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THE GREY MAN

Lindsay Hause

Autumn was the ideal time for hitchhiking in the Upper Midwest. Even in a cloudless sky, the sun's heat did not press into your back like it did in the middle of July, nor was there the humidity that clings to every part of you, making even breathing difficult. In the fall there was a crisp wind to cool your head and invigorate your step, but not so cold as the icy winter winds that chill one's marrow to slush. Cori knew these things about the north. She understood the earth on an elemental level. She knew that a fine October day in this bipolar place could swiftly turn into the glacial: a blizzard threatening to blind the world in whiteness. But her bones did not sense that today. So she walked the edge of the roadway, faded boots thumping on the asphalt, occasionally crunching a crisp leaf, thumb up with just that slight curve in it. A signal to the busy commuters.

It was unlikely any would be stopping to scoop her up along their way. Such few people did these days, even for someone seeming outwardly beautiful. So she continued on, arm outstretched lazily and occasionally on the off chance, with the resignation that she would be walking all the way. Hunger began clawing at her belly, a sudden insistence that was a sharp pain in the hollow of her body. Cori tried her best to ignore it and quickened her steps. The autumn breeze sent welcome goose bumps rising on her neck, dark tendrils of hair whipping about. Leaves skittered ahead of her down the shoulder of the road, making a dry chitter. She could not recall what had drawn her so far from her place by the river last night, her memory such a muddled mess these days, but it was past due time to return, before hunger consumed and crippled her.

As she made her way back, boots pounding out the pavement, she found her steps faltering as her eyes grazed a hawthorn tree standing tall off the roadway. Not native here, of course, but people bring things where they will. The leaves were turning their fiery orange-red, and the thorned limbs were laden with crimson berries. The hawthorn in its lovely autumn cloak of color made Cori recall a distant place she'd once belonged, where those she knew rendezvoused at such trees, sacred as they were. It

was forbidden for anyone to cut them down, lest they invoke the wrath of a powerful being. One such being went by the name of Oberon, but none she knew in her wanderings had heard a whisper of his whereabouts in quite some time. Idly, she wondered now where he was, for certainly he still was. But the emptiness of her belly was growing to ravenous proportions, so she took one last lingering look at the enchanting *Sgitheach*, chickadees alighting on its limbs to taste its berries, and then hurried on toward the river and the feasts it would hopefully offer.

As expected, she made it the six miles to the bridge downtown with no assistance beyond her own two feet. It could not be helped, no one trusted anyone these days. Everyone was suspicious. Everyone was suspect. Weren't they always, though? Perhaps it is not that people are any more suspicious than they ever were, but that people aren't so naïve as they used to be. Less likely to believe a fairy tale notion, or to trust a stranger by the roadway or the riverside. But who can say what goes on in the mind of man? Cori shrugged the idle thoughts away as she settled her pack onto the concrete ground.

Sifting through her things, her searching hands clutched her pack of smokes, but had no luck in finding a lighter. Cori sighed, rocking on her heels, staring up at the concrete archway beneath the bridge. Pretending for a moment it was the archway to some other place and time. Nowhere great, it did not have to be, just elsewhere. But the shrill honking of a perturbed commuter and the constant thrum of traffic dispelled any illusion gathering at the edges of her mind. There was a deep, rough "ahem" from the shadows beneath the bridge. A grey man emerged into the light, rubbing his scruffy chin. Cori thought, *he's all grey, grey hair, grey skin, grey coat, grey fingernails, grey on grey on grey. She'd lose sight of him if he stood before a storm cloud. Camouflage like that is a handy thing, one could disappear in this slate-grey city.*

"You homeless, girl?" he said through a gravel filled throat.

"Being between homes doesn't make one without," she said, spitting at the ground by his feet. Cori didn't feel the need to elaborate on her nomadic life lived by the waterways.

"Doesn't make one with, neither," he spat back, just missing the scuffed toe of her boot.

"Got a light?" she asked, holding out her hand. The lighter slid into her palm, warm from his pocket, greasy from his fingers. The lighter was a defiant hot pink, and Cori caught a chuckle in the back of her throat. The spark of the thing set her dark eyes alight, and she settled against the

alcove as the smoke settled in her lungs. She held it there, trapped in the darkness of her chest, before releasing it to the world again.

“You homeless then?” she asked the grey man.

“You’re standing in it, honey,” he said, his voice dragging over dry stones. To her arched brow, he said, “Homes can be elusive things, when ya move around as much as me. This is where I am today, for now, this is where I stay.” Cori nodded at this, as though it were the sagest of wisdom. She knew all the world as her home, and yet she struggled to find her place in it.

“What’s this then?” the grey man asked, tapping the side of her neck where a faded blue triquetra rested behind her ear, three triangular arcs interlacing with each other. There was a tight tugging at the small hairs there where he touched her, an inkling of something.

“What’s what?” She stepped back with a half scowl. A gruff acknowledgement left his lips and he left it at that. She shifted her beanie further down her head.

Ash flicked from the tip of her cigarette and the wind took it, tangling it into the grey man’s beard, getting lost in it with all the other soot and gunmetal. The old man was staring at her with ancient, unyielding eyes—they too were sooty of course. There was kindness in them, Cori noted, with a twinge of irritation.

Kindness had little use in her world, she gave up on the notion eons ago. One could not survive this hard, mechanized place with a tender heart, so Cori reduced hers to a thimble size. It beat simply so that she could breathe and find her next meal, find her next refuge, and that was its purpose. Her life was an endless cycle of hunger that always grew, and satiation that never stayed. It was a lonely existence, to be sure, but it was all that was left to her in this time, a time where human influence marred everything: the trees, the air, the water.

Her eyes found the torrent of the river beneath the bridge, that great river that stretched its yawning reach southward across the country. It was turbulent today, in the fading light as the sun made its slow decent in the sky, if a little diminished by lack of autumn rain. Dark greys and browns moving choppily over one another, the unseen depths calling to her. Cori knew in the spring, with waning cold and melting snow, it would be full to overflowing once more. Flooding out downtown, where she stood now submerged by at least a few feet of water. Spring changed everything, hid a little in its watery way, but revealed too much. No, autumn was her time. She relished it. The great shifting and falling away,

before everything went into a deep slumber. Slumber is what she longed for now. But first, a feast for her famished belly.

She studied the grey man as he studied her, both unyielding in their inspection of the other, neither shying away. The man appeared grizzled and world-worn, fine cracked webs fissuring the skin at the corner of his eyes and mouth, like a cliff face long weathered and worn by the winds and rains and unrelenting forces of the world. His hands were rough and calloused when they brushed hers, as he reclaimed his ridiculous pink lighter that stood so at odds with the man before her. *Better than no lighter*, Cori chided herself, *better than no source of heat or no means for nicotine*. Cori found so little solace in anything these days, but the nicotine went a small way in curbing her eternal hunger. And the sweet burn of a cigarette reminded her of another sweet, smokey burn from long ago. One she had inhaled as fervently as she sucks down this arsenic laden thing now.

“The Faerie fires of yore,” said the old man quietly with a glimmer in his grey eyes. Spoken so softly she thought for sure she’d imagined it.

“Excuse me?” Cori said, but it was reactionary.

She didn’t expect explanation and in fact did not even hear the grey man gruffly say “What?” as though he hadn’t spoken after all. She didn’t hear him because in an instant she was there again, in the wild, windy fields, smoke rising upward and filling her nostrils, dancing around the bonfire with so many of her kin. Alike and not. The ocean crashed its symphony against the shore and the night air sang with magic and mischief, the sky filled with countless stars. Crystalline kisses in a black velvet infinite. And humans were but a glimmer at the reaches of her mind. They did not rule the world yet, and so were merely a thought for later feasting. The grey man cleared his throat once more, and shattered Cori’s reverie.

“Name’s Obie,” the man said on a slight chuckle, though she couldn’t guess at what he found funny. And Cori did not want his name. Names were for the living. And the two of them were as good as dead to the world. *It holds no place for the likes of us. The castaways and wayward ones*, she thought, *the forgotten*.

“How do you know about...” but Cori trailed off, unsure if she had imagined him mentioning the fires in the first place. Her mind had a way of mixing memories with the present, of fabricating moments to repress her yearning for all that was now lost to history.

“Fancy a swim, old man?” Cori asked abruptly, tired of idle chatter.

Tired of people. Her belly was gnawing doggedly at her now, and she was so very ready for a deep sleep, until the spring at least.

“A bit cold for that, isn’t it lass?” The gravel voice took on a Scottish brogue, and she hesitated briefly, but shook the unease from her bones, certain it was her weariness and her ravenous appetite that made her tattered mind muddle things. Cori continued. She was so very hungry. And hunger makes a fool of even the most ancient of beings. She took the man gently by the arm and tugged him toward the water’s edge.

“But it’ll be nice, Obie,” she said to him sweetly, lacing her words in a fine dust of magic. “I’ll keep you warm.” She took the grey man’s hand in hers and dipped them together in the icy water, a sigh escaped her lips. She would eat and then find sleep.

“Have you wandered so far and so long from home, you no longer recognize one of your own? You no longer know your king?” the grey man mused. Cori looked into his eyes, uncertainty becoming a living thing in her mind. And for an instant he wasn’t the grey man any longer, but a tall dark figure, wreathed in shadows and wisps of frost, ancient eyes flashing silver, and a thorny crown upon his head, resting against the horns that rose from each temple. A dread chill slipped into Cori’s thimble heart, and she stumbled back.

“Oberon,” Cori said on a gasp.

“Correct you are, my wayward Kelpie.” On instinct only, Cori made for the water, splashing in boots and all. A crack of thunder let loose as her feet and legs met the water, and her body started to change. But a firm grip took hold of her hair, her hat falling away, pulling at her scalp and halting the transformation, as he dragged her soaking wet from the comforting icy clutches of the river. King Oberon—*Obie, of all the ridiculous and obvious things to miss*, Cori thought bleakly—shoved her to the ground and in an incredulous tone he said, “You tried to eat me.” She settled back against the concrete wall, glaring up at the old grey man who wasn’t a man at all. It was not a defiant glare, but a resigned one. Much to her annoyance, a kindness returned to the grey man’s eyes, a look of pity. She spat once more at the grey man’s feet.

“You are so tired, and so hungry, always.” It was not a question, but a statement he made. “You feel forgotten, but I never forget any of my own. I am sorry it has taken me so long.” The great king in his faded-grey-man glamour released a sigh heavy with sorrow and leaned down, slipping the tip of an iron dagger between her ribs, softly and with such care. She did not cry out at the pain felt there, for how beautiful it was to

feel something other than unrelenting emptiness. Miraculously he found her thimble heart, but then a Fae king was not likely to miss his mark. *It was a favor*, Cori thought bitterly but with a palpable relief, *a favor from the Fae King to a lowly Kelpie*. The Fae dealt in favors, trading in and owing debts, but this was one she would not be able to repay. She was exhausted and let her gaze wander, finding the choppy waves of the river. The rushing current the sweetest of lullabies—as old as time, as old as her memory. The grey man lit a cigarette and Cori’s mind was filled one last time of ancient bonfires and endless dancing and a glittering night sky. Rough, dry hands lifted her failing body and eased her back into the frigid water that was long her home.

“*Caidil gu math,*” sleep well, the old grey man said, his words lost to the wind. He ground his cigarette out beneath his booted heel and stepped once more into the shadows. If people had been so inclined to listen that evening, a banshee’s wail would have been heard, lamenting along the wind and the river. Though there seems little place left in the world for the hearing of such things.