odd, thought Gretel, because wolves didn't have wristwatches, or even wrists, usually.

It could talk, too. 'Ah, little girl,' he said, as soon as he spotted Gretel coming down the path hand-in-hand with Hansel. 'You're late, but never mind – where are you off to with that lovely basket?'

Gretel didn't have a basket. She realised the wolf was looking at Hansel how she might look at a picnic basket full of lovely food like cake and strawberry jam and sweets. The brother and sister stopped walking and exchanged a look. Gretel decided that honesty was the best approach.

'I'm not Little Red Riding Hood,' she told the wolf. 'I'm Gretel. From Hansel and Gretel. You know, with the gingerbread house and the oven.'

The wolf put his hands on his hips. 'Not Little Red Riding Hood! Not Little Red Riding Hood! Where is that lazy girl?' He turned his big red eyes on the pair of them and smiled a wide smile with lots of teeth in it.

'While I'm waiting, Not Little Red Riding Hood, I suppose I could just eat you.'

Hansel and Gretel looked at each other again. Hansel swallowed heavily and spoke up. 'Excuse me, Mr Wolf?'

'Yes, basket?' said the wolf. His teeth really were very large.

'I'm not a basket, Mr Wolf,' said Hansel. 'I'm Hansel. From Hansel and Gretel. You know, with the cage and the finger bone. So you can't eat us, because the witch is going to eat us.'

'Witch, smitch,' said the wolf. 'I'm hungry now. Look at my big stomach.' And he jumped at them with his big white teeth bared.

Hansel, with a mighty heave of his shoulder, threw something hard at the wolf. It struck him between the eyes and he dropped and lay like a big hairy rug in the middle of the path. The two children stepped carefully around him.

'What was that?' Gretel asked her brother.

'One of the left-over pebbles,' said Hansel. 'I panicked and just threw whatever I had in my pocket. I didn't think it'd do that to him, but I'm glad it did.'

He said this last defiantly, because Gretel looked so disapproving. 'But I think you killed him,' she said.

'He was going to eat us, Gretel,' said Hansel, reasonably. 'And besides, you're the one who has to push the witch into her oven, so you've no call to be squeamish.'

Gretel sighed. 'I wish I didn't have to.'

They went on along the path, holding hands as before. Soon, they come to a girl, about twice their age. She paced back and forth, wearing a bright red cloak and swinging a cane basket from one hand. She had long glossy black hair and very red lips in a pale face.

'Look at you delightful red-cheeked children,' she exclaimed. 'How sweet you are, how adorable. Have you seen a wolf? He was supposed to be here ten minutes ago. Probably off chasing the three little pigs again, or the nine little goats.'

'A wolf?' said Gretel, in dread, looking at that big bright red cloak.

'Big ears, big eyes, big teeth – you couldn't miss him.'

This time it was Hansel who chose honesty. 'I think we killed him.'

Little Red Riding Hood gasped and looked at them with outrage writ large upon her pretty face. 'You little brats!'

'I thought we were adorable and sweet,' said Gretel, primly. 'He tried to eat us, and we have to get to the witch's house to be eaten.'

'Oh, do you? Well, I have to get to Grandma's house to be chased by the wolf, and you've completely ruined it for me, completely.'

'He might not be dead,' said Gretel. 'He's just back that way, if you want to try to wake him up.'

Little Red Riding Hood looked even more affronted. 'I have a schedule to keep, you inconsiderate creature. I've got scones in this basket that won't stay fresh all day, and I'm sure Grandma's got better things to do as well. No, that's it. You're both coming with me.'

And she hooked up the basket so it sat in the crook of her elbow, seized each of them by a shoulder and began to march them along the path. The whole time, she kept up a running litany of complaints. 'I just don't know what these woods are coming to. You can't come in here to get your own story finished without tripping over everybody else's. Next thing you know, Goldilocks'll be knocking on Grandma's door looking for porridge, Rapunzel'll be in the garden stealing radishes, and Sleeping Beauty'll be up complaining she can't get any sleep for all the traipsing back and forth.'

Just as Little Red Riding Hood snapped out this last bitter appraisal of the state of her woods, she dragged Hansel and Gretel out into a clearing. 'There! Now in you go, scare Grandma, wait for me, threaten to eat me, chase me around, the woodcutter'll be along to take care of you.'

Gretel put her hands on her hips in a fury, glaring at Little Red Riding Hood. 'We're not wolves. We're not going in there to gobble your Grandma up! Why, we wouldn't hurt a fly.'

'Um, Gretel,' said Hansel, tugging on her sleeve. He had turned to look at the cottage nestled under three ancient oak trees in the centre of the clearing.

'Oh, you don't have to eat her,' said Little Red Riding Hood. 'You silly little child. Make it the version where the wolf locks Grandma in the broom closet instead of eating her, and the woodcutter isn't going to really chop your head off, is he? Now, hurry up. You've got five minutes to get into Grandma's bed to pretend to be a wolf pretending to be Grandma. I want nightcap and knitting, the works. Right?'

And Little Red Riding Hood marched off. Gretel, fuming, turned to her brother. 'She's a bossy thing! As if we ever would go in there and even so much as touch a hair on her Grandma's -'

She finally noticed the cottage that Hansel was mutely pointing at. It was made of gingerbread.

'Oh no,' said Gretel.

'What should we do?' wailed Hansel, hopping from foot to foot.

Gretel sighed again. According to their own story, they had to go in and terrorise an old woman. Now it turned out she was the loving grandmother of innocent, if bossy and annoying, Little Red Riding Hood, who would not be happy to find her grandmother in an oven. But they had to do something, or their story would never end, and their father would never find them. They would truly be lost in the woods with no way home.

‘Perhaps if we just go and explain the situation,’ she said at last. They walked over to the door, which was made from gingerbread like the rest of the house and smelled simply delicious, but no matter how hard they knocked, no Grandmas answered.

‘Maybe she got sick of waiting for Little Red Riding Hood, and went out,’ suggested Hansel. He tried the door, but it was firmly locked.

Gretel thought for a moment, then reached out and broke off a sugary bit of windowpane. Hansel promptly tore off a bit of roof and crammed it in his mouth.

‘Hansel! I was just getting her attention.’

‘Me too,’ said her brother, with his mouth full. ‘Besides, it’s been ages since breakfast and you’re not the one who has to be locked up in a cage.’

‘Hmmm,’ said Gretel. ‘At least you’ll be well fed – I have to do all the housework on starvation rations till baking day. So I need sustenance. And it really does smell good.’ She started nibbling on her windowpane. Hansel grinned and stuffed his mouth with more roof.

The door opened and a little old woman peered out at them. ‘What adorable little golden-haired children!’ she cried. ‘Who are eating my house! But never mind! What adorable, plump, little darlings.’

‘You must be Little Red Riding Hood’s grandmother,’ said Gretel.

‘Indeed I am,’ said the old woman. She had a pair of twinkling black eyes, just like a bird’s. She bent down and tweaked each of their cheeks. ‘Where is that lazy girl?’

‘Well,’ began Gretel, doubtfully. Although Grandma called them plump and prodded them as if to see how much meat they held, she wasn’t convinced this bony old woman was also the wicked witch.

‘Come in, come in.’ The old woman disappeared inside and Hansel and Gretel, exchanging another look, followed her.

Inside, there was a large birdcage hanging from the ceiling, big enough to hold a small boy, and an enormous oven, big enough to hold a full-grown, if skinny, woman. Scattered about the room were caskets of pearls and other jewels.

'Oh,' said Hansel, and 'Ah,' said Gretel. Behind them, Grandma shut the door and smiled. 'Aren't you just delicious? I could just eat you all up.'

'We're here as Little Red Riding Hood's wolf, not as Hansel and Gretel,' said Hansel quickly. He knew everything turned out fine in the end, but that cage did not look comfortable.

'That's right,' said Gretel, just as quickly. The cottage was filthy. The dishes needed doing, the floor needing sweeping, the marzipan windows needed cleaning, a lot of Grandma-type knickknacks needed dusting ... she rather envied Hansel his cage. Besides, she didn't want to have to push Grandma into the oven, even if she really was a witch after all.

'Really?' said Grandma. She looked at them with her shining black eyes. 'You certainly look like Hansel and Gretel to me.'

Suddenly the old woman seemed taller and thinner, as if she was stretching herself out to loom over them. 'Oh Grandma,' quavered Gretel, backing away with Hansel. 'What big eyes you have.'

The two children cowered in terror, quite forgetting that they knew how this story was meant to end. Grandma drew herself up even more with her hands on her hips and looked just as sharp and irritated as her granddaughter. 'I don't know what you kids are looking so frightened about. I'm the one who ends up in the oven. What was Red thinking, sending you in here? Wolf or the twin terrors, either way, it means a pretty bad day for me, don't you think?'

Gretel straightened and tried to look forthright and bold. 'If you promise not to eat us –'

'Eat you! Eat you! Why would I want to eat such a bony pair when Red's on her way with a basket of lovely food? You'd hardly make a morsel of broth.'

'Hey!' said Hansel. 'You said we were plump and delicious a minute ago.' Gretel nudged him hard. 'Oh, I mean – you want to feel my finger bone to see how skinny I am?'

'Oh, shush,' said Grandma. She sat down at the table with a thump and scowled, rapping her fingers on the table.

'I can see where Red gets her temper,' muttered Gretel. Just then the door opened and in walked Red, carrying her basket in one hand and her cloak folded over the other.

'Oh, bother!' she said. 'Why isn't Grandma locked away and you pair waiting in her bed? Shall I come back?'

'No,' said Grandma. 'I don't want to be eaten by a wolf or pushed into my own oven, thank you very much. Just you scream a bit, the woodcutter will come running, he can take these horrible children away, and then we can have a cup of tea and some scones.'

'We're not horrible!' cried Gretel.

'I'd like some scones,' said Hansel, humbly.

'I brought apples, too,' said Red. 'I know how you like apples.'

Grandma ignored them both and poked Gretel with a bony finger. 'Not horrible? In you waltz, ready to shove me into my oven and steal all my pearls, my darling granddaughter's inheritance, and you have the gall to claim you're not horrible?' Grandma looked really fierce now.

Hansel and Gretel looked at each other. 'We – we didn't know we could change it,' said Gretel, quietly. She was thinking about their stepmother, whose fate, according to the story, was to be gone when they returned, and who was quite kind, really.

Grandma snorted. 'Nonsense.' She stood up, took them by an arm each, and pushed them out the door. She shut the door firmly behind them, and they heard it lock.

Hansel and Gretel stood on the doorstep. They both suddenly realised they were cold and hungry. 'How will Dad know to come for us, if we haven't killed the wicked witch?' whispered Hansel. 'I don't want to be lost in the woods anymore.'

'Look!' cried Gretel. On the edge of the clearing, their father was hovering, holding his shining woodcutting axe. They raced over to him and he flung the axe aside and gave them both a big hug each, as big as a wolf's eyes or ears or teeth.

'I was just waiting for Little Red Riding Hood to start screaming,' he said. 'I'm the woodcutter, you know.'

'We took care of the wolf for her,' said Hansel, proudly.

Gretel hesitated. 'But we didn't kill the witch, so we didn't get any treasure.'

Their father held their hands tightly. 'That doesn't matter. Your story's finished one way or the other. Let's go home. I know the way.'

Gretel asked, her voice trembling. 'Is the Stepmo – is Mum going to be there?'

'Of course she will. She's waiting for her family to come home from the woods.'

On the way home, they met Snow White. She couldn't find her dwarves, so they directed her to the gingerbread cottage, where she could at least find scones and tea. And perhaps an apple.

END

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