

Half a Dream Away

“Ba...*looba*,” Max said aloud. No. He still didn’t like it. The name sounded too much like *Beluga*, and his drawing wasn’t a whale, not at all. Max lay on his stomach and studied the crayon outline, tilting the Richard Scarry book up from the carpet so he could look directly at the paper. Not bad. Hmm...the beard could be longer. The garden gnomes Mommy had placed on their front porch had beards down to their feet! Max picked up his gray crayon and added a few more squiggles. “Bo...ram.” No. “Ba...rond. Ba...ba...” Max dropped the gray and picked up a dark blue. Time to draw in the cap. Mommy’s gnomes had spotted caps, but those were too hard to draw. A plain old blue cap would have to do. The name Baron was all right, but Max thought it sounded too mean. His gnome was a good gnome, ‘a smart cookie’ his grandma would say. A mad scientist! Smiling at the thought, Max decided to draw some gold aviator goggles around the eyes. A pair of goggles and a diamond-studded belt. Max studied the additions and decided that his gnome was a big improvement on David the Gnome of TV. All he needed was a name...And it had to be good because Max didn’t want to call his soon-to-be best friend a rotten name. He stood up, taking the paper and holding it in front of his face. The gnome looked like he would be a lot of fun to play with, so Max needed a fun name. Max drew his eyebrows together, staring at the floppy cap and jolly black eyes. And then he had it. Of course! A smile lit up Max’s face. The name rolled off his tongue as easily as a gumdrop.

“Boomba!”

#

Away, far away in a time and place utterly foreign to the likes of Max, a great stirring took place in a spirit of the Glade. Whereas before this spirit was a nameless, shapeless being with little purpose other than fulfilling the unconscious needs of imagination, he was now an identity separate from the millions of other spirits floating aimlessly over the daisies.

The spirit felt the earth under his feet and was amazed how good it felt not to be constantly wandering. *I can take a step anywhere.* He stepped away from the Glade. *And another...and another.* Soon, he was running away from the Glade at full speed, and as his arms automatically began pumping at his side he noticed how strange his body looked in comparison to that of a spirit. Now that his child counterpart was experiencing greater intelligence, he found he could identify his parts with no problem. He slowed to a walk to take inventory. *Hairy hands...stumpy feet. A green tunic and brown trousers. Oh my, and what's this?* He tugged on the mass of gray hair growing down from his face. *Hah! A beard, of course.* He raised his hands still higher and felt the brim of something soft. He pulled the blue cap off his head and examined it carefully, running his wrinkled hands over the material. *How lucky I am to be connected to a child with such taste!* The gnome returned the cap to his head and stroked his whiskers. There was something missing here. He still needed...*a name.* And even as he thought it, his lips were forming the syllables.

“Boomba!”

#

Max was seven years old when he created Boomba the Gnome. It was a natural thing. To create a playmate when the only non-adult in the house was your five-year-old sister, and all *she* was good for was making him look cute in front of the grandparents when he would play peekaboo using the ottoman and make her giggle. But Max didn't think of himself as lonely. People at school liked him, his parents paid attention to him; even the family cat would curl up

on his lap every now and then. Still, drawing Boomba felt like something he needed to do. Before sitting down with his crayons and paper he had been running around outside, pretending he was Charles Lindbergh flying over the Atlantic in *The Spirit of St. Louis*. Last week, his second-grade teacher, Mrs. Margaret, had asked the class to choose a picture from her pile and write a one-sentence story about the image. Max chose the plane. He asked Mrs. Margaret everything he could think of about the plane and the man standing next to it, and after twenty minutes of thinking and scribbling, he came up with *There once was a man who believed he could fly, and because he believed, he did.*

The sentence had earned him a gold star, but it had also made him think. *What can I do if I really believe in something? Can I make anything happen?*

The next afternoon he put on his winter boots and coat, strapped a pair of swim goggles to his head, and decided he would try to get in a few aerial loops before dinner. He spent the first ten minutes setting the scene with his eyes closed, imagining the choppy waves hundreds, *thousands*, of feet below the wheels of his airplane. He imagined stormy clouds and monstrous raindrops and the determined rumble of his airplane engine. Eyes still closed, Max stumbled down the porch. He squatted, settling into the airplane's leather seat, and placed his hands around the engine stick.

Up, up, and away, Max thought. He opened his eyes. Disappointment hit him like a raging bull. Nothing had changed, nothing was the way he had imagined. Everything around him was familiar and boring and ordinary. Max tore off his goggles and returned to the house, head hung.

Drawing Boomba had felt like the natural thing. *There once was a man who believed he could fly, and because he believed, he did.*

Maybe Max wasn't the right man. Maybe, if he thought hard enough, he could find the right person to help free himself from the ordinary.

#

That night, his mother noticed the drawing as she tucked Max into bed.

"Did you draw this gnome, Max?"

Max nodded, a solar system blanket pulled tight to his chin.

"It's very good." She read the barely legible letters written in black crayon at the bottom of the drawing. "Boomba." She smiled and brushed her son's hair back from his forehead. "Are you two going to have lots of adventures together?"

Max nodded, smiling back.

"I'm glad." She kissed him gently on the forehead. "Sweet dreams, my love."

She turned out the light and left the room.

"Can you hear me, Boomba?" Max whispered into the darkness. There was no response, of course. Max may only be seven, but he knew a paper drawing couldn't come to life. Still, he liked to imagine what it would be like if Boomba *could* talk. What would they say to each other? Snuggling into his blankets, Max rolled onto his side facing the bookshelf with the taped-on picture.

"You're going to do great, Boomba. I hope you're not scared. Do you want to know what we're going to do tomorrow?" Max paused. He imagined the gnome shaking his hairy head. "We're going to fight trolls right outside their cave. It will be dangerous!"

Danger was the word Max lived and breathed by. If something wasn't dangerous, then it was no fun.

"We better get some sleep now. Those trolls better watch out!"

Goodnight, Max. He imagined Boomba's voice to be deep, like his grandpa's.

“Goodnight, Boomba.” Max yawned and closed his eyes. Today had gone well. And if tomorrow went as planned, he and Boomba would be heroes.

There would be nothing they couldn’t do.

#

Boomba woke up precisely at seven o’clock. There wasn’t a clock to be seen anywhere in the hut, but when the boy was awake he was awake; their sleep cycles were eternally yoked. He rose from his bed of pine needles, stretched, and released a seismic yawn that shook the moss-covered tree boughs that formed his roof. Boomba stood barefoot on his crochet rug, dressed solely in white long johns, his hands on his hips. “Today,” he pronounced to the empty hut, “we fight trolls.”

Whistling a tune that sounded like a mix between Brahms’ lullaby and the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles theme song, Boomba went to the window and threw the glass panes open. Sunlight and birdsong filled the hut. Boomba smiled and stretched once more. He looked through the window and saw a fairy dragon watering her plants the next hut over. Curious, Boomba poked his head through and called out a greeting. The fairy dragon glanced serenely at him.

“Hello! May I ask why you’re using a watering can instead of summoning a raincloud?”

The fairy dragon looked ready to ignore him, which Boomba thought was perfectly acceptable. Even in spirit form, he had been prone to pestering.

“First day, is it?”

Boomba blinked, surprised to see the fairy dragon a foot away from his window. “Yes,” he said proudly.

“Well I’ve been a Creative Counterpart for six years, and I’m telling you now that you get a little tired of taking the easy way out. Sometimes it’s nice to build something with your two hands, fill it up with water from the lake, and water the plants yourself.”

Boomba was taken aback. "I see. I'm sorry for asking."

The fairy dragon sniffed through long, thin nostrils. "One day you'll have plants of your own that need a personal touch. Then you'll understand."

Boomba nodded. His cap flopped from side to side.

The next time he blinked, the fairy lady was tending to her flowers, head bent as she doled out the water.

Boomba shut the window and puzzled over the lesson to be learned.

#

"Can I, Mommy?"

She looked at him, firmly at first, before her features relaxed into a weary smile that Max knew all too well as victory.

"Thank you!" He hugged her legs.

"Fifteen minutes, remember. Daddy will come out to get you when it's time to leave, so don't wander too far."

Max promised he wouldn't and raced for the foyer. He was pulling on his Thomas the Train sneakers when Lily sat down next to him. She was soft and round and didn't talk very much. Max couldn't wait until she was old enough to join him on adventures with Boomba.

"Max," Lily said slowly. Her eyes were wide, her chin sticky and wet from the apple slices she was snacking on out of a plastic bag.

"Yuck, Lily, you're disgusting." Max took the bottom of Lily's shirt and wiped her chin. "That's better. Now, what do you want? I have trolls to fight!"

"I want to go with you."

"No. You're too young."

Lily's bottom lip puffed out, and Max knew tears were coming soon. If Lily cried, Mommy would come. That meant no playtime. He took his sister's hand and did his best to sound like his father whenever Max asked to stay up an extra hour.

"In two years you'll be my age, Lily. Then you can come on adventures with me every day! And guess what will happen then?"

Lily frowned. "What?"

"I'll tell you all about Boomba."

"Who's Boomba?"

Max put a finger to his lips. "I'll tell you when you turn seven. Bye, Lily!"

#

Boomba stood in the middle of a meadow dressed in his signature garb and wielding a diamond-studded club. He thought the boy would like the gem addition—it fit the gnome theme.

"Ready when you are, Max." Boomba cast his mind to the boy's dimension. Through a swirling black cloud of memories, he saw Max picking up a hefty stick and admiring it. "You like the diamonds, don't you?" Boomba felt giddy. "Let's see how you'll like *this*." To the sky, he yelled, "I need one ugly troll, please, with a ten-foot sword on the side."

There was a slight rumble from up above. Boomba steadied himself, spreading his legs, bending his knees, keeping his club raised. Through the swirling cloud, he saw Max doing the same in his backyard.

Dark skies drifted in directly above the meadow. A louder rumble, then a troll wielding a ten-foot sword fell from the sky. Its contact with the ground was so great that it sent a jagged line of broken earth zig-zagging through Boomba's spread legs. Amazed, Boomba leaped to one side of the crack and rushed at the troll, the diamond club held high. The troll held completely still, just stood there like a tree with puny eyes.

“To victory!” Boomba cried, preparing to bludgeon the troll’s kneecap. With barely a flick of the wrist, the troll sent its blade whistling through the air, successfully chopping Bomba the Gnome in perfect halves.

#

With an overly dramatized cry of pain, Max threw himself backward onto the grass. He rolled over and over until he spread his arms wide, eyes closed, mouth slack. In his head, he heard the thunderous footsteps of the troll coming toward him. It was going to smash him into the ground! Excitement, the likes of which Max had never experienced before, filled his chest with unwavering courage. Somewhere, far away in his mind’s eye, he saw Boomba the Gnome—not crayon-drawing Boomba, but skin and bones Boomba—reaching for the diamond club.

In slow motion, Max reached out an arm, fingers clawing the ground for the weapon that would save his life. One more goliath step and he would be jelly between the troll’s toenails. Max’s fingers curled around the club’s handle...

#

Boomba took only a moment to appreciate how strange he looked without his lower half before regenerating, an action involving a feeling of disorientation similar to that of someone forcing themselves from a bad dream. A shadow fell over Boomba. The troll’s foot was blocking out the sun. Boomba pulled his cap low over his lightbulb ears and threw himself to one side of the descending foot. He rose shakily to one knee and shouted, “One diamond bazooka and a lightning storm background, please!”

#

Max rose to his feet superhero style. Head bent, he planted one foot on the ground, then brought the other swinging heavily forward. Bursts of lightning highlighted the troll’s groping

fingers as it reached for him. Max raised his head slowly and heaved his stick onto his shoulder. “Bazooka!” he screamed and watched in glee as firebolt after firebolt launched toward the troll’s chest. “Boom! Boom! Boom!” All direct hits! The troll looked down unbelievably at the smoking holes in his belly, then up at Max. Then it fell over, its head smashing into a clump of his mother’s flowers. Max whooped. He threw the stick over his head in celebration. What a fight! A sense of accomplishment washed over Max, and as he took a seat on the grass by the troll’s smoking remains, he wondered if any other seven-year-old he knew would have been brave enough to do what he had just done. No, Max decided. He and he alone was able to face a troll and live. He was special that way. He and Boomba.

“Are you okay, Max?”

Daddy was walking across the lawn. He was wearing the same sweatshirt he always wore when they went to visit Grandma and Grandpa—the one of the Boston Red Sox baseball team. “Yep. Mommy said I could play out here until you came. Look!” Max pointed to the dead troll. “It was trying to attack our house and I killed it with my diamond bazooka.”

Daddy looked very surprised. He must not have thought Max would be brave enough to do it. “Well,” Daddy said slowly, “it was a good thing you were here, Max.” He smiled. “Who needs a house lock when we have you?”

Max beamed.

“Walk over to the steps with me. I want to talk with you.”

“Am I in trouble?” Max asked as he took a seat.

“No, Max. No trouble. Do you remember Larry? The boy you played with last summer?”

Max nodded. All Larry had ever wanted to do was bang on Daddy’s drum set.

“Do you see him during school?”

“Sometimes. He’s a lot older than me, Daddy.”

“No, he’s not. He’s seven, isn’t he? Just like you.”

“He turned eight last week. Our class had a party.”

“Well just because he’s seven doesn’t mean you can’t play with him.” Daddy smiled and put a hand on Max’s shoulder. “You spend a lot of time by yourself, Max. I’m sure Larry would love to fight trolls with you.”

“I don’t think so. Boomba only knows me.”

Daddy patted Max’s arm. “All right then, champ. If you ever want to learn to ride the bike we got you let me know.” He stood. “I’ve got a couple more bags to carry out, and then we should be—”

“Do you think I’ll be able to walk around the whole world, Daddy?”

“The world’s an awfully big place. And you’re forgetting the oceans. You can’t walk on water, can you?”

“Aw, I bet I could,” Max said thoughtfully.

“Make sure your backpack is ready, okay champ?”

Max followed Daddy into the house. He didn’t want to play with Larry. He didn’t want to share Boomba with anyone else. Boomba let him do things no one else could do, not even Daddy. *One day, Max thought, I will walk around the world. I’ll start from this house and go to Boston and then South America and then Mount Everest. I won’t even have to walk because Boomba can give me wings. I’ll fly! Isn’t that right?*

Max dropped his chin and made his voice as deep as he could. “That’s right, Max.” And in his mind’s eye, he saw the gnome take off his cap and bow.

#

Boomba watched the troll’s carcass melt into the ground. He began whistling the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle theme song again. What a glorious day to be fighting trolls. And he wasn’t

alone either. Surrounding him, standing in meadows of their own, were all kinds of freed spirits that Boomba had yet to meet. There were rock people, glitter people, fire people, dinosaur and dragon amalgamations, gooey blobs, renditions of popular TV characters, animals of all shapes and sizes, and a myriad of fantasy creatures like Boomba. He even saw what looked to be a slice of pizza battling a squid with lasers that fired from each circle of pepperoni.

Boomba strolled down the center pathway. Life was so much better here than in the Glade. He didn't have access to the boy's emotions before yesterday. When the troll had fallen and the boy had jumped into the air, whooping, feeling proud and accomplished, Boomba had almost cried tears of joy. To help sensationalize the boy's creative experience was his sole purpose, and to know he was fulfilling that purpose to the fullest extent was extremely gratifying.

Throwing back his head, Boomba strutted down the lane to the huts by the forest allowing the Summoning Requests from his fellow Creative Counterparts berate his ears.

"Give me a bridge over a waterfall, on the double!"

"I need a yellow brick road sizzling hot."

"A complete scene swap with the first scene of Indiana Jones."

"One round of buzzards, and don't forget the carcass!"

Ah, the sweet sounds of creative control. Nothing like this, Boomba thought. Nothing like this in all the worlds.

#

It was November when Max first taped Boomba to his bookshelf. Around this time, Lucille had taken to retelling the story of *Around the World in Eighty Days* to her son after dinner before sending him off to do homework. She was amazed at how enthralled the boy was by the exploits of Phileas Fogg and his loyal companion, Jean Passepartout. She, too, had been an avid

reader of Jules Verne in her youth, but not at seven! Most boys that age would wander over to their Lego blocks or costume bins after five minutes of listening to Fogg's habits of punctuality. But not her Max. It was as if her narration transported him onto the London streets where he could see everything in absolute detail, not just the blurry images human brain's conjured when trying to picture a certain scene. She found herself glancing over at him between paragraphs, half amazed, half disconcerted by Max's trance.

Really like he's somewhere else entirely.

#

"You don't think there's anything...*wrong* with him, do you?"

Steve eased himself back onto the bed, hands behind his head. He had to be on site by four the next morning and had decided to retire to the bedroom after tucking Max in for the night.

"Wrong?"

"The way he just...stared off into space when you were reading him *Frog and Toad*. He has that same look every time I sit him down to read *Around the World in Eighty Days*. It scares me a little."

"He's an imaginative kid," Steve said, yawning. "I was the same way."

"I don't know..." She trailed off, trying to remember how she had interacted with books when she was seven. Hadn't there been a certain magic to it at that age? Hadn't the words just come alive? Maybe...A memory rose from her subconscious, a memory so deep in the abyss that she couldn't be sure it had been real to begin with. A rabbit named Valentine. Dopey ears, purple overalls, a squiggly grin...She shook her head and let out a little laugh.

"What is it?" Steve mumbled, his words slurred with sleep.

“Oh, nothing I suppose. It’s just that...did you ever have an imaginary friend growing up?”

“Did you?”

“I might have...or it’s just a silly dream from long ago.”

“My mother used to say childhood was a dreamworld on earth. I guess Max is proof that she was right.”

“Just so long as it doesn’t affect his schoolwork, I suppose.”

“He’s a good boy. Lily looks up to him.”

Lucille smiled. “Yes. Yes she does.”

#

The months ticked by. Fogg traveled from London to Turin to Suez; Max traveled just as far in his thoughts. All with Boomba’s help, of course. Always, in some corner of his mind, he saw the gnome strutting down cobblestone streets, exchanging money with crooked salesmen, and constantly flipping up at his wrist to look at the diamond watch he had summoned for himself. Max experienced the words of Jules Verne through the mind of an eccentric gnome who believed Max could fly.

His eighth birthday arrived, bringing with it a park ranger costume that Mommy said could be his explorer’s outfit. Max placed the wide-brim hat on his head and smiled.

They finished the book in May, a few weeks before school let out for the summer. Max crawled into bed that night facing his drawing of Boomba and whispered, “I want to meet you. One day, I want to meet you. I see you in the background, I know what you’re doing. You’re like the shadow of my mind. Or maybe I’m the shadow of yours.” Max sighed. This was stupid, it really was. People would start thinking he was crazy. “You make things real to me, Boomba. Couldn’t you do that to yourself?”

Max lay back. It was his sister's birthday tomorrow. He wanted to wake up early so he could see if her birthday present was still where he had trapped it. *Boomba can't hide forever*, he thought.

#

"Max."

For a second Max thought it was his mother touching his shoulder, trying to get him up for school. It felt much too early for school...But there *was* something he had to do, wasn't there?

Max opened his eyes. Lily stood by his bed. She was fully dressed. In the dawn light coming from the window, Max could see she was wearing the flower jacket Mom had bought her.

"Are you sick?" he asked her.

"I'm six now, Max."

"I know that! Did you think I was going to forget your present?"

"No..." Lily played with the zipper on her jacket. "You promised you would show me *him* when I turned six." She planted a finger on Boomba's drawing.

"No, I promised to show you when you turned *seven*."

"I *feel* seven."

Max untangled himself from his pile of blankets and rubbed his eyes. "You want to go outside now? Mommy and Daddy aren't even up yet."

"I'm too excited to sleep." Lily saw the hesitation on his face. "Please? It's my birthday. I promise I'll keep up. Mommy says I'm big for my age."

"Okay, okay. Let me get dressed first. I'll meet you by the front door."

Five minutes later, Max stood dressed in his park ranger uniform next to Lily on the porch. It was cold and gray outside, and part of Max wanted to still be in bed. If there was even the smallest expression of doubt on Lily's face, then he would have suggested waiting for after breakfast. But Lily was looking out their yard like a person on a quest.

"Where's Boomba?"

Max thought fast. He didn't want to disappoint Lily, but there was no way she would be able to see Boomba when even he couldn't. *She has to find her own friend.*

"Come on," he said, "I'll take you to your present."

"You hid my present out here?"

"I didn't hide it, I'm keeping it safe for you."

"What is it?"

"You'll see. It's not far."

#

Lily bounced along beside Max as they took the well-beaten trail through the woods that separated their house from their neighbors. Max had asked Daddy who lived there. "Grumpy old people," apparently. On the few occasions when Max had traversed the entire wood, he had never seen them outside or on the porch.

He walked Lily over to the rotting trunk of a fallen sycamore. This was one of Max's favorite spots because of all the weird bugs that burrowed inside the soft bark. Other wildlife gathered here too. Birds, squirrels, chipmunks. Some afternoons he brought his nature books here to try and identify as many living things as he could. Max was proud of his knowledge. He wished there was a nature contest in school like there was a spelling and poetry contest.

"Where is it?" Lily asked, looking around as if in a daze.

“Here.” Max led her around the trunk. There stood a cardboard box, partially covered with leaves. Max had been careful to poke enough holes through the top flaps. He supposed he could have left the flaps open, but he didn’t want to risk the hawks. Kneeling, Max opened the cardboard flaps.

“Look, Lily.”

She grabbed the edge of the box with grubby hands and poked her head inside. Max saw a smile dance across her face and was pleased.

“What is it, Max?”

“A hedgehog,” Max said wisely. “Kingdom Anamilia. Family Erina...Erinaca, no...”

“Can I hold it?”

“I don’t think you want to. You see the prickles, right? But he’s fun to watch walking around. I made sure to put a lot of bugs in there to keep him happy.” Suddenly, Max was anointed with a flash of inspiration. He took Lily’s hand, and they kneeled together beside the box.

“You want to see Boomba, right?”

“Yes!”

“Well, only I can see him because it was me who thought him up. But guess what? You can have a Boomba of your own!”

Lily stared into the cardboard box. “Boomba the hedgehog?”

“You can’t use my name! Come up with something else. And think of the hedgehog with some clothes and a personality.”

“Ok, but first I want to touch it.” Lily reached a hand into the box and lowered her fingers at a snail’s pace until they grazed the hedgehog’s spines. “Tickly,” she giggled. “I want to name her, Lily.”

Max narrowed his gaze. “You can’t name your imaginary friend after *yourself*. That’s weird.”

“Her name is Lily,” Lily said firmly. She squeezed her eyes shut. “She has a yellow raincoat and a big orange hat and she likes flowers.” She opened her eyes, then snapped them closed again and said speedily, “And she eats ice cream and tootsie pops because who likes eating bugs? There, Max, did I do it right?”

“I guess so.”

The woods had become strangely quiet as Lily had rattled off her hedgehog’s characteristics. For the first time, Max felt a little uneasy about being so far from the house so early in the morning. They really should be getting back. Mom would be up soon, and if they weren’t there—

“I see her!” Lily was standing as still as if someone had just called red light, her arm half raised.

“Really! Where?”

“She was there!” Lily pointed to a bush. “She was there in my head! I was just thinking *I* was a hedgehog and then I was! Her eyes aren’t the same color as mine, and she’s so big...”

Max crossed his arms. “Yes, that stuff happens when you use your imagination. But Lily the hedgehog’s in the dreamworld and you’re in this world.”

“Could I...use my imagination and think I’m in their world?”

“Hey, good idea. We could try—”

“Or I could imagine being *you*. Or Mommy or Daddy! Or eating all the ice cream I want.” Lily stared at him, a look of utter amazement on her face. “I can do anything!”

Max scratched behind one ear, a little uncomfortable. “Hey, Lily, why don’t we go back to the house and get some breakfast.”

“I want to go to the castle first. What if a dragon has taken it over?” Lily turned on her sneakered heel and began to dash off to the far edge of their property. Years ago, Dad had constructed a clubhouse that Max renamed ‘the castle’ because he thought playing in a clubhouse was too ordinary.

“Lily!”

“I just...want to see...if there’s a dragon.” Lily’s voice began to fade. A sudden and unexplainable terror seized Max.

“Lily!” Max took off after her. He crashed through bushes, dodged trees. When had she gotten so fast? There! He spotted the back of her flower jacket flapping over a slight hill. At the bottom was the castle. Max slowed to a jog and watched from the top of the hill as Lily approached the castle with exaggerated caution. Max looked around. The woods were still, the castle deserted, their neighbor’s porch also empty. Nothing to worry about. He watched Lily take a step toward the castle’s wood ladder. Her foot seemed to fall into something, making Lily look down.

Clumsy, Max thought. Stepping into a hole like that.

That was when Lily began to scream. He saw her batting her around her head like a girl possessed. Bugs were swarming her legs, her arms, her face. Big, black bugs. Max did not hesitate for a second. He stampeded down the hill, waving his arms, shouting his sister’s name. She was screaming her head off, not seeing him. And for good reason. She had been stung multiple times in the face and neck—the only parts of her body with exposed skin. Max, with his inflated knowledge of nature, gleaned from many hours reading in this very spot, recognized the bugs at once, and his terror hit a new stride. Yellowjackets. Even as he thought the name he felt a searing pain on his bare arm.

“Lily!” he shouted, trying to grab one of her flailing arms. “Come towards me!”

Lily stumbled in his direction. Her face was puffy red, her eyes almost swollen shut. And her breathing sounded like the chains that lowered the drawbridge of medieval castles. Max finally managed to grab her hand.

“We’ve got to run, okay? We’ve got to get back to the house so Mommy and Daddy can help you. Pretend like the dragon’s right behind us, okay? He’s breathing fire right behind you.”

Half sobbing, half wheezing, Lily clamped onto Max’s arm with both hands. He took off up the hill, churning dead leaves and dirt beneath the soles of his sneakers. The only sounds his brain acknowledged were chaotic in and out of his breathing and the frenetic gasping of Lily’s. Gray clouds seemed to have blocked his peripheral vision. Forward was all that mattered. He *had* to get to the house. Daddy would know what to do.

“M–a–a–aaax!” His sister sounded like an animal.

“We’re almost to the house, Lily,” Max almost screamed. Never before had fear gripped him this strongly.

A sharp pain in his arm made him falter. Lily had dug her fingernails into the soft flesh of his underarm. Max let go of her wrist and stopped running. Immediately, Lily collapsed onto the leaves, her hands now wrapped around her bloated throat. Max could no longer tell apart the features on her face—her chin was puffed up like a third cheek and the tip of her nose was all that could be seen because her forehead and cheeks were swollen so badly. Max felt like running away. This could not be his sister lying in front of him. It was an alien or an undiscovered species of ape. But it couldn’t be Lily.

“Ma–ha–ah–haax,” the creature in front of him gasped.

Max stepped away, shaking his head. His hands opened and closed automatically, spasming in time with the creature’s head jerking as it continued to claw at its throat.

Not my sister...not my sister. Max imagined bug-like antennae sprouting from the creature's ears...the swollen red skin turning pale green...the flower rain jacket transforming into black-spotted wings. Yes. That looked right. Max felt the fear melt away. This alien creature had tried to invade their home. But it was no longer a threat now, was it? Max saw it give one last twitch, then lie still. Dazed, Max turned his back on the body and started towards home.

#

Later.

After the discovery, the screaming, the questioning. After the procession of black and the tears. After the quiet of the day and the terror of the night, the doctors and priests, the father and the mother. After all those things, Max re-entered the world he and Boomba had created. On his bed before dinner, he decided to make things right. *Take me back, Boomba. Take me back to the time before all this. I'll fix it.*

Just like that he was no longer lying on his Teenage Ninja Mutant Turtle bed cover. He was seven years old again, putting on his sneakers, ready to go outside and play before they had to leave for Grandma and Grandpa's. Fifteen minutes, Mommy had said.

"Max?" Lily stood by the shoe rack. "I want to go with you."

Max looked at her lovingly. "Yeah, okay. I'm fighting a troll today. Do you want to be my Distractor?"

"Yes!"

"You'll hide behind a tree and make a loud noise. When the troll turns its back, I'll hit him with my bazooka!"

He helped Lily into her shoes and they ran outside together, hand-in-hand—

— "Max, dinner!"

The image of him and Lily running through the front yard began to fade, replaced by the white paint of his room's ceiling. The fan was going. Max watched the blades go around and around for a while. Then he slid out of bed and went to dinner.

#

The next day after school, Max went back into the woods for the first time in over a year. It was winter, and the ground was still frozen after last night's frost. The short time it took Max to reach the rotting stump surprised him. The doctor was right—he really must be growing. He looked up at the trees, sad, as he remembered how large the backyard had seemed two years ago. *Like a whole new world.*

The cardboard box was gone, but this was no surprise. Max supposed five seasons must have taken their toll, not to mention the hedgehog's claws. He began to search around the stump, looking for a burrow of some sort. He expanded the hunt in ever-widening spirals to no avail. Insubstantial piles of twigs, leaves, and soil only unearthed small rodents and, once, a disgruntled mole. Lily the Hedgehog was nowhere to be found.

Max returned to the stump and sat. Something Lily had asked him that last day had been tugging on his mind.

“Could I use my imagination and think I'm in their world?”

He may never be able to reverse the events of that awful day, but maybe, just maybe, he could bring back Lily's birthday present. And never have to think about any of this ever again.

Do your thing, Boomba. Let me in.

#

Boomba transported himself to the meadow as soon as he heard Max's request. Before last night, it had been months since Max had required his services. Boomba had been worried the boy was no longer interested in the imaginative. While such an event wouldn't mean returning to

the spirit Glade, it would mean an end to a job Boomba enjoyed very much. Just thinking about whiling away the days alone in his hut, with no one but the fairy dragon to talk to, made his beard itch.

In the middle of the meadow, Boomba grinned up at the sky. “A boy named Max, if you would be so kind.”

He watched the boy float gracefully through the clouds as one would an exotic bird come to roost. *So this is the marvelously creative child that has gifted me with such a build, such a name*, Boomba thought. He expected the boy to look happy. Instead, Max looked heartbreakingly solemn as he strode through the grasses. When the boy came within several feet, Boomba opened his arms, and Max fell into his embrace.

“This isn’t real,” Max said next to Boomba’s crinkled ear. “I know it isn’t.”

“But it will remain a memory, will it not? Real or imaginary, memory doesn’t know the difference.”

Max withdrew. “I came here to ask you something.”

“Of course!”

“What happens to imaginary spirits after their creator dies?”

Boomba remained unshaken by the question. “I suspect their spirit is sent back to the Glade. They will wait many years to be chosen by another child.”

“Is there any way to tell spirits apart?”

“No. That is why we are overjoyed to be discovered by a child. It means identity and purpose.”

Max thought for a moment. “This Glade...are there animals?”

“Yes, just as there are trees and clouds. Dreamworld is a paradise, Max. I really wish you could stay.”

“I’ve wished for that too, Boomba. Why do you think I used to spend so much time in books and outside playing make-believe?” He shook his head ruefully. “Come on, let’s go to the Glade.”

Boy and gnome walked side by side across the meadows, carefully avoiding the Creative Counterparts who were on active duty. Max watched objects fall from the sky and listened to the chaotic harmony of summoning requests. This *would* be a grand place to live. But in his case, living meant hiding, cowering away from the real world.

There once was a man who believed he could fly, and because he believed, he did.

I believed, Max thought. I believed in Boomba. I still do.

But his flight had crash-landed the day he was awoken by a girl in a flower rain jacket. Now it was up to him to pick up the pieces and walk home.

“This is it,” Boomba said, and there was a queasy quality to his voice. “This is the Glade.”

It was exactly like Max had imagined it to be. Tall trees populated a level plain with sponge-like grass and a scent so pungent that Max felt like someone had stuffed a rose up each nostril. It was a flowery smell to be sure, but so strong it was sour instead of sweet.

Gray wisps, as tall as the average human, drifted like feathers over the Glade. Some intermingled, some wrapped around tree trunks, but most looked utterly lost and devoid of purpose.

“They make me sad,” Max told Boomba.

“Me too. I don’t come here if I can avoid it.”

“Well let’s hurry, then. Help me look for a hedgehog.”

“A hedgehog? Anything you’re looking for, I can summon.”

“No. I want to find her myself.”

Doing his best to avoid the free-floating spirits, Max began searching for burrows, his head hung low like a bloodhound's. From the number of other small animals he saw out in the open, a hedgehog shouldn't take too long to find.

Fifteen minutes into the search, by a tree stump that looked curiously like the rotted one in his backyard, Max found a neat nest of leaves and twigs and downy grass. Max lay down on his stomach and peered inside. There she was. A sleeping hedgehog, all four of her little pink legs curled up next to its snout. Her spines gently rose and fell to the rhythm of easy breathing. Max smiled. He stood and motioned for Boomba to come over.

"Well isn't that sweet," Boomba said, hands on knees, head cocked to one side.

"Would you take care of this hedgehog for me, Boomba?"

"Of course I can, but...you could do it yourself. Stay, we could have many more adventures together."

"Oh, I know. Part of me wants to stay. My world can be so ugly, Boomba." Max gazed into the burrow at the sleeping hedgehog. "But I'll still visit. You can make me fly any ol' time. And I'll feel a lot better knowing Lily's hedgehog is safe. You'll keep her safe, won't you, Boomba?"

Boomba embraced him again, this time adding an extra squeeze. "I'll shine her spines every night by the fire and feed her nothing but fresh milk."

"No, not milk. Ice cream and tootsie-pops."

"You got it," Boomba said.

Max watched as Boomba took off his blue cap—the one Max had once drawn in with his denim blue crayon—and laid it on the grass. Then, with a level of care contradictory to the gnome's rough appearance, Boomba reached into the burrow, cupped the hedgehog into his hands, and transported her onto his cap. He lifted the bundle to his chest and gave Max a wink.

They looked at each other fondly, each knowing their time together was almost at an end but not wanting to say it. Max felt he was on the verge of losing something forever. That once he said goodbye, Boomba would fade and all their shared memories with him. Or maybe it was something else, some other loss that he was too young to put a finger on. Maybe in ten years he would know.

Max took a step back. "I guess I'll be seeing you."

Boomba smiled. "I'll always be half a dream away."