Ettie and the Midnight Pool



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Ettie and the Midnight Pool



Julia Green

Illustrated by Pam Smy

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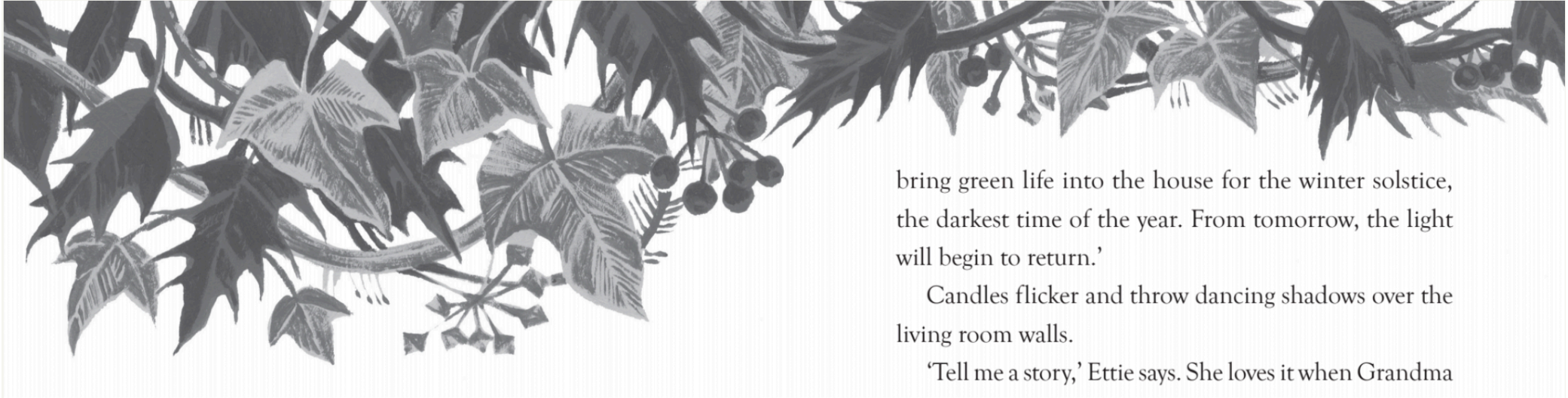
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For my sisters Alison and Sue, with love


Midwinter



It starts with a story.
An ancient tale.

High Fell House. 21st December. The shortest day of the year. Ettie puts another log on the fire; it crackles and spits and sends glowing sparks up the chimney. She climbs back onto the sofa, curls up next to her grandma, tucks her feet under her.

If only Mum was here. But she's still far away.

Earlier today, Ettie and Grandma walked along the lane and picked armfuls of wild ivy and holly with glossy dark leaves and bright berries from the hedgerows. They filled jugs and vases to decorate the room.

'It's an ancient tradition,' Grandma told Ettie, 'to bring green life into the house for the winter solstice, the darkest time of the year. From tomorrow, the light will begin to return.'

Candles flicker and throw dancing shadows over the living room walls.

'Tell me a story,' Ettie says. She loves it when Grandma tells the ancient tales.

'Which one this time?' Grandma asks.

'Your favourite,' Ettie says. She leans in closer.

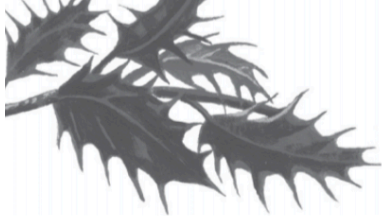
Grandma begins. Her voice rises and falls, casting the story spell.

Once upon a time, there were two young people who loved each other . . .

Ettie closes her eyes to make the pictures.

In her mind's eye, the ancient story takes place in the woods and fields near Grandma's house at High Fell. Orpheus and Eurydice walk together in the hay meadow and up through Fletcher's Wood. The stream in the story is Greenburn Beck, winding along the valley bottom. The lyre that Orpheus plays so beautifully is Grandma's old guitar.

Ettie knows the story, but even so, she listens intently. Each time a story is told, it happens all over again.



Eurydice did not see the snake, so close to her foot. She cried out in terrible pain. The snake had bitten her.

Ettie imagines an adder like the ones she's seen basking in the sun: the dark zigzag down its back, its flickering tongue . . .

Eurydice died in Orpheus's arms. Her soul slipped away, down down down to the dark Underworld. Orpheus's heart was broken . . .

Ettie shivers.

Grandma hugs her closer. 'It'll be OK in the end,' she whispers. 'I promise.'

Orpheus said he would fetch his beloved back from the Underworld, even though everyone told him it was impossible; too dangerous.

Love is stronger than fear, stronger even than death.

Ettie mouths the lovely words along with Grandma.

She loses herself in the story. She travels with Orpheus, down through the ancient mines and tunnels of the earthly world to the river which is the way to the world below. Here is the ferryman, his black boat appearing through the mist. The sad, beautiful music Orpheus plays as he travels through the dark, past the souls of the dead, deeper into the dark. Ettie's heart lifts when



the king of the Underworld says that, just this once, he will allow Eurydice to return to the earth and live again. On one condition: Orpheus must not look at her until they reach earth and sunlight.

Don't look back.

Orpheus promised.

'And . . . and . . .' Grandma's voice falters and fades.

Ettie looks up. 'Go on!'

Grandma brightens her voice. She rushes to reach the end of the story. 'And that's how Eurydice came back to life and light and air. Step by step, she followed Orpheus through the dark tunnels and caves, past the ghostly souls and fierce dog, onto the ferryman's boat . . . And they lived happily ever after.

'The gods told Orpheus his music brought such joy to the world that when he died his lyre would be turned into stars in the night sky. His spirit will dance and sing and make music in the fields of heaven for all time.'

Grandma walks over to the window and stares into the darkness outside. When she turns back, she has tears on her cheeks.

'What's wrong?' Ettie asks. A thread of fear tightens in her chest.

'Just . . . memories. It happens, sometimes. I'm sorry.'

'What memories?'

'Oh, things from long, long ago. I'm fine, honestly. Don't worry, Ettie.' Grandma brushes her tears away.

'Now, my lovely, it's time for bed.'

Ettie climbs the creaky stairs in the old house. She doesn't light the lamp in her bedroom; she settles herself on the window seat and looks out into the night. Words from the story echo in her head.

Don't look back.

Love is stronger than fear, stronger even than death.

She opens the window wide and leans out. The air's icy on her face. Something winged and soft brushes her cheek: a winter moth. Tawny owls call from the trees along the lane. A fox barks in the distance. These are the only sounds. There are no lights, no other houses, no one else for miles and miles. But so many stars!

Ettie squeezes her eyes to try to make out the shape of Orpheus's lyre in the starry sky. She finds Orion the hunter, the W shape of Cassiopeia, the Plough – pointing to the North Star, very clear and bright tonight. But no lyre.

Maybe Mum is looking up at the same stars in the dark sky above the mountains, thousands of miles from here. Maybe she is thinking about Ettie at this very moment and missing her. Maybe she is planning when she can return . . .

The fox barks again, much closer to the house now. A vixen calling for a mate. The eerie, shrieking sound echoes through the dark.

Ettie shivers. She gets into bed. She pulls the covers up tight.

Downstairs, Grandma picks up her ancient guitar and begins to play. A sad and beautiful song, full of love and loss and longing.

Ettie lies in the dark, eyes wide open, listening.

What was Grandma remembering, earlier? Something sad and secret from long ago, that she won't tell Ettie . . .

The music drifts and curls through the house like smoke; fills it with such sweet sadness.

Ettie's heart aches too.

