

# WHAT REALLY HAPPENED IN THE WOODS

A new take on *Hansel and Gretel* by Ashleigh Meikle

A young man trudged along the dusty forest road that yearned for the rains. He ventured deeper and deeper into unknown territory to a mysterious meeting. A piece of parchment in his hand had scribbles of a name and a description of the place he was going rather than a conventional address. On another bit of parchment, there was a letter, which had been the bait that had led the young man on this perilous journey in search of a story. A story, he had been told, that would set the record straight. A version, he had been told through whispers around the village, that was not recorded anywhere, or that was known by the outside world – a taboo version. The young man had a great interest in taboos and why they were taboo. Hopefully he would discover that today about the folktale he was investigating. The heavy forest canopy masked the sun, allowing only pinpricks of the light through. Silence reverberated uneasily around him. In the distance, a structure began to rise up, as if out of nowhere. He quickened his pace, eager to get to the first vestige of civilisation that he had come across since leaving his sleepy village. The structure, which appeared to be some kind of house, grew bigger and bigger. The young man broke into a run, panting when he stopped at the door. There was an oddly shaped and sweet smelling door knocker. It also felt sticky. “What a strange doorknocker,” he mused, knocking loudly on the wooden door. He peered at the house: most of it appeared to be wooden, whilst other parts looked as though they had been made out of food, specifically boiled sweets. He stepped back as feet ran to the door, and it was flung open. A woman with a crooked nose and dark, cloudy green eyes peered out. Her black hair was tied in a bun.

“Samuel?” she croaked. Samuel nodded. “Enter,” her eyes shone with an exuberance that Samuel did not see through the cloudiness of them. He followed her in.

“You know why I’m here, Madame Katharina?” he asked. She nodded with a smile at being addressed as Madame.

“To set the record straight,” she replied. “Oh my poor sisters...thwarted by two children and a girl and seven dwarves,” she sighed. Samuel sat down on one of the cloud-soft couches. Before him on

the table, lay a spread of sweets. “You must know the tale of Hansel and Gretel?” she asked Samuel. He nodded. “Good, then you will know what I am talking about when I tell you my tale,” she smiled.

“I know the village story that your sister attempted to eat the children,” Samuel said. Katharina hissed.

“My sister wanted nothing more than to help them, but let me start from the beginning boy, and then you can decide,” she said, a little too sweetly. “Once upon a time, a very long time ago, my sister lived in this house. She was very lonely and wanted children of her own but as a witch, she was barren, and unable to mate with anybody,” Katharina began her tale woefully. “Now, my sister watched day and night from her



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window, hoping for lost children. You see, we have bad eyesight, so cannot see unless something is very close. So when those two children came, she saw a chance to take care of them. She never intended to eat them, I believe. Fairy tales have painted witches as evil cannibals. We are just misunderstood," Katharina continued with her tale. Samuel listened carefully. Katharina watched through cloudy eyes for the young man's reaction: he was focussed on her, his quill poised.

"Please, continue," Samuel said. There was a hunger in his eyes for the tale. Katharina smiled.

"Very well. My sister welcomed the poor little dears into her house and fed them, gave them a place to sleep," Samuel's eyes widened in curiosity. It was not what he had heard over the years as a child: he knew the tale of the witch who had fattened up Hansel to try and eat him, and had heard that that same witch had been forced into an oven by Gretel – in varying versions of course: he had been the only child in his village to gain an education – the village saved for one child every ten years to attend schooling, and he had been the lucky one, so many of the tales he heard were orally told, and revised and embellished here and there over the years. There was something magical about oral storytelling, Samuel told himself. Whilst he loved the written word and often read to the younger children from his many books, he still enjoyed the weaving and threading that an oral tale brought, bringing the story and characters to life in a way that words never could. The witch had paused for a moment to sip on a bubbling goblet of drink – poison to humans, yet sweet and energising to witches.

"These children – Hansel and Gretel were the most ungrateful children ever! They plotted from the beginning to eat my sister's lovely home and then to kill her. Now, I know she locked the boy up and made him plump but the poor child was so deprived of food that she had to separate them. Is that not the case in the villages? You have to separate the children when they eat so that each child gets a fair amount?" she asked innocently. Samuel shook his head, very taken with her story telling abilities. "Not exactly..." Samuel trailed off. How could he explain to the witch that people just divided food up equally? He knew legends and tales, whispered after children had gone to bed, of tribes and other villages that partook in such practices.

"Those parents were nasty, you know, abandoning their children like that...my sisters and I vowed that if we ever found abandoned children, we'd care for them," Katharina sighed.

"But one sister tried to eat kids and the other was a murderer," Samuel piped up all of a sudden, not knowing where the words had come from. "Folk tales always told of your...cruelty," he formed the last word carefully, a word long ingrained within his psyche when it came to beings such as witches and step mothers, who often were witches posing as humans,. Katharina narrowed her beady eyes at

him till they were nothing more than green slits.

"Oh did they? I suppose you believe the tales you were told at your mother's knee then? Or are you able to hear my folktales as well?" Samuel nodded, and the witch smiled a gap-toothed, pointy smile.

"You know well the tragic end my dearest sister came to," she said dramatically. Samuel's quill quivered against his hand. "That little brat Gretel shoved her into the oven, just as she was warming it to bake more food for the children, but of course the story proclaims she put it on to cook them...all she wanted was for that brat to test the heat...but alas, my dear sister was pushed into the oven, MURDERED by that child!" Samuel almost thought he saw tears, but he knew from legends told over the years that witches could not cry. Katharina looked eerily into Samuel's eyes."You now have both sides," she grinned, her yellow saliva dripping off over her jagged and pointed teeth. "What is your verdict?" her eyes glowed with an unusual fervour. Samuel was in a trance. He had been told too many



stories about this event now. He shrugged. Katharina watched him. “I will come to you in three days for your answer. Now go.”

“Just one question,” he paused by the door. “Why has your version been ignored and thought of as taboo?” Katharina’s nostrils flared angrily.

“Why do you think, boy? I am a witch! Now go!” She turned to her bubbling cauldron – o what, Samuel could not be sure, but it didn’t smell good. Samuel slipped quickly out of the house, stopping to sniff the tiles: they were chocolate. He daren’t touch them – the witch had seemed hungry. He started to reach out to snap a piece off, and stopped: Katharina had seemed nice enough but he still felt wary, and the chocolate could after all, be bewitched. Many tales told of bewitched and poisoned food – deep down he still believed the tales he was told at his mother’s knee, in the dusky hours after dinner before heading to bed. The magic of the words still wove around him, cradling him protectively. He turned, and trudged out of the forest. Oral stories and tales were dangerous, especially when there were too many versions to deal with. Yet, he smiled fondly, there would always be a magic to oral tales. Something that was sadly becoming a lost art as more and more stories were written and he wondered if oral stories would ever survive in the ever changing world.

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Ashleigh Meikle is an Ancient History student, currently finishing a Master of Arts in Ancient History at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. She has always loved reading and since she was ten has enjoyed making up stories. She would love to write for children, and the many authors of children’s books she has enjoyed, such as JK Rowling and Frances Hodgson Burnett, have been her inspiration, amongst too many others to list. She says: “The world of reading and writing have always been inter-related for me, and always will be, for without being able to recognise letters we cannot read or write. There has always been a magical quality about words and the ability to weave them into a story that people will enjoy is something that I love doing and experiencing.”

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