

Short Story 119: In the House of Gingerbread

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Marc Aramini — 24 Apr 2015, 23:14

#IN THE HOUSE OF GINGERBREAD

"In the House of Gingerbread" first appeared in **The Architecture of Fear** in 1987 and is collected in **Endangered Species**.

##Summary:

The third person narrative begins from the point of view of a house:

The woodcutter came up the walk, and the ornate old house watched him through venetian-blinded eyes. — The house felt his feet on its porch, his quick knock at its door. It wondered how he had driven along the path through the trees. The witch would split his bones to get the marrow; it would tell the witch. It rang its bell.

Tina Heim opens the door to "the woodcutter", Lieutenant Richard Price, expecting some chicken soup as consolation for the recent death of her two year old son, Alan. Instead, Lieutenant Price presents his badge and interrupts her question, "Have the children?" by stating that he would like to talk to her, preferably sitting inside. Smelling something from the kitchen, he comments on the cooking she enjoys doing for the children every day (in the microwave) and she asks if he can simply enter her house. He claims that once he is inside, he is authorized by the state to search wherever he wants, but simply in the kitchen next to a plate with a gingerbread man on it.

She decides to be pleasant and pours him some coffee as they sit down, where she thinks, "This is my house — If this is an interview, then I'm interviewing him. She knew it was not true."

Price asks about her husband Jerry's death last November at the age of 41 from lung cancer, indicating that for a non-smoker who didn't work as a chemist certainly he was very young to die from such a malady. The policeman asks if he might smoke, and she retrieves an ashtray for him. She stalls for time by sweetening her coffee, trying to suppress and hide her tears.

Price says, "People must have wondered. My wife died about three years ago, and I know I got a lot of questions." Tina notes that the gingerbread man she cooked earlier is gone from his plate. The cop then asks about her son and his death last month, as well as details about her two remaining children, whom Tina reveals are step-children, in Jerry's custody rather than their mother Rona's.

Finally, Price brings up the reason for his visit: two large insurance claims in close proximity being paid, both benefiting Tina. However, when he mentions the insurance, he is distracted by the sound of what he believes to be a small child upstairs. She asks if he wants to go upstairs and check, since he doesn't really need an excuse.

The policeman instead keeps talking, asking if Alan was poisoned. "She nodded slowly,

pretending there was a lovely clay mask on her face, a mask that would be dissolved by tears, broken by any expression. "He ate paint chips, Lieutenant. In his closet there was a place where the old paint was flaking off." As she begins to cry, he tries to console her and she stands, facing a corner. "She hoped that when she turned around, he would be gone."

She comments on the unfairness of life, that Lt. Price could be there smoking while Jerry died of lung cancer but never smoked. Here he once again brings up Jerry's Attica Life insurance policy with a double indemnity for death by cancer; Jerry only lasted three weeks after going to the hospital. Each of the children still has a \$25,000 insurance policy, once again with a double provision for accidental death, as was the case for her son Alan.

"You think I killed him. If only my eyes could blast, she thought, he'd be frying like bacon. He'd be burning in hell. "You think I killed my husband and my son to get that money, don't you, Lieutenant?" She tried to picture it, his brown suit blazing, his face seared, his hair on fire.

He responds that he really doesn't think so and asks her to sign a paper that will allow an exhumation of Jerry's remains to test for cancer or other poisons. She wonders if they can actually tell, and thinks of the biblical woman's plea, "Lord, it has been four days now; surely there will be a stench" (from John 11:39, in which Lazarus's sister Martha cautions Jesus against rolling a stone aside and opening his tomb [incidentally, Jesus' resurrection of Lazarus in the gospel of John, as the culmination of his healing miracles and signs, sets Jesus directly onto the path of crucifixion]).

While arsenic and lead can be detected a century after death, Price explains that there are many other variables involved in whether the search will provide any concrete details. She signs the document.

In response to his question about the usage of lead paint, she reveals that the repainting of the house hadn't been completed, and that perhaps the paint Allan consumed was from the 1920s. She asks if he wants to see the closet, and takes him upstairs to the nursery. Price reflects that he wasn't even sure the house was that old — that perhaps it was "built new in the old style, like they do at Disneyworld", but Tina says it was built in 1882.

A paint can and stained newspapers are strewn messily about the room, and they hear "a scraping and shuffling that might have been a small dog scrambling to its feet, or merely some small, hard object sliding from a collection of similar objects, a baby's rattle leaving the top of a careless pile of toys."

Tina proclaims, "There's a child in there!" but Price finds the closet door locked. Noticing how cold it is in the nursery, Tina denies locking the room, and then realizes that he is only looking around "as a favor" to her. He posits it is a possum or squirrel in the closet, and tries to unlock the room. When asked about the presence of rats, Tina responds:

"We've tried to get rid of them. Jerry set traps in the basement— There was a faint scrabbling from the closet; she spoke more rapidly to cover the sound: "He even bought a ferret and put it down there, but it died. He thought Henry'd killed it."

Price has picked the lock and realizes that the entire frame has been painted over, making the door stick. During this process they proceed to a first name basis. When he finally pries the door open, "for an instant it seemed to her that there were eyes near the floor," though Price sees nothing but scratch marks in the paint which he thinks could have been a coon or a similar medium sized animal. He says he must be going, asking about a book she retrieved from under the strewn newspapers. "Just an old children's book. Jerry found it when he was exploring the

attic and brought it down for Alan. It was under the newspapers.”

As he is leaving, they discuss her plans to sell the house, and in response to his comments about it being a nice place, she mutters “It is *not* a nice place?” but her words were so soft only the house heard them. On the way out, they flirt and he promises to call her. She watches him walk away and pat the pocket of his jacket, where she is certain he stashed the gingerbread man cookie to be tested for poison. In her mind, she hears the verses from the children’s book she found under the newspapers upstairs:

“You may run, you may run, just as fast as you can,
But you’ll never catch

ME,” said the gingerbread man.

The narrative jumps once again to the house’s perspective: “That evening the house played Little Girl. The essence, the ectoplasm, the soul of the child seeped from the cracked old plaster that had absorbed it when new.” Plump Henry doesn’t notice, cursing everyone in his loneliness. His sister Gail studies upstairs, reading a summary of D’Annunzio’s *La Gioconda* and imagining herself as the titular model wreaking havoc upon her step-mother, burning her as Gail’s fantasies intermingle with the plot of the tragedy.

Tina is in the bathroom and sees the spirit of the house, “the silhouette of a child with braids, a little girl whose head and shoulders were almost the outline of a steeply pitched roof.” She imagines that Jerry is alive as she tries to ignore the specter in the steam which has come to haunt the old house:

It was not so much that she had forgotten, as that she had forgotten she herself was still living and that the living cannot communicate with the dead, with the dead who neither return their calls nor answer their letters. — He had given her perfumed body powder and a huge puff with which to apply it. She did so now because Jerry had liked it, thinking how long, how very long, it had been since she had used it last.

Noticing that the bathroom is very cold, just as the nursery was before, Tina contemplates that she might be too fat, “Yet Dick Price had smiled at her; she had seen the way he had looked at her — had felt the extra moment for which he held her hand.”

The narrative skips to Lieutenant Price reassuring the children Henry and Gail that it was indeed cancer all along. Gail continues to claim that Tina killed her father: “I’m sure she did. You don’t know her — she’s a real witch sometimes.” By this point Price has ascertained that Gail was the person who wrote the letters tipping off the insurance company that foul play had been committed. Henry admits he helped her with several of the letters, asking if Price will tell their step-mother. Price leaves, saying that Jerry’s lungs had been filled with asbestos fibers, something which usually only happens to insulators.

Tied up in the kitchen, Tina thinks of the grim wallpaper in the nursery they had attempted to cover and that, “It’s the gingerbread house — It doesn’t eat you, you eat it. But it gets you just the same.”

Henry and Gail enter and taunt her, planning to remove the adhesive tape so it will not be melted on her body and give them away after they use the microwave to execute her. Henry has tampered with the microwave in such a way that it will activate even with the door open. Tina refuses to plead for her life. Henry explodes an egg in the microwave to create a mess Tina might hypothetically be cleaning when she has her own accident, its burst “like an ax biting wood or the fall of a guillotine blade.” Tina says the children can go back to their mother Rona if they so desire, but they really want revenge and money in the form of the insurance money she has collected.

Henry cuts Tina loose so that there will not be rope burns on her body, and he forces her head into the microwave and starts it. A screaming starts, but it is not Tina's. Henry releases her and flames and smoke escapes the microwave. "She wanted to laugh. So Hansel, so little Gretel, cooking a witch is not quite so easy as you thought, *nicht wahr*?"

The flames spread to the curtain of the kitchen, and the dry wood of the room easily burns. Henry flees as the back door bursts inward, for Lieutenant Price has returned to help rescue them and aid in escaping the house. "Sirens and wolves howled in the distance, while one by one the dark rooms lit with a cheerful glow." Tina screams for her house, claiming she will remember her, no matter what. Dick points at a figure above: "for an instant (and only an instant) a white face like a child's stared from a gable window; then it was gone, and the flames peered out instead. An instant more and they broke through the roof; the house sighed, a phoenix embracing death and rebirth."

Later the fire captain asked how the fire started, but is met with silence and the terrified stare of Henry, while Gail edges toward the trees. Tina blames the disaster on a cooking fire started when Henry prepared eggs. Henry says, "She's the best mother in the whole world!?", and Gail readily agrees.

"Henry, you're a dear. Tina bent to kiss his forehead. "I hope those burns don't hurt too much." Gently, she pinched one of his plump cheeks.

He's getting fat, she reflected. But I'll have to neuter him soon, or his testicles will spoil the meat. He'll be easier to manage then.

(She smiled, recalling her big, black-handled dressmaker's shears. That would be amusing — but quite impossible, to be sure. What was it that clever man in Texas had done, put some sort of radioactive capsule between his sleeping son's legs?)

The story ends with Tina saying, "You know, Dick, you've never talked much about your own children. How old are they?"

##Commentary:

Every once in a while I take an existential look at this project and think, this story says everything there is to say right there — let it speak for itself. "In the House of Gingerbread" works on that level, with the dramatic tenseness, shifts in sympathetic points of view, and syncretism of immediately recognizable source material everyone should be able to recognize - all of these things contribute to a satisfying story that perhaps works best on a first read — but I keep writing anyway, with the injunction to my readers, go read Wolfe's stories again? they are far superior to the comments anyone can make on them, even in their mysteries.

This story and its tension works very well on the surface level.

"In the House of Gingerbread" plays with the reader's perspective quite a bit, but comes to a fair and unambiguous ending. It has a narrative strength which initially thrives on subverting expectations, even though the first paragraph explicitly narrates that the house is sentient and that a witch lives there, identifying Lieutenant Price as the "woodcutter" (of "Hansel and Gretel" fame). As the story progresses, Tina's sadness over her husband's death and her young child's demise is treated with sympathy and tends to erase the sinister effect of the house ringing its own doorbell at the start — as the first paragraph's implications are forgotten, eventually the domestic situation and Tina's feelings dominate the middle of the narrative, in a conflict that is immediately recognizable in its mimesis of a struggling, possibly dysfunctional step-family facing recent tragedy and (possibly unjust suspicion).

It is easy to sympathize with Tina's anger and sadness. The dramatic tension escalates between Tina and Lt. Price as the insurance exhumation seems to become the dominant narrative conflict, but towards the second half of the story, the children are revealed to be figures of tricky and duplicitous evil in their attempts to kill their "wicked" stepmother — with the rather interesting but logically unsound scheme of triggering a microwave malfunction and burning her to death. It is only at the very end of the story that the accuracy of the first paragraph is revealed — Tina truly was a witch, greatly interested in eating these children (thus her passion for preparing treats for their lunch every day). She is also interested in the children of "the woodcutter", all the while. Even with the loss of her strange familiar, the house, Tina seems to have triumphed and avoided the fate of the earlier witch - and in Wolfe's modernization of Hansel and Gretel, he even has Tina think of the step-children by the fairy tale names in the final scenes, blending together all of the similar elements: combining gingerbread house and gingerbread man, witch and stepmother, and transforming the oven into a modernized microwave (obviously less effective for cooking witches than was employed in the good old days).

The primary mystery of the story becomes the nature of the house and its relationship to Tina Heim. The text strongly suggests the house is "possessed" - it has absorbed the spirit of a little girl when it was new, possibly as early as 1882 when it was built (though perhaps as late as the 1920's, when the paint in the closet was originally applied), and is capable of "playing Little Girl" at times. It seems that the scratching within the sealed nursery room might be related to the manner in which the original little girl died, perhaps even locked inside the room Tina and Lieutenant Price attempt to force open. The paint which Alan consumed had already been peeled away there, and the concomitant coldness is the same feeling Tina gets when the spirit of the house plays Little Girl and watches her shower. Tina also continually thinks of the grim walls of the nursery that she and Jerry had tried to cover up, but their image keeps returning to her. Wolfe baldly states that even though "you" may eat the gingerbread house, it gets you just the same. The first paragraph makes it clear that Tina and the house are separate (i.e.- her witch persona is not another artifact or example of possession when the soul of the child flees the house - the house thinks of her as "the witch" from the very beginning.)

It is worth discussing that the original fairy story "Hansel and Gretel", while largely unchanged, features the triumph of the children. In this case, the portly Henry and conniving Gail (as Hansel and Gretel [though Gail consonantly imagines herself as Gioconda as well]) try to microwave the witch but fail, and it seems the wood cutter (Richard Price) has two children of his own who are also on Tina's menu. Wolfe clearly accomplishes something beneath the trappings of fantasy, and this involves creating a metaphor for the voracious need for sustainable resources? it seems that Henry and Gail are looking for the proverbial free lunch — the same kind of murderous attitude for personal profit which the insurance companies suspect in the case of two suspicious deaths. [In the original story, the mother and father of the children are both their biological parents, and share the responsibility for abandoning them, though this changes in later versions, even going so far as to redeem the father].

Much of the discussion of early tales such as those of "Hansel and Gretel" (and even "The Gingerbread Man") categorizes them as something like metaphors for the most basic human need: hunger stories of avoiding starvation and confronting suppressed horrors in harsh times, horrors which might include cannibalism. Some resources speculate that the oral tale actually originated during the Great Famine of the 14th century, when weak family members were viewed as conceivably disposable, and some critics actually conceive of the step-mother and the witch as two sides of the same coin, characters dealing with an almost identical starvation ideology: one throwing out the children and abandoning them to death and starvation because

of scant resources, the other actually eating the children to assuage the hunger inside her. (Though underneath it all is the implication that in harsh times, a step-mother or even a desperate mother herself might very well turn to eating easily killed children). In this way, the witch of the fairy tale is actually the step-mother, with both abandonment and cannibalism motivated by hunger and want, a dark hunger which creates the sinister and supernatural veneer of the ogre or witch in fairy tales. In the fairy tales, the death of one evil feminine figure is usually concurrent with the death of the other, permitting a happy ending when the children return to their father. Wolfe has recognized this symbolic association between the witch and step-mother characters and crafted a story where they are reunited in Tina, who at times displays sympathetic and human emotions. Even though her house is destroyed, certainly she triumphs, for the children's fear of her also seems to extend to a basic fear that society itself will prove unable to temper her response if they betray her openly (rather than covertly).

##Names:

-*Tina Heim*: Heim is the German word for "home". Tina can either be short for Christina ("follower of Christ") or derived from some other name, which can imply tiny.

-*Richard Price*: identified by the third person narrative voice as "The woodcutter", he goes by the nickname "Dick". Richard can mean "powerful leader". Price, besides its English meaning, can imply "enthusiasm" through its Welsh descent from the name Rhys.

-*Jerry*: Jerry's name implies "exalted of the Lord."

-*Henry*: The name Henry means "home ruler" — rather ironic here.

-*Gail*: Gail's name connotes "liveliness".

##Literary allusions:

Obviously there are two fairy tales directly referenced by the work — that of the German tale "Hansel and Gretel", a brother and sister who are lured into a gingerbread house by the promise of candy after their father leaves them in the woods at the insistence of their stepmother, only to be captured and fattened by a witch for consumption. Of course, in most versions of the fairy tale they triumph by casting the witch in her own oven, first by feigning thinness with a stick, then ignorance of how an oven works. The Brothers Grimm published a version of the story in 1812. (Tina's last name, Heim, is also of German origin). The symbol of the house as candy in times of starvation is quite interesting, and the temptation leads to very real dangers. In Wolfe's story, the house acts as a malevolent agent outside simple temptation (though Tina certainly seems to act as a temptress to "the woodcutter") and behind the promise of a normal suburban facade.

The other important source story, that of "The Gingerbread Man", actually appears in the book the deceased Jerry found in the house. It is quite clear that it is not from the text of the original 1975 *St. Nicholas Magazine* tale, "The Gingerbread Boy", for while that story contains a gingerbread man fleeing from the couple who create it and eventually being devoured by a fox, its taunt was not yet in the formula Wolfe employs. Indeed, it seems that Wolfe has probably paraphrased and restructured the modern boast of the fairy tale, which usually has the text "Run, run, as fast as you can! You can't catch me I'm the gingerbread man!" The idea of consumption in fairy tales is here one of runaway food, though in some variations the baked product or head cheese actually consumes others who get in its path. The gingerbread house of "Hansel and Gretel" is of course the lure that attracts them to the witch's grasp, but the interesting relationship between cooking, eating, and being poisoned in Wolfe's story still seem

born of that primal hunger of darker and more superstitious times - even if the oven is now a microwave.

Besides these fairy tales, Gail is studying a summary of **La Gioconda**, Gabriele D'Annunzio's 1899 tragedy. While the summary she reads gives an accurate depiction of the play, Gail imagines herself as the model Gioconda and mentally substitutes the words witch, Tina, and burned for wife, Sylvia, and maimed, also attaching her brother to the fiery fantasy:

**Gioconda is the model of the brilliant young sculptor, Lucio Settala.*

Although he struggles to resist the fascination that she exercises over him, out of loyalty to his witch, Sylvia, he feels Gioconda is the true inspiration of his art. During Lucio's illness, Tina arouses Gioconda's fury and is horribly burned by the model and her brother.*

In the original, the wife Sylvia saves her husband Lucio from committing suicide and even attempts to salvage the statue which is his masterpiece when Gioconda attempts to destroy it (after Sylvia jealously says that Lucio is no longer interested in using Gioconda as a model). The wife Sylvia is terribly maimed in the process. It is not clear that Lucio has a cognate in the Wolfe story, though perhaps Gail has sublimated some of her anger at the passing of her father into this daydream and gains satisfaction in wresting an eidolon of her deceased father away from Tina, "his witch" (in addition, her fantasies reveal that her mother Rona was a model as well). D'Annunzio was an important figure in the decadent literary movement, combining some of the mystical features of symbolists and aesthetes in an artistic direction which influenced Italian fascism and bears some strains of resemblance to Nietzschean thought. In **La Gioconda**, one of the themes is that a genius may sacrifice whatever is necessary, even "lesser" mortals, in seeking out a higher purpose or ideal. Gail's envisions herself as the sculptor's ideal model.

##Cultural allusions:

While at least one haunted house in the Chicago area was also built in 1882 (the Scutt Mansion at 206 N Broadway in Joliet), it seems unlikely that Wolfe based this house on that particular one, which had a public reputation for the ill fortune of its owners. It also seems an empty search to look for the daughters of famous writers or historical figures who might have died in the 1880s and "become" the spirit of the house.

When thinking of American writers who might interest Wolfe and have undergone familial tragedies, the death of Longfellow's wife when her dress caught fire kept coming to mind, but Longfellow himself died in 1882, and his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne, who also always springs to mind when strange houses with gables are invoked, had already been dead for years. It is likely the spirit of the house, which might be that of a girl trapped in the closet or even tortured in the nursery, maybe starving to death or accidentally poisoning herself by consuming inedible material from the house, is ultimately from an indeterminate source.

The case which the witch thinks of in which the man from Texas, Houston-based petroleum engineer Kerry Crocker, irradiates his son is summarized below:

A man used radioactive sources to intentionally irradiate his 11-year-old son on multiple occasions. The man had limited visitation rights following divorce from the child's mother in 1971. He obtained capsules from one or two cesium-137 oil and gas well logging sources, each 1-2 Curie, which he was licensed to use with a company. From April to October 1972 he used the capsules in 5 to 8 instances against his son. Around 8 April 1972 during a weekend visit the father instructed the boy to use headphones containing capsules. On 18 April the boy was taken to a doctor for treatment of skin blisters. Twice in July the father drugged the boy and put him to sleep on a cushion or pillow containing capsules; the boy awoke nauseous both times

and began to develop a rash on his thighs. On an August visit he was instructed to sleep on a couch containing two capsules; by this time he was under care of a doctor for skin lesions. In September the boy saw a physician for hair loss from one side of the head. On an October visit the father placed two capsules on the boy's legs while he was sleeping. In February 1973 a plastic surgeon diagnosed the boy's worsening skin lesions as radiation induced. The boy required 16 operations from January 1974 to November 1978 including numerous skin grafts; the irradiation also resulted in castration, with the resultant requirement for testosterone replacement.

The case was reported to law enforcement authorities on 31 January 1974, with charges brought against the father on 2 May and his conviction on 17 April 1975 on one charge. The father appealed but jumped bond when the appeal was denied, and was finally apprehended around 1981 following an FBI investigation. (Johnston)

Certainly the calculating betrayal of a son by his father, probably for revenge, fits with the story, but of special note to Wolfe fans is also the profession of the perpetrator

##Unanswered questions:

From the introductory segment, where the house contemplates that its witch will split the woodcutter's bones to get the marrow, are we to believe that Tina's relationship with Jerry and her feelings for Alan were genuine? It seems Lieutenant Price and his children have been selected as her future victims, regardless of whether her feelings for Jerry were sincere.

What is Tina's original relationship with the spirit and the house? Did she just happen to come upon it or is the relationship deeper? In the fairy tale, the house is the lure of the witch, and Tina's last name is German for home. (How long would a modernized witch live?)

##Connection with other works:

Wolfe loves appropriating fairy stories to ambiguous and sophisticated narrative ends, as we can see in *Peace*, "The Death of Koschei the Deathless", and "The Little Stranger" (which also played with some "Hansel and Gretel" imagery concerning a witch). The sympathetic portrayal of a rather hideous character is something that Wolfe has probably done a time or two in his fiction. The blending of the disparate ideas behind these fairy tales, thrust into a modernized setting that somehow seems to reveal the original source's motivation, is definitely one of Wolfe's most polished literary techniques, and, because of the easily recognizable material Wolfe is using here, creates a rich texture for this particular story - even if there are no enduring mysteries or truly complex enigmas lurking underneath the tale.

##Resources

-Johnston, Wm. Robert. "Texas Radiological Assault, 1972". **Database of Radiological Incidents and Related Events--Johnston's Archive**. 18 September 2007. Web. 23 April 2015.
<http://www.johnstonsarchive.net/nuclear/radevents/1972USA1.html>