

## John Grey's Journey

A middle-aged couple are with a young man. There is a large screen behind them, showing a row of humble wooden houses at the bottom, and at the top, a range of mountains, dominated by a flat-topped peak with a bumpy nose. John Grey is close to the screen.

John           What a wonderful story. You must take me to this place!

Sam            Whenever you like. Going to bring a nurse from the hospital?

John            There's half a dozen who'd like to come.

Clarice        You'll have to make a choice.

John            That'll be hard. It's flattering when people want you.

Clarice        (insisting) Still ...

Sam            (amused by his wife) You see ...

John            I'll ask Debbie! She'll want to come.

At once Debbie joins them, a bright-eyed young woman, with a keen mind, full of curiosity.

Debbie        (pointing at the mountain) Is that it?

Sam            That's the one!

Debbie        Why are we going out there?

Clarice        (after a pause) I don't think we know yet.

Debbie        Is there a story?

John            Oh yes, there's a story.

Sam            I was brought up out there. It's part of my story.

Debbie        And now you're taking me. I suppose it'll be part of mine!

Clarice        (wisely) We don't know how important a part. Not yet.

John            Clarice, you're thinking of something out of my reach.

Sam            That's her specialty. You'll get used to it.

Debbie        What are you two talking about? I don't understand.

Clarice        We're all going to the same place, but for different reasons. Our reasons are yet to be seen.

Debbie        Oh heavens! We're going into a mystery. Oh well ...

The screen shows a new picture: a clearing in dense forest, out in the mountains. There is a small fire.

John            (looking about) It all happened here.

Clarice        Cup of tea, Debbie. Milk in that jar. Be careful of the lid.

Debbie        I feel I have to be careful of everything, out here.

Sam            Not a bad way to feel.

John            And the tree house was over there?

Sam            Right where you're pointing.

John            Did they use the same track that we came in on?

Sam           The old boy had a horse. He used to ride along the race that took water to the mine.

Clarice       Sam is a funny man. If I give him a shopping list, he'll lose it in five minutes. But anything out here, where he grew up, he could find it in the dark.

Sam           Some things stick in your mind.

Debbie       This place has got a grip on me. I'm off to the city next year, to get myself qualified. I'll be sipping coffee and I'll see this place. I'll be at a concert, everyone going wild, and I'll see this place.

Clarice       I wonder if you'll ever come back?

Debbie       I wonder too, but I have to go. Something's calling me ...

She walks off.

Sam           You're on your own now John.

John          Not for long. Jen?

Another young woman, Jenny, strolls on.

Clarice       I've just been pouring tea. There's a clean cup.

Jen           Thank you. (to John, indicating ) You'll have to take me for a walk. Tell me all the stories haunting this place.

Sam           Haunting, that's the word. How did you know?

Jen           John's been telling me lots of things, which I think he got from you.

John          Everything I know I got from Sam. (after a moment's thought) And everything I don't know, I'm getting from Clarice.

Clarice       That's very nice John, but you know more than the rest of us put together.

Sam           (humbly) What do I know? Nothing.

Jen           Don't be too modest. Everybody knows something that nobody else knows.

Clarice       I wonder what it is in my case?

Sam           You always know the right thing to do.

John          I'll show you where the tree house was. You can stand on the very spot.

John and Jenny walk away.

Sam           He won't marry her. She hasn't got the brains of the other one.

Clarice       Debbie. I'm sorry she's gone. I wonder if he still hears from her.

Sam           Do you still see Alice in your dreams?

Clarice       My daughter. My little girl.

Sam           My beautiful young woman. The perfection of my life.

Clarice       She went to sleep, and when they found her, she wasn't there any more.

Sam           Our marriage ended there. We support each other now.

Clarice       I sometimes wonder what's flowing in my veins. It can't be blood any more.

Sam            Everything we do these days we do from habit. I don't feel properly alive.

The background picture reverts to the mountain-and-houses original, though the fire remains.

Clarice        We've made a home, where people come and go, but it's you and I, Sam, that sustain ...

Sam            And who are we doing it for, now that our daughter's gone?

Clarice        We're not special any more. We're just like everyone else.

Sam            And what's that mean?

Clarice        We're here for anyone who needs us. That has to be enough.

John sits at a table on the other side of the stage, writing.

John            (reading as he writes) I'll take you there. I'd like you to meet my friends. It's a mysterious place, but the mystery's inside me. Sam tells me everything I want to know, and his wife has a quiet control. If I was insecure, she'd be frightening, but she's reassuring. She gives me the feeling that somebody knows. If I say this to her, she pushes it away, gently, in a way that reinforces what I feel. But how soon can you come? Let me know when it's arranged, and I'll be there to meet you.

Enter Paula. She points to the mountain on the screen.

Paula            What does it mean to you?

John            That's more than I can say, but it's ever so important.

Paula            Will it stand in our way?

John            (hesitating) No ... I think it's my destination.

Paula            Are you ready to share it?

John            Yes. It's not hard to get to, but you have to know why you're there.

Paula            Have you been there, knowing why?

John            I've been there many times, but I can't say I know why I'm doing it.

Paula            Then you haven't been there yet.

John            Not really, no.

Paula            I don't think I can help. I don't think I'm any use to you.

John            That's sad ...

Paula            Nor are you any use to me.

She leaves as quietly as she came.

John            (sitting at his table, but not writing) It's no good, is it. I'll never put everything together while I'm here. I've built up so much, and I've got to put it all behind me ... (He stands. Sam and Clarice come on. Clarice hugs him tenderly, and Sam puts an arm around him.) My dearest friends ...

Sam            You've made up your mind. You know what you're doing ...

John            That's what I don't know!

Clarice        Somewhere inside you there's a reason, and you have to follow it. We're all slaves to things we don't understand. You'll find what's missing one day, and everything will come clear.

John         Your house is a simple place, with everything in order ...

Sam          For you, our door's always open.

Clarice       Write to us and tell us what you're doing.

John         You'll have to write back!

Sam          There won't be much to tell you. You know how quiet it is down here.

John         I'll envy you, because you'll be able to stand at the back door, and there ... always ...

He points to the mountain, he bows to his friends, and leaves, looking heartbroken.

Sam          He'll come back one day.

Clarice       We might be gone by then.

Sam          I'll put some wood on the fire.

The stage darkens, and when it becomes bright again, the screen shows an active city. Clarice is tending the fire, and we can see Sam lying in a bed at the side of the stage.

Sam          (calling) What are you doing, love?

Clarice       Building up the fire.

Sam          Don't let it go out, love. When it goes, I go too.

Clarice       It's not as bad as that, Sam. Where's that card you got from John?

Sam          (pointing) Read it to me would you?

Clarice       (reading) When I get back, I want you to take me into the mountains. I've seen a lot of fine places and met a lot of fine people, but two things stand out: that high hill on the horizon – you know the one– and the fire in the lounge at your house. It'll have to be winter, because I want to see that fire ...

Sam          Keep it going, love. When I'm not here ...

Clarice       Sam! No more of that. Doctor will come soon. He hasn't seen you for a while.

Sam          There isn't much to see. What did I weigh last time?

Clarice       You weren't too bad. You're hanging on.

We see John on the other side of the stage – the city side. We also see Harlem, a tall black man, his body wrapped in blankets, approaching him.

John         Bloody freezing. How would you survive ...

Harlem       Any loose change in your pocket sir? Cold tonight, I think.

John         (hand in pocket) It's not much. Oh hang on. (John gives the beggar a one hundred dollar note.) Get yourself a room.

Harlem       That's kind of you sir, but it's gotta last me more than a night.

John         It'll be snowing soon.

Harlem       I'll pretend I'm a tree. They look good, with their branches weighted down.

He goes. John looks around in despair.

John I should've pulled him into my room, but they wouldn't let him through the foyer. The world belongs to the haves. Everyone else can freeze!

He moves out of sight. Doctor Jordan comes to have a look at Sam.

Clarice Go through, doctor. You know where he is.

Sam Thanks for coming doc, but you shouldn't be wasting your time.

Jordan It's my job. Let's have a look at you.

Sam Put me into hospital, doc, let Clarice have a rest.

Jordan We might do that, if you get bad. You're hanging on pretty well.

Sam Like the man who slipped off a cliff. Gripped a rock with one hand and waved for help with the other.

Clarice Sam!

Jordan I should write down all these things you say. To encourage my patients!

Sam They'll survive, I suppose. But you can't save me. I'm done.

Jordan You're not, you know. You're still fighting, and while there's life there's hope. (Sam rolls over. Clarice and the doctor move away from him.) But not much. He's made a will, you say?

Clarice He has.

Jordan Everything else in order?

Clarice Except me.

Jordan (tenderly) You're strong. You look after yourself.

Clarice We've spent our lives together. I can't desert him now.

Jordan acknowledges her feelings, and leaves. Clarice returns to her husband's bedside.

Clarice Anything you'd like, Sam?

Sam I'd like John Grey to walk through that door. I reckon he'd fix me straight away.

Clarice (laughing) What with? A bottle of rum?

Sam That or something stronger.

Clarice I wonder how he's going ...

The screen shows a picture of Paris. John walks on stage again.

John I feel alive when I'm here. Anything could happen. (Debbie, whom we met earlier on, walks past, not noticing him.) Debbie. Debbie!

Debbie Good heavens above! John!

John I was thinking of you last night.

Debbie I was thinking of you today.

John Each of us must have known the other was near.

Debbie I was crossing the road when this truck roared up. The bastard nearly knocked me over, and when I looked at him, he looked just like you!

They laugh, and hug each other.

John Did you abuse him?

Debbie I wondered where you were.

John You're looking wonderful, Deb. Are you married?

Debbie I was for a while. It came unstuck. What about you?

John For a while. Then we let each other go.

Debbie Painful?

John No, a release. She didn't deserve captivity any more than I did.

Debbie You call yourself free?

John I can't think of a suitable word.

Debbie Drifting?

John More positive than that. Searching ...

Debbie You're not sure?

John Not sure, no. You?

Debbie We *are* talking directly, aren't we?

John We've been through the prelims before.

Debbie We ought to rush into a bar and drink, but ...

John ... no ...

Debbie ... we'll walk ... and walk ... saying whatever comes into our heads ...

John ... and maybe we'll annoy each other, and go two ways ...

Debbie ... or maybe we'll fuse. Something brought us together!

John Who's going to start?

Debbie You were always the great talker.

John Okay. When I thought of you last night, you were saying what you said ...

Debbie I know what you're going to say! I said, I can't understand why you're so mad about this place. I'm going to come back when I'm old ...

John ... and you said, maybe I'll understand you then!

Debbie Did you ever work it out?

John (as they go off) Yes and no ...

Debbie (as they disappear) Mr Perhaps! The Maybe Man ...

They disappear. The picture of Paris fades.

Sam Give us a drop of that rum, would you Clarice. Please.

Clarice This is the second today.

Sam I had sixty years without rum. I'm catching up.

Clarice (giving it to him) I never pour this stuff without thinking it's going to say something.

Sam It says calm down, to me. I'm looking after you, it says.

Clarice If that's what the rum says, it sounds like you don't need me.

Sam (putting the glass down hard) Yes I do! You're my other half. What they say about marriage is true.

Clarice What do they say about marriage, Sam? (Sam can't speak. There is a long silence.) I have to fill in the silence for myself. This is a strange new thing!

Sam Send John a message. I'd like to see him.

Clarice        We can't pull him back from the other side of the world.

Sam            There's an address on that card.

Clarice        Paris. He wouldn't want to leave there and come here. (She points to the row of humble cottages on the screen.)

Sam            He's never been back.

Clarice        (trying to restrain him) Oh Sam ...

Sam            He always said he would.

Clarice        If you say so, Sam.

She goes to the table where John Grey sat earlier, and writes.

Clarice        He's never been more tender. Sickness is improving him, except it's bringing him down. If you're thinking of a trip home, we'd love to see you. Sam won't be able to take you to the hills, but he'd love to hear about wherever you go. When he feels strong enough to get up, he looks at the horizon, though who knows what he sees? I think he sees what you always saw out there, and it makes him strong. He gets back into bed and he says, I'll never be lost. I think you know what he means better than I do. It would be lovely to see you again ... (she pauses) ... if ...

John and Debbie sit at a table on the other side of the stage. As they talk, the mountain on the screen fades, and we get pictures of Paris again, then, as their dialogue develops, the mountain reappears.

Debbie        You want to go home.

John           I feel I have to.

Debbie        I remember Sam. He took us into the mountains. Nice man. And Clarice.

John           She wrote to me.

Debbie        Saying you haven't got long if you want to see him again.

John           What do you think?

Debbie        You have to go.

John           And you?

Debbie        I have to go with you.

John           Why do you have to?

Debbie        It's not easy to say. If I don't go with you I'll be alone, in a wilderness of my own making.

John           Strange.

Debbie        I'm certain of what I say.

John           Then we're doing this together?

Debbie        We are.

On the other side of the stage. Doctor Jordan has come to see his patient.

Clarice        He's sleeping doctor, but only lightly. He'll wake up when you speak.

Jordan        How are things with you, Sam?

Sam            (quietly) Something awful doc.

Jordan        Something to take away the pain?

Sam            Please.

Jordan injects Sam, and he's quiet again.

Jordan (to Clarice) No more rum. This has more effect.

Clarice He's on the way out then?

Jordan A few days. A week or so, perhaps. I'll come at the same time tomorrow.

Clarice Thank you doctor. (She closes the door, then goes to her husband in his bed.) The long journey's done, my love. Only one more step, and you're there. Places were always important to you ... (She opens the back door and looks out to the mountains.) You learned most of what you ever learned out there. Your mother raised you. The world's only added a little to what you were ... (She waves a hand at the mountains.) You came to me, and now you're leaving. I wish it was the other way round. I'm selfish, aren't I. I'd rather be without the pain of being left alone. You're clever, Sam, you're going first. I won't be far behind.

The screen shows an aeroplane in flight, by day, by night, and in the early morning. Debbie and John appear wearing coats, and with luggage. They put the luggage aside and take off the coats; meanwhile, the screen reveals the mountain and the row of cottages once again. Doctor Jordan greets the returning travellers.

Jordan Sam had cancer in half a dozen places. I kept him dosed up to do away with any pain. Clarice took her

own way out one week later. She'd been a nurse, she knew what she was doing.

Debbie What does that say to me?

John What does it say to all of us?

Jordan He often spoke of you, towards the end. I think he half-believed that you could do for him what I couldn't do.

John People get these ideas ...

Jordan They get comfort. He liked to drink rum. We did get him off it, but only at the end.

Debbie Onto something stronger ...

Jordan It gave him some rest.

Debbie (to John) You want to see where they're buried.

Jordan There's nothing there yet, only a pile of dirt.

John That makes things very clear to me.

Debbie Will our car get us where we want to go?

John (nodding) It's a good road.

The screen shows us, for the second time, the clearing in dense forest not far from the mountain. The car that brought them is visible to one side. John is casting his eyes about, searching.

Debbie You're waiting for someone to speak. I'm sorry there's only me.

John I can hear well enough, Deb. And see.

Debbie What are you seeing, John?

John This mountain's been a magnet for me, for many, many years.

Debbie And now you know why?

John           Something awful happened here. Something wonderful too.

Debbie        They could only have happened here? No other place would do?

John           If you get on top of a mountain, you can look across the world.

Debbie        You tell yourself you can see.

John           You're thinking about the world because you can see it.

Debbie        It's good to be elevated then.

John           And bad. Who wants to know? It's painful.

Debbie        And if we didn't know what everyone down there was doing, we'd only be senseless trash?

John           You see it better than I do.

Debbie        This is a place of knowledge ...

John           Knowledge is a burden. How strange! It also makes us light.

Debbie        You're not going to float away from me, are you, John?

John           Float away with you, rather, Deb.

Debbie        Where to, John? Where?

John           There's nowhere to float to. I've suddenly seen something, Deb?

Debbie        Nowhere to float to? Didn't we float out here?

John           And aren't we still inside ourselves? Is not that a fact?

Debbie        Of course we're inside ourselves? Where else could we be?

John           We've got a little walk to take. In a few minutes we'll be free.

Debbie        (As she follows him, the view of the mountain reappears, replacing the view of the clearing they've been in.) Inside or outside ourselves? Which is it to be?

John           A little further and we'll know.

They walk, and the change already referred to keeps happening. John and Debbie move to the back, almost out of sight as the screen is lowered, so that their voices seem to come out of the mountain.

Both           Aaaaaaaaaahhh ...

John           Aaaaaaaaaahhh ...

Debbie        Aaaaaaaaaahhh ...

John           How I've longed to see with the eyes of this hill ...

Debbie        I've fought never to be fixed in a world of change ...

John           I've wanted to know, and now I can see ...

Debbie        If I come here with you, I'm taking you with me ...

John           If I come here with you, I've accepted your change ...

Debbie        You're not resisting?

John           I've lifted myself above the world to know that you can't ...

Debbie        Can we go down again now?

John           We can ...

Debbie        We will?

John            Into the world, as awful as it's been ...  
Debbie        To make it new because we know what it is ...  
John            That's an illusion, Debbie, but it's one we always  
                  need ...  
Debbie        Illusion's a reality, brought into being by love ...  
John            As you wish. I'm yours, we've been here, we can go  
                  down ...  
Debbie        As I wish? Are you with me, love? You've nowhere  
                  else to go?  
John            Down, down, into the world. It's only an illusion, but  
                  every part of it feels mine ...  
Debbie        Your illusion is mine. We can't ask more than that.  
                  Your illusion is mine ...

They disappear. The mountain glows with the afternoon light.