

The Grey Lady



a short story for English reading

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Introduction

Are there any ghost stories in your hometown?

How did they start?

Are these stories based on true events?

The Grey Lady

I should have left Karl's house earlier.

Then I could have caught the last bus home.

But we got talking, listening to music, laughing about stupid things.

I pulled my jacket collar up against my neck as the cold air wrapped itself around me. And cursed at myself for the hundredth time for missing the bus.

Stupid, so stupid.

It had to be at least seven kilometres back to my house. The walk didn't bother me. It was The Hollow that unnerved me.

Everyone at school had stories to tell about it.

The Hollow. That's where she died.

The Grey Lady. You can see her there at night.

She's waiting for someone. Waiting for revenge.

And we all rolled our eyes and laughed at those that told the tales.

There's no such thing as ghosts, I heard myself say.

But now I was just two minutes away from The Hollow. And

things didn't look the same here when I was on the bus.

Things seemed too quiet. Too still.

On either side of me, trees whispered in the shifting breeze that slid between them. Their voices called out to me in hushed tones.

Not too late to go back, not too late to go back...

The road rose up ahead. I never noticed it on the bus. It always seemed flat.

But now, on foot, it was as if the road itself was trying to make me turn back.

After the crest in the road, just blackness.

No light, no sound. Nothing but all-encompassing dark.

I took a breath and increased the pace of my walking.

On the bus, The Hollow seemed less than a minute. But how could I be sure? I never timed it. I didn't pay much attention to what was outside.

Either staring in a daze at the road in front and the back of the driver's head. Or lost in a series of dumb messages from Karl and our friends.

I increased the speed of my walking as I got to the top of the small rise in the road. When I got to the top of it, I gazed down into The Hollow.

Nothing but total darkness.

I looked back over my shoulder and saw the dim cone of light that shed out from a street lamp way back in the distance. I turned to the front and squinted my eyes to try to make out the next street light.

Nothing. Only sheer blackness.

Another breath and I took the first step down into The Hollow.

The memory of another Grey Lady tale slithered into my mind.

The voice of the kid at school as he told the story.

My aunt said that she killed all her children.

She killed them all one by one, then took her own life.

People said she had lost her mind.

I saw the face of the boy who spoke these words. An unpopular student at my school who everyone laughed at behind his back.

He spent too much time by himself, and usually I never gave him a second thought.

So why were his words of The Grey Lady so prominent in my head right now?

I marched ahead into the darkness.

The outline of the trees disappeared from view on either side of me. Like they no longer existed. Like they were no longer part of

this world.

Once again, the breeze danced through the branches and their voices called to me.

You can't go back. You can't go back.

I shook my head, pulled the collar tighter around my neck and quickened the pace.

My breath came in sharp puffs now. I told myself because I was walking so fast, but that little gremlin of doubt whispered in my ear.

Because you're afraid.

My hands thrust so deep into the pockets of my jacket, they restricted my movements and made it difficult to walk.

I pulled my hands free and found that I could walk even faster. I broke into a half-trot. Stopped, walked again, and walked faster and faster still.

That boy's voice in my head again.

She cut their throats.

His face clear in my mind.

Then cut them into little pieces and buried them in the trees in The Hollow.

People didn't find their bodies for years.

They put The Grey Lady in a mental institute.

She screamed every night until she died.

I swirled around. The street light I saw before was now completely invisible. I was surrounded by the gripping darkness. Enveloped in its arms.

Panic took hold of my breathing. I swallowed and forced a lungful of air inside my chest. I turned on each foot. My eyes darted into the eternal blackness all around me and for a second, I could not remember which direction I was going.

I leaned down and saw the white lines of the road and raced along them. They could lead me out of The Hollow and into safety.

The wind hissed through the trees as I ran ahead. It was racing with me, keeping me company, or mocking me. I could not tell.

As I ran down deeper into The Hollow, my head filled with tales of The Grey Lady. Stories and fables that I paid no attention to before now all surging back into my memory. My mind showed the speaker of each story as the words unfolded in my ears.

She stays in The Hollow, waiting.

Waiting for someone.

Waiting for revenge.

I tumbled forward, but more voices filled my ears. Stories of The Grey Lady.

She was driven insane by a curse.

She was the daughter of a rich landowner, and a local witch put a curse on her.

She loved her children. Even though she took their lives.

My feet stumbled ahead and my hands clawed at the cold air in front of me. Then I found myself going uphill again.

I had done it!

I had got to the bottom of The Hollow. Now I was on my way out again.

I let out a laugh of victory. My lungs burned as I took deep breaths and lurched ahead into the dark.

Then the sheer relief of a silvery-white light ahead. The next street light!

Thank god.

I slowed and gave myself permission to walk. My heart pounded in my chest and my breathing slowed.

The light grew brighter and I could make out the trees on either side of the road again.

How stupid of me, I said out loud. I'll laugh about this tomorrow

with Karl.

The light ahead grew brighter and brighter. I could make out the trees more clearly.

I bowed my head and laughed to myself again. I turned behind and looked into the blackness of The Hollow.

How small it looked now. Before it seemed like a huge chasm. Something inescapable.

I faced the front and peered into the light.

Then my breath stopped.

A figure.

All grey.

Surrounded by light.

Reading Comprehension Questions

Why is the narrator walking home?

Why did he miss the bus?

How far is it to his home?

What is the thing that worries the narrator on the walk home?

What is The Hollow? And why is the narrator unnerved by it?

What is the story of the Grey Lady?

Does the narrator believe these stories usually? How about now he is walking home in the dark?

What does the narrator think of the stories of The Grey Lady?

Try to describe where he is. Use your imagination to talk about his surroundings.

When he says the trees whisper to him, what does he mean?

What is the difference in his perception of the hollow in walking in the dark and being on the bus?

How does the narrator feel as he approaches The Hollow on foot?

What does the narrator notice about his surroundings as he walks into The Hollow?

What does he notice about the road?

The trees?

As he looks down into The Hollow, what can he see?

Where are the street lights?

Who tells the stories of the Grey Lady in his school?

Why did the memory of the unpopular student's stories about The Grey Lady become so clear in the narrator's mind?

Describe the trees as the narrator walks further into The Hollow.

What does he see?

What does he hear?

What horrific or gruesome stories did the narrator hear at school about The Grey Lady?

How did the Grey Lady murder her children?

Where did the Grey Lady spend the rest of her life?

Describe the narrator's feelings when he starts to walk uphill again.

Then how does he feel when he sees the next street light?

How does he feel when he looks back into the hollow?

What does he see at the end of the story?

Essential Vocabulary

collar	wrapped	cursed
the hundredth time	didn't bother me	unnerved
revenge	rolled our eyes	tales
ghosts	whispered	shifting
breeze	slid	hushed
tones	rose	crest
blackness	all-encompassing	increased
pace	timed it	daze
series	dumb	rise
gazed	darkness	shoulder
dim	cone	shed out
street lamp	distance	squinted
slithered	lost her mind	unpopular
prominent	outline	breeze
puffs	gremlin of doubt	thrust
restricted	half-trot	mental institute
swirled	enveloped	panic
lungful	darted	eternal
hissed	mocking	fables
surging	unfolded	tumbled
insane	curse	landowner

witch	stumbled	clawed
victory	lurched	sheer relief
silvery-white	permission	pounded
bowed	chasm	inescapable

Exercise

Write down all the words and phrases in your vocabulary notebook. Look in your dictionary and find the meaning of each word. Write the definition next to each word.

Then make up your own sentences using each word or phrase.

For example:

Collar — *a band of material around the neck of a shirt, dress, coat, or jacket.*

Wrapped — *covered or enclosed (someone or something) in paper or soft material.*

Then write a sentence of your own that uses the new word or phrase correctly.

The wind was blowing, so I pulled up the collar of my jacket.

I wrapped my arms around my friend and said hello.

Do this with all the vocabulary and, over time, this will help improve all your English skills — reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Discussion Questions

What do you think of this story?

If you were the narrator in the story, would you walk home alone?

How important is the setting of The Hollow to the story?

What effect does this have on the reader?

Does the narrator believe in ghosts at the beginning of the story?

How does his belief change through the story?

Why does this happen, do you think?

Why do the stories from the unpopular kid become so important to the narrator in the story?

What kind of person is the unpopular kid?

Why does he have so many stories about The Grey Lady?

Find parts of the story — sentences, phrases or words — that create a feeling of isolation in the story.

Why do these words, sentences or phrases have this effect?

Why is the story of The Grey Lady so significant?

How have the stories of her evolved over time?

What do you think the narrator saw at the end of the story?

If you saw this, what would you do?

What is an urban legend?

Why are these stories so popular today?

Is the story of The Grey Lady an urban legend?

Do you believe in ghosts? Why/why not?

Do you know of any ghost stories in your neighbourhood? How did this story start?

Are there any areas of your hometown that are scary at night?

Why? Describe these areas to the class.

What is it about the dark that makes people imagine things?

Do some cultures believe in ghosts more than other cultures?

Why/why not?

Why did people believe in ghosts in the past?

Do you know anyone who has said they have seen a ghost?

What do you think about this?

Do you think it is good for us to tell ghost stories to each other?

Why/why not?

Can ghosts harm us?

Is there a scientific explanation for ghosts?

How has social media influenced the telling of modern-day ghost stories?

Are modern-day ghost stories more or less believable than old ghost stories?

Why/why not?

Why do we like to hear ghost stories?

Why are people so interested in these kinds of stories?

Writing

This is a creative writing exercise.

You are going to write a ghost story. The title of the story is

The Grey Lady

Take a look at the things that some of the students in the story said about The Grey Lady. Now try to write your own story about her life and what happened to her.

Think about these questions when writing your story.

Who was The Grey Lady?

What was her real name and where was she from?

What kind of family did she have?

Did she have children? What happened to them?

Did some terrible event happen that changed her life? What was it?

Or did she live a long and happy life?

Was she a bad person? Or maybe she was good?

Remember — *this is your story. You can say whatever you want in your story.*

Take some time to write your story.

When you have finished, you can read it out loud in front of

your class.

Or give it to your teacher for review.

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