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Breadcrumbs

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"While mom washed my hair in the sink, she would tell me stories. When the shampoo dripped into my eyes, her words distracted me from the sting. Staring at the scenes in the Scandinavian plates over the basin, I would let my mind wander through the houses; the woman making cheese with her daughter, and the farmer hard at work with a hay fork and wagon. Mom always gave every story a Scandinavian twist, and each plot was set in Denmark. That's just how it was. It didn't occur to me that every story wasn't Danish until I was much older. Hans Christian Anderson had the last word - that's all there was to it."

Cover Page Footnote

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BREADCRUMBS

BY KRISTINA BRAELL

While mom washed my hair in the sink, she would tell me stories. When the shampoo dripped into my eyes, her words distracted me from the sting. Staring at the scenes in the Scandinavian plates over the basin, I would let my mind wander through the houses; the woman making cheese with her daughter, and the farmer hard at work with a hay fork and wagon. Mom always gave every story a Scandinavian twist, and each plot was set in Denmark. That's just how it was. It didn't occur to me that every story wasn't Danish until I was much older. Hans Christian Anderson had the last word—that's all there was to it.

My favorite story was "Hansel and Gretel." (Later, when I could read, this was replaced with an uncanny fascination with "The Wild Swans.") The plot was secondary to the lavish descriptions of the candy decorating the witch's cottage. Mom, who has a notable sweet tooth, could make my mouth water with images of the spun-sugar snow and gumdrop bushes outside, as well as the peppermint shutters, sweet, fruit-flavored glass and chocolate doors. The candy got better with each retelling, but the story usually wound up with a lecture on not getting lost and not talking to strangers. Bread crumbs weren't enough, she told me. I needed to look awake and pay attention constantly. "There are weird people in the world," was one favorite phrase, followed by an admonition for "stay with the group."

When I got older, I took to the woods on a regular basis. We had miles of trees behind our yard. With unkempt fields to the South and drumlins spotting the area, I had many opportunities to explore to my heart's content. The one time I got lost was with my younger brother. We were a mile north of the house and walking in circles—baffled by the identical tree-covered hills around us where the drumlin rose and dipped. In the falling dusk, we were utterly lost. I was thrilled when I remembered that following the sun would get us home, and we got back with only minor lectures from our parents. At the time, the thought that I had actually used the sun to find a direction was unbelievably cool and I strutted around the yard like John Muir for a month. We hadn't met any weird people, I hadn't had a group to stick with, but I had realized that sometimes you have to find your own breadcrumbs.