

PART ONE

BLEEKER STREET

1

Eleanore Rigby felt stunned as he stepped off the F train and headed toward Broadway. There was no way out of his current situation and he knew it. He had exhausted his mind and as it happens, the Pixie inside his Smart Phone, searching for some strategy before reaching the exit door from his guidance counselor's office. For all his frantic calculations, the only thing he could be sure of was that his goose was pretty well cooked. Unbeknownst to Rigby, the Pixie had quit shortly after the desperate search began. That worthy compatriot is enjoying a quiet retirement far away from anything even remotely resembling a human teenager.

The young man's second stop after leaving Scride's office was the popular computer distributor where he bought most of his equipment. He used the family credit card to buy a new smart phone. It was the hottest model on the market. It was lightening fast, loaded with memory, and the pixie who ran it had just graduated at the top of her class. She was considered an insufferable know it all by her classmates, but a phone is only as smart as the pixie who runs it, so Rigby was in good company.

These things often happen when someone shows great promise. The young pixie's classmates felt threatened by her genius and consequently chose to dislike her as a result of their own insecurities. As a genius himself, Rigby would have understood. Had he bothered to go to class, he might have been seen as a "know it all" rather than a slacker.

And that was the root of the problem wasn't it? Rigby's situation was one of his own making. No one knew this better than the young man himself, which explains why his first stop after leaving Scride's

office was the school library. He figured Miss Brickhaus would know what to do.

The librarian was used to Rigby showing up at any time of day. She didn't exactly wait for his arrival, but she always kept an eye on the door and was prepared to greet him should he walk through it. When he entered the impressive hall on that particular day, she could tell he was troubled by something. She knew that he would share it with her if he chose, but no amount of asking would pry his concerns from him. The young man didn't seem to notice her as he moved quickly toward the back of the reading room where they usually settled in for their marathon talks. The room was more like a nook, but it had a floor to ceiling window and provided a good view of the city below. Say what you would about the School for the Legally and Acceptedly Gifted, it occupied some prime Manhattan real estate.

Rigby was pacing and sounded like he was arguing with himself. The black and gold mop of hair which covered his head was even more unruly than usual. Brickhaus was far from old but she had worked around teenagers long enough to know when to let them stew for a bit. Eventually, Rigby placed a hand on either side of the long window and bowed his head. He had run out of steam.

The librarian walked out from behind the checkout desk and approached him in a way that could only be described as questionable for a faculty member, which is to say, she walked behind him and covered his eyes with her hands.

"Guess who?" she said.

"I know it's you Miss Brickhaus, but I don't have time to play today."

"Not even with me?" she asked, pretending to be hurt.

"No." he replied, stepping away and turning to face her.

"I have to be downtown in an hour."

"Why?"

"I have to go to work?"

"You have to what?"

"Go to work?"

"I don't understand."

"It's Scride. He put me into the work study program."

"He can't do that! You're only fourteen. Your parents would have to sign a form, which I doubt they did."

"They didn't."

"Then you can't do work study."

"I don't have a choice."

"What does that mean?"

"My parents never sign anything, I do it for them, so if Scride has the form..."

"Then you must have signed it."

"And if I question it..."

"You'll get busted for forging your parents' signature on school documents."

Forging someone's signature is a very bad thing to do. To forge someone signature means that one has signed someone else's name and said that the someone else whose name they signed is actually the one who signed it. Forging someone else's name is not only dishonest, it's also illegal.

"You see the problem," said Rigby.

"Yes." said Miss Brickhaus. "This will take some thought. Where did Scride put you?"

"I don't know, some office down on Bleeker Street."

"What do they do there?"

"I said I don't know."

"There's no need to get snarky with me, Eleanor Rigby. I'm on your side."

The young man knew he'd crossed a line. Nobody ever called him by his first name unless he was in trouble. If Miss Brickhaus of all people was doing it, he must be in even bigger trouble than he'd previously suspected.

"I'm sorry," he said, and meant it about more than just snapping at the librarian.

"Apology accepted. What do you intend to do?"

"I suppose I'll go."

"I suppose you'll have to."

They sat in silence for a moment. Then the librarian's concerned look morphed into a disturbing grin. "I'll do some digging. Scride's been on my list for a while. Maybe I can find some way to get you out of this."

"Thank you." said Rigby.

"Not a problem," said the librarian. "I owe him for certain... questionable statements about my character." Her grin intensified from disturbing to almost evil. "It will be a pleasure."

Rigby found himself feeling angry on her behalf. Scride might be able to make his life more difficult, but he couldn't stand the

thought of the counselor telling lies about the one person at S.L.A.G. he trusted.

"What did he say?" asked Rigby, his anger coming to the surface. This was happening to him more and more of late. Something that seemed only mildly annoying a month ago now sent him into a near fury. He suspected it was just puberty. If so, he wondered how anyone ever lived through it?

"Calm down, Ellie. Don't worry about it." Aside from his mother, Brickhaus was the only one who called him Ellie. "I'll take care of it. The less you know, the better. It's sweet of you though."

"Alright." Rigby took a steadying breath to calm himself. "If you say so."

"I say so. Now you'd best get a move on. You don't want to be late for your first day."

2

So there he was: Walking down Broadway toward Bleeker Street with a look of intense distaste on his face. It wasn't that he had anything against Bleeker Street as a concept. He simply disliked going anywhere with so little information about his destination. All he had was an address and a time to be there. Turning the corner onto Bleeker, he found himself wondering if this was some kind of trap. Rigby wasn't a paranoid person by nature; he just hadn't had time to get his new situation clear in his mind.

Where had Scride sent him? The counselor had said that it was the only job he could find that required absolutely no skills or aptitudes. What kind of job would require that you be good at nothing and interested in nothing?

He passed the last brownstone and found the address he was looking for. One would be hard pressed to find a less imposing door. Rigby could see it from the sidewalk. It sat quietly, in its frame, doing no harm to anyone. Why then, did Rigby feel as though it possessed some sort of life-changing power? There was a waist high gate separating the sidewalk from the steps leading up to the door. To the left of the inward swinging section was a shoulder high plaque upon which several neat lines of script had been printed. Rigby could only assume the script was the same name written in multiple languages. The writing seemed strange to the boy. Some lines were flowing and fragile looking. Others were blocky and stout. One line looked like nothing more than random claw marks.

He found the English writing all the way at the bottom as if it was added as an afterthought. It read "FDG investigations" and though it seemed haphazardly placed it looked friendly enough. Rigby

paused a moment longer, walked the five steps which led to the entrance, grabbed the door knocker, and began rapping. Nothing happened. He waited a few moments and knocked again. Nothing happened. He looked at his watch to be sure he was on time. He was. In fact, he was just over a minute early. He knocked again. Nothing happened. He stared at the door. There was no peephole or doorbell, just the brass knocker in the shape of a wrinkled old face, which was neither pleasant nor frightening.

He looked at his watch again, still early. Perhaps his new employer was out. Rigby pulled out his new Smart Phone and sat down on the top step to take a note about the situation. As soon as his rear end touched the concrete of the step, the door swung open. Framed by the doorway was what Rigby could only describe as an old lawn jockey in an Armani suit. The peculiar little man had longish black and gray hair, a short black and gray beard, shiny black Italian leather shoes, and freshly manicured little hands. With Rigby seated on the curb, the two could look each other in the eye.

The boy stood immediately. There was something about the miniature guy, which didn't seem quite right. For one thing, his eyes were so green they almost seem to glow. For another, even at fourteen, Rigby was almost six feet tall. This strange creature made him feel instantly short. The miniature man looked at the boy for a moment, then grunted.

"What do you want?" said the man.

"Umm..." said Rigby.

"Excuse me." said the man.

"I, umm..." said Rigby.

"I'm sorry. We're fresh out of umm today," said the man.

"No. I..." said Rigby.

"Where are my manners?" said the little man. "Why don't you come inside and we can continue our chat over some cocoa. I've only recently discovered a human recipe from Mexico that adds a dash of chili powder. I don't exactly know why, but who am I to argue?"

The man stepped aside and motioned Rigby through the door. The boy grabbed his belongings and entered, careful not to get too close to the strange fellow holding the door open. The hallway was spacious and finished with well-polished woods from floor to ceiling.

"You may seat yourself in the sitting room," said the old man. "I'll make the cocoa, then we'll chat." When Rigby said nothing, the Armani lawn jockey raised his volume and said each word slowly

as if speaking to an incredibly dense hearing aid pixie, or an incredibly inept translator. "Do you understand me? I admit my troll is a bit rusty, but we should be alright if we use simple hand gestures and speak slowly."

"Umm... Troll?" asked Rigby.

"Yes, my fine Troll. Very good," complimented the old man. "You do look different than I'd remembered your species. Less hairy, smaller limbs, understated brow ridge, but then it's been decades, so my memory may be failing me. I could have sworn your heads used to be about twice as large as one would expect, but not to worry, Perhaps you just haven't finished growing yet."

"But... I." stammered Rigby.

"Right, where are my manners? I promised us cocoa, didn't I?"

3

The old man hurried out of the room toward what Rigby guessed was the kitchen. He heard the sound of a faucet and the whoosh of a gas stove being lit. The boy couldn't resist. He had to take this moment to snoop. Around the sitting room, the boy saw the oddest collection of things. He couldn't imagine how they might relate. There were many items set in glass cases and on ornate pedestals. Many sitting rooms contain such places of honor, but in most of them, one finds things of obvious value such as antique vases and jewel-encrusted eggs. The strange old man had a rather peculiar view about what was of value.

There were old telephones, not antiques constructed of brass and wood, but simply old push button models. There were cheap looking electric typewriters and old video game consoles. On a pedestal in the corner was a contraption that looked like a bulky computer keyboard attached on one side to a boxy old black and white T.V. complete with dials, and on connected on the other side to an old cassette tape player. There were computer printers that still used ribbons and computer monitors that displayed strange and basic bits of computer code on screens that used blocky green letters and had no mice or trackpads.

Rigby walked around the room in confusion. Some of the artifacts he recognized as the ancestors of desktop computers one could find in any household, but others seemed so foreign that they could never have been anything but a hassle for anyone willing to waste their money.

Of all the things displayed in the room, the item placed in the center, in the place of honor, on the highest pedestal, was an old

punch card machine. The strange thing about it thought Rigby, when one considered the other items, was that the rest were in good condition. The revered punch card machine looked as though someone had taken a hammer to it and then come back with shotgun.

Sitting in its place, on the lighted pedestal, Rigby could see stains originating from the holes in the machine. It looked like an attempt to wash them away had only been mildly successful. The boy's mind began to make up stories about what had gotten inside and whether some kind of animal had destroyed the punch card machine, or if it had been destroyed in order to get at the animal that had found its way inside.

He was moving in for a closer look when the old man reappeared. He carried a tray on which sat two steaming mugs of cocoa and a plate of shortbread cookies. The fellow balanced the tray on one hand and used the other to flip a switch. The light surrounding the punch card machine went out and Rigby's attention was once again drawn to his strange looking host.

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"Well now," said the fellow, "You certainly are curious for a troll, aren't you?"

"I, uh..." said Rigby.

"No need to explain," the old man said in an effort to be comforting. "You're not here for your conversational skills. Forgive me. Sit. Have your Cocoa." The old man handed a steaming mug up to Rigby and motioned toward the one couch in the room that appeared to be of normal size. The instant Rigby was seated, the old man continued. "Your duties here will be fairly simple. Though I must admit, I was hoping for a more intimidating example of your species, you will do, I think. Not as scary as one might wish, but I'm sure you'll be able to reach things on high shelves and tell me when someone's at the door, or when the phone's ringing. You may, on occasion be asked to describe the weather, once we're outside, of course, but I doubt I will require this of you often."

"Sir?" Rigby interrupted.

The old man stopped short. He seemed more surprised than angry. "I'm sorry. Did you just interrupt me?"

"My apologies, Sir, but there must be some kind of mistake. I can answer a phone or a door, and if you want to know what the weather is like, I can look it up on the net and tell you before you go outside."

"Unheard of!" exclaimed the old man. "A troll that speaks in sentences? No, no... I don't think any of that will be necessary. I only need you to do... well, what trolls do."

"Which is..." asked Rigby cautiously.

"Why, state the obvious, of course!" said the old man.

"I don't understand." Rigby said.

"Good," said the old man. "I was beginning to worry. Your job is to tell me things that I already know. If the phone is ringing, you tell me it's ringing. If we go outside and it's raining, you tell me it's raining. If the sun is out, you tell me it's daytime, and if the moon is out you tell me it's nighttime."

"Why?" Rigby asked. He felt as if he was about to go around the bend.

The old man took a deep breath as if trying to control his temper and come up with an acceptable answer at the same time. "It's what trolls do. That is to say aside from reaching things on high shelves and looking frightening. Really. Most irregular. I've never met a troll who..." The old man paused for a moment. "Come to think of it, I've never actually met a troll. I mean, before today, but everything I've read about trolls leads me to believe that you are not a normal troll."

"But that's just it!" Rigby jumped in. "I'm not a troll!"

"Not a troll?" The old man asked. "Then what are you doing here? I placed an advertisement for a Troll."

"Did you specifically ask for a troll?"

"Of course not!" The old man exclaimed. "But what else would take a job with low pay, no chance of advancement, no creativity on the job, and nothing to do but look scary, reach high shelves and state the obvious?"

"Then why not be specific and advertise for a Troll?" Rigby asked.

"One does not just advertise for a troll." The old man said, "One is not allowed to advertise for a troll. Humans are not to know that trolls exist, and certainly not that gnomes hire them." He took a long swallow of cocoa to settle his nerves. "Well. If you're not a troll, what are you? The runt of some Ogre litter I presume, that would explain your access to the Internet. We all know what type of sites you Ogres run. I tell you right now. I will have no cigar smoking in my house, which brings me to another point."

Rigby cut the old man off again. "I'm not an ogre sir."

"Not an Ogre?" The old man asked. He seemed to be getting angrier and smaller at the same time, but Rigby wasn't sure if that was possible.

"No Sir." Rigby said. "I'm a human."

"Wax my beard!" The old man yelped.

"Do what sir?" Rigby asked. The old fellow definitely

appeared to be shrinking. "Sir, did I hear you correctly? Did you say you are a gnome?"

"Did I?" The old man asked.

"I think so sir, yes." Rigby said.

"Did you say you were a human?" The old man asked.

"Yes." Rigby said, hoping the old guy would stop shrinking soon. He was becoming difficult to talk to.

"Then I suppose I did." The old man said. He was now about the size of a teddy bear.

"So. What do we do now?" Rigby asked.

"I have to find a way to get us out of this." The old man said.

"Out of what?" Rigby asked.

"You have no idea how much trouble we're in." The old man said. He sounded every bit as nervous as he had a moment before, but at least he'd stopped shrinking.

"Perhaps I could help." Rigby said.

"No. You just stay over there and try to act troll-like. I'm the brains here. I'll think of something." A moment passed, in silence. Then there was a knock at the door.

"There's a knock at the door." Rigby said. He rose from the couch, but the gnome shot him a warning look. Rigby sat back down. "There's a knock at the door." He repeated.

"At least he can be taught," Frankie said, as he returned to lawn Jockey size. He looked at the boy for a long moment. "Stay there. Don't say a word. If anyone tries to talk with you, look confused and grunt."

"Umm hmm." Rigby said.

"That's good." Frankie went to the door.

PART TWO

THE AGENCY

5

Frankie watched the human cautiously as the door knocking continued. He wasn't sure what sort of mix up had happened to bring the strange creature to his place of business and residence, but there was no time to worry about it. Whoever rapped at the door could make trouble for him. He had to play it cool. He couldn't afford any mistakes.

His departure from the bank had not gone quite as smoothly as he'd first believed. Of course, the bank made no trouble, and Snotgrass did not so much as call a single person to complain. No. The problem was that Frankie had known exactly what he wanted to do, but hadn't the first idea how to do it.

As long as he could remember, Frankie had wanted to be a detective. This was a problem. The fairy world is a very structured place and gnomes simply don't do things like that. Policing was the domain of larger beings like centaurs and the occasional giant. Gnomes were made to run complex mechanical things, things that require mathematical skill and computation. And while such aptitudes may strike a human as a good skill set for detecting, From a fairy viewpoint, a highly adventurous gnome might seek a job as a courier, delivering things like bills and invoices through mail slots and under doorjambes. They are not intimidating enough to be taken seriously by the criminal fairy element. How could one take a cop seriously when anyone around could easily stuff said cop into a trashcan, head first?

So Frankie had resigned himself to living the kind of life that gnomes were expected to live, at least until he thought of something better. His time at the bank floated by in slow motion, but he thought of it as a means to an end. In other words, he thought of it

as something he had to do in order to be able to do something else later.

Now he was out of it, his own gnome, doing what he'd always wanted to do. At least he was trying to do what he had always wanted to do, in truth, he wasn't doing much of anything. People just don't seek out gnomish private investigators. His agency had been open for three months and he hadn't had a single client. One reason for the slow business might have been that faerie creatures, by nature, harbor a certain degree of prejudice against other faerie creatures. They do not like it, for example when ogres rescue princesses or when sea hags want to become nannies. Most faerie creatures believe that everyone has their place and should stay in it, particularly if that place happens to be less glamorous than yours.

In this, the creatures of faerie are not alone; Humans are no better in this regard, They too have held themselves back and slowed their progress because of an inability to get past prejudices. All one need do is look at human history to see that the greatest achievements have come by working together in mutual respect and understanding. Yet the main purpose of their day-to-day lives seems to be separating themselves from each other.

Humans and the faerie folk are not all that different; Perhaps the most profound act of prejudice committed by either species was their separation from each other. There was a time when faerie and human lived together and all it took to unravel the whole relationship was an egg. But that is for another time.

For now the more important issue relates to who is banging on Frankie's door with such insistence. Rigby, still sitting on the couch, said, "Is someone trying to break the door down or is that how all of you little people knock?"

Frankie was too concerned to be offended. Whoever was on the other side of the door did, in fact seem intent on breaking it down. The gnome stopped for a moment and thought assessed his situation. Whatever the banging was about likely had nothing to do with the young human on his couch. First, no-one knew the creature was there, and second; having a human on your couch was not, strictly speaking, illegal. Though contact between faerie and human was shunned, and considered low class at the least and scandalous at the kindest. Frankie let his mind wander. He often did his best thinking if he thought around a problem instead of straight at it.

Though the human's presence might be embarrassing, it was not a

crime. What else could there be which would cause someone to bang so insistently on his door? Everything in his home/office was properly bought and paid for, including the building itself. He did not owe anyone money, which he realized should have been his first thought. People bang most insistently at your door when they are owed money. His dues to the private investigators' union were all paid and his license was in good standing.

He would have liked to think that there was some villain at the door seeking revenge for his overthrow due in large part to some case Frankie had cracked for some attractive and good looking wood nymph who would be very grateful to Frankie, and who would also against all odds be a decent cook. Frankie did not consider himself to be prejudiced against wood nymphs, but it is common knowledge that a wood nymph's talents lay outside the kitchen and their cooking abilities are usually limited to burning water and transforming bread to coal with a toaster.

The gnome broke himself out of his daydream with the reminder that not only had he no nymphs for clients; and there were no mustachioed villains seeking revenge. His lack of clients also assured him that the door banger was not a rival private eye, consumed by jealousy and hell-bent on destroying Frankie's business.

In the end, the gnome realized that the only way to know who was on the other side of the door was to open it. "Someone's banging on your door," the human chimed in, making an effort to impersonate the troll he was supposed to be and not doing a bad job of it.

6

"Well..." Frankie said. "Might as well see who it is." He reached out and took the knob, turning it slowly. He opened the door inward and was immediately upended by another small shape which was caught in the act of a particularly forceful swing toward the door. He avoided a rap on the head only to be wrapped up in the momentum of the swing. Down he fell in a heap, legs and arms akimbo.

Once the pile of limbs began to untangle, Rigby observed that the visitor was similar in size and shape to the old man who may or may not have hired him. The new one was beardless, where the old man's sported a respectable crop of growth, but as the boy looked on, the jumble before him looked suspiciously like two jockeys fighting over the best spot on the lawn.

The scuffle only lasted for a moment. The pair had found themselves tangled accidentally and the resulting action was little more than an attempt to get free. They two gnomes wobbled to their feet and regarded each other silently while the tension passed. The newcomer took in the room and spoke with a deep drawl that belied his size, "Hey Frankie, how y'all doin'?"

"I was doing fine, Wally," said Frankie amiably, "Until you tried to break down my door."

"Sorry about that, Hoss," Wally said. "I didn't want to be seen outside."

"You mean you didn't want to be seen outside my door," Frankie said.

"Well... Yeah," Wally said, "But not because it's you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Frankie asked.

"Can I sit down on your couch, here?" Wally asked.

"Suit yourself," Frankie said. "Mind the troll."

"I've never seen one of them hairless kind before," Wally said with an impressed sound. "Does it bite?"

"Only if you provoke it." Frankie said with a wicked smile. Rigby picked up on the cue immediately and attempted attempted a throaty growl, which had a satisfying impact on the new gnome. Wally sat as far toward the other side of the couch as he could. Once settled, he looked at Frankie expectantly. "So," he said. "How do we do this?"

"Do what?" asked Frankie.

"This." Said Wally.

"This what?" asked Frankie.

Rigby thought the situation looked bleak. He was about to step in and try to clarify things between the two, but a look from Frankie stopped him from speaking.

"Wally," said Frankie, with saint-like and obvious patience. "Why don't you just tell me what you're doing here and we'll take it from there."

"You've just got to help me," Wally said. "It's my wife. She's been missing for three days. The police have nothin'."

"Nothing at all?" ask Frankie.

"No." Said Wally. He sounded miserable. "They're lamer than a pole cat with an ingrown toe nail and they won't tell me a thing."

"You sure there's something to tell?" asked Frankie.

"Seems like they know more than they're saying." His misery took on an angry edge. "They never tell me they don't know; only 'Well Sir, all we can say is.' Like I'm not allowed to know what's going on with my wife. I think thy can say a lot more than they will say, if y'all receive my meaning."

"What would you like me to do about it?" Frankie asked; obviously not seeing the whole picture. Wally and Rigby both shot him a look that either of them would normally reserve for an extremely slow-witted child who wants rainbow sherbet and won't stop yelling until it gets some. Again, Rigby wanted to intervene, but sensed it was best for all involved if he kept silent.

"What do you mean, 'What do you want me to do about it?' said an increasingly exasperated Wally, "You're supposed to be a private detective aren't you?" Normally when one is described as being exasperated, the description is meant to illustrate, or show, that

the person is so completely overwhelmed by his or her situation that he or she can scarcely express how overwhelmed he or she is.

"Well... Yes. I am a private detective, and this is an investigation agency in which you stand, but you still have not told me what exactly you want me to do." Frankie cast a swift look over to Rigby who seemed to be doing everything to keep from talking but sewing his own mouth shut. Wally, it seemed, had also noticed.

"Frankie, I think you might want to do something," Wally said. "Your hairless troll looks to be having some kind of fit."

"He'll be alright," Frankie said, "He gets that way before he needs to relieve himself. He'll take himself outside and do his business when the strain becomes too much."

For his part, Rigby wasn't sure if Frankie's comment was meant to be a signal for him to leave, or for him to sit still. Either way, he was getting tired of being spoken of as if he weren't there, and treated like some sort of inferior creature not worth commenting on except to discuss his hairlessness, or his bathroom habits.

Treating someone as an inferior is never a friendly thing to do. To say something is inferior is to say that it is not as good as you are. Of course, some people are better at certain things than others, but to call something inferior is to say that it is less of a thing than you are just because it is not you, or is not the same kind as you, or looks different, or speaks differently, or just about any other silly reason one person can have for placing him or her self above another. Such people should be assisted in any way possible; insofar as that assistance might lead them to a more realistic way of seeing the world around them

There are also those unfortunate individuals who either believe themselves inferior to others, or believe that those around them view them as inferior. When such a person is brought to one's attention, it is often said that the unfortunate individual has "an inferiority complex." Rigby did not have such a complex, but he was beginning to wonder if he should develop one.

Rigby had never liked being treated as an inferior. Perhaps that's why he was able to get along with so few of his teachers. It was certainly why Mr. Scride was rapidly becoming number one on our his most disliked adults list. Adults were notorious for looking at younger people as inferior and adults in authority were the worst.

There is truth in the idea that children are, in many ways inferior to adults. They usually have less education and fewer life experiences to draw on. Even a child such as Rigby, exceptional and brilliant though

he may be, was still lacking in the experience department. And well he should be. The world in which we live is far too full of pressures, which make a child think it should be an adult before it is even ready to be a larger child.

Rigby might come to remember fondly the day when he met Frankie for the first time and was mistaken for a hairless troll, but as he sat there, watching Frankie write down what little information Wally had about the missing Mrs. Wally, he was struck with a strange sensation. He thought he liked this place, and the strange little man. Confusing though it was, Rigby found himself confronting a feeling he rarely felt, and even more rarely admitted. He thought he might want to help. He wasn't sure, but the young man certainly thought he might be feeling a wanting to help sensation approaching.

There was something about the gnomes, one so distressed, the other trying to be so thorough. He liked them. Not quite the way a person likes a pair of puppies looking together to find a bone, but something like that. He just felt like he wanted to give them a nudge in the right direction. Then it hit him. He'd zoned out again. He didn't know what the right direction was and he hadn't been listening to Wally. He would have to ask the other one, Frankie, he thought his name was, for his notes. Rigby hoped that Frankie was just pretending to see him as a mindless oaf. If the little detective really believed it, Rigby knew there was trouble ahead.

The gnomes sat back, Frankie in an armchair and Wally on the end of the couch, as far away from Rigby as he could and still be sitting on the furniture.

"The real problem," Frankie began, "Will be finding out what the police already know. From what you've told me, either they don't know much or they won't say much."

Rigby couldn't help but think that Frankie was the one who now sounded like a Troll. He was repeating what Wally had told him at the beginning of the conversation. Had they made no progress while Rigby was zoning out? The urge to speak up was almost overwhelming, but he held his tongue, which would have been much easier for a real troll to do considering the fact that your average troll can wrap its tongue around its head like a turban and has fingers like vise grips.

Frankie was still speaking. "So I suppose I'll start there: See if I can get any more out of them than you did. I wouldn't hold out much chance of that, though. I'll probably have to start from the beginning

and hope the trail hasn't gone too cold." Rigby knew this meant that Frankie was guessing there was still some kind of trail left to follow. "I'll leave for the station right away," Frankie continued. He opened a drawer in the coffee table and pulled out the largest stack of carbon paper forms Rigby had ever seen.

"If you'll just sign here," Frankie said, indicating the stack of paper. "Then initial here, here, here, here, here, and here." The gnome turned to a page about halfway down the stack, showing it to be made up of at least two separate documents. "This first one gives me your consent to look into your financial records. The next gives me the right to ask questions on your behalf." Wally signed and initialed the second form. Frankie pulled another from the pile. "This one allows you to reveal the fact that I am working for you, should such a revelation prove necessary."

"Why would it?" Wally asked.

"One never knows." Frankie said as he pulled forth yet another form. "This here gives me the right to look into your personal records should you become a suspect."

"What!?" Wally exclaimed, "Why would I be a suspect?"

Frankie tried to calm the younger gnome down. "I'm not saying you are, Wally, but the investigation might turn toward you and I need to be able to rule you out in order to find the real villain. It's standard procedure in this sort of case, Wally, I promise."

"Well," said Wally. "If you think it's best."

"I do." Frankie said.

"Alright then." Wally conceded.

"Now, we just have one more, and I know you're not going to like it, but I need you to sign it anyway." Frankie said.

Wally seemed depressed. "What could be worse than giving someone access to everything about my personal life?" he asked.

"Well this form here allows me to use human resources in order to solve your case." Frankie stopped speaking and waited for the explosion.

"TO USE WHAT?" exploded Wally.

"Humans." Frankie said, trying to calm Wally. The poor gnome looked like he was about to explode. "I don't really think they could be as bad as people say, I mean, A few of them might be useful somehow, and if it helps me find your wife..." Frankie left his thought unfinished, leaving it up to Wally to fill in the blanks. "This form is simply a waiver which shows that you understand I might need to use

some unorthodox methods to get the job done.”

“I reckon it couldn’t hurt.” Wally said. “that is, if nobody knows about it.”

“Strictly confidential.” Frankie said. “just between us.”

“Alright then, I guess we have ourselves a deal. I’ll transfer the fee out to your account.” He stuck his hand out to Frankie, who took it and shook it once firmly.

‘We have a deal,” Said Frankie.

He rose from his chair and led Wally toward the door. Wally hesitated only a moment before shooting a cautious glance at Rigby and following the other gnome. When they reached the door; Wally stopped and turned to Frankie.

“You might want to think about taking that troll with you as you go. He’s scarier than a pole cat caught in a tail trap.” Wally said.

“I’ll think about it.” Frankie said. I’m not sure if I’ll be keeping him.”

“You should. He seems well mannered enough and you might need to reach things on high shelves.”

“I’ll think about it.

Wally stepped through the door and Frankie closed it behind his first client while wearing his most reassuring smile. He stepped back into the room and studied Rigby for a long time. Finally he heaved a heavy sigh.

7

"Now. What to do with you."

"I don't mean to be rude, sir, but you could stop treating me like a troll. I'm not a troll. I may be young, but I'm a man and..."

"And feisty too."

"If you were looking for a Troll, you should have advertised for a troll. It's not my fault you were unclear. I was told I was to report to work and here I am. If you choose not to use what I have to offer, that's your problem."

"Drink your cocoa," said Frankie.

Rigby had forgotten all about the mug he was holding. He sipped at the cocoa. It was cold, but still tasty. Frankie continued to look at him; assessing the situation.

"Tell me then. What have you to offer?"

"I'm excellent with computers, There isn't a program written I can't figure out, and most of them I can hack."

"So you're used to abusing Pixies. What else?"

"Excuse me?"

"Pixies."

"What pixies?"

"The ones who live and work in your computers."

"I think you mean pixels, you know, the dots of light that make up the picture on your screen?"

"No. I mean what I say and I say what I mean and nothing ever in between."

"What?"

"Oh! Wax my beard I spoke in verse, but I suppose it could be worse. I'm frustrated and that's the thing"

"At least you didn't start to sing."

Rigby couldn't help himself. He smiled. He had no way to know that gnomes rhyme when they get frustrated or confused. The way some humans tap their feet or their fingers. Other humans pull out their hair or bite their fingernails. Rigby noticed that the gnome was looking at him again, but this time there was the beginning of a smile on his wrinkled and bearded face.

"Well," said Frankie. "I suppose we could give it a try. I might have use for someone with a high reach. But I will not condone pixie abuse so if you have a computer of some kind, please hand it over."

"Why?" Rigby asked. "What are you going to do?"

"Nothing."

"Then why do you want me to take out my Smart Phone? I just bought it."

"And we were doing so well," said Frankie to no one in particular. "I'm not going to break it if that's your concern."

"Then why do you want it?"

"Because it's polite."

"What's polite? Giving you my new Smart Phone?"

"No."

"Then what?"

Frankie took several deep breaths in order to avoid another rhyming spell. After taking several more deep breaths and counting to one hundred. He sincerely hoped the young human was teachable.

"If you are going to work with a pixie, it's only polite to introduce yourself." Frankie said patiently, and thankfully without verse.

"But you haven't introduced yourself to me yet."

"Right, my apologies. You may call me Frankie." The gnome made a slight bow.

"Whatup, Frankie? I'm Rigby." said the boy. He attempted a poor imitation of Frankie's bow.

The gnome stopped short and considered the human. He was young and slightly gawky all knees, elbows, and attitude. For just a moment the gnome felt as though he could look into the future and see the figure before him just beneath who he would some day become. For a moment the old gnome couldn't breathe. Then the moment passed. "Well..." said Frankie.

"Well what?" asked the boy.

The gnome recovered quickly. "Well... Now... Since we've gotten that business out of the way. Your computer please."

Rigby was clearly skeptical, but handed over the smart phone.
“Right.” Said Frankie. “Now lets see who’s home.”

PART THREE

PENELOPE MUSTARDSEED

PEASEBLOSSOM

8

Frankie tapped the screen gently with a small finger. "Hello," he said. "Anyone home?" There was no response. Rigby eyed him skeptically. The young human had no reason to doubt him, but Frankie was beginning to feel self-conscious anyway. The last thing he needed was to add an uncooperative pixie to his already strangely staffed agency. He still hadn't made a final decision about the boy.

Frankie was more open-minded about his associates than most. Perhaps this was because he was an atypical gnome who didn't feel that species should determine destiny. Maybe the same inquisitive nature that steered Frankie toward a career in detective work made him more curious, or perhaps the reason for Frankie's tolerance was that he was just a friendly little guy. Whatever the reason, he had started to devise some investigatory strategies in which cross species cooperation would be useful, it might even be a way to set his agency apart and give it the sort of advantage that would distinguish it from others and possibly, at long last, reward him with some success. He let his train of thought run down these tracks, and realized that a good pixie might be just what he needed to complete this new recipe for success. A bad one might destroy the dish all together, like putting salt in your cocoa instead of sugar. He needed this to work. He tapped on the screen again.

"Hello? You can come out, it's alright."

Nothing happened. Frankie would have to think through the problem from another angle. He turned to Rigby.

"Give me a moment."

Rigby shrugged. For his part, he had no idea what was going on. Frankie left him alone in the room. After a moment, there was the

Rigby began to wonder what sort of appliances the little old man had in there. They seemed to work, remarkably fast. First the cocoa and now the coffee seemed to be done almost as soon as the old fellow began to prepare it.

Frankie re-entered the room with one steaming mug on the same tray he'd used before. The coffee smelled amazing. Rigby could feel his mouth coming to attention from where he stood next to the couch. The little man walked over to the small table where he'd left the Smart Phone. He picked up the device and placed it face down on top of the steaming mug.

"Wait just a minute," Rigby sputtered, "Isn't the steam going to mess up the circuitry?"

"Nothing to worry about." Frankie said, though the gnome had placed himself between the boy and the table, just in case the youth decided to make a lunge for the phone. "Just let the coffee draw it out."

The process took longer than Frankie expected. After ten minutes he sneaked a look at Rigby who seemed to grow even more skeptical of the gnome's plan. After 15 minutes the young human had contracted a serious case of the fidgets. Just as Rigby was about to begin a rant about circuits and their incompatibility with moisture, something happened. A noise came from inside the mug. It was a small noise, probably because the opening of the mug was covered by the Smart Phone. The sound was the sort of sloshing that occurs when an over-eager gold fish breaks the surface of its bowl as the flakes hit the water. Then there was a definite splash. Rigby looked to Frankie with guarded wonder in his eyes. There was no mistaking the source of the noise.

With great care, Frankie slid the Smart Phone from the top of the mug and said, "Hello there. You can come out now, no-one is going to hurt you."

"Ha!" came the reply from inside the mug. "As if you could."

More noise came from the mug. It sounded like someone was swimming in there. Frankie seemed perplexed. "Come on now," he said. "I put out my best brew. It's only right that you at least greet me properly before drinking yourself into a stupor."

9

When Frankie removed the smartphone from atop the mug, the splashing sounds stopped. Rigby began to make out small groaning noises. Before long a small and delicate hand appeared and clutched the lip of the mug. There was the sound of a mighty heave and a leg appeared for the moment, only the foot and bare calf showed. On the foot was a sensible shoe and the leg was covered in a sheer stocking which, even though it still dripped with coffee, displayed the calf to be firm and shapely. Then another arm appeared followed at last by the Pixie's face. It was the most beautiful face Rigby had ever seen. He gasped and his fourteen year old heart recognized things his fourteen year old body was only just beginning to be able to tell him. He wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. He wanted to sing and yell and break things for no reason he could understand other than the sheer desire to do it.

The Pixie shot a furious look at Frankie and pulled herself the rest of the way out of the mug to stand on the wide rim of the vessel. For the moment she didn't seem to have noticed Rigby, which was just as well. He was still staring openly. Once the initial shock had worn off, he began to notice details. Even at two and a half inches tall; Rigby could tell that she was perfectly proportioned. Everything about her fit effortlessly. She wore a lab coat that was probably white when it wasn't soaked with coffee, sheer stockings, and a skirt that was probably some shade of Kaki, and once white blouse. Rigby's mother would have called her look business casual. At the moment her hair was brown (pixies can change their hair color at will) and was gathered in an unassuming up-do that had probably been charming before it was dunked in the mug. Rigby fought bravely to focus on

what was going on. The pixie was speaking.

"Okay Wrinkles," she said. "What's the deal, what are you doing with human... technology, and why did you play the coffee card? I like a coffee break as much as the next girl, but I don't appreciate being dunked like a cruller."

As she turned to take in her surroundings her eyes locked on Rigby for the first time. She jumped when she saw him, gasped, lost her balance, and fell backward into the coffee mug with another splashing "kerplunk". After a moment of coughing and sputtering her voice became understandable again.

"Forget the technology question you insane old Lawn Jockey! What are you doing with a Human? You set me up, gnome. When my wings dry out enough for me to transmogrify..."

She struggled to find a firm hand hold inside the mug. Rigby started to move toward it but stopped at a sharp gesture and a firm shake of the head from Frankie.

Most humans are completely unaware of the fact that many of their traditions and customs have their roots deeply embedded in the faerie world. One should not be surprised, considering that the two species lived side by side for millennia. Nonetheless, considering that most humans no longer know that the world of faerie exists, it cannot be held against them that they do not give their faerie counterparts the proper credit. Truth be told, some of these traditions are something of an embarrassment to the fae folk. One such tradition is the coffee break.

10

As old as the bean itself, the coffee break practically rules the pixie community. They are all but powerless against a good cup of coffee, and go to great lengths to ensure that their weakness for the bean is never a weapon to be used by their enemies. When one thinks of a pixie, one often envisions the human-friendly pixies of animated films that flit around in balls of light and make little chiming noises when they get excited. One thinks them whimsical and harmless, blonde and pretty like miniature Barbie dolls with wings and unrealistic unbelievable torsos. Hollywood has much of the physical part right. Yet, Pixies, while perhaps the most aesthetically pleasing of all the fae, are much more than beautiful objects to look at.

Many have made the mistake, of focusing only on physical beauty when describing the universal attractiveness of the pixie. In truth, any number of creatures in the fairy realm are equally pretty to look at. What makes the pixie so stunning is its intellect. Pixies are by far the smartest creatures in the world of the fae, which is nothing to sneeze at. Behind their eyes, which are usually violet and covered with spectacles; pixies are notoriously nearsighted, is a keen intelligence and formidable strength. Pixies are not to be taken lightly. Enmity with a pixie should be avoided at all cost.

Like gnomes, they have the ability to change their size and can appear as small as a dust mote, or as large as five and a half feet tall. They are naturally athletic and graceful. An angry pixie at full height, brandishing a fairy blade is an intimidating sight indeed. Very few who see the wrong side of an enraged pixie live to tell the tale.

On the bright side, Pixies tend to look upon the rest of us with a sort of put upon indulgence, which is to say they often interact with others

as if by virtue of being something other than a pixie, everyone else is a few steps behind and should be, if not pitied, at least accommodated. They are usually slow to anger, but one can never be too careful. Fortunately for both Frankie and Rigby, the pixie before them was not so much angry as she was annoyed.

She finally regained the top lip of the coffee mug and stood there eying both the gnome and the human sternly, with appraisal and skepticism. Her lab coat was dripping and coffee stained. Her hair, though in an up do and out of her face, was beginning to wilt. Even so, she cut an intimidating and disturbingly feminine figure. Had she been a human girl, one might have said, "She stood there eying them up and down, the absolute embodiment of Girl Power." The pixie was not a human girl. She was a mature female of her species, and seemed content to stare at them forever, eyes full of judgment. For their part, the boy and the gnome had no choice but to stand quietly and be judged.

11

The Pixie turned abruptly to the boy. "What's your name human?" The whip crack demand of her question caused Rigby to jump, though he was in less danger of falling into a coffee mug.

"uh... I... uh..." Rigby stammered.

"Oh dear lord!" beseeched a frustrated gnome.

"Okay Wrinkles," said the pixie. "What's the deal? Is this one of those special humans?"

"He's just overwhelmed by your presence," said Frankie, who honestly didn't know how to defend the young human.

"Umm, Yeah, what he said," managed Rigby.

The pixie ignored the boy, choosing, for the moment to focus on the gnome. "Now, see here wrinkles, you tricked me. I don't appreciate it and when the Rumpus hears about it."

"The what?" asked Rigby.

"There's no need for that," said Frankie "This one works for me and considering that you work for him, it only seems fitting that..."

"I WHAT?" shrieked the pixie.

"What the..." said Rigby.

"ENOUGH!" bellowed Frankie, in a voice he hardly looked capable of producing.

Both the young human and the Pixie managed the same look of insulted astonishment. When they noticed the likeness, they turned brusquely away, looking anywhere but at the gnome or at each other.

"Here are the facts, as you Pixies are so fond of saying: This young human, umm what's-his-name..."

"Rigby," supplied Rigby.

"Yes, quite right, there's progress. This... Rigby here, is in my

employ, and as you are in his employ, by being assigned to the device he owns..."

The pixie tried to interrupt but the gnome ignored her.

"...You therefore work for him, though in the normal course of business he would be unaware of your presence. Nonetheless as the things he demands of you will often be things I demand of him, it is only right that we are properly introduced, as is the law, and that we establish a normal working relationship, as is..."

"Get to the point, gnome," said the increasingly irritated pixie.

"In short," continued Frankie. He has to know you're there so he can do what I need him to do, so get over it."

"But..."

"But nothing, and don't try "The pout". It doesn't work on me."

"The Pout" did however work on Rigby. He was overwhelmed with the need to agree with the Pixie. Anything she said had to be right simply because she had said it. His voice seemed to be coming from someplace far away.

"Maybe I can just... forget I ever saw her." Rigby began. "It's not like I knew she was here before, why not simply..." He fell silent as if seeing clearly for the first time. Frankie was pointing directly at the Pixie making some sort of uncharacteristic growling noise.

"That's enough of that," Frankie said between growls. "This is no way to begin. I will release you when you release him and not before."

"Fine." Said the pixie who looked like she was about to start pouting again and controlled it with a visible effort.

"Good." Said Frankie, lowering his arm. Now to business. I am Frankie. There is more to my name but that isn't important for now. Introduce yourself Human. Full name please."

Rigby wasn't happy. Right then he thought the worst thing in the world would be for the pixie to laugh at him. Nonetheless he knew, somehow that this was an important moment so he swallowed his pride, extended his hand, and said. "Eleanor John Rigby."

The pixie's head snapped up as if an alarm had sounded somewhere in the distance. Then she looked confused. She stared at him. It felt as if his face had become a puzzle she was trying to piece together, Only someone had put all the pieces into a bag and thrown away the box with the picture that displayed what the finished product was supposed to look like. After a subjective eternity, the pixy gave up, heaved a heavy sigh, adopted a look of resignation, and said. "Alright. My name is Penelope Mustardseed Peaseblossom. Waste it and suffer."

Rigby wasn't sure what that meant, but he didn't think it meant "Charmed I'm sure."

"Alright Penny," said Frankie.

"Penelope," said Penelope.

"Right, Penny, Eleanore,"

"Rigby." Said Rigby.

"Right. Penny, E.J. Let's get to work. We have a water sprite to find."

'We do?' asked Rigby and Penny at the same time, then shot each other a suspicious look.

"Yes," said Frankie in a voice that conveyed greater meanings. "We do."