Near a vast and deep forest there lived a woodcutter in a small cottage that he shared with his wife and his two children—a daughter and a son. The girl was called Gretel, and the boy was Hansel. Most years, the family had but pickings to eat, and they often went hungry. When a great famine came to the land, the woodcutter and his wife—who was the children’s stepmother—realized that they could scrape by no longer.

“The problem is Hansel and Gretel,” the stepmother said to the children’s father, as he sat brooding by the fire. “Let’s put them in the wagon and drive to my sister’s house on the other side of the forest. We can drop them off outside and have her deal with them.”

“What?! Of course not!” cried the father. “I won’t abandon my own children!”

“Then you’re a fool,” the stepmother hissed. “Don’t you realize that we’re in the middle of a famine? If we keep the children around, all four of us will starve to death!”

“Well, then,” the father replied, “we’ll go into the forest and gather as many apples as we can. Then we’ll all have plenty to eat!”

But the stepmother only laughed harshly. “Do you think you’re the first one to think of that?” She raised a skinny arm and gestured toward the trees. “The woods have been hunted and harvested for months by people with that exact same idea. You’ll find nothing left out there!”

The stepmother continued, “So that leaves us with only one option. We’ll take Hansel and Gretel to my sister’s place and have her take care of them, at least until this famine ends.”

The father sighed a heavy sigh. “Temporarily?”

“Yes, temporarily,” the stepmother assured the children’s father. “Think of it as . . . a summer visit with relatives.” She smiled as if remembering a visit of her own. “You know how children cherish time with family they don’t see very often.”

While the woodcutter took a few minutes to consider this, the stepmother muttered to herself, “Of course, I don’t want to see them again—ever.”

“Well, I guess there’s no harm in it . . . but”—the children’s father grimaced—“isn’t your sister . . . a witch?”

“A witch??!!” The stepmother seemed to be gritting her teeth. “There are no such things as witches.” The stepmother jabbed a bony finger toward the woodcutter’s face. “YOU are acting like a child!”

The woodcutter shrank as far back in his chair as he could, and the stepmother leaned in until her face was inches from his.

“F-fine then!” the father said, a bit fearfully. “We’ll take them to your sister’s place!”
The stepmother leaned back and smiled a satisfied smile. “Excellent.” Then she rose and left the cottage to bring in some wood for the stove. There was such a spring in her step now that the clatter of her shoes on the porch caused a flock of crows to flee from a tree several yards away.

“But ... only for a little while...” the woodcutter whimpered from inside the cottage.

The next morning, Gretel awoke up to the sound of birds chirping. With surprise, she realized that she was lying outside in a pile of leaves, and to her right was a small house with walls the color of gingerbread. The windows of the house sparkled with what looked like crystals of sugar, the door was a deep chocolate color, and the roof was covered with snow-white icing. How delightful! Gretel thought.

“Hansel, Hansel, wake up,” said Gretel. “Do you see where we are?”

“I do, Gretel,” replied Hansel, rubbing his eyes. “But how? How did we get here?”

“I don’t know,” Gretel said, trying not to panic.

When Hansel saw the house, he forgot his confusion.

“Gretel, aren’t you hungry? I am. And that house—it looks like it’s made of something sweet. Why don’t we see if we can eat it?”

Gretel snorted. “Don’t be silly, Hansel. Those aren’t real sweets! They’re fake, for decoration.”

“Well, they look pretty real to me...”

Gretel studied the house some more and then sighed. “Go ahead, if you must. Just know that it’s rather foolish.”

Hansel slowly walked across the grass to the house. He placed his right hand on the door and, to his delight, began to feel it melt a little under his touch. Hansel tried to snap off a piece of the door. It was tough, but finally a small piece broke off. Gretel’s eyes were wide now, but before she could say anything, Hansel shoved the sliver of door right into his mouth.

“Mmm, chocolate!” mumbled Hansel, his mouth full. He put his left hand into the hole left by the first piece and broke off another, which also disappeared into his mouth.

Gretel was hungry too, and she had to admit that the house looked tasty. She walked over to a window and used the tip of her finger to scrape some sugar off. (It was, indeed, sugar.) Next Gretel reached up and peeled off a small piece of roof icing. Hansel was much shorter than Gretel and had to settle for the walls and windows.

The two of them continued snacking on the house for nearly half an hour. How long it had been since they had been able to fill their bellies like this! Hansel was reaching for another sliver of chocolate from the door when Gretel finally spoke. “Hansel, we had better stop. I’m getting full.”

Hansel nodded. His stomach was starting to hurt, and they both knew that it was not healthy to
eat this much candy—even during a famine. Hansel had just begun to pull his hand from the hole in the door when it was grabbed from inside. He found himself held tight against the surface of the door, his face pressed into the chocolate, which immediately began to melt.

“Gretel!” Hansel cried. “Help!”

Gretel tried to tug Hansel away from the door, but whoever had grabbed Hansel suddenly let go, and the two fell to the ground. Then the door creaked open, and out stepped a tall woman in a black dress. As she crept towards the two children, they tried to scramble away on their backs, but she was fast. Soon she had placed a cold, bony hand on each of their foreheads. Gretel felt it first, but after a couple of seconds, Hansel started to doze off too.

The two children woke up in warm, cozy beds under layers of blankets. A small wooden table had been placed beside each bed, and on top of each table was a hot bowl of chicken noodle soup and a spoon. The woman dressed in black sat on a chair between the beds.

“Ahhh! It’s that witch again!” yelled Hansel, who had thrown off the covers and was now fumbling out of bed. But the woman stepped in front of him and blocked his way.

“Please, child, I won’t hurt you,” said the woman in a voice that was surprisingly sweet. “I’m only trying to help.” She gently pushed Hansel back into his bed.

Hansel and Gretel stared at the woman, still frightened and not sure what to do. “Why don’t you eat your soup?” the woman said. “You can’t live on candy alone.”

Hansel and Gretel exchanged confused looks. They were no longer hungry, but the soup smelled so lovely, and it had been months since they had been offered something so substantial. Gretel tasted hers first, and then nodded to Hansel, who picked up his bowl and began slurping it down.

“What are your names?” the woman asked as they ate.

“I’m Gretel, and this is Hansel,” Gretel said before Hansel could swallow a mouthful of soup.

The woman frowned. “Do you children have a stepmother, by chance?”

“Yes,” replied Hansel, now that his mouth was no longer full. “How did you know that?”

“Well, you see, my sister has two step-children with your exact names—or so I’ve been told. We haven’t spoken in years.” The woman leaned back in her chair and stared thoughtfully at the children. “How did you get here?”

“We don’t know.” Gretel looked at Hansel, who shrugged and went back to eating his soup.

After several moments, the woman spoke again. “I think I know how you arrived. You must have been on a wagon with your father and stepmother, and while you were asleep, you fell off, and you just happened to fall here outside my gate.”

Hansel frowned. “That makes no sense at all. I don’t remember being on a wagon last night. I
remember falling asleep in bed.”

The woman thought some more about this, and then she spoke again. “I’ve got it this time. You were in the wagon last night, but when you fell, you both hit your heads hard and got amnesia. That’s why you don’t remember riding in the wagon.”

This time Gretel argued. “Doesn’t amnesia erase all your memories? Then why do we still remember everything before the wagon? Why do we still remember getting in bed and going to sleep?”

The woman nodded, realizing that this theory was wrong too. She thought again for a couple of minutes, and then her eyes grew wide. “Children, I imagine that your stepmother isn’t very nice to you.” The woman sighed. “She isn’t very nice to anyone.”

Hansel nodded sadly. He remembered harsh punishments for the smallest mistakes, the constant grumbling, and the cruel way the stepmother reacted to everything the children did.

Gretel only watched the woman carefully, wondering where this was going.

“Do you know what I think, children?” asked the woman. “I think that my sister loaded you into the wagon while you were sleeping and brought you here. “I think she set you down on the ground for me to find.”

Hansel and Gretel were silent for the next couple of minutes, shocked. How could their stepmother do such a thing? Why did their father allow it? Or did he?

The woman seemed to reach a decision. “Don’t worry, children,” she said. “I have a plan to make things right.” She leaned forward in her chair. “But I’ll need you to help me.”

The woman, whose name was Beatrix, asked the children to call her Aunt Bea. She explained her plan carefully—whispering, though, as if someone might be listening nearby—and asking lots of questions about the woodcutter’s cottage.

That night, as the full moon was coming out, Hansel, Gretel, and Aunt Bea left the candy house and set out on foot. They found the tracks made by their father’s wagon and followed them for hours. At one point, Aunt Bea had to carry a tired Hansel while Gretel held the lantern that helped them see the tracks.

Finally, the tracks came to an end—just outside the woodcutter’s cottage. Silently and carefully, Aunt Bea opened the nearest window and poked her head in to see if the coast was clear. After climbing through the window, she helped the children crawl in. Then, all three crept into the bedroom where Hansel and Gretel’s stepmother slept alone most nights, snoring too loudly to share a bed with their father.

Hansel and Gretel helped Aunt Bea push the stepmother’s bed to the front of the house where two big doors opened onto the yard. With both doors open, the doorway was wide enough to push the bed through.
Their stepmother had slept soundly through storms that had easily woken Hansel and Gretel, so they didn’t worry about her waking up until they had to put her into the wagon. They couldn’t fit in the bed of course, so they all worked together to lift her from the bed—blankets and pillow and all—and lay her, very carefully and slowly, in the wagon.

Once the stepmother was settled in the wagon, Aunt Bea harnessed up the family’s scrawny horse and climbed onto the driver’s seat. “You children get in your beds,” she said. “I’ll complete the final part of my plan alone. And I’ll be back tomorrow.”

Hansel and Gretel were glad to be back in their own beds, but they couldn’t fall asleep. They were too scared that their stepmother would escape from the wagon and come for them. They didn’t know what Aunt Bea was going to do with her sister, but they knew that when they saw their stepmother again, she would most definitely be angry with them. VERY angry. For hours they stared out their bedroom window, but they never did see the wagon again that night, and eventually they drifted off.

Early the next morning, Hansel and Gretel went to wake their father and tell him that they were back. He, of course, was delighted to see them. He didn’t know how they had gotten there, or why his wife was missing, but he was too happy to worry about that now. He immediately went to the kitchen to gather as many morsels of bread as he could find for their breakfast.

The children were definitely not full after eating the meager breakfast, but they were so glad to be home that they barely noticed. As soon as they got up to clear their plates, there was a knock on the door, and Hansel and Gretel froze.

Before the children could react, their father went to answer the door. Hansel and Gretel heard Aunt Bea’s voice. They couldn’t understand everything she said, but they heard her speak their own names a few times.

When Aunt Bea entered the kitchen, the children ran and hugged her. Aunt Bea squeezed them tight with one arm. In the other was a basket.

“I brought plenty of good food, too!” she said. “It’ll last for weeks!”

They all talked for a while. At lunch time, Aunt Bea laid out a large platter of meat and another of vegetables. Hansel and Gretel were amazed. There was so much tasty food, they forgot all about the flavorless crumbs of bread that had been their breakfast.

“Mmmm!” mumbled the father. “This is the best meat I’ve ever had!” He stopped chewing long enough to ask “Where on earth did you get it?” before tearing into another piece.

Aunt Bea smiled mysteriously. “Oh, I have my sources!”

“I see,” said the father, who first furrowed his brow and then shrugged and kept eating. “By the way, have you seen my wife—your, er, sister? I searched the house for her this morning and couldn’t find her. In fact, now that I think about it, I haven’t seen her all day!”

“Strange,” said Aunt Bea, right before taking another bite from her fork. “You know, she was
always so unpredictable!"

Hansel stared doubtfully at Aunt Bea, and Gretel hid a smile behind a big spoonful of potatoes.

“Well,” said Aunt Bea. “Maybe we’ll see her again today.” She winked at the children as she motioned to the platters of meat, adding “After all, there’s plenty left.”