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### **In a Distant Land**

**A Story About the Courage and Strength that Lie Within Us**

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#### Cover blurb:

It is not because things are difficult that we do not dare,  
It is because we do not dare, that they are difficult.

*Seneca*

The Novemberlands are supposed to be dangerous. That's what the grown-ups say. The slopes are too precarious, the mountain sides too icy, the valleys too sinister. What lies beyond, no-one knows. Perhaps a beautiful land, a better one than the one where they live. The children dream about it. One day, they make a decision: they want to see the new world with their own eyes, and they dare to take the first step...

#### **In a Distant Land**

#### **A Story about the Courage and Strength that Lie Within us**

Told by Michael Engler

With Pictures by Matthias Derenbach

**A** warm gust of wind blew through the beech tree, causing the leaves far above Animah's head to rustle gently. A leaf fell and floated down into her lap. Animah picked it up, turning it carefully between her fingers as she looked intently in the direction of the Novemberlands. She took a deep breath and continued with the story of her village.

'So they built the village far away from the Novemberlands. Because the Novemberlands appeared too dangerous. The slopes were too precarious, the mountain sides too icy, the

valleys too sinister. That meant that nobody ever knew what lay beyond the Novemberlands.'

**B**eyond the Novemberlands was an unknown land, a place nobody knew anything about.

An entire land that could be invented. How wonderful! Children immediately started painting pictures in their minds of a beautiful place, better than their own. They dreamt of green meadows on rolling hills, babbling brooks full of glittering fish, deep forests and butterflies. With every wonderful image they conjured up, their longing grew. And so one day, Odilli asked: 'Why don't we go and see what's really there?'

'Because the journey would be dangerous,' thought Amalfi.

'Because we're safe here,' Olafur pondered.

'Because we're afraid,' said Animah, quietly. 'As scared as the grown-ups. Because we don't know what we'll find there, either.'

**T**he children took the dusty paths back to the village. They saw the grown-ups in the fields, gathering stones, pouring tankards of sand onto scorched earth and picking dried leaves from the trees. Later on, Animah lowered her bucket into the well. The bucket hit dry ground. Animah looked over to her beech tree, sadly. At that moment, she made a decision.

**I** don't want to be afraid any more,' she murmured.

'We don't want to be afraid any more either,' said the other children. A few of them still wanted to speak to the grown-ups. But the others said that they didn't have the courage anyway, otherwise they would have done something long ago. The leaves in the tree above them whispered: 'Do you have enough courage? Do you dare to try?' Carefully, Animah dug a sapling out of the hard earth.

**A**s the next day dawned, there were no figures to be seen scurrying through the shadows of the houses. They met on the edge of the village, just as they had agreed. Each of them carried a sack with bread and water for the journey. Animah held her beech sapling gingerly in her hands. Their journey would be long, they could sense it, but long is not forever, they knew that. The journey was hard, but they had expected that. Fear and hope glinted in their eyes.

**T**he first step into an unknown land is always the hardest. The children hesitated, because they were afraid. But Animah said, 'It is all right to be afraid. Because only stupid people

never get scared.’ And so the children held hands, so that they could share their fear. After all, fear gets smaller if you give some of it away. Together, they took the first step.

**I**t was their first night without their parents. Not only that, but they were in a strange land. The humid air tasted like mouldy bread and the ground beneath them was as hard as stone. Nobody knew this place, no-one knew the rules. The children heard themselves breathing, murmuring, sighing. They sensed each other’s warmth and felt each other’s hands in their own, fearful or comforting. They knew they had each other. Now, and tomorrow too. That meant a great deal. A great deal more than the fear.

**T**hey lost track of the most direct route in the thick fog. On the new paths they found, dark shadows and black branches grabbed at the children like gnarled fingers. ‘Noises and shadows can’t hurt us,’ Animah reassured the others, hoping she was right.

**T**he children had shadows of their own. They were gentle and harmless. And they had fingers of their own, which they could make into strong fists. Now the children saw other things on the new paths: a mountain hare, leaping across the landscape, and a cloud that seemed to be showing them the way.

**T**he journey got harder, which the children had feared. That was why they had prepared for the worst, but dreamt of the best. The rain was against them and now the darkness held them back even during the daytime. They faced up to the rain and defied the darkness by inventing new images of the land that awaited them. ‘We’ll bathe beneath waterfalls and jump in puddles...’ Animah began, her voice sure, and one child after another added something else to the picture. The colder it got, the warmer the image became. This gave them strength against the rain and the darkness and whatever was still to come.

**B**ut the Novemberlands didn’t take any nonsense. They were harsh and cold, their storms were devious and their ice was mean. When some of the children couldn’t go on, the others built them stretchers and sleighs from whatever they could find. Fear found its way into the silence between the storms; it ate away at their clothes along with the frost and tried to get to their little hearts. Swirling snow blurred the children’s vision. Thunderous storms took their breath away. But with what was left of their breath, they screamed into the storm. They took aim at fear with a handful of snow. They laughed at the eerie silence until it disappeared. And when they laughed, they lived. They didn’t take any nonsense!

**T**he cold of the winter burned their skin, which kept them warm. And their dreams made them fearless. But on the final steep slope, when their little ice-cold feet slipped, when their numb fingers became useless, when white flurries filled their eyes and hunger sapped their strength, a few of them doubted. And the snowflakes whispered: 'Do you have enough courage? Will you dare to try?' With the last of her strength, Animah lifted her head towards the piercing snow and cried: 'Oh yes! We have enough courage and we dare to try!'

**O**nce again, the strong held up the weak. Once again, the brave encouraged the fearful. Once again, the assertive held out their hands to the cautious. Once again, they held together. And together, together, they climbed, metre by metre by metre, up and up. Until they saw the light.

**I**t looked different than the children had imagined. The meadows were greener, the forests denser, the hills softer and the skies clearer. Full of hope, full of dreams, full of future, the children stormed down the mountain. Into their new land, their new world, a world for new stories, for new happiness and other dreams.

**H**ooting, cheering, laughing, they rolled through the delicate grass, danced over soft earth and climbed up shady trees. They were so full of life and, once again, they had so much time.

**A**nimah gingerly planted her sapling in the earth. As she watched, she saw the grown-ups coming closer, hesitant. The other children were already running towards them, jubilant. The leaves of her beech tree blew in the warm spring breeze: 'You had enough courage. You dared to try.'