

PALMERVISION



BUCK PAIVA

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by

Buck Paiva

For many years I've strongly held the conviction that these things—these beings, these ghosts, or whatever they may be—are *not* my imaginary friends.

Friends don't haunt friends their entire lives. Friends don't make you question your sanity. Friends don't tear at your soul every minute of every day.

Imaginary? Maybe. Possibly. In all likelihood, yes. But friends? Not a chance in Hell.

A typical morning in the life of Palmer Johnting begins when my vibrating alarm watch goes off at 7:05. I roll my considerable girth out of bed, take off the watch and set it on the nightstand. Then I remove the plugs from my ears and put them in their case.

That's when the peace comes to an end.

I can hear Hole in the master bath carrying on as usual. Day and night, she never stops talking. Ever. I call her Hole for that's what she is, a hole in my bathroom wall in the shape of a mouth—only about five times larger than the average facial orifice—complete with lips, teeth, tongue and feminine voice which periodically injects normal prose into its constant stream of nonsensical, lyrical madness.

“...snicker bars and matchbox cars. Peanut butter hair gel. All's well. Oh, hey honey, how you doing this morning? Did you know there's a fly in here. Blue suede shoe fly. Cherry-flavored insecticide..”

That was just a taste, a sampling of the twenty-four hour, lunatic talk show piped directly into my bathroom. It's like having a mental patient permanently installed in the wall for my inconvenience. Ignoring her, as I do them all—sprites, my mother termed them—I jump in the shower with the wet radio blaring my favorite morning program. It helps to block out the babbling.

After toweling off, I open drawers to my dresser—which used to be my mother's, as did the master bedroom—and am greeted with tentacles. Squido, another sprite. Reaching through its green appendages, I feel for and grab what I need. Socks. Briefs. T-shirt. Usually I just close my eyes, it's easier that way.

My old bedroom I haven't visited in several years. I walk past it on my way to the kitchen with rarely a thought. Last time I looked in there, the Mass had grown to occupy a third of the room, engulfing most of my old bed. When I was a kid it had been a small, irremovable, black dust bunny that only I could see. Now it was a three-dimensional obsidian inkblot the size of several refrigerators.

Cereal and juice while coffee brews. Slim is there as always. His gray-skinned, lanky body is dressed in faded jeans and a crisp white tee. He sits on the floor in the breakfast nook, back up against the wall. Slim doesn't speak much, which is fine by me as I stopped interacting with sprites, for the most part, six years ago after my mother passed. Instead, he enjoys his eternal cigarette and the smoke—which I thankfully cannot smell—circles lazily around his bald, narrow head.

After what I've just revealed it may not be necessary to admit this, but I am a very lonely man.

You have questions, as do I. Most of mine have remained unanswered my entire life, but I'll attempt to provide answers to some of yours.

For starters, I've been seeing sprites since before age six. My mother initially thought I was an over-imaginative child. As the years went by we both came to realize that it wasn't that simple.

As for what they are, your guess is as good as mine. Delusions are just as likely an explanation as ghosts or anything else. I can only see and hear them. They have no mass, nor scent. I pass right through them as if they weren't there, like holograms.

Or hallucinations.

They come in a wide variety. On one extreme there are the humanoid sprites—Slim, for example—and on the other are those that appear to be inanimate objects—like the Mass. I see the same ones day after day, and I'm accustomed to them. Seldom do I encounter new ones or do regulars go missing. Then again, I don't visit many new places—my life is a routine—and sprites are location bound. They can't stray far, and many are

completely stationary, like Hole and Squido.

And they're everywhere.

If you are wondering about their names, that's all me. I name them as I see them. None of them have ever corrected me.

Yes, I can speak to them, after a fashion. Not all can talk but I've held what you might call conversations with those with the ability in the past.

To my knowledge nobody else can see them, and on my mother's recommendation I never shared my secret with another living soul. I've never heard or read of others cursed in the same manner—unless you count Wonderland's Alice. When I was young, Mom told me I was gifted, as any caring parent would. She labeled my unique, peculiar ability “Palmervision” and suggested that I embrace it.

Mom's love and support was unwavering.

I'm sure you'd like to know if I've ever sought psychiatric help. The answer is no. If you were in my shoes, would you confess seeing monsters to a licensed professional with the authority to have you committed? Honestly?

I did have a brain scan, an MRI, when I was a teen—my mother worked out some deal to make it happen. It came back normal.

Two Tuesdays ago, there was a tremor in the Force—to steal a phrase from Obi-Wan Kenobi. A sense of impending changes. Big changes.

I dreamed that I became one of them. A sprite. It was me, but as a four-inch tall circus clown with blue skin and four eyes. I lived in somebody's cupboard.

Forever.

That morning, Hole was mumbling about karma—I think.

“...in the grand scheme of things, yes? Things happen for a reason. 'Tis the season. It's mojo time, dearie. High tide. Drown your pride. What comes around goes around, do you know what I mean? Are you listening? This means you, buster. You can't put a bandage over a shark bite. Closet dwellers don't get stage fright. Goofball. Super fall...”

Whatever.

Squido kept its tentacles retracted and several times I caught Slim grinning at me while I ate. Grinning! Slim hadn't looked at me directly in years, and he never smiled. Confounded and distracted, I knocked a full cup of coffee off the counter while making my lunch. I lost a lot of time cleaning up the mess and wound up missing my bus by seconds. I watched it pull away as I hoofed it down the sidewalk.

When I reached the bus stop, I let loose with a few choice expletives.

“Miss your bus?” asked somebody nearby.

“No, Tourette's,” I replied. When I turned to look, the inquisitive party wasn't human, but the one I call Plumpkin. A filthy, overweight vagabond with a misshapen, orange cranium and broken, yellow teeth. He caught me off guard. A sloppy mistake on my part as I'm well aware the bus stop is the turf of this particular sprite. He's the reason I time my arrival so tightly in the first place.

Like Hole, Plumpkin is a talker.

I plopped down on the bench. Plumpkin sidled up to me and began to pester. “Haven't spoken to you in ages, bub. Ever on the move, eh? So, how've you been? Sorry to hear about your mother. Truly am. Life is short. It is, isn't it?”

Tempted to walk to the next stop, but already winded, I opted to remain still and quiet for the fifteen minutes it would take for the next 56E to arrive. The two other people waiting for a bus pretended I hadn't just blurted out a response to, in their eyes, nobody at all. They ignored me and I ignored the talkative sprite.

But it wasn't so easy that morning. There was a feeling in the air that something massive—and likely unwelcome—was headed my direction. A sense of foreboding about which, for some reason, I assumed the sprites might have some information. Maybe it was the way the house sprites were behaving, I don't know.

Though the temptation to inquire about it weighed, I stuck to my guns.

“I see. Still not speaking to the likes of us, eh? Hardly fair, you know. It's a lonely existence and it's not every day somebody like you comes 'round, Palmer. Nope, not every day. That's a shame.”

I heard the same rap about loneliness from them—the various inhabitants of

Monsterville—before. Those that could speak were never too shy to complain. Back when I communicated with them, I'd interrogate sprites from time to time. The answers, however, were always vague or misleading. Utterly disappointing. They didn't seem to know what they were or why I—their reluctant mayor—was the lucky one who could see and hear them. They didn't seem to care about much beyond the one thing I could provide them.

Company.

Either they were simple and clueless or they were very convincing liars. Of course, there was the possibility they didn't exist at all. There was always that.

Bottom line, conversations with sprites were never fruitful and seldom pleasurable. Hence, as I mentioned before, most of my questions remain unanswered.

Is it any wonder I finally gave up on them?

Lonnie and Liza Gertz are my employers. The couple own Gertz Hardware, a quaint shop with inadequate defenses against the titans of home improvement such as The Home Depot. The place is mismanaged, micromanaged, and barely manages to stay afloat let alone turn a profit.

It's about as improbable and tenacious as your truly. A perfect fit.

On that odd Tuesday, I strolled in twenty minutes later than normal and was immediately called into Lonnie's office.

I hate Lonnie's office.

“You're late, Palmer,” said old Lonnie as he leaned back in his chair.

“Hang 'em!” shouted Graybeard, the resident sprite. “Hang the bastard!” Hopping around on his single, wooden peg leg, the decrepit pirate made a noose of his scarf and howled with laughter.

I rolled my eyes.

“There's a first time for everything, boss.”

“Liza's phone is acting up, too.”

“Sounds like it needs a timeout. I'll get to it first thing.”

Bifocals were adjusted. Papers were shuffled. The old man was preparing to drop some lecture on me, in his own befuddled way. Meanwhile, Graybeard made childish faces and shoved a crooked finger into one of his cavernous nostrils.

I had to get out of there. “We done, boss?”

“You know, Palmer, I hired you as a favor to your mother. God rest her soul. She was a good woman, a strong woman. But a polite woman. A lady.”

Graybeard suggested that Lonnie harbored strong feelings for my mother, despite her current state of being. I paraphrase for the sake of decency.

“Boss. I've got things to do, people to see. Phones to fix.”

“You always were the sarcastic one, Palmer. Ever since you were a boy.”

“Lonnie, you're never going to find somebody to do everything I do. Not for what you pay me.” The truth, and he needed to hear it on a regular basis. Not only did I manage the telephone system, I was their sole electrician, network tech, and systems engineer.

“Ho! Cajones grande, Palmer!” The idiotic pirate grabbed his crotch with both hands. “You're gonna need 'em.”

“So can I go now?”

Lonnie let out a sigh and shook his head. Sure signs of his disappointment—not that I cared. He then informed me that a new cashier would be starting later that day. “She'll need a code in the P.O.S.,”—the point-of-sales system, smart cash registers—“before lunch. Name's Sabrina Lobb. Two B's. Do you think you can wedge that into your busy schedule?”

“Great talk, boss. Inspirational.”

Like nearly every workday, I brought my lunch and carried it to Cupid Park. Not its real name. Its actual name is Franklin Park, and it's one of the older parks in town. A park with character; contoured with hills and creeks, populated with trees and bushes that have been around for decades. The rash of antiseptic, prefab parks that are popping up

everywhere make me sick to my stomach.

I call it Cupid Park due to its resident sprites: Trixie, Nixon, and Stupid. All three have physical characteristics that anybody would—if able to see them—associate with the Roman god of erotic love and beauty—or at least the twentieth-century, commercial version. Nude, pink bodies with fluffy, white wings. I say nude only because they wore no clothing. These cupids have no genitals at all—like undressed Ken dolls—and were anything but sexual beings. They also had snouts, pig ears, and hooves for feet.

What was that saying about flying pigs?

Nixon was the mean-spirited one. Whatever it had to say to me was usually an insult. But its worse trait by far was its habit of urinating on everything in sight, despite the lack of genitals—with sprites, anything goes. Of course, park-goers never felt a thing.

Stupid I so dubbed because its communication skills were limited to grunts and guffaws. Stupid laughed hysterically at Nixon's antics and Trixie's acrobatics.

The Three Stooges of Monsterville.

It was Trixie, the last sprite I still acknowledged to any degree at this point, that kept me coming back. Trixie was an entertainer. It always did silly tricks for me, like mid-air somersaults and cartwheels. That day it met me at the park entrance, flying upside down and smiling.

“Palmer, look what I can do!”

I smiled back and started feeling normal again. I allowed myself to dismiss my premonition of gloom and doom as simple paranoia.

“Nixon says things are going to change,” added Trixie. “What does that mean?”

So much for paranoia.

Trixie volunteered nothing more on the subject and I didn't press. My vow of silence remained in tact and the park visitors in my vicinity were saved from having to witness the large, lone man with the disheveled hair talking to himself.

I ate quickly and left.

Walking back to the hardware store I was acutely aware, and suspicious, of the sprites I passed. Did that one always glare at me so hard, or was this new behavior? Was that purple turtle thing I never bothered to name mouthing a warning? Or just yawning?

Limbo was local to Gertz Hardware, a ball of flesh with a dozen arms and legs jutting out in every direction. It spent most of its time rolling up and down the aisles. That afternoon, I could have sworn that it stopped and faced me, before turning its back to me—a pretty good trick as it had neither face nor back.

A cold shoulder from a creature with none to give.

All the little signs seemed to be adding up to something. My dream. Hole jabbering about karma. The perceived changes in attitude among the sprites I've known for many years. Slim smiling. Nixon's prediction. *Things are going to change*. Just what was that supposed to mean?

And again, my dream.

Then there was Plumpkin. Plumpkin knew about my mother. I never told him, he “heard” about it. The statement had escaped my attention that morning but when it finally registered, it did so with a jolt. Who had he heard it from? Was there communication between sprites across distances, some kind of network? Is that where Nixon got his information?

But if I didn't think they shared information ordinarily then why would I believe they knew something of my premonition? Did I expect them to obtain the knowledge through some kind of osmosis, from some higher source?

It seemed that my new assumptions were clashing with my established notions.

My mind worked overtime, and in attempting to discern the meaning of it all, I hadn't stopped first to consider if I truly wanted the mystery solved. I was terrified to uncover the truth, yet at the same time I couldn't stop the wheels from spinning.

But then, what was I afraid of? What did I really have to go on? Coincidences? Bad dreams and suspicions? After having lived with monsters for thirty years you'd think nothing could spook me.

Becoming one of those monsters though... that would do the job nicely. A fate worse than death.

So it was, in a state of near hysteria, that Liza found me. Panicked and sweating at my desk and staring off into space.

And obviously not working very hard.

“Earth to Palmer.”

“Huh?”

“Do you want to come meet the new cashier?”

I was unprepared for how beautiful the newest addition to the Gertz team was.

Sabrina may not meet the standards of glamor magazines, and nobody was going to mistake her for one of Hollywood's leading ladies, but the fact remained that I found her very attractive. Some might call her overweight, or worse. Having been on the receiving end of those remarks my whole life, I wasn't about to judge her through the narrow lenses of the same society which wouldn't give me the time of day.

In my mind, she was way out of my league. Granted, my league was nearly nonexistent. The pool of available dating candidates was shallow for a fat, abrasive nerd who lacked any social skills. Add probable, undiagnosed psychosis to the mix and the pool was pretty well drained.

Yeah, Sabrina definitely fell into the “unattainable” category. All women did.

She was clearly not used to being the center of attention, and I was so focused on the way her cheeks reddened as she was introduced to the staff that I almost forgot my predicament. Mike Flint, one of the stock boys, took notice of my open admiration and made a crack which I only half heard. The others laughed—though not Sabrina, she dropped her eyes and turned even redder—and I excused myself.

Public embarrassment combined with private mental anguish. I locked myself in the back restroom and purged half my lunch.

Not one of my prouder moments.

Days went by, then a week. No more mention of karma or change, though Slim continued to grin. Actually, the grin had mutated into something resembling a self-satisfied smirk. But I hadn't had any other nightmares, so things were settling back to a state of normality.

Such as it was.

My working hypothesis was that I had only convinced myself that there was a disastrous event awaiting me in the near future. Chalk it to up to simple paranoia—again. As for the sprite network, it was more likely that I had slipped and said something about my mother to that melon-headed Plumpkin at least once over the past few years. For all I knew, Nixon was planning to alter its *modus operandi* and began defecating on folks, and that's all there was to that reference.

Best not to dwell on it.

I worked over the weekend for lack of anything better to do, and to keep my mind occupied. Plus, Lonnie and Liza were happy to see me busy and productive. Not to mention that my tiny office was usually devoid of sprites. Occasionally Limbo would roll by, but Pippy—skinny, stockinged legs whose green-and-black bands reached up through the ceiling—was the only sprite that ever entered, though it typically stood guard just outside my door.

The fact that Sabrina's work schedule coincided with my overtime may also have had something to do with my decision.

Then last Wednesday morning Sabrina stopped by my office to say, “Hi.” I was unaccustomed to friendly visits and could only stare at her with my mouth open.

“Um. So I understand that you like to visit the park down the street?”

“Cu— I mean, Franklin. Yeah.”

“You eat your lunch there, right? Is it nice?”

“Sure. Yeah.” A man of few words. What an idiot.

“You know I moved here from San Antonio, right?”

“That's what I hear.”

“Well, I still don't know the area very well. Or anybody here, really.” She laughed

nervously with her hand over her mouth. It was intoxicating. “Anyway, would you mind if I—”

“Tagged along? No, I'd like that. If you brought your lunch, we could go today. It'd be my pleasure.” Where all that came from, I had no idea. Suddenly, I was Joe Cool. No stumbling or constipation of the mouth. No sarcasm.

Sabrina actually beamed. “I do— Um, did. I can break at noon, if that's good for you.”

I couldn't think of a reply. I had spent my wad, lost my inertia. Quick. Smile, nod. Make her go away now.

“OK,” she said. “See you later.” And she left.

The most amazing thing that had ever happened to me, and it happened at work. Unbelievable. I had been asked out. My mother would have been out of her mind with excitement.

Palmer Johnting had a date. A lunch date, but still a date.

A date. At. Cupid. Park.

Crap.

I quickly began devising an escape plan.

The problem as I saw it was multifold. First, I had no dating experience to speak of and would be awkward at best. Next, Trixie would be a serious distraction, and in actively trying to ignore it, or covertly shoo it away, I was certain to summon some nasty blunder into the world. Then there was the long term strategy—or lack thereof. Assuming lunch went without incident, could I drag this woman into my sad existence? Even if she were willing, would it be the honorable thing to do?

I couldn't answer yes to that last one.

It seemed that no matter how lonely I was, or how delighted I was that Sabrina had shown an interest in me, I had no choice but to deliberately sabotage our date.

What would've been my first.

At a quarter to twelve, I brought down the point-of-sales system with a single manual command. The way the Gertz's reacted, you would have thought we were under attack from terrorists. They, of course, had no idea what had caused the outage but within a minute they were both standing at my desk demanding that I address the problem.

Regrettably, I had to work through lunch to fix it and “try to determine” what happened. Sabrina took the news well enough.

Later, I told Lonnie that we probably had had a power surge and expressed the need for better protection—namely the uninterruptible power source I'd been telling him we should get for over a year.

One stone. Two dead birds.

Sabrina was off Thursday and Friday so I was able to avoid any discussion of lunch for a few days at least. The weekend I spent at home reading, sleeping and sitting in front of the television. The only bathing I did was submerging myself in a well of depression and self loathing.

Typically I don't watch much TV as my living room is not the most pleasant place to be. It is inhabited by two sprites, Sticks and Puddles, who make me more than a little uncomfortable.

Sticks sits in an invisible chair endlessly fidgeting. A body like a stuffed canvas sack, black piping for limbs that end in pillowy hands and feet, he crosses and uncrosses his tubular legs over and over again. But the content expression painted on his big canvas head never changes.

Sticks always makes me think of Mr. Peanut, the snack food mascot.

The first sprite I ever saw as a child was a big white bloodhound who loved to wag his tail and who sneezed often. He never budged from his spot in the living room and seemed happy to just sit there day and night. I called him Puppies.

I loved him dearly.

By my teens, Puppies had gone from sitting to laying. Then in my twenties, Puppies

began to melt—no, liquefy is a more accurate description. Today, he is mostly a pool of fur and flesh from which only part of a head and snout surface—the occasional sneeze causing tiny ripples. Hence the new name, Puddles.

Big, sad eyes observed me as I sat watching cartoons and network news.

Then, Sunday evening—just two days ago—the sprites went ballistic.

In the middle of a *Tom and Jerry* episode, Sticks leaped to his feet and began jumping up and down, raising his arms in what appeared to be anger—a terribly disturbing sight made even more so by the drawn-on smile. I was already scared to death and then a low, gurgling growl came from Puddles' direction. I got up and backed out of the room.

As I reached the kitchen, I turned around to find Slim standing. I'd *never* seen him stand before. He towered over me, the back of his head flat against the ceiling, and smoke billowed from his nostrils.

I think I tried to scream. Nothing came out.

It was unquestionably time to retire for the evening, and to curl up into a ball under the covers—the Mayor of Monsterville was reduced to a quivering man-child on the verge of a complete breakdown.

Sleep came to me eventually—but probably out of pity.

“...enough stalling, cinder block. Time to talk. Sink or swim, she said to him. Plastic wrap booby trap...”

Yesterday morning's pre-shower, psychotic pep talk. By the time I stepped out, Hole was raving more fiercely than ever before.

“...not playing with you any more, buddy boy. Get your butt on the bench. Bacon bits never quits. We've waited long enough for this. Take that, chicken fat—”

“Shut up! Just shut up!”

Thirty years of monsters under my bed—or in my dresser, wall, kitchen, you get the picture—had finally taken its toll.

“What do you want from me! I can't take it any more! Damn you all!”

I didn't wait for a response. Without a doubt there was one and it probably had the Mad Hatter's stamp of approval. I continued to yell over Hole's verbal assault until I had dressed and left the bedroom. Slim stood and stared me down while I threw together lunch and hustled out of the house.

“So today's the day, eh?” asked Plumpkin as I blew past him and stumbled on to the bus.

Things were going to change. But, so soon?

I became hypersensitive on the bus ride, on the lookout for something—anything. But for what, I could only imagine. Supernatural tailors popping up out of nowhere to take measurements for my clown costume?

They'd have to make allowances for scale.

My heart was racing when I got to the hardware store. There was definitely a sprite conspiracy of some kind, and I was doomed. The boogeymen were going to get me after all.

The citizens of Monsterville were out to assassinate their mayor—or shrink him.

But how? How were they going to take me out when they couldn't physically interact with me? Could they employ some real-world agent to do the dirty deed? Or was I truly out of my mind and the vivid fragments of my imagination were forming a coo to overthrow my sanity once and for all.

I almost didn't care any more. I just wanted it to be over.

With great difficulty I got through the morning—Pippy elected to stand in my office the entire time, tapping alternating feet. When noon arrived I grabbed my lunch and made to head out. Sabrina stopped me before I reached the exit.

“Going to the park today?”

“Uh, yeah.” It was true, that's where I intended to eat. Even when facing my demise, I was a creature of habit.

“Care for company?”

“Sure. Why not?”

“Cool.”

Under my breath I said, “Got nothing to lose now.”

“I’m sorry?”

“No, I’m sorry. I’m not making any sense.”

“If you’d rather we didn’t—”

“No, that’s not it. It’s just— I’m having a really weird day.”

“I’m OK with weird,” she said, smiling. “And weird’s OK with me.”

A ray of sunshine briefly bursting through my dense, dark mood.

“Then what are we waiting for? Let’s go.”

If it was going to be my last day as a human, I might as well try on a grownup suit for size. I’d never bothered to before, and it was probably the last time one would fit.

The sprites we passed on the way to the park stared at me as if they’d never seen me before, or were seeing me in a new light. Maybe they were watching me take my last stroll. A death row inmate on his way to the execution.

We didn’t speak very much until we entered the park.

The cupids kept their distance, but I wasn’t relieved. Not having Trixie rush to meet me promptly only served to punctuate the mood among the sprites.

We sat on my favorite park bench and Sabrina managed to engage me in conversation, and to my credit I held my own. She shared with me the fact that she and her family were estranged, that she had basically been ostracized for her failure to accept their religious beliefs. Then she gave a sympathetic ear to my story—sans sprites. I explained how my father had ran out before I was born, how my mother had managed to hold on to and eventually pay off the house while raising her only son. My eyes watered a little when I told her how mother had succumbed to cancer and passed away before the treatments had even gotten started.

I was beginning to feel a little better. Who knew sitting and sharing life stories with a beautiful woman on a park bench was good therapy?

Twenty minutes passed before we remembered our lunches. Personally, I wasn’t very hungry but Sabrina pulled out a sealed container of salad greens, so I removed my hastily

prepared ham sandwich from its Zip Loc baggy and took a bite. Then she took out a small package of chicken wrapped in cellophane.

Plastic wrap booby trap.

My face gave me away.

“What's wrong, Palmer? It's only chicken. Extra lean breast, it's good.” *Take that, chicken fat.* “Do you want some?”

The hour of my demise was upon me. I felt it wash over me and I shuddered.

Waves of destiny breaking over the jutting rock of Palmer Johnting.

High tide. Drown your pride.

At that moment Trixie started to approach us. I shook my head to ward it off. Sabrina took that as a declining of her offer, but Trixie kept coming.

Bacon bits never quits.

It came to within three feet and started shouting excitedly. “Palmer! Palmer! Is it true? Did things change already? You're gonna start talking to us again?”

I stopped chewing. My saliva glands dried up suddenly and the bread-ham-and-cheese ball in my mouth became a brick that I badly needed to expel.

“Well,” Sabrina said, “are you going to answer it or not?”

On reflex I tried to swallow, and started choking.

Doubled over, coughing up into a trash receptacle, I was dimly aware of Sabrina apologizing. “I didn't know if I should come right out with it or wait. I just figured 'sink or swim', you know?” I recovered from my near-death experience and carefully lowered myself back on the bench.

“I'm so sorry, Palmer. It just seemed like the right moment.”

“You—” I said without looking in her direction, “you see them, too.”

“The specters? Only all my life”

“I call them sprites.”

Sabrina giggled. “Aren't sprites supposed to be tiny things? Elves and pixies? Some

of these guys get fairly big.”

I couldn't argue.

“They— This— This whole thing... I think it's been about you the whole time. It started the same day you did.” Turning to face her, I said, “I thought they were going to kill me. Turn me into one of them.”

Sabrina touched the my cheek. The only woman besides my mother to ever do so. “Oh, you poor thing. They don't communicate very well, do they?”

“No. No they don't.”

She inclined her head towards Trixie. “Are you going to introduce me?”

I did the honors, without looking around first to ensure nobody was watching. “Sabrina, this is Trixie. Trixie, this is Sabrina.”

“Yea!” yelled Trixie. “Palmer's back!”

It felt so strange to be addressing a sprite in front of another person.

Strange and wonderful.

Last night, Sabrina accepted my invitation to dinner and I cooked for her.

Palmer Johnting cooked dinner for a woman. Wow.

I gave her a tour of the house sprites and they were all well behaved. Slim was back to dragging on his cigarette in a seated position and ignored us as we cooked and ate.

We spent hours just talking. It came out that her family disowned her because of her visions—specters had no place in their Evangelical world view. It took months for her to understand what one of her specters had been trying to tell her. “I finally figured it out,” she explained, “but I was skeptical. There was somebody like me out in California? It just sounded too good to be true. When I googled Gertz Hardware and it came up, I cried for days.”

“There must be some kind of network then. I'll be damned.”

“Pretty amazing, huh?”

It was amazing. The sprites, instead of conspiring to transform me, or do some other

unspeakable harm to me, where only trying to hook me up. Somehow, they had found another person with the same gift and gotten her to pick up and move half way across the country.

However, I suspected that there was an ulterior motive. I found it highly unlikely my little monster matchmakers were so magnanimous that their only desire was to arrange a meeting between Sabrina and I and let the two of us relish in the knowledge that we weren't alone. There had to be another angle, and knowing the sprites as I did, I suspected that they wanted me to pay attention to them again.

It sounded like a fair deal to me.

After all that had transpired, it was time to reevaluate my opinion of them. First off, they aren't imaginary. Or if they are, at least now it's a delusion I can share with another. Secondly, maybe they are my friends after all.

Sabrina said, "I can't tell you how glad I was it turned out to be you and not one of the jerky stock boys."

"How did you know it was me?"

"Have you looked at yourself lately? You look like you've seen ghosts!"

"Yeah, I suppose that's true. I'm just happy to know I'm not crazy."

"I dunno about that," she said with a sly smile. "Maybe you're imagining me, too."

"Don't say that. Don't ever say that." But it did give me an idea. "Besides, if you were imaginary, could I do this to you?"

Which brings us to this morning. I woke Sabrina a few hours ago and told her I was going to be late for work. She suggested—most brilliantly, I might add—we both call in sick and stay in bed all day.

Hole seconded the motion from the bathroom—I think.

"...seize the day. All work, no play. Between the hours, the hero cowers. The pirate waits to berate. There's another fly in here, honey. Bees and honey. Honey do. A strange brew are we. He, she, and little one makes three..."

Nixon was right. Things were going to change.