

Jerusalem

Neil Gaiman

*I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.*
~ William Blake

Jerusalem, thought Morrison, was like a deep pool, where time had settled too thickly. It had engulfed him, engulfed both of them, and he could feel the pressure of time pushing him up and out. Like swimming down too deep.

He was glad to be out of it.

Tomorrow he would go back to work once more. Work was good. It would give him something to focus on. He turned on the radio and then, mid-song, turned it off.

"I was enjoying that," said Delores. She was cleaning the fridge before filling it with fresh food.

He said, "I'm sorry." He couldn't think straight, with the music playing. He needed the silence.

Morrison closed his eyes and, for a moment, he was back in Jerusalem, feeling the desert heat on his face, staring at the old city and understanding, for the first time, how small it all was. That the real Jerusalem, two thousand years ago, was smaller than an English country town.

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Their guide, a lean, leathery woman in her fifties, pointed. "That's where the sermon on the mount would have been given. That's where Jesus was arrested. He was imprisoned there. Tried before Pilate there, at the far end of the Temple. Crucified on that hill." She pointed matter-of-factly down the slopes and up again. It was a few hours' walk at most.

Delores took photos. She and their guide had hit it off immediately. Morrison had not wanted to visit Jerusalem. He had wanted to go to Greece for his holidays, but Delores had insisted. Jerusalem was biblical, she told him. It was part of history.

They walked through the old town, starting in the Jewish Quarter. Stone steps. Closed shops. Cheap souvenirs. A man walked past them wearing a huge black fur hat, and a thick coat. Morrison winced. "He must be boiling."

"It's what they used to wear in Russia," said the guide. "They wear it here. The fur hats are for holidays. Some of them wear hats even bigger than that."

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Delores put a cup of tea down in front of him. "Penny for your thoughts," she said.

"Remembering the holiday."

"You don't want to brood on it," she said. "Best to let it go. Why don't you take the dog for a nice walk?"

He drank the tea. The dog looked at him expectantly when he went to put the lead on it, as if it were about to say something. "Come on, boy," said Morrison.

He went left, down the avenue, heading for the Heath. It was green.

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Jerusalem had been golden: a city of sand and rock. They walked from the Jewish Quarter to the Muslim Quarter, passing bustling shops piled high with sweet things to eat, with fruits or with bright clothes.

"Then the sheets are gone," their guide had said to Delores. "Jerusalem syndrome."

"Never heard of it," she said. Then, to Morrison, "Have you ever heard of it?"

"I was miles away," said Morrison. "What does that mean? That door, with all the stencils on it?"

"It welcomes someone back from a pilgrimage to Mecca."

"There you go," said Delores. "For us, it was going to Jerusalem. Someone else goes somewhere else. Even in the Holy Land, there's still pilgrims."

"Nobody comes to London," said Morrison. "Not for that."

Delores ignored him. "So, they're gone," she said to the guide. "The wife comes back from a shopping trip, or the museum, and there's the sheets gone."

"Exactly," said the guide. "She goes to the front desk, and tells them she does not know where the husband is."

Delores put her hand around Morrison's arm, as if assuring herself that he was there. "And where is he?"

"He has Jerusalem syndrome. He is on the street corner, wearing nothing but a toga. That's the sheets. He is preaching—normally about being good, obeying God. Loving each other."

"Come to Jerusalem and go mad," said Morrison. "Not much of an advertising slogan."

Their guide looked at him sternly. "It is," she said, with what Morrison thought might actually be pride, "the only location-specific mental illness. And it is the only easily curable mental illness. You know what the cure is?"

"Take away their sheets?"

The guide hesitated. Then she smiled. "Close. You take the person out of Jerusalem. They get better immediately."

"Afternoon," said the man at the end of his road. They'd been nodding to each other for eleven years now, and he still had no idea of the man's name. "Bit of a tan. Been on holiday, have we?"

"Jerusalem," said Morrison.

"Brrr. Wouldn't catch me going there. Get blown up or kidnapped soon as look at you."

"That didn't happen to us," said Morrison.

"Still. Safer at home. Eh?"

Morrison hesitated. Then he said, in a rush, "We went through a youth hostel, down to an underground, um . . ." He lost the word. "Water storage place. From Herod's time. They stored the rainwater underground, so it wouldn't evaporate. A hundred years ago someone rowed a boat all the way through underground Jerusalem."

The lost word hovered at the edge of his consciousness like a hole in a dictionary. Two syllables, begins with a C, means deep echoing underground place where they store water.

"Well, then," said his neighbor.

"Right," said Morrison.

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The Heath was green and it rolled in gentle slopes, interrupted by oak and beech, by chestnut and poplar. He imagined a world in which London was divided, in which London was a city crusaded against, lost and won and lost again, over and over.

Perhaps, he thought, it isn't madness. Perhaps the cracks are just deeper there, or the sky is thin enough that you can hear, when God talks to His prophets. But nobody stops to listen any longer.

"Cistern," he said, aloud.

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The green of the Heath became dry and golden, and the heat burned his skin like the opening of an oven door. It was as if he had never left.

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"My feet hurt," Delores was saying. And then she said, "I'm going back to the hotel."

Their guide looked concerned.

"I just want to put my feet up for a bit," said Delores. "It's just all so much to take in."

They were passing the Christ prison shop. It sold souvenirs and carpets. "I'll bathe my feet. You two carry on without me. Pick me up after lunch."

Morrison would have argued, but they had hired the guide for the whole day. Her skin was dark and weathered. She had an extraordinarily white smile, when she smiled. She led him to a café.

"So," said Morrison. "Business good?"

"We do not see as many tourists," she said. "Not since the intifada began."

"Delores. My wife. She's always wanted to come here. See the holy sights."

"We have so many of them here. Whatever you believe. Christian or Muslim or Jew. It's still the Holy City. I've lived here all my life."

"I suppose you must be looking forward to them sorting all this out," he said. "Er. The Palestinian situation. The politics."

She shrugged. "It doesn't matter to Jerusalem," she said. "The people come. The people believe. Then they kill each other, to prove that God loves them."

"Well," he said. "How would you fix it?"

She smiled her whitest smile. "Sometimes," she said, "I think it would be best if it was bombed. If it was bombed back to a radioactive desert. Then who would want it? But then I think, they would come here and collect the radioactive dust that might contain atoms of the Dome of the Rock, or of the Temple, or a wall that Christ leaned against on his way to the Cross. People would fight over who owns a poisonous desert, if that desert was Jerusalem."

"You don't like it here?"

"You should be glad there is no Jerusalem where you come from. Nobody wants to partition London.

Nobody goes on pilgrimages to the holy city of Liverpool. No prophets walked in Birmingham. Your country is too young. It is still green."

"England's not young."

"Here, they still struggle over decisions made two thousand years ago. They have been fighting about who owns this city for over three thousand years, when King David took it in battle from the Jebusites."

He was drowning in the Time, could feel it crushing him, like an ancient forest being crushed into oil.

She said, "Do you have any children?"

The question took Morrison by surprise. "We wanted kids. It didn't work out that way."

"Is she looking for a miracle, your wife? They do, sometimes."

"She has . . . faith," he said. "I've never believed. But no, I don't think so." He sipped his coffee. "So. Um. Are you married?"

"I lost my husband."

"Was it a bomb?"

"What?"

"How you lost your husband?"

"An American tourist. From Seattle."

"Oh."

They finished their coffee. "Shall we see how your wife's feet are doing?"

As they walked up the narrow street, towards the hotel, Morrison said, "I'm really lonely. I work at a job I don't enjoy and come home to a wife who loves me but doesn't much like me, and some days it feels like I can't move and that all I want is for the whole world to go away."

She nodded. "Yes, but you don't live in Jerusalem."

The guide waited in the lobby of the hotel while Morrison went up to his room. He was, somehow, not surprised in the least to see that Delores was not in the bedroom, or in the tiny bathroom, and that the sheets that had been on the bed that morning were now gone.

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His dog could have walked the Heath forever, but Morrison was getting tired and a fine rain was drizzling. He walked back through a green world. A green and pleasant world, he thought, knowing that wasn't quite it. His head was like a filing cabinet that had fallen downstairs, and all the information in it was jumbled and disordered.

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They caught up with his wife on the Via Dolorosa. She wore a sheet, yes, but she seemed intent, not mad. She was calm, frighteningly so.

"Everything is love," she was telling the people. "Everything is Jerusalem. God is love. Jerusalem is love."

A tourist took a photograph, but the locals ignored her. Morrison put his hand on her arm. "Come on, love," he said. "Let's go home."

She looked through him. He wondered what she was seeing. She said, "We are home. In this place the walls

of the world are thin. We can hear Him calling to us, through the walls. Listen. You can hear Him. Listen!"

Delores did not fight or even protest as they led her back to the hotel. Delores did not look like a prophet. She looked like a woman in her late thirties wearing nothing but a sheet. Morrison suspected that their guide was amused, but when he caught her eyes he could see only concern.

They drove from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv, and it was on the beach in front of their hotel, after sleeping for almost twenty-four hours, that Delores came back, now just slightly confused, with little memory of the previous day. He tried to talk to her about what he had seen, about what she had said, but stopped when he saw it was upsetting her. They pretended that it had not happened, did not mention it again.

Sometimes he wondered what it had felt like inside her head, that day, hearing the voice of God through the golden-colored stones, but truly, he did not want to know. It was better not to.

It's location-specific. You take the person out of Jerusalem, he thought-wondering, as he had wondered a hundred times in the last few days, if this was truly far enough.

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He was glad they were back in England, glad they were home, where there was not enough Time to crush you, to suffocate you, to make you dust.

Morrison walked back up the avenue in the drizzle, past the trees in the pavement, past the neat front gardens and the summer flowers and the perfect green of the lawns, and he felt cold.

He knew she would be gone before he turned the corner, before he saw the open front door banging in the wind.

He would follow her. And, he thought, almost joyfully, he would find her.

This time he would listen.