



TALES OF NEWFOUNDLAND ♦

The Fairies

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Welcome back to the fire, friends. When you hear the word fairies, you likely think of something small and sweet, with gauzy wings, out of a children's book. Put that clean out of your mind tonight. Because the fairies of Newfoundland are nothing of the sort. They are old, and strange, and not to be trifled with, and on the Rock, within living memory, sensible grown people took great care not to offend them. Tonight we talk about the Good People, and about what it means to be taken by them.



CAROL

The Good People. Marty, I have heard they call them that not because they are good, but because you do not dare call them anything else. Is that right?



MARTY

That is exactly right, Carol, and you have put your finger on the whole heart of it. In Newfoundland, brought over by the Irish and the English who settled there, the fairies were a real and serious presence, and you never, ever named them plainly or spoke ill of them, in case they were listening. So you called them the Good People, or the Little People, or just, delicately, the fairies, and you kept on their good side, because a person who fell foul of the fairies could find themselves in a great deal of trouble. And the greatest trouble of all, Carol, was to be taken.



CAROL

Taken. Marty, taken where? By whom?



MARTY

Here is how it happened, in a hundred outport tellings, Carol. A person would go out, often a child, sometimes berry-picking on the barrens, or walking home along a wooded path at dusk. An ordinary walk, ground they knew well. And then, somehow, they would not come home. And the whole community would turn out to search, calling and searching through the woods and the bogs, all night sometimes, days sometimes. And when the lost one was finally found, Carol, and often they were found, they would be somewhere they had no business being, and they would be dazed, and strange, and unable to properly say what had happened, only that they had been away, with the fairies, in the fairies, as they said, and that the time had passed differently, and they were never quite the same again.



CAROL

Away with the fairies, and never the same. Oh, Marty. That is such a specific, eerie thing. What do you think was really happening?



MARTY

Well, Carol, let me give you the honest ground under it first, because it is real and it is important. Newfoundland is a place of thick woods, and endless barrens, and sudden fog that can drop over you like a blanket and turn the whole world into featureless grey. And a child, or anyone, out on the barrens when the fog comes, could become lost within a hundred yards of a path they had walked a thousand times, wander for hours in terror and exhaustion and cold, and by the time they were found be so dazed and frightened and hypothermic that they truly could not tell you what had happened. That is a real danger. It killed people. And when it did not kill them, it left them shaken and confused in a way that begged for an explanation.



CAROL

And the explanation was the fairies. Marty, I see it. A way to make sense of a child vanishing on ground they knew, and coming back changed. But it was more than an explanation, wasn't it. People actually protected themselves.



MARTY

They did, Carol, with real care, and this is where it becomes wonderful. There were rules, protections, everyone knew them. The most famous was bread. You never went out onto the barrens or into the woods without a bit of bread in your pocket, because bread, the honest food of home and hearth, was proof against the fairies, and they could not take you while you carried it. If you felt yourself going astray, getting that strange led-around feeling in the fog, the remedy was to turn your coat inside out, to confuse the fairies and break their hold on you. You did not whistle after dark, for fear of what might answer. And if the fairies did leave you something, a bit of fairy money, you might look in your pocket in the morning and find only dead leaves, for fairy gold never lasts.



CAROL

Bread in your pocket and your coat turned inside out. Marty, I find that so moving, actually, that whole communities carried bread against the fog. It is folklore, but it is also just, wisdom, isn't it. Take something from home when you go into the wild.

MARTY

That is precisely it, Carol, and it is why I never laugh at the fairy belief, however much I understand the fog and the bogs beneath it. Because those old rules kept people alive, and kept them careful, and kept the children close. Do not wander off alone. Take food when you go out. Respect the wild places, and do not be too proud or too loud in them, for they are older and stronger than you. Turn back when the fog comes. Every one of those fairy rules is good, hard survival sense, dressed up in magic so that a child would remember it and a grown man would not feel foolish obeying it.

CAROL

Magic as a way to make people remember good sense. Marty, that keeps coming up at this fire, doesn't it, that the old legends are wisdom in a costume. But tell me true. Is that all the fairies were? The fog and good sense?

MARTY

Here is what I will tell you, Carol, and it is where I always land. There are people in Newfoundland, right up to today, sober and sensible people, who will tell you, quietly, that once, out on the barrens or in the woods, something happened to them that the fog does not explain. A feeling of being led. A time that did not add up. A presence just out of sight. And I am not going to sit at this fire and tell those people they are wrong, because I was not there, and the world is a great deal stranger than we like to admit. So carry your bread, friends, when you go into the wild places. Maybe it is only good sense. And maybe, out on the lonely barrens where the fog comes down, the Good People are watching still, and would rather you kept on their good side. I would. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tomorrow I am putting a heel of bread in my coat pocket and leaving it there. Hold your people close, respect the wild and the old, and come back to the fire.