



# Ring of the Farjumpers

A folk tale about  
**The Little People of the Ozark Mountain**  
**Book One**

*Stories of an adolescent past,  
retold for grown-ups, who still  
cherish the magic of those days gone by!*

by

**Tom Gnagey**





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Book One in the series

A folk tale about  
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Although not entirely necessary,  
it will help to read this book before  
perusing the other volumes in the series.

Book One: Ring of the Farjumpers  
Book Two: The Ambassador and the Touchperson  
Book Three: Man of the Clan  
Book Four: Twiggs and Cinnamon

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## **CHAPTER ONE:**

### **That Enchanted Spring Day in the Meadow**

Now, to an outsider, they may just seem to be part of one more fanciful folk tale, but to those of us who grew up in the Ozark Mountains they are as real as you and I.

My first personal experience with the Little People occurred one bright, Spring, morning when I was nine - nine and a half, to be completely accurate. Being an early riser, I had slipped into my pin-striped coveralls, and was running across the meadow, just as the sun was breaking over the hill to the East. I was enjoying the rush of the breeze on my face and the feel of the morning dew on my bare feet.

Please understand that this was not just all play. No Sir! I truly thought it my sacred, early morning duty to wake the birds and other little creatures in the valley. Since I was four, it had become my daily ritual, promoted, early on, by my parents in their attempt to catch an additional forty winks.

If you have walked the Ozark back-country, you will understand about its uneven, rocky red ground, and may even have marveled at the fact it could grow anything save the most resolute weeds. Most mornings, those rocks were my friends. I would arrange the largest ones to help me ford the stream. Several, of medium size, would become a seat on which I

would rest, munching an apple or hand full of freshly plucked berries while surveying my domain from high on the hillside. The smaller round stones were just right for target practice - I could pick off a tin can at twenty paces (well, maybe only ten!). And the small, flat ones made wonderful skipping stones, helping me occupy endless hours at the duck pond.

I was, in fact, heading toward the pond when it happened. It was the warm weather catastrophe every little boy dreads most - a stubbed toe! Having had much experience with various types of abrasions, I had often wondered why a scrape on the elbow or knee, though painful at the moment, soon eased, while that of a stubbed toe remained as a throbbing affliction for hours and hours.

The culprit on that morning, was the grass-hidden edge of a large flat rock. I was speeding along at full trot, calling resolutely to the Bobwhites (which were, in my mind, the most difficult of the birds to awaken), when suddenly that unmistakable bolt of grating, stinging, pain befell me. On impact, I tumbled head over heels into the wet grass. When at last I came to rest, I just lay there motionless for a long moment, looking up at the pastel streaked heavens and sincerely inquiring, "Why me, Lord?"

My grand Saturday had been ruined almost before it began. A guy couldn't run or skip or hop or do summer salts or climb trees with a stubbed toe, and although the cool water of the stream would ease the pain a bit, what fun was skinny dipping if you couldn't kick your legs or jump off Jutting Rock. No two ways about it, my day had been flat out ruined.

Regardless of the self-restraint he tries to muster at times like this, a nine and a half-year-old guy may, on occasion, shed a few tears. And shed them I did! Huge streams began rolling down my already smudged cheeks. They arose, more out of disappointment than from pain. I distinctly remember thinking that as long they were already flowing, I might as well get some mileage out of them. So, I sobbed a bit harder than was actually necessary, hoping to

procure the pity of someone, and perhaps make God, himself, feel just a bit bad about having let this dreadful calamity befall me.

Eventually, I sat up, placing my wounded foot on the other knee, thereby moving it into position for closer examination. My worst fears were realized. It was a humdinger all right - a scraped and bleeding, throbbing, humdinger! I uprooted a handful of grass and threw it at the ground in disgust. It didn't help, but did seem the thing to do. That was the moment I first spied him.

There in the grass, no more than half a jump rope away, was a tiny little person about the size of a skinny ground squirrel. I knew immediately what I was seeing. Father had often told me wonderful bedtime stories about the Little People, but until that moment, I must admit, I had been some skeptical. No more, however!

Never having been accused of being timid, I leaned a bit in his direction and said, "Hi there. I'm Jason but everybody calls me Jay. What's your name?"

Before I could finish, he vanished right before my very eyes. I got to my knees and, bravely ignoring the throbbing toe, cautiously crawled toward the spot on which he had been standing. I carefully searched the grass with my hands. He was gone all right. No doubt about that. I sat again, realizing I had just scraped my wounded toe even more. The pain, however, paled in light of this extraordinary new development.

I looked all around being very quiet so as to not scare him away again, should he reappear. Oh, how I hoped he would reappear! I fully understood the considerable significance of the moment. Hardly daring to breathe, I continued to slowly scan the area. My heart thumped wildly, as if I had just dashed up the hill to the old log cabin.

Presently, I spied movement in the grass. It was too tiny a parting of the blades to be rabbit or a coon, yet much

too large to be a tree toad or snail. Then, there he was! This time I didn't speak. I didn't move a muscle. I didn't blink my eyes or lower my head. I just looked down past my nose in wonder at my new companion. It was then that I remembered Father had once said the Little People were not allowed to talk to us humans, or they would lose their magical powers.

This Little Person appeared to also be a boy - a bit older than I was, I thought. His smaller size made it difficult to tell for sure. On his head was a brown, wide-brimmed, flopped over, pointed hat with a large, tattered, white feather jutting backward from the band. He wore a green vest over a bright yellow long sleeved shirt, and baggy, knee-patched, brown pants. On his feet were green pointed boots with the look of felt or suede rather than hard leather. His cheeks were red, yet his complexion well-tanned.

He stood there with his feet apart and his arms crossed as if daring me to do something. I must admit, I thought him quite brave to just stand there, holding his ground like that - considering his tiny size.

After a few moments, I could contain myself no longer. I figured that since Father hadn't said anything bad would happen if mortals spoke to them, it would be ok for me to try once more - this time in a very soft tone, borrowed, for the moment, from Grandma.

"Please don't be afraid of me, Little Person. I want to be your friend."

Well, much to my everlasting surprise, the Little Person spoke back.

"I'm not afraid of anything! I'm a Nearjumper, soon to be a Farjumper of the Clan Dewgoodabee."

I truly didn't understand the meaning of his words, but was simply overjoyed at his response. His high pitched little voice sounded a whole lot like old Mr. McVay - he had come

from some far-off land as a young man, and Father called his charming accent a brogue. I thought it had a most pleasing ring to it.

Then, like a clap of thunder foretelling the storm to follow, it occurred to me that he was not supposed to have talked to me! What had I done? By speaking with him that way, had I been responsible for making him lose his magical powers? I felt a cold, prickly, rush swell throughout my body - much like that when Mother caught me making sugar bread just before supper.

In an attempt at damage control I said most earnestly, "You don't have to talk to me. I don't want you to lose your magical powers. I am truly sorry if I made that happen."

"Not to worry, young mortal," came his squeaky response. "That only applies to Bigguns."

"Bigguns," I asked?

"Ya, Bigguns. You know, Moms and Dads and big folks like that."

I was much relieved, though the gnawing feeling that I had done something very wrong continued to linger for some time. It was a familiar feeling which, unfortunately, I deservedly felt all too often!

"I see you stubbed your toe," he said, cautiously moving toward my foot. "Looks like a humdinger. Bet that one really hurts."

Hands behind his back, he carefully examined it with his eyes. "Yup, I'll bet that one really stings."

"It sure does," I answered, now beginning to feel a bit more comfortable about this strange and totally unanticipated development.

"I can fix it with a Wishgrant if you want me to, but you need to know that I am only allowed to ever grant you one wish in your whole life time, so you'd better think about it some before you ask."

"You can grant wishes? Any kind of wishes," I asked.

"Almost any kind. They do have to be unselfish wishes, and I have to be completely sure they are really going to be good for you," he explained, strutting a bit, as if suddenly feeling quite self-important.

"Gee! That must be great," I said, partly to him and partly just thinking out loud. I had spent a good deal of time wondering about how it would be to have magic powers. I had even prayed for them on a few occasions, but, sadly, to no avail.

The Little Person interrupted my fantasy.

"It's a big responsibility, really. I mean how in the name of St. Bountiful am I supposed to know if it's really going to be good for somebody?"

"I see what you mean."

We both fell quiet and did some hard thinking on that for the next few moments. Presently, I broke the silence:

"Well, if I only get one wish in a whole long life-time, I think I'll pass on this one. Stubbed toes hurt a lot, but I reckon someday I'll probably need a wish a whole bunch more than I do today."

"Gramps would say you're a wise Laddy for thinking that way," the Little Person responded. "By the way, my name is Twigginton, but most folks call me Twiggins."

Politely, he stuck out his hand, all quite automatically, as if wanting to shake, and then shrugged his shoulders as if

slightly embarrassed, when he realized our hands would just never be able to clasp one another.

I quickly responded by carefully offering the pointing finger of my right hand. He took hold of it with both hands and we sort of did a shake thing. Unfortunately, I shook too hard and raised him six inches off the ground. He held on for dear life, though he smiled through it all, as if it were actually great fun. I gently returned him to the ground. (Well, as gently as a nine and a half-year-old boy can do anything!)

"Sorry about that, Twiggypin."

"It's Twiggs," he corrected in a nice way.

"Twiggs, that's right," I said. "Look, Twiggs, if I don't get this toe into some cool water very soon, it'll blow up and hurt all day. How about you come with me over to the stream and we can talk some more?"

"OK. I'll race you," Twiggs said, with an impish gleam in his eyes.

And then, POOF! He disappeared again. For a moment, I searched there for him and then decided that he had probably done his invisible jumping around thing. I got up - actually being quite careful for me - and gingerly, heel-hobbled toward the stream. One-foot hopping would have been faster, but prior experience with stubbed toes had taught me that the jolts resulting from such hops multiplied the throbbing many-fold.

When I arrived, a few minutes later, there was Twiggs, standing on Jutting Rock, arms crossed, looking as pleased as punch that he had beaten me. Not liking to lose at anything, I felt a bit miffed so just ignored him, while I found a spot along the bank where I could sit and dangle my foot in the cool water. My how good that felt at last!

Trying to disregard the defeat, I changed the subject.

"So, Twiggs, how old are you?"

"I'm twelve and three quarters," he answered.

I wasn't entirely sure what a 'three quarters' was, but supposed it was more than twelve and a half. Halfs were pretty important at my age, so I figured three quarters must be important at his.

"I'm just nine and a half. I'm the shortest boy in my class, but Father says I'm the smartest. He's probably right. All I ever get are A's."

"Short heck! I think you're big, even for my age," Twiggs said, breaking into an ear-to-ear grin." We both laughed.

"So, how do you disappear and then come out somewhere else?" I asked, not really expecting he'd tell me his secret, but still thinking it was worth a shot.

"It's real easy," he said, demonstrating. "You just spread your feet apart like this, cross your arms - so - close your eyes, and imagine the place you want to be."

At that, he was gone again, only to reappear almost instantly on a flat rock no more than an arm's length away from me.

"See how easy it is," Twiggs said, with that now familiar shrug of his shoulders. "Try it. Go ahead, Jay-man."

"I don't think big people like me can do that," I said.

"You'll never know 'til you try," came, Twiggs eager response. He jumped up and down, clapping in excited anticipation. "Come on. Give it a go!"

Obviously, this little fellow had not had much contact

with us humans, but, what the heck, I would try. Wouldn't it be fine if it worked! My mind raced with images of all the tricks I could pull on the bigger guys at school, and how I wouldn't have to waste so much time getting from the house to the pond or the spring or the candy store. My whole being surged in eager expectation.

I stood up, assumed the proper stance, folded my arms, and with my eyes closed so tightly that they teared, imagined my back porch where I had left my shoes. I kept my eyes tightly closed. It actually felt like something was going on - well, maybe! My heart pounded but I dared not breathe. Then, after several moments had passed, I bravely began opening my eyes. Not all at once, mind you. This was far too big a deal for that. First, I cracked my right one just a slit, followed a long moment later by my left.

A second, major disappointment that morning! I was still right there in the meadow beside the creek. I did quickly check out my feet to see if, by chance, I had gotten my shoes, but no such luck.

"Did I disappear?" I asked, at that point no longer really believing that I had.

" 'Fraid not," Twiggs answered, slowly shaking his head, and with noticeable disappointment in his voice.

"Did I fade out just a little, maybe? Perhaps I didn't think hard enough," I went on, grasping at straws.

"Naw, nothing happened at all big guy. Pop said you mortals can't do it, but I could never understand why not. It seems so easy to me, you know? Sorry if I got you all excited for nothing."

"Aw, that's ok. I really didn't think I'd be able to do it anyway," I answered, trying to let him know I wasn't going to carry a grudge over the matter.

This Twiggs kid was starting to grow on me. I sat back down and let the cool stream again flush away my pain. There were no two ways about it though, I really was greatly disappointed and it must have showed.

Twiggs sensed my sorrow and came over to me, patting my leg with far more compassion than any twelve and three quarters year old guy had ever shown me before.

"Want to sit up here on my knee," I asked? "We could see each other better while we talk."

"Sure, that would be great!" he said with his characteristic enthusiasm. "You, know, I've never touched a mortal before, let alone talked to one like this."

"Really! I'm the first? So, how is it?" I asked, trying to hide the fact that I was not at all surprised by his disclosure.

"Seems okay, so far. Gramps told me that a lot of you are actually all right folks."

I reached down to pick him up. He reared back a bit, palms pushing the air in my direction. "No, please," he said, as if fending me off. "Let me get myself up there. I'm afraid you'll squish me with your strong big hands."

'How about that,' I thought. 'Twiggs, who was twelve and three quarters, thinks I am strong. Pretty nice!' My chest swelled with pride and a new sense of power overtook my soul. If one can strut while sitting down, I strutted with the best of them.

Then, poof! There he was sitting astride my knee, much the way I would sit on the rail fence by the old log cabin up on the hill. It was hard to believe this was really happening. For a moment, I wondered if, perhaps, it were all a dream. No. A stubbed toe would never hurt that much in a dream.

"So, tell me more about this jumping thing you can do," I asked.

"Well, like I said, I'm just a Nearjumper so I can't jump any farther than I can see. When I turn thirteen, I get to join the Ring of Farjumpers. Then I'll be able to jump anywhere in the whole World. That's when I get the Sacred Red Feather for my hat."

"Wow! You'll be able to jump anywhere?"

"Yup. Anywhere I can imagine in my head."

"Why not 'til you're thirteen, I asked?"

"That's when a boy of the Clan Dewgoodabee becomes a man. There's a big Ascension Festival and we all dance and sing, and play games and such. It goes on for a full week. Every night we shoot fireworks and have a big bonfire. On the Sunday before, Pop and Gramps will take me to the secret Sacred Place and give me the magic. It'll take all day. I've been studying with Gramps every night since I turned twelve. There's a lot to learn. For one thing, I have to know all the stories about the olden days. Like I said, it's a big responsibility, being a man of the Dewgoodabee Clan."

I was impressed. "Where's this secret place?"

Twiggs grinned and giggled. "It wouldn't be a secret place if I told you, now would it? Besides, nobody but Gramps knows exactly where it is. Pop and I will be blindfolded 'til we get there."

"Sounds exciting to me, Twiggs."

"Yup. It's an exciting thing all right," Twiggs repeated, growing suddenly somber.

"What's the matter," I asked?

"Well, you see, once I become a man, I won't be able to talk to you anymore. That makes me feel sad because I think I really like you. Like I said, you're my first mortal friend."

I, too, grew immediately serious and a bit sad. Twiggs seemed like such a nice kid, and I really didn't have many friends, myself. I lived in the country and, face it, the other boy's moms tended to think I had a dangerously overactive imagination, so they seldom allowed them to come out and play with me.

At that, forcing his broad grin back across his face, Twiggs stood up there on my knee and said, "But, hey, we have the rest of Spring and most of Summer. In that amount of time we can have all kinds of fun together, so let's get at it!"

He sailed his hat a good four feet, ringing a dandelion, and began peeling off his vest, as he suggested, "How about a swim?"

"Great," I replied! But then I remembered my toe. "You go ahead, Twiggs. I'd better just watch today. My toe is just too sore for a swim."

"Are you sure," he asked, with that impish sparkle suddenly back in his eyes?

"Sure. You remember," I said, pulling my foot out of the water as if to offer unnecessary proof.

Well, lo and behold, my toe looked fine! I quickly pulled up the other foot, thinking I must have mistakenly examined the wrong one, but it was also perfect.

Bending over and covering his mouth with both hands, Twiggs tried to hide his happy, thoroughly mischievous, laughter.

"What's going on here?" I asked quite solemnly. "I said I wanted to save my one big wish for something really

important." I was suddenly quite peeved at this Twiggs person.

"You didn't use up your wish. You see I have to do two Goodakts a day, so I just made your toe better because I wanted to. Now, I only have one more Goodakt left to do and the sun's barely up. I've got it made!"

"What exactly is a Goodakt," I asked, somewhat hesitantly, still not fully convinced that it was all on the up and up?

"It's like a good deed, I suppose you'd say. I just have to be sure it's something that will really help the person. That really helped you, didn't it," he added, frowning his brow a bit, as he awaited my answer?

"Oh, yeah, it helped me a lot. Thanks! It's all just a little hard to believe, you know?"

His brow smoothed.

"Yup. I suppose I do, but really, I still don't understand why you mortals can't do the magic for yourself."

Vest in hand, Twiggs jumped to the ground.

"What else can you do," I asked, as we each busied ourselves, stripping to our birthday suits in anticipation of an enjoyable swim?

"Lot of stuff, but we'll have time to talk about that later. Last one in is a mangy mortal! Woops! Sorry about that. It's just a little saying we have. I guess it's not a very good one is it?"

Then, after a moment of serious reflection he added, "You see, I never really had to think about that before, Jay-man. I really am sorry."

"No problem, Twiggypin, 'cause you see, the last one in is really a Lousy Little Person," I yelled, as we both jumped in feet first. We were laughing so hard as we hit the water that we almost drowned. And if that weren't enough, the splash I made was so big it sent Twiggs straight to the bottom of the swimming hole. I looked for him with some concern, carefully turning 'round and 'round in the water, waiting for the ripples to subside and allow a better view through the surface.

Suddenly, there in my ear, I heard Twiggs whispering.

"Here I am," he said, and I realized he was safe and sound, sitting right there on my shoulder.

We swam for hours, occasionally stretching out on the rock to catch our breath and chat a bit more. Like with all new friends, there was much for both of us to learn.

"So tell me some more about this Ring you're going to join that will let you jump anywhere in the World," I asked at one point.

"Well, it isn't really a ring, of course. That's just a word we use that means a group of people - like a circle of friends, you might say. Only it's more than just friendship because all Farjumpers are bound together by the magic. It's like you can feel the magic in a Farjumper even though you actually can't see it. I suppose it's hard for an outsider to understand, but next to becoming a man, becoming a member of the Ring of the Farjumpers is the biggest deal there is for a young person in my World."

Twiggs was right. I really couldn't understand about the Farjumper thing, but that would be okay. I figured it must be sort of like the Shriners, but with magic instead of funny hats. I did understand how very important it all was to him and that seemed to be what counted the most right then. What an amazing new friend I had made.

Then, with an impish sparkle of my own, I asked, "At

thirteen, do all of the girls also get to become men?"

I ducked as Twiggs tossed a tiny stone in my direction.

"Of course, not, you dunce! They have their own secret ceremony and become women."

We laughed. Had he been my size, that kind of exchange would have called for some rough and tumble wrestling. We had to settle for broad smiles and friendly chuckles. What an interesting relationship this promised.

I tried to push out of mind the gloomy thought that all of this would have to come to an end in a few short months. Like Twiggs, though, I was determined to enjoy it for as long as it could last.

By the time the sun was well on its way down behind West Hill, Twiggs and I realized that we had played the day away. We sat together in silence on a newly discovered rock shelf, which overlooked the broad, green valley beyond, where Twiggs indicated he lived. We were both lost, deep in our own, yet I'm sure very similar, thoughts.

"I'm really glad I didn't let you scare me away this morning," Twiggs said, breaking the silence, and deliberately keeping his gaze fixed on the sunset. "I must admit I was pretty scared when you first spoke to me."

"Scared? That's hard to believe. You seemed so brave."

"When you're my size, you don't dare give in to fright every time some big thing in the World alarms you, or you'd be terrified all the time."

"Yeah, I know how that is," I responded, nodding my head most sincerely.

"You?" It had been a question.

"Yeah, me! Like I told you, I'm the littlest guy in my room at school. I know how hard it is being small, believe me."

"But you're smart! Doesn't that count for something?" Twiggs asked, appearing a bit confused.

"Oh, that's fine so long as I'm in the classroom, but once outside with the guys it doesn't count for anything. In fact, they even make fun of it."

We sat silently once more, contemplating this new strand in our rapidly growing bond.

"So, just exactly where do you live," I asked, partly trying to find a way out of that painful subject and partly out of bona fide curiosity?

Twiggs turned around and faced East.

"Between here and there," he answered, with a shrug and a sweep of his hand, obviously trying to avoid a specific answer. "I live in a wonderful old oak stump in a small village called Bountiful."

I followed his lead and also turned around.

"I've been all over out there and I've never seen it," I answered, again a bit skeptical.

"Mortals can't see it," Twiggs tried to explain. "It's like it's there but it isn't, ya know?"

"Well, no, I don't know, but I reckon I'll have to take your word for it. Does that mean I can never visit you there," I asked, somewhat sobered at the thought.

"No more than I can probably ever visit you in your home," Twiggs said.

"Why not? My parents would love to meet you."

Then, on second thought, I added with a smile, "You would be sort of hard to explain I suppose. Parents tend to get bent out of shape over stuff like this. I saw it happen when I took a two-headed turtle home once. You're right, okay, but I still don't like it. "

"Ya, I know. Me neither."

"I reckon that means I shouldn't even tell them about you, doesn't it," I said, again thinking out loud.

"Oh no! Please, you must never tell anyone," Twiggs said excitedly, getting to his feet and pulling nervously at the brass button on the side of my coveralls.

"Okay! Okay! I'll never tell anyone unless you give me permission first," I agreed.

I just looked down at him for some time as he silently worked at shinning up my button with the forearm of his shirt. Eventually he spoke:

"That's one magnificent button you have there."

"You like it? Here, let me rip it off and you can have it."

"Oh, no! I didn't mean that," Twiggs said, obviously taken aback by my offer.

"Sure, why not? Just stand back, a way so I don't slip and hit you. It's been loose anyway," I insisted, as I began tugging and twisting.

In another minute, it was off.

"Here ya go, friend. One genuine brass button."

As I sat it down on the rock in front of him, we both broke into laughter, saying in unison: "Where will you/I wear it?" We rolled on the ground, reveling in the absurdity that could only be that hilarious to boys our ages.

Once we had dried our tearing eyes and regained control of our senses, Twiggs spoke:

"I'll keep it on my dresser beside my bed to remind me of you forever and ever."

He searched through his pockets for something to offer me in return. There was a tiny lump of maple sugar, a withered watermelon seed which he appeared to be surprised was even there, an elm leaf carefully rolled up and tied with red thread, but nothing really big enough for me to keep.

"I know," Twiggs said at last, and he began taking off his belt. "Here, take this and you can wear it like a ring on that big finger you first stretched out to me in friendship."

The trade of precious things was complete. It was a very special moment of connection that neither of us would ever forget. A huge, full-out bear hug seemed in order, but that, of course, was out of the question. He patted my hand and I moved it in response - this time just ever so slightly. He understood.

"I better be getting home," I said. "My folks are sure to be worried. I'm not usually gone all day long like this."

"Me too," Twiggs said with a sigh.

We agreed to meet again the following morning at daybreak at Jutting Rock. With some degree of effort, he hoisted the button onto his shoulder, grinned his broad, friendly grin, and poofed himself and his precious cargo out of sight.

I looked after him and waved good-bye. Then moving

slowly toward home, I cinched-up his little brown belt around my finger. I had never had a ring before, but this one was the finest I could imagine ever having.

Although I knew for sure and certain that our lives had been changed forever that day, I had not even a glimmer of the truly wonder-filled relationship that lay ahead. In the least, I had learned that sometimes even stubbed toes may lead toward extraordinary ends, and that, in and of itself, was a sufficient lesson from that enchanted Spring day in the meadow.

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## **CHAPTER TWO:**

### **It's Hard to Explain a Large Brass Button**

Being able to jump only as far as he could see, it took Twiggs eight separate jumps to get home that evening. After number seven, he paused there on the hill overlooking Bountiful, and carefully considered just where he should enter his village. If he appeared on Main Street, there would be way too many questions about the big brass button. If he showed up on his doorstep, like usual, he risked running into one of his parents before he had prepared a good explanation. Jumping directly into his bedroom seemed the safest strategy.

Once there and just as he had promised, he proudly placed the shiny brass button on his dresser. With dusk settling in over the village, Twiggs lit the candle there on the wall above his bed. The flickering light reflected off the button and cast interesting, gently swaying, golden images on his ceiling and walls.

Twiggs hung his hat on a bedpost and his vest over the back of a chair. He sat on the edge of his bed, slipped out of his boots and, with hands behind head, lay back on his pillow to think.

Twiggs knew that sooner or later he would have to explain the button, and wanted to make sure he did it all just

right. Oh, he would be honest. Twiggs was always honest. He was a Dewgoodabee. That wasn't the issue. It was how to break the news to his parents in just the right way. After all, he figured no one else in Bountiful had probably ever before had a mortal for a friend. He wanted this whole thing to make him a hero and not get him into trouble.

Kids, having mortal friends wasn't actually forbidden by the Book of Sacred Laws. That was part of what Gramps had been teaching him. It was though, shall we say frowned upon by some members of the community.

Mom would be afraid he was putting himself in danger being with a mortal - even a nine and a half-year-old mortal. Dad would ask if he thought it was really fair to the mortal boy to promise a friendship that would have to end in just a few months. Those were tough arguments to refute. It would take some more thinking.

"Twiggington! Wash up for supper, Dear," came his mother's familiar call. Perhaps he'd wait until after supper to initiate the discussion.

"You were gone a long time today, Twiggs," his ever-smiling mother said, as he entered the kitchen.

"Yes ma'am. I was playing up in the meadow beyond West Mountain."

"That's pretty far away, isn't it?" his father asked.

"Actually, it's only eight jumps away," Twiggs said, trying to minimize the whole distance thing. He pulled out his chair and sat down, joining his parents at the table.

"It's a beautiful valley with a stream and woods. There's even an old log cabin with a rail fence," he continued, trying to convince his parents that his going there was, not only safe, but even educational. He tucked his napkin under his chin.

"So, what did you do up there all day?" his mother asked, as she began passing the dishes of food.

"Oh, the usual stuff, I guess."

"Like what usual stuff?" his father questioned, truly interested.

"Like swimming and riding turtles and racing - just usual stuff like that."

"Racing who?" his mother asked, looking just a bit surprised. "I thought I understood you to say this morning that you wanted to be by yourself today."

'Woops!' Twiggs thought to himself. 'I think I just let the mortal out of the bag, so to speak! Guess it won't wait 'til after supper, now.'

He cleared his throat and spoke out loud.

"Guys, I have something I have to tell you and I'm not sure how you're going to take it."

His father put down his fork, patted his mouth with his napkin and, looking at Twiggs, said, "What is it, Son? You know we are always in your corner."

The time had come to just spit it out and see what happened.

"Well, you'll never guess who I ran into up there in the meadow this morning," Twiggs began, hoping to set a light mood.

"No, I suppose we won't," his mother said, smiling and glancing at his father, a question showing on her brow.

"Well, see. I mean. Gee whiz!"

"What is it, Son? Just tell us," his mother encouraged calmly, reaching over and gently patting Twiggs' hand.

"Okay. (Big breath.) See, I met this really nice mortal boy who is nine and half and he stubbed his toe and I Goodacted it and we swam and we laughed and we raced and we joked and I sat on his knee and we ate berries and apples and talked about what scared us and I gave him my belt and he gave me a button and now we are best friends and I promised to meet him there again tomorrow morning. There! That's it. All of it."

He needed a big, catch up breath.

Had Twiggs not lowered his gaze to his lap, he would have noticed that his parents were smiling at each other, working hard to keep from giggling out loud. His father regained his composure first:

"How nice that you made a new friend today. What is this mortal boy's name?"

Twiggs looked up, completely flabbergasted.

"Jay. His name is really Jason. Sometimes I call him Jay-man - he likes that - and he calls me Twiggypin."

"You say he is nine?" asked his mother.

"Nine and a half, really. He says he is the smallest boy in his class at school. I'd sure hate to see how big the others must be!"

They all nodded in agreement.

"Well, if you say he's a nice lad, I'm sure he must be," his father said. "Pass the bread, will you please."

The conversation turned to other things, mostly

between his parents. Twiggs didn't hear much of it. He was dumbfounded at his parent's response, or lack of it, really. He had expected a big, question-upon-question and lecture-upon-lecture deal made of it. Presently, Twiggs couldn't stand it any longer.

"Pardon me," he interrupted, "but aren't you going to caution me against letting him hurt me, or tell me how it might be wrong to start a new friendship I won't be able to continue for more than a few months, or say how careful I must be in trusting a mortal with our secrets? Aren't you going to say all that? Huh!"

His father reached over and put his hand on Twiggs' shoulder.

"It seems we don't need to say any of that, because you have already thought about it, all by yourself. We're proud of you, Son. You're going to make a fine and honorable Dewgoodabee Man, come the end of this summer."

Twiggs could think of nothing to say, so he fidgeted a bit and flashed his well-known grin - even if a bit more sheepish looking than usual. As he finished his meal, he just sat quietly, deep in thought. 'Well, what do you know? They trust me. I mean I always knew they trusted me on the little, every day, stuff, but this is a pretty big deal - befriending a mortal. Wow!'

"You seem tired, Twiggs," his mother said at last, interrupting his thoughts. "I'll do the dishes for you tonight. Why don't you hit the hay early?"

It was a most tempting offer and for a moment, Twiggs considered it. But, then he thought, if he were to be considered a man in some ways, he knew he must try to be a man in all ways, and that meant fulfilling his responsibilities.

"Thanks, anyway, Mom, but I can do my chores. You guys go sit on the porch and make goo-goo eyes or

something."

After the dishes were done and carefully stacked on the shelves, Twiggs proudly took the brass button out onto the porch to show his parents. They were impressed, both with its beauty and with its size.

"Well, I guess you'll be needing a belt, then, won't you?" his mother said, after Twiggs had recounted the specifics the precious stuff trade. "I'll bet old Mr. McAferty has one down at his store that will be just right. You're growing so fast, you would have soon needed a new one anyway."

"Tell us," his father asked, "Just what in the name of St. Bountiful, is the mortal boy going to do with your belt?"

"His name is Jay, Dad. Can you please call him Jay? I'm beginning to have a problem about the offensive way we use the term, mortal, around these parts."

"Okay. I'll try my best. I'll have to change the way I've always talked though, so be patient with me when I forget. But, still, about the belt?"

"Jay's going to wear it like a ring. It's a little big, but he can snug it up and put another hole in it if he needs to. If it doesn't wear out, I suppose he can probably wear it all his life."

"Does the mort... ." His father caught himself. "Does your friend, Jay, know about your life - that it goes on forever, I mean?"

"No. We didn't get into that. I'm not sure I want to. Do you think I should?"

"I guess that's another question only you can answer," his father replied.

This, being a man thing, was beginning to get on

Twiggs nerves. There was apparently going to be lots more responsibility attached to it than Gramps had implied. Twiggs had many things to think about as he returned to his room.

He straightened his pebble collection and rearranged his sock drawer. He moved his chair to the opposite corner and slid the braided rug closer to his bed. Rearranging things usually helped Twiggs think, but not that night. He'd have to bring in the big artillery! He dropped to the floor on his stomach, and slid underneath his bed, collecting all the dirty clothes he'd stashed there on those occasions when he had been in too big a hurry to take them to the hamper in the kitchen. It was quite a collection.

Having properly deposited them, he returned to his room and got ready for bed. He patted his big brass button, wondering if his new friend had gone to bed yet. He folded down the comforter, blew out the candle and lay there on his back. He rolled his head a bit to one side so he could look out the window at the dancing stars and waving branches. Most nights he could imagine fantastic pictures among the stars, but none were there that night. He had had no idea that being a Biggun was going to be so complicated. Even though the button-thing had gone remarkably smoothly with his parents, he still had to be concerned about how the others in Bountiful were going to react. Sooner or later, they would find out.

Twiggs did manage a broad smile as he recalled his wonderful day with his new mortal friend (Sorry! ... with Jay.). It was great to have a friend who was so big and so strong and who liked all of the same outdoor things that he liked. Twiggs got goose bumps just thinking about how awesome it had been to speed through the water as Jay swam fast, letting Twiggs hold onto the hair on the back of his head.

Although he had not told Jay, he, himself, had very few friends. In fact, Twiggs was the only boy in the entire village of Bountiful, and that made for a very lonely life. Oh, there was Alexis, but she was a girl, and up until recently, girls had seemed more of a pest than a source of friendship. Thinking

about that made him recall the Story of the Great Exchange, just recently learned from Gramps.

Many years before, in a far-off land across the ocean, the Little People lived happily in their beautiful highland kingdom of Bountifillia. It had been provided for them by The Wise One on the stipulation that they live a peaceable, simple, happy, and helpful life together. The mountainsides were covered with heather and periwinkle. The cool, pure, streams were filled with fish. The gently rolling, lush green foothills were laden with fruits of every kind. They enjoyed a wonderful, happy, tranquil life together.

As the years passed, however, there became so many of them, that they needed more land and more food and more trees for building new houses and barns and stores. There developed many different ideas about how to go about securing these things, and about solving the ever increasing, problems. Some Little People even became selfish - a trait never before seen in Bountifillia. For the first time in all of history, bickering and open discord broke out.

The Wise One was displeased with what he saw, except, that is, for two very special Clans - The Clan Dewgoodabee and The Clan Callbackabee. He carefully watched them as they continued to be helpful folks, trying to resolve the disagreements and heal the spreading wounds of ill will.

Eventually, fighting broke out among the most quarrelsome clans. It became clear to The Wise One, that the Little People's well-structured society would soon be destroyed by their own self-serving ways. It was then that The Wise One appeared and gathered the elders of the two kind-hearted clans for The Audience of The Great Exchange.

The Wise One promised to remove the two clans to another wonderful, untouched, bountiful land across the sea, but there was one condition: In exchange for this new kingdom in the Ozark Mountains, and in order to keep this

devastating chain of events from ever happening again, each village would have born to it, only two children every thirteen years - one, a girl baby and the other, a boy. In this way, the clans would remain small but strong and vigorous. Each new Little Person would, upon reaching maturity, take a mate from the other clan - the surest way, The Wise One said, to build and maintain a solid, friendly relationship between the clans for all time.

After much discussion of the pros and cons and after consulting the history books and examining the rapidly deteriorating current state of affairs, the elders of both clans agreed to The Great Exchange.

To this very day, it has worked exactly as planned. Life for the Little People of the Ozarks goes on simply, just as it did hundreds of years ago. Love, caring and helpfulness, continue to be their source of happiness as they grow and thoughtfully replenish the souls of each fresh generation.

It was also at that time, that the Clans decided to perform their magic for the mortals with whom they shared the beautiful hills and valleys. However, in order to keep their society unspoiled, and to prevent unnatural alliances from being formed, (as the Wise One had earlier required), they decreed that their adults could not speak with mortals. To enforce this most important of all the laws, they established the first and only punishment in the history of their society. It was decided to remove the magic power from anyone who disobeyed.

And so, with some thoughtful limitations attached, the magic continues to be shared to this very day. Seldom - like once in a thousand-thousand times, Twiggs figured - do the mortals even realize how those wonders have come about. Mortals, it has been discovered, are quite skeptical of anything they can't understand, and that kind of denial helps to maintain the secret of the magic, and eternally protects the Little People's privacy.

Recalling that story was somehow reassuring to Twiggs, and at last, he was able to close his eyes and fall asleep. He dreamed of cabins and rail fences, of a new friend and his own parent's smiling faces. But most of all, he dreamed about how hard it is to explain a large brass button!

## **CHAPTER THREE:**

### **Forever Is A Long, Long Time!**

It seemed as though I had not slept all night. All I could think about was meeting Twiggs early Sunday morning. I had forgotten to tell him I'd have to leave for church at ten thirty, but then I would return right after dinner - for some reason at our house, lunch was called, dinner, on Sunday.

For reasons that were never quite clear to me, I wasn't allowed out of my bed before five AM, so the night before I had laid my blue jeans and tee shirt on the foot of my bed. That way, I could be all dressed and ready to hit the floor running at five sharp. And hit the floor running I did. I grabbed an apple and a pocket full of peanuts as I raced through the kitchen, closed the door quietly (well, you know how that goes!), and was soon galloping along in eager anticipation of my second day with Twiggs.

I wondered if he would already be there when I get to Jutting Rock?

I didn't have to wait long to find out, because there ahead of me was the swimming hole. Sure enough, there he was, beaming from ear-to-ear and sitting cross-legged, as was his style.

"Hey, Twiggs, Hi!" I yelled, waving both hands and

galloping a bit more wildly than before.

"Hi yourself, Jay-man," came his cheery reply. Twiggs sprang up to greet me as I knelt beside him. I was breathing hard from my long run.

"I don't suppose Nearjumping makes you get out of breath like this, does it," I asked, smiling and panting.

"I've never been out of breath in my whole life - not that I can remember, at least," came, his thoughtful reply. "It sounds serious. How does it feel?"

"You mean you've never run really hard," I asked.

"I've never needed to run, I guess. I'd like to try it though. Let's see now, how would I do that?"

It was hard to believe that any healthy twelve and three quarter's year old boy wouldn't know how to run, still, this was Twiggs. Patiently, I tried to help.

"Father says that running is really just leaning over forward and then catching yourself with one leg and then the other before you fall over on your face."

It sounded strange and we both chuckled. Twiggs jumped down off the rock onto the sun-baked, red clay bank of the stream. His first try wasn't very successful and he did, indeed, fall flat on his face.

"How about if you just start out walking," I suggested. "Then walk faster and faster and pretty soon you'll be running." I demonstrated.

"You're the expert at this running thing, Jay-man. Let me try it that way."

After just a few minutes, and only a few more falls, Twiggs had it pretty well mastered. For the next half-hour, all

he wanted to do was to run up and down the bank. He laughed and grinned and eventually, he also began breathing hard. After a while, he ran back to Jutting Rock, where I was laying on my stomach, head propped up, chin in my hands. He collapsed on the grass in front of my face and lay there on his back for the longest time trying to catch his breath.

"That was great, Jay-man!" he puffed. "What other things can you teach me?"

Imagine that! Me teaching a genuine magic person new things. It was an exciting concept.

"Well, there's tree climbing," I suggested, pushing myself to my knees and looking around for a likely candidate.

"There. The elm tree over there. It's a great climbing tree. Let me show how you do it."

I ran to the tree and spit on my hands, getting them ready to help me shinny up the first six feet to the lowest branch. In the process, I lost Twiggs. I had figured that he would probably beat me there like he had done the day before, but I looked all around and he was nowhere to be seen.

"Twiggy-pin! Where are you old man," I called, hands cupped to my mouth?

Presently the grass parted and there he came on a dead run, huffing and puffing and laughing out loud.

As he staggered toward me he said, "Here I am. Thought I'd try it your way. It's really great, you know, this running stuff. I can't imagine why I hadn't figured it out all by myself, long ago."

I just shook my head and smiled.

Again, he collapsed on the ground, turning over and

looking up at the elm tree. Immediately, he broke into gales of laughter as I began my climb.

Pointing up at the tree he asked, "How in the name of St. Bountiful do you think I'll ever be able to wrap my short little legs and arms around that huge tree trunk? Yours barely make it. Come on, now!"

It truly was somewhat of a struggle, even for me, but having begun the climb I wasn't about to quit and admit I couldn't do it - not in front of my new best friend!

"You just watch, and I'll show you how it's done," I snorted, straining every muscle I possessed. "Then we'll find one that's more your size."

You can bet I gave it all I had. Finally, I could grab that bottom limb. Then I knew I had it made. Legs up and over, one hand free to pull against the trunk, and in no time flat I was sitting astride that first branch. Twiggs clapped and whistled, kicking his legs in the air. Then, once having gained a standing position, up the tree I scurried branch after branch, as if they were my private stair steps to heaven.

"Hello, down there," I called, as I reached the highest branch that looked reasonably safe for me!

"Hello, yourself," came that now familiar whisper in my ear. Twiggs had joined me with one of his Nearjumpy things.

"Gee, this is really high. Aren't you afraid you'll fall? I mean if you fell, you'd just have to fall - splat! It's not like if I fell. I could just do a Nearjump and reappear safely on the ground below. But you! You'd break your head!"

His grin was bigger than usual as he added, "I figure in order to climb trees, you mortals have to be either really brave or awfully dumb."

I turned my head to stick out my tongue, but suddenly

he was on the branch above me. From that safe distance, he began chanting, in a far too familiar, sing-songy way, "I can go higher than you can. I can go higher than you can." If he hadn't been my best friend, I might have let that upset me.

"Okay, Jay-man, I see how it's done. Let's find a tree that's more my size so I can try."

Down I went, hanging that obligatory extra moment on the lowest limb, before letting go and falling to the ground.

"There's some underbrush up by the cabin that'll be just about right for you," I said.

"Great," Twiggs said, obviously finding it hard to contain his enthusiasm.

"Last one to the cabin is a ... Then he stopped in mid-sentence. "I guess I'll have to work on another saying for times like this, won't I?" We both laughed, with exaggerated nods of the head.

"How about you ride on my shoulder this time. It's a far piece up there and that way we can talk as we go."

That would become our standard method for cross-country treks. I learned to be very careful, remembering to keep erect and minimize the jerks and jolts. When I did forget, I'd find Twiggs dangling from my collar or catching hold of a belt loop on the way down. He always thought it great fun. In fact, Twiggs was the easiest guy to get along with that I had ever known.

Even that first time we did pretty well. Arriving at the cabin, he jumped to the ground. I pointed out two of the bushes that I thought looked promising, and Twiggs eagerly took the challenge. He climbed them for the better part of an hour. Up and down. Up and down.

I don't suppose I had ever before just sat, so quietly, for

so long in my whole life. I was simply fascinated, just watching Twiggs having so much fun. I began to realize how much I would have missed, if God had actually granted me those magic powers for which I had once, so earnestly, prayed.

Presently, Twiggs ran over to where I was sitting, my back against an apple tree.

"I suppose this is the feeling you get when you say, 'I'm plumb tuckered out,' " he said, smiling ear-to-ear as he plopped down on the ground. Once again, he just lay there, breathing hard for the longest time.

"Are you all right?" I asked after a while.

"I'm wonderfully all right!" came, his happy response.

I looked at the sun and determined it was time for me to leave and go to church.

"I wish you could come along, Twiggs, but I don't think that would be a good idea."

"No, I'm sure it wouldn't be," he agreed. "I think I'll just stay here and take a nap. Isn't that what you call a mid-day sleep?"

At that, I just had to grin and shake my head. Old Twiggypin had never taken a nap before, either! How little he knew about us mortals. But then, how little I knew about the Little People. We both still had lots and lots to learn. It was going to be one fantastic summer!

At church, I was even more restless than usual - and I had never been known to be less than uncommonly active. With Father's pen, I filled in all of the O's in the program, and then folded and re-folded it into a variety of paper airplanes. I examined the contents of Mother's purse. I sat up. I lay down. Bending over and looking between my legs, I

momentarily considered crawling under the pews to the back of the church - bad idea! Through it all, I thought the preacher would never quit.

When at last he ended the final prayer, I energetically added my own - and far too loud - "Amen!" Mother and Father were not really upset, they just couldn't figure out what had gotten into me the past thirty-six hours.

Then, of course, they still had to stop and shake hands, chatting with everybody and anybody - something I usually enjoyed, but that day it more than tested my nine and a half-year-old patience. With a forced smile, plastered on my face, I nodded politely at each and every person. Privately I was tugging on Father's pant legs and muttering quick departure-type suggestions under my breath, hoping to move things along.

At last, we were home. I changed my clothes and had the table set well before Mother could get the dinner out of the oven. She appreciated my help, but shook her head in disbelief.

"You are a different young man, lately. No doubt about that!"

The baked chicken was delicious and the corn and mashed potatoes, too. I received two warnings about eating too fast, and three, "What's gotten into you's?" (That just may have been an all-time 'what's-gotten-into-you' record for a single meal.)

During the course of things, Mother announced, that Mrs. Englander had said Sammy could come and spend the night next Friday. Of course, she was expecting me to be excited. I'm sure my reaction disappointed her.

"I imagine I'll have w-a-a-a-a-y too much home work that night, Mother. Better cancel for now."

With Mother's mouth, agape, I wiped my chin on the napkin, excused myself, and headed out toward the meadow.

"I'll be in by sunset," I called back over my shoulder, and rushed on my way. I knew I'd have questions to answer when I got home that night, but that would be then, and now was now!

I couldn't believe my eyes. I found Twiggs still sound asleep in the shade of a spreading blue thistle plant. Somehow, people look different when they're sleeping. I knelt down and sat back on my legs, just watching him for some time. Presently an ant began climbing his cheek and he awoke with a start.

"Jay-man," he said, as he suddenly realized I had returned. He looked around and sat up.

"That sure didn't take you long."

He yawned, rubbed his eyes and stretched his arms.

"So, what's next," he asked, jumping to his feet as if fully recuperated.

I pulled a peanut from my pocket and offered it to him.

"I'll bet you're hungry, by now, right?"

He rubbed his stomach.

"Well, actually yes I am. Thanks."

I thought it comical, watching him, as he held the peanut in both hands, nibbling away at it much like a squirrel, but I didn't even crack a smile. I'd never want to do anything that might hurt the feelings of my brand new, very best friend.

"I'm hot and sticky, how about a little swim," I suggested. "We can decide what to do next while we cool

off."

The water felt especially good that day, there with my new friend. I usually swam alone and pretended I was a spy or a dolphin or an Olympic swimmer or diver. Today I didn't have to pretend anything. Since I now knew my big splashes wouldn't hurt Twiggs, I did cannon ball after cannon ball off Jutting Rock. He was amazed at the huge waves I could make. Come to think of it, I was pretty impressed, myself!

He would follow me in, and actually, for his size and all, made some pretty good splashes, himself. He liked to swim underwater, once I showed him how. We had had so much fun swimming that the afternoon had slipped away before we realized it.

We got out and lay on the warm flat rock to dry off.

"I've never had this much fun in my whole life," Twiggs confided.

"It has been great, hasn't it," I agreed.

We were silent for a while.

"I guess being a mortal wouldn't be all that bad, after all," Twiggs said.

"What do you mean, 'All that bad'?" I asked, thinking it sounded a bit like a put down.

"Oh, I didn't mean anything bad by that. I just always figured that mortals must lead pretty dull and plain lives. Without the magic, you have to do everything for yourselves, but really, it's great fun that way. I just didn't understand, that's all."

That seemed a good lead-in to a question that had been on my mind for some time. "Why do you call us mortals? Why not Big People or humans? Why mortals?"

His answer began a bit slowly.

"You know what mortal means, don't you," Twiggs said, a bit hesitantly?

"Sure, it just means that someday we all have to die. But that happens to everybody," I answered.

"Well, not quite everybody," Twiggs said, obviously beginning to get quite uncomfortable.

"What do you mean, not quite everybody?"

"I knew I'd have to tell you this sooner or later. I just hoped it would be later - much later - I guess," Twiggs said.

"Tell me what?"

"Okay. Promise you won't get mad or stop liking me as your best friend."

"Sure, I promise. Now what's this all about?"

"Well, you see, Jason (when he opted for Jason instead of Jay-man, I knew we were suddenly into a very serious topic), we Little People never die. We're immortal."

I didn't know what to say. I was in shock. I just lay there, shoulders propped up by my elbows. I picked at my fingernails and flipped a small stone away with my pointing finger.

"You promised," Twiggs said, sitting upright, and wringing his hands.

"Oh, I'm not mad or anything, and you'll always be my best friend. I'm just having trouble taking it all in."

Silence again fell over us. Twiggs pulled on his baggy

brown pants and began pacing back and forth. I followed suit and tried to slip my tee shirt on over my still wet shoulders. Half on and half off, I just let it stay that way.

"Well, I can't understand how that can possibly be, but I do believe you," I said, taking a seat on a large, nearby rock. "I can't see how that changes anything between us, though, does it?"

"Oh, no! I hope not," Twiggs said, Nearjumping up onto my knee.

"I mean we're just talking about the next couple of month anyway, right," I added, trying to play down the whole long-term aspect of things.

"Right, just the next couple of months," he repeated, following my lead, and quickly sobered.

I munched on some of the peanuts that had fallen from my pocket as I had pulled on my jeans. I offered one to Twiggs who passed, silently shaking his head and patting his stomach as if to say he was still plenty full. I really wasn't hungry, either, but a full mouth gave me an excuse not to have to speak.

Perhaps I felt a little of jealous of Twiggs regarding this immortality thing. I needed time to sort it all out, but that would have to wait until later. It was just so hard to comprehend that Twiggs would live forever. At least at nine and a half, forever is a long, long time!

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## CHAPTER FOUR:

### **There's nothing like a hug to remind you that you're precious!**

"Well, I told Jay about my immortality today," Twiggs related to his parents, as they were finishing supper.

"How did he take it?" his father asked.

"Pretty well, I think. It happened just before we had to leave, so I'm not for sure. He wasn't mad or anything and he said he'd still be my best friend forever and ever."

"Perhaps you need to talk with Gramps about all this when you're with him tonight for Instruction," his mother suggested. "He's a wise man and may have some ideas for you,"

Twiggs didn't share with his parents all of the mortal things he had learned to do that day. He thought it might in some way offend them, after all, he was the son of Little People and not of mortals. From his non-stop, ear-to-ear grin, however, they understood that something quite wonderful had happened.

"We're so pleased to see you this happy, Son," said his Father. "But, be sure you remember, that as good a friend as he is right now, it will have to come to an end very soon."

'What a depressing idea,' Twiggs thought to himself. 'I just make my first really best friend, and already I have to think about giving him up.' The smile dimmed considerably.

Twiggs had not been with Gramps since he had met Jay, but Gramps knew immediately something wonderful had taken place.

"My, aren't we fit as a fiddle this evening," Gramps said, after surveying the lad for no more than a few seconds.

"I got great news, Gramps! At least I hope it's great news. Mom says I should talk with you about it."

During the next half hour, Twiggs talked non-stop about Jay, and swimming underwater and climbing trees and running and sharing peanuts, but most of all, about having a friend who understood how it was to be a lonely boy.

Gramps listened intently, not once interrupting. He was a great listener. The old gentleman's eyes danced and he appeared to be every bit as excited for Twiggs, as Twiggs was for himself. Once the whole story, with every last detail, was out, Twiggs felt a burden had been lifted. He wasn't at all sure, why, but there was no doubt about it, he felt greatly relieved.

As was often his approach, Gramps responded with a story.

"Once upon a time, many years ago, right here in this valley, there was a ten-year-old lad who felt very lonely. One day he happened upon a young mortal lad about his own age. Over time, their friendship grew and they came to love one another. When the parting came, as his thirteenth birthday approached, both lads felt sad, because they would be leaving each other for ever. But you know what, Twiggs?"

"What Gramps?"

"They both soon learned, that they each carried the other deep inside their hearts, and in that way, they could never ever really be separated. To this very day, that lad - who is now an old man - sometimes goes to the stand of trees behind his mortal friend's house and secretly watches him as he draws water from his well, or plays there with his grandchildren. On one occasion, he was even able to grant a most important wish and save his friend's wife when she fell gravely ill."

Then Gramps just sat silently - which was also his way. Twiggs had seen the special sparkle in Gramps' eyes as he related the story - more than usual. He saw the parallel between his own situation and that of the boy in the story - more than usual. He noted the coincidence that all of that had taken place in this same valley, and saw the tears well up in the old man's eyes for just an instant as he spoke of secretly observing the friend from the grove of trees.

"That boy was you, wasn't he, Gramps?" Twiggs said at last.

The old man put his finger to his lips. He leaned close to Twiggs.

"Sh-h-h," he said, looking around, pretending to be seeing if anyone else were listening. "You're right, of course, but that needs to remain our secret, Laddy. Not even your Father knows about it."

"Why not," Twiggs asked, also in hushed voice.

"Because, my son, until you've personally experienced such a friendship with a mortal, you cannot truly understand about them. And when they can't understand such things, people tend to get a bit edgy - uncomfortable even. I see no reason to make others uncomfortable, now, do you, Laddy?"

"No Sir, I don't. I understand what you are saying and it really has helped me. I'll not tell a soul - well, like I said, I

already told Mom and Dad. I guess I goofed, huh?"

"Your Mother and Father are exceptional people. They will handle it just fine. However, you may find that only providing them with the barest of details may be best in the long run."

"What about the button? How will I explain that to others?"

"Knowing you, Twiggs, I imagine you already have several ideas about that, don't you?"

Twiggs shrugged, grinned and nodded as if slightly embarrassed.

"Well, yes Sir, actually I do. I wondered if I just said I found it up on West Mountain - which is where my friend gave it to me, and I did sort of find it there on the side of his coveralls. Would that be close enough to the truth?"

"Sometimes a close truth is really better for everyone concerned than a full truth."

Gramps was, indeed, a wise old man. Twiggs felt fortunate to have him as both his Grandfather and his Ascendance Instructor.

"Did you run and climb trees and swim and dive, Gramps?"

"Oh my, yes, Laddy. It was, up to then, the greatest time of my life. Has he taught you to turn summer salts and play statue, yet?"

"Gee, no! You mean there's still more I get to learn?"

"A lot more, my Son. It will be a grand experience. Treasure every moment. Fill your heart with wonderful memories each and every time you are together."

"Oh, I will, Gramps. You can bet on that!"

Gramps got up from his rocking chair and poked in the fireplace for a few minutes. Then he stood up and took a long loving look down at Twiggs, who was perched there on the sofa, his legs folded underneath him - something new he had seen Jay do.

"Come to me, Twiggs," Gramps said, extending his arms.

Twiggs eagerly complied, and soon the two were gently wound together in the hug of all hugs. After a very long moment - perhaps several, in fact - Gramps eased away just a bit, and placed one hand on Twiggs' shoulder, ruffling his sandy hair with the other.

"It's good for our people, when, every generation or so, another of us befriends a mortal. It keeps us up to date. It adds a new thread of understanding to our knowledge of the universe. It serves as a mirror to see ourselves more clearly. It provides us with an expert in mortal affairs, should we ever need one. I am pleased that this time, it is you, Twiggs."

Another long hug followed. More than a few unseen tears were shed as the boy and the old man experienced a new and special bond - a bond neither could, at that time, share with anyone else. There was no one in the World who Twiggs admired more than Gramps, and he would come to remember that moment as a highlight of his life.

On the way home, Twiggs stopped in the mushroom grove and just sat to think a while longer. He thought about how lucky he was to have been the boy-child born that generation; about how beautiful the night sky was; about the love, freely given him by Mom and Pop; and, of course, about the brand new, very private relationship he now shared with Gramps.

He thought about how it would be if he could somehow become a mortal and stay with his good friend, Jay, forever - well for a mortal lifetime at least. He wondered how much he would miss his family and all the other Little People if he were to do that. Feeling more than a little uneasy about the prospect of mortality, he wondered if, perhaps, he could live as a mortal until he became very old and then return to being immortal. He was sure the Wise One would think that unfair. So, did he, actually. He wondered if the Wise One looked after mortals, as well as Little People.

He imagined many things. He wondered how it would be to have a body as huge as Jay's; to be able to climb real, mortal-realm sized, trees and to splash water out over the banks of the stream; to go to school and play ball with other boys; and to be so strong that he would need no magic to break thick sticks and lift large rocks. It was all like wanting a new toy more than anything else in the World, and knowing that you could never have it. It was like being told how delicious maple sugar was, but never getting to try it.

Back in his room, he sat silently for a time with no thoughts at all, and then smiled broadly again as images of the day past began playing over in his mind. He paged, somewhat aimlessly through the new book Gramps had given him that evening. There was so much more to learn. At that moment, it seemed that not only did he not know much about mortals but neither did he know much about his own kind.

What if he just didn't learn his lessons? Then he wouldn't become a Biggun, and perhaps he could keep his new friend for at least one more year? There were many uncertainties running through his young being that night, but as he looked back on his evening, one thing he did know for sure and certain: There's nothing like a hug to remind you that you're precious!

## **CHAPTER FIVE:**

### **What a different world it would be if everyone were always honest**

I hadn't really been sick since - well, I couldn't remember the last time. I faked it sometimes to get out of school but, actually, I was a very healthy specimen. My cheeks were red, my hair was shiny, and my eyes were bright - all sure signs of the hardy Watson constitution, according to Grandma Mary. That Monday morning, however, I had a fever, I had no appetite, and when I tried to lift my head from the pillow, it was as heavy as a mid-summer watermelon. Tragedy of all tragedies, I was, indeed, sick!

Now, I really didn't mind that I would miss school, and the idea that Grandma Mary would come over and make me White House tea and read to me from Treasure Island wasn't all that bad. The problem was that after school I wouldn't be able to play with Twiggs. Somehow, I just had to get myself going.

I struggled into a sitting position on the edge of my bed, surveying the room for my clothes. As usual, Mom had them all laid out on the chair beside the door. That morning, the chair seemed a country mile away. I mustered all my strength and stood up - at least I think I stood up.

Actually, the next thing I remember was looking up from my bed into the face of old Dr. White. He said I had fainted. How embarrassing! Fainting was something girls and old-maid aunts did; not nine and a half year-old boys! When I heard that news, I pulled the sheet over my face and hid in total humiliation.

Suddenly it struck me, and in a flash, I pushed the sheet down saying: "Doc, don't you dare tell anybody in town that I fainted. I'd never live it down!"

Securing his smiling promise, I felt some better, though I did soon concede to being sick, and settled in for the duration.

I worried about Twiggs and what he would think when I didn't show up at Jutting Rock, which was by then our well-established meeting spot. I wondered - for the first time, actually - how Twiggs began his day. Did he sleep in a bed? Did his Mother have his clothes all ready for him each morning? Did he take his bath at night or in the morning - or did he bathe at all? Perhaps he just did some magic thing and all the smudges vanished. Now that would be great magic!

I absolutely hated baths, but they were mandatory - almost sacred rituals, it seemed. The biting sting that accompanied the soaping of my daily complement of cuts and bruises only made the ordeal that much worse. Baths took up so much valuable time and by the next night, I'd just be dirty all over again. It seemed a futile exercise to me. My logic and nightly protestations however, fell on deaf ears. I wouldn't give up, however!

I realized that I didn't really know much about the daily lives of the Little People. I didn't even know if Twiggs went to school - probably not, since there were only two kids in the whole town. Maybe what he did with that Gramps person was his version of school. If he didn't go to school, I wondered how he spent his days. Maybe he got to play all day long, every single day. Now that would be the life, no doubt about

it!

As I was making a mental list of all the things I wanted to ask him, I must have dozed off. It was noon when I awoke and sure enough, there was Grandma Mary with the special tea. It had been the clinking of the spoon, stirring in the milk and sugar in the china cup that had awakened me. When I was sick was the only time I got to use the good china.

She helped me sit up, and snuggled several freshly fluffed pillows behind my back. Grandma was the very best thing to have when I was sick. No request that I made, not even an occasional, ill-tempered demand, was ever, too much. No matter what transpired, she always remained her calm, smiling, and totally helpful self. I imagined that was because she still remembered how distressing it had been when she had been so ill a few years back. I had been so impressed with her when I was four that, at that time, I had decided when I grew up I wanted to be a grandmother.

At two o'clock, a grilled cheese sandwich sounded good so, of course, Grandma fixed one for me. When it arrived, I managed one bite and then could eat no more.

"One bite's better than none at all," she said cheerfully. "Every little bit will help you get your strength back."

By three o'clock, I was actively worrying about Twiggs. It would soon be time to meet, and I had no way of getting a message to him. That wasn't a good way to treat your brand new, very best friend, but I could think of no way around it. I felt sad and uncharacteristically helpless.

Mom had been to town and she brought me a new comic book - not one I would have selected, but it was a nice thought on her part. Boredom required that I do something, so I began reading it.

At about three thirty an astonishing event began to unfold right there in my bedroom - well, in my bed, actually! I

felt a rustling under the sheet near the foot of my bed. I lowered the comic and was startled to see the sheet moving up and down. I wiggled my feet to see exactly where they were. No, it wasn't them causing the ruckus. Whatever was there, it gradually started making its way up the bed, directly toward me. I pulled up my feet and scooted myself to the opposite corner, becoming both a tad frightened and yet more than a little intrigued.

Suddenly, the moving bump disappeared and soon thereafter, something was brushing against the bottom of my foot, tickling it.

"Twiggs?" I whispered as a question. I began to figure out what might be going on.

Slowly, I pushed down the sheet, soon revealing my tiny friend, kneeling there beside my foot, tickling it with the tattered old white feather from his hat.

"Twiggs!" I repeated, this time a bit louder and sterner.

I was at the same time filled with joy and concern.

"What are you doing here? Don't you know somebody might see you?" I asked. "You said you'd never come here!"

He kept at my foot, giggling the whole time, until I finally drew it away, thinking that might get his attention.

"I'm serious, Twiggs," I said, finally, in the most commanding tone of voice that nine-and-a-half-year-old vocal cords could muster.

That got his attention and he poofed himself onto my lap.

"I was worried about you, Jay-man," he said, looking around as if mystified by the entire situation.

"Why on Earth are you still in bed? It's time to be playing!"

"I'm sick. I won't be able to play today. I'm sorry, but I couldn't figure a way to let you know."

"What is, sick?" Twiggs asked, a most puzzled look washing over his face.

"You mean you guys don't ever get sick, either?" I began.

"Well, I don't know if we do or don't until you tell me what this, sick thing is."

He looked around the room, nodding to himself.

"It looks like a pretty good deal though - tea in good china, sandwiches, books, soft pillows. Do you get to do this often?"

"No, no, Twiggs," I said, trying to stop him before he made it all into some kind of joyous celebration. "Sick means I don't feel good. I got a bug of some kind. I have a fever and throw up a lot. I even faint ... Well, just believe me, it's no fun at all."

Twiggs' blank look continued. I had had no idea how difficult it would be to explain, sick, to someone who didn't know about it. After a few more, graphic, examples and after he perched on my shoulder and burned his little hand feeling my forehead, he seemed to get the general idea. I could tell he felt genuinely sorry for me, even though he didn't fully understand the condition.

"Shhh! Here comes Gramma," I whispered excitedly, as I heard her familiar, and usually welcome, clip clop, advancing down the hall. Hide! Quick!"

Twiggs just stood there as if befuddled, so, picking him

up by the shoulders of his vest, I lifted him down between my legs and covered him with the sheet. Grandma just stuck her head in to check on me. I flashed a smile and told her I was doing fine; that I was tired and thought I'd take a little nap; would she please close the door for me. She smiled and nodded, and, as was her way, did as I asked.

"Whew, Twiggs, that was a close call," I said, searching for him among the now tangled sheets. I hope I didn't hurt you but why didn't you hide?"

"What is, hide?" he asked.

"Boy, I could see I still had a lot more work to do with this kid!"

Twiggs stood up. He looked around for his hat, which had been knocked off during his unceremonious uprooting. Finding it at last, he said:

"Well, since you need a nap, I'll be on my way. I hope you stop being sick very soon."

"Wait! Don't leave me, you dingbat! I'm not really tired. I just said that to get rid of Grandma so we could have some privacy here, and you can stay a while longer," I explained, shaking my head in utter disbelief.

"We would call that a lie, Jay, and it is something we never do. Are mortals allowed to lie?"

I fell back onto my pillows, raising my arms toward heaven.

"Geez! Now you're my conscious, too."

With some effort, I sat back up. How could I explain?

"It was just a little white lie that didn't hurt anybody. Come on. Don't get all bent out of shape over it. Let's talk. I

have a zillion questions I thought of for you today."

Twiggs remained mightily concerned about the lying thing.

"Can't you please answer my questions, first?" he asked.

"Gramps told me last night that sometimes a near truth was better than a whole truth, but that doesn't seem to be what you just did."

Now that was an opportunity I somehow had to seize!

"Sure, it is. I am kind of tired and I will go to sleep - just later on, that's all."

Although that explanation, no longer really satisfied either one of us, Twiggs dropped the matter for the time being. 'This kid sure has an irritating way of provoking my soul,' I thought. 'He ought to be a preacher! They get paid for doing that!'

"Do you want to use your wish now, and have me make you get better?" Twiggs asked, jumping up to my knee.

I thought for just a moment before answering:

"No, but thanks for thinking about it. I really am beginning to feel a little better, and even if you did make me well right now, Mom would still never let me go play today."

"You sure are a hard one to grant a wish to," Twiggs said, his familiar grin and sparkle finally returning. Then he added in a most thoughtful manner: "How do mortals get over being this sick thing?"

"It's just being sick, not this sick thing," I explained. "There are little gismos of some kind that float around in our blood and fight off sickness for us. If we just rest and wait,

then, after a while, we feel better."

"I see," Twiggs said, a finger to his chin and nodding as if he thought he at last understood.

"My magic comes from my head and yours comes from your blood."

I decided to let it go at that and agreed. In a way, he was right. I did sort of have some magic right there inside myself. I had never thought of it that way, though.

I was slowly coming to understand that this was one of the really handy things about having Twiggs as a very best friend - he helped me see things about myself in new ways. At that point in my life I couldn't fully appreciate it, of course, but even then, I understood it was a wonderful gift. That day he made me think about the difference between partial truths and little lies, and what a different world it would be if everyone were always honest.

## **CHAPTER SIX:**

### **Life is precious, and everybody needs a chance to appreciate that.**

When Twiggs arrived at Gramps' place that evening, he had much to relate and many questions to ask. Why don't we get sick? How does our magic work? Why can't mortals see us when we are here in Bountiful? Why are we so tiny? Is it okay to be friends with someone who tells lies - well, little gray lies? Why can't mortals live forever? Can Little People use their magic to become mortal? If so, could you reverse it, later on? And on and on and on down a non-stop, wonder-filled list.

Gramps' eyes danced as he listened to the seemingly endless inventory of things Twiggs needed to know.

"My you have been doing some deep thinking, haven't you," Gramps said, once Twiggs slowed down for a breath.

"You know, Laddy, having just one question that fires your soul, is more important than knowing a whole book full of irrelevant information. It is wonderful to finally hear you asking your own important questions. Be patient and they will all be answered."

"It's really hard to be patient since I met Jay," Twiggs

tried to explain. "He's just full of questions and he always seems to find ways to get answers - though I'm not so sure he always gets really good answers. His chief source of information about life seems to be other nine and a half year-old guys. Sometimes he talks to me about things that I think I should have already wondered about, but I haven't."

"Why haven't you, I wonder," asked Gramps?

"Frankly, I think I've had it w-a-a-a-y too easy here in Bountiful."

"Too easy?" Gramps asked, cocking his head.

"Yup. If there is something, that I really need, it's always provided for me through Goodakts from Mom or Pop, or somebody else. Jay says there are lots of mortal kids who never get everything they need. Some of them even have to go to bed hungry at night. Heck, some don't even have a bed to go to at night. Why don't we do something about that? We could, you know!" Twiggs said most passionately, a hint of anger, perhaps even outrage, in his delivery.

Gramps sat back in his chair, stroked his gray beard, and began to rock very slowly - the sure sign to Twiggs that another story was on its way. That night, Twiggs was eager to listen - to listen for the answers to his many questions. He folded his legs underneath himself - Jay-man style - and prepared to take it all in.

"At the dawn of time the Wise One created a single village of people, on the heather covered hills of the Homeland. He called it Edenton. It was a beautiful little place with streams and flowers and trees and bountiful gardens and orchards. No need ever went unmet. Whenever His children were hungry, food appeared. When they were in need of new clothing, their bodies were covered. When their souls yearned for music, it came from the heavens. No one ever wanted for anything. No one was ever hurt or became ill. The Wise One loved them all so much, he gave them eternal life. They had

no worries. They had no labors necessary to sustain themselves.

"Unfortunately, they sought more and more to keep themselves happy - more entertainment, more delicious kinds of food and drink, more luxurious clothing and houses, and more and more exciting and stimulating activities to occupy their time.

"Since the Wise One was pretty new at this people-creating process, he sat back and reflected on his work. He was not pleased with how things were going. His people had become self-centered and cared little about the welfare of others. Traits such as compassion, and loving and nurturing were nonexistent and not, he decided, about to be developed so long as He continued providing everything. Although His people adored Him, they showed no appreciation for their life or privileges or one another.

"It was at that time - the Time of the Partition - that the Wise One made several crucial changes. In a way, it was all a great experiment. As in all experiments, there would be several groups, each treated differently so as to determine which would produce the most satisfactory results.

First, He divided His people into two sets - those North of the river became mortals and those to the South, remained immortal. Mortals would live a life span to be determined by the way they cared for themselves and each other - typically between fifty and one hundred years. They would have no magic within themselves, but to help them survive The Wise One turned them into giants, and created huge animals and plants to meet their various needs. In this way, He transferred the magic from Himself to their surroundings.

"The questions He was asking were: 'Can the mortals learn to balance their own needs, with those of others and of the planet which must sustain them? Can they develop those noble characteristics that He had long ago planted as seeds within each one of his children? Can they learn to create their

own magic - medicines, technology, cooperative social systems, a means for spiritual guidance, an organized fund of necessary knowledge, and can they become wise enough to learn from the successes and mistakes of former generations?'

"Wow!" Twiggs interrupted. "He really made it tough on them, didn't he?"

"We'll see. Keep an open mind and you may find some other interpretation - some other option," Gramps cautioned (as he often did!). He then continued.

"The remaining Little People, who only at the moment of Partition, of course, needed to be so named, experienced some major changes as well. Although they remained immortal, the Wise One no longer provided for them directly - He no longer granted their every wish or met their every need as he saw it developing. He gave the magic to each Little Person to use as he or she saw fit. But along with the magic, came The New Obligations."

Twiggs interrupted once more.

"Are those the same New Obligations that you already taught me, Gramps?"

"They are indeed. Why don't you recite them now? That way you can practice them while you help me tell this story."

So, Twiggs began. He felt the Obligations were most sacred, so, though never having been told it was required, he stood and cleared his throat before beginning.

"In order for My Kind to survive and prosper, I will be ever-mindful that:

"All life on Earth flows from the energy of the Sun. I owe my existence to the sun and the forces that have created

it.

"My body is one with the planet, since it was created from the elements of the Earth and Sky and Water.

"The posture of that body defines my character, so I will carry myself with pride and dignity and strength.

"From posture flows attitude, which is the way of thinking I use as I approach my life, my work, my play and the people I encounter.

"Attitude allows love, which is the sense I have that all beings, including myself, are precious.

"Love is the basis for Compassion, which is my feeling that all beings are worthy of my attention and care and understanding and patience.

"From Compassion flows Nurture. Nurture is my determination to see that all beings always have an adequate opportunity to live and grow safely and comfortably, and that good and adequate care is taken of all those who are within my immediate reach.

"Nurture forms and disciplines my use of Power. Power, is simply my ability to influence myself and others.

"Power, directed by these five attributes, fosters and maintains Peace, both within me and in the World.

"Only in Peace, may we each be free to realize our own Ultimate Potential."

Twiggs bowed, ever so slightly. Gramps nodded, smiling and clapping his familiar, slow, deliberate single clap.

"Wonderful, Twiggs. Wonderful!" he said.

Twiggs felt proud, but more than that, that time, as he had repeated those words, they seemed filled with meanings he had not understood before. He shared that reaction with Gramps.

"That is how it should be, Twiggs," Gramps said. "Each and every day we should grow in ways that will help us redefine and more completely understand the Obligations. You are, today, well on your way to being ready for your Rite of Ascension."

That was the first-time Gramps had actually said in words that he was doing well in his studies, so Twiggs was greatly pleased.

"Now, where were we in the story?" Gramps asked.

Twiggs helped.

"The Wise One had just given the Little People the magic."

"Oh yes," Gramps continued.

"Well, in order to keep His two experiments from interfering with one another, The Wise One established two realms of existence - one for the mortals and one for the Little People. In this way, they would not interfere with each other. In order to help the Little People understand and appreciate their immortality, he made it possible for them to enter the world of the mortals. But to protect them from possible harm or exploitation by those larger and stronger beings, He made it impossible for the mortals to enter the private realm of the Little People. Their villages would remain forever invisible and untouchable to the mortals - in every way invulnerable to their considerable powers."

"What about the magic," Twiggs asked? "How did the Wise One regulate that?"

"You will remember that during the Before, only The Wise One had the magic that provided for his people. By changing that, and giving it to them, he hoped they could learn to use it wisely and that they would be forced to cooperate and come to appreciate one another.

"To accomplish that, He put some limits on its use. Magic would only work when used for good and never for evil. It could never be used on oneself, except for purposes of transportation or, temporarily in a dire emergency. Only those wishes of others that were unselfish and truly good for them in the long run were to be granted. No wish should be good for one and at the same time hurtful to another. And finally, each and every day, every single Little Person beyond the age of eight was required to preform at least two Goodakts for others. In that way, the Wise One assured that everyone would pay attention to the real needs of others and would think about the long term good of the entire clan each time."

Twiggs listened intently, from time to time nodding in agreement. Presently he asked, "Here's something that I never wondered about before, Gramps. It just never occurred to me. I don't know why. What happens if we don't perform our two Goodakts each day?"

"Then, until that time when you make them up, no Goodakt from another will take on you," Gramps explained.

He then added, "And isn't it fine that you have never had to wonder about that? Your parents have taught you so well that you never even considered being any other way. A World not needing threats to exist and grow, is a wonderful kind of World, don't you agree?"

"Oh, yes, I do agree, Gramps, but I just had never had to think about all that until I met Jay. He talks about rules and being grounded and even getting spankings. I have always believed that anyone who would hit someone else must be a bad person. But his parents aren't bad. Still, I just can't even imagine Mom or Pop hitting me in order to help me learn to be

a better person. That makes absolutely no sense. Mortals truly do have strange ways of looking at things."

"Well, at least they have a very different way of looking at some things. That is all part the Great Experiment I suppose - to see how these two very different sets of conditions will affect folks," Gramps tried to explain.

"Did the Wise One make any other changes for us at the time of the Partition?"

"He made two more very wonderful changes for both us and the mortals. In the Time Before, the Wise One, Himself, had created each person and set him onto the Earth. In His attempt to help us appreciate and treasure each other more, he instituted marriage and child bearing.

"Through marriage, He arranged for a couple to live together and care for each other and to learn more about each other than anyone had ever dreamed possible before. Marriage gave everyone a very special, private, sharing relationship; someone to love and pleasure you, and someone for you to love and pleasure in a new and extraordinary way.

"And because of marriage, families were created. They were like miniature clans within the bigger clan. And into each family were to be born children. In this way, new lives came to be cherished more than any other thing in the entire universe. The parents cared for them, taught them and helped them each grow into proper and contributing members of our larger society. The family provided a learning place in which children could try out various ways of relating to others. It was a haven - a safe place, where each youngster could search for and develop his own personality - his own approach to life - so when, later on, he entered the World of his Clan, he had already had many years of helpful practice and guidance."

"That was a great plan, Gramps. Everybody needs a place where they know it will be okay to goof up sometimes, especially when they are learning new things - like how to be a

person. I'm really sorry every family can't still have children, though."

"Well, that was a necessary change, which I have already described to you. That came later on, but even so, among every generation, in each village, there is still one family to act as a model, so we will never forget how precious a new life really is."

"One more thing, Gramps. Jay goes to church, but he never actually talks about the Wise One. Don't mortals know about Him?"

"Oh yes. In fact, many mortals seem to know Him quite well. After the time of the Partition, they began calling Him by another name - the Great Omnipotent Doer, I believe. By now, Twiggs, you surely know about the mortal's fondness for short cuts. They shorten everything! As I recall, they eventually even shortened His name to some, three letter acronym!"

What an evening it had been! His stopover at the Mushroom Grove was necessarily longer than usual. There were so many new things to absorb; so much to be grateful for; so many new ideas that Twiggs' mind raced to consider.

As he sat there watching the stars above, he found himself hoping that his new best friend, Jay, would soon find someone as special as Gramps - someone who was older and wise and caring, and who could help him come to better understand the universe. Life is precious, and everybody needs a chance to appreciate that.

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## **CHAPTER SEVEN:**

### **It's foolish to mistrust someone just because he's different.**

I spent most of the week in bed. Twiggs faithfully visited me every day. It was all that he could do to refrain from Goodakting me, even though I had painstakingly explained how one had to take advantage of any and all opportunities to miss school. He didn't understand, but he agreed to play it my way.

During the course of the week, he got well acquainted with my family (they, of course did not meet him). He especially liked my Grampa Watson - said he was a lot like his Gramps. Twiggs encouraged me to spend time talking with him. He said that old folks possess the secrets of successful living, but that they can't pass those secrets on to the younger generations unless the young people make the effort to seek them out and ask to hear their answers. He made a lot of sense. Sometimes I wondered if Twiggs really weren't an old man just disguised as a boy! Or, perhaps just being twelve and three quarters made one that much wiser.

When Friday finally arrived, so did Sammy, despite all the excuses I had mustered. I was obviously feeling well enough to go back to school. I had learned long ago that an essential part of wisdom was sensing exactly how long one

could milk a good thing. I therefore didn't protest that Friday morning decision.

It was not that I didn't like Sammy. He was a really nice kid and we often played together at school. I suppose I was about his best friend outside of his special classroom. Sammy was deaf and lots of kids made fun of him for that, the same way they made fun of me, sometimes, for being so short or smart.

Sammy rode the bus home with me after school. I had learned enough sign language so we could talk a little, but mostly he wrote things down on a pad when he was at my place. It worked fine, although I did have to be more patient than I was used to being. He liked outdoor things like I did and he was a great swimmer. He could hold his breath longer than I could and he thought that was great - so did I, actually. I liked seeing Sammy happy.

He was pretty strong, so when he came out we usually worked on the rock dam at the swimming hole - adding another row across the top or shoring up weak spots. That day we decided to make the water deeper, so we were busily engaged in hauling large rocks from a spot at the base of the south hill, across the meadow to the stream. We used my wagon as our truck.

Twiggs knew that Sammy would be there so I wouldn't be able to play with him. Neither of us thought that was fair - it being the first day I had been allowed back in the meadow after being sick - but we accepted it. He had asked if he could come and watch, if he promised to stay out of sight. I had agreed, with some reluctance and much trepidation. As it turned out, it was nice knowing that my very best friend was at least nearby. It struck me that it was the first time I had not referred to him in my mind as my very best new friend. Our friendship had matured. It was comfortable.

At any rate, Sammy and I would carefully pick out a rock, load it up, and, with him pulling and me pushing, we'd

make our way across the bumpy terrain.

"It seems much easier today," Sammy indicated. "Not so heavy as last time I was here."

"I think you've just got stronger," I said, forming my words distinctly with my lips so he could read them easily. He held up his arms, showing off his nonexistent nine and a half year-old muscles.

After the third rock was delivered to the dam site, it became obvious to me that they were getting lighter and lighter every trip. I could see that Sammy was really puzzled. When at last I stopped to think about it, I was only puzzled for a second. I turned my face away from Sammy and yelled:

"Twiggs! Wherever you are, stop helping us!"

Then in a calmer voice, suspecting he was probably well within ear shot, I explained;

"Sammy's getting suspicious. Besides, you're taking all the fun out of it. We like to see how strong we are. The heavier the better. Struggling with the great big ones makes us feel powerful - it makes us feel good inside, like we have really accomplished something worthwhile. So please butt off."

The remainder of the rocks seemed regular weight. After we had a sufficient stack beside the stream, we carefully inspected the dam and determined just where each rock should be placed. We worked steadily for several hours before the big job was finished. Another six or eight inches in height had been added, and the water immediately rose accordingly within the swimming hole. Upstream from the dam, it backed up another ten feet, making the area suddenly look huge.

We sat on Jutting Rock and rested, admiring our work and patting ourselves on the back for having accomplished a

feat which we agreed no other nine-and-a-half-year-old guys could have possibly done. Sammy indicated that the higher the water got the shorter the jumping distance was off the rock. We discussed alternatives to that problem - keeping the water at the same level from now on, or building a tower on Jutting Rock to make it higher. The tower idea sounded brilliant, but we put that off until another day. Then, sufficiently rested, and pretentiously pleased with ourselves, we were ready for a swim.

Once in the water, we were even more pleased with the new size, and agreed that it seemed much deeper than just the six inches we had added. We had an underwater breath holding contest so Sammy could win, and then a cannonball contest so I could win. We always did those same things and we always knew exactly how they would turn out. But, that was fine because it made us both feel good, and after all, that was what playing was supposed to do.

There was no doubt about it; Sammy had a wonderful time. I was really glad things worked out the way they had. We always had a great time when we were together, and since Twiggs, I had to some extent forgotten that.

Thinking about it, I realized that he had probably been my best friend before Twiggs poofed into my life. As I sat on the rock watching Sammy enjoying the water below, I wondered if he would again become my best friend after Twiggs and I had to stop seeing each other. I wondered if it were possible to have two very, best friends at the same time. It was one of those ideas that made nine-and-a-half-year-old sense, even though it didn't.

Whereas on other occasions the prospect of losing Twiggs had depressed me, this time it sparked a brand-new idea. Twiggs hadn't said that we couldn't see each other. Just that we couldn't speak to each other. I wondered if speak meant communicate or just talking with our voices. I would ask him later. Perhaps we wouldn't have to end our friendship, after all.

I was so excited about my new idea that I had difficulty entering fully into the rest of the day with Sammy. We played statue and tag and climbed a few trees. Mother let us build a campfire in the back yard and we roasted hot dogs and marshmallows for supper. It was a good time, but I couldn't keep that new idea out of my thoughts.

When bedtime came, we cleaned up and crawled into bed. As usual, Father told a bed time story. Even though Sammy didn't catch it all, he thoroughly enjoyed the whole event. He had snuggled close to Father - my usual spot - but that was okay. Sammy's Dad had died in the war so I sort of understood what was going on.

After the story, Sammy and I giggled together for another half-hour about all of the things that only nine-and-a-half-year-old boys find funny. We had a short-lived belching contest - it was a draw - and tried unsuccessfully to pass some gas, at last deciding that hot dogs weren't nearly as good gas makers as baked beans.

Sammy fell asleep first. He wasn't used to playing hard like I was. I watched him sleep. He looked just like any normal guy, sleeping like that. It was the first time that day I had even thought about him as handicapped. Being deaf never interfered with our relationship. I decided, therefore, that when he was at my place, he wasn't handicapped. Perhaps that explained why he loved to be there so. It was sort of the same reason I used to like it so much when I would play alone in my meadow - then, no one was ever taller or stronger or faster than I.

I wished that Twiggs would show up, but I knew his parents wouldn't allow him out that late. I wondered if they would ever let him stay overnight with me. Probably not, since my parents couldn't give their permission to his parents - and these Little People seemed sticklers for doing things exactly according to Hoyle.

I hoped that I had not hurt Twigg's feelings by telling

him to cease and desist on the rock moving assistance. He probably didn't understand why I wanted to do it the mortal way, but, still, I doubted if he would be mad about it. He'd patiently wait for my explanation. That's the way best friends were - they gave each other the benefit of the doubt, even when they didn't understand.

Soon after breakfast the next morning, Sammy's mother picked him up. Before I could head out for the meadow, I had to do my Saturday morning jobs - sweep the front porch, mow the lawn and help Father wash the car. I always liked helping Father, but that day, he sensed my mind was elsewhere.

"You've seemed a bit different, somehow, these past couple of weeks," he said to me as we soaped up the hood of the maroon Chevy.

"Different?" I asked.

"Yes. Sort of happier I reckon, and yet sort of wrapped up in your own thoughts. Is there anything Mother and I need to know!"

What a dilemma! Yes, there was something they needed to know. I had a new friend and they always asked to meet, if not approve of, all my new friends. But, no, they couldn't know about it. What would honest old Twiggy-pin do in a situation like this, I wondered? Perhaps this was an occasion for a little truth rather than the whole truth. I'd give that a try.

"Well, I am happier, I suppose," I began. Thanks for noticing. It's Spring time and I can be outdoors and do things that are fun with my friends, and you know how a kid likes that." A pretty good start, I told myself, buying more thinking time, by rubbing a bit harder as if having just found an exceedingly stubborn spot.

"A nine-and-a-half-year-old guy just has a lot of a stuff

to think about. I'm sure you remember how it was, don't you, Father."

Now that, I thought, was a stroke of pure genius, invoking our male bond thing. Never missing a beat with my circular cleaning motion, I peeked up at him to see his reaction. I could often tell what he was thinking even before he said it, just by the expression on his forehead. It was smooth - no wrinkling and no quivering. I figured he had bought it.

"Yes, I understand about how it is," he said. "Mother and I just want you to know that you can talk to us about anything - anything at all, Son. Never hesitate. We're both here for you, you know."

"Ya. I know that. Thanks."

Yes!!! I had pulled it off. Twiggs' Gramps sure knew what he was talking about when it came to this truth stuff.

It was almost noon when my jobs were finally finished - much later than usual due to Sammy's presence earlier in the morning. I was pretty sure Twiggs had been around watching, but at least he hadn't interfered - well, tried to help, I suppose, from his point of view. Mother had packed a lunch for me. I gave her my usual peck on her cheek, and headed out for the rest of the day.

"Be careful, Jay," she called after me, which was the pattern of our usual parting ritual.

"Okay," I responded, again as usual. If she intended that phrase to be helpful she was missing the mark. At play time, no nine-and-a-half-year-old boy wanted to be careful - he wanted to live out dangerous adventures. I supposed that her misunderstanding stemmed from the fact that sadly, she had never had the chance to be a nine-and-a-half-year-old boy. I wondered if Twiggs' parents had some similar dumb thing they said to him. I smiled, fantasizing about a class that

prospective parents all had to take - 'How to make up dim-witted things to say to your kids'.

As soon as I was out of sight, I slowed down to a walk and yelled for Twiggs, who immediately surfaced on my shoulder.

"Long time no see," he said, trying to be very much mortal-like in his language.

I had to chuckle, because he could just never deliver our slang expressions in a believable way. Bless his tiny little heart though, he did keep trying.

"Same to you," I responded. "What's new?"

"I've really missed playing out here with you this week. You're feeling better, are you?"

"Ya. I'm fully recovered. We'll just have to make up for lost time, today. What did you think of Sammy?"

"Seemed like a nice enough kid. One thing though. Why didn't he ever talk to you, and why did he keep fidgeting with his fingers, that way?"

That's two things I said, overjoyed, as nine-and-a-half-year-old boys always are when they catch someone else in a mistake. Then I explained - or tried to. Of course, my first, short version didn't satisfy him, so I then had to give him the complete package of details - measles, fever and all. Finally, he was satisfied, though also, deeply troubled about it. Twiggs had to be the most compassionate kid I'd ever met.

As we moved up toward the old cabin (earlier in the week we had decided to restore it and make it into our clubhouse) Twiggs related many of the new things he had been learning from Gramps. For the first time since we had become very best friends, he seemed really excited about the prospect of his, becoming-a-man thing. Hearing him so

excited about it, made me happy for him but selfishly sad for me.

Life had been a lot easier before Twiggs - no doubt about that - but it had also been a whole lot less - oh what shall I call it - complete or meaningful, I suppose. Now, I thought about all kinds of things I never had before - things like honesty, and friendship, and life and death, and differences and similarities among people. Heck, I was becoming a regular philosopher - or was that proctologist? I'd have to look it up later.

I was mostly pleased with the new way I was thinking about things, even though in some rudimentary way, I realized, even then, that it meant I was giving up the innocence of childhood. I really did hate that part of it all.

That day, Twiggs and I only spent a short time talking about serious matters. As was becoming my custom, I had several questions for him to ask Gramps. We agreed that all the serious talk interfered with our playtime, so we got right to work on the cabin. We had to saw down and trim up several small trees to replace rotted logs. The roof needed much repairing. I tried to cut shake shingles from an oak stump, but no luck there. We'd think on that problem for a while.

We went for our usual swim. Twiggs was impressed with the addition to the dam. Soon finished, we lay on the rock to dry off and mostly just did our giggling thing. The more we got to know about each other, the easier it was to joke together. He seemed more like a mortal every time we got together - not that he ever could be, but he seemed less unusual - less alien. I wondered if in his eyes, I was changing in that same way. For some reason, I couldn't bring myself to ask.

For sure and certain, we were no longer afraid of each other. He and I decided that kids, can probably overcome those kinds of people barriers faster than grownups (Bigguns!). We were both learning an important lesson during

those first weeks together: It's foolish to mistrust someone just because he's different.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT:**

### **Extraordinary experiences simply cry out for a celebration.**

On Sunday morning Twiggs was up and around earlier than usual. It was to be a very special day for him. He and Gramps were going on a morning outing. Twiggs' mother made ready a snack of sandwiches and fruit, and tucked it all into a small, split-reed basket. At Twiggs' request, his Mom made lemonade, and added two fresh apple torts, with cinnamon glaze - Gramps' favorites. (Well, Twiggs sort of liked them, too!)

Twiggs wasn't sure where they were going or why, but he sincerely enjoyed being with the old gentleman, so was anticipating the affair with great pleasure. Long ago, Twiggs had concluded, that if he couldn't have other kids to play with, old people were the next best thing. He had planned to meet Jay later on, after church. All in all, it should be a wonderful day!

He and the basket of goodies arrived at Gramps' place a bit early, but Gramps, well known to be an early riser, was already sitting on his front porch, whittling and whistling.

"So, where we going, today, Gramps?" Twiggs asked immediately.

"You'll know when we get there," Gramps replied somewhat mysteriously, his eyes dancing. Giving his carving piece one last careful inspection, he slipped it into his large coat pocket, picked up his walking stick, and the two of them were off.

"I think we'll walk a while instead of jumping all the way, today," Gramps said. "That will give some time to talk."

The arrangement sounded fine to Twiggs, since he had several big questions on his mind. He lost no time getting to them.

"I don't mean to question the Way of the Clan, Gramps, but there are some things I just don't understand," Twiggs began, wording it in precisely the same way he had earlier rehearsed it. He felt it was very important not to seem as though he were just out and out objecting to anything.

"First of all, when mortals grow up they are allowed to select their own husband or wife. As I understand it from Jay - who by the way still hates girls (they both chuckled) - mortals get to know a lot of different possible mates and then they decide together who they will marry. That seems like a very good plan. Why don't we do it that way?"

"Well first of all, Laddy, I agree that it is a good plan. But since The Time of the Great Exchange, with the limitation of new born children, it has just not been possible, has it?"

"I guess not. I'm just getting a little concerned about whether or not I'll really be able to love this girl I am supposed to marry someday. I mean, I don't even know her yet. I see Jay's parents loving each other so much and the same for his grandparents. Their system seems to have worked out so well."

"And our system?" Gramps asked, leaving it hang.

Twiggs thought about it for a while before he responded - a trait he had been trained to acquire since he began his studies with Gramps.

"I guess all our married couples are really pretty happy, too, aren't they? I wonder how that can be?"

Gramps smiled, obviously pleased with Twiggs' studied observation, and then added one of his own.

"I believe that the Wise One must have regretted that it was necessary to take that element of choice away from his Little People, so, in his great wisdom, he divined that each pair to be mated, would be compatible in every way. It has always been so, and I have no reason think it will be any different for you."

Twiggs was relieved to understand that things would turn out fine between him and the girl he would someday marry. Deep down inside, however, he was more than a little envious of the way Jay was going to get to go about it all - that is, if Jay ever stopped hating girls! At that, he had to smile. Twiggs had seen some signs that Jay was mellowing on the subject, but Jay, of course, would never admit to it.

"When do I get to meet this girl from the Clan Callbackabee? Do I get time to know her before the wedding? Do you know her name? Is she pretty? How does she feel about leaving her people to come and live with ours? Does she know about me?"

"Whoa! So many questions and all of them important," Gramps said. "It seems you have begun giving a lot of thought to your relationship with girls."

Twiggs blushed and momentarily looked away into the distance.

"Hey," Gramps added quickly, placing his big arm around Twiggs' shoulders and pulling him close, "I think it's

wonderful you are reaching that stage. It's just one more indication that you truly are becoming ready for your ascension to manhood.

That relieved Twiggs a bit and gave him courage to ask his next question - a much more difficult one because it was closer to the whole birds and bees thing. He knew he needed to begin immediately before he lost his nerve.

"So, you said that back before the Time of Partition, The Wise One created all the kids himself - that none of them were conceived or born like they are today, right?"

"That is correct," Gramps answered, knowing full well the question to follow, but content to wait patiently for Twiggs to frame it.

"Well, what I don't understand then, is why He had made us into males and females in the first place - I mean back before kids were being born." (That was the first-time Twiggs had ever in his whole life actually said the words male and female out loud to anyone but Jay. Suddenly he felt that quite a grown-up conversation was underway.)

Gramps gave Twiggs' shoulder a long squeeze. Switching his walking stick into his other hand, Gramps offered this response:

"Perhaps, in the beginning, the Wise One knew he needed to have a backup plan in case the original one failed. Who can really know? There will always be some things about life and the universe that we will never be able to comprehend. A man must be able to accept that."

"Like, how space has an edge with nothing beyond it?" Twiggs added as an example.

"Yes, and like why we were created as male and female, well before it was a necessary part of our lives."

Twiggs remained quiet, though his mind continued to race as they continued their trek. Soon, they reached the top of West Mountain (East Hill, to Jay). It was easier going up there along the ridge.

It had not been the kind of answer Twiggs had wanted, and he found it most unsatisfactory, but then the space thing was also unsatisfactory, so he did sort of understand what Gramps had meant.

The whole idea that there would not be adequate answers to some of his big questions was most distressing. It would take a lot more time and thought to fully comprehend. He wondered what Jay thought about such things. Jay always had opinions about everything, and often, exhibited wisdom well beyond his years. Twiggs wasn't questioning what Gramps had said, mind you, he just thought a second opinion from a different perspective, might be helpful.

From the ridge, they looked down on Jay's meadow, and could see him there, enthusiastically chasing butterflies.

Excitedly, Twiggs said, "Look down there. That's my friend, Jay."

Twiggs leaned close to Gramps so he could sight along his arm as he pointed. Twiggs didn't want Gramps to miss it. The boy was obviously thrilled to share the sight of his friend with Gramps.

They stopped for just a moment to watch. Gramps smiled, nodding, and then turned and continued walking along the ridge. Lagging behind for another few seconds, Twiggs jumped up and down waving, knowing full well that Jay could not see him. At that moment, he thought he understood how Gramps must feel when he stands in the grove of trees and watches his boyhood friend.

Running to catch up, Twiggs asked, "Can you tell me where we're going, now?"

"It won't be long. Let's jump over to the ridge of the South Hill - aim for that large flat rock that is reflecting the sun. Ready?"

"Ready," Twiggs replied. Following Gramps' lead, he assumed the Nearjumping stance.

Twiggs alit too close to Gramps and was jostled to the ground. It made for a good laugh between them as he scrambled to his feet, brushing the dust from his pants. They looked down into the valley below. Twiggs had never ventured that far on his own. Gramps pointed through the trees to a spot about half way down the hillside and slightly to the right of where they were standing.

There stood a small, older, one story, house. It was shake shingled with a fireplace chimney on one end and big porch across the back. In the large, neatly kept back yard was a carefully piled rick of wood, a covered well, a picnic table, and an old tire swing hanging from a stately oak tree.

"Jay would say that oak tree would make a humdinger of a climber," Twiggs noted.

"And he'd be right," Gramps said, speaking deliberately and smiling nostalgically.

"What?" Twiggs asked, not sure of what Gramps had meant.

"That's my mortal friend's house, down there, Twiggs - the one I told you about. And there," he added, again pointing - that time to the left - "is the grove from which I sometimes watch him. When we were your age, we spent many a happy hour up in that tree. If you look closely you can still see part of the tree house the two of us built one summer."

Twiggs felt that this was a great moment between him and his old friend. There they stood, the only two people in

Bountiful who had ever made contact with mortals, and they were sharing those mortal friends with each other. A great moment, indeed! Twiggs moved close to Gramps and put his arm around the old man's waist. Gramps looked down and pulled Twiggs even closer. They just stood there for the longest time soaking in their very special relationship.

At last, Gramps broke the silence. "See that big tree just to the far side of the grove?"

"Yup. I see it," Twiggs replied.

"See the branch that curves low over the little pine tree?"

"Yup."

"That's my favorite spot to sit and wait to see if my friend will appear," Gramps explained. "Let's jump there together, holding hands this time, so someone I know won't fall off the limb and land on his pratt!"

Twiggs smiled, eager with anticipation, even if somewhat taken aback to have heard Gramps use the rather risqué word, pratt. A moment later the deed was done. Gramps took a seat on a big knotty bump, laying his walking stick across his lap. Twiggs straddled the limb, between Gramps legs. Smoke was coming from the chimney, so Twiggs figured the friend was at home.

The short wait seemed interminable to Twiggs. Gramps took out the piece of wood he had been whittling. It turned out to be a huge round disk on which he had carved, 'D. and F.'

"What is that, Gramps? Twiggs asked.

Gramps handed it to Twiggs, who turned it over and over, in an attempt to figure out what it was.

"Why that's a wooden nickel, Lad," Gramps answered.

"What in the World is a wooden nickel?"

"In the mortal's olden days, stores used to give them away. Originally they were oversized copies of the nickel - that's a kind of coin they use."

Twiggs didn't understand what a coin was, but he could skip that for now.

"What do the letters mean - the D and F?" he asked.

"My friend's name was Douglas, so that's what the D. stands for," Gramps began.

Twiggs eyes lit up as he interrupted. "And the F stands for Forest - your name, right?"

"That's right. When we were boys together, there was a popular phrase in the Mortal Realm that we would always say as we left each other. We'd slap each other's backs - with the full intention of leaving them stinging - and say, 'Don't take any wooden nickels'. So now, when I come to see him, I always make him a wooden nickel and farport it down onto the table."

"That way he knows you're here even though he can't see you, right!"

"Right, again, Lad."

Twiggs gave it one more close inspection and then handed it back to Gramps, who briefly put it to his lips and then farported it down to the table.

It wasn't long after that that the back door opened. Twiggs was more excited than he could remember ever having been before, and save for Gramps' strong arm and quick reflexes, would have - without a doubt - fallen off the

limb. A white-haired old man appeared with a bucket, and headed across the lawn to the well. Twiggs smiled up at Gramps just in time to see a tiny tear trickle down his cheek. Gramps didn't seem to even be aware of Twiggs, so intently was he watching his friend.

On closer examination of the scene below, Twiggs made a startling discovery. That was not just any gray-haired, old man down there. That was Jay's Grampa! Again, he turned his head to Gramps, bursting to break the news.

Gramps put his finger to his lips, reminding Twiggs to remain quiet. The lingering wink and knowing nod, from Gramps, told Twiggs that he had known all along.

'So, that's why Gramps brought me here,' Twiggs thought to himself. Now he felt even closer - closer to Gramps and somehow closer to Jay. This was a generational thing they had going here. 'Well what do you know about that!'

On his way back across the yard to his porch, Jay's Grampa spied the wooden nickel. He paused, at first, just looking down at it - a faint smile breaking across his time worn face. In a slow and deliberate manner, he reached down and picked it up. After a moment of tender examination, he put it to his lips, then turned, surveying the entire area behind the house, giving a thumbs up salute all around. Nodding to himself and wiping a tear from his own eye, he slipped his tiny treasure into his watch pocket and made his way inside.

Twiggs just sat very still, not wanting to interrupt Gramps' special moment. Later he would talk with Gramps about whether or not he should share this with Jay. He figured not, but thought it should be discussed.

Gramps, then, Farjumped back to Bountiful. That was fine with Twiggs. He, himself, Nearjumped up to the top of the ridge and then on down to Jutting Rock to wait for Jay. Twiggs knew that he was arriving quite early, but could use the time to think. The morning had given him a lot to ponder.

Noon had come quickly, and suddenly realizing that he was hungry, Twiggs opened the basket. Gramps hadn't wanted anything. Twiggs eyed the sandwiches and the berries but opted immediately for the apple torts with cinnamon glaze. After all, extraordinary experiences simply cry out for a celebration.

## **CHAPTER NINE:**

**Life is a basket, which you get to fill with wondrous times and treasured friendships.**

Jay had once warned Twiggs about it: When a guy thinks too hard for too long, he wears out his brain and falls asleep on the spot. That day, Twiggs proved the adage. With his tummy, pleasingly full of cinnamon glazed apple torts, he had curled up in the warm, summer sun, and fallen fast asleep.

Eventually he was roused by the unmistakable distant whooping and hollering of his friend Jay, who was making his way across the meadow toward the swimming hole. For as fast as Jay could run, it took him an incredibly long time to make that short trip. It was as if he felt obligated to detour after every bird and butterfly that crossed his path. And should a squirrel happen by - forget it. He'd end up atop some towering oak tree without a clue as to his original destination.

Jay reveled in the outdoors. His every moment there was a celebration of life and living it. That was the greatest lesson Twiggs thought he had learned from Jay: Life is precious, so treasure every moment. He concluded that when you are immortal it's more difficult to appreciate that fact.

Twiggs got to his feet, scanning the distance for his

suddenly vanished friend. Sure enough, Jay had been rerouted by a rabbit, and was headed at full speed up the slope toward the cabin. Twiggs decided to meet him there.

They arrived at almost the same moment. A smiling and puffing Jay gave up the chase when he saw his friend. He plopped himself down on a stump to rest, only to spring up immediately, asking, "None of your people live in this one, do they?"

"No. You're fine. Once we move in, a stump becomes invisible to you guys, remember?"

Jay was relieved and he sat back down to get on with his rest.

"You know Twiggypin, since I can't see your house, you should draw me a picture of it. I mean, not only have you seen mine, you've been inside it. Heck, one day, as I recall, you even did your thing and cleaned my room up for me so we could get out to play sooner."

The idea made sense to Twiggs, so he promised to get to work that very night on a picture that would show his entire street. He'd include the mushroom grove where he did his best thinking, and the stand of grape hyacinths in which he and Alexis sometimes played.

The boys decided to continue their work on the cabin. Earlier that morning, Jay had located a fallen cedar tree just a bit deeper into the woods. He felt sure he could cut shingles from it. He gathered the saw and axe from inside the cabin and, with Twiggs perched on his shoulder, into the woods, they went.

It grew much darker and cooler in there away from the sunlight. Jay spied the cedar tree. It was at the very moment when he was pointing it out to Twiggs, that disaster struck! Down into the eerie twilight, out of a nearby Elm tree swooped an owl. Jay put up his hand to fend it off, but he was too late.

The owl snatched Twiggs in its strong claws and climbed back to its perch high above.

Jay shook his fist and yelled angrily at the owl. He could not remember ever before having felt so frightened and helpless. Tears began streaming. His heart pounded. What could he do? The lowest branch was much too high for him to ever reach. In desperation, he threw a stone at the bird, and then another and another, all the while screaming at the villainous owl to let his friend go, "Or else!" Or else what, he wasn't at all sure, but felt it lent an air of authority to the threat.

Although it had seemed an abominable eternity to Jay, in reality less than a minute had elapsed when he felt the familiar presence of Twiggs, back on his shoulder.

"Hey, big fellow. I'm fine. Stop crying. Remember, this is me, Twiggington, son of Woodington, Nearjumper of the Clan Dewgoodabee, soon to be elevated to the Ring of the Farjumpers. No lowly owl, regardless how big, is ever going to be able to harm me. Come on now. Calm down. Everything's okay."

"And I wasn't crying," Jay began, intentionally sniffing in an exaggerated manner and smiling through his tears. That gave them both a good laugh, though be it a still nervous laugh on Jay's part.

Wiping his eyes with one hand, Jay gently removed Twiggs from his shoulder with the other, and for the longest moment, held him tenderly against his chest, gently stroking his friend's back with his pointing finger. That was as close to a hug as they had ever managed. Though born out of unnecessary apprehension, it was a wonderful, warm, and loving moment - one of those times Gramps' had described - that they would cherish and carry deep in their hearts forever.

An awkward moment followed. After all, boys don't hug boys! Twiggs jumped onto a nearby log, nervously buttoning and unbuttoning his vest. With his toe, Jay drew lines in the

soft, moist ground of the woods. Ultimately, it was Twiggs who broke the uneasy silence.

"By the way, pal, next time you sling a stone in my direction, be a bit more careful. You knocked off my hat!"

Jay managed a proud smile at hearing how close he had actually come to the owl. Then with concern, said, "Sorry, about that. Come on. We better find it before a pack rat takes it home."

Twiggs didn't understand about pack rats but remained unconcerned.

"No need to look, Jay-man. I'll just farport it back."

At that, the hat reappeared on Twiggs head.

"How did you do that?" Jay asked, realizing immediately that he could never really understand. They both ignored the question.

Recalling an endless list of his own long lost items, Jay continued:

"I reckon that means you never lose anything, doesn't it? Boy, would that ever come in handy for me."

Knowing Jay as he did, Twiggs fully understood his friend's plight, and with a tone of powerless compassion, quietly responded, "Ya, believe me, I do know it would."

\* \* \*

Then it was back to shingle making for the rest of the day - the rest of the week, actually. It became a far larger task than we had imagined.

During the course of the remodeling project, we spoke of many things, exploring the mysteries of life, our planet and

the universe as a whole. On occasion (curbing my initial inclination to throw-up!) I even quietly listened as Twiggs talked about girls, romance, and other closely related, thoroughly disgusting, topics. Those times emphasized how we were now different, and I really hated to think about that.

Summer came into its own and the plentiful rains of Spring gave way to the often-parched weather of July and August. Twiggs finally understood why the dam was needed. Without it, the stream would have left a mere trickle for us to wade in.

With school out for the summer, Twiggs and I spent just about every daylight hour together. Much to our astonishment, his parents even began allowing him to stay the night with me in our cabin. Those times, though wonderful, also attested to how we were growing apart.

Twiggs no longer entered as enthusiastically into belching contests, nor truly delighted in the joys of gas passing. He was becoming more serious. Oh, we were still very best friends and enjoyed being together. We were in and out of the swimming hole many times every day. We climbed trees and made up silly songs. We worked on the dam and played out exciting good-guy, bad-guy, shoot 'em up scenarios at the cabin. But things were different.

Having arrived at ages nine and three quarters, and twelve and eleven twelfths, in some way served to suddenly magnify our age difference. We talked about it once in a while, but it was a difficult topic. We both knew that very soon we had to deal with our inevitable parting. Twiggs had run the sign language thing by Gramps, but it was his opinion that was just like talking, so we wouldn't be able to use it to fudge on the 'No Speaking' rule.

In fact, it was to be worse than I had known, because once Twiggs did his ascension thing, he was never to let me even see him again. That was, undoubtedly, the saddest part of it all for me - to know that I still had a very best friend, but

that I would never again be able to see him.

"It doesn't seem fair that you'll be able to see me, but I won't be able to see you," I said to him one day, revealing far more anger in the tone of my voice than I intended.

"If you want, I'll promise to never come back and look for you," Twiggs said. "That really would be the fairest way, I suppose."

For quite a long time we just sat silently together there on a limb high in our favorite climbing tree. That didn't seem like a truly fair solution to me. Making it tough on him, just because it was tough on me, seemed to serve no useful purpose. Besides, I still hadn't given up. After all, Twiggs may have been a Nearjumper, but I was the Master of "The Scheme."

During that next instant - had I been a cartoon character - there would have been a big, yellow light bulb floating garishly above my head.

"You'd think," I said, thinking out loud, as I did so often in Twiggs's presence, "That your Council of Elders would see what a good thing they have going here."

"What do you mean?" Twiggs asked, tossing one leg over the branch, which he had been straddling, so he could turn and look me in the face.

I tried my hand at devising an analogy.

"You and I are like a bridge. A really strong bridge."

Twiggs didn't get it, though it was entirely clear to me.

"What are you talking about, 'like a bridge'?"

"Well, just think about it. You and I have this really great relationship. We trust each other completely. There is

nothing we wouldn't do for one another. (I even broke the sacred and long standing tradition of all nine-year-old mortal boys and used the 'L'-word.) We love each other, okay. What better two people in all of history could they find to be - what's the term - ambassadors to each other's realms?"

Twiggs jumped down into my lap.

"Wow, Jay-man. What an idea! Gramps once said he thought it was great that every generation or so, two of us seem to get together this way, so we can keep tabs on how the mortal experiment is going."

"Mortal experiment? What mortal experiment?" I asked, not understanding the expression.

"Never mind that. I really can't talk about it. The important thing is, you may have solved our problem! I'll speak with Gramps this very evening."

At the prospect of a continuing relationship, we renewed our activities with exaggerated enthusiasm. We laughed a bit harder than called for. We climbed a bit higher than was safe. We cannon-balled with greater than usual fervor and walked the rail fence with skill and daring which we were sure had never before been witnessed in all of history. Even if the new plan fell through, we would now have that splendid afternoon of daring and excitement to remember.

As the sun began to set, I walked us to the top of East Hill - West Mountain, from Twiggs side the World. The Rite of Ascension would be on August 27th, exactly one week away. Our daily moment of parting was becoming increasingly difficult, so we made as little of it as possible.

"See ya!"

"See ya!"

And he left.

As I watched him jumping along on his way home, I wondered just when our very last good-bye would occur. Waving, I silently wished him luck in his talk with Gramps, but almost immediately uncrossed my fingers, figuring that once again, his chances were slim to none.

We had learned so much from each other - Twiggs and I. We had talked about how we would each carry a part of the other deep inside us forever. We had changed each other - improved each other, I chose to believe - in countless ways. Although I suppose, I had been vaguely aware of it before, my relationship with Twiggs had brought it to the forefront of my thinking that summer. I just felt so lucky to be alive.

On my walk home that evening, I drew on the developing proficiency of my nine and three quarters year old brain, and formulated this satisfying analogy (or was it a simile? I never could keep those two straight!): Life is a basket, which you get to fill with wondrous times and treasured friendships.

## **CHAPTER TEN:**

### **Forever seems like such a long, long time.**

Twiggs felt hopeful as he approached Gramps' place. Six months earlier he would have given up before trying, but S.E.J. (Twiggs' mortal-like acronym for, Since Experiencing Jay), he had acquired a robust and enduring state of optimism. Twiggs now divided his life B.E.J. (Before Experiencing Jay) and S.E.J. (Since). He only hoped he had been able to help his young friend half as much - even a quarter as much - as he felt Jay had helped him.

Twiggs had prepared his lessons extra thoroughly to be sure, he would make a good impression on Gramps. That way, when they were finished, he would be in a better position to pop the big question about becoming an ambassador. Thinking of it in words like that, made it sound like a ridiculous pipe dream, but nevertheless, he'd give it his best shot.

The lessons went very well. Gramps seemed pleased and pulled out a large new book for Twiggs to study. It had the ominous title: The Secret and Most Sacred Rite of Ascension as instituted by The Wise One through his devoted scribe, Quilliam.

"You must learn well, the teachings in this book, as it will be one from which you will be required to answer questions at the Rite of Ascension. Even one wrong or

incomplete answer will disqualify you, and you will then have to wait another full year before you may try again," Gramps stated in the most solemn voice Twiggs had ever heard.

After all that, Twiggs could not decide whether to thank him or reassure him, or bow or what, so he just sat there, stroking the big book as though he recognized its immense importance.

Then he knew the time had come to make his proposal. He swallowed and cleared his throat.

"Gramps, remember how happy you were when I first told you about Jay? You said you thought it was a good thing that every generation or so, one of us and one of them got acquainted, so we could keep our finger on how things were going out there in the Mortal Realm. Remember that?"

"Yes, I certainly do remember that, Laddy."

"Well, Jay and I got this idea."

Gramps' rolled his eyes and sighed deeply, probably chuckling on the inside and asking, 'What scheme have they launched now,' but, of course, he did not openly disclose any of that to Twiggs.

"Go on," he urged, patiently.

"Well, since it seems like such a good idea to keep in touch with them, and since Jay and I truly are very best friends who would never ever harm or disturb the other in any way, we just thought that maybe you could tell the Council of Elders that they should let me become, sort of, the ambassador to the mortal realm."

Twiggs waited for a reply.

Before responding, Gramps stroked his beard, for what the boy realized was an uncommonly long time. At last, and

choosing his words very carefully, Gramps spoke:

"Twiggs, my Son, I think it is laudable that you two think so much of each other. Goodness knows, goodwill among men is what the Wise One wishes most of all for his children. And, there is more than a kernel of good sense in what the two of you have proposed. But, ambassador? A thirteen-year-old Ambassador to the entire Mortal Realm?"

He paused.

Not having yet given up, Twiggs remained silent, staring intently into the old man's deeply tanned face and waited for more. The boy had no response, if that truly had been a question to him. He couldn't decide whether it called for his poor little, puppy face or his I'm a grown man face, so he just kept the one he was wearing at the moment.

"It appears that this could just be a strategy to keep the two of you together as Bigguns. If that would be its main purpose, Twiggington, you are making a deceitful proposal. You have at least a week in which to think about that, for it is you, not I, who would have to present it to the Council, and you cannot do that until after you become a man of the clan."

Twiggs couldn't read Gramps' true feelings. His expression stayed the same. His rocking neither increased nor decreased and the stroking of his beard remained constant. His eyes contained no more or no less sparkle than usual, and the tone of his voice remained calm and deliberate. All in all, probably a better deal than if he had become upset, but still, with Gramps, it was difficult to tell.

Twiggs thanked Gramps for the lesson and for listening to him. Gramps walked Twiggs to the front porch and watched after him as he disappeared around the grove of hyacinths. Shaking his head as if in pleasant disbelief, Gramps glanced toward the heavens and muttered out loud:

"Watch out, my dear Wise One, you just may have met

your match!"

Once back in his room, Twiggs didn't even light his wall candle. He just lay back on his bed, there in the dark, to think. He was about to make the biggest and most unselfish decision of his life. He had known from the moment Gramps spoke what he had to do. It was just very difficult to accept. Tears moistened his face. That night he sobbed himself to sleep - not with the desperate sobs of a frightened child - oh no - but with the mature, selfless sobs of the soon to be newest man of the Clan Dewgoodabee.

The next day, he cut short his time with Jay, using his studies as an excuse. By lesson time that evening, Twiggs had written a lengthy document for Gramps - and, he hoped, for the Council. His writing no longer contained the words of a boy. It didn't ramble or repeat itself, as Twiggs' essays were wont to do. It was a carefully thought out, beautifully crafted, straight to the point, piece of work.

The moment he arrived, he handed it to Gramps, with this explanation of its contents:

"When I suggested that I wanted to be the Ambassador to the Mortal Realm, I was really just being selfish. We hatched the plan, mostly, to get around the Sacred Law and for that, I am positively ashamed. I have decided to abide by the Law, and I accept the fact that after my ascension, I will never speak with Jay again.

"The fact remains, however, that I do believe the concept of such an Ambassador is a good one that the Council must consider. I think they should appoint someone else, and I will plead the point with them as soon as possible after my ascension.

"Getting to know this wonderful mortal friend is one of, if not the finest, experiences I have ever had, but, then you know how that can be, don't you Gramps? He taught me to appreciate things I had always just taken for granted. He

made me see possibilities in myself that I had never dreamed of. He showed me how important it is to enjoy every minute of every day. Mortal or immortal, it makes no difference.

"He has changed me for the better and there is no way that I will not pass that on to my friends, and someday, I hope, to my own son. It won't be in stories about the mortals. I will follow the law on that. It will be reflected in just being me, the way I am now, that is forever different - better, I believe - than before I met him.

"So, that's my decision. I'll do as you did and part from my mortal friend forever, but I will work hard to see that some kind of contact is maintained by someone else. It seems a healthy thing to me - this learning from each other. And I want our realm to be the healthiest possible place for my son and his son."

Twiggs sighed, the biggest sigh of his young life and then backed up a step, taking his usual seat on the sofa. His lower jaw quivered but he would not shed tears. He felt drained and terribly sad, yet newly strong and pure and loyal. Somehow, he would make it work. That is what men did.

He knew in his heart, however, that his two hardest times still lay ahead - breaking the news of his decision to Jay, and then, sometime during those next five days, saying good-bye forever. Up until that moment, forever had presented him no problem. Now, suddenly, forever seems like such a long, long time.

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## **CHAPTER ELEVEN:**

**It's not every day your very best friend becomes a man.**

I awoke from a bad dream, to find Mother and Father there beside my bed. Although I couldn't remember all the details, I knew it involved Twiggs being carried off forever by a huge flying stone. It made no sense, once I was awake, but the terrible feeling lingered, and the cradling arms of Father were most welcome.

Mom left my room, only to reappear shortly with her sure cure for all nighttime maladies, a glass of warm milk. It wasn't my favorite, but over the years, it's very aroma had come to rekindle in me those special feelings of safety, security and love, that had always been associated with it. I drank more slowly than usual, so I could remain wrapped in my Father's strong, comforting arms for just a bit longer.

I looked over at my alarm clock and smiled. Suddenly it seemed ridiculous for me, the earliest riser in the county, to have an alarm clock. It said four thirty as my parents finally re-tucked me into my bed. They each kissed my forehead and left the room. As soon as their light was out, I dressed and left through my window - an absolute prohibition, but something told me I had to go.

As urgent as the summons felt, I walked through the meadow, not wanting to awaken the animals so early. I don't

remember heading for any one particular spot, but soon found myself up on the ridge of East Hill. There was a lone, stately oak tree there, quietly standing guard just as it had when Grampa was a boy - or so he had told me. I shinnied up to the first branch and just sat there, balancing back against the trunk, staring off in the general direction of Bountiful. All I knew, of course, was a general direction.

Presently, and not at all unexpectedly, I heard that precious, high pitched little voice:

"You couldn't sleep either, huh?" His tone was hushed and his expression solemn as he appeared in front of me on the branch.

"Had a bad dream and couldn't get back to sleep," I explained, cryptically.

"I'm not sure I ever even got to sleep last night," Twiggs reported.

I nodded, trying to suggest some kind of understanding. On occasions like this, Twiggs and I could just sense things about each other without needing lots of words. He sighed. We just sat and watched the mist begin to gather in the rays of the breaking dawn.

Finally, I decided the time had come.

"I reckon your talk with Gramps didn't go so well - the one about the ambassador thing."

"Well, yes and no," Twiggs said.

Understanding that meant bad news, I didn't press for further information. Twiggs offered none.

"Ready for your big day, yet?" I asked, attempting a shift in the conversation - if what we were having qualified as a conversation.

"I'm getting there," he answered, again offering no details and I not pressing for any.

We watched silently as the sky took fire, rushing the sun's fresh colors into every nook and cranny of the distant, wispy clouds. We agreed how beautiful it was. I had never dreamt that being with Twiggs could have been, at once, both so fine and so terrible.

"I dreamed you were taken off into the sky by some evil force, and that I would never see you again," I offered, thinking it a good lead-in to what, sooner or later, had to be the topic of the morning.

"Scary?" Twiggs asked.

"Ya, and sad," I answered adding what I thought had been the more important element. At this rate the conversation could take all day and when finished, neither one of us would have said anything that was really on our minds. Perhaps a change of scenery would help.

With dawn's light, and the bird's growing serenade, I suggested we go down to the berry patch and pick ourselves some breakfast. Twiggs agreed.

Soon, we had eaten our fill.

"Want to go for a swim?" Twiggs asked, also grasping at straws in order to get something going.

"If you do," I answered, not particularly enthused about trying anything.

I began walking in the general direction of the swimming hole, Twiggs on my shoulder, seemingly snuggled closer than usual to my neck. That was nice. I reached up and patted his legs. He liked that, I could tell.

When we reached Jutting Rock, I sat down, and Twiggs jumped to the ground. Sitting cross-legged, he took up a position right in my line of vision. He looked up at me. 'Here it comes,' I said to myself. It was one of those things that had to be said, even though it really didn't need to be said.

I knew Twiggs to be a completely honest and honorable guy. He would follow the laws of his clan, and I knew that was how it should be. I'd not ever consider tempting him to do otherwise - well not now, anyway, since he had helped me learn about such things. I just couldn't understand how doing the right thing, could be hurting us both so deeply.

On several occasions, recently, I had tried to talk with God about it, but no good answer ever seemed forthcoming. I knew Twiggs had done the same, though we never spoke of such things.

Twiggs explained his decision, and again agreed to stay away from me if that were my wish. I told him, "No."

I had decided it would be better to know that he was still around. I just hoped that the life he would be seeing me leading would live up to the high expectations I knew he had for me. He said not to worry about that. It was to be my life and not his, after all, and regardless of what he saw happening, he would always assume I was doing it for a good reason.

I felt some relief at that, not having realized how much concern it had been causing me.

After that talk, I didn't feel nine or even nine and three quarters anymore. I felt - I don't know - ageless, I suppose captures it best.

Then, determined to make the best of the time we had left, I tore off my clothes, yelled, "Last one in is a lousy Little Person," and dove into the water.

Twiggs wasn't far behind.

With the facts, at last, out in the open, we were both surprised at what a good time we could have. It would never again be like the carefree times we had known earlier, but it was really fine. We laughed and splashed, and did all of our old favorite things. Twiggs hitched rides on the Bluegills. I spread my legs and they passed through. I finally won a breath holding contest. He let me win, but that was okay.

We rearranged a few of the rocks along the top of the dam. I finally gave in and let him use his magic to bring one rock from the hillside and place it on the dam. The one he chose was absolutely huge. It was one that I, or even ten of my friends and I never could have moved. It would be impossible to explain, but what the heck. It made Twiggs feel so good to think he had helped. I was confident that I would find some way to account for its presence.

'I know,' I thought to myself, at last. 'I'll just tell everybody that one of the Little People from the next valley moved it for me. It's no less than they would expect from me and like Twiggs says, honesty is the only policy.'

Next, we were off to the cabin. Along the way, I picked an apple and cut Twiggs an extra juicy, cone shaped morsel - just the way he liked it. Once inside the cabin, Twiggs did his thing, and had the place spic and span in nothing flat. I lay on the bed we had built for me, and he on the smaller version we had built for him.

We laughed, recalling the first night we had tried sleeping there together in one big bed. I kept rolling over onto him, so next morning he insisted we fix him separate quarters. Eventually, it took the form of a shoebox and some dry grass, carefully wrapped inside a farmer-size red handkerchief. It worked perfectly (of course!).

We each got comfortable - finally ready to talk. I couldn't believe that I was the one actually about to bring up

the "G" subject.

"So, have you met the girl from the other clan yet?"

"Not really met her, but I spied at her through the trees the other evening."

"Well, what's she like?" I pressed, surprised at my own interest to hear his opinion.

"She has long golden hair. Her cheeks are rosy, her legs are long and she carries herself very well."

"Sounds like you're describing a horse," Twiggypin. "I mean, you know, is she pretty?"

"Jason Gregory Watson! I never thought I'd hear you ask a question like that," Twiggs said, bouncing on his bed, joyfully.

"Well, neither did I," I admitted, reluctantly.

"Anyway, how is she?" I insisted.

"Really pretty, a lot like your mom," he said thoughtfully.

I had never thought of my Mother as being pretty, but upon brief reflection, I supposed she was.

"So, are you okay about marrying her, and everything?"

"I think so. It would be nice to get to do it your way, but I'm content to do things according to our traditions," Twiggs explained.

"Tell me again when that happens?" I asked.

"Not until we are seventeen. That's when all of my people marry."

"I think I'll probably wait 'til I'm older," I said. "Maybe even twenty or twenty-five. Mother and Father were twenty-two. That seems about right to me."

Goodness! An entire discussion about girls and such, and I had not the slightest inclination to shoot my cookies. Gee, how things change; even those things that those younger, nine and a half year-old boys know for sure and certain will NEVER change!

I counted up on my fingers, and then, on the log above my bed, carved the year Twiggs would be married. That way I would remember to think about him when the time came.

Is there anything about your Rite of Ascension that you can tell me - I mean without revealing any secrets or anything like that.

"Well, I suppose I can tell you a little. Let's see. Like I already said, early Sunday morning, Gramps will lead Pop and me up the hill to the Sacred Place. Then Gramps will read passages from the Secret Scripture and ask me lots and lots of questions about our beliefs and our history and things like that. I have to get all the answers right. Then, assuming I pass that part, I get to bathe in the sacred pool with Gramps and Pop. For some reason, that is the most important part in becoming a Farjumper.

After that, some other things happen that I don't even know about. When it is all over, Gramps will put his hands on my head, say a prayer, and proclaim me a man. Then we will come down the mountain and I will be presented to the Council of Elders as the newest Man of the Clan Dewgoodabee, Farjumper Twiggington, Son of Woodington and Sire of the New Generation."

"Wow!" I said. "I'm impressed. Are you scared?"

"Sort of. Not scared, I guess, just pretty nervous,"

Twiggs said.

"Then the festival begins," he continued, "And we all dance and eat and sing and have a wonderful time. It's also the first time I get to meet Cinnamon."

"Cinnamon?" I asked.

"That's the girl's name. Isn't it beautiful? 'Cinn-a-mon!' I think I'm so lucky that she has such a pretty name."

"Do you get to kiss her that night?" I asked, fully realizing I was pressing my luck.

"That's a very personal question, Jay-man," Twiggs said, begging the question while turning fifteen shades of red none of which matched his mattress.

"Well, it isn't as if we've never talked about personal stuff before, is it?"

"No, but this seems different. I mean Cinnamon is going to be my wife. I think what goes on between her and me should stay private, you know."

"So, you do get to kiss her," I said, surmising he wouldn't be so secretive if nothing were going to get to happen.

"You bet your sweet life I get to kiss her," Twiggs blurted, rolling onto his back and flailing his arms and legs in the air.

We both laughed convulsively for longer than called for. I'm not really sure why. Probably out of uneasiness – perhaps even embarrassment, I suppose. Neither of us had ever kissed a girl before, though we had discussed technique on several occasions.

Later on, Twiggs confided that actually he only got to

kiss her if she agreed. That seemed fair to us both.

When evening came, we found ourselves right where we had begun our day. It had been a wonderful day, as it turned out. We were both in high spirits, though physically exhausted. Sitting atop East Hill, with our backs to the sunset, we paused to look out over Twiggs' valley.

Pointing a bit to the right, Twiggs spoke:

"It'll be somewhere over there. See where that big rock juts up out of nowhere. We call it Standing Rock."

"You mean that's where your ceremony will be?"

"Yup, around there somewhere. Like I told you, I don't know exactly."

He paused briefly and then continued. "I mean you couldn't see anything of course, but I just thought you might want to know, anyway."

I understood what he was saying, without his ever needing to ask it.

"I'll be right here, watching over the whole affair, Twiggs. You don't think I'd miss out on the most important day in my very best friend's life do you!"

Twiggs, who had been sitting on my shoulder all this time, stood up and leaned close to my face. He gave me a quick, gentle kiss and said:

"Thank you for everything, my dear, dear friend."

Things were suddenly growing serious far faster than I wished.

I took him from my shoulder and, for the second, and probably final time ever, held him close against my chest.

"I love you so much, Twiggs. I don't want you to leave me, you know."

"Yes, I know. I feel the same way, but . . ." his voice trailed off.

I picked up the phrase: "But, I reckon you're saying that time has finally come, aren't you," I confirmed, more than asked.

"Yes, my friend, that time has finally come. Always remember how much I have loved you, Jay. I'm going to be a better man because I have known you."

Blinking back tears, I carefully stood him on the palm of my right hand and extended it toward Bountiful. We took one last, long, fond look into each other's faces. He turned toward his World and was at once gone. I turned away, not wanting to watch him jump from place to place, as had been my custom.

I sat and cried, sobbing my heart out for many minutes. I wanted to get it out of my system right then and there. When finally I stood again and began stepping off the long trek home, my tee shirt was soaked and my vision still blurred from the last stubborn volley of tears. Come early Sunday morning I would be back. After all, it's not every day your very best friend becomes a man.

## **CHAPTER TWELVE:**

### **Perhaps they'll make me king!**

From the moment, he had awakened, that morning, Twiggs felt remarkably confident and unbelievably calm - a welcome, though unanticipated state of affairs. His mother had made ready the special green robe that he would wear for the ceremony. He hesitated for a moment before slipping it on - after all this was a once in a lifetime occasion, and he wanted to savor every aspect of it. Holding the robe to his cheek, he felt how soft it was. He admired its satiny sheen, and deep, forest green hue. It would be the last time that he would wear the green of childhood. He took the faded green vest from the back of the chair and held it up in front of himself. After the ceremony, he would don the red vest of manhood.

Enough of that! Twiggs slipped into the robe and admired himself in his mirror, as he carefully tied the gold braided belt that had been worn at Rites of Ascension by his father and grandfather and so on, as far back as the lineage had been recorded.

Hair neatly combed, he was finally ready. He kissed his big brass button for good luck, and took a moment to picture Jay, who he envisioned perched high in the big oak tree atop West Mountain, his faithful vigil already begun.

Twiggs and his parents made their way to the town-square. Everyone in Bountiful was there to see him off. The men patted him on the back and large women squeezed his cheeks. 'If nothing else, today will put an end to this, cheek-squeezing thing,' Twiggs thought.' The time was at hand.

The blindfold turned out to be a green hood, instead. Twiggs' father placed it over his son's head, just before Gramps, in turn, placed a red one over his father's head. With his hand firmly gripping the back of Gramps' golden sash, Twiggs was ready for the important journey up the mountain. His father was similarly holding onto Twiggs' sash. Gramps led the way.

Gramps, as it turned out, was Chairman of the Council of Elders, a fact that had not previously been made known to Twiggs. That position was reserved for the wisest of the old men. Twiggs agreed that Gramps filled the bill. He only hoped he wouldn't let the old gentleman down, by flubbing up on some important question.

Although Twiggs had learned that walking up the mountain was a symbolic part of the ceremony, portraying the rise from boyhood to manhood, he wished they could just jump, and get it over with. He was eager to get on with it all.

Eventually they arrived at the base of that very Standing Rock that Twiggs had pointed out to Jay. Gramps removed their hoods, and with a wave of his hand, the underbrush vanished and the ceremonial grounds appeared. Though used to magic, Twiggs had to admit, that had been a spectacular transformation.

At the base of Standing Rock was the glistening, white, marble, altar, just where Gramps said it would be. A few yards in front of it, was the Sacred Bathing Pool. It appeared to have been carved from one huge block of marble. There were crescent-shaped steps leading down into the crimson water which it cradled. A striking, large, red bird was perched on the branch of a small golden tree, to the right of the altar.

The Sacred Place was circular, ringed by huge trees, with their limbs above, forming a dome, which filtered the first rays of morning's light - casting finger-like shadows across the scene. The ground was pure white sand that seeped between Twiggs toes as he walked. The entire area shimmered from some inner bluish illumination. In the background, the hushed euphony from the wind, playing around the top of the great stone formation resonated like a choir of a thousand voices singing just for Twiggs.

Gramps, bedecked in the flowing golden robe of a Council Member, and with the magnificent Standing Rock to his back, took his place behind the altar. He bowed ever so slightly in the direction of the red bird, before facing forward.

Twiggs' father, wearing the magnificent crimson robe of a Man of the Clan and member of the Ring of the Farjumpers, took a position facing Gramps but just to his right. Gramps then signaled Twiggs to assume his place, directly in front of the altar. As rehearsed, Twiggs kneeled.

"Who presents this youth for The Rite of Ascension?" Gramps asked in a powerful, deliberate, dignified, voice, which contrasted greatly with the far softer one, which Twiggs was used to.

"I, Woodington, Man of the Clan Dewgoodabee, Master Farjumper and Sire of the youth, Twiggington, do proudly present him for The Rite of Ascension."

So far things seemed to be going fine, Twiggs thought.

Gramps spoke again:

"Twiggington, this is, as you understand, the most solemn and sacred of all occasions. Through this rite, you will ascend to manhood, the noble and cherished state in which you will experience eternity. It is the moment in time when you cast off your childlike ways and freedoms, and assume

the responsibilities of the mature adult life as required by The Book of Sacred Laws.

"Are you prepared to assume this hallowed station?"

"I am prepared, and desire to prove myself worthy. Please, Great Leader, ask of me the most difficult questions and I shall demonstrate my readiness." (Those words were part of the age old scripted ritual, but at that moment seemed to portray Twigg's feelings exactly.)

Twiggs stood, hands folded in front of him, and faced Gramps.

A lengthy question and answer period followed. With every response, Twiggs felt his confidence growing. Question after question, hour after hour, Twiggs fielded intricate inquiries on every conceivable topic. He truly shared the sacred knowledge, and was proving, with ease, how well he could apply it.

At the precise moment when the sun reached its zenith, a burst of light suddenly, and all quite unexpectedly to Twiggs, reflected off the lustrous alter and engulfed him. It was an exhilarating feeling. It took his breath away, and rendered him light-headed. The brilliant rays seemed to penetrate deep into his body - deep into his very soul. He felt a oneness with his surroundings - a oneness with the universe. He felt the inner presence of The Wise One, of Gramps and Father, not above him or in front of him nor to one side of him, but nestled somewhere deep within himself. And there was more. Indeed, he also felt the presence of his dearest friend of all, the Jay-man.

As the sun inched on, the mystical light dimmed and then faded away. Twiggs was sorry to have it depart. It was like nothing else he had ever known. In that moment, he realized a part of it had not moved on, but was there, residing permanently inside of him, providing a new sense of strength and possibilities.

Expecting the questions to continue, Twiggs tried to clear his head. Once more, he turned his eyes toward Gramps.

"You have captured the light of eternity within you, my son, and with it the Wisdom of the ages is yours," Gramps said, beaming from ear-to-ear and suddenly again sounding like the kindly, soft spoken Gramps Twiggs knew and loved.

The old man lovingly approached Twiggs, his long arms soon encircling him in a hug that lasted many minutes. A prayer was offered for Twiggs' eternal safety and for the wise use of his several new, substantial powers.

Then Gramps led Twiggs to where his father stood and he received his Father's blessing and lingering embrace. It was no longer the familiar, tender hug of childhood, but the hardy, forceful, man to man encounter, Twiggs had often witnessed, but never before experienced. He felt a man, even if not yet so pronounced.

After another prayer, the three of them bathed together in the deep red waters of the Sacred Pool. Gramps poured handful upon handful of water over Twiggs' head. 'So much for neatly combed hair,' Twiggs mused to himself - his mind wandering ever so briefly from the serious matters at hand.

With the Sacred Bathing completed, the older men donned their robes again, and then helped Twiggs into his very own, brand new, brilliantly crimson robe - the Sacred Red Robe of a Farjumper.

That, Twiggs knew, was the signal for him to kneel one final time before Gramps and receive his blessing. With his large, ageless hands firmly pressed against Twiggs' head, Gramps looked heavenward and said quite simply:

"Oh, Wise One, I present to you, your newest servant."

Twiggs rose to his feet, still facing Gramps. Then, at last, his old friend, bending slightly forward, and looking directly into the lad's eyes, made the long awaited and most sacred of all sacred pronouncements:

"Upon this place and in this moment, I now declare you, Twiggington, son of Woodington, to be a Man of the Clan Dewgoodabee and Novitiate of the Ring of The Farjumpers!"

Twiggs' heart raced as, first, he received a kiss on the forehead from Gramps, and then from his father. It was a joyous moment. Tears flowed freely through the smiles of all participants. It was a proud moment, shared by three generations of family men.

"There are three remaining tasks for us, Twiggs," Gramps said at last.

"You must make your Sacred Promise to abide by the Book of Great Laws, receive the Sacred Red Feather for your hat, and The Council of Elders must assign you your life's vocation."

As Twiggs, ever so solemnly, made his promise to abide by the Laws, tears again made their way down his cheeks. It was at that moment, he fully realized, for sure and certain, that he would never again speak with his very best friend. Both Gramps and his father understood his unspoken anguish. They placed their reassuring hands on Twiggs' shoulders. It was handling such things that proved ones maturity, and Twiggs was determined to handle it.

Next, his father carefully selected, and then plucked, a beautiful long feather from the tail of the most agreeable large red bird. Removing the old tattered white one from Twiggs' hat and placing it in the boy's palm, he inserted the grand new one in its place.

"Your vocational assignment will be announced later in the week," Gramps said.

"Now it is time to bid this place farewell for another generation. The next time we appear here, it will be you, Twiggs, who will be presenting your son to me for the Rite of Ascension. Now, let's all Farjump back to the Village Square and get your joyous festival underway."

With a wave of his hand, the forest returned.

"But, Sir," Twiggs said, a degree of disappointment in his voice. "I beg your pardon, but you haven't yet taught me how to Farjump."

"Believe me, Son, since first touched by the waters of the Sacred Pool, you have had the power. Did you not hear me pronounce you a member of the Ring of the Farjumpers? Just close your eyes, picture the square, and do what comes naturally."

Still a bit baffled, Twiggs would try. ... When, at last he opened them, Twiggs could not believe his eyes. There he was in the center of the Village Square. He was indeed a member of the Ring of the Farjumpers. He went on ahead, leaping for joy and tossing his hat high into the air even though he knew, full well, that would not appear very manly.

After obtaining the congratulations of the Council members, he received his mother's tender hug and kisses. Twiggs then received best wishes and handshakes from everyone else in town. The party had begun. The musicians began to play. The food was set out on the long wooden tables and everyone ate their fill. The streets were filled with dancing couples. His festival was all that Twiggs had dreamed it would be.

He imagined how it would be the next night, when he and Cinnamon would finally meet. He saw them talking and walking hand in hand. He saw them leaning into the shadow of the band shell, delighting in that first tender kiss. His heart raced in anticipation.

But, for the moment, Twiggs danced. He ate. He sang. He talked with everyone. He even tried his not too shabby hand at the fiddle. It was his moment!

Still, his usual sparkle truly was not there. Through it all, Twiggs just couldn't dispel the saddening image of Jay, sitting all alone up in their Oak tree. More than once that evening, he found himself smiling on the outside while fighting back tears on the inside.

It grew late and the townsfolk began making their way home. The fireworks had been spectacular and the huge bonfire would continue roaring well into the wee hours of the morning.

It was well after midnight when Twiggs was finally settled into his bed. He knew that from now on there would be no more tucking in at night, so he called as cheery a, "Good night folks, Love you," as he could muster. His folks acknowledged with their own, "Sleep well. We're proud of you, young man."

The next day would be his first full day as a man. He wondered what he'd do all day, just being a man. That had not really crossed his mind before. He hoped that the Council soon assigned him a vocation so he could get on with it. He had always wanted to be a shoemaker like his father, but he knew the village really didn't need a second shoemaker. Perhaps a hat maker – that way he and his father would keep their townsfolk covered at both ends.

Enjoying one last smile, as he entered that hazy twinkling of time between wakefulness and sleep, he quipped to himself, 'Perhaps they'll make me king!'

## **CHAPTER THIRTEEN:**

### **Stories about life should have happy endings, don't you agree!**

It had been a lonely time for me - those first days after our parting. On Sunday, it had seemed like I had a sacred duty to perform. I begged off church. Surprisingly, my parents allowed it with no discussion whatsoever.

I had climbed up the big oak tree on East Hill at five AM and had remained there until well after sunset. The apples and sandwiches I had taken along went uneaten - my appetite hadn't been up to par for several days. I wanted to be there - I needed to be there - but there wasn't really anything for me to do. Mostly, I had just stared off into the distance thinking about the good times Twiggs and I had had. From time to time I would focus my attention around the area of Standing Rock.

There had been one extraordinary experience of note that day, and it had occurred at noon. Suddenly, from somewhere around the base of that lone, majestic rock, something caught the sun's rays, and as they reflected, they seemed to be aimed directly at me. For an instant I had been blinded and in that moment I had a vision of Twiggs, standing before a large, white, marble slab, surrounded by a blue mist. He was dressed in a long green robe, and he, too, was engulfed in this same brilliant light. For just a second or two it

had been as though he had jumped himself inside my very soul - no, it was more like I had somehow been transported into his. There was a feeling of final sharing.

It was over as quickly as it had begun. Perhaps it had just been a boy's fantasy, working to make something special out of an otherwise mundane day. Perhaps I had nodded off in the warmth of the mid-day sun, and dreamt the whole thing.

Perhaps not!

I choose to believe that something magical - spiritual, if you will - transpired at noon that August 27th. Since that moment, I have felt . . . it is difficult to put into words. I have felt somehow cleaner. Purer, is a better word. It is like all my past transgressions have been wiped clean, and I now have the opportunity for a fresh, more mature, start in life.

That was two long days ago, now, and whether or not anything actually happened, is no longer of any consequence. I know for sure and certain that I grew up in that moment and did begin anew. It's a calm and strong feeling that I carry in my heart. Though coming three years early, I choose to believe it was my own, private, Rite of Ascension, and I am taking it very seriously.

I am, again, sitting astride that special branch in the big oak tree, waiting for the sun to rise. It has become my very best thinking spot this week. It is where I feel closest to Twiggs. I know I must soon give him up and get on with making other friends.

Mother said Sammy could come and stay overnight tomorrow. Perhaps that will be a good start. We always enjoy each other. He loves to make jokes and laugh. That should be good for me. Later on today, I must go up to the cabin and put Twiggs' little bed away. I'd hate to have Sammy see it there and think I play with dolls.

I am still wearing Twiggs' belt as my ring. It seems like

the only tie to him that I have left - well, that and this tiny little picnic basket he forgot to take with him. I suppose he still has my button. My how he loved that silly old brass button!

One by one, the birds of my meadow are tuning up for their morning songfest. I guess they can awaken all by themselves. I've known that for years, of course, but life seems somehow safer and less capricious when a guy has certain rituals to mark his days. Like, in the cool morning air of summer time, when I watch the sun rise while immersed in the warm, safe waters of the swimming hole. I reckon I'd better get down there. The night's darkness is slowly becoming streaked with narrow golden bands of day.

\* \* \*

The water is wonderful this morning. I think the Bluegills miss Twiggs. They seem to be swimming in search of something they can't find. 'Believe me, guys, I know how you feel.'

Well, how shall I spend my day? Everything around here reminds me of Twiggs. I wonder if that will ever end? Maybe I should give this place a rest. I could go over to Grampa's, and climb his tree and swing in his old tire swing. The little round, pointed roof over his well needs to have a few shingles replaced. I could take some that were left over from fixing the cabin, and make it as good as new. If I were to do the work while they were away, they would never even know who had done it.

I declare, I'm thinking more like Twiggs every day. That's okay, though. Isn't it? Perhaps I will begin doing two Goodakts every day like he does. You know that really is a fantastic idea! Maybe it'll catch on and spread all over the World - well, all over the Mortal's World, I suppose I should say. That idea makes me feel warm and somehow less troubled inside.

Suddenly I'm hungry. I never realized before how great

it is just to feel hungry! I'll dry off and then go pick an apple. I'll climb to the very top of the biggest apple tree and pluck me off the best that's there. Suddenly, I'm feeling like I'm worth the best, again!

\* \* \*

I did find a great one - huge and red and perfectly shaped. It polished up so shiny I can see myself in it. Woops! I forgot to comb my hair this morning. That's funny. A month ago, I wouldn't have cared about that. ... It's strange how old habits die so slowly. Just now, before I took my first bite, I cut out a perfect little cone-shaped morsel for Twiggs. I'll just put it here on the rock beside me. A mouse or rabbit can enjoy it later. Twiggs would approve of that. He loved the animals and they always seemed to trust him.

I'll never forget the afternoon he decided he wanted to ride a squirrel. It was hilarious. Before the day was over, he had done it, too. I think he got his sense of adventure from me - at least partly, anyway. He wasn't much for that kind of thing when we first met. I hope his Little People can appreciate that trait. I wouldn't have wanted to turn him into something that would make him in any way abnormal among his own people. ... However they react, Twiggs will be able to handle it. I know he will.

Guess I'll hike on up the hill to the cabin and stash his bed. I'm not sure if I have ever just walked up this trail before. Seems I'm not in quite such a hurry anymore. Yesterday Father asked me if I was feeling down. He said I didn't seem to have my usual pep. I've got the same pep as always, I think. I'm just conserving it and putting it to better use - well, different use, at least.

When Mother saw that I was reading in the encyclopedia, last evening, she felt my forehead, joking that I must be ill. All of the studying Twiggs had to do for his ascension thing, got me to thinking. There's a whole lot about this World and the people in it that I don't know. All of a

sudden, I'd really like to learn about it. I imagine she'll find me with my nose in that encyclopedia - and more - quite often during the next few years. I wonder if there's a section in it about girls? Guess it won't hurt to look.

\* \* \*

That's strange. The cabin door is open a crack. Twiggs and I must not have closed it all the way when we left the other day. I sure hope the pack rats haven't been visiting. ... Looks like I lucked out on that one. Nothing seems to be missing. Let's see. Where can I hide Twiggs' bed. I reckon it's silly to even keep it, but then, the new me, is just a sentimental old guy at heart.

I thought this would really be hard, but I'm handling it pretty well. I'm proud of myself. ... I know! I'll bet the bed will just fit in the hole behind the loose stone in the fireplace. That has always been my very best, secret hiding place. I didn't even tell Twiggs about it. I figured that even very best friends have a right to keep some things private from each other. Of course, I never figured out if it really was possible to keep secrets from Twiggs. What a guy he was - is - whatever.

Let me just set his bed here on the floor while I ease out the stone. ... There! Oh good! There will be plenty of room. ... What's this thing? It's never been here before. "

\* \* \*

That thing turned out to be a tightly rolled parchment scroll. It was about six inches high and was tied with a small, braided, golden string - like a miniature sash. I took it over to my bed, and sitting Twiggs style, carefully unrolled it and began to read.

BE IT KNOWN TO ONE AND ALL,  
that on this day,  
August twenty eighth, in the year 5718 A.P.,  
The Council of Elders  
of the Little People of the Ozark Mountains,  
does now and forever more,  
appoint for the first and last time,  
a new officer to be known as  
The Ambassador to the Mortal Realm,  
whose duty it shall be to meet thrice yearly  
for one full day on each occasion,  
with the mortal contact, whom we will call,  
The Chosen Touchman of the Mortal Realm.  
It is our pleasure and sacred duty to name as this Touchman,  
the Mortal, Jason Gregory Watson  
and the Sons of his lineage who succeed him into eternity.  
It is our further pleasure and sacred duty to name as our  
Ambassador to The Mortal Realm,  
The Honorable Mister  
Twiggington,  
Son of Woodington, Man of the Clan Dewgoodabee,  
Member of the Ring of The Farjumpers,  
and Sire of the New Generation.  
These Sacred Encounters shall occur each year on  
August 27,  
the anniversary of Twiggington's birth and Rite of Ascension;  
April 12,  
the birthday of Jason Watson; and  
December 23,  
The Time of Continuance,  
when we pause  
to remember  
and appreciate  
our loved ones, near and far.

So Be It Into Eternity

I re-read that tiny scroll a dozen times before, at last, I  
carefully rolled it up and re-tied it with the pretty golden string.

It seemed as though I had seen that tiny sash before, but I couldn't place it. I readily admit that by then, there was more than one teardrop moistening that most precious little document.

Who would have thought that a stubbed toe in a rocky meadow on a regular, run of the mill, Spring day, would ever, in a billion years, lead to something as wonderful as the relationship Twiggs and I have had - and now, due to some extraordinary twist of fate, are going to be able to continue?

I had to smile and shake my head as I wondered just how old Twiggypin had been able to pull this off. Grampa always told me that, 'good things happen to good people.' Twiggs is good people, and perhaps just by being his unselfish, altruistic, self, the Council had recognized what an exceptional being he is. I was not at all sure that I would have had the strength of character Twiggs had shown through all of this.

Perhaps I did, though. When he made his decision, I made no attempt to stop him. Loving someone enough to let them make their own tough decisions, even when they go against your own self-interest, is perhaps, the highest test of true friendship. I truly was prepared to live with my wonder-filled memories - and together, we have built so many of them.

I cradled the precious scroll on Twiggs bed, along with his basket and his belt, which I had just removed from my finger. They would all be kept safe and sound, together, there behind the big gray stone at the base of the fireplace.

In my mind's eye, I pictured the next time that I would remove it. It would be that wonderfully special day in the future, when I would, for the very first time, read the scroll aloud to my own nine and three quarters year old son, and begin sharing with him my cherished stories about The Little People of the Ozark Mountains. It had suddenly become my duty and profound pleasure to prepare him to become the next Touchman of the Mortal Realm - and that was a trust, which I

would not take lightly.

I carefully and thoughtfully replaced the stone, that would, I knew, faithfully guard my special treasure. Kissing my fingertip, I touched it to the stone.

At that moment, the door creaked, its familiar creak, and inched open, just a tiny crack. 'The wind,' I thought to myself, as I stood up and turned around.

But no! There, coming toward me through the air, as straight as an arrow and directly into my hand, sailed a small, tattered, white feather!

I rushed to the door, threw it open, and, at the top of my lungs called out:

"Twiggs, you did it! I love you my friend! I'll see you again come December!"

Stories about life should have happy endings, don't you agree!

The End

or, The Beginning  
(Perhaps they are the same!)

With love and best wishes  
for a wonder-filled life,  
I remain, your faithful Storyteller,  
Tom Gnagey