

The Lingering Beats of the Two Souls

by Cali Poulton

In the heart of the forest, the shadows strangled every tree as they whispered the secrets of lost souls. The breath of the forest left the ground feeling barren and cold—leaves and small twigs being the only things that draped the desperate floor. All except for four knees, two noses, four hands, several fingers, and two hearts that beat too slow. Hansel and Gretel, at the age too young to live on their own, had been dumped into the forest's dark abyss. They lay there despairingly as soft whimpers escaped their languid, absorbed mouths.

Nobody knows how they got there or perhaps who their parents were, but the trees and the sky and the fowls of the air would find themselves watching the alienated kids. The two small children, whose souls beat two times too slow, gathered up their limbs and followed their feet around the forest. They didn't stop until their eyes beheld something so astonishing that it took their breath, leaving them suffocating on the forest floor. Once their breath finally found its way back to their frail, ugly lungs, the two small children banged on the door made out of gingerbread, frosting, and candied hearts.

I remember the look on their faces as I opened my door, which was enhanced by the scent of sugary vanilla. As the fragrance danced with the perfect amount of spices, it created a harmonious symphony. The aroma twirled into my nose and left my heart upon a cloud of softness and tranquility. But their faces—there was something wrong with them. I knew I couldn't slam the door on two small, innocent kids, so I allowed them into my house made of sweets. I understood that I had made a mistake once their bloody, muddied toes were permanently imprinted onto my candy-cane checkered floor. I forced thick saliva to slide down the chambers of my throat as I asked them if they wanted anything to eat. Seemingly stitched with a dull needle, their mouths were frozen in an unyielding stance. But their eyes—there was something even more deviant about their eyes. As they pierced into mine, my flesh seemed to be torn off my own body. Their eyes sliced into the bottom of my forehead and caused it to throb. Each pulsating beat echoed through my temples, forming a rhythmic agony that ached at my bones. My head dangled downward as it was swarmed with dead weight. *What was wrong with their eyes?*

I offered them something to eat and something to drink. The young boy and girl nodded their heads in a melody as I gathered three freshly baked cookies and two glasses of warm, velvety milk. Even I, who was surrounded by sweet treats like these nearly all the time, was tempted by their delicious invitation.

My mouth gaped open as a stunned expression etched across my face. The two small children, seated comfortably on chairs made of gumdrops, only stared at the mouth watering plate of goods. They didn't even attempt to place the delectable sweets or satiny milk into their secured mouths. They just glared with their malevolent, cold-blooded eyes.

I went on to ask them if they didn't like cookies and milk and would rather something else. Simultaneously, the two small children looked up at me. Large, ear-to-ear grins devoured their faces. This left their ugly, sharp teeth exposed, and an unsettling gust of wind dove into the crevices of each ivory formation. Their smiles, which were too effortlessly perfect, confirmed my error in letting them into my sugar-kissed gingerbread house. I then knew they weren't hungry for cookies and milk. They were hungry for something much more than that.

The lights broke into an inky mood as the air that strangled me hung heavy with an unnatural stillness. There was only a short moment of unbridled silence until the two small

children hurdled from their chairs. On their four hands and four knees, they galloped towards me.

I slipped onto the ground as the nonexistent bones that laced my heart broke into seven thousand hopeless pieces. My eyes emitted bloody tears that decomposed into my soul-shaken flesh. At first, I allowed my body to release ear-splitting screams, but then, after moments of indescribable pain, I sewed my mouth shut with a dull needle. One by one, tooth by tooth, bite by bite, the two small demons used their sharp, ugly teeth to tear me apart. I could not only feel the warmth of my own blood but could also smell the metallic scent, which was forever cemented into my nose. Their serrated razors ripped apart my flesh, exposing it for all to see, and leaving it raw and naked.

Soon enough, the world stopped spinning, my candied house escaped from my view, and I was left with nothing but darkness,

and stillness.

Even the thump of my heart
was still.

