

Title of the Short Story

The Gingerbread Cookie

© 2026 Milton Chanes

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission from the author/publisher, except for brief quotations used in reviews, articles, or critical commentary.

Edition: July 2026 – Version 1

ASIN: BoFS1Z37HW

Independently published through Amazon KDP.

Design and layout: Milton Chanes

Cover: Milton Chanes

Printed and distributed by Amazon.

This story reminds us how far human beings can go when certain circumstances shatter their moral limits. For better or worse, knowing the truth remains necessary, because only then can we understand the monster we ourselves might become.

War is the playground of psychopaths

The Gingerbread Cookie

A short story that serves as a prologue to the novel
inspired by real events surrounding

“The witch of Buchenwald.”

Milton Chanes

The gingerbread cookie

Dresden, spring 1915

*«Madness is the exception in individuals. But in groups, parties, nations, and ages, it is the rule.» —
Friedrich Nietzsche.*

We shall begin this story on a spring morning in nineteen fifteen, on a street in Dresden called Schillerstrasse, where the sun fell obliquely across the cobblestones and the air smelled of freshly baked bread from the bakery on the corner.

The protagonist of this prologue is eight years old and walks as though the world were an entirely safe place.

She wears a white cotton dress with a blue satin bow at the waist, tied by her mother before she left the house. White knee-high stockings, freshly washed. Black buckle shoes.

Striking blue eyes. Blonde hair falling to her shoulders, arranged in two braids ending in two smaller

blue bows. On her head, a round straw hat with a matching ribbon and a small bow secured with a pin.

The idyllic image of a little Saxon girl from a respectable working-class family.

In her hands, a wicker basket covered with a checked cloth. Inside are the things her mother asked her to bring back from the market: three onions, a piece of bacon wrapped in waxed paper, a bunch of parsley, three apples. It is the Great War—barely a year since it began—and already some things are becoming scarce in the city, but the girl's family is not yet going hungry. Her father works as a foreman in a factory. They have a decent home and, above all, they have bread.

The girl returns from the market with the basket hanging from her left arm. She skips.

She does not quite walk. She skips. She takes two ordinary steps, then a small hop on the third, as though some private music were setting the rhythm. Sometimes she whistles. Sometimes she sings softly a little school song about the shepherd and the lost sheep. Sometimes she simply looks up—at the eaves of the houses, at the pigeons, at the first green leaves on the linden trees along Schillerstrasse—and smiles for no apparent reason.

She smiles at the pigeons, at the sky, at the linden trees. She simply smiles.

The street watches her pass with a mixture of affection and familiarity.

—Good morning, Frau Schäfer!

Frau Schäfer, the baker, sixty years old and widowed, leans out through the doorway of her shop. There is flour on her apron and flour in her eyebrows. She smiles.

—Good morning, my little one. Are you helping your mother today?

—I always help her. Today I'm bringing the onions.

—Good girl. Good girl.

The girl goes on. Three steps, a little hop. Three steps, a little hop.

—Herr Brückner!

Herr Brückner, the shoemaker, looks up from the sole he is stitching in the doorway of his workshop. He is an older man, bald, with his glasses resting on the tip of his nose. He is missing a finger on his left hand; an accident from his youth.

—Ah, little one. Give my regards to your mother.
How is she?

—Fine. Cooking.

—Good girl. Good girl.

The whole street gives the girl back the same echo. She is the best-mannered child in the neighbourhood. The girl who greets everyone. The girl who remembers names. The girl who asks about granddaughters, cataracts, the bad knee, the cat that went missing last week. The girl who listens to the answers with her eyes wide open, nodding solemnly, as though every confidence were, at that very moment, the most important thing in the world.

It is what they will remember about her thirty-five years later, should anyone ever come to ask. “She was the sweetest child I ever knew,” Frau Schäfer will say then, already very old, sitting on the bench in the square, speaking with difficulty because she has lost almost all her teeth. *“I cannot believe what they say. I cannot. To me, she was the angel of the neighbourhood.”*

And Frau Schäfer will not be lying. To Frau Schäfer, the girl was exactly that girl.

Halfway down the street, beside the entrance to number seventeen, an elderly woman stands on the pavement, with two cloth bags resting on the ground. It is Frau Wagner, the widow of a postal clerk, sixty-eight years old. She has lived alone on the second floor of number seventeen for eleven years. She has no children. A small woman, slightly stooped, with white hair gathered into a low bun beneath her cap, always dressed in black because, since Herr Wagner's death, she has never worn any other colour.

She is standing there because she cannot manage the bags. She has carried them from the market and, upon reaching the entrance, she is out of breath. She leans against the wall with her right hand. She breathes slowly. She waits.

—Frau Wagner!

The girl runs over. The wicker basket swings from her arm.

—Little one, little one... —the woman says, smiling tiredly—. Again today...

—Shall I carry the bags upstairs for you?

—Only if your mother has not told you to come straight back...

—My mother knows.

It is true. Her mother knows. She has already had this same conversation with Frau Wagner herself three times over the past few months. She told her: *“Frau Wagner, if the girl helps you carry the bags upstairs, do not give her so much as a Pfennig. It is her Christian duty, not a job. Do not get her used to being paid.”*

Frau Wagner accepted this. But she herself is an old woman, a devout widow, a German of the previous generation, and it seems impossible to her that someone should carry two bags up two flights of stairs without receiving anything in return. So each time she negotiates with herself a compensation that is not money.

Today, the compensation is a gingerbread cookie. Frau Wagner bakes them on Wednesdays. Today is Thursday. In the kitchen, on a tray covered with a cloth, there are still a dozen left. A cookie—Frau Wagner thinks as the girl picks up the first bag—is not money. A cookie is affection. And the mother has said nothing about that.

They climb the stairs slowly.

The girl goes ahead with the heavier bag, the one containing the vegetables. The woman follows behind with the other, gripping the handrail every four steps.

—Be careful, little one.

—Don't worry.

At the first landing, the girl waits for the old woman. The old woman is breathing heavily. She smiles.

—You have extraordinary strength for such little bones.

—I help Mother with the washing on Sundays.

—Ah, Sundays. When I was a girl, Sundays...

And she begins, for the tenth time, to tell a story from Frau Wagner's childhood in a village near Görlitz, a story the girl has already heard nine times and now listens to for the tenth with the same expression of focused interest, eyes wide open, nodding solemnly as though it were the first time. The woman tells her about the River Neisse, the geese, the miller father, the mother who sang in the kitchen. The girl nods. The girl smiles at the right moments. On the second landing, she says the exact words the woman is waiting to hear:

—What a beautiful story, Frau Wagner.

Frau Wagner, who has a story her husband had eventually stopped wanting to hear, who has a story no one in the world asks her for anymore, sighs with pleasure.

She rests her free hand on the girl's straw hat. With her fingers, she tucks a blonde strand behind her ear. She murmurs:

—You are an angel, little one. An angel of the Lord.

For an instant, the girl lifts her face and looks her in the eyes. It is a strange look. A very adult look. Not the look of an angel of the Lord, but of someone calculating something. Yet the moment passes so quickly that Frau Wagner does not notice it. Frau Wagner is almost seventy and her eyes are tired. She sees only what she wants to see.

The girl smiles again. She keeps climbing.

Frau Wagner's apartment is small. An entrance hall with a dark oak coat rack. A sitting room with a round table covered by a crocheted cloth, two upholstered armchairs, an oil portrait of Herr Wagner in his postal uniform. A kitchen at the back. A bedroom the girl has never seen.

And, in the sitting room, on a low table beside the window, a cage.

A cage of golden wire, with thin vertical bars, a small side door, and a tiny swing hanging from the ceiling. Inside, a yellow canary. The canary is called Hansi. He

sings to Frau Wagner every morning. Since her husband's death, he has been her only companion in that house.

Frau Wagner leaves her bag on the kitchen floor. Before going to the cupboard, she approaches the cage for a moment and looks at the bird with a small concern, almost childlike herself.

—Poor Hansi. He's been strange today, you know, little one? He hasn't sung all morning. And look, look at him there in the corner, not moving... I wonder whether he might be catching a chill. The mornings are still cool.

She gives the cage a very gentle tap with the nail of her little finger. The canary hops onto the swing, goes "pip," then hops again. Frau Wagner smiles in relief.

—Well. Something is moving. Wait here a moment, little one. I'll get your cookie.

—Yes, Frau Wagner.

The old woman disappears into the kitchen. The girl hears her open a cupboard. She hears her lift the cloth from the tray. She hears her wrap something in a small piece of waxed paper.

The girl remains still in front of the cage.

The canary hops from the swing to the feeder.

He tilts his head slightly towards her.

She looks at the little bird.

The little bird is in the cage. That is all we can say with certainty. Whether he was ill, whether he was strange, whether he had not sung that morning because his little heart was about to fail at any moment or simply because he had woken in a bad mood—canaries have sad mornings too—we shall never know. What we see now, at this very moment, is a canary hopping from the perch to the swing, moving towards the feeder, pecking at a couple of seeds, then hopping back onto the swing.

It is a little bird that usually sings, eats, and sleeps.

How much longer he had to live before that Thursday, only God knew.

The girl has both arms hanging by her sides. She has already set the wicker basket down on the floor beside the door. In her right hand, her fingers are slightly closed around something small. If Frau Wagner were to return from the kitchen at that instant, the only thing she would see—but she will not, because she is still busy with the waxed paper in the kitchen—the only thing she would see is an eight-year-old girl beside the cage, looking at the little bird with her head slightly tilted. A girl perhaps

worried by what the old woman herself has just told her: that Hansi had seemed strange that day.

It looked like a spring postcard. A pious little girl worrying about a sick canary.

Slowly, the girl takes one step closer to the cage. She places both hands behind her back, one against the other, as though she were about to begin reciting a poem at school. Except that her right hand, now behind her back, remains closed around a small object.

She looks at the little bird. The little bird hops back onto the swing. He looks at her—canaries look, though not in the way humans do. He goes “pip.” He hops again.

And then something happens.

Something small.

Something that, seen from the outside, would barely have seemed like a movement.

What happens between the girl and the little bird during the next minute takes place without any witness seeing it. It happens with the thin vertical bars between them. It happens with two small hands that hardly move.

It happens with a thin, long object slipping through the golden wire. It happens with a little bird moving

towards that hand, as he has approached Frau Wagner's hand a hundred times before, unable to understand that this time the hand is not bringing seed.

At some point, a small sound is heard. A faint sound. Not a song. A sound like an ungreased hinge.

So brief that, in the kitchen, Frau Wagner—who is finishing the bow on the little packet of waxed paper—vaguely lifts her head, thinks, *poor Hansi, he really was strange today*, and returns to her bow.

And then, silence.

Absolute silence in the sitting room.

* * *

Frau Wagner enters the sitting room with the little waxed-paper parcel in her hand.

The girl is standing by the window, looking down at the street. Both hands at her sides. Her face completely serene.

—Here you are, my dear.

The girl turns around. She smiles. She takes the little parcel. But she does not open it. She looks at it in her hand as though it were an enormous gift. Then she raises her eyes to Frau Wagner.

—Frau Wagner...

—Yes, little one.

—Frau Wagner, something is wrong with the little bird —she says in a worried voice. It is exactly the voice an eight-year-old girl should have after seeing something bad and not knowing what to do. There is a tremor in her lower lip. Moisture gathers in the corners of her eyes.

The performance is perfect.

—What are you saying, my dear?

—The little bird... isn't moving.

Frau Wagner sets the kitchen cloth she is carrying in her other hand down on the table. She hurries towards the cage. She bends down. She looks.

Hansi is lying on the floor of the cage. On the sand. On his side. Both little legs folded. His beak slightly open. His eyes—the one visible from Frau Wagner's angle—closed.

—Oh, my God.

—Is he...?

—Hansi. Little Hansi...

Frau Wagner opens the small side door of the cage. She reaches in—her wrinkled hand, marked by age, with Herr Wagner's gold wedding ring still on her ring finger—and lifts the bird out. The little body is still warm. Lukewarm. But he is not breathing. There is no heartbeat. His head hangs limply over her palm.

—Poor thing. Poor Hansi.

The old woman sits down in one of the upholstered armchairs. The dead bird rests in her palm. She begins to cry. She does so silently, without theatrics, the way old people cry. Tears run down the wrinkles to her chin and, from her chin, fall onto her black apron.

The girl watches her.

She stands two metres from the armchair, still holding the little cookie parcel in her hand. She looks at the woman. She looks at the bird. She looks at the woman again.

The girl wears exactly the expression an eight-year-old girl should wear when she sees an old woman crying. Eyes wide open. Eyebrows slightly drawn together. Lips

parted. The helpless tenderness of someone who would like to offer comfort and does not know how.

Yet if there had been a third witness in that sitting room—someone with the patient gaze of a person who had seen enough of the world, someone who knew that children's faces sometimes say one thing while their eyes say another—that third witness would have noticed something. Something almost invisible. Something lasting barely a fraction of a second.

They would have noticed that, while the old woman cried, the girl's eyes did not seek the old woman's face. They did not look for comfort. They did not offer it. They were elsewhere. Fixed—fixed in a way almost never seen in a child—on the little yellow body collapsed across the wrinkled palm.

And during that same second, they would have noticed a pupil barely dilated. A breath slightly deeper than normal. A lip parting one millimetre more, not from helpless tenderness, but from something else that cannot be named.

Then the second passes, and the expression of helpless tenderness returns to its place.

Frau Wagner has seen nothing.

Frau Wagner is crying.

But something inside the small body standing two metres from the armchair has taken note of that second. It has stored it somewhere things are not forgotten. And that fraction of a second will never be forgotten.

—Frau Wagner... would you like me to call someone?

The old woman looks up. She shakes her head. She wipes her eyes with the back of her hand.

—No, my dear. No, no... what can you do? The poor thing was old already. He was old.

—But...

—Go, little one. Go home, your mother is waiting for you. Take your cookie. Thank you for the bags, my angel. Go on, go.

The girl nods. She steps closer and kisses the old woman's damp cheek—a small, light kiss, exactly the kiss one is supposed to give—then picks up the wicker basket from the floor of the entrance hall and leaves. She closes the door carefully, slowly, so as not to make any noise. Her black buckle shoes go skipping down the stairs again. Three steps, a little hop. Three steps, a little hop.

Out in the street, already in the full light of midday, she opens the little parcel of waxed paper. She takes out the gingerbread cookie. She looks at it for a moment against the light—golden, smelling of cloves and cinnamon and something deeper, that dark molasses note only old German widows who have spent decades baking in the same kitchen from the same recipe know how to bring out—takes a small bite from one corner, and keeps skipping towards the entrance of number twenty-two, where her mother is waiting for her.

She is happy.

Her happiness is not pretended. Her happiness is entirely sincere. The girl walks down the street in the exact psychological state of a child who has performed a good Christian deed—helping an old woman—and has been rewarded with a cookie.

Of the other thing—of that minute in the sitting room beside the cage—she thinks nothing. Neither that it was wrong nor that it was right. She does not consider hiding it or confessing it. She simply does not think about it.

It is as though it had never happened.

And here is the exact point at which this novel begins to have something to say to you.

Because most children, by the age of eight, already know that hurting someone is wrong. Most of them feel, after causing harm, some form of unease. A weight. A knot. A need to confess or, at the very least, to conceal it consciously.

This girl does not.

This girl eats the cookie with genuine happiness.

And in her little blonde head, at that moment, there is no dead bird. Not because she has forgotten it. But because, for her, the bird never entered the category of things that matter.

During that minute in the sitting room, the bird ceased to be a living creature. It was merely something small and fragile in her hands. Like the wicker basket. Like the cookie. Like the onions inside the basket. And as she watched the motionless little body, the girl felt something brief, almost imperceptible. Something she did not know how to name then, and would take many years to experience again with the same intensity.

A vibration. A little warmth. A pleasure.

She kept it to herself without naming it. She kept it beneath the smile with which she walked through the door of her home ten minutes later.

Her mother, in the kitchen, looked up from the stove.

—Did you help Frau Wagner?

—Yes, Mother.

—Good girl.

The girl set the basket on the table. She sat down. She began to eat the cookie slowly, both feet dangling from the chair, swinging them slightly.

She said nothing about Hansi.

Not because she kept it secret. To keep something secret, one must first remember it. To remember it, one must first have given the memory a place in one's mind. And that, in her mind, had no place.

Hansi, quite simply, did not exist.

Her mother, with her back to her, stirred the onions in the frying pan and hummed a church song.

* * *

Meanwhile, Frau Wagner, on the second floor of number seventeen, finished crying.

She rose from the armchair. She carried the little yellow body into the kitchen. She laid it on a small white cloth.

She heated water for tea and sat at the round table. As she drank in small sips, her tired eyes settled, unwillingly, on the little yellow body resting on the cloth.

And she saw something.

She saw that Hansi had, along his left side, where the yellow feathers had separated slightly under the weight of the body lying on its side, several dark spots.

She moved closer. She picked up the bird again. She turned him gently over in her palm. And with her other hand, she parted the feathers with the nail of her little finger.

Beneath the feathers, she saw not one large wound, but twelve or thirteen tiny punctures. Spread across the

entire left side of the little bird and rising towards the neck. As though they had been made with a thin, long, pointed object.

And she saw something else. Something that took her breath away.

She saw that the bird's eye—the right eye—was not closed by death.

It was sunken. Ruptured. Empty.

As though a fine point had entered there and twisted inside until it destroyed it.

Frau Wagner remained very still. She searched for explanations. An insect. A mouse. Something. But insects do not sting twelve times, and mice do not go for the eye, and nothing in that small, clean sitting room suggested the presence of any creature at all.

Then, as she bent down to pick up a handkerchief that had fallen beside the small side table against the wall—exactly beside where the cage had been—she saw something on the floor.

Behind the little table. Barely visible.

A round-headed pin.

She picked it up between two fingers.

A pin of the sort used to secure straw hats. Like the one the girl had worn that morning in the ribbon of her hat.

The point of the pin was stained a dark red, almost brown now, almost dry.

Frau Wagner remained on her knees for a long time, the pin between her fingers.

She did not need to think for very long. Old women know things. They know, for example, that evil can wear the face of an angel. They know because, over the course of a long life, they have seen it at least once.

Frau Wagner rose from the floor. She wrapped the bloodstained pin in the same piece of waxed paper in which she had meant to wrap the rest of the cookies. She placed it in the top drawer of the side table. She closed the drawer.

She never told anyone what she had found.

It was only a little bird. And the girl was the angel of the neighbourhood. And she was a lonely old widow whom no one would believe.

After that Thursday, Frau Wagner continued to let the girl carry her bags upstairs. She continued giving her

cookies. She continued smiling at her on the stairs. She continued calling her pretty child and telling her, *you are an angel of the Lord*.

She did it because she could not afford to have seen what she had seen. The truth was too costly. And the girl, after all, never did anything else to her.

And Frau Wagner, for the six years she had left to live, pretended to herself that that Thursday in the spring of nineteen fifteen had never happened.

She pretended so thoroughly that, in the end, she came to believe it.

* * *

Evil does not arrive all at once. Sometimes it begins with something so small that no one dares to name it. With a pin in a cage. With a girl who does not flinch. With an old woman who would rather not have seen.

Some are born with the capacity. Others learn it. Most remain on the threshold all their lives and never cross it.

But some do cross.

Some, at some point, find the circumstances they were missing. The wrong century. The wrong husband. A uniform. A place where no one asks questions. And then little birds stop being little birds.

What you are about to read is based on real events. The names, the dates, the places—all of that will come later.

For now, there is only a girl skipping down a staircase, a gingerbread cookie in her hand, while two floors above her, an old woman discovers, without daring to say it aloud, that evil does not always arrive with the face of a monster.

Sometimes it arrives with a blue satin bow at the waist.

On Evil

When does evil begin? Are we born with it, and is it simply the environment that awakens it? Or does evil always, sooner or later, find a crack through which to emerge?

Perhaps it is not only the environment that determines its appearance, but also the moral boundary each society establishes to distinguish what is acceptable from what is intolerable. When that boundary shifts, what once seemed monstrous may come to be seen as normal.

There is a phrase attributed to Nietzsche that captures this brutally: if we crush a cockroach, we may seem like heroes; if we crush a butterfly, like villains. The act is the same—taking a life—yet it does not provoke the same reaction. The difference lies not in what we do, but in the story we tell ourselves to justify it.

Perhaps evil does not begin when someone crosses an obvious boundary, but much earlier: when they learn to call necessary, normal, or even right what they would once have been incapable of doing.

Milton Chanes

In memory of the anonymous victims of Buchenwald,
most of whose names will never be known.

Dedicated to my wife, Andrea,
my son, Sebastián,
and my daughters, Audrey, Drew, and Olivia.

To my parents, Isabel and Alberto.

Contents

The gingerbread cookie	9
On Evil.....	33