


STEPHEN KING

HANSEL
and
GRETEL

A stylized illustration of Hansel and Gretel in a forest. Hansel, on the left, has blonde hair and wears a red tunic and blue trousers. Gretel, on the right, has blonde hair and wears a white dress with a brown bodice. They are standing in a dense forest with large, dark green leaves. The illustration is done in a folk-art style with bold outlines and flat colors.

MAURICE SENDAK

The haunting tale of two brave
children lost in a great, dark forest
full of dangers waiting to devour them,

reimagined by literary legends:

STEPHEN KING
and
MAURICE SENDAK.

Let Mr. King, global bestselling and
award-winning author, and Mr. Sendak,
Caldecott Medalist of *Where the Wild
Things Are*, guide you into the most
deliciously daring rendition of this classic
Grimm fairy tale yet. But will you find
your way back out?

HARPER





HANSEL and GRETEL



HANSEL and GRETEL

RETOLD BY

STEPHEN KING

PICTURES BY

MAURICE SENDAK

HarperCollins Publishers

INTRODUCTION

When I was asked if I might be interested in writing a new interpretation of “Hansel and Gretel,” bending it to fit (loosely) with set and costume designs Maurice Sendak had created for the Humperdinck opera of the story, I was interested. When I saw the pictures themselves, I resolved to give it a try. Two of his pictures in particular spoke to me: One was of the wicked witch on her broom with a bag of kidnapped children riding behind her; the other was of the infamous candy house becoming a terrible face. I thought, *This is what the house really looks like, a devil sick with sin, and it only shows that face when the kids turn their backs.* I wanted to write that! To me, it was the essence of this story and, really, all fairy tales: a sunny exterior, a dark and terrible center, brave and resourceful children. In a way, I have been writing about kids like Hansel and Gretel for much of my life.

There is also the effect that Mr. Sendak has had on me personally, not least because I used his charming rhyme *I’m really Rosie / And I’m Rosie Real* in my book *Rose Madder*, a dark fairy story about a battered woman coming to believe in herself. Also, in a very real (*Rosie* real) way, I grew up with Maurice Sendak. You see, once upon a time, long ago, a very young couple named Stephen and Tabitha (he was twenty-three, she was twenty-two) had children who, of course, wanted stories—not just at bedtime but all through the day.

I’m sure Tabby knew Sendak’s work, but I did not. I was charmed by the stories—sunny exterior, dark in the center . . . or sometimes vice versa—and our versions of Hansel and Gretel clamored for them over and over. My son wanted *Where the Wild Things Are*. My daughter always wanted the story of Jennie the



terrier in the existential *Higglety Pigglety Pop! Or There Must Be More to Life*. (“She looks so *sad*,” my little girl would always say.) By the time she was three, my little girl was reading it to me. Later, we had a third child, and his favorite was *Chicken Soup with Rice*. I’m sure there are many baby-boomer parents out there (some perhaps reading this) who can relate and might be glad to have another helping of Mr. Sendak to read to their grandchildren.

I have always been fascinated with magical children’s stories and Mother Goose rhymes, and I actually wrote a novel (*Fairy Tale*) incorporating many of them, including “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Jack and the Beanstalk,” and “The Goose Girl.” Even “Hansel and Gretel” is alluded to when the young protagonist loses his way in the haunted city of Lilimar because his back trail has disappeared (think breadcrumbs).

You will say that I have taken liberties with the story told by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm—I have, and I don’t apologize. The magical duckling that takes the siblings across a lake or river (it’s only described as “a large body of water”) struck me as a little too *deus ex machina*, so out it went. (I probably would have left it in if Mr. Sendak had illustrated it, but he didn’t.) I did, however, leave in the rhyme that all of us who’ve heard the story remember: *Nibble, nibble, little mouse, who is nibbling at my house?* I tried to leave in all the good parts, in other words.

Reader, I hope you will enjoy this poor effort at breathing a bit of life into an old story, and I know you will enjoy Maurice Sendak’s art, which is sunny on top and dark inside.

Or vice versa.

—STEPHEN KING





ONCE UPON A TIME,
long before your grandmother's
grandmother was born, a poor
broom maker and his wife lived on the edge
of a great dark forest with his two children,
Hansel and Gretel.





The broom maker was an easygoing man;
his wife, the children's stepmother,
was a shrew who liked to have her
way and mostly got it.

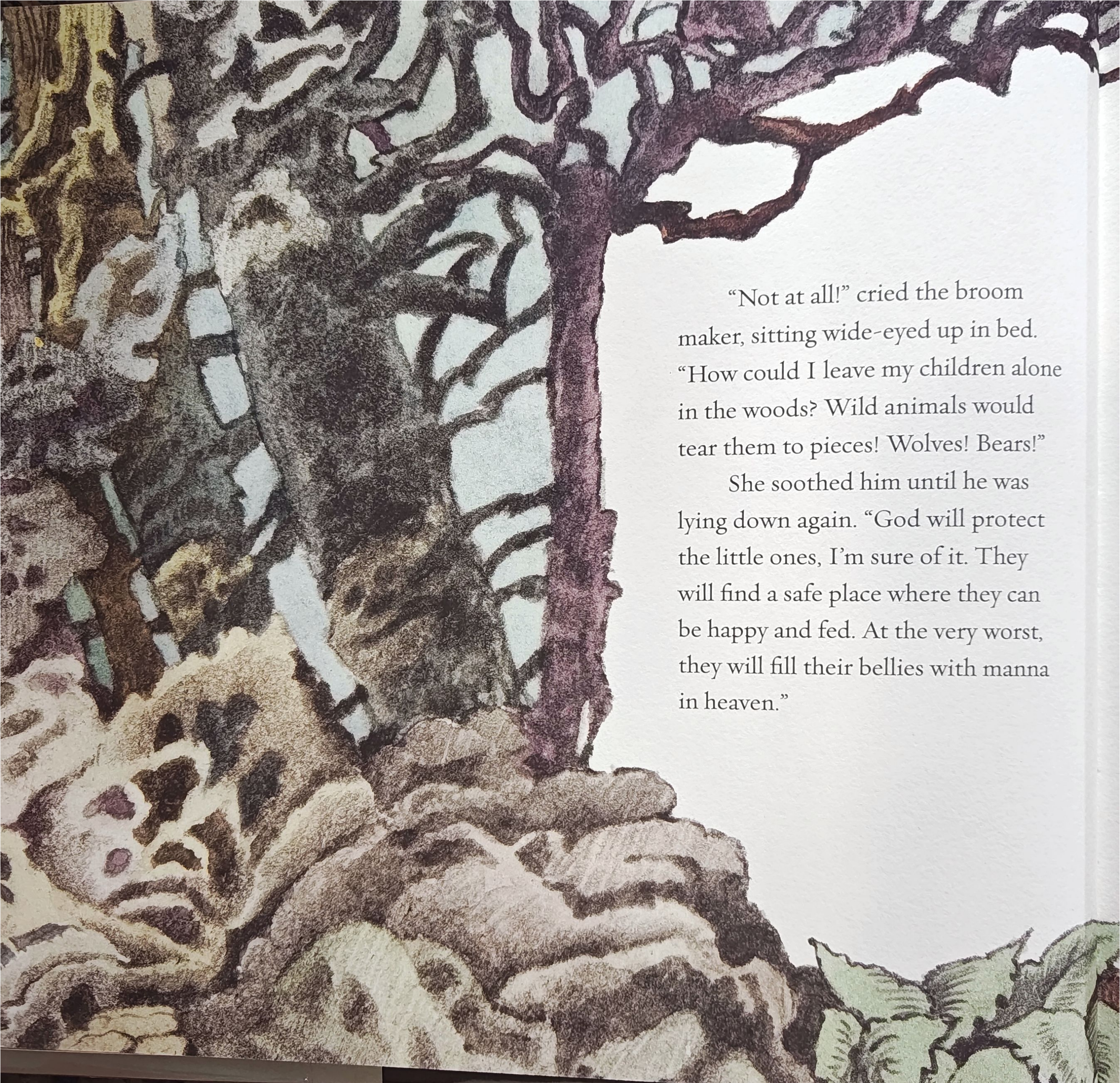
Life went along well enough for
this little family until a drought fell upon
the land, followed by a great famine.

There was little to eat, then less, then
almost nothing. One evening while the
broom maker and his wife were lying
in bed, he said, "What will become of us?

How can we feed the kids when we have almost
nothing for ourselves?"

His wicked wife had been waiting for him to
say this so she wouldn't have to. "I know," she said.
"Tomorrow morning, we'll take those
tiresome children into the thickest part
of the woods. We'll make a fire for them
and give them each a piece of bread.
Then we'll leave them by themselves
and go off to our work. They won't
find their way home, and we'll be
rid of them."





“Not at all!” cried the broom
maker, sitting wide-eyed up in bed.
“How could I leave my children alone
in the woods? Wild animals would
tear them to pieces! Wolves! Bears!”

She soothed him until he was
lying down again. “God will protect
the little ones, I’m sure of it. They
will find a safe place where they can
be happy and fed. At the very worst,
they will fill their bellies with manna
in heaven.”

A large, gnarled tree trunk with a hollowed-out section, set against a white background. The tree trunk is dark brown with a rough, textured bark. A large, irregular hole is carved into the side of the trunk, revealing a lighter, smoother interior. The tree trunk is positioned on the right side of the page, with its base extending towards the bottom left corner. The background is a plain, bright white.

“I don’t know . . .”

She could tell he was weakening.
“Then all four of us will starve together.
Is that what you want? You can gather
wood for our coffins!”

“Let me sleep, woman.”

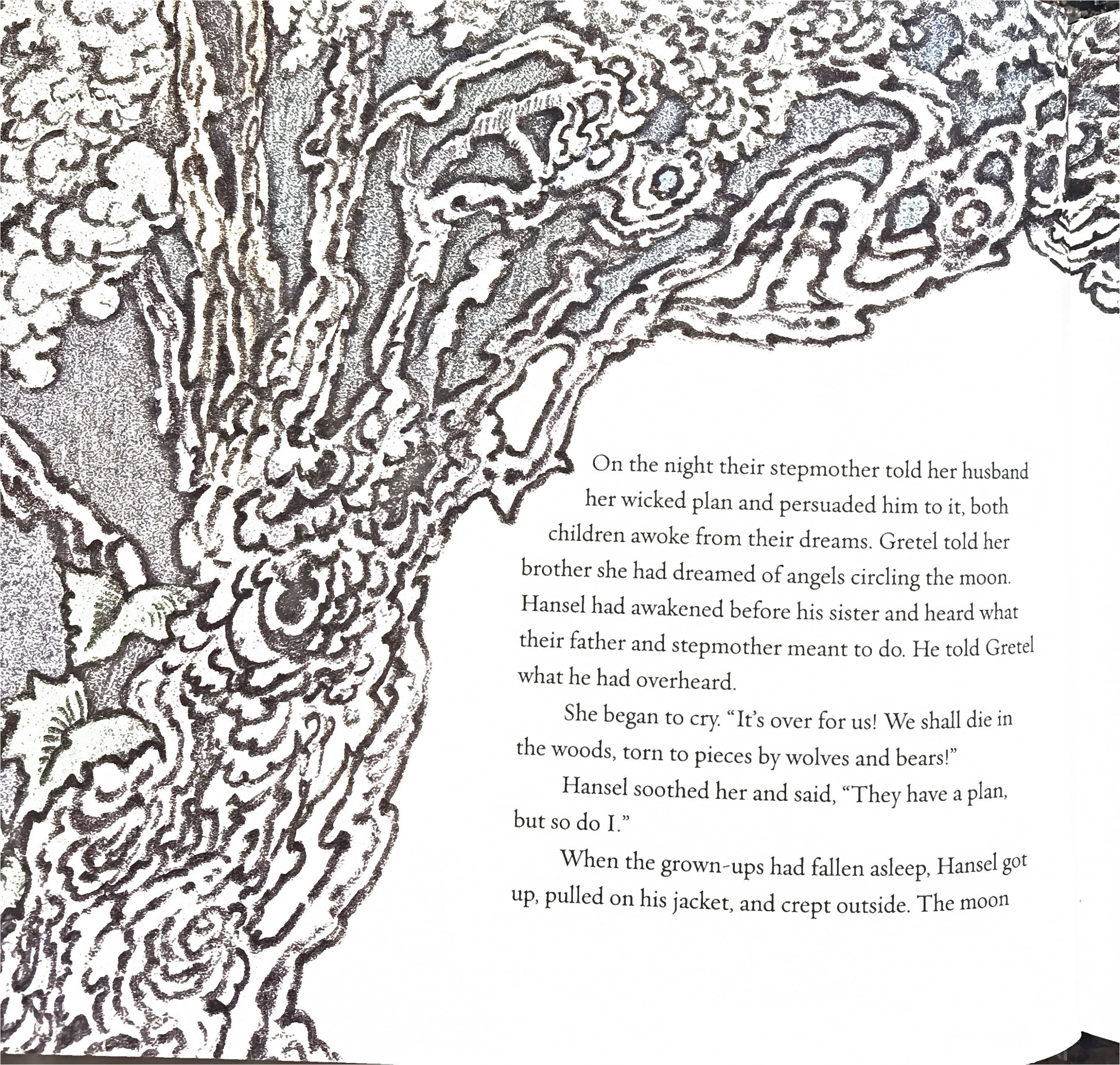
But she would give him no peace
until he agreed.

Now, these children had dreams.
Gretel’s was peaceful, of angels circling
the moon. Hansel, however, had
a nightmare.





He dreamed of a witch on a broomstick, flying through the clouds with a bag behind her filled with screaming kids.

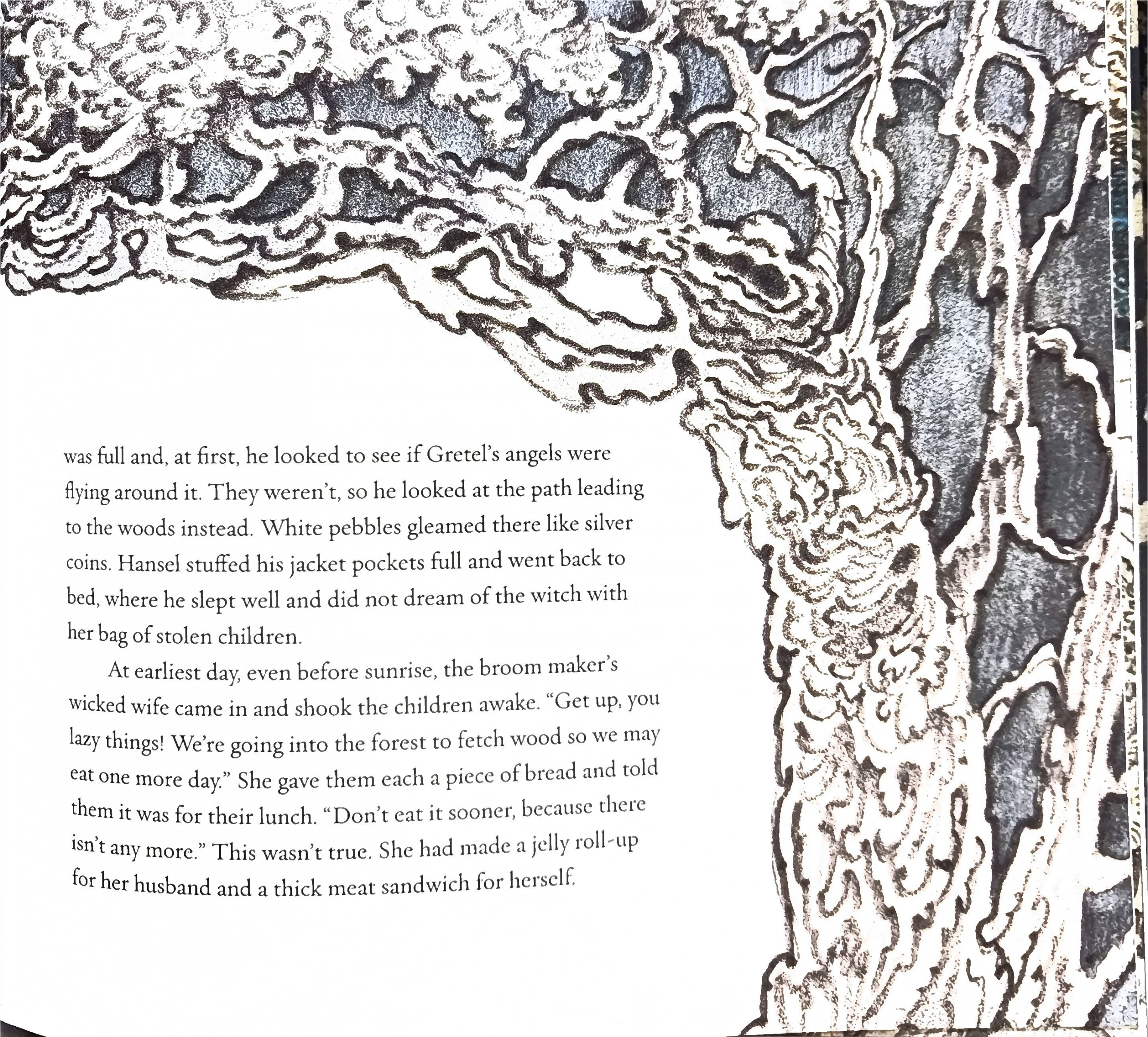


On the night their stepmother told her husband her wicked plan and persuaded him to it, both children awoke from their dreams. Gretel told her brother she had dreamed of angels circling the moon. Hansel had awakened before his sister and heard what their father and stepmother meant to do. He told Gretel what he had overheard.

She began to cry. "It's over for us! We shall die in the woods, torn to pieces by wolves and bears!"

Hansel soothed her and said, "They have a plan, but so do I."

When the grown-ups had fallen asleep, Hansel got up, pulled on his jacket, and crept outside. The moon



was full and, at first, he looked to see if Gretel's angels were flying around it. They weren't, so he looked at the path leading to the woods instead. White pebbles gleamed there like silver coins. Hansel stuffed his jacket pockets full and went back to bed, where he slept well and did not dream of the witch with her bag of stolen children.

At earliest day, even before sunrise, the broom maker's wicked wife came in and shook the children awake. "Get up, you lazy things! We're going into the forest to fetch wood so we may eat one more day." She gave them each a piece of bread and told them it was for their lunch. "Don't eat it sooner, because there isn't any more." This wasn't true. She had made a jelly roll-up for her husband and a thick meat sandwich for herself.



Gretel put both pieces of bread in her dress pockets because Hansel's pants had none, and his jacket pockets were full of stones. Then the four of them went into the forest. The broom maker wouldn't so much as look at his children, for he was ashamed. They hadn't gone far when Hansel lagged behind, looking back at the cottage.

"What are you doing?" the broom maker's wife asked. "Why do you keep falling back, stupid boy? We have a long day ahead!"

"Oh, well," Hansel said, "I'm looking at my little white cat. She's sitting on the roof because she wants to say goodbye to me."

"You idiot," the woman said, and cuffed the back of Hansel's head. "That isn't your cat; it's the sun shining on the tin side of the chimney where the stones fell away!"



Hansel knew that; he was looking for the stones he had dropped on the path.

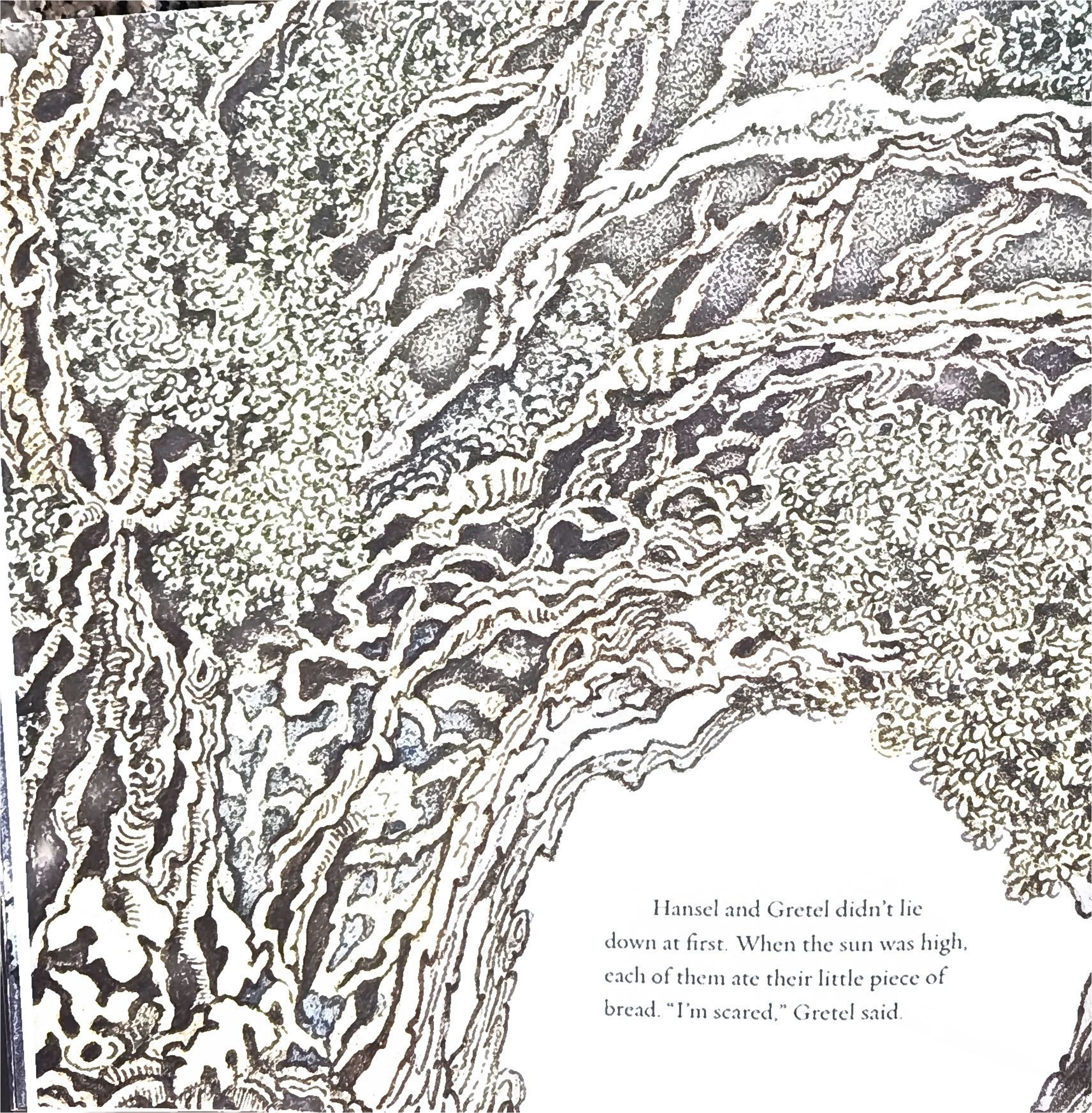
When they got deep into the woods, farther than they had ever been before, the children's father said, "I'll make a fire so you won't be cold. Gather some sticks. Your mama and I will go into the forest to cut wood. When we're finished, we'll come back and get you."

She's not our mama, Gretel thought but did not say. *Our mama was nice.*

She and Hansel gathered twigs and small branches. When the fire was going, the woman who was not their mama said,

"Lie down by the fire and rest awhile because you have had a long walk."





Hansel and Gretel didn't lie down at first. When the sun was high, each of them ate their little piece of bread. "I'm scared," Gretel said.



“Father is close by,” Hansel said. “I hear his ax chopping wood.”

But it wasn't his father. His wicked stepmother had tied a branch to a dead tree, and when the wind blew, it sounded like their father's ax chopping wood. The afternoon was long, the fire was warm, and the children's eyes grew heavy. They fell asleep in each other's arms. Gretel dreamed of angels. Hansel dreamed of an ugly witch flying with a bag of stolen kiddos on the back of her magic broom.

When they woke up, it was night. The fire had burned down to a few embers. Gretel began to cry. “How will we find our way home? The bears will eat us!”

Hansel gave her a hug. “Wait a bit and trust me. We'll find our way.”

When the moon rose in the sky, the white pebbles Hansel had scattered gleamed like silver coins. They followed them all night long and never saw a single bear. Just before daybreak, they arrived at their father's cottage. Hansel knocked stoutly on the door and said, “We're home! Why did you leave us? Let us in!”

Their stepmother opened it and said, “You bad children! We saw you sleeping and decided to come back for you this morning. You should have stayed where you were so you wouldn't get lost!”



But their father was delighted to see them because he hadn't wanted to leave them in the first place.

The drought continued, and so did the famine. One night after Hansel and Gretel went to bed, they once more heard their stepmother pouring poison into the ears of their weak-willed father. "Listen, husband, and listen well," she said. "We have eaten everything but half a loaf of bread. When that's gone, our song will be sung. We must get rid of the children. We'll take them even deeper into the woods, and this time they won't find their way back."

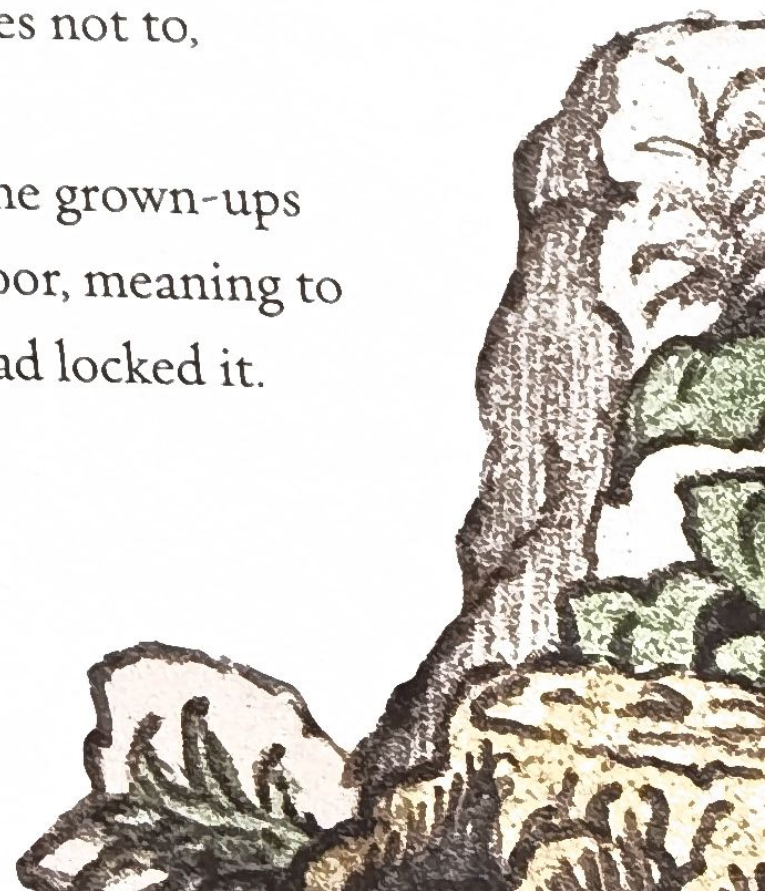
"But the wolves!" said the broom maker. "And the bears! Those things are hungry too."

"Better a quick death in the jaws of an animal than slow starvation in the jaws of circumstance," she said—she who had hidden away half a ham and a joint of beef.

"I suppose you are right," the broom maker said. "God will protect them."

"So He will," said she, "and if He chooses not to, they will eat in heaven."

Hansel lay awake until he could hear the grown-ups snoring. Then he got up and went to the door, meaning to gather more pebbles, but his stepmother had locked it.







Hansel tried the window, but his stepmother heard it creak and awoke. She came out of her bedroom, holding up a candle.

"I thought I heard my little cat wanting to come in."

"Your cat has left us because we have no food for it! Now go back to bed or I'll beat you!"

With no choice, Hansel went back to bed, where he found his sister sitting up and crying. He hugged her and said, "Go back to sleep. Your angels will protect us."

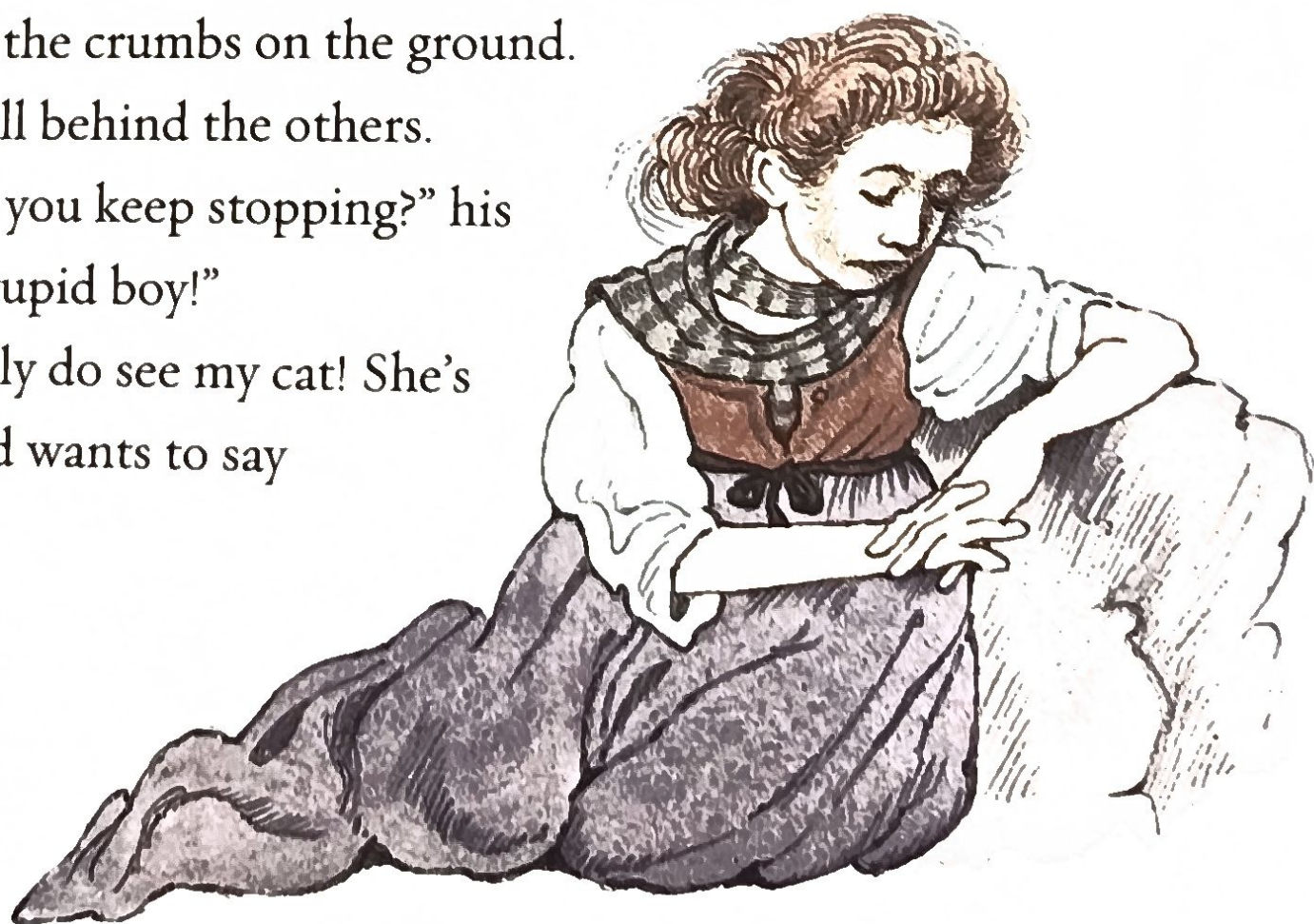
He thought, *If they don't, I will.*

Early the next morning, the stepmother roused the children from their beds. They were given pieces of bread much smaller than the last time. On the way to the woods, Hansel broke his into pieces in the pocket of his jacket and then began to scatter the crumbs on the ground.

This caused him to fall behind the others.

"Hansel, why do you keep stopping?" his stepmother asked. "Stupid boy!"

"This time I really do see my cat! She's sitting on the roof and wants to say goodbye to me."

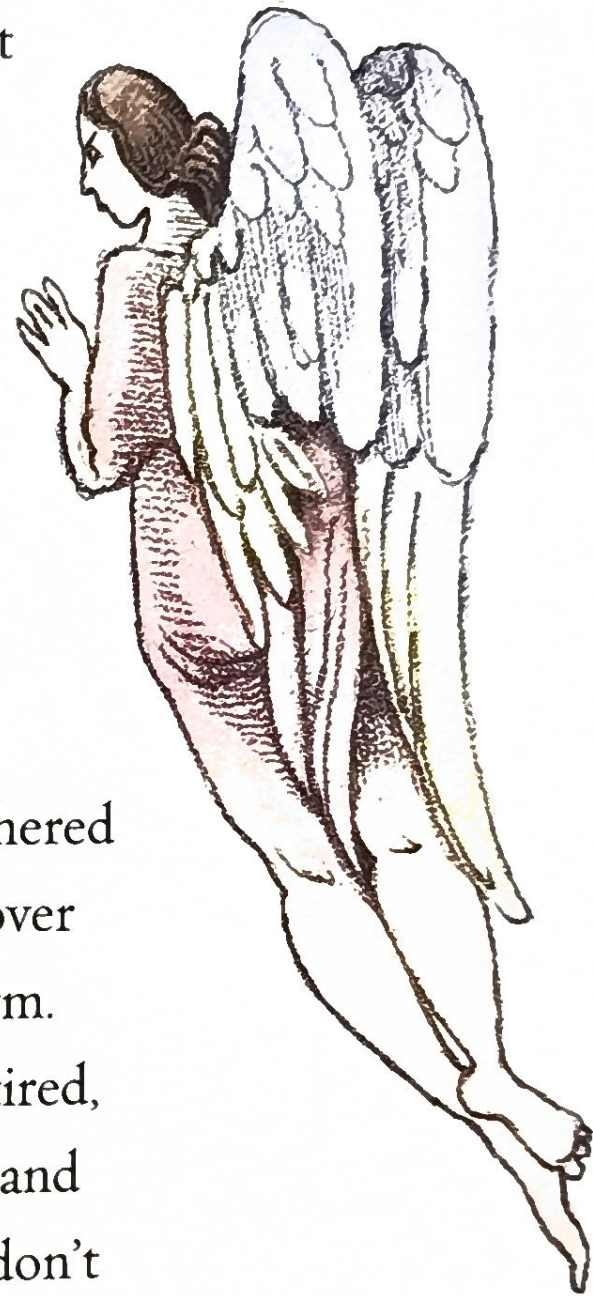


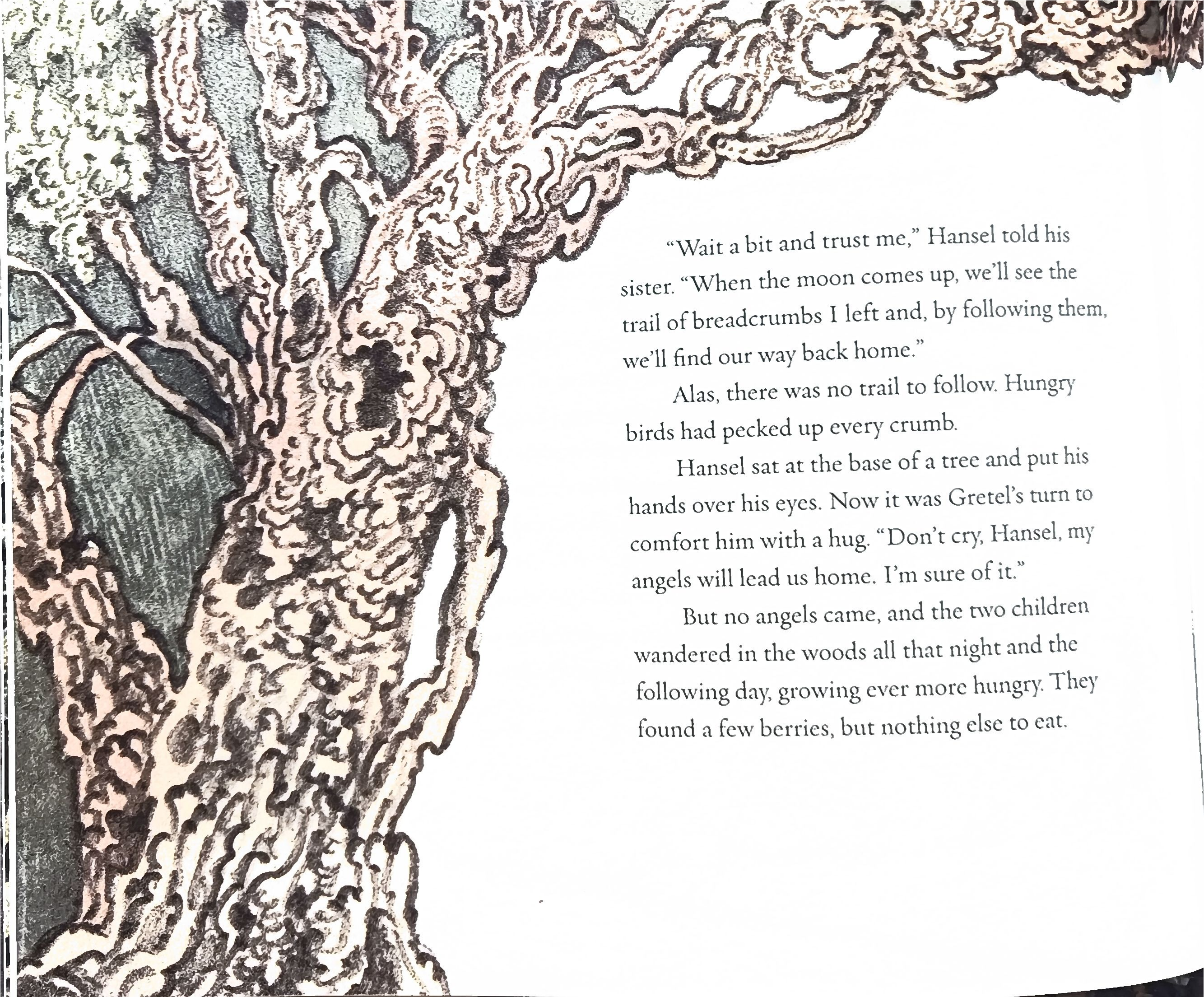
"Fool, I told you that your cat is long gone. It's just the sun shining on a piece of tin. Now come along!"

Hansel rejoined the others, but he kept to his father's side, away from the snoop eyes of his stepmother, and continued to drop small pieces of bread on the ground. Meanwhile, the grown-ups led the children into the deepest, darkest part of the forest, where the trees crowded together, and their branches looked like clutching fingers.

At last, they came to a clearing and all of them gathered sticks and branches. The broom maker struck his flint over the kindling and lit a fire that was large, bright, and warm. Their stepmother told them, "Sit here, kids. If you get tired, you can sleep a little. We'll spend the day cutting wood and come back for you when we're finished. And this time, don't wander away!"

When the sun was high, Gretel shared her bread with her brother because Hansel had scattered his so they could find their way home. They fell asleep as before and awoke after dark. They had been abandoned.



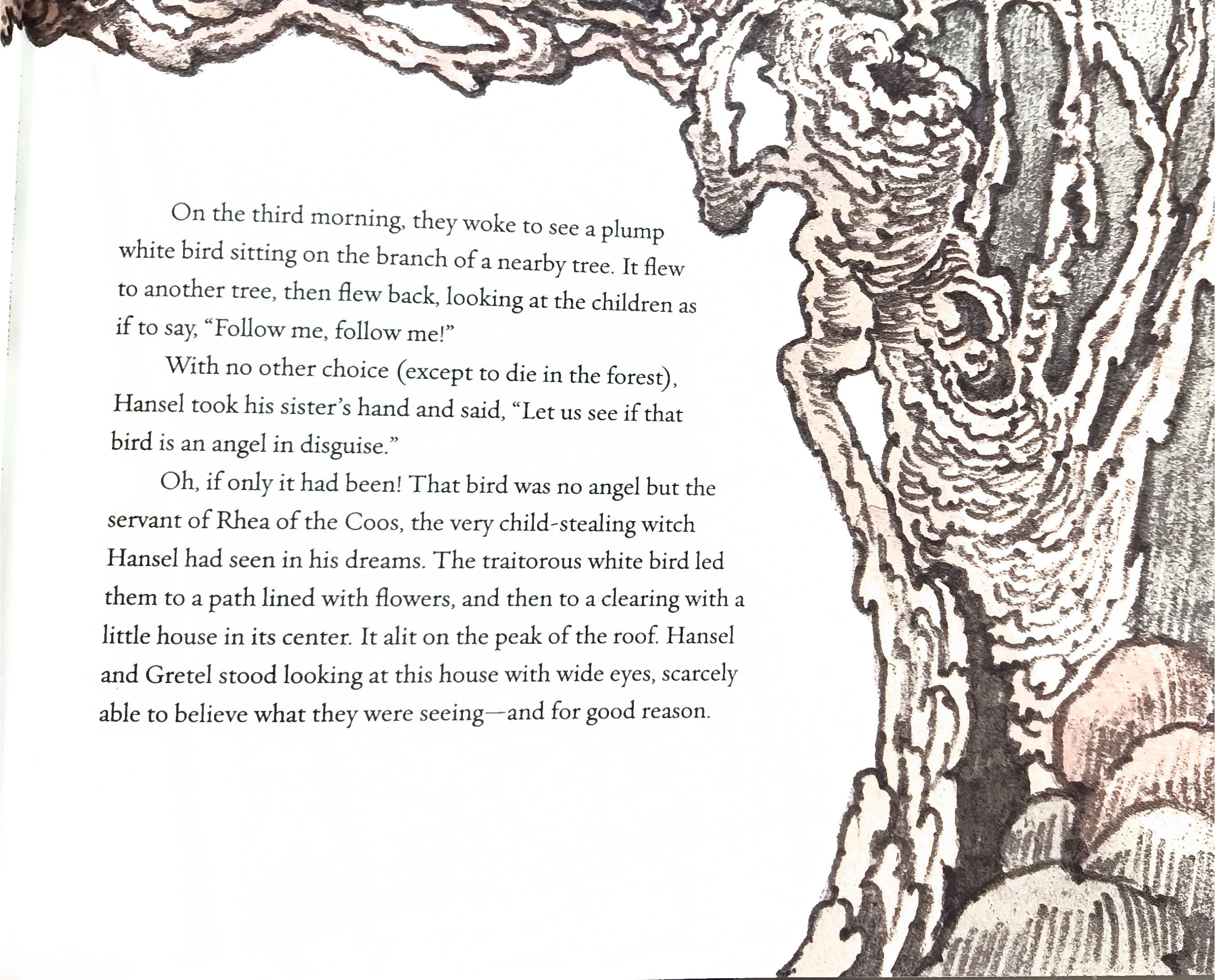


“Wait a bit and trust me,” Hansel told his sister. “When the moon comes up, we’ll see the trail of breadcrumbs I left and, by following them, we’ll find our way back home.”

Alas, there was no trail to follow. Hungry birds had pecked up every crumb.

Hansel sat at the base of a tree and put his hands over his eyes. Now it was Gretel’s turn to comfort him with a hug. “Don’t cry, Hansel, my angels will lead us home. I’m sure of it.”

But no angels came, and the two children wandered in the woods all that night and the following day, growing ever more hungry. They found a few berries, but nothing else to eat.



On the third morning, they woke to see a plump white bird sitting on the branch of a nearby tree. It flew to another tree, then flew back, looking at the children as if to say, "Follow me, follow me!"

With no other choice (except to die in the forest), Hansel took his sister's hand and said, "Let us see if that bird is an angel in disguise."

Oh, if only it had been! That bird was no angel but the servant of Rhea of the Coos, the very child-stealing witch Hansel had seen in his dreams. The traitorous white bird led them to a path lined with flowers, and then to a clearing with a little house in its center. It alit on the peak of the roof. Hansel and Gretel stood looking at this house with wide eyes, scarcely able to believe what they were seeing—and for good reason.



The walkway leading to the cottage was paved with pink peppermint candies. The roof was made of overlapping cookies for shingles. The eaves were gumdrops that shone in the morning sun. The walls were made of those spicy gingerbread cakes known as lebkuchen. The windows were spun sugar. Tall candy canes stood beside the door, which was open as if to say, "Come in! Come in!"

"Oh, it smells so good!" Gretel said.

"Let's have some, for we are very hungry," said her brother. "I'll eat part of a wall, and you can have a window. That will be very sweet."

Hansel pulled some gingerbread from the wall and crammed it into his mouth. Tasty! Gretel, meanwhile, broke off a windowpane of sugar and began to eat it. Delicious!

Then, from inside this cozy little cottage, there came a gentle voice that said, *Nibble, nibble, little mouse, who is nibbling at my house?*



Hansel and Gretel looked at each other with wide eyes. Hansel swallowed a mouthful of gingerbread wall and replied, "Hungry children is what we are, lost in the woods, and we've wandered far."

They could have run away, but they were too hungry. Hansel stood on tiptoe and helped himself to a gumbdrop eave, then boosted Gretel up so she could have her share.



The door of the cottage opened and an old woman leaning on a crutch came out. The children were so frightened that they dropped the sweet treats they were holding and stepped back. But the old woman had a kindly and gentle face, with laugh lines around her eyes and smile lines around her mouth.

"Oh, you poor lost children," said the old woman. "You must come in and have a proper meal."



The white bird, its evil job done,
flew away from the roof. The children
turned to look at it so did not see the
kindly face turn into that of an ugly
old hag with yellow, half-blind eyes,
snaggle teeth, and a wart on her nose.

This was Rhea's real face.





“Would you like soup and pancakes?” asked the witch (once again wearing her kindly face).

Hansel said thank you and Gretel dropped a pretty curtsy. In they went, and once they were inside, the house also changed and showed its real face, which was terrible indeed. The sugar-glass windows sank inward and became watchful eyes; the gumdrops melted into a rotten banana nose; the candy canes beside the door sprouted teeth; worst of all, the peppermint path became a long pink tongue.

Hansel and Gretel saw none of this as the kindly old woman took each by the hand and led them into her



awful enchanted house. She sat them down at her table and fed them pancakes with honey and a piping hot soup full of meat and vegetables. In it, she had put a special powder. They ate until their bellies were bursting, then fell asleep with their heads in their arms because of the sleeping powder and because they had walked miles and miles through the pathless forest. Once they were asleep, the pleasant aromas became the smells of rotting fruits and vegetables, the walls started dripping with slime, and the kindly face once more became the evil face of Rhea. Her yellow eyes peered nearsightedly at the sleeping children.



"I have them now," she said. "I'll eat the boy first. The girl will serve me until it's her turn in the cooking pot."



Although nearly blind, Rhea was strong; her crutch was merely a prop. She carried Hansel into a room at the back of the cottage. Here was a cage made of iron bars. Inside it and beneath it were littered the bones of the children the witch had brought to her house on her flying broom, just as the unfortunate boy had seen in his dreams.

Later that day, she shook Gretel awake and cried, "Get up, you lazybones! Fetch water and cook something good for your brother! He's too skinny! When he's fattened up, I'm going to eat him."

Gretel began to cry, but it did no good; the witch enjoyed the tears of children, as witches always do.




“If you try to run away,” Rhea said, “I’ll kill him and eat him quick as winking, even though he’s nothing but skin and bones.”

Hansel was given rich food to eat every day; Gretel was given nothing but a little soup and a few spoiled and flyspecked vegetables. Every morning, the old witch limped into the back room on her crutch and told Hansel to stick out his finger. “So I can see if you’re fat enough yet.”

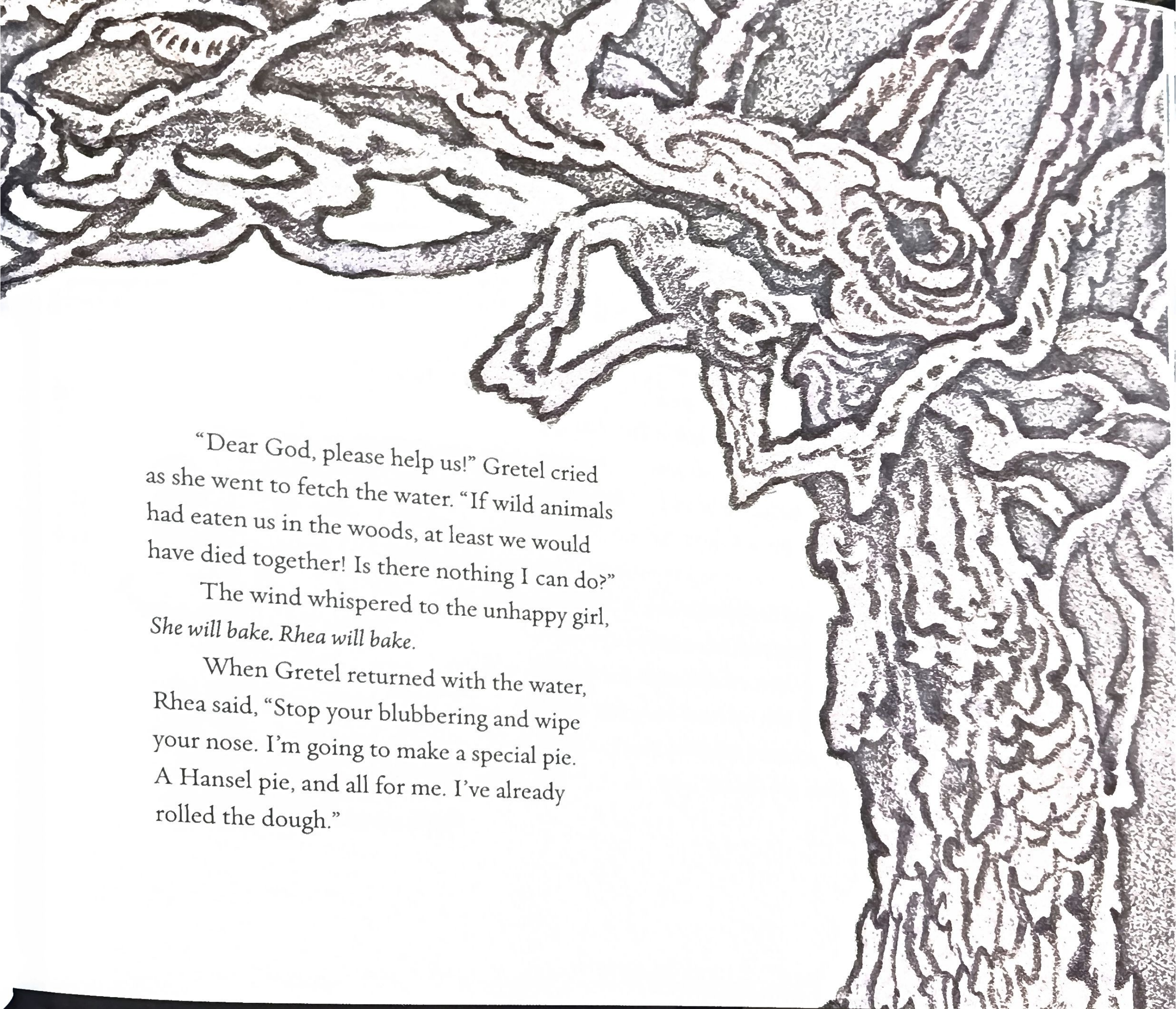
But instead of his finger, Hansel stuck out one of the bones for Rhea to feel. Her eyes were so bad she didn’t know the difference and wondered that the child didn’t fatten as he should have.





Several weeks went by in this fashion, and she believed Hansel was still thin. There was plenty to eat in her little cottage, but Rhea was hungry for boy-food. Finally, the day came when she could wait no longer, for her eyesight had failed even more and she could see little more than shadows.

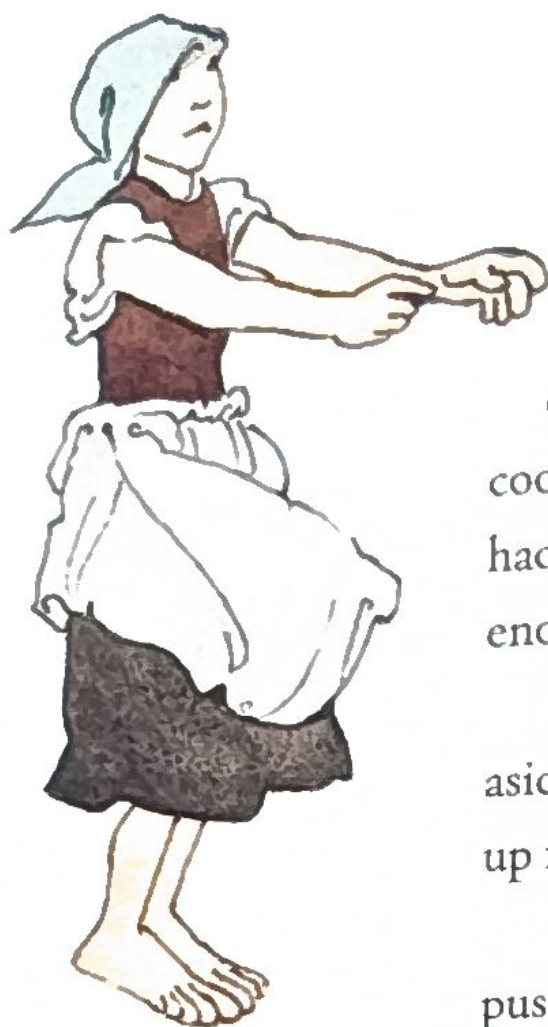
"Gretel!" she shouted. "Fetch some water, you lazy girl, and set it on the stove. For fat or thin, tomorrow I'll light the oven and pop him in!" She felt in her kitchen drawer, pulled out her longest knife, and showed Gretel.



“Dear God, please help us!” Gretel cried as she went to fetch the water. “If wild animals had eaten us in the woods, at least we would have died together! Is there nothing I can do?”

The wind whispered to the unhappy girl,
She will bake. Rhea will bake.

When Gretel returned with the water, Rhea said, “Stop your blubbering and wipe your nose. I’m going to make a special pie. A Hansel pie, and all for me. I’ve already rolled the dough.”

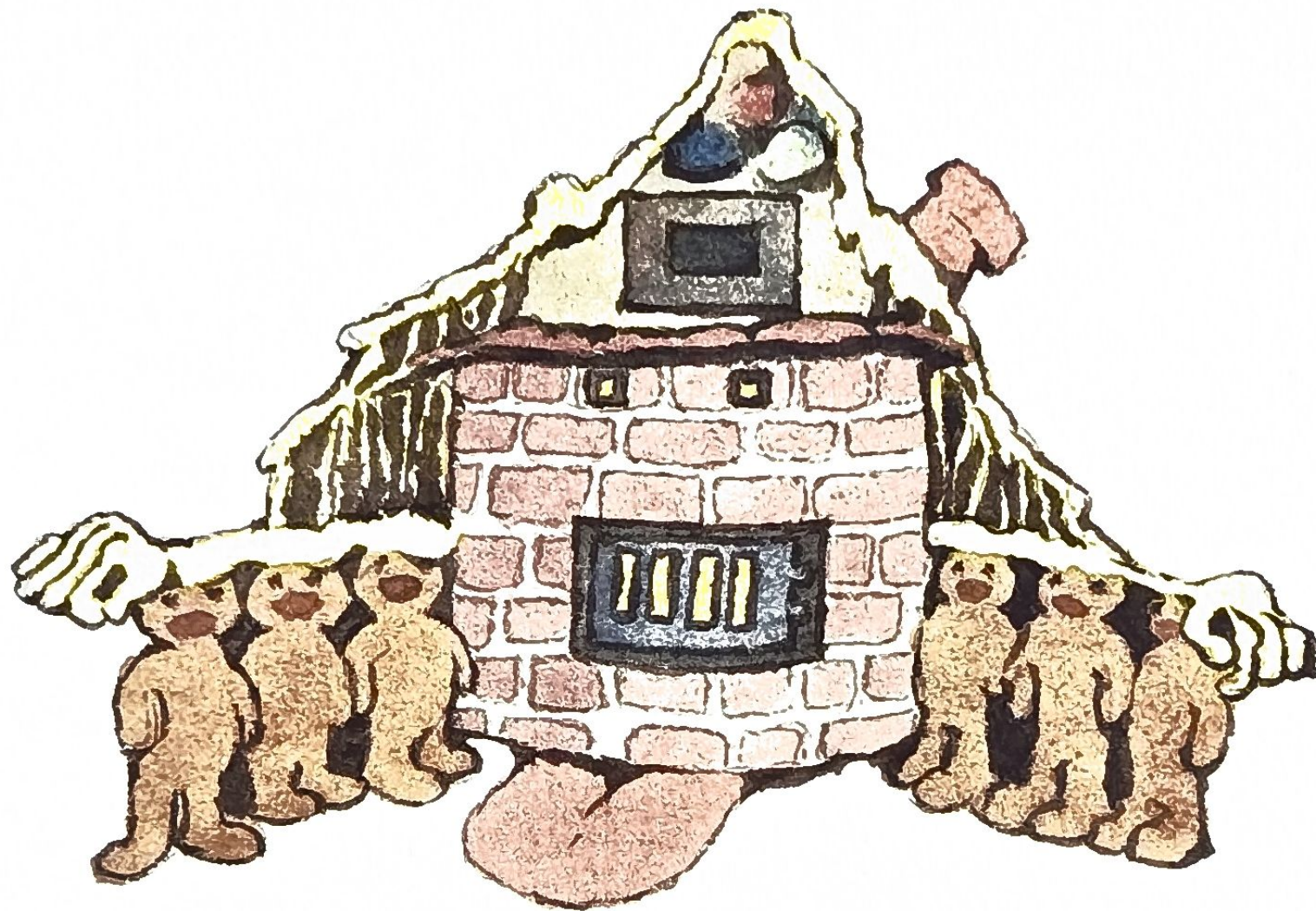


She pushed Gretel to the open oven door. "Lean in and see if the fire is hot enough for baking." Gretel saw that the witch had made enough dough for two pies and understood she meant to cook *her* as well. Then she remembered what the wind had said and told the witch, "I don't think it's hot enough for baking."

"Idiot child!" Rhea said, and pushed the girl aside. Gretel slipped behind her. "You wouldn't know up from down or hot from cold!"

She leaned close to the oven door, and Gretel pushed her in headfirst! How Rhea did shriek as her filthy hair and the wart on her nose caught fire! Gretel seized the witch's scrawny legs, pushed her all the way in, and dropped the iron bar that secured the oven door. From inside came the most horrible howls and banging. Gretel thought the wind had been right: Rhea did indeed bake.





Gretel ran into the back room and used the key hanging on the wall to unlock the cage and let Hansel out. "We are saved, dear brother. I have pushed the witch in the oven and she is dead."

Hansel leaped out of the cage and hugged his sister. They were happy as only children who have avoided a terrible fate can be. Hansel was all for leaving right away but, in her service to Rhea, Gretel had noticed a certain trunk under the witch's bed. She persuaded Hansel to open it, and inside they found heaps of gold and precious stones, for witches enjoy treasure almost as much as they enjoy eating children.

"Now," Hansel said after they had filled their pockets, "let us leave this terrible place. Looking out the back window, I have seen a wide path through the woods. We should try that."

Gretel said, "A good idea, but we should take some food because we are deep in the woods."

"You were always smarter than I," said Hansel, kissing her cheek.

"I hope you will remember that," said Gretel, smiling. "Boys think of treasure, but girls think of the important things in life."

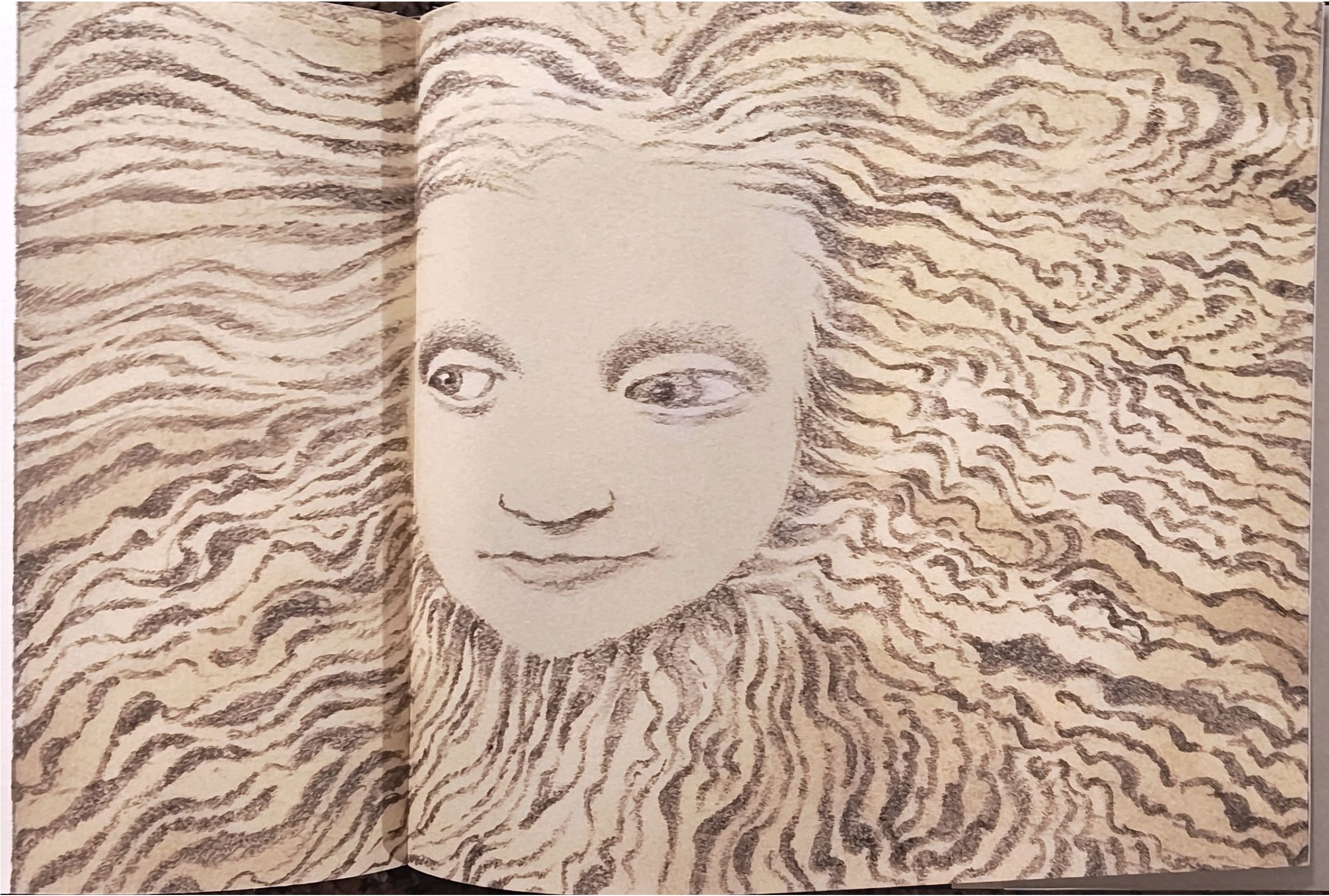
They walked for two days and slept in the woods for two nights, and if wolves or bears saw them or smelled them, they let the children alone, for the animals of the forest had also hated and feared Rhea.



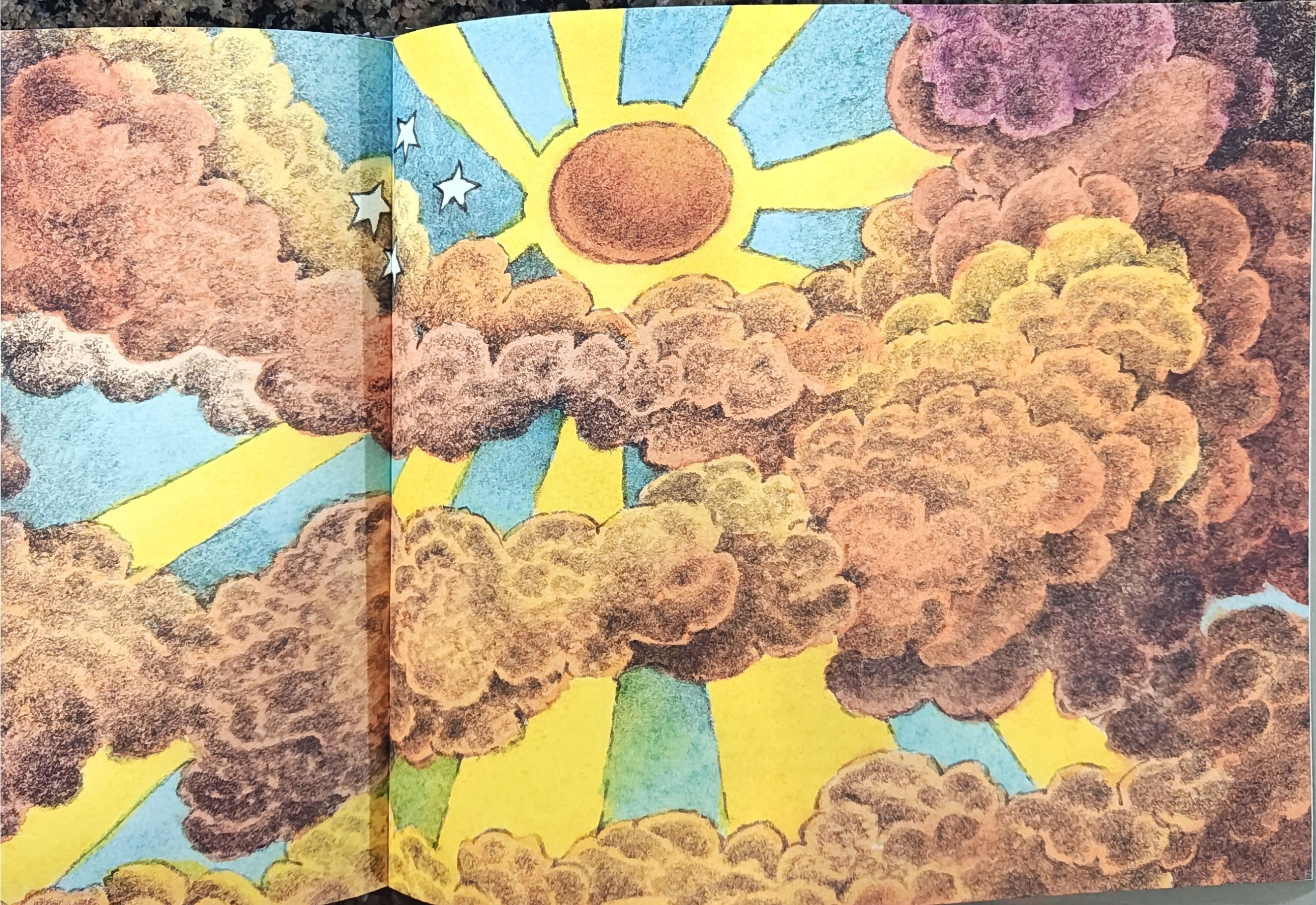
At last they emerged from the woods and, in the distance, saw the broom maker's cottage. Their father saw them coming and ran to meet them, hugging them and covering them with kisses.

"I haven't had one happy hour since we left you in the woods," he said. "I sent your wicked stepmother away and looked for you, but I thought you were dead."

Hansel turned out his pockets, showering down gold and rubies and diamonds. Gretel turned out hers and showered down gold and emeralds and sapphires. Now their cares were at an end, their father promised never to wrong them again, and you know what comes next.



They lived happily ever after.





Hansel and Gretel

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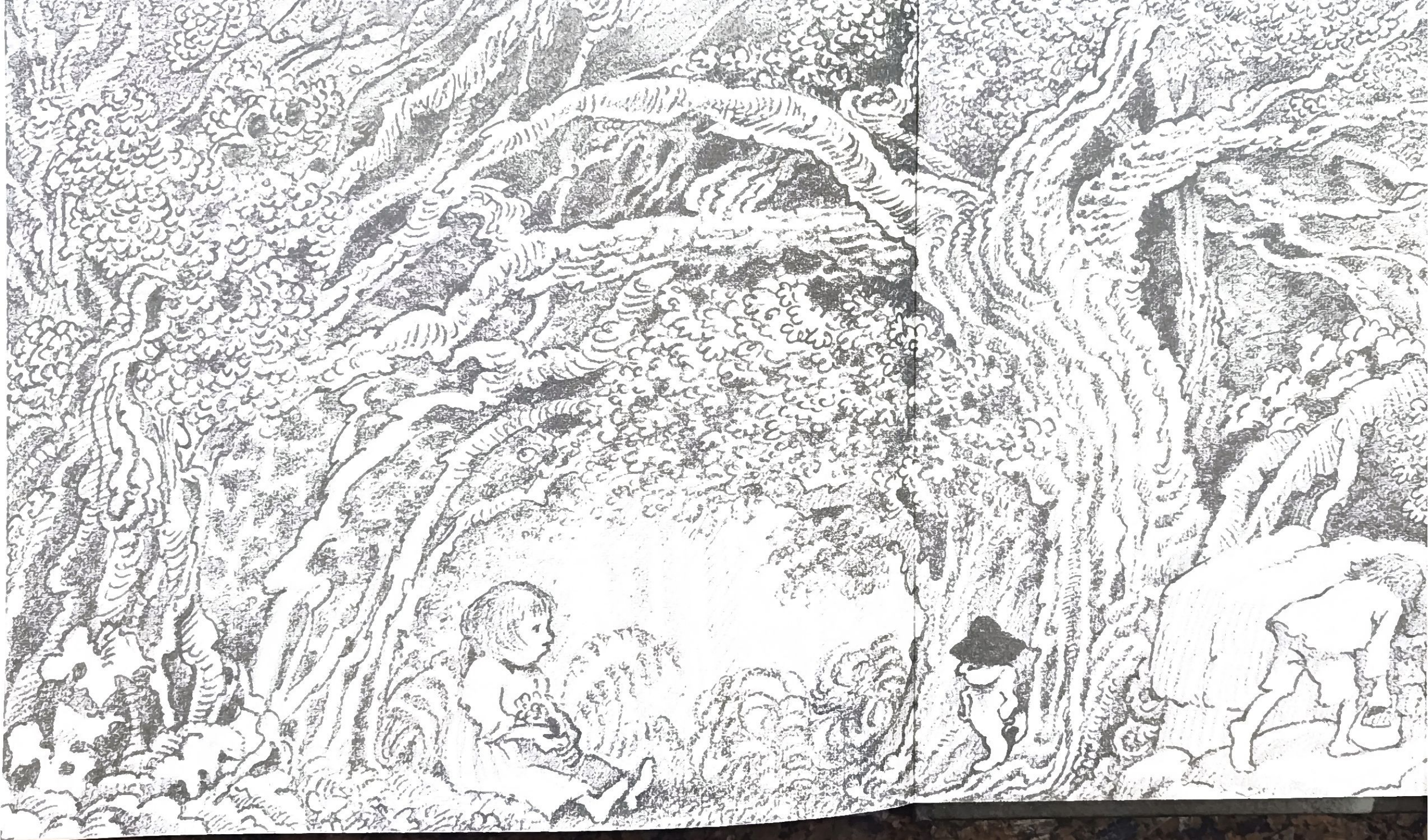
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First Edition



STEPHEN KING

is the author of more than sixty books, all of them worldwide bestsellers. *Holly* was a *New York Times* Notable Book of 2023, and *11/22/63* was named a top ten book of 2011 by the editors of the *New York Times Book Review*. King is the recipient of the 2018 PEN America Literary Service Award, the 2014 National Medal of Arts, and the 2003 National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. He lives in Bangor, Maine, with his wife, novelist Tabitha King.

MAURICE SENDAK'S

books have sold over fifty million copies and have been translated into more than forty languages. He received the 1964 Caldecott Medal for *Where the Wild Things Are* and is the creator of such classics as *In the Night Kitchen*, *Outside Over There*, *Higglety Pigglety Pop!*, *Nutshell Library*, and the recent *Ten Little Rabbits*. He has received the international Hans Christian Andersen Medal for Illustration, the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award from the American Library Association, and the National Medal of Arts in recognition of his contribution to the arts in America. In 2003, Sendak received the first Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award, an annual prize for children's literature established by the Swedish government.



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