From the Horse's Mouth

an interview with 18.6 contributor: Ingrid Keenan

IHLR: The title of your story, "Hansel and Gretel's Mother Waits by the Door for Her Children to Come Home," explicitly references a fairy tale though the story itself seems less like a re-telling and more like a spin-off. Can you talk about the connection?

KEENAN: The inspiration for this story came from a TV version of "Hansel and Gretel" that I watched with my kids a few years ago. This version foregrounded the parents more than usual and made me realize I had never considered the mother's role, which is a strange one. In particular, I found myself wondering how she felt when the children arrived home safely, despite her best efforts; all of a sudden, "Hansel and Gretel" seemed more like a thriller than a fairy tale.

But when I sat down to write, I found I wasn't as interested in the mother as straight-up villain as I was the idea of a flawed mother. I found myself wondering what was happening back at the cottage after the children left? What was the mother thinking? How long did it take her to regret sending them away? If you've ever lost sight of small children in a crowded place, for even a few minutes, it crosses your mind: is this it? And then, almost every time, there they are, around the next corner, and everything is fine. But what if that feeling of unbearability kept going? At what point would you stop thinking it's going to be fine? I think that parents of missing children who keep a porch light on for twenty years, who refuse to ever move, are completely rational: how else do you keep yourself from falling into the certainty that the worst has happened?

IHLR: Your narrator blames herself for the children's disappearance. In the Brothers Grimm version of "Hansel and Gretel," and in other retellings, the mother is directly responsible for the plan to abandon the children in the woods. How important is the mother's complicity in your version?

KEENAN: Many fairy tales have evil stepmothers, and I find "Hansel & Gretel" unusual in that it's the mother who's the baddie. We can feel fairly comfortable with the idea of an evil stepmother, but there is something unnatural, even monstrous, about a mother who purposely puts her children in harm's way; in a way, she presages the witch, another monstrous woman who is an untrustworthy figure for the children.

Like anyone who has read fairy tales to their children, I have worried over this. It's especially striking to me that mothers are so often the storytellers, the ones who read these stories to their children. So why are we making them (and stepmothers) so wicked?

Maybe these are cautionary tales? "Fine, I'm the worst mother in the world, but let me tell you about Hansel and Gretel's mother!" or, "You may think I'm mean, but if I died and you had a stepmother. . . ."

In my story, of course, Lisa never wanted any harm to come to her children; she just acted in anger, and it was that unlucky one time in a million when something bad happened. And, in fact, she tries to save them; at the end of the story, she tries to write them into a fantasy world, into an escape from reality that will save them from what has most likely happened to them.

IHLR: Because we all know the story of Hansel and Gretel, the title of your story does much to set an ominous tone before we begin reading. How do you extend that tone throughout the story?

KEENAN: When I first drafted this story, I had it in mind for a contest that had a 1,200-word limit. I had a clear idea of the arc of the story, so I had to be very sparing with words, and in the first draft, I found I had to stick to the facts; there wasn't ever space for me to say how Lisa felt, to try to catch the thoughts running through her mind. Although the story evolved beyond the word limit, I found a lot of freedom in this terse, panicky tone. I like the shallow-breathed rhythm of it, and I hope this does create a sense of tension.

IHLR: The repetition of the word *fact* to open several sentences in your story seems to be a quick and effective means of exposition. How does the balance of fact and mystery figure into the story, especially in that slightly ambiguous ending?

KEENAN: Lisa is desperately trying to keep herself from falling into the abyss of the unthinkable, and she tries to do so with facts: what she knows, the steps that led to this point. I originally called the facts "breadcrumbs," but that seemed too obvious a reference, so I changed them to stepping stones. However, all the facts in the world don't get her to the conclusion she needs, so later, when she is (I think) about to be told horrible news by the police officer, she tries to get away from facts by re-writing the story: she sees her children not walking down a rainy city street, but through a fairy tale forest, and those elements of fantasy make another series of stepping stones. Danger is transformed into adventure; the unbearable, into story.

IHLR: Another story of yours, "Shut In," illustrates a relationship that robs a character of agency when she moves in with her lover. A different story, "Life During War Time," shows an off-kilter wedding shower. Can you talk a bit about your impulse to show an otherwise seemingly normal, domestic life skewed by uncanny details?

KEENAN: The domestic and the uncanny are natural playmates. There is so much space in the repetition, the boredom, the absurdity of much of it, to allow the weird to seep in, like that stage of falling asleep where you start to dream. You can spend so much time folding the same laundry, or washing the same dishes, or opening gifts at a bridal shower, that eventually you will ask yourself: "What if, next time . . . ?" Never forget that Shirley Jackson conceived of "The Lottery" while pushing a baby carriage up the hill to her house for the thousandth time.

—Nancy Dinan, column editor