

Neil Gaiman

The Ocean at the End of the Lane

Excerpt

I remembered it before I turned the corner and saw it, in all its dilapidated red-brick glory: the Hempstocks' farmhouse.

It took me by surprise, although that was where the lane had always ended. I could have gone no further. I parked the car at the side of the farmyard. I had no plan. I wondered whether, after all these years, there was anyone still living there, or, more precisely, if the Hempstocks were still living there. It seemed unlikely, but then, from what little I remembered, they had been unlikely people.

The stench of cow muck struck me as I got out of the car, and I walked, gingerly, across the small yard to the front door. I looked for a doorbell, in vain, and then I knocked. The door had not been latched properly, and it swung gently open as I rapped it with my knuckles.

I had been here, hadn't I, a long time ago? I was sure I had. Childhood memories are sometimes covered and obscured beneath the things that come later, like childhood toys forgotten at the bottom of a crammed adult closet, but they are never lost for good. I stood in the hallway and called, "Hello? Is there anybody here?"

I heard nothing. I smelled bread-baking and wax furniture polish and old wood. My eyes were slow to adjust to the darkness: I peered into it, was getting ready to turn and leave when an elderly woman came out of the dim hallway holding a white duster. She wore her gray hair long.



I said, "Mrs. Hempstock?"

She tipped her head to one side, looked at me. "Yes. I *do* know you, young man," she said. I am not a young man. Not any longer. "I know you, but things get messy when you get to my age. Who are you, exactly?"

"I think I must have been about seven, maybe eight, the last time I was here."

She smiled then. "You were Lettie's friend? From the top of the lane?"

"You gave me milk. It was warm, from the cows." And then I realized how many years had gone by, and I said, "No, you didn't do that, that must have been your mother who gave me the milk. I'm sorry." As we age, we become our parents; live long enough and we see faces repeat in time. I remembered Mrs. Hempstock, Lettie's mother, as a stout woman. This woman was stick-thin, and she looked delicate. She looked like her mother, like the woman I had known as Old Mrs. Hempstock.

Sometimes when I look in the mirror I see my father's face, not my own, and I remember the way he would smile at himself, in mirrors, before he went out. "Looking good," he'd say to his reflection, approvingly. "Looking good."

"Are you here to see Lettie?" Mrs. Hempstock asked.

"Is she here?" The idea surprised me. She

had *gone* somewhere, hadn't she? America?

The old woman shook her head. "I was just about to put the kettle on. Do you fancy a spot of tea?"

I hesitated. Then I said that, if she didn't mind, I'd like it if she could point me toward the duck pond first.

"Duck pond?"

I knew Lettie had had a funny name for it. I remembered that. "She called it the sea. Something like that."

The old woman put the cloth down on the dresser. "Can't drink the water from the sea, can you? Too salty. Like drinking life's blood. Do you remember the way? You can get to it around the side of the house. Just follow the path."

If you'd asked me an hour before, I would have said no, I did not remember the way. I do not even think I would have remembered Lettie Hempstock's name. But standing in that hallway, it was all coming back to me. Memories were waiting at the edges of things, beckoning to me. Had you told me that I was seven again, I might have half-believed you, for a moment.

"Thank you."

I walked into the farmyard. I went past the chicken coop, past the old barn and along the edge of the field, remembering where I was, and what was coming next, and exulting in the knowledge. Hazels lined the side of the meadow. I picked a handful of the green nuts, put them in my pocket.

The pond is next, I thought. I just have to go

around this shed, and I'll see it.

I saw it and felt oddly proud of myself, as if that one act of memory had blown away some of the cobwebs of the day.

The pond was smaller than I remembered. There was a little wooden shed on the far side, and, by the path, an ancient, heavy, wood-and-metal bench. The peeling wooden slats had been painted green a few years ago. I sat on the bench, and stared at the reflection of the sky in the water, at the scum of duckweed at the edges, and the half-dozen lily pads. Every now and again, I tossed a hazelnut into the middle of the pond, the pond that Lettie Hempstock had called . . .

It wasn't the sea, was it?

She would be older than I am now, Lettie Hempstock. She was only a handful of years older than I was back then, for all her funny talk. She was eleven. I was . . . what was I? It was after the bad birthday party. I knew that. So I would have been seven.

I wondered if we had ever fallen in the water. Had I pushed her into the duck pond, that strange girl who lived in the farm at the very bottom of the lane? I remembered her being in the water. Perhaps she had pushed me in too.

Where did she go? America? No, *Australia*. That was it. Somewhere a long way away.

And it wasn't the sea. It was the ocean.

Lettie Hempstock's ocean.

I remembered that, and, remembering that, I remembered everything.