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Sweet Tooth

On an old tube television set, a well-polished man announced the Friday morning news. It was the end of the broadcast, and the station’s local weather assessments were followed by a brief public notice: “Remember to be on the lookout for young Christina,” he recited. “Police ask that if you see her or have any clues that could lead to her discovery, call…” Sighing, I turned off the TV and directed my focus back to scrubbing my kitchen. It was still a complete mess after Sunday’s banquet of a meal, and my old bones couldn’t perform as well as they once had. I could feel the familiar pangs of hunger in my belly, though, and knew I’d have to eat again soon, so cleaning the kitchen had become a priority.

Aside from the visible brown grime that coated the floor and counters of my massive kitchen, the inside of my cottage was utterly delightful. I had painted much of the interior in pastel colors, with leafy green plants occupying every corner. The stone floor completed the aesthetic, offering a dark contrast to the sickeningly cheerful interior. In the center of the kitchen sat a large chimney servicing a large iron cheese cauldron—a structure left over by the cheesemaker who built the cottage two centuries prior. The outside of the cottage was, perhaps, even more enchanting. Little heart cutouts formed a white wooden latticework under the crest of the roof’s eaves, standing out against the light pink sawn shingle siding. Its overwhelming gingerbread style almost seemed out of place here in the woods, but it never failed to draw in admirers that had managed to lose their way from the hiking path in the nearby park.

Cursing silently to myself, I scrubbed the last bit of filth from the butcher-block countertop and tossed my cleaning rag into an adjacent bucket filled with soapy water and the culmination of this iteration’s cleaning efforts. “Why are children always so messy?” I muttered to myself, raising a wrinkled arm to wipe sweat from my brow. The hunger made my stomach feel as if it were made of lead. I felt, surely, that I was starving.

Suddenly, the “THWACK” of my white picket gate closing captured my full attention. Stumbling to the door, I could see a pale young boy in corduroy overalls carefully navigating the pathstones leading to my porch. His blonde hair, parted neatly, shone in the sunlight.

Wiping the hot saliva from my chin, I removed my apron and casually tossed it to the floor.

*KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK* “Hello?” he called.

Slowly opening the door, I peered down at him, a wide smile invading my wrinkled face. “Well, hello, young man! What brings you all the way out here? Are you lost?”

“Err, hi, ma’am, I’m looking for my sister Greta. Have you seen her? I lost her on the path…”

Peering closer, I could see that his little blue eyes were tinged with red. He’d been crying.

“No, I’m afraid I haven’t seen anybody around here in days. Where are your parents?”

Rather absently, he told me that his mother was at the park’s playground, probably asleep in her car.

“Do you know her number? You can call her on my home phone, and I’ll treat you to some candy for being such a brave young man,” I said, oozing grandmotherly sweetness.

“Wow—O-Okay!” He exclaimed excitedly, his sullen demeanor suddenly shifting.

I invited him inside and latched the door behind us.

“What’s your name, young man?” I queried sweetly. He told me his name was Hanson, and a bit more prodding revealed that his birthday was coming up in a week—he’d be turning ten.

“Oooh, well isn’t that exciting? Here, have an early birthday present,” I cooed as I handed him a chocolate bar and a soda.

*It felt as if my guts were trying to eat their way out of my stomach.*

As he greedily consumed the candy, I tapped my chin. “Say, before we call your mother, do you think you could help me with something? I need to clean this big ol’ pot, but I’d have to crawl inside. I’m so old that if I tried, I probably couldn’t get back out. Can you help me? It’ll be very easy, and then we’ll get you home.”

He nodded reluctantly and trudged into the kitchen.

*I was so close.*

I pulled out a decrepit step-ladder from beside my light blue 50’s-style Frigidaire refrigerator and placed it against the side of the cauldron. “Here you are. Don’t forget to take off your shoes. I’ll hand you a rag as soon as you’re in,” I said reassuringly, hoping my face didn’t betray the anticipation I was feeling.

Hanson carefully worked his way up the ladder, straddled the side of the pot, and then slid inside, just as Christina had a week ago.

Cackling maniacally, I lowered the lid onto the cauldron. Hanson, realizing he’d been tricked, began to cry out frantically, but it was no use: nobody could help him now.

I tossed his shoes into the fire pit below the cauldron, where they landed next to the charred remnants of what had been a cheap pink pair of Sketchers.

“Tennis-shoe plastic is such a wonderful fire-starter,” I thought as I opened the powder-pink gingerbread front door to grab firewood.

On my way out, I shouted to Hanson, “Don’t worry, deary! After I’ve eaten you, I’ll find your sister, too—just as a gesture of goodwill!”

Cackling again, I slammed the door.