

Pip and the Fairies

By Theodora Goss, illustration by Susan Moore

3 October 2005



"Why, you're Pip!"

She has gotten used to this, since the documentary. She could have refused to be interviewed, she supposes. But it would have seemed—ungrateful, ungracious, particularly after the funeral.

"Susan Lawson," read the obituary, "beloved author of *Pip and the Fairies*, *Pip Meets the Thorn King*, *Pip Makes Three Wishes*, and other Pip books, of ovarian cancer. Ms. Lawson, who was sixty-four, is survived by a daughter, Philippa. In lieu of flowers, donations should be sent to the Susan Lawson Cancer Research Fund." Anne had written that.

"Would you like me to sign something?" she asks.

White hair, reading glasses on a chain around her neck—too old to be a mother. Perhaps a librarian? Let her be a librarian, thinks Philippa. Once, a collector asked her to sign the entire series, from *Pip and the Fairies* to *Pip Says Goodbye*.

"That would be so kind of you. For my granddaughter Emily." A grandmother, holding out *Pip Learns to Fish* and *Under the Hawthorns*. She signs them both "To Emily, may she find her own fairyland. From Philippa Lawson (Pip)."

This is the sort of thing people like: the implication that, despite their minivans and microwaves, if they found the door in the wall, they too could enter fairyland.

"So," the interviewer asked her, smiling indulgently, the way parents smile at their children's beliefs in Santa Claus, "did you really meet the Thorn King? Do you think you could get me an interview?"

And she answered as he, and the parents who had purchased the boxed set, were expecting. "I'm afraid the Thorn King is a very private person. But I'll mention that you were interested." Being Pip, after all these years.

Maintaining the persona.

Her mother never actually called her Pip. It was Pipsqueak, as in, "Go play outside, Pipsqueak. Can't you see Mommy's trying to finish this chapter? Mommy's publisher wants to see something by Friday, and we're a month behind on the rent." When they finally moved away from Payton, they were almost a year behind. Her mother sent Mrs. Payne a check from California, from royalties she had received for the after-school special.

Philippa buys a scone and a cup of coffee. There was no café when she used to come to this bookstore, while her mother shopped at the food co-op down the street, which is now a yoga studio. Mrs. Archer used to let her sit in a corner and read the books. Then she realizes there is no cup holder in the rental car. She drinks the coffee quickly. She's tired, after the long flight from Los Angeles, the long drive from Boston. But not much farther now. Payton has stayed essentially the same, she thinks, despite the yoga studio. She imagines a planning board, a historical society, the long and difficult process of obtaining permits, like in all these New England towns.

As she passes the fire station, the rain begins, not heavy, and intermittent. She turns on the windshield wipers.

There is Sutton's dairy, where her mother bought milk with cream floating on top, before anyone else cared about pesticides in the food chain. She is driving through the country, through farms that have managed to hold on despite the rocky soil. In the distance she sees cows, and once a herd of alpacas. There are patches too rocky for farms, where the road runs between cliffs covered with ivy, and birches, their leaves glistening with rain, spring up from the shallow soil.

Then forest. The rain is heavier, pattering on the leaves overhead. She drives with one hand, holding the scone in the other (her pants are getting covered with crumbs), beneath the oaks and evergreens, thinking about the funeral.

It was not large: her mother's co-workers from the Children's Network, and Anne. It was only after the documentary that people began driving to the cemetery in the hills, leaving hyacinths by the grave. Her fault, she supposes.

The interviewer leaned forward, as though expecting an intimate detail. "How did she come up with Hyacinth? Was the character based on anyone she knew?"

"Oh, hyacinths were my mother's favorite flower."

And letters, even contributions to the Susan Lawson Cancer Research Fund. Everyone, it seems, had read *Pip and the Fairies*. Then the books had gone out of print and been forgotten. But after the funeral and the documentary, everyone suddenly remembered, the way they remembered their childhoods. Suddenly, Susan Lawson was indeed "beloved."

Philippa asked Anne to drive up once a week, to clear away the letters and flowers, to take care of the checks. And she signed over the house. Anne was too old to be a secretary for anyone neater than Susan Lawson had been. In one corner of the living room, Philippa found a pile of hospital bills, covered with dust. She remembers Anne at the funeral, so pale and pinched. It is good, she supposes, that her mother found someone at last. With the house and her social security, Anne will be all right.

Three miles to Payne House. Almost there, then. It had been raining too, on that first day.

"Look," her mother said, pointing as the Beetle swerved erratically. If she looked down, she could see the road through the holes in the floor, where the metal had rusted away. Is that why she has rented one of the new Beetles? Either nostalgia, or an effort to, somehow, rewrite the past. "There's Payne House. It burned down in the 1930s. The Paynes used to own the mills at the edge of town," now converted into condominiums, Mrs. Archer's successor, a woman with graying hair and a pierced nostril, told her, "and one night the millworkers set the stables on fire. They said the Paynes took better care of their horses than of their workers."

"What happened to the horses?" She can see the house from the road, its outer walls burned above the first story, trees growing in some of the rooms. She can see it through both sets of eyes, the young Philippa's and the old one's. Not really old of course, but—how should she describe it?—tired. She blames the documentary. Remembering all this, the road running through the soaked remains of what was once a garden, its hedges overgrown and a rosebush growing through the front door. She can see it through young eyes, only a few weeks after her father's funeral, the coffin draped with an American flag and the minister saying "fallen in the service of his country" although really it was an accident that could have happened if he had been driving to the grocery store.

And through old eyes, noticing that the rosebush has spread over the front steps.

As if, driving down this road, she were traveling into the past. She felt this also, sitting beside the hospital bed, holding one pale hand, the skin dry as paper, on which the veins were raised like the roots of an oak tree. Listening to the mother she had not spoken to in years.

"I have to support us now, Pipsqueak. So we're going to live here. Mrs. Payne's going to rent us the housekeeper's cottage, and I'm going to write books."

"What kind of books?"

"Oh, I don't know. I guess I'll have to start writing and see what comes out."

How did it begin? Did she begin it, by telling her mother, over her milk and the oatmeal cookies from the food co-op that tasted like baked sawdust, what she had been doing that day? Or did her mother begin it, by writing the stories? Did she imagine them, Hyacinth, the Thorn King, the Carp in the pond who dreamed, so he said, the future, and the May Queen herself? And, she thinks, pulling into the drive that leads to the housekeeper's cottage, what about Jack Feather? Or did her mother imagine them? And did their imaginations bring them into being, or were they always there to be found?

She slams the car door and brushes crumbs from her pants. Here it is, all here, for what it is worth, the housekeeper's cottage, with its three small rooms, and the ruins of Payne House. The rain has almost stopped, although she can feel a drop run down the back of her neck. And, not for the first time, she has doubts.

"One room was my mother's, one was mine, and one was the kitchen, where we took our baths in a plastic tub. We had a toaster oven and a Crock-pot to make soup, and a small refrigerator, the kind you see in hotels. One day, I remember having soup for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Of course, when the electricity was turned off, none of them worked. Once, we lived for a week on oatmeal cookies." The interviewer laughed, and she laughed with him. When they moved to California, she went to school. Why doesn't she remember going to school in Payton? She bought lunch every day, meatloaf and mashed potatoes and soggy green beans. Sometimes the principal gave her lunch money. She was happier than when the Thorn King had crowned her with honeysuckle. "Young Pip," he had said, "I pronounce you a Maid of the May. Serve the May Queen well."



That was in *Pip Meets the May Queen*. And then she stops—standing at the edge of the pond—because the time has come to think about what she has done.

What she has done is give up *The Pendletons*, every weekday at two o'clock, Eastern Standard Time, before the afternoon talk shows. She has given up being Jessica Pendleton, the scheming daughter of Bruce Pendleton, whose attractive but troublesome family dominates the social and criminal worlds of Pinehurst.

"How did your mother influence your acting career?"

She did not answer, "By teaching me the importance of money." Last week, even a fan of *The Pendletons* recognized her as Pip.

She has given up the house in the hills, with a pool in the backyard. Given up Edward, but then he gave her up first, for a producer. He wanted, so badly, to do prime time. A cop show or even a sitcom, respectable television. "I hope you understand, Phil," he said. And she did understand, somehow. Has she ever been in love with anyone—except Jack Feather?

What has she gained? She remembers her mother's cold hand pulling her down, so she can hear her whisper, in a voice like sandpaper, "I always knew they were real."

But does she, Philippa, know it? That is why she has come back, why she has bought Payne House from the Payne who inherited it, a Manhattan lawyer with no use for the family estate. Why she is standing here now, by the pond, where the irises are about to bloom. So she can remember.

The moment when, in *Pip and the Fairies*, she trips over something lying on the ground.

"Oh," said a voice. When Pip looked up she saw a girl, about her own age, in a white dress, with hair as green as grass. "You've found it, and now it's yours, and I'll never be able to return it before he finds out!"

"What is it?" asked Pip, holding up what she had tripped over: a piece of brown leather, rather like a purse.

"It's Jack Feather's *Wallet of Dreams*, which he doesn't know I've taken. I was just going to look at the dreams—their wings are so lovely in the sunlight—and then return it. But 'What You Find You May Keep.' That's the law." And the girl wept bitterly into her hands.

"But I don't want it," said Pip. "I'd like to look at the dreams, if they're as nice as you say they are, but I certainly don't want to keep them. Who is Jack Feather, and how can we return his wallet?"

"How considerate you are," said the girl. "Let me kiss you on both cheeks—that's the fairy way. Then you'll be able to walk through the door in the wall, and we'll return the wallet together. You can call me Hyacinth."

Why couldn't she walk through the door by herself? Pip wondered. It seemed an ordinary enough door, opening from one of the overgrown rooms to another. And what was the fairy way? She was just starting to wonder why the girl in the white dress had green hair when Hyacinth opened the door and pulled her through.

On the other side was a country she had never seen before. A forest stretched away into the distance, until it reached a river that shone like a snake in the sunlight, and then again until it reached the mountains.

Standing under the trees at the edge of the forest was a boy, not much taller than she was, in trousers made of gray fur, with a birch-bark hat on his head. As soon as he saw them, he said, "Hyacinth, if you don't give me my *Wallet of Dreams* in the clap of a hummingbird's wing, I'll turn you into a snail and present you to Mother Hedgehog, who'll stick you into her supper pot!"

—From *Pip and the Fairies*, by Susan Lawson

How clearly the memories are coming back to her now, of fishing at night with Jack Feather, searching for the Wishing Stone with Hyacinth and Thimble, listening to stories at Mother Hedgehog's house while eating her toadstool omelet. There was always an emphasis on food, perhaps a reflection of the toaster and Crock-pot that so invariably turned out toast and soup. The May Queen's cake, for example, or Jeremy Toad's cricket cutlets, which neither she nor Hyacinth could bear to eat.

"I hope you like crickets," said Jeremy Toad. Pip and Hyacinth looked at one another in distress. "Eat What You Are Offered," was the Thorn King's law. Would they dare to break it? That was in *Jeremy Toad's Birthday Party*.

She can see, really, where it all came from.

"I think the feud between the Thorn King and the May Queen represented her anger at my father's death. It was an accident, of course. But she blamed him for leaving her, for going to Vietnam. She wanted him to be a conscientious objector. Especially with no money and a daughter to care for. I don't think she ever got over that anger."



"But the Thorn King and the May Queen were reconciled."

"Only by one of Pip's wishes. The other—let me see if I remember. It was a fine wool shawl for Thimble so she would never be cold again."

"Weren't there three? What was the third wish?"

"Oh, that was the one Pip kept for herself. I don't think my mother ever revealed it. Probably something to do with Jack Feather. She—I—was rather in love with him, you know."

The third wish had been about the electric bill, and it had come true several days later when the advance from the publisher arrived.

Here it is, the room where she found Jack Feather's wallet. Once, in *Pip Meets the Thorn King*, he allowed her to look into it. She saw herself, but considerably older, in a dress that sparkled like stars. Years later, she recognized it as the dress she would wear to the Daytime Emmys.

And now what? Because there is the door, and after all the Carp did tell her, in *Pip Says Goodbye*, "You will come back some day."

But if she opens the door now, will she see the fields behind Payne House, which are mown for hay in September? That is the question around which everything revolves. Has she been a fool, to give up California, and the house with the pool, and a steady paycheck?

"What happened, Pip?" her mother asked her, lying in the hospital bed, her head wrapped in the scarf without which it looked as fragile as an eggshell. "You were

such an imaginative child. What made you care so much about money?"

"You did," she wanted to and could not say. And now she has taken that money out of the bank to buy Payne House.

If she opens the door and sees only the unmown fields, it will have been for nothing. No, not nothing. There is Payne House, after all. And her memories. What will she do, now she is no longer Jessica Pendleton? Perhaps she will write, like her mother. There is a certain irony in that.

The rain on the grass begins to soak through her shoes. She should remember not to wear city shoes in the country.

But it's no use standing here. That is, she has always told herself, the difference between her and her mother: she can face facts.

Philippa grasps the doorknob, breathes in once, quickly, and opens the door.

"I've been waiting forever and a day," said Hyacinth, yawning. She had fallen asleep beneath an oak tree, and while she slept the squirrels who lived in the tree had made her a blanket of leaves.

"I promised I would come back if I could," said Pip, "and now I have."

"I'm as glad as can be," said Hyacinth. "The Thorn King's been so sad since you went away. When I tell him you're back, he'll prepare a feast just for you."

"Will Jack Feather be there?" asked Pip.

"I don't know," said Hyacinth, looking uncomfortable. "He went away to the mountains, and hasn't come back. I didn't want to tell you yet, but—the May Queen's disappeared! Jack Feather went to look for her with Jeremy Toad, and now they've disappeared too."

"Then we'll have to go find them," said Pip.

—From *Pip Returns to Fairyland*, by Philippa Lawson