

BIG CITY LITTLES

BY CHARLES DE LINT

FAITH, HOPE, AND CHARITY
ARE ALL VIRTUES, AND
SOMETIMES IT CAN BE DIFFICULT
— YET ESSENTIAL —
TO TELL THEM APART.

The Fates seem to take a perverse pleasure out of complicating our lives. I'm not sure why. We do such a good job of it all on our own that their divine interference only seems to be overkill.

It's not that we deliberately set out to screw things up. We'd all like to be healthy and happy, not to mention independently wealthy—or at least able to make our living doing something we care about, something we can take pride in. But even when we know better, we invariably make a mess of everything, both in our private and our public lives.

Take my sister. She knows that boyfriends are only an option, not an answer, but that's never stopped her from bouncing from one sorry relationship to another, barely stopping to catch her breath between one bad boy and the next. But I should talk. It's all well and fine to be comfortable in your own skin, to make a life for yourself if there's no one else on the scene to share it with you. But too often I still feel like the original spinster, doomed to end her days forever alone with some garret.

I guess for all the strides we've made with the women's movement, there are some things we can still accept only on an intellectual level. We never really believe them in our hearts.

THE LITTLE MAN SITTING ON SHERI PIPER'S pillow when she opened her eyes was a good candidate for the last thing she would have expected to wake up to this morning. He wasn't really much bigger than the length from the tip of her middle finger to the heel of her palm, a small hamster-sized man, dressed in raggedy clothes with the look of a bird about him. His eyes were wide set, his nose had a definite hook to it, his body was plump, but his limbs were thin as twigs. His hair was an unruly tangle of short, brown curls and he wore a pair of rectangular, wire-framed eyeglasses not much different than those Sheri wore for anything but close work.

She tried to guess his age. Older than herself, certainly. In his mid-forties, she decided. Unless tiny people aged in something equivalent to dog years. If this were happening to one of the characters in the children's books she wrote and illustrated, now would be the time for astonishment and wonder, perhaps even a mild touch of alarm, since after all, tiny though he was, he was still a strange man and she had woken up to find him in her bedroom. Instead, she felt oddly calm.

"I don't suppose I could be dreaming," she said.

The little man started the way a pedestrian might when an unexpected bus suddenly roars by the corner where he's standing. Jumping up, he lost his balance and would have gone sliding down the long slope of her pillow if she hadn't slipped a hand out from under the bedclothes and caught him.

He squeaked when she picked him up, but she meant him no harm and only deposited him carefully on her night table. Backing away until he was up against the lamp, his tiny gaze darted from side to side as though searching for escape, which seemed odd considering how, only moments ago, he'd been creeping around on her pillow mere inches from her face.

Laying her head back down, she studied him. He weighed no more than a mouse, but he was definitely real. He had substance the way dreams didn't. Unless she hadn't woken up yet and was still dreaming, which was a more likely explanation.

"Don't talk so loud!" he cried as she opened her mouth to speak again.

His voice was high pitched and sounded like the whine of a bug in her ear.

"What are you?" she whispered.

He appeared to be recovering from his earlier nervousness. Brushing something from the sleeve of his jacket, he said, "I'm not a what. I'm a who."

"Who then?"

He stood up straighter. "My name is Jenky Wood, at your service, and I come to you as an emissary."

"From where? Lilliput?"

Tiny eyes blinked in confusion. "No, from my people. The Kaldewen Tribe."

"Who live ... where? In my sock drawer? Behind the baseboards?"

Why couldn't this have happened *after her* first coffee of the morning when at least her brain would be slightly functional.

He gave her a troubled look. "You're not like we expected."

"What were you expecting?"

"Someone ... kinder."

Sheri sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm not a morning person."

"That's apparent."

"Mind you, I do feel justified in being a little cranky. After all, you're the one who's come barging into my bedroom."

"I didn't barge. I crept in under the door, ever so quietly."

"OK, snuck into my bedroom then—which, by the way, doesn't give you points on any gentlemanly scale that I know of." "It seemed the best time to get your attention without being accidentally stepped on, or swatted like a bug."

Sheri stopped herself from telling him that implying that her apartment might be overrun with bugs his size also wasn't particularly endearing.

"Would it be too much to ask *what* you're doing in my bedroom?" she asked. "Not to mention on my bed."

"I might as well ask what you're doing in bed."

"Now who's being cranky?"

"The sun rose hours ago."

"Yes, and I was writing until 3 o'clock this morning so I think I'm entitled to sleep in." She paused to frown at him. "Not that it's any of your business. And," she added as he began to reply, "you haven't answered my question."

"It's about your book," he said. "*The Travelling Littles*."

As soon as he said the title, she wondered how she could have missed the connection. Jenky Woods, at her service, looked exactly like she'd painted the Littles in her book. Except...

"Littles aren't real," she said, knowing how dumb *that* sounded with an all-too-obvious example standing on her night table.

"But... you ... you told our history. ..."

"I told a story," Sheri said, feeling sorry for the little man now. "One that was told to me when I was a girl."

"So you can't help us?"

"It depends," she said, "on what you need my help for."

But she already knew. She didn't have to go into her office to take down a copy of the book from her brag shelf. She might have written and illustrated it almost 20 years ago. She might not have recognized the little man for what he was until he'd told her himself. But she remembered the story.

It had been her first book and its modest, not to mention continuing, success was what had persuaded her to try to

make a living at writing and drawing children's books. She'd just never considered that the story might be true, never mind what she'd said in the pages of the book.

~~THE TRAVELLING LITTLES~~

There are many sorts of little people—tiny folk, no bigger than a minute. And I don't just mean fairies and brownies or even pennymen and their like. There are the Lilliputians that Gulliver met on his travels. Mary Norton's Borrowers. The Smalls of William Dunthorn's Cornwall. All sorts. But today I want to tell you about the Travelling Littles who live like gypsies, spending their lives always on the move.

This is how I heard the story when I was a small girl. My grandpa told it to me, just like this, so I know it's true.

The Littles were once birds. They had wings and flew high above the trees and hills to gather their food. When the leaves began to turn yellow and red and frost was in the air, they flew to warmer countries, for they weren't toads to burrow in the mud, or bears to hibernate away the cold months, or crows who don't allow the weather to tell them when to live, or when to move.

The Littles liked to travel. They liked the wind in their wings and to look out on a new horizon every morning. So they were always leaving one region for another, travelling more to the south in the winter, coming back north when the lilacs and honeysuckle bloomed. No matter how far they travelled, they always returned to these very hills where the sprucey-pine grow tall and the grass can seem blue in a certain light, because even travelling people need a place they can call home.

But one year when the Littles returned, they could find nothing to eat. They flew in every direction looking for food. They flew for days with a gnawing hunger in their bellies.

Finally they came upon a field of ripe grain—the seeds so fat and sweet, they'd never seen the like, before or since. They swooped down in a chorusing flock and gorged in that field until they were too heavy to fly away again. So they had to stay the night on the ground, sleeping among the grain-straw and grass.

You'd think they would have learned their lesson, but in the morning, instead of flying away, they decided to eat a little more and rest in that field of grain for one more night.

Every morning they decided the same thing, to eat a little more and sleep another night, until they got to be so heavy that they couldn't fly anymore. They could only hop, and not quickly either.

Then the trees began to turn yellow and red again. Frost was on the ground and the winter winds came blowing. The toad burrowed in his mud. The bear returned to his den. The crows watched from the bare-limbed trees and laughed.

Because the Littles couldn't fly away. They couldn't fly at all. They were too fat.

The grain-straw was getting dry. The tall grass browned, grew thin, and died. After watching the mice and squirrels store away their own harvests, the Littles began to shake the grain from the blades of grass and gather it in heaps with their wings, storing it in hidey-holes and hollow logs. The downy feathers of their wings became all gluey, sticking to each other. Their wings took the shape of arms and hands and even if they could manage to lose weight, they were no longer able to fly at all now for they'd become people—tiny people, six inches tall.

That winter they had to dig holes in the sides of the mountains and along the shores of the rivers, making places to live.

And it's been like that ever since.

In the years to follow, they've come to live among us, sharing our bounty the way mice do, only they are so secret you never see them at all. And they still travel, from town to town, from borough to borough, from city block to the next one over, and then the next one over from that. That's why we call them the Travelling Littles.

But the Travelling Littles are still birds, even if their arms are no longer wings. They can never see a tall building or mountain without wanting to get to the top. But they can't fly anymore. They have to walk up there, just like you or me.

Still the old folks say, those who know this story and told it to me, that one day the Travelling Littles will get their wings back. They will be birds again.

Only no one knows when.

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"You want to know how to become a bird again," she said.

Jenky Wood nodded. "We thought you would know. Yula Gry came across a copy of your book in a child's library last year and told us about it at our year's end celebration. Palko John—"

"Who are these people?"

"Yula is the sister of my brother's cousin Sammy, and Palko John is our Big Man. He's the chief of our clan, but he's also the big chief of all the tribe. He decided that we should look for you. When we found out where you lived, I was to talk to you."

"Why were you chosen?"

He had the decency to blush.

"Because they all say I'm too good-natured to offend anyone, or take offense."

Sheri stifled a laugh. "Well," she said. "I'm usually much less cranky when I've been awake for a little longer and have had at least one cup of coffee. Speaking of which, I need one now. I also have to have a pee."

At that he went beet-red.

"What, you people don't? Never mind," she added. "That was just more crankiness. Can I pick you up?"

When he gave her a nervous nod, she lowered her hand so that he could step onto her palm, keeping her thumb upright so he'd have something to hang on to. She took him into the kitchen, deposited him on the table, plugged in the kettle, then went back down the hall to the washroom.

Ten minutes later she was sitting at the table with a coffee in front of her. Jenky sat on a paperback book, holding a thimbleful of coffee she'd given him. She broke off a little piece of a bran cookie and offered it to him before dipping the rest into her coffee.

"So why would you want to become birds again, anyway?" she asked.

"Look at the size of us. Can you imagine how hard it is for us to get around while still keeping our secret?"

"Point taken."

Neither spoke while they ate their cookies. Sheri sipped at her coffee.

"Did your grandfather really tell you our story?" Jenky asked after a moment.

Sheri nodded.

"Could you bring me to him?"

"He passed away a couple of years ago."

"I'm sorry."

Silence fell again between them.

"Look," Sheri said after a moment. "I don't know any more than what you read in my book, but I could look into it for you."

"Really?"

"No, I'm actually way too busy. Joke," she added as his face fell. "It was a joke."

"Palko John said we could offer you a reward for your help."

"What sort of reward?"

"Anything you want."

"Like a magic wish?" Sheri asked, intrigued.

He nodded. "We only have the one left."

"Why don't you use it to make yourselves birds again?"

"They only work for other people."

"Figures. There's always a catch, isn't there? But I don't want your wish."

He went all glum again. "So you won't help us?"

"Didn't I already say I would? I just don't like the idea of magic wishes. There's something creepy about them. I think we should earn what we get, not have it handed to us on a little silver platter."

That earned her a warm smile.

"I think we definitely chose the right person to help us," he said.

"Well, don't start celebrating yet," Sheri told him. "It's not like I have any idea how to go about it. But like I said, I will look into it."

"I've decided to give up men," Sheri told Holly Rue later that day. She'd arrived early at Holly's store for the afternoon book club meeting that the used book shop hosted on the last Wednesday of every month. The book they'd be discussing today was Alice Hoffman's *The River King*, which Sheri had adored. Since she had to wait for the others to come here to discuss it, she kept herself busy talking with Holly and fussing with Snippet, Holly's Jack Russell terrier, much to the dog's delight.

"I thought you'd already done that," Holly said.

"I did. But this time I really mean it."

"Have a bad date?"

"It's not so much having a bad date as, A, not wanting to see him again after said date, but he does and keeps calling me or B, wanting to see him again because it seemed we were getting along so well, but he doesn't call. I'm worn out from all."

"You could call him," Holly said.

"I could. Would you?"

Holly sighed. "Not to ask him out."

"I thought women's lib was supposed to have sorted all of this out by now."

"I think it's not only society that's supposed to change, but us, too. *We* have to think differently."

"So why don't we?"

Holly shook her head. "Same reason they don't call, I guess. Give me a hob over a man any day."

Sheri cocked her head and studied Holly for a long moment.

"What?" Holly said. "Did I grow an extra nose?"

"No, I'm just thinking about hobs. I wanted to talk to you about them."

Holly's gaze went to an empty chair near the beginning of the store's farthest aisle, then came back to Sheri.

"What about them?" she asked.

There was now something guarded in the book-seller's features, but Sheri plunged on anyway.

"Were you serious about having one living in your store?" she asked.

"Um ... serious as in, is it true?"

A few months ago they'd been out celebrating the nomination of one of Sheri's books for a local writing award—she hadn't won. That was when Holly had mentioned this hob, laughed it off when Sheri had asked for more details, and then changed the subject.

"Because the thing is," Sheri said. "I could use some advice about little people right about now."

"You've got a hob living in your apartment?"

"No, I've got a Little—though he's only visiting."

"But Littles aren't—"

"Real," Sheri finished for her. "Any more than hobs. We both know that. Yet there he is, waiting for me in my apartment all the same. I've set him up on a bookshelf with a ladder so that he can get up and down, and got some of my old Barbie furniture out of my storage space in the basement."

"You kept your Barbie stuff?"

"And it's a good thing I did, seeing how useful it's proven to be today. Jenky—that's his name; Jenky Wood—like the size, though he's not particularly enamoured with the colors."

"You're serious?"

"So it seems," Sheri told her. "Apparently he thinks I can find out how they can all become birds again."

"Like in your story."

Sheri nodded. "Although I haven't got the first clue."

"Well, I—"

But just then the front door opened and Kathryn Whelan, one of the other members of their book club, came in.

"I think I know someone who can help you," Holly said, before turning to smile at the new arrival.

Snippet lifted her head from Sheri's lap with interest—hoping for another biscuit like the one Sheri had given her earlier, no doubt.

"Someone tall, dark, and handsome—not to mention single?" Sheri asked after they'd exchanged hellos with Kathryn.

"Not exactly."

"Who's tall, dark, and handsome?" Kathryn asked.

"The man of my dreams," Sheri told her.

Kathryn smiled. "Aren't they all?"

Sheri was helping Jenky rearrange the Barbie furniture on the bookshelf she'd cleared for his use when the doorbe rang. "That'll be her," she said, suddenly nervous. "Should I hide?" Jenky asked.

"Well, that would kind of defeat the whole purpose of this, wouldn't it?"

"I suppose. It's just that letting myself be seen goes so against everything I've ever been told. My whole life has been a constant concentration of secrets and staying hidden."

"Buck up," Sheri told him. "If all goes well, you might be a bird again and it won't matter who sees you."

"I'd rather be both," he said as she went to get the door.

She paused, hand on the knob. "Really?"

"Given a choice, wouldn't you want to be able to go back and forth between bird and Little?"

She gave a slow nod. "I suppose I would."

She turned back to open the door and everything just kind of melted away in her head. Jenky's problem, the conversation they'd just had, the day of the week.

"Oh my," Sheri said.

The words came out unbidden, for standing there in the hallway was the idealization of a character she'd been struggling with for weeks. The new picture book hadn't exactly stalled, but she kept having to write around this one character because she couldn't quite get her clear in her head. She'd filled pages in her sketchbook with drawings, particularly frustrated because while she knew what the character was supposed to look like, she was unable to get just the right image of her down on paper. Or perhaps a better way to put it was that she didn't so much know what the woman should look like; she just knew when it was wrong.

But now here the perfect subject was, standing in the hallway.

Where were her watercolors and some paper? Or just a pencil and the back of an envelope. Hell, she'd settle for a camera.

Although really, none of that would be necessary. Now that she'd seen her, it would be impossible for Sheri to forget her.

It wasn't that the woman was particularly exotic, though there were those striking green streaks that ran through her nut-brown hair. She wasn't dressed regally either, though her simple white blouse and long flower-print skirt nevertheless left an impression of royal vestments. It wasn't even that she was so beautiful—there were any number of beautiful women in the world.

No, there was an air about her, a quality both mysterious and simple that had been escaping Sheri for weeks when she was doing her character sketches. But she had it now. She'd begin with a light golden wash, creating a nimbus of light behind the figure's head, and then—

"I hope that's a pleased 'Oh my,'" the woman said.

Her voice brought Sheri back into the present moment.

"What? Oh, yes. It was. I mean I was just..."

The woman offered her hand. "My name's Meran Kelledy. Holly did tell you I was coming by, didn't she?"

Her voice was soft and melodic with an underlying touch of gentle humor.

"I'm sorry," Sheri said as she shook Meran's hand. "I can't believe I've left you standing out there in the hall." She stood aside. "Please come in. It's just that you just caught me by surprise. See, you look exactly like the forest queen I need for this book I'm working on at the moment and ..." She laughed. "I'm babbling, aren't I?"

"What sort of forest is she the queen of?"

"An oak forest."

Meran smiled. "Well, that's all right, then."

With that enigmatic comment, she came into the apartment. Sheri watched her for one drawn-out moment longer, then shut the door to join Meran and Jenky in the living room.

"I should also tell you that there's a wish up for grabs," Sheri said after she and Jenky had taken turns telling their story. The two women were sitting at the kitchen table, Jenky on the table in a pink plastic chair. They all had tea—Jenky in his thimble since he didn't like the plastic Barbie dishware, the women in regular porcelain mugs.

"For the one who helps the Littles with this, I mean," Sheri added.

Meran shook her head. "I have no need for wishes."

Of course she wouldn't.

Meran was probably the calmest woman that Sheri had ever met. Neither meeting the Little nor the story the two of them had told seemed to surprise her. She'd simply given Jenky a polite hello, then sat and nodded while they talked, occasionally asking a question to clarify one point or another.

What world does she live in? Sheri had found herself thinking.

A magical one, no doubt. Like the forest in Sheri's latest picture book.

"You can have it," Meran said.

But Sheri shook her head right back. "I don't believe in something for nothing."

"Good for you."

What an odd response. But Sheri didn't take the time to dwell on it.

"So can you help us turn them back into birds again?" she asked.

"Unfortunately, no. Odd as it came to be, the Littles have evolved into what they now are and that kind of thing can't be turned back. It's like making the first fish that came onto land return to the sea.

Or forcing the monkeys to go back up into the trees once more instead of becoming men and women. Evolution doesn't work that way. It moves forward, not back."

"But magic. ..."

"Operates from what appears to be a different law of physics, I'll admit, but that's only because it's misunderstood. If you have the right vocabulary, it can make perfect sense."

Sheri sighed. "So we're back where we started."

"No, because the clock doesn't turn backward."

"I don't understand."

Sheri might have felt dumb, but Jenky looked as confused as she was feeling and he was a piece of magic himself, so she decided not to worry about it.

"What's to stop the Littles from continuing to evolve?" Meran asked. "Into, say, beings that can change from bird to Little at will the way Jenky here has said he'd like to."

"Well, for one thing, we don't know how."

"Now there I can help you. Or at least I can set the scene so that you can help him."

"I'm still not following you."

"There's an old tribe of words," Meran explained. "Not the kind we use today, but the ones that go back to the beginning when a word spoken created a moment in which anything can happen."

"The before?" Sheri asked.

"It's just another way to say the first days of the world," Jenky told her. "Our storytellers still tell the stories of the first days, of Raven and Cody and the crow girls and all."

"It was a time of Story," Meran said. "Although, of course, every age has its stories, just as every person does. But these were the stories that shaped the world, and part of that shaping had to do with this old tribe of words."

"A tribe of words," Sheri repeated, feeling way out of her depth here.

Meran nodded. "I can wake one of those words for you," she said. "Not for a long time, but for long enough."

"So you'll just say one of these words and everything'll be the way we want it to be?"

"Hardly," Meran said with a smile. "I can only wake one of that old tribe. You will need to say the words. It's a form of communal magic, which is mostly the kind I know. One person wakes it, another gives it focus."

"But I wouldn't know what to say. Maybe Jenky should do it."

"No, this works better when a human speaks the words."

That gave Sheri pause, the way Meran said the word "human." It was the way humans spoke of other species. She wanted to ask Meran what she was, but she supposed now wasn't the time. And it would probably be impolite.

"So what words do I say?" she asked instead.

"You'll know when the time is right."

"But. ..."

Meran gave her another of her smiles. "Don't worry so much."

"OK."

Sheri looked from the magical woman sitting across the table from her to the even more magical little man sitting in a Barbie kitchen chair between them. Jenky watched her expectantly. Meran said nothing, did nothing. There was an unfocused look to her gaze, but otherwise she seemed to merely be waiting, managing to do so without conveying the vaguest sense of pressure.

But there was pressure all the same—self-imposed on Sheri's part, but no less urgent for that.

What if she didn't say the right thing? How much was she supposed to say? How was she supposed to know when the time was right?

It was all so nebulous.

"So when do we start?" Sheri asked.

Meran's gaze came into focus and found Sheri's.

"Breathe," she said. "Slowly. Try to still the conversations that rise up in your head and don't concentrate on anything until you feel a change. You'll know it when you feel it."

Then she slowly closed her eyes. Sheri copied her, closing her own eyes. Breathing deeply and slowly, she tried to feel this change. Something, anything. Maybe a difference in the air. Some sense that they were sideways from the world as she knew it, inhabiting a pocket of the world where magic could happen.

If magic *was* real, that was.

If it...

She wasn't sure where it originated, the sudden impression of assurance that came whispering through her, calm and sure and secret. She felt like she was at the center of some enormous wheel and that all the possibilities of what might be were radiating out from her like a hundred thousand filigreed spokes. It was like floating, like coming apart and reconnecting with everything. But it was also like being utterly focused as well. She could look at all those threads and easily find and hold the one that was needed in her mind.

"Hope," she said.

"Is that word for them or for you?"

As soon as Meran asked the question, Sheri saw how it could go. She realized that under the connection she felt to this wheel of possibilities, she'd continued to harbor her own need, continued to reach for that elusive partner every single person looked for, whether they admit it or not. He could be called to her with Meran's old tribal word. The right partner, the perfect partner. All she had to do was say, "For me."

Because magic was real, she knew that now. At least this magic was real. It could bring him to her.

But then she opened her eyes. Her gaze went to Jenky, watching her with expectant eyes and held breath.

Promises made. Promises broken.

What good were promises if you didn't keep them? How could you respect yourself, never mind expect anyone else to respect you, if you could break them so easily? What would the perfect man think of her when he learned how she'd brought him to her?

Not to mention what she'd said barely 10 minutes ago, how it wasn't right to have something for nothing.

But that was before she'd realized it could really be made to happen.

That was before all the lonely nights were washed away with the promise of just the right man coming into her life.

"No," she said. "I meant faith. Belief. That bird and Little can be one again, the shape they wear being their own choice."

Meran smiled.

"Done," she said.

Sheri felt a rumbling underfoot, like a subway car running just under the basement of her apartment building. But there was no subway within blocks of her place. The tea mugs rattled on the table and Jenky gripped the seat of his chair. Something swelled inside her, deep and old, too big for her to hold inside.

And then it was gone.

Sheri blinked and looked at Meran.

Was that it? she wanted to ask. What happened? Did it work?

But before she could speak, there was a blur of motion in the middle of the kitchen table. Jenky leapt up, knocking his little chair down. He lifted his arms and they seemed to shrink back into his body at the same time as his fingers grew long, long, longer. Feathers burst from them in a sudden cloud. His birdish features became a bird's head in truth, and then the whole of the little man was gone and a gray and brown bird rose up from the tabletop, flapping its wings. It circled once, twice, three times around the room, then landed on the table again, the transformation reversing itself until Jenky was standing there.

He looked up at her, grinning from ear to ear.

Sheri smiled back at him.

"I guess it worked," she said.

A couple of days later, Sheri looked up from her drawing table, distracted by the tap-tap-tapping on her windowpane. A little brown and gray bird looked in at her, its head cocked to one side.

"Jenky?" she said.

The bird tapped at the glass again so she stepped around her table and opened the window. The bird immediately flew in and landed on the top of her drawing table where it became a little raggedy man. Sheri wasn't even startled anymore.

"Hello, hello!" Jenky cried.

"Hello, yourself. You're looking awfully pleased with yourself."

"Everyone's so happy. They all wanted to come by and say thank you and hello, but Palko John said that would be indecorous so it's just me."

"Well, I'm glad to see you, too."

Jenky looked like he wanted to dance around where he was standing, but he made himself stand straight and tall.

"I'm supposed to ask you if you've decided on your wish," he said.

"I already told you—I don't want a wish."

"But you helped us, and that was our promise to you."

Sheri shook her head. "I still don't want it. You should keep it for yourselves."

"And I already told you. We can't use it for ourselves."

Sheri shrugged. "Then find someone who really needs it. A person whose only home is an alleyway. A child fend off unwelcome attention. Someone who's dying, or hurt, or lonely, or sad. You Littles must go all over the city. Surely you can find someone who needs a wish."

"That's your true and final answer?"

"Now you sound like a game show host," she told him.

He wagged a finger at her. "It's too late in the day to be cranky. Even you have to have been up for hours now."

"You still don't get my jokes, do you?"

"No," he said. "But I'll learn."

"Anyway, that's my true and final answer."

"Then I'll find such a person and give them your wish."

With that he became a bird once more. He did a quick circle around her head, followed by a whole series of complicated loops and swirls that took him from one end of the room to the other, showing off.

"Come back and visit!" Sheri called as he headed for the window.

The bird twittered, then it darted out the window and was gone.

"So what's the deal with Meran?" Sheri asked Holly the next time she came by the book store. "Where do you know her from?"

"I had a ... pixie incident that she helped me out with last year."

"A pixie incident."

Holly nodded. "The store was overrun with them. They came off the Internet like a virus and were causing havoc and down the street until she helped us get them back into the Net."

"Us being you and your hob?"

Just as she had the last time the subject of the hob came up, Holly's gaze went to an empty chair near the beginning of the store's farthest aisle, only this time there was a little man sitting there, brown-faced and curly-haired. He gave Sheri a shy smile and lifted a hand in greeting.

"Oh-kay," Sheri said.

She could have sworn there was no one sitting there a moment ago and his sudden appearance made the whole world feel a little off-kilter. She'd only *just* gotten used to little men who could turn into birds.

"Sheri, this is Dick Bobbins," Holly said. "Dick, this is Sheri Piper."

"I like your books," the hob said.

His compliment gave Sheri perhaps the oddest feeling that she'd had so far in all of this affair, that a fairy tale being should like *her* fairy tale books.

"Um, thank you," she managed.

"He didn't appear out of nowhere," Holly assured her, undoubtedly in response to the look on Sheri's face. "Hobs can have this ability to be so still that we don't notice them unless they want us to."

"I knew that."

Holly grinned. "Sure you did."

"OK, I didn't. But it makes sense in a magical nothing-really-makes-sense sort of a way. Kind of like birds turning into Littles, and vice versa."

"So was Meran able to help you?"

The hob leaned forward in his chair, obviously as interested as Holly was.

Sheri nodded and told them about how it had gone.

"I understand why you didn't let Meran's magic bring you the right guy," Holly said when she was done. "I mean, after all. You *were calling* it up for the Littles. What I don't understand is, why didn't you use the wish they offered you?"

"Because it's something for nothing. It's like putting a love spell on someone. Isn't it better to get to know someone at a natural pace, work out the pushes and pulls of the relationship to make it stronger, instead of having it all handed to you on a platter?"

"I suppose. But what if you never meet the right guy?" "That's the risk I have to take."

"So here I am, still waiting like an idiot on the man of my dreams."

I don't know which bugs me more: that he hasn't shown up yet, or that I'm still waiting.

But I got to do a good turn and my picture book is done. Meran loved the paintings I did of her as the forest queen. Her husband even bought one of the originals once I'd gotten the color transparencies made.

What else? I've got a new friend who's a hob, and at least once a week Jenky Wood flies up to my windowsill in the shape of a bird, tapping on my windowpane until I let him in. I've got my Barbie furniture permanently set up for him on a shelf in my studio, though I have repainted it in more subdued colors.

So what am I saying?

I don't know. That we all have ups and downs, I guess, whether we bring them on ourselves or they come courtesy of the Fates. The trick seems to be to roll with them. Learn something from the hard times, appreciate the good.

I didn't really need fairy encounters to teach me that, but I wouldn't trade the experience of them for anything. Not even for that elusive, perfect man.

Author's Note: Sheri's story of the Travelling Littles is adapted from an Appalachian story detailing the origin of gypsies; I found the original version in *Virginia Folk Legends*, edited by Thomas E. Barden. Thanks to Charles Vess for introducing me to this delightful book.

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