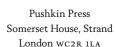
PUSHKIN CHILDREN'S



H.S. NORUP



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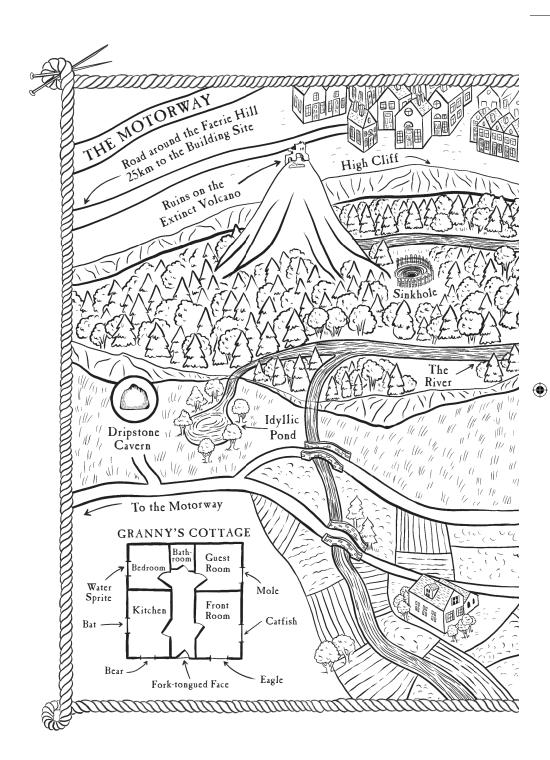


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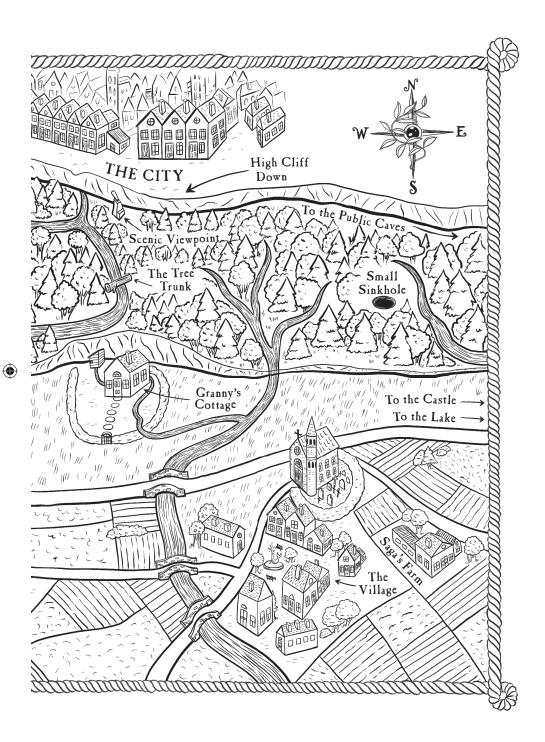
















1 Saga

Entirely Ordinary

Saga squinted through her misty glasses at the faerie creature. She shivered and tightened the hood of her red waterproof jacket. A cold October rain bounced on the puddles and lashed at the back of the bus shelter where she was waiting. The road remained deserted.

'Guess it's just us. Again,' she said to the creature—a tree sprite she called Mr Tumbleweed—who lay sprawled in her bicycle basket. He was the size of a nursery-school child, and his twiggy, stick-insect-like legs hung out over its side.

The only answer she got was a snore. A snore that sounded like a gurgle, because her bicycle was outside the shelter in the pouring rain, and the tree sprite's mouth—a gash in his log head—was wide open.

Exactly one bicycle stood in the long row of bike racks by the boarded-up lakeside kiosk.



Last Saturday, only two others had joined her litter-pick walk in the woods. But right after the summer, right after she'd become a little bit famous, more than twenty kids from school had turned up.

'Come on. Let's go!' she said, as much to herself as to her companion, and stepped out from the shelter. 'Wake up!'

When the tree sprite didn't stir, she reached out to shake him. However, before she even touched his gnarled shoulder, he emitted a high-pitched whine and shot up, as if she'd set him on fire. In one leap, he was atop the bus shelter roof.

'Somebody should not touch this one body with some iron thing,' Mr Tumbleweed complained in his creaking woodenfloorboard voice.

Saga turned her arm and glanced down at the metal button on her sleeve. 'Sorry. I didn't think.'

'Then somebody should try thinking!'

'Sorry. Will you help me, please?' At least he could do that when they were alone.

With a grumble she couldn't catch for the pounding rain, he leapt down and jumped across the empty car park. Saga trotted after him in her wellies, splashing straight through the deepest potholes, towards the dense greyness that she knew must be the lake. Before she'd picked up the first plastic bottle, raindrops were already sliding down past the knitted rainbow scarf and inside her jumper.

Mr Tumbleweed reappeared out of the sheeting rain, extending both hands, his twig fingers spread wide. Each of them pierced a piece of litter—bits of sweet wrappers, torn





magazine pages, soggy tissues. Saga plucked them all off and stuffed them in her bin bag.

On hot summer days, the grass embankment would be crowded with people who came to swim in the cool water. Even off-season, when the little kiosk was closed, it was a popular place for picnics and bonfires. In the month since she'd last been here, quite a lot of litter had accumulated on the sandy strip by the water's edge and under the gorse bushes. Saga couldn't understand how some people had no problem bringing their own food and drink but didn't take their rubbish with them when they left.

While they made their way along the lake, Saga let her thoughts wander. As usual, whenever she was bored, they wandered back to Faerie and to the adventure she and her best friend Alfred had been on in that other realm. They had encountered sprites and tiny butterfly faeries, vicious pixies, fearsome high faeries, helpful shapeshifters and terrifying beasts. Some of them had even appeared nearby in the real-world forest.

But, in the two months since Alfred had left, Saga hadn't seen a single faerie creature. Except Mr Tumbleweed, of course. And she'd been collecting rubbish in the woods most Saturdays, half hoping for a sighting. There would be no sightings today, not here by the lake. She stomped on a plastic container and picked it up, before she carefully tackled the shards from a broken glass bottle.

Three hours later, Saga cycled home to the farm, while Mr Tumbleweed snored in her basket. She was soaked to the bone, despite her waterproof gear. Inside the boot room, she





left her drenched clothes in a pile and headed directly to the upstairs shower. So she was only wearing knickers and her inside-out vest and a towel wrapped around her wet hair when she discovered Oliver was home.

He stood in her room, by her desk, turning the pages of her notebook. Her Faerie Investigation Society notebook, where she'd sketched and described all the faerie creatures she'd seen.

'Hey! That's private!' Saga stormed at him, snatching the notebook out of his hands so quickly one of the pages tore. 'And this is my room!'

'Nice to see you too.' Oliver sniggered in that annoyingly overbearing big-brother manner of his. He peered at the torn paper pinched between his fingers. 'Is that supposed to look like a dog with antlers?'

Involuntarily, Saga shuddered. 'A wolf,' she muttered, a memory of those antlered wolf beasts clear in her mind. She rubbed her bare arms where goose pimples sprang up. 'A faerie creature that me and Alfred—'

'Oh, grow up and stop that faerie nonsense. How old are you? Ten?' After Oliver had turned eighteen and now thought he was an adult, he'd become even more self-important.

'You know I'm twelve. And faeries are actually real.' She glanced up at the wardrobe, where Mr Tumbleweed was shaking his log head from side to side.

'Tell someone who cares. I just came to borrow your scissors.'

'Steal, more likely,' Saga muttered under her breath, as she pulled a desk drawer out and found her scissors. 'Why are you here? Did your fancy school throw you out?'





'Ha, ha. I have two weeks off. You have one, right? And still a whole week of school to go first.' He left her room, calling, 'You'd better be quiet in the mornings...'

Saga gritted her teeth and decided that early Monday morning she'd get Poppy and Daisy—their two younger sisters—to come upstairs and play their shrilly recorders right outside his bedroom door. With Oliver at home from boarding school, the coming weeks would be less boring, but not in a good way.

'I wish I could tell someone who cares,' she said, sinking down on her chair. But, unfortunately, whenever she mentioned faeries, most people reacted like Oliver. Or worse. 'I wish I could tell the whole world about faerie creatures.' Leaning back, she tapped the bridge of her glasses. 'I wish I could become the David Attenborough of the faerie world...' She imagined herself walking through the twilit faerie landscape, speaking to a TV camera in stage whispers, filming a documentary.

'Faerie bodies will not be happy to have somebody talking about them to human nobodies,' Mr Tumbleweed said from the top of the wardrobe.

'How would they even know?' she said, dismissing the treesprite's warning. He was always so negative.

She tried to return to her documentary fantasy, but, in her mind, antlered wolves appeared and chased her camera crew away. Saga shook her head to get rid of the image.

It was no use daydreaming anyway. She had to do something concrete. Something people would notice and appreciate—like stopping the construction of a motorway tunnel through the Faerie Hill.





That was what she and Alfred had done a couple of months ago. On their expedition to Faerie, they'd found an enormous dripstone cavern inside the hill. A cavern so spectacular that even the mayor realized preserving it would be more valuable than his beloved motorway tunnel.

The fact was that that one week of frantic action had put the rest of her life into perspective. After the initial media buzz, which Alfred was only too happy to let her handle on her own, interest in Saga and her nature group projects had petered out.

The rush of having had a real impact on the world had been incredible. And now... Nothing. The past month, since it had all died down, had been the most boring period of her entire life.

With her bare feet, Saga pushed off from the leg of her desk. She tucked her knees up, wrapping her arms around them as the chair swivelled, wishing she could swirl herself into that other realm.

The chair stopped, facing the window. Outside, rain slid down the glass in steady streams, blending the darkening grey sky and the bare brown fields.

'Nothing ever happens here! I wish Alfred was coming for the autumn break. I wish something exciting would hap—'

'Somebody should take care what they wish for,' Mr Tumbleweed groaned.

'Or what?' Saga sighed. She had to do something. Anything. Luckily, she still had one idea. One idea that could grab people's attention, whether they believed faeries were real or not. An idea that had sprung from her belief that there might be other humans in the faerie realm.





In addition to documenting everything about faeries in her notebook, Saga had also been to the library and searched the microfilm archives for information about the Faerie Hill and its surroundings. Specifically for information about disappearances and suspicious occurrences. Unfortunately, all the instances that were marginally interesting had taken place long before she was born. All except one.

Twelve years ago, a baby had vanished. In the newspapers, the case was referred to as 'the kidnapping of Baby L'. She'd found out precious little about the family, but it was clear that the child was never returned to its parents and had never been found.

To Saga, the obvious explanation was that the baby had been taken by faeries. The faeries would've exchanged the child for a changeling—that was what faeries did in stories. All she had to do was return to the faerie realm, find the child, who must be her age now, and bring them home. Simple. Well, simple if she had any means of returning to Faerie... But without Alfred, no chance.

At first, she'd actually thought Alfred might be a changeling, but he was something far more fascinating. They'd discovered he was a demi-fae: half human and half faerie. Half watersprite, to be precise.

With her whole being, Saga wished it was her. But she was just an entirely ordinary human, with ordinary human parents, living a boring ordinary human life.

She sighed again and did the one thing that always cheered her up. After powering up her laptop, Saga clicked on her saved shortcut to the local TV station's website. It opened a video





from the protest march against the motorway tunnel through the Faerie Hill. A memory she relished.

She was watching herself tearing free of a police officer's grip, when she noticed a photo of Mayor Underwood in the sidebar news section. He was smirking at her from above a headline that read: *Underwood Cavern Grand Opening*.

Forgetting the video, she tapped the photo, right on the mayor's long nose. An even larger photo of his smug face popped up. She quickly scanned the text, muttering, 'Oh no, oh no, oh no,' as she read.

At the same time, a thrill surged though Saga's body. Because surely something exciting was about to happen.



