First published in 2023 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA, UK
Vijverlaan 48, 3062 HL Rotterdam, Nederland
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 83913 210 0

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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I Would Take You There

I would take you there, to the land beyond the sea,
I would take you there, and all that we would be
Are unremembered echoes, passing through the mind,
Unless they too pass through the arch: those we left behind.

These are the words of that oldest of lullabies. The one that parents sung long ago to children whose dreams were filled with the land of faerie. It goes on to speak of the endless rolling hills, of green, lush forests which never fade, of ice-capped mountains, of villages, towns and cities filled with strange buildings, more grown from trees and earth than built.

In the longest versions of that song, in verses now known to only a few, it speaks of

Those hidden, mystery folk, faces bright with shining eyes,
Whose long lives flit between their world and the land
of you and I.

If you were to hear that song sung on a midsummer's eve, you might just believe that some land out there does exist, a place of wonders, of magic, of faeries.

And you would be correct.

Summer Moon Rises

Jojo Locke lay in the bed that had once been his father's, not sleeping. He had turned out the light some time ago and his brother Ricco was snoring soundly from his camp bed on the floor.

It wasn't the snoring that kept him awake. Or the gentle farts coming from Trevor, his grandad's dog, curled up at the end of his bed. It wasn't the sound of *Mickey Mack's Family Game Show* buzzing from the television in the front room. Or Grandad's throaty coughing. Or Grandma occasionally shouting answers at the TV that couldn't possibly be right (Question to Harold from the Livingstone family: *We asked your brother Clyde to describe you in three words. What did he say?* Grandma's answer: *Kitty cat.*) Or his mum's soft replies to her mother-in-law: 'Could be, Marnie. Let's see what he says.'

None of these things kept Jojo awake. What kept him from sleep was the thought of Dad. His vanished dad.

In other years, he'd spent months looking forward to this trip: finishing school, coming down by train from the London flat where they lived with Mum, to this other world between the shining sea and rolling hills. Grandad picking them up and bundling their things into the back of his old, green Jeep, then joggling down the roads to the cottage in the lane.

But things had changed for Jojo. He had just finished Year 6, he was off to secondary school in September and Jojo had found himself, this year, for the first time really, thinking about the dad he'd never known – or thought he'd never known. Maybe it was all that growing up he'd been doing, knowing that big things were ahead, big changes.

What Jojo knew was that this year, he had not been able to shift his thoughts from the man who'd disappeared when he was five. Instead of looking forward to his summer holiday, Jojo had been dreading this moment: staying in the house that his dad had once called home, where he'd done all his growing up, in the bed he'd once slept in. Right then, Dad was all he could think about. Or perhaps it wasn't Dad himself he thought of but the absence of him.

He was missing. Truly missing. Not just from Jojo's world, but from his mind, from his heart, from all his rememberings.

There was nothing in the huge open space where his dad should be. Nothing but one snippet of memory. And perhaps this more than anything was what kept Jojo up at night: that one memory of a voice above him – a deep voice, an excited voice – and the great big chasms where memories should be.

'Don't worry, little man,' said the voice that Jojo was sure was his dad's. *'Don't look back. It's going to be OK.'*

That was it. The entirety of Jojo's memories of his dad. Twelve words. No pictures, no sign to say who was at the end of that meeting. But somehow Jojo was certain this

was his father's voice. The memory had come to him one day when he was leaving school. His friend Bolu had just got into his own dad's taxi. Jojo waved goodbye, tried to turn but found he could not take his eyes from his friend, caught in his father's embrace. Watching them, Jojo felt an ache in his heart, a longing for something unknown or something lost. Then the voice had spoken, clean out of the clear blue sky:

'Don't worry, little man. Don't look back. It's going to be OK.'

It was all Jojo could do not to cry but instead to hurry home. He couldn't ask Mum about it. She didn't talk about Dad. No one talked about Dad.

For about the millionth time since he'd got there, Jojo checked his phone on the bedside table. It was about as useful as a brick here in Dor, the village that time forgot; there was no signal. He wondered if he'd rather have stayed in London. If he'd rather be heading to the shops with his friends than exploring the river with Grandad. He wondered if he'd rather be at Bolu's house, drawing and coming up with their ideas for the perfect comic than running around the park in Dor. Rather be there thinking of nothing much, than here, thinking only of a man he did not know and could never know.

At least then he wouldn't feel this . . . hollowed-out-ness. There was no other word for it. Not just empty but like something was missing, like something had been taken.

He wondered, as he had a thousand times since the voice

had spoken, if the past was best forgotten. There was no good in trying to claw back something that was long gone.

✳

The moon was full that night. And the sky was clear. And if Jojo had gone to the window of the little room he would have had a clear view up and down the lane. He'd have seen the parked Jeep and the old bike resting against the stone wall, the bin wheeled out for the bin man in the morning, the cottage's garden on this side of the road and the big old barn on the other. He'd have seen a lone fox weaving across the field beyond. And if he'd kept watching, he'd have seen his holiday begin to take a strange turn.

It started with a man dressed in black. He seemed to come from the barn across the way to stand in the middle of the road. But no door opened in the barn. He seemed to stare up at Jojo's window, but no eyes could be seen beneath his dark hood; instead a pair of stars twinkled in their place. He seemed then to be waiting, and indeed he was.

In his waiting, the man in black toyed with a little sack attached to his belt. He reached in and pulled out what appeared to be a few specks of golden dust. He put his fingers to his lips and blew and the specks, now free, lifted on the breeze, floated, glowing ever so slightly. They drifted up, spiralled round and found their way to Jojo's window and through a crack between the frame and the sill. In they swam, like dust motes in the sun, dancing the short space across the

room and coming to land on Ricco's eyes. Jojo saw none of this.

That night, Ricco dreamed of an endless tea party with a family of talking badgers, a favourite dream of his, which the man in black knew all too well.

His name is the Sandman. He is the keeper of dreams. For a fleeting night, he brings into sleeping sight the longings of human hearts – those desires hidden even to the dreamer. He may, if he wills it, give life to deep-felt fears too. Dreams and dreads which, when morning breaks, are swept away with the coming dawn. Forgotten once more.

The fox, having wriggled through the hedge and out onto the road, arrived at the Sandman, looked up into his starry eyes, nodded once and continued on his way.

'A nice gentleman, that Mr Fox,' said a voice from a small bench beside the man in black, a bench which you could be sure had not been there a moment before.

The Sandman did not answer. He looked down at the curious new arrival.

The person on the bench, for she was a person of sorts, was standing, rather than sitting on the bench, and grinning a wide, mischievous grin. Even while standing she only reached up to the Sandman's elbow. As well as being as small as a young child, the woman was dressed something like a pirate. She wore high, brown leather boots, striped trousers in black and red and what looked like an old, worn, burgundy army jacket, studded with buttons. Over all of this was slung

a multitude of bags and parcels. On her head sat a three-pointed hat beneath which her white hair stood out stark against her dark brown skin. Hanging from her ears were enormous, thick gold hoop earrings.

She was, of course, a faerie. Not the pink, glittery picture book kind. She was the swashbuckling, tricksome, real kind.

'You look old, Penperro,' said the Sandman.

The miniature lady grinned and then stuck out her tongue at the man in black. It was a curious expression coming from the small wrinkled face.

'Old indeed, Sandman,' she said, 'so old I can barely remember the last time someone called me by that name.'

The Sandman did not reply. He knew as well as the faerie beside him that there was nothing that she did not remember like it were yesterday. That was her gift. And her curse. He stood silently, watching the cottage.

'I'll be older still before we're done,' said the faerie. 'This will take more than that one spark of memory let loose in sleeping minds.'

At this the Sandman took a long breath. 'Indeed it will.'

'It may take more than we have left to give,' said the faerie. 'More than I have, anyways.'

The Sandman stood silently in thought again. And then said, 'Time grows short and you grow old.'

The very small, very curious lady made an elaborately silly face at the man in black, sticking out her tongue again, raising one eyebrow, wrinkling her tiny nose.

The Sandman turned away, returning his eyes to Jojo's window, tutting and muttering something under his breath that sounded distinctly like, *'Faeries.'*

'In there, is he?' said the lady. She'd returned her face to normal and followed the Sandman's starry gaze. 'I see. I see.' As if she saw through the window, through the wall, right through to the boy in the bed. 'He will need a considerable amount of help.'

The Sandman nodded. 'Help him, Penperro,' he said.

'He's ready,' replied the tiny woman. 'It is time.'

If you could have seen the Sandman's hidden face, you would have been sure he frowned at this. 'Our time is nearly up,' he said. 'The light is nearly out. That boy is all that stands between all we are and an end that should never come. It is now or it is never.'

Penperro the faerie turned to him. She had been going to make another face and say that she knew that as well as he. But the Sandman was gone; like the golden dust, he'd drifted up and away.

The little woman stood, looked down at herself and said, 'I'd better get changed first. No need to alarm anyone.' But she did not then reach into one of her many bags. She merely wrinkled her nose and blinked.

Now if Jojo had been watching at his window and seen the flash of light and the transformation that took place, maybe then what followed would have been easier to believe.

Maybe.

Twinkling Eyes

Jojo was not at the window. He lay in bed, worrying about the next day and the ones to come, thinking about the nights ahead in the creaking cottage with Grandad and Grandma, thinking about Mum going back to London, off to work, thinking of hours of the summer ahead. Thinking about Dad, clinging to that one snippet of memory, even though it filled him only with a sense of loss that he'd not felt before – it came over him in waves.

He didn't want it. If that was all he got of his dad, he didn't want it.

'I just wish . . . I just wish,' he whispered there in the dark. 'I could see him. Just once. That I could remember.'

Knock! Knock! Knock!

The sound of the brass door knocker banging against the wooden door was so loud that it was if the cottage itself jumped. 'Widdershins!' shouted Grandma in the front room. Ricco muttered something about crumpets in his sleep. Grandad started coughing uncontrollably. Trevor's next fart came out like a trumpet parp. And Jojo's mum stood bolt upright on the sofa in the living room.

'I'll get it,' she said. Lizzie Locke was a busy woman. She worked every hour she could as a junior accountant at JP Slater's so that every penny she earned could go towards a

home and food and clothes for her two precious boys who meant everything to her. They were the world – all she had.

She was a busy woman and a prepared woman. She was always ready. The knocker went and Lizzie leaped upward from the two-person sofa, where she was sitting, sandwiched between her lost husband's parents.

Still in bed, Jojo stayed perfectly still and listened. A strange tingling filled his fingertips. Something was happening – something unplanned, unexpected, unaccountably exciting; a little ball of nervous energy fizzed in Jojo's stomach.

He listened, over his brother's snoring, to his mum muttering to herself: 'Bit late for a delivery,' she said.

Jojo listened as the floorboards in the hall creaked, as the door handle turned and then:

'Hello, Lizzie!' It was a voice he was sure he'd heard before.

'Errr . . .' said his mum. 'Do I . . . ? Who are you?'

'Come on, Lizzie, you remember me.' A little flash of light burst in beneath Jojo's door.

'I remember you,' said his mum in a funny sort of faraway voice.

'I'm Aunt Pen,' said the caller at the door.

Another sort of flash of light.

'You're Aunt Pen,' Mum droned.

'I'm Jojo's godmother.'

A final flash.

'You're Jojo's godmother,' said Mum in that faraway voice.

Something surely was happening – that ball of energy had bounced around Jojo's stomach like a firework and now made its way to his heart, threatening to burst.

Mum carried on in her normal voice. 'Oh, come in, come in. How long has it been? We haven't seen you since . . . since . . . such a long time. Come in.'

Jojo snuck from his bed, crept across the room and pulled the door open a crack. He could only see Mum taking a dark red coat and hanging it beside their own coats. He caught sight of white hair and a black felt hat, exactly like something an aunt would wear. Then he saw the aunt in question. Hanging from her ears were the biggest, thickest, gold hoops Jojo had ever seen.

'Come in, come in,' his mum said again. 'Are you here to stay? It's a bit of a squeeze.'

'Maybe. Maybe. I will see what needs to be,' said the woman, Aunt Pen, as Mum led her down the hall and Jojo got a first full look at her. 'But I won't take up any room. Promise.'

A woman as tall as Mum. Dark, wrinkled skin and white hair like Grandma. She wore a white blouse and a long black and red skirt. Around her neck were dozens and dozens of necklaces, with beads and lockets and pendants on every one which tinkled and rattled and rang as she lightly followed Mum. But the necklaces were not the strangest thing about her. That was her eyes.

Her eyes were as deep and as dark as the night sky but

within them twinkled a light that did not belong in this world – it was as if the stars had come to rest in those eyes.

And as Jojo looked, those eyes turned towards him.

They turned towards him, and Aunt Pen, or whoever she was, grinned and winked.

'I'll not be the least trouble,' she said. 'Promise.' Aunt Pen raised a pair of crossed fingers for Jojo to see.

Trouble.

Beyond the Sea

In the land beyond the sea, the one beyond our world, beyond the beyond, the one which the Sandman and Penperro the faerie called home, nothing looked as it did in that ancient lullaby. Hope and life and light had left the land of the faeries, or to give it its proper name, Elfhaeme.

The cities, towns and villages lay abandoned; weeds sprang up between the cobblestones, walls sagged and collapsed inwards, roofs which had been a living mass of green were now brown and dead. The ice-capped mountains still stood, but above them swirled black and purple clouds, ominous and terrible. The forests had grown dark too; the glades and dry stream beds were choked with evil weeds, which pulled down and devoured the great trees. The rolling hills were no longer green. They were simply grey lumps. The lesser faeries' powers diminished with the waning light and those that hadn't fled to the human world cowered in their dark homes, knowing it would not be long before all the lights went out.

In a western corner of Elfhaeme stood a castle on a rock in an eternally stormy sea – Dinn Ainnhir, the House of the Nine. It was here that all the life, all the colour, all the magic had gathered. That is not to say this place was crowned with life itself. On the contrary. It was hard and grey, like a granite tooth jutting up out of the dark depths in which it stood. But

this was the place where all that vivid life and magic had been drawn and used as a sinister power – the power to hold back death.

There was a throne room in that castle. It had nine sides and once had nine thrones, one for each of the nine faerie queens. Three sets of three.

The first and the oldest, Aoede, queen of song. Followed by Melete, the queen of action, mother of the faerie knight, she who is known to many as Caelia Ceridwen. To complete their triplet came Mneme, the one we call Penperro. She is queen of memory.

The next triad are led by Arche Nymphidia, she who commands all beginnings. After her comes Athena Melpomene, queen of strife, known to many as Morrigan Moronoe, bringer of war. The last of the middle sisters is Arato Thelxinoe, also known as Mabivissey. She is queen of endings, bearer of death. We shall hear much more of her tale.

The last three of nine, the younglings, spend much of their time in the human world, tending, growing, surveying all that they create. Titania, queen of the sky. Morgana, queen of the land. And last, the lost queen, Acciona, queen of the sea, known to her sisters as Polperra the young, Polperra the explorer.

Those sisters, three sets of three, have been known to many, in many ages, in many guises. To the Ancient Greeks, they were the Nine Muses of Boeotia. To the many peoples of the South Pacific, they are the great pantheon of

goddesses. To the Norsemen, they were known as the Nine Mothers of Heimdallr. To the people of Iceland, they were the nine maidens, daughters of Rán. To the Celts, they were the Priestesses of Annwn, the witches of Ystawingun and the sorceresses of Caer Lloyw. And in Britain they are remembered as the Nine Sisters of Avalon.

Now only two could still be found – one hidden in the house and one banished to the other world. The rest live in memory, waiting to discover their fate. Now there were but two thrones in that great castle. Two empty thrones. Surrounded by great columns and huge, stained-glass windows.

All was quiet within the House of the Nine. All was quiet within the room of thrones. All had been quiet for a long time. Where was the last queen that called this place home? Where did she hide? Nobody could say. No noise betrayed her. But then . . .

. . . a voice broke out, from somewhere deep in the bowels of the rocks.

'JOJO!' the choked voice cried. Then, 'Left him . . . alone.' And finally, 'Must . . . get . . . back!'

There was no answer, no reply, except from the same place deep in the rock, a cracking, a thunderous boom as if something split, something splintered, as if some deep magic was straining, snapping.