John Witt II

Dr. Katie Cortese

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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.

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Greta pushed aside spindly overgrowth as she stumbled through the forest’s dense vegetation. Twigs and small branches crackled defiantly underfoot, piercing the otherwise eerie stillness. Wildlife, if it existed in this place, was uncomfortably silent – a thought that caused Greta no small amount of anxiety as she scoured the area for her younger brother, Hanson. ‘*Perhaps*,’ she thought, ‘*he’s been attacked by a bear – or carried away by a forest lion.*’

She had once been acquaintances with a girl who had gotten lost in these woods. Greta briefly wondered what had become of Christina. They weren’t very close, but they had shared a homeroom at school. Only a month ago, the girl had been teasing her crush and borrowing pencils without asking. The image of an alive and triumphant Christina wearing animal skins and wielding a bow flickered through Greta’s mind. The idea was ridiculous, but picturing the lost girl as having become a feral queen of the wilderness made Greta feel a little better about being lost.

Through the trees, she spotted something large and pink. Moving closer, she could see that it was an adorable cottage nestled in the middle of a small clearing - something reminiscent of the doll houses she had played with as a younger child. A heavily wrinkled woman with gray hair struggled to collect wood that was neatly stacked beside the house, grunting from effort as she hoisted it by the armful and placed it into a small wooden wagon. Thinking immediately that the old woman may have seen her brother, Greta began to exit the tree line, maneuvering carefully around thorned underbrush. Before the aged stranger had an opportunity to notice her, however, her foot struck something hollow – something metallic – causing her to fall hard into the grass. Greta felt pain shoot through her ankle, and was overtaken by a sweet, yet deeply sour odor. Peering down, she could see that she had tripped over a rusted bucket that had been filled to the brim with a putrid brown sludgy liquid – a substance that, to Greta’s displeasure, was rapidly soaking into her jeans.

Greta gagged.

She clambered back to her feet, ignoring the pain and the slick grime that now covered her hands and knees. Choking back another retch, she attempted to wipe her palms on the grass, but the stench clung to her.

The old woman hadn’t seemed to notice the commotion and was now pulling the loaded cart back towards the front of the cottage. Though she appeared to be straining, Greta couldn’t help but notice that the woman seemed to be much stronger than she appeared.

*‘I have to get her attention.’*

A choked yelp escaped Greta’s mouth as she tried calling out to get the woman’s attention, but it was too late: she was already vanishing back into the cottage. Greta continued to hobble towards its light pink façade, noticing as she got closer that it was adorned with cute heart-shaped trim.

\*BANG BANG\*

Loud knocks caused nearby cellar doors on the side of the house to tremble, startling Greta.

She froze. It sounded as if somebody were trying to escape, but the padlock on the door had been left unlocked and lazily askew.

She hesitantly placed a shaky hand on the oxidized iron handle leading to the cellar and lifted it, spying only darkness. From the void, a whisper called out to her for help – something that chilled her to the bone. Still clutching the cellar door handle, she cast the door open, hoping that sunlight would reveal the source of the whispers. Still, the darkness seemed to swallow the sun, maliciously overpowering it as soon as its rays entered the crypt-like confines of the cellar.

Yet, something glinted inside that caught Greta’s eye; Just inside of the cellar was a distinct gel pen that had belonged to Greta. Covered in holographic Lisa Frank stickers, she was sure until now that she had simply lost it at school. Thoroughly confused at its presence, Greta stepped inside to pick it up.

\*THWACK\*

The rebellious rays of sunlight rapidly vanished as the cellar door slammed shut, followed by the clicking of the padlock.

*‘Oh no.’*

Greta’s heart felt as if it were going to beat out of her chest.

An old voice, muffled, called from outside the door: “Thank you, deary! You’ll cook up just fine, after I finish my business with the young man I’ve got in the pot right now. I assume you are the sister he was searching for. I’ll tell him I found you and let him *stew* over it!”

*‘Cook? Young man? HANSON?!’*

Greta called out to the woman, screaming and slamming her fists against the cellar door - pleading in vain. As she screamed, she was met only with a devious, gleeful cackle and faint whispers emanating from the depths of the cellar.

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I sat in my recliner, lazily picking my teeth as “Wheel of Fortune” played idly on the thick tube television. The kitchen was, once again, messy beyond belief. Still, I couldn’t help but feel satisfied; it wasn’t often that I had the pleasure of experiencing two-for-one bargains in this relatively secluded location.

The curtains hanging over the living room window caught a sudden breeze, toying with the light from the setting sun as they fluttered about.

I chuckled to myself softly.

*‘I really do love family meals,’* I thought.

*‘They always bring everybody together.’*