

Our Town by Fearn Kenyon

Henry bounded up the hilly high street beside his mum. He was full of chatter about their day at the dragon boat race. The day was still warm, and Henry had been happy to watch his brothers in their race but wished he was old enough to share an adventure. Henry and his mum turned into the old churchyard. He knew it would be no good to hurry her along now. She would want to sit in the quiet of the church while they waited for the others. Henry often marvelled that his tall mother with her fair hair and practical ways was just as happy on the back of a fast horse as she was on a sombre church bench. He let her enjoy the peace of her meditation after a busy day. He drifted silently around. As they often did, his eyes caught the one on the huge, ornate map on the floor of the north aisle. He gazed at the parade of travellers, jesters, and ancient wonders. Henry thought life looked a great deal more interesting back then.

Henry knelt down and touched the image of the great horse. He thought of the words his mum said when they last looked at the map, '550 years, our church, our town'. He looked at the familiar shops surrounded by mythical figures and magical creatures in the fading light of the day. He leant in and breathed '550 years, our church, our town'. As he stood, the map beneath him started to shimmer. He blinked quickly, confused. The dull figures were suddenly dancing in golden light. Henry glanced around. Nothing else had changed. The church was quiet, his mother's head bowed slightly, the air still. As he looked back to the map, a flash of bright dazzled his vision and drowned the church in light.

Henry shook his head. The light faded as quickly as it came, and he felt a moment of fear. His hand had not moved from the horse on the map but when he looked down, the map was gone and the church around him was bare and rustic.

He walked out into the street. The neat row of parked cars had gone, and the black tarmac road was now no more than a dusty track flanked by carts and tables and booths as far as Henry could see. A tumbler in a green and orange motley bowed deeply in front of him before leaping away into the crowd. Medieval music rose and drifted over the chatter of tradesmen, mixing with the smell of roasting nuts and warm pies. Henry was almost swept away by a parade of entertainers and their animals, while a line of pilgrims made their way steadfastly through the crowd. Henry was surprised to see that their calm, reflective expressions were not at odds with the noise and merriment of the fayre that surrounded them. Around Henry, jesters jangled, leapt, and posed. The market was alive with ancient wonders. Henry looked down and saw he wore a woollen tunic and brown leggings. He bought a sweet cake from a nearby stall and was surprised by how pleasant it was. He moved with the crowd then stood for a while to watch a troop of musicians who had started up a lively tune.

As the sun began to set, Henry tore himself away and made his way back to the church. He noticed a pile of rags on the ground by the entry to the churchyard. Henry startled when the pile of rags gave a twitch. His heart raced as a gnarled and knotted hand emerged. Only then was it apparent that the rags contained a tiny, crooked old woman. He hastened past her to reach the church. He ducked his head but caught the old woman's pleading words. 'Aid, relief, change. Aid, relief, change', she chanted after him.

Henry ignored her but felt a wave of emotions that he could not define. As he approached the church door, a darkness suddenly descended. Henry felt as if he was thrown into an immense whirlpool. He blinked his eyes and was shocked to find himself standing again in the spot by the north aisle where the map had been. Henry ventured outside and saw the same tumbler bow and leap, exactly as he had before. Henry's young mind set aside all questions as he was filled with

delight once more in the wonders of the fayre. He moved with joy between the musicians, animals, and entertainers and marvelled at the magic of the ancient town.

After a while, he wove his way back to the church but was stopped by the old woman's calls. 'Aid, relief, change', she demanded, her shrill voice rising. Henry sighed, he was not sure what good it would do but, standing as far back as he could, he leaned towards her and gave her some coins. He ignored her imploring words and hurried away.

Almost immediately, the darkness swirled and Henry was back in the north aisle. He was confused now and was starting to worry. He left the church quickly and dodged past the tumbler. He looked out at the crowd. The scene suddenly excluded him, and he wondered how much time was passing and how he would ever get home. He turned and regarded the wizened old woman again. He knew with certainty that he could not ignore her this time. Her face was visible now, and her soft grey eyes held his. Cautiously, he moved towards her and asked what he must do. She said 'I know your route here; I seek the same. The journey of my ancestors ends three hundred years from now. I must see the end of my line, for change may yet come to pass'. Henry was baffled by these words and tried to understand what she wanted him to do. He no more knew how he had got here than he knew how to leave. She stood up slowly and her ragged clothing hung loosely around her. She was silent as she moved purposefully towards the church. Henry followed behind her even as the now familiar darkness engulfed them both. As his vision cleared, Henry and the old woman stood together in the north aisle, looking out at a new scene. Before them was a small crowd of busy men in suits and caps, and the noise of market animals filled the air. Henry felt relief that they were moving somewhat closer to his time, then panic at how far he truly was from his home.

Wordlessly, the old woman led him to the side of a dark blacksmith's shop. Henry felt the heat of the furnace and smelled the burning of the molten iron and coals. The smith was hard at work and a tall woman waited nearby, holding a fine horse. The smith did not look up from his work. The tall woman started to leave. The old woman was still, her eyes darting between the two. With a voice that decried her age, she called out loudly for assistance. She slipped back out of sight, dragging Henry with her. The smith turned to seek the source of his summons, finding instead the tall woman. They exchanged smiles and began to talk. She found that the smith had truly not seen her, and he learned she had been concerned about disturbing him at his work. They laughed at themselves and as they talked, they opened to each other. Their talk and laughter created a little world between them. The world shimmered as their admiration grew, and the old woman nodded to herself. She and Henry walked away unnoticed.

Once more, Henry found himself approaching the north aisle where the map had been. He turned to ask the old woman if she had fulfilled her wish and seen the end of her line. The lifting, swirling air carried her answer away, but could not hide her smile and shaking head as everything spun around them.

Henry opened his eyes and was relieved to see he was back in the church, alone and in his own clothes. He was kneeling by the great horse on the map. He looked around for his mother but found the church door open. The road was bathed in the pale orange glow of the early sunset. Henry's relief mixed with curiosity and wonder at all he had seen. He felt he had aged a decade as he wondered if the smith and the tall woman were still talking, would they marry, where was the old woman now. Deep in thought, he wandered out of the church. On the ground by the entry to the churchyard, Henry was surprised to find his mother sitting cross-legged in the same spot where the old woman had been. As she saw him, she put away the horseshoe she had been toying with and smiled up at Henry, her grey eyes dancing in the fading light.

