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ADAM GIDWITZ

Also by
Adam Gidwitz:

A Tale Dark and Grimm
In a Glass Grimmly

THE GRIMM CONCLUSION

ADAM GIDWITZ

ANDERSEN PRESS • LONDON

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Version 1.0

Epub ISBN 9781448187638

www.randomhouse.co.uk

This edition first published in 2014 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

First published in 2013 in the United States of America by Dutton Children's Books, a division of the Penguin Group USA Inc.

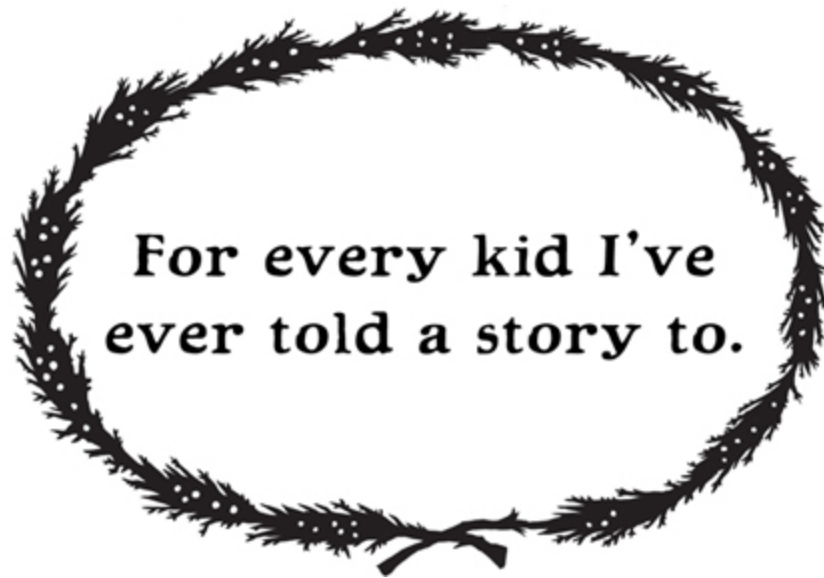
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 78344 089 4



**For every kid I've
ever told a story to.**



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Once upon a time, fairy tales were grim.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines the word *grim* as 'ghastly, repellent, or sinister in character'. Their example of how to use the word is this: 'a *grim* tale.' (Really! It says that!)

Once upon a time, fairy tales were Grimm, too. That is, they were collected by the brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm.

You know the tales of the Brothers Grimm.

For example, raise your hand if you've ever heard of a story called 'Little Red Riding Hood'.

You haven't?

Oh, you have. Then why aren't you raising your hand? Go ahead and raise it. I don't care how stupid you look, sitting in the corner of the library by yourself, or on the school bus, or in bed at night, raising your hand for no apparent reason. How else am I supposed to know whether you've read 'Little Red Riding Hood'?

Raise it.

Thank you.

OK, raise your hand if you've heard of 'Hansel and Gretel'.

Do it.

Thanks.

Raise your hand if you've heard of 'Rumpelstiltskin'.
(I assume you're raising your hand.)

'Sleeping Beauty.' (Your hand's still up, right?)

'Snow White.' (Of course you have.)

'Cinderella.' (Your hand *better* still be in the air.)

But now you're thinking: *Wait a minute. You said fairy tales used to be grim - i.e., ghastly, repellent,*

sinister. These stories aren't ghastly, repellent, or sinister at all. They are cute, and sweet, and boring.

And, I must admit, these days you are correct. The versions of these stories that most people tell are indeed cute and sweet and incredibly, mind-numbingly, want-to-hit-yourself-in-the-head-with-a-sledgehammer-ingly boring.

But the original fairy tales were not.

Take 'Rumpelstiltskin', for example. You may know 'Rumpelstiltskin' as a funny little tale about a funny little man with a funny not-all-that-little name.

But do you remember what happens at the end of that funny little story? The girl guesses his name, right? And he gets very angry. And do you remember what happens then?

No?

Well, in some versions of the story, Rumpelstiltskin stamps his foot and flies out the window.

Which makes no sense. Who has ever stamped their foot and suddenly gone flying out of a window? Impossible.

In other versions of the story, he stamps his foot and shatters into a thousand pieces.

This is even more ridiculous than him flying out of a window. People don't shatter. People are fleshy and bloody and gooey. *Shatter* is not something that people do.

So what actually happens when the girl guesses Rumpelstiltskin's name? In the real, Grimm version of the story?

Well, he stamps his foot so hard that it gets buried three feet in the ground. Then he grabs his other leg, and he pulls up on it with such force that he *rips himself in half*.

Which, it must be admitted, is indeed ghastly, repellent, sinister - and *awesome*.

**The story I am about to tell you is like that, too.
It is Grimm. And grim.**

**In fact, it is the grimmest, Grimmiest tale that I
have ever heard.**

And I am sharing it with you.

Yeah. You're welcome.

Jorinda and Joringel





Once upon a time, in the days when fairy tales really happened, there lived a man and his wife. They were a happy couple, for they had everything their hearts desired. They had a little house, a little garden, and in the centre of that garden, they had a pretty little juniper tree.

Yes, they had everything their hearts desired. Everything, that is, except a child. More than anything else – more than their house, their garden, their tree – this couple wanted a child. But they did not have one.

One winter's day, the wife stood in the garden beneath the juniper tree – which is a handsome pine with needles so dark they are almost blue and little red berries that look like drops of blood. She was peeling an apple with a knife when her hand slipped, and she cut herself. A drop of her blood fell to the snowy ground. She saw the drop of blood on the snow, and she thought, 'Oh, how I wish I had a child, as red as blood and as white as snow.'

Hold on. I have to interrupt.

You think you know this story. You think it's 'Snow White'.

You think wrong.

If I wanted to be educational, I would explain that fairy tales often share 'motifs' with one another - images and phrases that crop up again and again, even in tales from different countries and cultures. Which is a little bit interesting.

I do not, though, have any desire to be educational.

No. I just want to tell you this completely messed-up story.

Well, a month went by, and the snow with it. Two months, and the world was green. Three months, and flowers came out of the ground. Four months, and the trees of the forest pressed hard upon one another and the green branches all mingled together. The fifth month passed, and the wife stood under the juniper tree as its blossoms fell to the earth. When the sixth month was gone, the berries had grown big and firm, and the woman became very still. After the seventh month, she snatched at the juniper berries and ate so greedily she grew sad and sickened. When the eighth month had passed, she called her husband and wept and said, 'If I die, bury me under the juniper tree.' With that she took comfort and was happy until the ninth month. Then she bore twins: a little boy with dark hair, dark eyes, and lips as red as blood; and a little girl with dark hair and green eyes and cheeks as white as snow.

She brought them to her husband. This man took one look at his two beautiful children, and he was so happy that he died.

WHAT? He was so happy that he *died*?

Yup.

That sort of thing used to happen all the time. It was just... 'Oh, I'm so happy! I'm so happy! I'm so ha-a-a-ack-ack-ack...'

Dead.

On the infants' very first night in this world, their mother sat by the fire and wept with joy for her living children and with grief for her dead husband. The infants, off in their crib, wondered where their mother was, and why she was not holding them, and where that distant crying sound was coming from. At last, because a baby needs to be held, the infant girl reached out her tiny hand, and the infant boy reached out his, and they held onto one another.

Now, this mother was a very learned woman. She was known far and wide for her collection of old books and her mastery of dead languages. But no amount of learning or knowledge had prepared her to raise two children on her own. She had no books for that – and what she did read about children in her ancient books had very little to do with these two delicate, squirming, crying creatures.

She was afraid. She feared that she would raise them badly. So she pretty much left them alone. She would feed them and clothe them and then she would retire to her study and pore over her ancient books in dead languages and try not to think too much about the babies who cried for her from the room upstairs.

Well, these babies grew, as babies will. Soon they were scampering around on their own, laughing and running and playing.

Everywhere the little boy went, the little girl went. And everywhere the little girl went, the little boy went. They tended to the house together and played together out of doors and tucked themselves in bed at night and told each other bedtime stories – so their mother wouldn't have to stop her studies. And they rarely called each other by their

names, which were strange and German and hard to pronounce. They called each other Little Brother and Little Sister, even though they were just about exactly the same age. They loved each other so dearly that one grew sad when the other was out of sight. The little boy would often say to his sister, 'If you won't leave me, I won't leave you.' To which the little girl would always reply, 'I will never, ever leave you.'

Now, even though the children called one another Little Brother and Little Sister, I can't manage to tell their entire story without using their names. I did try, but it gets very confusing. For example, if I want to let you know that one of them looked little, I can't say, 'The enormous, murderous ogre peered down at little Little Sister.' That would sound weird.

Since I'm going to need to use their names, you're going to have to learn to pronounce them. Even if the children, generally, didn't bother.

The little girl's name was Jorinda. You pronounce that YOUR-INDA.

The little boy's name was Joringel. You pronounce that: YOUR-INGLE.

Yes, German is weird.

As the years went by, the mother became more and more worried about her children. She worried that she neglected them, and she worried that they had no one who knew how to guide their growth properly.

So she decided to marry again. She consulted all the ancient books that she owned, considered all the single men in the village, and decided on her husband.

The man she chose was neither handsome nor very kind, but he was a good cook, and the mother had read that growing children need good, hearty food to help them grow.

Also, he had two beautiful daughters, just a little bit older than Jorinda and Joringel. So the man knew how to raise children. That, the mother decided, was good, too.

And everything was good. For a few days.

Jorinda (that's the girl) and Joringel (that's the boy) always cleaned the house and took care of all the chores, so their mother did not have to interrupt her important studies. Well, one day, they asked their new stepsisters if they wanted to help clean the house.

The girls flipped their long, beautiful hair and laughed. 'Why would we *want* to help?'

'You look like you're doing a fine job on your own!'

And they walked away giggling.

So Jorinda and Joringel went into the kitchen where their stepfather was cooking and asked if they could have some help with the laundry, now that there was twice as much of it to do. He brandished a wooden spoon and chased them away.

Soon, Jorinda and Joringel began to realise that their new family members did not like them very much. In fact, the stepsisters loathed Jorinda and teased her cruelly. And the stepfather hated Joringel with a passion as hot as the hottest coal. I don't know why. He just did.

One day, Jorinda and Joringel found themselves standing outside their mother's study.

The little boy sniffled hard. 'I wish Mama would come out.'

'Shh,' said Jorinda. 'Don't disturb her.'

Joringel's jaw was moving sideways, back and forth. This either meant he was thinking about something or he was going to cry. Jorinda was nervous about both possibilities.

'I'm going to knock,' said Joringel.

'Don't!' Jorinda hissed. But before she could stop him, he had rapped three times on the door of their mother's study.

Behind the door, they could hear a chair being pushed back and pages being shuffled. 'Coming!' a voice called.

Jorinda tried to pull her brother away, but Joringel stood firm.

The door opened, and their mother appeared. Her long hair was held up in a messy bun behind her head, and she was blinking, as if she weren't used to looking at anything that wasn't words on a page. When she saw the children, she smiled sadly and kneeled before them.

'Yes, my dears?' she asked.

Suddenly, Joringel didn't know what to say. He looked at the floor.

'Nothing, Mama,' Jorinda cut in. 'We're sorry to disturb you.'

But her mother said, 'You're not disturbing me. What is it?'

Joringel raised his head. His eyes were brimming with tears.

The mother took her children by their small hands and led them into her study.

The walls were lined with ancient volumes, huge books bound with leather and nails. It smelled musty in there, but the sunlight slanted warm and bright through the small window. Jorinda and Joringel felt like they were entering a secret temple. Neither breathed.

The mother sat down by her desk and, holding her children's hands, looked into their eyes. 'What's bothering you?' she asked.

Joringel said, 'I wish we had our real father with us.'

His mother nodded. 'So do I. Every day. Every night, when I try to sleep, the pain is like a stone under my mattress. But do you know what to do when there's a stone under your mattress that you just can't get rid of?'

'What?'

'Get another mattress, and another, and another. Bury the stone under mattresses, until you don't feel it any more.'

Joringel squinted. 'You sleep with lots of mattresses on your bed, Mama?'

His mother smiled. 'It's a metaphor.'

Joringel didn't know what a metaphor was. Neither did Jorinda, but she wasn't about to let the longest conversation they had had with their mother in years end yet. So she said, 'I hate our stepsisters. They're selfish, and they're mean.'

Her mother pressed her lips together. Then she said, 'Anger is a weed, Jorinda. It grows up through the soil, choking every other plant. You must stamp it out. Don't let it enter your garden. Stamp out your anger until it never comes back.'

Both children held their faces tight. Jorinda was trying to stamp out her anger. Joringel was trying to smother his pain. Suddenly, a single tear choked its way out of Joringel's eye. His mother reached out her finger and caught it. She wiped it on her shirt. 'And never cry,' she said. 'Choke back your tears. Tears are waves on the ocean of sadness. You will drown in them if you're not careful. Believe me. I know.'

Then Jorinda and Joringel's mother turned back to the ancient books on her desk. She clenched her jaw and exhaled through her nose, like she was steeling herself against something. She began to read.

Jorinda took her brother by the arm and led him away.

Excuse me. I have a question.

What do you think of the advice that Jorinda and Joringel's mother just gave them?

Is it good to stamp out your anger? To choke back your tears? To smother your pain? Is that how you find peace?

I'm just wondering. Cos I'd like to know.

Also, you're probably thinking, *Hey! You promised to tell us a grim and messed-up story. This story isn't*

messed up. It's all emotional and stuff!

Yeah, I'm sorry about that.

But we have now arrived at the part of the tale that might fairly be described as ghastly, repellent, and sinister.

In other words, the part you've been waiting for.

You have been warned.

It was morning, and Jorinda and Joringel's stepfather was in the kitchen with his daughters, taking big red apples from a marketing basket and putting them in a large chest with a big heavy lid and a sharp brass lock, when Jorinda and Joringel came in.

Jorinda, seeing the lovely apples, said, 'Stepfather, may I have an apple?'

The man said, 'Of course, my dear.' And he handed the little girl an apple. The stepsisters scowled.

And then Joringel said, 'Stepfather, may I have an apple, too?'

'NO!' the man bellowed. And he snatched the apple back from Jorinda, threw it into the chest, and slammed the heavy lid shut.

The stepsisters laughed loudly.

A few minutes later, Jorinda was outside weeding the garden while Joringel mopped the floors in the living room. The stepfather approached the little boy. The man's voice was gentle when he said, 'I'm sorry I snapped at you. Would you like an apple now?'

Joringel nodded.

His stepfather smiled. 'Then follow me.'

So Joringel followed his stepfather past his mother's study and into the kitchen. The stepsisters were nowhere to be seen. The man walked over to the great chest of apples. He unlatched the sharp brass lock and lifted the heavy lid with a creak of hinges. 'There,' he said to the little boy. 'Choose any apple you want.'

Joringel bent down and leaned his head over the apples. They smelled fresh and rich, and their yellow skin was dappled with rose and –

BANG!

The stepfather slammed the lid of the chest down.

Right on the back of Joringel's neck.

And the little boy's head fell off into the apples.

For a moment, there was no sound in the kitchen at all, and the only movement was the dust dancing in the slants of light from the window. The stepfather stood stock-still over the chest. The boy's small, headless body lay on the floor. Blood pooled under his severed neck. His head, of course, was in the chest of apples.

And then his stepfather said, 'Oh no! His mother will be furious with me!'

Wait, he just *killed* the kid, and he's worried his wife will be *ticked off*?

You think?

The stepfather gathered up the little boy's body and carried it to a chair that sat near the front of the house. Then he went to the kitchen, opened the chest, retrieved Joringel's head, and took it over to his body. He placed the head on the severed neck, and then tied it on with a white handkerchief. Finally, he put a fine red apple in the little boy's hand.

Joringel sat in the chair, eyes wide and staring, facing the front door.

The stepfather surveyed his handiwork, nodded once, and went back to the kitchen to clean up.

Is everyone OK out there?

I will remind you that, just because this is a fairy tale, that does not mean that it is appropriate for little children. Little children should not be hearing

stories about decapitation and infanticide. In fact, anyone who's young enough not to know the words *decapitation* and infanticide should probably put this book down right now.

OK? Did you do it?

No, I didn't think you would.

A little while later, Jorinda went looking for her brother. She found him sitting in the chair by the front door, his head tilting slightly off to one side, his eyes wide, an apple in his hand, and a handkerchief around his neck. The handkerchief was red.

'Little Brother, Little Brother! What a lovely apple you have!' she exclaimed. 'Will you share it with me?'

But her brother just stared at her, deathly still.

Jorinda began to feel frightened. She went into the kitchen to find her stepfather scrubbing the floor. 'Father, Father!' she said. 'I think there's something the matter with Little Brother! His eyes are wide and staring, his face is pale, and when I asked him to share his apple with me, he didn't say anything at all!'

The stepfather shook his head. 'Oh, he's just being rude. Go back in there and ask him to share it with you again. If he still doesn't reply, slap him in the face.'

Oh, yes - he said that.

So the little girl went back into the front room and said, 'Brother, Brother, will you share your apple with me?'

And he said ...

Nothing. Because he was dead.

So the little girl took a deep breath, looked ruefully towards the kitchen, cocked her hand back, and slapped her brother in the face.

And his head fell off.

‘OH, MY GOD, I KILLED MY BROTHER!’ the little girl screamed.

Her stepfather burst from the kitchen, saw the boy’s head lying on the floor, and bellowed, ‘What have you done, you wicked child?’ He glanced at the closed door of the study and hissed, ‘Your mother will be furious with you!’

Jorinda was hyperventilating.

The man took her by the arms and whispered, ‘There, there, my dear. Don’t cry. Come in the kitchen.’ And then he added, ‘I’ll help you hide the body.’

So the stepfather dragged the little boy’s body into the kitchen, and Jorinda carried her beloved brother’s head after him. And then the stepfather took out a big knife, and he carved the meat from Joringel’s bones.

And he threw it into their largest stew pot.

At this point, I imagine that every adult reading this book aloud has just slammed it shut and said, ‘Never mind. Forget it. We’re done here.’

And half the kids are probably screaming for their mothers. And the other half are screaming at the adult to keep reading because this is, well, completely awesome.

Let me say that I agree with all parties involved. Adults, you really should not read any further. Kids who want your mums, you should probably go get them. Kids who think this is awesome, you have never been more right.

What did I tell you about fairy tales? Did I lie?

Once the father was done carving the meat from the boy’s bones and putting it into the stew pot, he said, ‘Now open the icebox.’

The icebox was a deep hole, just behind the kitchen, where perishables were kept. It was cool and damp, and became icy in winter. Hence the name.

Jorinda, still hyperventilating, opened the icebox, and the stepfather lowered the stew pot into it.

‘This’ll keep for a good long while,’ he said. And then he turned to the little girl and stuck a thick finger in her face. ‘If you ever mention this to anyone, you’ll be hanged. But first, I’ll make you eat this stew.’

Finally, the man led his stepdaughter back into the kitchen, where he took the boy’s bones, tied them up in a kerchief, and handed them to Jorinda. ‘Go,’ he said. ‘Bury these under the juniper tree.’

So Jorinda went into the garden, stood under the juniper tree, and buried her brother’s bones.

As she scooped the last handful of black soil onto the makeshift little grave, a tear ran down her cheek, and she thought, *You said you’d never leave me.*

OK! I’m sorry!

I know, I know.

This is bad. This is, maybe, the worst thing that you have ever read, in any book, ever.

I am sorry for that.

But let me say this: while I do like messed-up stories, and I do like stories where grim, bloody, horrible things happen, I do not like stories with sad endings.

I hate them, in fact.

So lots of grim, bloody, horrible things will keep happening in this book, but everything will turn out OK in the end. I promise you.

Of course, before things get better, they’ll probably get worse.

Ready?

Then buckle up, and let’s do this thing.

Ashputtle





Before I even say 'Once upon a time,' I've got to tell you something.

'Ashputtle', which is the title of this chapter, is the Grimm brothers' name for 'Cinderella'.

And now you are worried.

You do not want to hear the story of Cinderella, because you have heard it ten hundred thousand million times, and it makes you want to hit yourself in the head with a sledgehammer.

Good. I'm glad you don't want to hear the story of Cinderella, because I don't want to tell it.

I want to tell you the story of Ashputtle.

'Cinderella' is the name of the cute version of the story, the one that makes little girls want to dress up like pretty princesses.

That story makes me want to hit myself in the head with a sledgehammer, also.