

distant shores**an original yarn fiction by anj medhurst**(inspired by *The Summer Book* by Tove Jansson)

The summer Sophia turned eight, Grandmother announced to everyone's surprise that they would not be staying in the cabin on the island but instead travelling to England. They would stay with Grandmother's niece, Emma, and her family, in a seaside village, where Sophia would practice her English and they would eat crab sandwiches and drink tea.

Sophia could hardly believe it was true. After all, she had not once heard Grandmother mention this mysterious niece (and what's more she also had a son, Joel, who was barely a couple of years older than her) and how could someone who was related to Grandmother, and to Father and Sophia herself, be growing up in England, where everyone drinks tea and eats sandwiches!

'What would be the point of boring you with tales of someone you've never met, who lives in a place you've never seen?' Grandmother said, dismissing her questions with a brief swish of her hand before turning back to the pile of sweaters, socks, waterproof boots, and sun hats that was accumulating on the bed in front of her.

'Will it be hot or cold? Dry or wet? I heard England was always covered in thick fog.' Sophia quizzed her Grandmother as the pile of clothes, shoes, hats, and swimming suits was transferred into her huge suitcase.

'The climate of England is actually very similar to ours here in Finland,' she replied, 'If a little less so. A little less humid in the summer, a little less cold in the winter, a little less

rainy in the spring, and a little less stormy in the autumn. I think we will find it very pleasant – and probably not at all foggy.’

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And now here they were; in a small English village by the North Sea, where the air smelled different, the water tasted funny, and the sea felt warm but looked brown.

‘Are you mad?’ Joel had shrieked with laughter as Sophia had declared the sea to be as warm as a bowl of Lohikeitto, ‘Maybe you’re some kind of fish, or a cold-blooded reptile creature?’ he teased, as Sophia strode unerringly into the gentle waves before kicking off away from the shore and turning to wave at Joel as she trod water.

‘Only a crazy person would choose to swim in this. It’s freezing!’ he hopped around in the shallows, ducking and waving his arms around to fend off the droplets as Sophia splashed him with her feet.

‘Freezing?’ she scoffed. ‘The sea by our summer cabin in the Gulf of Finland really does freeze in the winter and yes, only a crazy person would swim there between October and April but this is really very nice. You should be braver, it’s fun, come on!’

But Joel refused to be tempted and after a while Sophia saw Grandmother walking slowly along the beach, digging her cane firmly into the loose pebbles that formed the shoreline, and she hauled herself up the gently shifting shingle to greet her.

‘Grandmother, can you believe that Joel refused to swim with me? He says the water is “freezing”. Can you believe that?’

‘We mustn’t be rude about our kind host, Sophia.’ Grandmother tutted at Sophia but her eyes were smiling. ‘Us Finns have the sea in our veins, you know. Maybe the English have historically been a bit more land-based?’

Sophia is not convinced by her grandmother's logic but she wraps her beach towel around her shoulders and sits on the warm pebbles next to Joel who is sifting the stones through his hands, back and forth. Sophia can see that he has goosebumps on his arms. Maybe Grandmother is right. Maybe the Finns are just made of sturdier stuff.

They chatter about what they might do after lunch – Sophia would like to make friends with the piebald pony that lives in the Cow Field.

'But why is it called the Cow Field if it only has a horse in it?' she'd queried as Joel had given her a tour of the village pointing out the notable features, Alfie the piebald being one of them.

'It's just the name it has always had,' Joel shrugged. 'Maybe it had cows in it once, I don't know.'

'Well, that's just silly,' Sophia was not convinced but Grandmother pointed out that there were plenty of names on their summer island that didn't make an awful lot of sense.

'Just think about it Sophia, The Cairn doesn't actually have a Cairn on it, does it? I mean, it may have once when the grandfather of the oldest fisherman on the island was a small boy but no one there now remembers it and yet we still call it The Cairn – and The Magic Forest. Have you ever known anything in slightest bit magical to happen there?'

Sophia's eyes widened in amazement. 'When have you not known something magical to happen in the forest. It's the most magical place in the whole of the Gulf of Finland.'

Grandmother conceded that she might be right about that and the three of them returned their attention to the pebbles around them.

'I've never known a beach with so many pebbles before.' Sophia scooped a handful up and let them trickle through her fingers. 'Why are there no flat rocks or sandy pools?'

“it’s the geology.’ Joel answered. ‘I’ve been learning about it at school. This part of England used to be joined to mainland Europe, did you know that? Four hundred and fifty thousand years ago, we’d have been able to walk to Holland from here, maybe even to Finland.’

‘You might have been able to,’ Grandmother smiled. ‘I am quite glad that the sea is here now, as I would much prefer to go by boat.’

‘Look!’ Sophia interrupted their geology lesson and held up a pebble for them to see, ‘It has a hole going all the way through it.’ She held the round flint pebble, worn perfectly smooth, with an irregular shaped hole right through the centre of it, up to her eye and squinted through it. ‘I can see Holland I think. Just there on the horizon.’

‘That’s a Hag stone,’ Joel nodded knowledgeably ‘they ward off witches.’

‘How?’ Sophia poked her little finger into the hole and wiggled the stone in front of Joel.

‘It’s the hole. It lets the good luck through but the bad luck and evil spirits are too big so they can’t get through.’ Joel tugged at the stone on Sophia’s finger. ‘Your finger can’t get through the hole, maybe you’re a witch.’ He chuckled as Sophia screwed her nose up and quickly pulled the pebble off her finger.

‘I am not a witch you silly boy. How can that be true? How can a pebble stop a witch?’

‘Hag stones do all sorts of things,’ Joel continued. ‘You have to hang them on your barn door before you milk your cows to stop the milk going sour, and sailors fix them to their boats to stop the witches grabbing hold. We’ve got one on a string by the cottage door to keep the evil spirits out.’ Joel plucked the stone from Sophia’s hand. ‘You should take it home and hang it above your door.’

‘It sounds like nonsense to me’ Sophia looked unconvinced but Grandmother nodded at Joel.

‘I think we will take it home with us. A little piece of English folklore as a reminder of our visit. And warding off witches will be a bonus.’ She turned to Sophia, ‘I remember how superstitious my own dear grandmother was. If the moon was full and the midges stopped dancing, or the cutlery crossed in the drawer, or swallows left the barn unexpectedly she would tell tales of ill-luck and foreboding and cook elixirs of herbs to protect my poor grandfather – who was incidentally a learned doctor who held no truck with her ‘nonsense’ as he called it. But he didn’t get ill, and they suffered no bad luck in their long lives, so maybe there is something to be said for paying heed to folklore and superstition, even if you don’t really believe it can be true.’

Grandmother dug her cane into the pebbles in front of her and attempted to haul herself up. ‘Give me your hand Joel, would you? And help this wise old lady to her feet.’ She winked at Joel and rearranged her skirt before they turned to walk back up the beach towards the village.

‘Let’s go and make friends with that piebald pony, shall we? And then maybe we’ll have a nice crab sandwich and a cup of tea for lunch. What do you think Sophia?’

Sophia skipped ahead holding her hag stone up to the sky. ‘I think that sounds like a very good plan indeed.’

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