

The Grey Folk

‘There, Joey! Can you see ‘em?’ Grandad’s fingerbones dug into my shoulder. With the other hand he pointed towards the stones, his eyes fixed, alert.

It was a September evening, I remember. The sun had been warm all day, drying up last night’s rain, but now an early mist was rising. I couldn’t see anything except the dark stones in the fog; but Grandad stared and stared.

I’d never seen him behave like this before. It spooked me. ‘Grandad,’ I stammered, ‘shouldn’t we be getting back?’

He blinked a couple of times. ‘Eh?’ he said. Then he turned and nodded, almost to himself. ‘Aye, lad. Tea.’

To my relief, he started off down the hill at once. ‘Come on, lad,’ he cried, like he was back to himself again. At the gate we passed the National Trust sign. *Hallrigg Stones*, it said. *Please keep dogs on a lead*. Mam had told me there used to be twenty of the stones, brought from miles away thousands of years ago. Nowadays there’s only three left standing. A couple more are lying flat. Nobody bothers with them, only walkers passing on the bridleway.

As we scrambled onto the path I said, ‘What were you looking for, Grandad?’

‘Looking for?’ he said. ‘Who says I was looking for anything?’

‘You were, Grandad. Couldn’t take your eyes off them stones.’

He shrugged and grinned. ‘Maybe I was looking for the Grey Folk.’

‘Who?’

‘The Grey Folk. Them that live there, among the stones. Didn’t your mother ever tell yer?’

‘What, like them travellers, that was camping in the lay-by?’

‘No, lad, no. The Grey Folk – well, y’see, they’re not like you and me.’ He lowered his voice. ‘They’re more like – well, they’re like the mist on the hill, in among the wisps, and the barrows, and the beech trees.’

I looked at his face, to see if he was serious.

‘Oh, you’ll not see them under the noonday sun,’ he went on. ‘But in the evenings, as the dew falls, *then* you might.’

Drips fell from the hawthorns onto the brown leaves scattered on the track. Our footfalls were dead and silent. ‘What do they do, the Grey Folk?’ I said, shivering.

‘Oh, they don’t have much truck with real people, lad. Mostly they take no notice. But it’s said, if you ask ‘em right, they’ll grant you your last wish.’

‘Your *last* wish?’

‘Aye.’

I thought for a minute. ‘But what about the other wishes? I mean, is it like the genie? Do you have to make three wishes, or something, and they only grant your last one?’

But then I realised what he meant – he meant your last wish *ever*. Like, before you die. I grabbed his arm. ‘Grandad,’ I said, ‘this is just a fairy story, right?’

He laughed and patted my head. ‘Aye, lad,’ he said. ‘I suppose it is. Just a fairy story . . .’

In those days, Grandad would go walking whenever he could. Sometimes he'd go as far as Keswick, and get the bus back; sometimes he'd go down to the river and watch the waterfall, feeling the spray on his face. Other days, he'd make the short climb to Hall Rigg. Mam said he was doing very well, keeping up his spirits after Grandma died. That's when he'd come to live with us: 'Nothing for me here now,' he'd said, as he left their old bungalow.

But as the Autumn came on proper, and the rain kept him indoors, he started looking back through his old photo albums. Mam said it wasn't good for him.

'Don't you think that's enough for now?' she said, one day when he'd sat with them all afternoon while the rain spat down from a granite sky.

He shrugged, and gestured to me. 'Here lad,' he said, pointing to a picture, 'who d'you think that is?'

It was a tiny snapshot, a few inches square, its reds faded to pink and its greens and yellows merging to brown. But for all that it was clear: a young, slim-waisted woman with curly golden hair and wide eyes who smiled broadly at the photographer.

'Pretty, isn't she?' said Grandad.

I wasn't old enough to think of girls in quite that way, but I had to admit she looked all right.

'That's your grandma, that is,' he said.

I stared. The Grandma I'd known was old, and grey and bent.

'Wasn't she beautiful?' he went on. 'Look at them curls. Lovely and soft, they were. I used' – he swallowed – 'I used to run my fingers through them, and she'd smile . . .'

I thought for a minute he was going to cry, but he forced a grin and said, digging in his pocket, 'She gave me one, you know.'

Mam came in with the dinner plates. 'Gave you one what? What are you on about now?'

Grandad glared at her. 'One of her curls,' he said. 'Night we was married.' He held out a silver locket. I opened it, and inside was a tight yellow curl. I touched it, and it was soft and silky, like he said. It was strange, touching this piece of someone from long ago.

Grandad sighed. 'I never wore this. Just kept it safe in a drawer. But now, I reckon . . .'

He hung it round his neck and tucked it into his shirt.

'Dinner's ready,' said Mam.

November brought starry, frosty nights and bright, cold days. Grandad got to walking out again, muffled up in his parka, scarf and woolly hat. But he was quieter like, and when he came home he'd flick feverishly through the albums, clutching his locket. Mam looked at him and shook her head.

Everything was all right till one afternoon when he slipped out and stayed out. By the time the early dusk came on, he still wasn't back. 'I hope nothing's happened

to him,' said Mam, chewing her lip. She threw on her coat and grabbed the torch. 'We'll have to go and find him. I wonder which way he went?'

And I knew, without having to think. 'I bet he's up at Hall Rigg,' I said. Mam swore.

We struggled up the bridleway, slipping on the wet leaves that lay thick in the ruts. Around us the mist was rising, and the torch's beam did nothing but light up the fog; but the stooping outlines of the hedgerows showed us the way. By the time we'd pushed open the gate and scrambled over the tussocky grasses up to the stones, Mam was gasping. I blinked into the mist: it seemed that the shadowy stones were leaning inwards, to see what was going on. I thought there were more than usual, almost as if they'd all been stood up again; but then the fog was thick, and I could hardly tell where stone ended and mist began. Above the shroud, the full moon loomed blurred and hazy. The stars had been stolen away. It was cold, and I felt myself trembling.

And then I saw, by the pale light in the centre of the circle, Grandad, dancing. Dancing alone. No, not alone: it was the moonlight that thickened the mist like curds in the milk, made the clumps hang together and gave them shapes. It seemed that they were all dancing, whirling to an unheard music, a sighing on the air. And grinning amongst them danced Grandad, enveloped and embraced and caressed by the grey mist. Smiling, twirling, springing.

Mam held me back. 'Oh, Dad,' she whispered.

Then slower and slower went the dance, and gradually the other dancers melted away, and Grandad stepped slow, swaying as if he held someone to him; till in the end he stared down at his hands while the mist melted into the shadows.

We helped him home, heavier by the step and wheezing hard. Struggling into the sitting-room we laid him on the couch, with blankets and a hot water bottle. His fist was clenched tight, his eyes closed. His breathing shallowed.

'I'll call the doctor,' said Mam, pale. 'Keep an eye on him.' Then I heard her talking from the hallway. 'Worried about my dad – get someone to come out . . .'

I peered at Grandad, wondering what had possessed him to stay up there in the cold. Then into my head came the thought of a smiling face, and a halo of curls.

Suddenly, his eyes flicked open. 'Joey,' he said, and tried to smile. His breathing was laboured, his hand cold.

I don't know why, but I said: 'Was them the Grey Folk, Grandad? Were you dancing with the Grey Folk?'

He closed his eyes, and I thought he was gone. But he opened them again and brought his tight fist to his lips, kissing it. 'My last wish, Joey,' he whispered. 'I got my last wish.'

The doctor had hardly arrived before it was all over; she shook her head and Mam cried. Then gently we prised open Grandad's fist and found the curl of Grandma's hair.

‘Best put it back in his locket,’ sniffed Mam. ‘Keep it safe for him.’ But when we opened the locket, there was one already in there. ‘I suppose he must have had another one all the time,’ she said.

I wasn’t so sure. I wondered if it was Grandad’s last wish, granted by the Grey Folk.