

GRANDMA'S GLASSES

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By

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May 1997

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Henry returned from his tenth birthday treat tired and happy. He and his friends had been for a long walk through Sherwood Forest to explore all the places of Robin Hood's famous adventures. They had played on the bridge where Little John had met and fought Robin Hood. They had visited the places along the paths in the forest where the sheriff's men had been ambushed and, after playing at ambushing each other, had ended their games with a picnic under the great oak tree where Robin Hood and Maid Marion and all his men used to feast. Henry's mother had

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cooked venison for their picnic and carved it with a large sharp knife with an antler handle, and had baked old-fashioned shaped loafs. They drank apple juice out of battered old pewter mugs. Henry fancied himself as Little John and pretended they were sharing their picnic with Robin Hood and his men.

Henry was an only child who lived with his mother and father and grandmother in an old fashioned house with lots of bedrooms and an attic. Henry loved his grandmother and often spent time with her listening to her stories of life in England when she was a schoolgirl. That night before going to bed, he went to tell her all about the outing to Sherwood Forest with his friends. She was always interested in what he had been doing and when he told her about his adventures with his friends, she had searched on her tabletop for one of her many pairs of glasses. They were all shapes and sizes, some with large round lenses, which made her look very wise and others with dark lenses, the kind gangsters had, which she wore in the bright sunlight. She found one with small silver square frames and after she had put them on she began telling him about Robin Hood and Maid Marion, as if she had known them personally. What excited Henry most of all was his grandmother's vivid descriptions of the dark wet dungeons

of Nottingham Castle, just as they had been at the time of Robin Hood. She shuddered at some of the things she saw and closed her eyes tightly together, as if to stop herself looking and he suspected she wasn't telling him all she knew. At last realising how late it was she removed her glasses and Henry pecked her on the cheek for a good night kiss.

As he lay in bed, he wondered how his grandmother was always able to tell him such wonderful stories and why it was for each story she used to wear a different pair of glasses. One of the earliest stories of hers he remembered had been about a hobgoblin who had been caught by a beautiful princess with a magic golden chain.

Shortly after his birthday, his grandmother became ill and died. Henry was very upset and missed her very much. When he came back from school, he often went to her room where she had listened to him and she had told him so many stories. All his grandmother's things had been tidied away, as if she had never existed and he felt very sad. He used to stare out of the window that overlooked their garden and hoped that something would happen - anything. He looked for her glasses, which had always lain in such disorder on her table and discovered them packed untidily into a drawer with her pencils, pens and hundreds of post

cards sent by family and friends when they were on holiday. He smiled when he saw one that he had sent her from a holiday in Wales when it had rained all the time.

He disentangled the glasses and placed them in neat rows just like he had seen at the opticians. He found the small square framed ones which his grandmother had worn when she had last told him about Robin Hood and twenty three other pairs with their different shaped gold and silver frames. There was one with very thick lenses and heavy steel frames, which he didn't recall his grandmother wearing. The pair she usually wore during the day still had its right arm awkwardly stuck on by cellotape. He tried them on but everything became blurred and took them off and was about to return all the glasses to the drawer when, on a whim, he put on the square glasses. To his amazement, he saw unfolding before his eyes, the same scenes of Robin Hood in Sherwood Forest and Nottingham Castle that his grandmother had described. It was as if it was just happening. He looked down into the dungeons, but was so frightened by what he saw in the dark damp cells, he snatched the glasses off his face and stood shocked and disbelieving. He heard the front door open and swept all the glasses back into the drawer and went to his own room to do his homework, but all the time he saw the terrible scenes in

the dungeons of half naked and hungry men chained together and he was unable to do any work.

He had to wait several days before he was alone in the house and could revisit his grandmother's room. He went straight to the table and arranged the glasses neatly on the tabletop. He put on a pair with circular lenses and saw the Queen being crowned in Westminster Abbey. He wondered if he could look at the scenes in the life of other monarchs. He closed his eyes and thought very hard about William the Conqueror and, to his astonishment, when he opened his eyes, he saw William the Conqueror and hundreds of soldiers landing on a beach but there were no signs of a battle. He took the glasses off and made a note on a piece of paper that through the square framed glasses, he had seen Robin Hood and through the circular lenses in gold frame, he had seen Monarchs. He tried several other pairs. There was one that zoomed in on Egypt and he watched to see how the ancient Egyptians built the pyramids. He left to last a pair of fragile rimless glasses and, when he put them on, he was amazed by what he saw.

He had entered the world of the fairies. They really were just like people but very small with transparent wings. They looked so young, and though most of them were girls, he was glad to see some boys. He watched some fairies and

their families playing in a pool bathed in bright moonlight. Beside the pool, there were kingfishers perched on branches and herons standing by the water's edge. Green and yellow dragonflies with coloured wings were playing a game of hide and seek and blue and white-tipped winged butterflies greedily sucked nectar from water lilies. Wise looking and patient frogs surveyed the tranquil scene while fish of all kinds swam fearlessly near the heron. In the distance Henry saw a castle high up on a mountain pinnacle. Who lived there, he wondered? But before he could look any further, he heard his mother calling him.

During the following weeks, Henry often slipped into his grandma's room, and selecting one or other of the glasses, was carried away into another world and time. On several occasions he watched what was going on in fairyland. There was always so much happening and the scenes gave him a sense of peacefulness. The animals in fairyland had no sense of fear. The rabbits never ran away when the fairies approached them and the cats ignored the birds. Even the dandelion seeds had a life of their own, flying off together as if they were going on a day's outing.

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One day he was looking through the bronze framed glasses and recognised the local park with its grand house and the boathouse on the lake. It was a moonlit night and a man was rowing a boat out of the boathouse while another man sat in the stern holding a wooden box on his lap. Henry realised he was watching something that had taken place many years ago. The boathouse gleamed strangely as if it had been freshly painted. Lawns stretched down from the house to the water's edge and lighted candles were clearly visible in the rooms of the grand house. He watched as the boat moved quietly away from the boathouse to one of the islands in the middle of the lake where the rower moored it against the island bank. The man with the box got out and secured the boat to a nearby tree while the rower picked up a couple of spades from the bottom of the boat. They both scrambled under some bushes to a clearing and started to dig a hole between two large oaks. The soil was soft and it took them only ten minutes to dig a hole two foot deep. They lowered the box into the hole and were just filling it in when Henry heard a noise behind him. He had been so absorbed in watching the men, he hadn't heard the room door open.

"Henry, Henry. What are you doing wearing your grandmother's glasses. You're supposed to be doing your

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homework. Take them off at once," his father saying angrily.

Henry did as he was told and put the glasses back in the drawer, but said nothing about what he had seen. He wasn't going to tell anyone in the family about his grandmother's extraordinary glasses and they would only have laughed at him if he had told them about the men burying a box. He slipped out of the room and heard his father locking the door behind him.

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At the first opportunity Henry visited the local park, which had once been part of a large country estate, with cedars of Lebanon trees, Wellingtonians and Rhododendrons. The stately home had been turned into the town's museum, He went down to the lake and saw a very dilapidated boathouse, which still had traces of green paint. He looked across to the island where the men had buried the box. It was a thin strip of land, fifty yards long by fifteen wide, covered by a thick, impenetrable mass of bushes and trees.

Every night before going to bed, Henry tried the handle of his grandmother's door, but it remained locked.

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Nobody said anything to him about his wearing his grandmother's glasses, but he knew his family thought it was odd. He had no intention of telling them what he had been able to see through the glasses.

The door remained locked for several weeks until one day, Henry returned from school to find the room had been emptied of all his grandmother's things and decorators were stripping the wallpaper. He was devastated and, on asking what happened to his grandma's glasses, his mother told him that they had been sold to a dealer who had called last week at the door. He had given ten pounds for the lot, saying he would be able to extract the gold and silver from them. Henry went white. If only he had said something about the extraordinary glasses, but it was too late now. Henry went round the local second hand shops looking for them, asking at each if they had any old glasses for sale, but none had.

Gradually, Henry thought less and less about his grandmother's glasses. He was grateful that he had his most unusual experiences and often recalled the many things he had seen and learned looking through them. He was particularly puzzled about the fairies and decided that the herons would not have survived if they hadn't eaten the fish and the birds would have starved if they hadn't eaten the

butterflies and the cats would have died if they hadn't eaten the birds. Fairyland, he concluded, had to be make-believe.

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Several years later Henry got a summer holiday job in the local park helping to clear undergrowth on the lake islands. After clearing a couple of the islands, they started on the island where Henry had seen, through his grandma's glasses, the men burying the box. He worked with a will clearing the brambles and nettles and cutting down the saplings. Henry recognised the two large oaks and mentally made a note of where the box would have been buried. It took three days to clear the island and Henry couldn't wait to discover if, what he had seen through his grandmother's glasses, was real or a just dream. He had to find out. He got permission to camp on the island for a few days. He set up his tent near the two oaks, close to where he reckoned the men had dug the hole. After cooking his supper he waited until dark and with the light of his torch began digging where he thought the box was buried. He dug down until he struck something hard. He cleared the sand to reveal the box that he had seen the men carrying. He eased it free and took it to his tent. It was a heavy oak box, about eighteen inches

long, nine inches wide and ten deep, and it was locked. Henry prised it open. The box had a lead lining, and inside, there were several neatly wrapped packages stitched in sailcloth. He cut open the first and to his amazement unwrapped a pair of glasses exactly like those of his grandmother's. He carefully opened the other packages, revealing the square framed glasses and the heavy steal ones. They were the same identical twenty-four pairs of glasses with which he had once been so familiar. He found the fragile rimless glasses through which he had observed the fairies but, when he put them on, he only saw the blurred image of the inside of his tent with his sleeping bag. He tried the square framed lenses through which he had seen Robin Hood but there was nothing to be seen. He tried all the glasses in turn but they were all out of focus. At first, he was bitterly disappointed and then he started to laugh. Did his grandma really see what she said she saw through her glasses or was she pretending? Had he, too, then persuaded himself that he could see what she had seen? But then if it was make believe how had he been able to see the men burying the box and then for him to find his grandma's glasses? It was a mystery. He slowly filled in the hole to disguise all traces of where the box had been.

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The next morning he took the box home and hid it in the attic where it lay forgotten until many years later, his parents came to sell the family home. While clearing out the attic his father came across the box and opening it was surprised to see the old lady's glasses and when he told his wife about them, she recalled selling them for a tenner. We must tell Henry we've found them. He'll probably be quite pleased if we save them for him. Do you remember how distressed he was all those years ago when he found I sold them to a dealer?