

## Aftermath: Hansel

Our father alternates between hugs and apologies. He lifts Gretel off the floor again and again. In his arms, she seems to hang like a rag doll. Her eyes look sewn open, her mouth stitched into a half smile. I glance around the cottage—our stepmother must be somewhere, but there would be no place for her to hide. I cannot picture her face. When I try, all I see is the witch.

“She’s dead,” our father says finally. He begins crying as never before, thick heaving sobs that could be sadness or joy or relief. He looks across the bare wooden table at the gold coins we have brought. His eyes grow wide as mouths. To him, the coins must look like the kinds of food he hasn’t eaten in years. Before we left the witch’s, we considered filling our pockets with gingerbread, peppermints, gumdrops, but we weren’t hungry, and we weren’t children anymore. We took only the coins. Walking home, my sister and I were quiet and sluggish and full. My mouth felt stung by sweetness, my stomach was heavy as a cow’s udder hanging low with milk. Everything I saw made me feel sick—I couldn’t tell the difference between sugar and star, chocolate and tree.

Our father tucks us into bed, kisses us each on the forehead three times.

I cannot sleep. Of all the things that could haunt me now, of all the things that may haunt me forever, it will not be the witch. It will not be her stringy black hair, not the way it seemed to crawl on her head like thousands of centipedes, not her rotted teeth, so dark that they appeared to be gaps in her mouth, not what I imagined such gaps led to—the black pit of a stomach that had digested boys before me. Not her laugh, the cackles that pierced the air like breaking dishes, not the sound she made when she burned, screams high and haunting like the wails of an infant, not the sickening smell of burning flesh mixed with the sweetness of candy, not the mess we saw in the oven after, slivers of yellow bone sticking out of a sizzling, tarish lump of blackened flesh. What will haunt me will be what came before that, before the witch. It will be my father leading us into the woods, my sister behind me, small and thin and shoeless, my stomach so empty it felt full, my head seeming to drift above me like a balloon. And my hands, dropping bread crumbs in a trail behind me: just in case, just in case.