

The Village of Wonder

I

It was Argwings who had found the village but Old Grace who had given its name. When the river had all but dried up, and the land was dying from thirst, ten families had decided to move from the barren town to another place to start new lives. Argwings and Old Grace were one of those families.

The families were walking in a valley, worn-out and weary, when all of a sudden, six-year-old Argwings went running to the side and up a hill. Old Grace called for him to come back to the group but he did not stop. He ran out of sight and did not return. After a short while, Old Grace and the rest began to worry, for the hills were said to be haunted by dreadful creatures. They sent two young ones to go and fetch him, but they too did not return.

The families, now quite worried, decided that they all would go and look for the children. They walked over the hill, and they too, never returned.

The families found Argwings standing just over the hill staring at the most strange and beautiful thing they had ever seen. There below them lay a stone-paved street. The families had never before seen a street among the green valleys and the hills. All they ever saw were footpaths and animal trails crisscrossing the green grass and, where it did not rain, dust. But never before had they seen a stone-paved street.

The street was made of beautiful, bright, blue cobblestones, so clean and polished that the clouds and the sky seemed to float down below. The soft, billowy clouds were streaked with hues of pink and orange inside the stones and Argwings and the other two children had lost themselves in the reflection. So completely enchanted were they that they did not see what lay before them.

“Goodness gracious,” sighed Old Grace.

On either side of the street grew the most peculiar trees, so peculiar that the families were not certain they were trees at all. There were ten of them, five on either side, and their trunks were enormous in size. They were thick and round, silvery-white and brown, for the silvery-white was itself a reflection of the clouds in the street, the prettiest colour of bark they had ever seen.

The tree trunks were almost as big as houses and their branches reached for the sky. They had leaves wider than the widest umbrella, so wide they looked like rooftops. These trees also had flowers, small and silver. The flowers, so soft and fragile, would, with the slightest breeze, turn into powder and blow away. But, though the breeze constantly blew, and the silver flowers did blow, the trees never lacked for them for they seemed to bud

continually. As soon as one left another took its place so instantaneously that it almost went unnoticed.

“Goodness gracious,” sighed Old Grace yet again.

Tiny, gold watering cans constantly poured out a golden liquid at the base of the trees. They hung in the air, slightly tilted towards the ground, not held by anyone or anything.

“Goodness gracious.”

A little pond lay at the end of the street, silvery like the flowers and the clouds in the cobblestones. The water seemed to drain with every Argwings’ breath and fill up just as rhythmically.

At the end of the cobbled street, beyond the pond, stood another hill, and the blue-paved street with its dazzling trees lay neatly between the two. Beyond the trees, on either side, lush green valleys bore fruit trees much thinner and more ordinary.

Old Grace started down the hill, slowly for she was very old indeed. The families followed close behind. Once at Argwings’ side she placed her hand on his head.

“Argwings,” she said. “Isn’t it very beautiful?”

Argwings looked up at Old Grace with his soft brown eyes and rewarded her with an angelic smile.

“Come on then,” she said to everyone.

Old Grace approached the tree closest to them. It took her some time, for she was very old indeed, and had to stop repeatedly to catch her breath. She stood beneath the tree, her tiny frame as an ant in comparison. She tapped the bark with her bony, old knuckles, then placed her ear to the tree and listened.

Bewildered and befuddled the families gathered around and stared up at the tree. They stared down at the gold watering cans, stared up at the sky, and finally they stared at the ground and at one another. Mr. Kindly, who had persuaded the families not to leave Old Grace and the orphan alone in the old town, now cleared his throat and stepped forward.

“Old Grace,” he said, “we had better be moving on.”

Old Grace turned round with a disappointed look on her face.

“It’s getting darker by the minute,” Mr. Kindly informed.

Old Grace turned to the old tree and tenderly stroked its bark.

“Old woman,” called Mr. Cashin, “there’s no time to talk to trees.”

Old Grace turned and smiled at him, as to a child.

“Mr. Cashin are you blind?” she asked, calm yet firm, then turned back to the tree and rapped on the trunk with her bony, old knuckles. Each time she rapped she took a tiny step

sideways. The families watched perplexed as she knocked on the tree trunk again, and again, and yet again. By the time she had knocked her way round the tree, it was dark.

The families grumbled. They had long been wandering in the wilderness and were yet to find a place they could call their own.

“I knew we should have left them behind,” someone ventured.

“Let’s leave them now,” said another.

They had been patient with Old Grace. She was just as wise as she was grey, but now they were tired of her and her old ways.

“Shush,” she hushed.

The clouds in the street, which had captivated the children, disappeared with the setting of the sun, and they joined the rest at the tree.

“We’re hungry!” they cried. “And it’s getting cold and dark.”

Mr. Cashin cleared his throat, but as he opened his mouth to speak, Mr. Kindly placed his hand on his shoulder to stop him.

Old Grace stared at the giant tree trunk with her eyes squinted and her brow furrowed.

“Old Grace,” said Mr. Kindly, “perhaps we should move on and find a place to rest for the night.”

Old Grace smiled back at the families and continued her tapping. She put her ear to the trunk and listened, nodded, listened and nodded.

“She’s clearly bonkers,” said Mr. Cashin, under his breath.

“Argwings?” Old Grace called, turning round.

Then she noticed that Argwings was not among them.

“Argwings?” she called. “Where is my grandson?”

Miriam, his friend, yawned and said, “He’s staring at the stones.”

Argwings stood gazing at the cobblestones, now a murky grey with the approaching darkness, and waited for the sun to reappear. Old Grace called to him.

“Argwings?”

Argwings did not seem to have heard.

“Argwings?” she called again.

“Why do you talk to him?” asked Mr. Curious.

“He’s deaf!” said Mr. Cashin.

“Argwings!” called Old Grace, ignoring the men.

Argwings looked up and smiled. Just then, there came a loud groaning and deafening creaking accompanied by a warm gust of wind that blew their clothes and rustled the leaves on the trees.

A soft whisper carried through the air, words clear and crisp.

Listen, listen and listen closer

No man, woman or child ever

Other than those that here and now gather

Shall be privy to this our wonder

And no thing here seen, heard or found

Shall ever wander over the hill beyond.

Argwings watched, astonished, as a giant shadow suddenly loomed over little Old Grace, over the ten families and over the cobbled street. One by one the trees began to move. They stretched and yawned and were heard to sigh as their branches grew thicker and longer. The leaves broadened and the flowers spread. Small gaps and holes began to form in the trunks and lines appeared on the thick bark just as if an invisible hand had drawn them. Then sounded a rumbling deep down in the earth; the ground beneath them groaned and seemed to quake.

Argwings watched as the cobblestones heaved and rolled beneath his feet revealing the most fascinating sight he had ever seen. Within the stones appeared the bright moon and shining stars floating weightlessly in a black river. Argwings glanced over his shoulder at Old Grace who held her hand to her chest and beckoned with the other. He hesitated.

“Argwings,” called Old Grace.

Argwings ran to Old Grace and the rest, all huddled around her watching the trees continue to twist and turn and transform right before their eyes. Children clutched their fathers and babies hung onto their mothers. The grownups themselves stood shocked and scared. Argwings, hidden behind Old Grace, peeked from under her arm, his eyes large with fright and wonder.

The earth below gave a final hiccup and then became still.