

THE FOREST

KIM WILKINS

KIM WILKINS was born in London, and grew up by the seaside in Australia. She is the author of seven supernatural thriller novels for adults, five psychic crime stories for young adults, and five fantasy books for children. She has won Australia's Aurealis Award four times, and has a PhD in writing. Her novels include *The Infernal*, *Grimoire*, *The Resurrectionists*, *Angel of Ruin*, and the Gina Champion Mystery series. Her most recent novels are *Rosa and the Veil of Gold*, *Giants of the Frost*, and *The Autumn Castle*.

In the story that follows, Kim Wilkins reworks a classic tale to take us into the neon-lit world of danger and dark magic that can only be found on the other side of the mirror...

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I.

My brother and I turned fifteen on the same day, but we are not twins.

His mother is my stepmother; his stepfather is my father. We were raised together from the age of seven. We squabbled over toys, mocked each other's weaknesses, screamed red-faced that we hated each other in one moment and pored over comic books together the next. All this familiarity, however, was not proof against attraction.

My brother's name is Hansel. On the day he turned fifteen, he was half-boy, half-man. He wore his hair long, and could almost be mistaken for a girl, except that his body had begun to change. His long limbs were becoming dense with muscle.

At our birthday party that day, I watched him across the table, beyond the limp cake that Mother had grudgingly spared an egg and a cup of flour for. And Hansel watched me because that is what we did. We watched each other. In the morning, while the grim skies above the city of Stonewold leeches themselves to muddy grey-green and the traffic began moving beyond our grimy windows. After school, while the black and white television flickered and grimaced in our gloomy

living room. At supper, while our parents fretted about money and meted out string beans as though they were emeralds. And then at bedtime, across the four feet of space between our single beds. We watched each other, and our eyes became as hungry as creeping poverty had made our bellies.

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And so my brother and I turned fifteen on the same day, and we watched each other turn fifteen and something insistent pressed on my heart while I watched him: a fear of loss, a horror of growing older. Perhaps it is hindsight that allows me to describe it, because at fifteen most feelings are indescribable. At fifteen, feelings are flashes of incomprehensible white heat, convictions are as unutterable as they are searingly vital. The fabric of being is stretched by the swing of that hinge between childhood and adulthood. Souls ache.

We were dispatched to bed after a supper of rough bread and dripping: Mother said that as we had eaten cake, we need not also eat a full meal. We said our goodnights as we had always said them and climbed into our individual beds. But the pressure on my heart would not abate and I tossed and turned for nearly an hour before I dropped into sleep.

It seemed only minutes later that I woke to see a dark figure standing at the window. It was Hansel, gently parting the curtain to look outside.

‘Hansel?’ I said.

He turned, smiled. The streetlight caught him across the cheek and my fingers prickled with the desire to touch him. ‘I can’t sleep,’ he said.

I turned back my covers and stood with him, pulling the curtain open now so that the familiar peaks and edges of Stonewold were in view. The orange streetlights turned the perpetually swirling cloud above to amber. The slick streets were empty, oily with rain and muck.

‘There is more, isn’t there?’ Hansel said.

‘Somewhere.’

‘They warned us in school that one day we would say these things.’ His fingers laid loosely on the windowsill. Long, tanned fingers with bitten nails.

One of the first lessons of our seventh grade was about puberty, how it

would catch us and make us unhappy with what we have. How we would start to think about the forest.

‘Do you think anybody ever gets to the forest, Gretel?’ Hansel said.

‘We won’t, and that’s all that matters. “Born in the city, die in the city” — so the saying goes.’ I indicated with a tap on the glass the rusting, cut-out trees sprouting from the roof of the next building, the steel spirals mimicking organic shapes that hung from our own building. ‘This is the closest we’ll get to the forest.’

He leaned his head on the glass, closing his eyes so his long black lashes fanned out on his cheeks. ‘I know I could breathe among the trees.’ Then he opened his eyes and fixed me in his gaze. ‘But this feeling will go away. A few years, we’ll learn to bury it.’

‘I don’t want to bury it,’ I murmured, the pressure on my heart becoming painful. ‘I would rather suffer.’

‘I know,’ he said, and it was the profoundest thing he had ever said. His fingers reached for mine and clutched them. A moment hung suspended between us, a sliver of clarity in the fog of adolescence. He lifted my hand to his mouth and his tongue slid out and licked my index finger, wound around and down. An intoxicating weakness washed through me. He grasped me around both wrists gently and pulled me towards him, spreading my arms. ‘I want to be young forever,’ he said.

‘I do too.’ I could feel the heat of his body through my thin cotton nightie.

He kissed me. It wasn’t the first time, but the intent was new. All my senses flared into life and I moaned a little, a sound I’d never heard coming from me before. He pulled off his shirt, and I pulled off my nightie and my breasts were pressed against his bare skin while two of his fingers trailed a searing passage down my body, crept inside the elastic of my underpants and slid inside me.

Noise. Light. We jumped apart.

Mother was standing in the doorway, one hand on the light switch, the other hand clutching a pile of our folded laundry. ‘What’s going on?’ she shouted in a panicky voice. ‘Father! Come here.’

Father was there a moment later, his grizzled moustache drooping over his

mouth as he stared at me, then Hansel, half-dressed, red-faced.

He marched in, grabbed Hansel roughly by the shoulder and pushed him out of the room. I quickly scrambled back into my nightie. The door of the bathroom slammed shut, and I heard the key in the lock. Father returned, wordlessly removed Mother from the room, then locked the bedroom door as well.

I sat on my bed, my heart thundering. The curtain still lay partly open, revealing a shard of the amber sky. I heard voices and crept to the door to listen. Mother and Father.

‘... shame upon this family,’ Mother was saying.

‘I won’t have that boy in this home any longer.’

‘And I won’t have that girl.’

A long silence. The subway roared beneath the building, shaking its foundations. Then Mother said, ‘We can’t afford to keep them, anyway.’

‘I’ll take them into the old city tomorrow,’ he said. ‘They’ll never find their way back.’

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II.

Father was a concreter, a trade that many young men of his generation were trained for, but a trade that had rapidly become obsolete. As Stonewold grew, every inch of dirt and grass disappeared under a hard grey veneer. There was simply nothing left to concrete. He eked out a living on minor repair jobs. The rusty tray of his old XP utility was lined with concrete dust and the occasional hard lump that had set on the beige paint before he could clean it up. At dawn, Hansel and I were herded into the tray, where we were told to sit with our backs up against the cabin for safety. The ute took off, rattling over tramlines. We held hands.

‘What will we do?’ I asked, close to Hansel’s ear.

‘I have a plan,’ he said as our apartment tower disappeared. From the

inside pocket of his windcheater he pulled a packet of Winfield cigarettes. 'I stole these from Father this morning.'

'What use are they to us?'

He glanced over his shoulder. 'I'm going to leave a trail, to lead us back home.'

He shifted over closer to the side of the tray and began to drop cigarettes, one after the other, along the route through the city. They were brightly white against the grubby streets, and I cautiously shed my anxiety. Those pale cylinders would lead us home. Home was not a happy place, but it was better than being exposed in the city. Dark shadows stalked the city streets, shadows with names like Violence and Winter and Disease. But their king was Hunger.

We were leaving the new city behind now, with its rigidly planned structures of unpainted concrete, bristling with plastic and iron vegetation. As we wound down into the valley of the old city, the streets grew so narrow that the thin, black buildings seemed to bend towards each other in aggressive challenge. The smell was bitter: damp rot and garbage and decades-old car fumes trapped in tight alleys. Underlying it all was the ceaseless aroma of dead things, for many things died in the city. I presumed Mother and Father expected us to die, and while this horrified me, it didn't surprise me. The instinct to destroy the young was always latent in their generation; it simply became more pronounced when we were all competing for food.

Spirals within spirals, demented alleys; the ute finally came to a halt in a space so tight that Father simply couldn't drive any further.

He got out, opened the back of the tray. 'Here you are, kids.' He handed us a rusty coin each, just enough to buy a bread roll. 'I'll pick you up in the same place at nightfall.'

This was a lie, and all three of us knew it, but nobody spoke it.

Hansel and I stood in the mouldy alley and watched Father's ute back out into the street. One of the headlights was bent, shining at an odd angle against lichen-splattered brick. The engine spewed blue smoke as Father turned, revved, and drove away.

The swirling olive-tinged clouds were thick and sludgy above us, and the tall buildings created cold shadows. An unnatural lightlessness pervaded, as though it

were about to pour with rain any moment; but rain rarely came to Stonewold despite the perpetual cloud cover. Miserable drizzle sometimes, or weeks and weeks of unbearably chill humidity. Never a thundering downpour to wash the streets clean.

‘What now?’ I said to Hansel.

He shrugged. ‘I guess we follow the trail.’

We walked to the next block, where the first cigarette lay waiting for us. Hansel picked it up, brushing at a grey stain on the white paper. He straightened, scanned for the next, and on we went. We passed boarded-up shops, their faded signs streaked with water stains and bird droppings; we passed a concrete children’s playground, with a toppled-over climbing frame and an odour of cat urine lingering in the sand pit; we passed an empty car yard where aluminium cans and fast food wrappers clung to the chain wire fence and six bent hubcaps were propped up against the shopfront. Behind the clouds, the sun had risen and so the traffic started. We risked our lives at intersections where road rules had long since been abandoned. We passed rows of black apartment blocks. Most of their windows were shut against the smell and the ugliness of the city, but one stood open, Led Zeppelin’s ‘Kashmir’ spurting at deafening volume onto the street. The song followed us for two more blocks, a steam train on heavy rails.

Then the cigarettes ran out.

‘Shit,’ Hansel said, after a long search.

I tried not to panic. A cold wind had risen, and Hansel wondered aloud if the cigarettes had simply blown away. Then an old tramp with a brown coat came past us, walking in the other direction, a crisp Winfield cigarette between his lips.

‘Hey, grandad!’ Hansel said, grasping the old tramp’s arm. ‘Where did you get that?’

The tramp grinned, pulled a handful of cigarettes out of his pocket. ‘Summun lift’em on the stritt.’

Hansel rolled his eyes and groaned. ‘Did you pick them all up?’

‘Inny I could see. You want ‘un?’

Hansel took the cigarette offered to him, leaned in to light it from the

tramp's cigarette. He angled his head slightly as though he intended to kiss the old man. I admired the soft line of his jaw.

'Iss a good day,' the tramp said to me, laughing softly.

'It is?' I said impatiently, too caught up in my own suffering for kindness.

'Allays a good 'un when you git smokes fer nuppin'.' He winked, waved and shuffled off.

Hansel blew out a stream of smoke. Shrugged. 'We're fucked now.'

'Maybe we can find our way back anyway.' I glanced around, trying to squeeze familiarity out of the surroundings. 'I think we came under that arch.'

'I don't remember it.' His eyes went skyward. 'It's strange here in the old city, without the tram cables. Feels like we're not in a cage for once.'

I followed his gaze, cheering myself. The edge of a feeling tickled me, a feeling like liberty.

'Come on,' he said. 'You're probably right. Under the arch.'

Gradually, we grew dizzy. The streets of Stonewold seemed designed to confuse. Landmarks repeated, causing the cold anxiety that we were retracing our steps. When our legs ached we knew we were heading slowly upwards, and so were going in the right direction. When they didn't ache we were relieved of discomfort, but knew we were losing ourselves. The day progressed; I grew hungry. I swallowed three times for every hunger pain, as we had been taught in school. It didn't work. It never worked, but it was better than doing nothing. We talked about spending our money on bread, but decided to save it: insurance against things getting worse. Those who are schooled in privation can always imagine worse privation; bad luck only takes the wealthy by surprise. Hansel clutched my hand, dragging me hither and thither, deeper and deeper into the maze of the city. The streets were too narrow for traffic. The noise withdrew through black alleys. I was nearly ready to admit that we had no hope of finding home again.

That was when I saw the white bird.

'Hansel, look!' It was the strangest bird I'd seen. I was used to the dull brown sparrows of Stonewold, small and dirty. This bird was snowy white, with a

long, elegant tail, an azure crest on his head, and proud black eyes. Most unusually, it was mechanical, made of springs and screws. It sat on the sign of an empty shop cleaning its metal feathers.

Hansel stopped and turned, his eyes following the direction I was pointing. He smiled, approached and held up his hand. 'Hello. Where are you from?'

The bird raised his crest and spoke, clicking his tongue in his beak. 'The forest.'

Hansel and I exchanged desperate glances. The forest? Now the bird spread his snowy wings and swooped into the air. He stayed low, heading down an alley. Without a word between us, Hansel and I began to run, following the bird, splashing through mud and nearly slipping on the algaed bitumen. The way home was abandoned behind us along with daylight, which was closed out by narrower and narrower spaces. Finally, the bird burst through the other side of the black alley. A half-demolished building lay to our left, a group of shops to our right. Ahead of us was a shining mirror, twenty feet tall and easily as wide, embedded in a grey wall. The bird arrowed towards it, its reflection growing larger all the time. We could see ourselves in pursuit. The mirror drew close; we pulled up, the bird didn't. It speared into the mirror. A ripple of light flashed behind it. The cityscape in the mirror disappeared. In its place was a forest.

I choked on my own breath. Ran forward, puzzled to see my own reflection hovering ghost-like among the verdant shadows. Hansel was beside me a moment later, hands pounding on the mirror.

The bird sat on a branch and made a noise almost like laughter. Only now it wasn't mechanical, but a real bird of feathers and fine bones.

'How do we get in?' Hansel shouted.

'We all go empty-handed into the unknown!' the bird squawked, then took to the sky and disappeared.

'What does that even mean?' I murmured as I gazed at the forest. Drooping larch cast its hanging shadows over sunlit rocks. Long, soft grass rippled in the breeze. A narrow stream curled its way through the trees, and suddenly I was desperately thirsty. All around me were the smells of water gone bad: stagnant, mouldering. I wanted more than anything to bend at the side of that sweet stream and drink.

Hansel had picked up a half-brick from the demolished building and threw it hard against the mirror. The brick bounced back, hitting him in the shoulder. The mirror didn't crack. He staggered, swearing in frustration.

'I wouldn't do that if I were you.'

Hansel and I turned. Outside one of the shops was a woman, around the same age as our parents. She was well-dressed and tidy, with shining chestnut hair and thick spectacles. The sign over her head said, *Sweet Shop*. My mouth began to water.

'Why not?' Hansel demanded. 'What's in there?'

'It's a trick of the imagination, that's all. There is no forest. Just a mirror. Look.'

We looked. The forest was gone. The reflection of the dark city gazed back at us.

'Besides,' she said, 'breaking a mirror is seven years' bad luck.' She smiled. 'Would you like to come in?' She stood aside, nudging open the door of the shop.

Hansel and I stumbled over our feet in our hurry to accept her invitation.

Inside the sweet shop, the air was warm and heavy with the aroma of baking biscuits. The walls were painted black, which contrasted strongly with the coloured sweets: reds and pinks and greens and bright yellows. Strings of gingerbread hung like streamers from the ceiling; barrels of butterscotch, jelly shapes, powdered Turkish delight and other treats waited in every corner; and a little fountain of chocolate stood in the middle of it all, bubbling over neatly stacked pink marshmallows. I forgot myself. It wasn't the sweets that aroused this fissure in the meaning of things; it was the concept of *plenty*. In all my life, I had never seen *plenty* before.

The woman sat on a stool by the counter and crossed her stockinged legs neatly. 'Help yourselves.'

'We can't afford to pay for this,' I said, blinking back into cognisance.

She waved my concern away with a flick of her beautifully manicured hand. 'Oh, never mind. You look hungry.'

Hansel had no hesitations. He was already stuffing gingerbread into his mouth.

‘I need to tell you something, though,’ the woman said. ‘I do prefer to be up-front about these things. I’m a witch.’

Hansel laughed, spraying crumbs from his mouth. He didn’t believe in witches.

I was less sure. ‘What do you mean?’ I asked, tentatively nibbling some peanut brittle.

‘I’m a witch. Magic spells and so on. I control all the rats in this part of the city.’ She clapped her hands together and out of the shadowy corners advanced a dozen rats. They gathered at the bottom of her stool and waited, patient as newly trained puppies. Even the rats couldn’t turn me off the food which, now it had hit my stomach, had aroused ravenous hunger. I finished a slab of peanut brittle and went for a strap of raspberry licorice.

‘Are you going to put spells on us?’ Hansel asked.

‘Heavens, no. There’s no need for that.’

‘That’s cool,’ he said, reaching his hand into a barrel of jelly snakes.

‘Stay a while,’ the witch said, wistfully blinking her pale eyes behind the thick spectacles. ‘As long as you like. Eat what you like. I’m going to sit here and count my money.’

She popped open the cash register and pulled out handfuls of gold coins, which she began to count and stack, humming softly to herself. The big enamel stove ticked softly, warming the space. I had to admit that she seemed very friendly and kind for a witch, and I relaxed and filled my stomach with sweet delights. Afterwards, she made us thick hot chocolate to drink, and then the evening was approaching so she insisted we stay a while, that there would be crumpets and marmalade for breakfast and, as long as we didn’t mind the rats, we were welcome to sleep in the spare bedroom.

I had reservations, I do remember that. My stomach was full, we might have been on our way. But what reservations can stand up to abundance? In the morning, there would be more, and more was what I wanted.

Our beds were side by side, under a window with a white blind. Hansel held my hand for a long time, but eventually sleep caught him and he let me go and turned on his side. As I drifted off, I listened to the sound of the rats skittering around under our beds, and the clink of the witch, counting her gold coins by the thin electric light.

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III.

‘Did I forget to mention that I eat children?’

I opened my eyes. The witch was leaning on my bed, dressed in a tidy beige suit. One of the lenses of her spectacles was cracked, the other missing completely.

Confusion arrested me. ‘What did you say?’

‘I eat children.’ She smiled. ‘So much for wanting to be young forever, eh?’ She stood and walked away.

I checked Hansel’s bed. He was gone. I leapt up and made to run after her, but beneath my feet a swarm of rats began to move. Warm, scratching bodies. I lost my footing, I fell. A rat squealed. I began to shout. ‘What do you mean? Where’s my brother?’

Her voice was calm, drifting from within the sweet shop. ‘Well, come and see.’

I kicked rats out of my way. One bit my bare toe, but I hardly felt it. My heart seemed to have grown too large for my chest, it sat on my lungs. The chocolate fountain had been cleared away from the centre of the sweet shop. In its place was a silver cage. And in the cage was Hansel.

I approached, limbs shaking. His knuckles were bloody, a graze adorned his temple. He looked up at me with sulky eyes. ‘The bitch caught me.’

I reached for the bars. The moment I touched them, a sweet melody began to play, a pearly, disembodied voice gathering in the dark arch of the room:

I swear by the sour, I swear by the sweet,

Someone is trying to steal your meat.

The witch strode over and knocked my hands off the cage with a thick candy cane. 'Don't touch,' she said. 'Or I shall know, and you will end up in there with him.'

I realised she was having trouble focusing on me, and I glanced at the floor of the cage. Shards of broken glass. Hansel had broken her spectacles trying to get away from her.

She blinked rapidly. 'I can't see well enough to go to the grocery store for turnips,' she said. 'You'll have to go.'

'Turnips?'

'For my boy-roast. One must have vegetables with meat. Too much meat by itself is bad for one's colon.'

I was speechless. The witch carefully pulled a handful of coins out of her pocket. Peering closely, she fingered them one by one until she landed on the right denomination. She held it out to me. 'Here. The grocery store is two blocks west. The rats will show you.' Then she smiled. 'And if you try to run, the rats will tell me and I will cut Hansel up bit by bit. I will have boy-fondue instead of boy-roast. I will invite all my witchy friends over and we will listen to Carole King and talk about how *good* life used to be. Understand?'

I nodded, felt the sweat forming around the coin in my palm. At least going to the grocery store would give me time to think of a plan to free Hansel.

She gave me a little push towards the door. Scurrying feet followed me: two rats, close at my heels.

The first thing I saw, as I emerged into grey daylight, was the giant mirror. There was no forest in it, no white bird. Only miles of concrete structures, strangling out the day. Gloomy clouds crowded down on me; I hesitated, straining to see the sunlit stream again.

'There is no forest,' one of the rats said, in a soft voice.

I looked down. 'I saw the forest.'

'Don't talk to it,' hissed the other rat. 'The witch just wants turnips.'

‘A friend of mine thought to get through to the forest,’ the first rat said.

‘A friend?... A rat friend?’ I had never heard a rat speak before.

‘Yes. He stole a gold coin from the witch, and came here and slammed himself up against the mirror until he brained himself. You see his bones there.’

I moved towards the mirror, and stooped to pick up a rat bone. Perhaps from a hind leg. I put it in my pocket.

‘Hurry, hurry,’ said the second rat.

‘Do you like the witch?’ I asked.

‘Nobody likes witches,’ said the second rat.

‘But she gives us lots of things,’ said the first rat. ‘Sweetmeats and so on. If we stay loyal to her, she gives us one coin every five years.’

‘And if we are disloyal,’ said the second rat in an urgent voice, ‘she boils us up in a pot. Let’s *hurry*.’

I returned to the witch with a turnip twenty minutes later, and she declared she would cook Hansel that very afternoon. Then she retired to count her money, and I sat next to the cage — careful not to touch the bars — to keep Hansel company.

I had never lost anything as precious as Hansel. I cried and my tears fell onto my hands.

‘Don’t cry,’ he said. ‘I’ll get out of this.’

‘How?’

‘When she opens the cage, I’ll overpower her.’

I didn’t point out that he hadn’t managed to overpower her when she’d put him *in* the cage.

‘Then we’ll run to the mirror and escape into the forest.’

'It's not there any more.'

'It might come back.'

I pulled the rat bone out of my pocket and handed it to him through the bars. 'Nobody gets through the mirror.'

He turned the bone over in his hands. 'That bird did,' he said, but he sounded less certain now,

'That witch has so much,' I said. 'She has gold coins, and more sweets than she could ever eat. Why must she eat you as well?' I shivered, thinking about my own fate. 'Why must she eat both of us?'

Hansel didn't answer. He tucked the bone behind his ear; his long hair covered it. 'I might stab her in the eye with this,' he said. He seemed very young, a little boy, playing a game of superheroes.

My hand stole between the bars, and he took it. I noticed he held it very tightly. We said nothing for a long time.

* * * *

IV.

'Almost the dinner hour,' said the witch. 'I need to heat the stove. How much fat is on you, boy? If I roast you too hot, you'll get tough. I do despise chewy children.'

I shuffled out of the way and watched as the witch reached blindly for Hansel. The bars sang, but she didn't mind. Quickly, Hansel pulled the rat bone from behind his ear and thrust it out towards her. Her fingers caught it.

'My!' she said. 'You are very thin.'

'I'm only a boy,' he said in a little voice. I wanted to laugh and cry at the same moment.

'Hmph.' She put her hands on her hips. 'Hmph. I have the stove far too hot. I'll have to adjust it. You looked so succulent when you first arrived.'

She turned to me, fixed her pale gaze just above my eyebrows. A smile

formed, a very unpleasant smile.

‘Gretel, perhaps you can help me.’

I scrambled to my feet. She grabbed my hand and hauled me behind her. ‘I can’t see the controls on the stove properly since your brother busted my spectacles.’ She thrust me in front of a large dial on the side of the stove. ‘What does that say?’

‘H for hot,’ I replied.

‘Put it on M for medium.’

I would like to say that I saved my brother then, that I had the forethought to turn the stove off all together. But while my mind tried to process the impulse, the witch guessed my hesitation and whistled for two rats, who came to supervise. I turned the dial to M. Medium. Hansel would be roasted at a medium heat, and there was nothing I could do.

The witch opened the stove door. A wall of heat blasted out, making me stagger back. The long cylinder inside was deep enough for a tall boy like Hansel to lie, curled in a foetal position. It was lined with coals that glowed orange. She handed me a poker. ‘Rake those coals so they lie even,’ she said. ‘I want him roasted nicely all over.’

I reached in as far as I could. My arm grew hot. I raked the coals.

‘Get right into the back.’

‘But —’

‘Climb up on the lip of the stove. Do as I say! I’ll cut him to pieces!’

I climbed onto the lip of the stove. My hand burned against the soot-streaked enamel. I reached as far as I could. My shoulder was pushed up against the opening to the stove. I turned my head away, trying to keep my face from roasting. I saw her piles and piles of gold coins on the bench next to the stove. And I had an idea.

My heart thudded, because I doubted myself. But necessity made me bold. I crouched, pretending to peer into the stove. ‘What’s that?’ I said.

'What's what?' she asked, myopic gaze seeking me out.

'Is that a gold coin at the back of the stove?'

She jumped. 'What? Is it melting?'

I stepped down, adopted a casual tone. 'Oh, it wasn't a coin at all.'

'A coin? Melting in there?'

'No, no. Nothing at all. Nothing. Here, let me keep raking the coals.'

'You're just saying that, now. There's a coin in there. You are going to rake it up and keep it.'

'No, it was a trick of the light.'

'Rats!' she exclaimed, and immediately three of them were at her feet. 'One of you climb up and tell me if you see a gold coin in the back of the stove.'

The first climbed up. 'Nothing, witch,' it said.

'I don't believe you. You want it for yourself.'

The second climbed up. 'Nothing, witch,' it said.

'Ah!' she exclaimed, pulling at her hair. 'I can't trust you. There's gold melting in there!'

The third climbed up. 'Really, witch. There is nothing there.'

She kicked the rat out of the way, doubt possessing her, ravens in her brain. 'I'll look for myself.' She pulled out a big pair of oven mitts and leaned into the mouth of the stove, muttering, frantic.

I kicked her. I kicked her so hard that I tore the muscle in my right thigh. Her upper body slammed onto the coals. Rats began to bite my feet. I pushed the stove door, but her bottom was in the way. She was screaming. I lifted her legs and cracked them between the door and the stove. Something broke. I folded her in, slammed the door shut and dropped the latch.

Then I went to the dial and turned it up to VH. Very hot.

Hansel had heard the screaming, and was shouting at me to come. I limped out, my blood still thundering.

‘What happened?’ he said.

‘She’s in the stove,’ I said, panting, shaking the bars of his cage. The cage began to sing, but this time the music was out of tune, warped and dripping. The bars began to dissolve in my hands, turning to sticky sugary syrup. Hansel leapt free and embraced me. The rats were in chaos. Some were shouting that they had been liberated, while others tried to trip us and bite us.

Hansel linked his arm through mine and we turned to the witch’s cash register. We filled our pockets with gold coins, then ran out of the shop and stopped at the mirror. Already, four rats, gold coins clenched between their teeth, were trying to bash their way through. Again and again they struck themselves against the unforgiving glass, until they were battered and bleeding.

I put out my hand. The mirror was cool. It did not bend, it did not melt, and it certainly did not let me through.

Hansel hammered his shoulder against it, grunting. Sweat formed on his brow. In the mirror, I saw the white bird sitting on the exposed brickwork of the half-demolished building to our left. I looked behind me. In reality, it wasn’t there.

‘How do we get in?’ I called to the bird in the mirror.

It didn’t answer. I watched as Hansel knocked himself against the mirror, as the rats began to drop, one by one, in bloody mangled heaps.

And I knew.

We all go empty-handed into the unknown.

‘Hansel, turn out your pockets,’ I said. I reached into my own pockets, dropping coins on the ground as if they were as inconsequential as dust-balls. ‘But the money,’ he moaned. ‘I’ve never seen so much of it.’

I was too young to articulate my conviction: that wealth could be measured without coins, that youth and health and love — oh, god, love — were blessings not to be squandered. All I could say was, ‘I know this will work.’

Hansel stopped. He turned his pockets inside out. A clattering, ringing shower. Gold coins in shining, seductive clusters at our feet along with the dull rusted ones our father had given us. We faced each other. He leaned down, kissed me hard. He tasted like candy and fear. I took his hand, and we walked forward.

Softly. Into the forest.

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AFTERWORD

It only struck me recently that the scariest thing about Hansel and Gretel isn't the witch, but the idea that your parents might abandon you in the woods. It got me thinking about generational conflict and what forms it takes, about cashed-up boomers so freaked out about their own immediate security that they're eating the future: selective blindness to environmental damage, ridiculous wars that need never be fought, pricing young slackers like me out of the housing market. So, I thought the story of Hansel and Gretel might be an interesting way to express some of these ideas.

— *Kim Wilkins*