

Millers' Tales

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New World Fables, Book One

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*In memory of Betty Harway, who gave me
The Yellow Feather Mystery for my eighth birthday,
making this novel inevitable.*

Prologue

Listen. Let me tell you a story. It's an improbable tale, in which I am sold to a dwarf, captured by a witch, transformed into a pig, and befriended by a wolf, and that's only the beginning. It isn't even my story. It's really about my sister, Helen, who was the most beautiful girl in the world, and Bernard the wolf boy, who loved her.

Sound familiar?

Wait. Let me tell it.

Helen and George

Chapter One

We were poor.

Four of us lived in a single room on the third floor of an old-law tenement.

Coming through the door, you found yourself in the foyer. Looking left, into the east wing, you saw a Murphy bed and a battered wardrobe, ahead, into the dining room, a pine table and four empty beer barrels permanently borrowed from one of Papa's haunts, and beyond that, a black pot-bellied stove. Looking right, you didn't see the west wing – that's how we referred to the communal toilet halfway down the hall – but rather a badly stained rug and much-abused armchair collectively representing the parlor, and in the far corner, a sheet draped over a clothesline, which shielded our nursery from view. Peeking behind the curtain, you saw a mattress, a once-elegant quilt that Mama brought with her from the old country, and a few toys Papa had carved from scrap wood.

Calling Papa's carvings toys overstates his skill as a craftsman. They were at best rudimentary figures on the end of a dowel that, like stone-age cave drawings, suggested more than they represented. Papa's talent lay not in the shaping of these figures, but in bringing them to life.

Each night after dinner, he would tuck us into our bed, sit outside our curtain, an oil lamp turned up bright behind him, and tell us fairy tales, using the wooden figures he'd carved to create a shadow play on the sheet. In lilting tones, he shaped a world from memory, imagination, and shadow, and Helen and I lay in our bed, watching, listening, spellbound, as its history unfolded before us.

Holding a shadow puppet in front of the sheet, he began, "Once upon a time, there lived a miller – no relation, mind you – who encountered a king traveling down the road." A second shadow puppet, this one with the points of a crown atop his head, joined the first. "The miller was both awed and galled to be in the royal presence. Awed because the king was rich and powerful. Galled because he himself had nary a pot to piss in."

From the parlor armchair where she sewed, Mama called out, “Buddy, watch your language.”

“Well, he didn’t,” Papa argued.

Helen and I stifled giggles behind the sheet.

“Nevertheless,” Mama maintained.

Papa sighed. “Forgive me, Sunshine. He lacked even a vessel in which to urinate.”

“Ach,” Mama complained. “You make things so complicated. How about: He was very poor?”

“Who’s telling this story, Rose?”

“So far as I can tell, no one. And if you don’t get on with it, they’ll be too old for stories by the time you finish.”

“No we won’t,” Helen and I cried out in unison. We’d heard their banter so often, our words were almost a religious response.

Chuckling softly, Papa continued, “He was very poor. He had but one treasure, a daughter of surpassing beauty, and being of a certain nature, he could not help but boast about her to the king.”

“Why couldn’t he help it?” Helen asked on cue.

“Ach!” he snorted. “Ask me why it rains down instead of up. Ask me why the fox hunts the rabbit. Ask me why the landlord wants the rent.” He rushed on before we could ask any of these questions. “Because it’s their nature, and neither the rain, nor the fox, nor the landlord can go against their nature. So it was with the miller.”

From her chair Mama declared, “I know another Miller whose nature is getting the better of him, and if he lets this story go on too long, he’ll find his wife is asleep before his children.”

“Rose...” Papa admonished, a pleading note counterpointing his severe tone.

“I’ve been up since the crack of dawn,” Mama complained, not sounding tired to me.

“Ah, rosy-fingered dawn. I’ve seen the crack of dawn, and still I love you best,” he asserted.

“That so? Well, finish your story and come to bed.”

He went on, slightly hurried at first, but soon returning to his normal pace. “The king seemed unimpressed with the miller’s description of his daughter’s beauty and talent, and this too galled the miller. She was, after all, his only treasure. So he piled it on thicker and thicker, till the malarkey was flowing like beer from a tap. The king just rode along beside him, a look on his face like he had stepped in something nasty and wanted to find a place to scrape his boots.”

We giggled at that. I could picture the king’s face, nostrils flared in disgust, his eyes darting about furtively as he looked for a good rock or patch

of grass on which to clean his boots.

“At last, desperately trying to impress him, the miller told the king that his daughter could spin straw into gold. The king, also being of a particular nature, could not let that pass. ‘That, I’d like to see,’ he said. And what could the miller do but agree to have his daughter show him?”

It was my turn to ask the question. I said, “What was the king’s nature?”

Papa laughed harshly. “Well, he was king, and that meant he loved wealth and power above all. So he told the miller that if she could do it, he’d marry her, otherwise...”

I heard the springs of the parlor armchair squeak, followed by the creaking of the floor boards, as Mama got up and went to Papa. She whispered, “Now you sound like your father, Buddy. Don’t be filling their heads with ideas about wealth and power.”

“And beauty,” Papa interjected. “The holy trinity. Wealth, power, and beauty.”

“Come to bed,” she said wearily.

“A few more minutes, Sunshine,” he pronounced.

“I’m getting in,” Mama told him. “I’ll try to stay awake.”

Papa hurried on as best he could, but he had a story-teller’s nature and could not go faster than the tale allowed. Even though he’d told us this and many other stories a thousand times, once it laid hold of him, he could do nothing but tell it to the finish. He relayed to us how the king, three times, locked the miller’s daughter in a room filled with straw and demanded she spin it all into gold by morning or face death, and how, three times, a mysterious little man, in exchange for some token, accomplished the task and saved her. The last token, of course, was her first-born child.

Although the tendrils of sleep had taken hold of me by now, as a matter of pride I struggled to outlast Helen, who was two years younger. I kept myself awake by asking questions – why did she marry such a greedy, nasty king? why did the gnome want her child? – until annoyance tinged Papa’s voice, and then I fell silent.

Fighting to keep my eyes open, I let my glance jump between Helen’s face and the shadows of the puppets dancing across the hanging sheet. Once her lids veiled the green sparkle of her eyes, I listened more to the timbre of Papa’s voice than to his words, letting the flickering light and the cadence of the story hypnotize me until the tale bled into dream. Although I can’t be certain he continued after we had fallen asleep, I think it more likely that rain would fall up, the fox would befriend the rabbit, and the landlord refuse the rent, than that Papa would leave a story half-told.

Chapter Two

Before Papa started coming home drunk, he used to call Mama Sunshine. He would come home from work, pat her on the rump and say, “Give us a kiss, Sunshine,” and Mama would cluck her tongue in irritation and kiss him gingerly on the lips. Then Papa would roar, “What kind of miserable peck is that?” and chase her around, grabbing at her backside, shouting, “Don’t be so miserly, woman,” and when he caught her, he’d kiss her long and hard, until she broke away breathless, his workaday filth smeared across her freckled cheek. Then she’d cluck her tongue at him again, but she’d leave the dirt there, as if it were a badge of honor.

But eventually she stopped kissing him, and he stopped calling her Sunshine. Now when he stumbled home with empty pockets and called out to her, she didn’t even look up from her sewing.

“No money?” Mama would ask.

“No work,” Papa would slur in reply.

“Beer’s free then, is it?” she’d pursue, adding when he didn’t reply, “If you can’t find a job, Buddy Miller, learn to steal. Just remember you’re responsible for what you become.”

I’ve always believed that. Mama wasn’t one to spout aphorisms, so I took her words to heart: No matter what happens, you are responsible for what you become.

Papa disagreed. “Ah, Rose. It’s hard to find something that suits me,” he complained.

She sneered at him. “You think I sew because I like to? I was a Richfield.”

Helen and I speculated about what being a Richfield meant. We tried to ask her a few times, but Mama only cried and sent us away.

In our corner one evening, during just such an exchange between our parents, I whispered to Helen, “I bet Mama was the only daughter of a wealthy merchant.”

Helen glanced nervously at the sheet as the stridency of Mama’s voice

rose on the other side. She nodded in half-hearted agreement.

“Of course, she was very pretty,” I said.

“Beautiful,” Helen corrected.

“The most beautiful girl in the kingdom,” I said, staring into her gold-flecked green eyes, barely able to see them in the dim, sheet-filtered light.

It was easy for me to imagine that Mama had been the most beautiful girl in the kingdom; I imagined she must have looked like Helen, and Helen was the most beautiful girl in the world. While I was a skinny kid with unruly hair like my father’s and a pleasant, but ordinary face, Helen’s looks were so startling that street artists stopped us on our way home from school and asked to sketch her. Her fair skin, delicate features, blood-red lips, and ebony hair arrested the gaze of everyone who saw her. But mostly, it was her eyes: you couldn’t look into her eyes and not love her.

“And Papa was a farm boy,” I continued, until the sound of weeping brought my story to an abrupt end.

We peered out from behind the sheet. Papa stood leaning against the rickety pine table, sobbing, his tear-filled eyes fixed on Mama, who sat by the window sill, sewing, not deigning to look at him.

Silently, Helen crept out from behind the sheet and made her way over to him. Neither of them appeared to notice her. She laid her hand on top of Papa’s. He looked down, startled, as if surprised to find her there. Then, grinning and lifting her up, he said, in words barely slurred, “Ah, here’s my Sunshine.” Helen planted a kiss on his cheek, and Papa squeezed her against his chest.

From where I sat, I could see his eyes grow brighter with tears. He collapsed onto a barrel, placed Helen on his lap, and wrapped an arm around her waist. The tears ran down his cheeks. He saw me and waved me over with his free arm. “C’mere, boy,” he said. “Papa needs a hug.” I ran to him and leapt into his lap, and he squeezed me almost as hard as I imagined he had squeezed Helen.

Over his shoulder, I could see Mama at the window. The low sun splashed orange light on the cityscape and made her red hair incandesce. Her eyes, too, glowed with the reflection, flickering like candle flames amidst the deepening shadows. I felt sorry for her. I wanted to include her. I tried to hop down from Papa’s lap, but he held me to him. I liked being held captive by his strong arm. Guiltily, I turned away from Mama, put my face against his neck, and inhaled the sour stench of sweat and stale tobacco smoke.

When we clambered back into bed, Helen whispered to me, “Do you think she still loves him?”

“Sure,” I said, wanting to believe it.

“I don’t. I think she hates him,” Helen countered.

I didn’t want her to be right. If Mama hated him, he might leave, and I

didn't want him to leave. He was my papa. I didn't understand that separating hate from love is like stripping the silver off the back of a mirror.

Chapter Three

Papa had stopped performing the shadow plays. He rarely came home before our bedtime anymore. So at night, I recited the stories from memory until Mama told us to go to sleep. Then we lay awake behind our sheet and listened for him. Often we fell asleep without ever hearing him, but sometimes he exploded into the flat, shouting, “Where’s my Sunshine?”

Then Helen burst out from behind the sheet and rushed into his arms. I followed cautiously behind her, watching Mama glower at them from the parlor chair.

One night he entered the flat quietly, probably not expecting to find anyone awake, but I was too hungry to sleep, and Mama apparently had not given up the vigil either. I heard a barrel scrape the floorboards, as he pulled it out from beneath the table, and then Mama’s voice coming from the parlor chair.

“Where do you go, Buddy?” she asked. “Do you not know we love you?”

I heard her tread softly across the floor. I wanted to get up and look, but dared not move.

“I do, Rose. Sure I do,” he whispered softly.

“Then why don’t you come home?”

“Ah, it’s hard, Rose. I try. I do.”

“Do you remember how it used to be?” she asked.

I heard the barrel scrape again and imagined he must have stood up.

“You used to be my Sunshine,” he said.

“I could be again,” she said, “if it will help you remember who you used to be.”

The Murphy bed groaned and squealed beneath their weight as they got into it, then their talk turned to whispers, and their whispers turned to sighs.

In the morning, on the way to school, I told Helen all I had heard. She was as hopeful as I was, but that evening when we sat down to our meager supper, Papa was not there. When he arrived hours later and shouted his

usual inquiry, Mama did not respond.

Helen and I waited behind the sheet, hoping Mama would go to him, but when he shouted again, Helen could not help herself and ran to his arms.

Mama shooed her back to bed, and the two of us waited to hear what would happen. We heard Mama ladle the remaining soup into a bowl and drop it on the table. "That's all there is," she said.

"It'll do, thanks," Papa replied.

"Maybe for you, Buddy Miller."

I never considered how he knew we were hungry, whether by the looks on our faces or the paucity of our mother's purchases, but Mr. Andizhan, the grocer on the corner, gave Helen and me crusts of day-old bread on the way to school. He was fat and sweaty, and he spoke in broken English we could barely understand, but he smiled when he gave us the bread and never asked for anything in return.

I think he was in love with Helen. Everyone was in love with Helen. She shone, and I was lucky enough to be made visible by her light.

I felt guilty about the bread. Helen and I tacitly agreed to keep it to ourselves. Mr. Andizhan always admonished us as he gave it to us, "You eat, you eat. Childs need food." We worried that his generosity would cease if he suspected we were sharing with Mama and Papa. I don't think I would have shared anyway. I could barely refrain from wolfing the bread down right there in front of the grocery.

I don't know if we would have starved otherwise, but it helped a lot. Between Mr. Andizhan's bread and the occasional apple the boys at school gave Helen – she always saved me the core – we got by.

Mama, on the other hand, began to lose weight. I didn't notice at first. What kid would? She had always been svelte, but at supper one evening, I saw in the lamplight that her face had grown thin. Her features cast sharp angular shadows, and her eyes shone dully from deep sockets. Even the sheen of her normally-radiant red hair had faded.

I glanced at her bowl and saw that she had served herself only half the portion of soup she had given to me and Helen, and I realized she had been doing this for weeks. The words, "Here, Mama, have mine," formed on my tongue and crumbled to dust there, desiccated by hunger. My throat constricted. I swallowed my voice, and still I felt empty. I looked down at my own bowl and began to eat. I could not give it up. I could have eaten a hundred bowls of soup and still would not have been sated.

I knew there was more in the pot. She always left enough for Papa. A sudden fury rose up in me, and I thought, "Why should we save anything for him? She should have his soup, not mine. Better yet, we could share it."

I eyed Mama over the top of my bowl. She ate slowly and deliberately, portioning her vegetables. Helen, beside me, scarfed the soup as if it might

be taken away from her. Realizing I was eating the same way, I tried to slow down, but couldn't. I raced through my bowl, finishing first, and then enviously watched as Mama and Helen worked on theirs. We each had a piece of bread, and I gnawed on mine while they finished.

I contemplated the soup still in the pot. I could smell it. It called to me. I knew Mama should have it. She needed it most. I said, "Mama, is there more?"

"The rest is for Papa," she replied, glaring at me, her eyes warning me against starting down this road.

"But I'm hungry," I whined.

Helen kept quiet. I could feel her eyes on me, but I wouldn't look at her.

"Your father needs food, too, George," Mama said, her voice fat with disapproval.

I misunderstood her tone. I assumed the disapproval, like the soup, was for Papa. I said, "He's not here. Why should we starve?"

Like a bolt of lightning her open palm struck my cheek, sending an electric flash through my brain and causing my ears to ring as if with thunder. Distantly, I heard her say, "He's your father, George. You have no right to judge him."

Crying, I ran from the table and hid behind the curtain in my corner of the room. Lashed by shame, my cheek stinging, I wailed and shrieked with frustration and hate, until, exhausted, I rolled over and sobbed into my pillow, plotting my revenge. I would run away. I could steal food if I had to and not have to depend on anyone else to feed me. I'd eat as much as I wanted, and if I couldn't get food, and I died of starvation, they'd have to live with the guilt.

Was it that night I woke up from my dreams of a martyr's vengeance to the sound of voices? I don't know for sure, but that's how I remember it. Memory is like a jigsaw puzzle where the pieces fit in more than one place. It doesn't matter.

The squealing of the bedsprings from across the room is probably what woke me, but the first thing I remember hearing was Papa's breathless voice saying, "Ah, Sunshine, I've missed you."

Mama, her voice thick and throaty, replied, "It's you who stays away, Buddy, not me who keeps you."

"It's hard for man to see his family this way."

"It doesn't have to be this way, Buddy. We can find someone to take the children. Just till you're back on your feet. I can help you. It can be just us two. Like in the beginning. Like a fresh start."

Her voice was filled with a hope and a nearly irresistible importunity that made what she said seem reasonable even to me, but Papa said, "No, Rose. Don't say such things. I'll get a job. I'll stop drinking."

But he didn't, and I listened to Mama tell him night after night how much better off we'd all be. Surely, someone would take us in. Who could resist a bright boy like George and a girl as beautiful as Helen? With only the two of them to feed, they'd get by. Their love would sustain them, like before.

Sometimes I believed she acted out of love – for him as well as for Helen and me – but then I saw the way she looked at us. Hate gleamed like tears in Mama's eyes when we ran to Papa and hugged him, and jealousy shone like sweat on her forehead whenever he called Helen his Sunshine.

What does it matter? Once again, it's the silver on the back of the mirror. Eventually, like hunger, she wore him down.

Chapter Four

It was a Sunday, and we set out early for the park. Mr. Andizhan hadn't opened the grocery yet, and only a few of the pushcarts were out. Even before the sun rose over the tops of the lowest buildings, I could tell it was going to be a beautiful day. Rain the night before had muddied the streets, but the spring air smelled clean and full of optimism.

I had never been more than a few blocks from home. Even with the entire city laid out before us, begging to be explored, Helen and I had never ventured past our school. I looked over my shoulder as we walked, trying to fix our building's location, but Mama kept calling to me, "Keep up, George. Stop dawdling." Quickly enough the building vanished.

Despite knowing the purpose of our outing, seeing the different parts of the city excited me. Not long after we left familiar territory, an enormous church loomed ahead of us.

"What is that church, Papa?" I asked.

Loquacious as always, Papa named the church, launched into its history, and even briefly described the character of its congregants, and as he poured forth this dissertation, I glimpsed hope.

"How many churches are there, Papa?" I asked.

"In the city? Hundreds, George. You can't walk two blocks without seeing a church. There's a lot of praying goes on in this town," he said.

Mama sighed.

I knew then what I needed to do. I would leave a trail of churches from our neighborhood to the park. I spaced my questions to avoid becoming annoying, but just as the previous church disappeared from view, I fixed on another. Papa answered my questions, although his discourses gradually diminished in length and fervor, and Mama occasionally giped about his more comprehensive knowledge of pubs. I concentrated on memorizing the routes between churches. I didn't hope that I could find my way from the park to our apartment, but I thought I might wend my way from one church to the next.

Helen seemed to realize what I was up to and joined in the questioning.

Mama was short with us all. “Less talking, more walking,” she ordered, but whenever silence fell, it lay heavily across our backs, and even she seemed relieved when one of us asked another question.

At the entrance to the park, Mama asked Papa, “He knows where?”

Not looking at her, Papa replied, “Yes,” and strode quickly through the gate.

I briefly wondered who knew “where” and intended to ask Helen if she had any ideas, but the overwhelming beauty of the park quickly drove all such thoughts from my mind. Birds flitted among the branches of budding trees, flowers sprung up beside the paths in ordered profusion, and families strolled alongside them and across the fields. Some wore the drab, much-mended clothing familiar to us, but others were as splendid as the birds. Compared to the dark canyons of the city streets, this was paradise.

We found a quiet place where the trees got a little dense, and we reclined among them to eat our breakfast. Mama had packed a loaf of bread, a hunk of cheese, and an apple each for Helen and me. A feast. Papa sliced the bread and cheese. Helen and I ate the apples, smiling and forgetful.

When we finished eating, weariness crept up on us. Helen and I had not slept much the previous night, and the walk and our full bellies conspired against us. The four of us lay down on our old quilt, and when Helen and I awoke, we were alone.

Helen sobbed against my shoulder. “I didn’t think they’d do it,” she said. “I thought I dreamed what we heard last night.”

I didn’t know how to answer. I had thought the same things. I stroked her hair gently. “Don’t cry,” I consoled. “I know the way home.”

We found the remaining bread and cheese in a paper bag next to us on the quilt. We ate it and felt better. The sky was not dark; it was probably mid-afternoon. “We’ll be home by supper,” I said.

Helen looked at me hopefully, her green eyes gleaming. “Should we go home?” she asked.

I hadn’t considered this. I gave her the only answer I had. “Where else can we go?”

I draped our quilt over my shoulders and took hold of Helen’s hand. We had barely stepped from our copse of trees, when a stooped little man, barely taller than we were, approached us. “What beautiful children,” he said, scrunching his face, which was wizened like an apple left too long on the sill, into an approximation of friendliness.

Staring at Helen, he said, “I have no children. But I wish for such beauties.” His voice was not deep, but gravelly and foreign-sounding, and the intensity of his stare discomfited us both.

Helen, accustomed to compliments, said, “Thank you.”

“Where are the parents? You are not alone?” he asked. He smiled, and his eyes became two slits lost among a tangle of cracks and wrinkles.

“We’re – we’re on our way home,” I stammered.

“You know the way?” he asked, opening his eyes wider as if in surprise. “Come, I will help you. I am Mr. Big.” He bowed formally and presented me with a business card. In embossed typeface, it read:

BIG
Problem Solver
Your problem is my problem – Size does not matter

“Come, I live close. I have food. We eat, then I will take you home.”

“Thanks, but we’re not hungry,” I said, pocketing the card and starting to walk away.

“Ha! Ha!” He laughed loudly. His laugh was joyous, not derisive, as if he found my claim genuinely humorous. Even I smiled at the absurdity of it.

“Good, good,” Mr. Big said, smiling. “Do not eat if you are not hungry. But what are such beautiful children doing alone?” He limped toward us, leaning on a crooked cane.

“What’s the matter with your foot?” Helen asked.

“I asked first,” Mr. Big answered, wagging a crooked finger at her.

Helen stared at her feet and mumbled, “Mama left us.”

Mr. Big’s grin widened, and the wrinkles on his face consumed his features. He limped closer. “That is too bad,” he said. “Where’s Papa? Children should not be left alone. I have no children, but I wish for such beauties.”

He was very close to Helen now, close enough to touch her.

Her voice trembled when she asked again, “What happened to your foot?”

“Ah, yes, my foot. It has always been so. Some things are like that.” He reached out and cupped Helen’s chin in his gnarled hand. “I would take care of you,” he said.

Helen screamed, and I yanked her out of his grasp. I ran, as fast as I could, dragging her after me, and behind us, I thought I could hear him chuckling.

We didn’t stop running until we were out of the park. We passed through a great stone gate and found ourselves on a broad avenue. At last, panting, we slowed to a walk, both of us continually glancing over our shoulders to see if the lame old dwarf pursued us. We scurried along, away from the park, concerned only with escaping from Mr. Big. My heart beat frantically in my chest, pounding out a rhythm of terror, which had just begun to slow, when Helen asked, “George, do you know where we’re going?”

I didn't. I stared around in a panic. My heart renewed its frenetic tattoo. The tall buildings towered over us like petrified giants, frozen in attitudes of indifference, who if they could move, would only scoop us up and eat us. Drays pulled by enormous snorting horses rumbled past us, and carriages, urged by whip-flicking drivers, rattled by as if racing to meet the devil. A sea of people surged around us, dragging us along in their ebb and flow, as if we were pebbles on the shore, and I reached for Helen's hand.

"George?" she said again.

"This way," I said. I swallowed an unchewed lump of fear and pulled her after me.

Within a few blocks, I recognized the last church I had memorized, an enormous cathedral, the largest building I had ever seen. I sighed with relief. We paused in front of it to catch our breath and stared up at the stone saints, who stared back with blank, indifferent eyes. Above the saints, the stained glass glinted malevolently in the sun, like the eye of an angry god. Then the doors of the cathedral opened and vomited forth the saved: women in bright dresses and gaudy bonnets, festooned with flowers and birds, mustachioed men sandwiched between white straw hats and shiny black shoes, and children, gleaming like pearls of salvation.

Few of them glanced at us as they went by, although some paused long enough to worry us. One woman stared overlong at Helen as she passed. I heard her remark, "What a pretty urchin."

We scurried on.

"Don't talk to anyone," I instructed Helen.

"It's not my fault," she said.

"It's okay," I said. "Let's just go home."

"Can you find it?" she asked.

We were just approaching the second church, a smaller, but still impressive structure. "Yes," I said, confidently. I could.

We marched quickly, anxious to beat the sunset. The lengthening shadows changed the appearance of the landmarks, and I misstepped a few times. More than once, I felt the drumbeat of terror in my chest, as we stumbled blindly through the forest of unfamiliar buildings, but I clutched Helen's hand tightly and retraced our steps until I managed to find the next church.

The crowds thickened as we got farther from the park and the *mélange* of accents grew familiar. No one looked at us as we hurried invisibly on, the poor as indifferent to our plight as the rich. Exhausted, we dragged ourselves toward home. The last red rays of sunlight shone on our building before the sky went dark.

Papa fell off his barrel when we walked in, and he and Mama both rushed to embrace us.

“Where did you go?” Mama asked, her voice oozing with concern. “Papa and I took a walk, and when we came back you were gone. We looked everywhere. We were so worried.”

I stole a glance at Helen to see what she would do. She clung desperately to Papa’s neck and bawled her eyes out. I threw myself at Mama and wrapped my arms around her waist, squeezing her as hard as I could, half wanting to hold her forever, half wishing I had the strength to crush her to death.

Papa said, “It doesn’t matter. They’re home now, and we’ll never be apart again.”

Chapter Five

By July, starvation stalked us once again, and Papa suggested sending us out to work. Mama forbade it, and once again convinced Papa that abandoning Helen and me was the only path to salvation. Helen and I stayed up each night listening to them talk. Only when we heard Papa snoring did we allow ourselves to drop off to sleep. But knowing what they were planning didn't help us much.

"What can we do, George?" Helen whispered.

"I can memorize the churches again," I said.

"But what if there aren't any churches?"

I groped for her hand in the darkness. "There's always churches."

There were churches. From our tenement to the bridge across the river, I memorized all the churches and the routes between them, although Papa was not as forthcoming this time with his histories.

We paused in the middle of the bridge to watch a train rattle across, spitting contemptuous orange sparks at the dark gray water, which flowed beneath us like molten lead. Upriver and down, other great bridges spanned the water, and ships slid ponderously beneath them. The vastness of the river daunted me. I imagined myself falling into it and being swept irresistibly out to sea.

I reached unconsciously for Mama's hand. It felt clammy, and I guessed she must be as scared as I was. We held hands all the way across the bridge. On the far side, she shook me loose and wiped her hand against her skirt as if to dry it.

We walked a few blocks from the bridge, and I continued to scan the area for churches. Papa, however, stopped answering my inquiries. He looked around as if he didn't know the way.

"Where are we going?" Helen asked.

"It's a surprise," Mama answered, smiling stiffly. "You'll like it."

We strolled on a bit further, and the streets became crowded. Mama and Papa led, leaving Helen and me to follow as best we could. I wondered if

they simply meant to lose us in the crowd. Behind us, a bell clanged and wheels clattered, and I turned to see a streetcar rolling toward us. Papa swept us aboard, and thrilled as I was to ride in a streetcar, I knew that all hope was lost.

I didn't know how Papa could afford the fare, but he pulled the coins from his pocket and dropped them into the box. I looked out as we rattled down the avenues, but couldn't mark our route. I had nothing to latch onto; the sights blended into an incomprehensible blur. The long journey and the swaying of the trolley nauseated me, but at last, as grateful to escape as I had been in the park, I fell asleep in Mama's lap.

When I awoke, Mama's grasp felt slack around my waist. I glanced to my right and saw Helen sleeping soundly in Papa's lap. Papa stared out the window. His furrowed brow worried me. He wore his sorrow on his face, and it didn't suit him.

I reached over and touched his arm. He looked down at me, switching from the tragic to the comic mask as he did so. "What is it, George?" he asked, smiling intensely.

"Where are we going, Papa?" I asked in a whisper.

"Oh, we're going to have great fun, George. Don't you worry."

I turned away from him and closed my eyes, leaning back against Mama and trying to match the rhythm of my breathing to hers. Letting worry go, I fell back to sleep and dreamed of being swept out to sea by the great gray river.

I was still more than half-asleep when Mama and Papa dragged us off the trolley onto the crowded street. A tinny ragtime melody floated above the thrum and gabble of traffic and people. The morning had been drab, but the sun now shone brightly overhead, and the temperature had gone from warm to hot. The air smelled of sea spray and fried food. The suggestion of a cool breeze snuck through the crowd, and we pushed through as if searching for its source.

From the boardwalk, I could see the beach, the white sand thick with bathers in their heavy woolen costumes, and beyond, the black ocean, stippled with whitecaps and the heads of swimmers. I inhaled the breeze deeply, relishing its smell and its cooling touch. People strolled along as far as I could see in either direction. Some ate as they walked, and I looked at them jealously. The smell of food quickly overpowered the scent of the ocean breeze, and I imagined that the hiss of the waves was really the sizzle of great vats of grease. My stomach rumbled so loudly, only the clamor of the crowd masked it.

Papa placed a hand on my shoulder and drew my attention to an enormous lattice framework behind us. I had never seen anything like it. White-painted beams supported iron rails, which rose and fell in a series of

hills and valleys. An open-air train carrying screaming passengers rocketed along the rails, and I turned away, not wanting to see them crash.

Beside me, Helen cried in sympathetic terror.

Papa chuckled. He squatted between us and drew Helen to him. "It's all right. It's fun. A roller coaster. They're having fun."

Helen looked at him, an uncomprehending scowl on her face. She blinked the tears out of her eyes. "Fun?" she asked.

"Sure," Papa said. "Watch."

We watched the roller coaster rocket its shrieking passengers up and down the rails, finally coming to a screeching halt. We couldn't see where they got off, but Papa assured us that they were unharmed. A few seconds later the roller coaster cars climbed once again to the peak of the tracks and plunged downward, and another batch of passengers shrieked their way along the rails.

"What is this place, Papa?" I asked.

"It's an amusement park, George. Haven't you ever heard of one? People come here to have fun. To shoot-the-chute and ride the Ferris wheel and eat spun sugar."

"Why are we here?" I asked.

He hesitated before answering, and I thought I saw his eyes grow bright with tears. Standing up from his squat, he said, "We're here for the same thing. We're going to ride the rides and see the freaks and eat till we burst." The enthusiasm in his voice rang false, and Helen looked at me knowingly.

Suddenly Helen screamed. Her beautiful face contorted with fear and horror. "Mr. Big, Mr. Big," she shouted pointing into the crowd.

I followed the line of her finger, but could not see him.

Mama asked, "Who is Mr. Big?" She squinted into the distance.

Helen said, "He's the horrible little man we met in the park. The one who gave George his card."

Exchanging significant glances with Mama, Papa said, "Well, it couldn't be him. Probably just someone from one of the freak shows."

Mama cupped Helen's beautiful chin in her hand, just the way Mr. Big had done. "Don't be frightened," she said. "Let's get something to eat."

Again, we feasted. We ate corndogs and fried potatoes and drank soda. I had never tasted anything so good or eaten so much at once. When we finished, we went to the roller coaster. We stood in line and watched the trains screech along the track, but as we got to the front and prepared to board, Helen screamed in panic.

At first, I thought she had seen Mr. Big again.

"What's the matter?" Papa asked.

"Please, Papa, don't make us go," she begged.

Papa laughed and tousled her hair. "Okay, you don't have to go." He

looked at me and said, “What about you, George? Are you brave enough?”

I nodded, fear locking my jaws.

“Good,” he said. “Helen can wait with Mama.”

The train lurched out of the station, pulled toward the crest of the rails by some rattling under-mechanism. Slowly it crept upward, every foot of the climb punctuated by a ratcheting clank and a corresponding tightening in my gut. It hesitated at the top, and for a moment, I could see the world sprawled below us, and then we plunged.

The contents of my stomach rose up into my throat. Only my ongoing shriek prevented me from spewing them onto the riders in front of us. We raced toward the bottom and then, hitting it, rocketed up the next rise. Up and down, rising and falling, climbing and plunging, we tore around the track, my emotions alternating not between terror and relief, but between terror and the anticipation of terror, until we came to a jerking halt. When the train pulled back into the station, I stumbled away from the platform, sweating and nauseated. Papa walked alongside me, chuckling, guiding me with gentle pressure on the back of my sweating neck.

Helen ran up. “You look green,” she said.

I could not even pretend to have enjoyed it.

Mama said, “I don’t think George liked it, Buddy.”

Papa laughed. “Maybe before lunch would have been better.”

I hated all of them at that moment. I wished the ocean would swallow them up.

Helen took my hand and said, “You were brave. I was too scared to go.”

Then I hated myself for having thought anything bad about her. She was my one true ally. “Thanks,” I said.

We boarded the Ferris wheel next. The wind rocked the car, but even swaying high above the park didn’t compare to the roller coaster. I could tell Helen felt differently by the way she clung to Papa’s arm. Mama shifted nervously in her seat, and I hoped that she was scared.

I tried to distract Helen. “Look at everything you can see from here,” I said. “There must be a million people down there. Papa, what’s that ride where they slide down into the water?”

“That’s the Shoot-the-Chute,” he said.

“And what’s that little town over there with the church and the clock tower? We must be so high up. The people look so small.”

“That’s Lilliputia,” he said. “A place where hundreds of little people live. Should we go?”

“No,” said Helen forcefully. “Maybe Mr. Big lives there.”

“Why are you so afraid of this Mr. Big?” Mama asked. “I’m sure he’s just a harmless dwarf.”

I shivered as I thought about him. I could hear his gravelly voice in my

head. "I have no children, but I wish for such beauties."

"It will be fun," Mama insisted. "They're just little people."

Papa paid the admission, and in we went. I felt like I had stepped into a fairytale book. Pennants waved over a child-sized castle. Miniature houses and shops lined a village square with a small fountain at its center. Little people in Bavarian costume roamed busily about. Mama and Papa strode like giants loosed among the villagers.

Helen and I spied a pair of miniature jugglers in cockscombs tossing wooden clubs between them, and we ran toward them. Children and little people ringed them, while the adults watched from the back.

Suddenly a tiny woman, wearing a bright yellow dress, burst from a building, screaming, "Fire! Fire!"

Smoke poured from the second-story windows, and orange flames flickered in the doorway. Bells clanged, and a fire engine pulled by ponies raced into the square. Firemen in leather helmets leapt from the seats and began pumping water onto the fire. More firemen, the largest no bigger than me, ran up carrying buckets and quickly formed a brigade. They worked quickly, filling buckets from a hand pump by a horse trough and passing them from hand to hand. The chief soon announced that the fire was out and the crowd roared its approval.

"That was great," I said to Helen.

Behind us, a gravelly voice said, "Yes. Marvelous. Two shows a day."