

THE
STRANGEWORLDS
• TRAVEL AGENCY •

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Orion

ORION CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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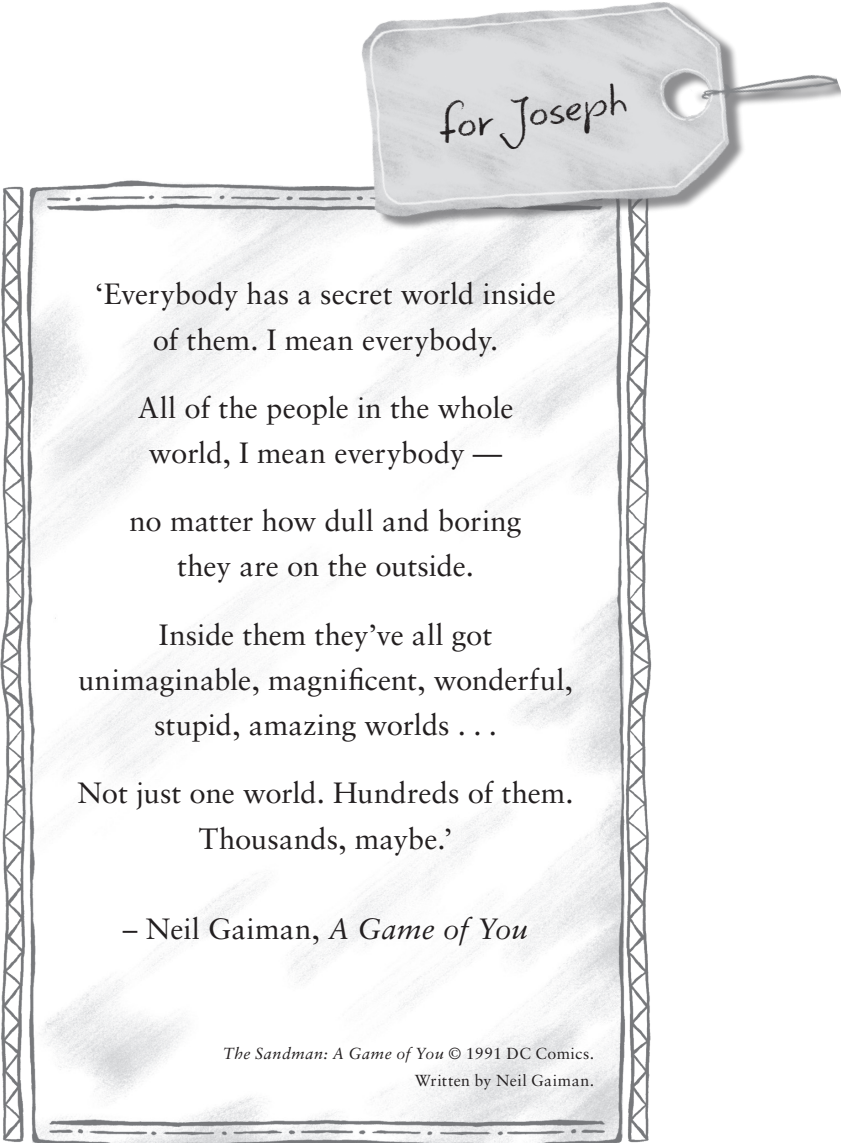
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for Joseph

‘Everybody has a secret world inside
of them. I mean everybody.

All of the people in the whole
world, I mean everybody —
no matter how dull and boring
they are on the outside.

Inside them they’ve all got
unimaginable, magnificent, wonderful,
stupid, amazing worlds . . .

Not just one world. Hundreds of them.
Thousands, maybe.’

– Neil Gaiman, *A Game of You*

The Sandman: A Game of You © 1991 DC Comics.
Written by Neil Gaiman.



There have always been places in our world where magic gathers.

You can see it, if you look close enough. You might see an ancient horse and cart passing down a modern high-street; or a cobbled alleyway that people walk into, but never out of. Now and again, you might see it in a person – someone who looks like they’ve stepped straight out of an old photograph. Or, perhaps, someone whose bag seems to hover off the ground catches your eye in a coffee shop. And when you look again they, and their bag, have disappeared.

And, occasionally, you see magic in shops.

Squashed between brand name stores and fancy displays, the shops soaked in magic are never

eye-catching, or ostentatious. Their windows are stained with dirt and dust, and sometimes their signs have peeled away so much that it looks as though ghost letters are trying to work their way through. Magic does not wish to be noticed, you see. And most people are happy to pretend it does not exist.

The Strangeworlds Travel Agency was very much like a magical shop should be.

The leaded windows were dirty and cracked. There was peeling paint on the front door and it hardly ever seemed to be open. However, there was one element of the shop that refused to fade into the background: the sign over the window. It was always clearly painted, in silky gold letters embellished with black against a ruby-red background. There was one globe at the beginning of the sign and another at the end. The shop was out of its time, for certain, and yet the name was blazoned for all to see.



In the time between the agency opening almost one hundred and fifty years ago and the summer everything changed, the only thing that altered about the frontage

was the globes – they were repainted occasionally, to reflect the shifting borders of various countries.

So, a change was overdue. And it was a new visitor coming into Strangeworlds that ultimately saved the business.

As well as other things.

*

Jonathan Mercator was working. At least, that's what he would claim to be doing, if you asked him. What he was actually doing was sitting at the shop desk, ankles crossed on the surface as he leaned back in his chair, reading.

A number of open journals lay on the desk beside his shoes, and the sound of several out-of-sync clocks, ticking to their own distinct rhythms, filled the otherwise silent air. Jonathan paid them no attention.

It was going to be, by his standards, a very busy day.

A shadow crossed in front of the large bay window. And then it passed again, this time pausing in the region of the front door. After a moment the door opened, scraping over the swollen floorboards, and a boy came in, curling not so much his lip as his entire face at the sight of the shop interior.

Jonathan raised his eyes over the edge of his novel and watched the boy with interest.

‘Um . . .’ The boy looked around. ‘This isn’t Games Warehouse, is it?’

The interest slipped from Jonathan’s face like water vanishing through a sieve, and he gazed around in false astonishment. ‘Isn’t it? Whatever gave you that idea?’

The boy pulled his phone out. ‘It’s supposed to be here.’

‘Ah, well then. If your *phone* says this is the place, it must be correct. Don’t trust your own eyes, whatever you do.’ Jonathan reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and fished out a very small magnifying glass. It was made of a bronze metal, with a thick glass lens. He tossed it at the boy, who caught it uncertainly. ‘Have a good look around, make absolutely certain, why don’t you?’

‘What’s this for?’

‘Humour me.’

The boy frowned and lifted the magnifying glass to his face. ‘What am I supposed to see? Does this even work? Everything’s blurry.’ He put the glass back on the desk. ‘What sort of place is this?’ His loud voice was absorbed by the room, so the sound of it fell rather flat.

Jonathan sighed, picking up the magnifying glass and putting it back in his pocket. ‘The sign over the window wasn’t enough of a clue? We’re a travel agency.’

The boy snorted. ‘All right, maybe it does say *travel agency* over the door, but you don’t even have a computer.’

Jonathan looked at his desk, before taking his legs off it. As well as the pile of journals, there was a half-drunk mug of tea and a plate with the crumbly remains of toast and peanut butter still on it. He put the novel he was reading down, fanned open to save the page. ‘What on earth would I need a computer for?’

‘Er . . . don’t you need to book flights? Arrange holidays?’

Jonathan smiled. A smile full of secrets. ‘I’m not that sort of travel agent.’

The boy frowned. ‘What *do* you do, then?’

Jonathan pushed his glasses up his nose and folded his hands, his fingers interlocking like gears.

But he was saved the trouble of answering by the suitcase to his left springing open.

Perhaps, before things become too complicated, we should clarify precisely *why* this young man was so sceptical about The Strangeworlds Travel Agency.

First of all, the visitor was correct in pointing out that the place was a technological relic. Indeed, the most modern item in Jonathan Mercator's possession was a typewriter from the 1960s. He liked to type passive-aggressive notes on it and hide them in library books. The desk the typewriter sat upon wouldn't have been out of place in the office of a Victorian headmaster, and even Jonathan's clothes looked old. You got the feeling someone might well have died in some of his tweed suits. They were not the sort of thing you'd expect an eighteen-year-old to be wearing.

Then there was the fact that the travel agency had no fancy posters of Disneyland, or the Algarve, or anywhere else you might have wanted to visit. There were no posters at all, in fact. Only a few globes and atlases. And something that was like a globe, except the sphere was shaped more like a pear than a ball.

And then there were the suitcases.

They filled an entire wall of the travel agency, sitting in neat wooden slots that had been built right into the wall. The shelves went from floor to ceiling, each suitcase snug in a niche of its own, its handle waiting to be grasped and pulled down. There were more suitcases stacked between two fireside armchairs like a coffee table, others neatly arranged in piles

against the far wall and a couple leaning against Jonathan's desk.

You could count at least fifty of them stacked in the wall, and not a single one was alike. There were leather ones, heavy cardboard ones, shining crocodile hide ones, and some made of skins that would make even the most learned of zoologists scratch their heads. Some had stamps on their edges, some had splashes of paint, and at least a dozen had paper labels tied onto their handles with string.

The Strangeworlds Travel Agency looked more like a lost and found office, or a rather specialist antique shop, than a travel agency. So it was hardly surprising that the boy was suspicious – even before the suitcase sprang open.

At the sound of the suitcase bursting open, Jonathan turned around, startled, his wood-and-leather swivel chair screeching on its casters. The suitcase lid flew back and a torrent of water splashed out of it.

‘What’s happening?’ the boy gasped, backing quickly away from the flood.

Seconds later, a man climbed out of the suitcase as if it were a trap-door. He was soaking wet and coughing. A collapsed telescope was hanging from his belt in a leather hoop. He quickly reached back down

into the case and heaved until a woman half-clambered, half-tumbled out as well. She landed on her hands and knees, her many-layered dress dripping onto the floorboards. She had three pairs of spectacles hanging around her neck, and thick black hair that was braided and decorated with little strips of ribbons and lace.

And around her right ankle was wrapped a bright red and very slimy-looking tentacle.

‘The blasted thing’s still got hold of me, Hudspeth,’ she huffed, sounding more annoyed than frightened, even as the tentacle wrapped itself higher around her leg.

Her partner gave a sort of mild slap to the tendril. ‘Get off. Pick on something with the same number of legs, why don’t you?’

The tentacle clenched tighter and went redder.

‘Kindly disentangle yourself,’ Jonathan sighed. ‘I can’t have anything coming back with you. You know the rules.’

The woman kicked again, and at last the tentacle let go of her ankle and fell back into the case with a splash.

The suitcase jumped, and the lid snapped shut with a *CLUNK*.

The couple lay on the floor, wet through, catching their breath and grinning like no one who had just

climbed out of a suitcase along with an overly affectionate octopus had any right to. Then they looked at each other and started laughing.

Jonathan pulled one of the journals towards himself. He flipped through it to the right page, and picked up a pen. ‘Welcome back, both of you. Mori and Alfred Hudspeth . . .’

‘Just Hudspeth, if you don’t mind,’ the man winced.

‘Fine. Hm,’ Jonathan pouted. ‘Your registration doesn’t mark you as due back for another week. Didn’t you have a jolly old time?’

‘Jolly’s not the word I’d use.’ The woman, Mori, ruffled her hair, and lifted a pair of glasses to her face, before taking them off and trying a second pair which she kept on, apparently liking them better. ‘The weather’s taken a turn for the worse – you wouldn’t believe the size of the waves. There was talk of ships being blown off the edge of the map entirely.’

Hudspeth nodded. ‘Worst storm I’ve seen for a long time. The ports were all but shut down on the lower half of the world. And they’ve swapped currency again, did you know that?’

‘Oh, for heaven’s sake.’ Jonathan picked up a piece of paper and wrote on it, shaking his head. ‘They do it

so often they'll be back to a barter system next time someone visits. Did you at least get some decent notes?'

'Decent enough.' Hudspeth pulled a damp-looking book from inside his shirt and put it on the desk.

Jonathan raised an eyebrow at it. 'You realise that each one of these guidebooks is extremely valuable? Not to mention unique to each suitcase?' He picked it up between thumb and finger. It dripped. 'This is not how I expect Society members to treat documents in their care.'

'Hey, there wasn't a lot of time for sitting and writing essays,' Hudspeth laughed.

Jonathan didn't join in.

Hudspeth held his fringe back. A cut was visible on his forehead, white where the water had made the wound swell. 'See that? More than a slight fracas by the time we got to the Cove of Voices. Captain Nyfe doesn't want to give passage to anyone she doesn't know, not with how things are at the moment, so we had to catch a lift off one of the smaller vessels to try and get around to The Break. And we almost lost the suitcase when the storm started . . .'

'And then the – the octopus things.' Mori wiped at her eyeliner with a manicured finger. 'What did she call them?'

'*Hafgufa*,' Hudspeth said. 'Monsters of the mist.'

‘That’s it.’ Mori dabbed at her makeup again. The makeup around her eyes was somehow still immaculate. ‘They seemed to be attracted to the suitcase. We had to jump overboard when the beast got hold of the ship. Never seen that before. We were picked up by one of the lifeboats, but finding somewhere to open the case was a nightmare.’

‘Doesn’t mean we wouldn’t do it again.’ Hudspeth grinned.

‘Well, thank heavens you managed to wade back through that ocean of excuses,’ Jonathan said drily. He opened the damp book, and gave it a read. ‘All of one single paragraph written, too.’ He looked up. ‘You know this really isn’t good enough.’

The couple blushed.

‘There wasn’t really time—’

‘We – we nearly lost the suitcase, you know.’

‘*Don’t Lose Your Luggage*,’ Jonathan snapped. ‘That’s Rule Number One. If you wear that badge on your arm,’ Jonathan nodded at a very faded and torn patch on Hudspeth’s sleeve, ‘you abide by the rules and requirements. This isn’t just an opportunity for you to—’

‘We’ll do better, next time,’ Hudspeth interrupted dismissively, helping his wife to her feet. ‘You all right, Mori?’

‘Just about.’ She checked her clothes, fixing them back into position.

As she moved her skirt, a magnifying glass attached to a ring swung down from where it had been tucked into her belt.

This magnifying glass was not as small as the one Jonathan had returned to his jacket pocket. This one was the size of a hairbrush, and had a heavy sort of look about it. The handle was a stained red wood, trimmed with polished brass. The circle of brass that held the lens in place was gleaming, and the glass itself was thick. It was attached to Mori’s belt by a metal loop, like the sort of ring you put your keys on, only much stronger and nicer to look at.

Jonathan stared, his face going from polite to outraged like the flick of a switch. ‘You – you took a magnifying lens with you?’

‘Only as a precaution,’ Hudspeth said quickly. ‘You never know—’

‘I *do* know,’ Jonathan snapped, drawing himself up so he seemed much taller than his usually unimpressive five-foot-eight. ‘How – how *dare* you? You know full well you do not have the authority to wield that.’

‘Listen—’

‘No, *you* listen.’ Jonathan came around the desk, his eyes flashing dangerously behind his glasses. ‘You’re Society members. You know the history of the agency, and you know *why* those lenses are a restricted item. How dare you keep one, let alone take it with you? I am your Head Custodian. I should strike your names off the ledger right this second.’

Mori blushed redder than ever. ‘It was just in case—’
‘In case of *what*?’

‘Sorry.’ Hudspeth raised his hands. ‘Jonathan . . . Mr Mercator . . . We’re sorry. We got it in Five Lights, and thought it might come in useful.’

Jonathan held his hand out. ‘Hand it over.’

The couple looked at each other.

‘I am your Head Custodian,’ he repeated. ‘Unless you want a lifetime ban, hand it over. Now.’

Reluctantly, Mori unhooked the ring from her belt, and put the magnifying glass into Jonathan’s hand.

Hudspeth scowled. ‘Cost me an arm and a leg, that did.’

‘You’re lucky it’s not costing you more,’ Jonathan said ominously. He dropped it into his desk drawer. ‘If you don’t trust yourselves to use a suitcase – and only a suitcase – don’t bother coming back here. This isn’t a game.’

‘All right,’ Mori said gently. ‘We’re sorry. We didn’t think. And we’ll do better with the guidebook, next time. And the suitcase. Not come as close to losing it, I mean.’

Jonathan shut the desk drawer, and nodded. ‘Thank you.’

‘Taking your responsibilities seriously, I see,’ Hudspeth said, with grudging admiration. ‘No offence meant, er . . .’

‘I’m quite sure.’

Mori’s dress dripped water onto the floorboards.

‘Until next time, then.’ Jonathan pushed the ledger towards the edge of the desk and placed a pen into the groove where the pages met.

The two travellers signed their names on the open page. And then there were quick handshakes and smiles, before Mori and her husband excused themselves. They walked inelegantly outside, their clothes still soaked.

The bell over the door shook silently, the tongue long since torn out.

Jonathan fetched a mop and bucket from behind the doorway that led to the back of the shop. He pulled it through on its three remaining wheels, before slapping the mop onto the floor.

He noticed the boy, whose mouth was flapping like he was a goldfish at feeding time. ‘Oh. Are you still here?’

The boy shook his head, snapped his mouth shut, and ran out of the door.

The bell wobbled violently.

Jonathan tutted, and carried on mopping the floor. Once it was dry, he picked up the wet suitcase in one hand, testing the weight and shaking off a few droplets of sea-water. There was a faint scent of cold and salt in the air.

Jonathan gave the suitcase an affectionate pat. Then he put it carefully back into its empty space on the shelves. He went over to the desk, and took out the large magnifying glass, holding it up to the light and examining the lens for a moment. It really was beautiful. Highly crafted. Made by someone who loved it, and would have done wonderful things with it.

A look of anger suddenly crossed over Jonathan’s face.

He dropped the magnifying glass to the floor, and brought his foot down hard.

The glass cracked in two under his heel.

He relaxed a bit. Better to have it broken than at risk of falling into the wrong hands.

He gave a small laugh, barely more than a breath with sound in it, and turned to say something. ‘Did you—’

Then quickly he shut his mouth again, in the way people do when they remember that the person they wanted to speak to is no longer there.

He was quite alone.

And he felt it.