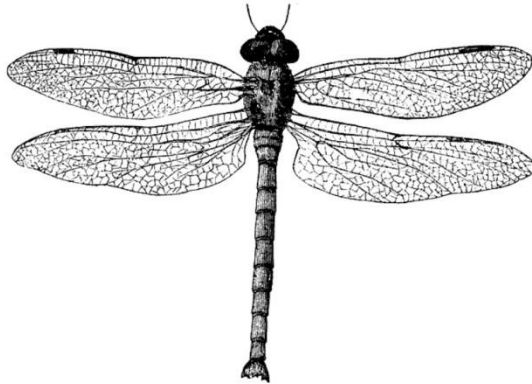


**All Over the Place**  
**Part I:**  
**Pocket Full of AI**



**HP Hanson**

**All Over the Place**  
**Part I: Pocket Full of AI ...**

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# **All Over the Place**

## **Part I: Pocket Full of AI**

### **One**

IT WASN'T SO MUCH that Andrew was surprised by the pixie as he was by how she talked to him.

Of course, at first he didn't realize that it was a pixie at all. At first he thought it was some kind of a big bug, a weird dragonfly or something like that. It was all tangled up in the netting that Dad had put over the cherry tree to keep the birds off the cherries, struggling, its wings making a buzzing noise now and again.

But then Andrew looked closely at it, and he saw a tiny little girl, with wings. She had black hair, long and all messed up, and she was wearing an odd-looking costume that reminded him of the ballerinas he'd seen in

The Nutcracker last Christmas, only hers was green like the leaves on the cherry tree.

He shook his head and blinked, then blinked again when it still looked like a little girl instead of a bug.

“Wow,” he said, amazed. “Are you all right? Are you hurt or anything?”

And that’s when he was surprised, by the voice in his head, inside his head, somehow. And by the words, several bad ones his Dad had used when he hit his thumb with a hammer one time. Words Andrew was not supposed to say, ever.

But the little girl with the wings had stopped struggling and was looking at him.

“No,” the voice in his head sighed. “I’m not hurt, I’m just stuck. I should have been watching where I was going more carefully. I didn’t see this stupid net.”

“Can I help?” Andrew wasn’t sure he could, because she was really, really tangled up and so little that he might squish her.

“Say, what are you, anyway?” he asked. “I thought you were a bug.”

“Bug! I’m not a bug, I’m a pixie. And you don’t have to shout. I can hear fine.”

Andrew was beginning to get used to the voice in his head. It reminded him of his teacher’s voice, except

higher, so it sounded sort of familiar. He watched in fascination as the pixie began to untangle herself more carefully, slowly unwrapping the netting from her arms.

“Well, what’s your name?” Andrew discovered he was whispering. “Mine’s Andrew.”

“Alsrendelgloriendulciendesanto Green. Call me Al.” She got the last of the net unwound from her leg and jumped into the air, wings buzzing like a hummingbird.

“OK, Al.” Andrew didn’t know what to make of that long name, but “Al” seemed fine. “Uh, are you going to fly away now, or what?”

“I won’t fly away if you get me a cherry. I’m hungry.” She was hovering in mid-air about a yard from Andrew’s head, looking back and forth between him and the cherry tree.

“OK.” He lifted the netting and slipped under it. “Say, if you’re a pixie, can you do magic?”

He reached up into the little tree and plucked off a nice, ripe cherry for Al, and then got a couple more for himself. His Dad wouldn’t miss just a few, he thought.

“Magic? What’s that? Hmm ... ouch. You know, maybe I did hurt myself. My left rear wing hurts, and I don’t think it’s working right.”

Andrew slipped back outside the netting and saw that Al was flying a little lopsided.

“You could sit on my shoulder and eat this,” he offered.

She landed on the bill of his cap instead, and when he looked up he could see her little legs dangling over the edge. She wasn’t wearing shoes.

“Hand me that cherry, will you please?” said the voice in his head, so he held the cherry up above where the legs were. It was snatched out of his hand.

For the next few minutes, all Andrew could hear was an incredible amount of chomping and chewing and swallowing in his head. Then a cherry pit dropped from his cap and there was a huge belch. The BURRRP echoed back and forth between his ears a few times.

“Oh! Excuse me. But that was perfect. Just what I needed. You have no idea how hungry I was. Thank you!” Al said.

By then Andrew had eaten his two cherries and spat out the pits. They were good, he thought. And then he thought, now what?

“So what’s this ‘magic’, anyway?” Al asked, startling Andrew out of his thoughts.

“Magic? Well, it’s when you can do stuff, uh, by magic, I mean, stuff you can’t normally do without

magic. You know, like fly. Oh. Wait.” Andrew realized that he had confused himself.

“Well, I can’t fly so well just now, because I’ve got a sore wing. But if flying is magic, then I can do magic, I guess.” Al was patient, at least.

“But you’ve got wings, so you’re supposed to fly. If I could fly, that would be magic, though, I think. Or if you can make things disappear just by saying some magic words or something.” Andrew was desperately trying to keep the conversation going, so Al wouldn’t fly away forever. She was interesting.

“I just made that cherry disappear. But I guess that’s not what you’re talking about, is it?” Then Al yawned, and the sound inside Andrew’s head was truly strange, a long HOOOWUMMMM that vibrated his eyeballs. “I’m sleepy. Can I take a nap in your shirt pocket?”

It was late August, but the day was cloudy and cool, so along with his Rockies cap, Andrew had on his soft flannel shirt, the blue plaid one with a pocket on the front.

“Sure,” he said, and pulled the pocket open with his finger. The feet disappeared from the bill of his cap, and then he saw the little green figure diving gracefully past his face. He could barely feel her when she landed neatly in his shirt pocket. And before he knew it, there was a snoring sound in his head, a kind of soft rumbling

occasionally interrupted with a sneerk or a snort. It was a bit like a kitten's purring.

Now what? he thought. I've got a sleeping pixie in my pocket. What do I do now? Tell Jason?

Andrew's brother, Jason, was inside reading a book and didn't want to play outside. That's why Andrew had come out in the first place, looking for something to do. He was wandering around the yard, and he'd found Al.

Andrew's step-mom was in the kitchen, making lunch. Maybe, he thought, I'll tell her. He ran toward the door. But before going inside, he stopped. Wait, he thought. What am I going to say? She'll probably think I'm crazy. Who ever heard of having a pixie in your shirt pocket? He took a deep breath and went inside.

Elaine was chopping up some celery, and Andrew could smell tuna fish. Tuna salad for lunch, he thought. Yum.

Well, OK, here goes, Andrew thought.

"Guess what? I've got a pixie in my pocket. She's got a sore wing." He held his breath.

"A pixie? In your pocket? That's nice, Andrew. What's her name?" She continued chopping away.

"Al. She said to call her that. Her real name is so long I forgot it, Al-something Green, she said." Andrew wondered if she believed him.

“A pixie named Al, hmm? Well, that’s nice. Now, could you go call your brother and tell him that lunch is almost ready, please? Time to wash up.” She took a spoon and put a big dollop of mayonnaise into a mixing bowl. “And why don’t you take that shirt off? It’s too warm here in the house for it.”

As Andrew ran upstairs to find his brother, he thought about what to do with his shirt. Maybe if he hung it on a hanger in the closet and shut the door, Al would still be there after lunch. He didn’t want her to fly away. But first he wanted to show Jason.

Jason was curled up in a chair by the window in his room, reading *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. He didn’t really like it much when people interrupted his reading, so he scowled when Andrew came into the room.

“I’m supposed to tell you that lunch is ready. But, look here, I want to show you something.” Andrew was back to whispering, hoping not to wake up Al. He had his shirt off and was holding the pocket open.

“Something what? In there?” Jason closed the book on a bookmark so he wouldn’t lose his place, and walked over to where Andrew was holding the shirt.

As Jason peered down into the pocket, Andrew suddenly felt the scream. It was in his head like before, but he wasn’t hearing it this time, he was feeling it.

“EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE...”

Jason had his hands over his ears, so Andrew knew he was feeling it, too. A least that was something.

## Two

“WHAT WAS THAT? What *is* that?” Jason’s eyes were about the size of dinner plates.

“That’s Al. She’s a pixie. Al, don’t worry, this is my brother Jason. It’s OK, really. Are you all right?” The screaming had stopped, but Al still looked scared.

“I’m fine, except my wing hurts more. You just scared me, that’s all. I was asleep, and I woke up with this strange face looking at me. Uh, sorry about the scream.” Al yawned again, and Jason looked surprised. Andrew, though, was getting used to the strange sounds in his head.

There was a distant voice from downstairs and a grown-up voice said, “Jason, Andrew, lunch is ready. Wash up, please.” Al jumped.

“Don’t worry, Al, that’s just Elaine. You were asleep when I talked to her before. She wants me to leave this shirt up here, so you’ll be safe, OK?” Andrew had to do the talking, because Jason was standing there, staring at Al, with a totally surprised look on his face. He wasn’t saying anything, just staring.

“Is she one of those really big people, bigger than you?” Al looked worried.

“Right. She and Dad are bigger. Why? Is that a problem?” Andrew wondered why Al looked so concerned.

“Big people can’t seem to tell that we’re different from bugs. I think their eyesight isn’t so good. If she sees me in the house, she’ll think I’m a dragonfly and try to smack me with a newspaper or something worse, like suck me up with that giant noisy hose that sucks. It’s happened before. And it’s pretty disgusting, all that dust. Ick.” Now Al was starting to look scared.

“Can’t you just tell her to stop? I’m sure she wouldn’t want to hurt you.” Andrew couldn’t believe that anybody would really want to hurt Al.

“Doesn’t work. They must not hear too well or something. I’ve got to get out of here.” Al started to climb out of the pocket, and Jason’s mouth dropped open as she flexed her wings. “Ouch! Oh, man, how can I fly feeling like this?”

The voice from downstairs was louder this time, and beginning to sound just a little cross. “Boys! Please come down to lunch. It’s ready now!”

And then a second voice chimed in, a deeper one. “Jason, Andrew. Lunch. Come down, please.”

“What’s that? Another big one?” Al looked panicked.

“Oh, that’s just Dad. He’s harmless, don’t worry. Listen, you just stay here in my pocket and rest. We’ll take you outside after lunch, OK?” Andrew knew he had to hurry things along, because pretty soon Dad would come upstairs to get them. Jason knew it too, and he was tugging at Andrew’s tee shirt.

Andrew ran into his room and carefully hung the flannel shirt with Al in its pocket in his closet on a hook, and they started downstairs. Jason finally found his voice.

“So you can hear her and I can hear her, but they can’t, right?” He was whispering now.

“I guess so. That’s what she said.” Andrew decided to start talking normally again, because he knew that whispering might seem suspicious to the grown-ups.

“So where did you find her? Oh, wait. We should talk about this after lunch.” Jason realized that lunch was not the place to discuss Al.

Lunch was strange. Oh, the food was great, as usual, and both Jason and Andrew were pretty hungry. But they also wanted to get back to Al, so they ate fast. And they had trouble not giggling with each other.

“Wow,” Dad said. “You guys must really be hungry. Want seconds?” As usual on weekends, he was covered with sawdust from working in the shop. This time, he was making a new bookcase for all of Jason’s and Andrew’s books that wouldn’t fit into the bookcases they had.

“No, thanks, I’m full. May we be excused, please?” Jason was being extra polite.

The two grown-ups looked at each other.

“You must have something going on, huh?” Dad had this way of asking questions indirectly, without really asking.

“Uh, well, yeah, I’m reading Tom Sawyer, and it’s really exciting just now. See, there’s this cave, and, well, I want to see what happens...” Jason’s voice kind of trailed off as he realized that he had just talked himself into a corner. How could he go outside with Al if he was reading Tom Sawyer?

“OK, well, you boys may be excused. But, remember, we need to go shopping for school supplies later. I’ll help Elaine get things cleaned up here, and then we can go, OK?” Dad looked at them for confirmation.

Andrew had an idea. “Dad? Is it all right if we eat a few cherries for dessert? They look pretty good. And it rained so they should be all washed off.”

The grown-ups looked each other and agreed.  
“Well, sure, but not too many. We need to save some to have for dessert tonight, right?”

With that, Andrew and Jason were able to head back upstairs to find Al.

But they couldn't. Al wasn't in the pocket of Andrew's shirt any more. It was hanging in Andrew's closet, just where Andrew had hung it up, but the pocket was empty.

“AL!” Andrew whispered so loud it was almost like regular talking. “AL! Where did you go?”

Andrew and Jason looked at each other when they heard a “MMRRF, MMUMFF” noise in their heads. Then there were some more bad words, which Andrew tried to ignore.

“I'm down here. Yuck, what is this place? It stinks!” The trouble with having Al's voice inside their heads was that neither Jason nor Andrew could tell where it was coming from.

But the “down here” part made them look toward the floor, where they saw Andrew's dirty laundry basket. There was something wiggling under a dirty sock, a sock that somehow had stepped into a mud puddle.

Jason bent down and lifted the muddy sock, and there was Al, lying on her back on top of some dirty

underwear. He stuck out his index finger, and Al scrambled up onto it. Jason couldn't feel a thing, she was so light.

“What happened?” Jason whispered.

“Sorry, I fell. I thought I'd try flying, but I just can't. Hurts too much. So I fell. Gotta say, you sure have some stinky stuff down there. Whew!” Al shook her head, and her hair waved around.

Jason looked slightly offended. “It's not mine, it's Andrew's. Uh, I guess mine isn't any better, though.” Andrew just felt embarrassed, so he pretended to be busy putting on his flannel shirt.

“So, look, guys. I can't fly. Could you take me home, please? There's no other way for me to get there, and the others will get worried.” Al looked back and forth between the boys.

“Others?” They both whispered it at the same time.

“You mean ...” Jason said.

“There's more than ...” Andrew said.

“Whoa, whoa, slow down. I can't listen to two of you at the same time.” Standing on Jason's finger, Al was holding up her little hands to stop them. “Yeah, the others in my swarm, back home. They'll get worried. It's not a very big swarm, just a few of us, not like the big

ones up in the mountains, like the Brown swarm. But they'll still worry."

"Oh. Well, where's home? We're not supposed to go very far," Andrew was a little worried about the concept of a swarm of pixies.

"It's down the stream a little way, by a pond. That's where we're staying just now. We move around." Al's response seemed a little vague to Andrew, but he thought he might know where Al was talking about.

But Jason did know. "Oh, yeah, down behind Billy's house. Well, um, we're not really supposed to play down there. But maybe we can get you home anyway. Right, Andrew?"

Andrew didn't like the idea of heading down into the stream-bed, a place that he knew was off-limits to both of them. But he wanted to get Al home, too.

"Well, we're not supposed to play down there, but maybe this isn't playing, is it?" Andrew tried the idea to see how it sounded.

It sounded good, but he was still unsure. Jason looked concerned, too.

"No, I guess it's not. Let me get a jacket so nobody will say anything." Jason headed toward his room, with Al still perched on his finger. "It's not playing at all.

And besides, all they're worried about is us getting lost.  
And we won't, right, Andrew?"

Andrew nodded and tried to look confident on the  
outside. But inside he wasn't so sure.

## Three

BACK IN JASON'S ROOM, Al took a look around. "Holy Schmoley, what's all this stuff? Where are we, anyway?"

Once again, Jason seemed slightly offended. "It's my room. And this is my stuff. You know, toys. Furniture."

Al looked at the walls and the ceiling, then the window. "Is that one of those invisible hard shield things that cover the holes in all the gigantic boxes around here? I bonk into them sometimes. It hurts."

"That's a window, Al. It has glass that lets us see out but it keeps the outside, uh, outside. Like bugs, it keeps bugs out. And cold air, in the winter." Andrew felt like he was explaining things to a three-year old.

"Yeah, and pixies, too. But sometimes they have this bouncy grid over them, like a tight net. That doesn't hurt so much, but it still keeps me out." Al seemed grumpy.

The boys looked at each other puzzled.

Then Andrew had a thought. “Oh, you mean a screen. That’s so bugs stay out but air comes in.”

“You big people don’t like bugs much, do you?” Al sniffed.

“Well that’s grow-ups for you. They don’t like bugs, or dirt, or just about anything that’s fun to us.” Jason sounded resigned to the notion.

“You said something about toys. What’s that?” Al, it seemed, didn’t know much about anything.

“You don’t know what toys are? Where have you been, anyway? Living under a rock?” Andrew was aghast.

“Well, we used to live under a rock, but then we moved to this log, across the pond from another log ...” Al stopped when she saw Andrew’s expression. “What’s wrong?”

Andrew was rolling his eyes. “It’s just an expression! And toys are things you play with. You know, fun things like toy cars and games and puzzles and things like that. That’s what kids do, is play a lot. So we have a lot of toys.”

“Hmm. So, if you play with a stick or a rock, does that make it a toy?” Al seemed sincere, but neither Andrew nor Jason could tell for sure. To them, it just seemed like another dumb question.

“Yes, I think it does. You play with toys and toys are what you play with. So anything can be a toy. We just have both kinds, special toys-only toys and other things that are toys when you play with them.” Jason wondered to himself why this all seemed so complicated.

“Oh.” Al thought for a while. “Well we’ve got lots of toys where I live, then. That makes me feel better somehow. I was worried there for a minute that I was missing something.”

Jason let Al climb back into Andrew’s shirt pocket and retrieved his own jacket from the closet. “Ready to go home? Hmm. I think I better take Tom Sawyer along just in case.”

“Just in case of what?” Al asked.

“Just in case I need it.” Jason’s answer was just a little mysterious.

The grown-ups were busy cleaning up the kitchen, so it was easy for Jason and Andrew to stroll innocently out the basement door without being seen. They walked over to the cherry tree, slipped under the net, and filled up some pockets with ripe cherries. Andrew gave another to Al and both he and Jason got to listen to the chomping and chewing and swallowing again.

And then there was the inevitable BURRRP in their heads.

But then Jason remembered that you could see the whole back yard from the kitchen window. Uh-oh, he thought. How are we going to do this? He sat down on a log and opened his book.

“Jason? What are you doing?” Andrew hadn’t thought of the kitchen window problem.

“Well, I told them that I wanted to read Tom Sawyer, right? And because whoever is in the kitchen can probably see us, I thought I ought to do just that. Besides, how are we going to get past the fence with somebody watching?” Jason nodded toward the window.

“What’s this Tom Sawyer business I keep hearing about, anyway?” Al, it seemed, didn’t want to be ignored.

“Huh? Oh, it’s a book, a story.” Jason looked surprised.

“Book? What’s that?” Al’s head popped up out of Andrew’s pocket.

“You don’t know what books are?” Andrew was surprised, but then not so surprised. Al seemed to have an awful lot of gaps in her knowledge. There was all sorts of stuff she didn’t know a thing about. Maybe pixies could fly, but they sure weren’t rocket scientists.

“This is a book, Al.” Jason held Tom Sawyer up for the pixie to see. “It’s got writing in it, see this? The

writing tells a story. This one is about a boy who lived a long time ago.”

“You mean that all those little insect tracks, or whatever they are, mean something? Oh, come on! That’s nuts!” Al didn’t seem to be able to read, Andrew realized.

Gee, how strange, he thought. But it fits with all the other things Al doesn’t know, somehow.

“Sure they do! Here, let me read some.” Jason put the book in his lap and opened it. He didn’t pick the place where his bookmark was, because that was where Tom had kissed Becky Thatcher, and he didn’t want to read that part out loud. But this, he recognized, would be a good part. He cleared his throat and began reading.

Tom lay thinking. Presently it occurred to him that he wished he was sick; then he could stay home from school. Here was a vague possibility. He canvassed his system. No ailment was found, and he investigated again. This time he thought he could detect colicky symptoms, and he began to encourage them with considerable hope. But they soon grew feeble, and presently died wholly away. He reflected further.

Suddenly he discovered something. One of his upper front teeth was loose. This was lucky; he was about to begin to groan, as a "starter," as he called it, when it occurred to him that if he came into court with that argument, his aunt would pull it out, and that would hurt. So he thought he would hold the tooth in reserve for the present, and seek further. Nothing offered for some little time, and then he remembered hearing the doctor tell about a certain thing that laid up a patient for two or three weeks and threatened to make him lose a finger. So the boy eagerly drew his sore toe from under the sheet and held it up for inspection. But now he did not know the necessary symptoms. However, it seemed well worthwhile to chance it, so he fell to groaning with considerable spirit.

Jason stopped reading and grinned. "Tom Sawyer is always trying to play some kind of trick on his aunt."

But Al was getting impatient. "Oh, you just made that up. I think it's just insect tracks."

“Al, it’s not insect tracks. It’s writing, letters and words and sentences that tell a story.” Jason seemed offended that Al didn’t know about reading and writing.

But Al wasn’t interested. Worse, she was petulant. “Anyway, who cares? Are you taking me home or not?”

I guess pixies don’t go to school, Andrew thought.

“Well, we’re not supposed to go through the fence, and somebody might see us from the kitchen window up there.” Once again, Jason nodded toward the window.

“I don’t see anybody up there,” Al announced. “Can they see you if you can’t see them? I couldn’t. Would that be magic if I could, Andrew?”

“Huh? Uh, Jason, let’s go now! Quick!” Andrew said it without thinking, and they both dashed for the gate, Al holding on tight to Andrew’s pocket so she wouldn’t be jounced out.

They were across the yard and through the gate in a matter of seconds. Then they scrambled down the hill into the tall grass and weeds by the creek, where they were hidden from the house.

And suddenly it was very still.

## Four

MAYBE, ANDREW THOUGHT, it's because of all the grass and weeds and bushes. They keep it quiet somehow, keep the sounds of the cars and air conditioners and all the neighborhood noises out.

“What happened to all the bug noises?” He asked.

Then Andrew realized that the quiet wasn't just because the neighborhood noises had stopped. So had all the cicadas and crickets and other chirpy things. And birds. Up in the yard, they had been hearing magpie squawks and some other birds, he remembered.

It was positively spooky.

Maybe, he thought, Al would know. He looked down at his pocket, but Al had disappeared.

“Jason! Where's Al?”

“In there.” Jason pointed at Andrew's pocket. “She ducked down inside. Hey, Al? You OK?”

The little black-haired head popped up again. “Yup. Sure am. What's happening?”

“Why is it so quiet?” Andrew asked. “Where did all the bugs and birds go?”

“Go? They didn’t go anywhere, they just shut up. Noisy lot, those bugs and birds. Always chirping and squawking and cheeping and skreeking. I wish I could get them to shut up like you guys can.” Al looked disgusted. “They shut up because they know you’re here. Buncha scaredy cats, if you ask me.”

“They know we’re here?” Andrew was surprised yet again.

“Well, yeah. Duh. Of course they know. I mean, if you were sitting on a bush and some gigantic, noisy, smelly creature showed up, crashing about, wouldn’t you know?” Al’s look made Andrew feel dumb.

“Oh. Well, so, which way do we go to get you home, anyway?” Andrew thought it would be a good idea to change the subject.

“Downstream. Right. Thataway.” Al pointed.

“OK, Andrew, let’s go.” Jason started off down the little stream, along a path that was faintly visible.

Some time later, Andrew looked around and found that he didn’t recognize anything at all. It all looked strange, foreign.

“Jason! Where are we? Are we going to get lost?” Scared feelings were tickling around his edges.

“Can’t get lost. See the stream? It’s flowing downhill, in the same direction we’re going. If we turn around and go the other direction, upstream, opposite to the way the water is going, we’ll wind up back where we started, behind our house. Right?” Jason sounded supremely confident.

He kept going along the faint path, not even slowing down. Andrew scurried along behind him. He didn’t want to get left behind.

After a while, the stream began to become wider, and the current slowed down. A little clump of cat-tails was growing beside the path. Andrew noticed that the bug noises were back, most of them, at least. And there were some frogs croaking – ribbet, ribbet noises mixed with neek-breeking.

About a dozen steps later, the path curved, and they noticed that it was skirting the edge of a little pond. About six feet out from the bank, there was a big rock, and on the rock was a large, dull green frog that looked poised to dive into the water.

“Hey, Grimpen! You seen Bee lately? I need some tender loving care. Got a bum wing.” Al’s voice in their heads had become normal by now, but neither Jason nor Andrew knew what a grimpen was.

But instead of diving into the water, the frog stood up on its back legs, and the boys realized that it was a

squat little man. Or at least something sort of like a little man, a really ugly one.

“Is that Alsendrendelglorienduluciendesanto I hear? My goodness gracious! What ever are you doing in that giant’s shirt pocket?” The ugly little man was peering closely toward Andrew.

“Bewickendumentoriodestromdelentrent is over by the log, gathering some dinner. Haven’t seen the others lately. Say! Don’t they teach giants that it’s not polite to stare?”

Andrew and Jason, stunned speechless by the notion of a frog that turned into an ugly little man who talked, were standing there with their mouths open like a couple of dopes. It occurred to both of them about the same time that they were hearing the ugly little man with their ears rather than in their heads.

Jason was the first to recover. He decided quickly to be extra polite. “Uh, sorry, sir. I didn’t mean to stare, but, uh, I’ve never seen anything like you, sir.”

“What?! You’ve never seen a gnome before? Well, I’ll tell ya. They don’t teach kids the way they used to. What’s the world coming to, anyway?” The ugly little man, or, rather, the gnome, seemed grumpy.

“Oh, sorry, guys.” Al’s voice in their heads was doubly confusing now, what with the gnome’s voice ringing in their ears. “Grimpen, these are my two new

friends, Jason and Andrew, whose pocket I'm in. I hurt my wing and they've brought me home. Guys, this is Grimpen the Gnome. He's sort of the big boss of the bog around these parts."

"Hello, Grimpen. Sorry to stare." Andrew was being polite, too.

"Hmmp. Well, no harm done. Anyway, Bewickendumentoriodestromdelentrent is farther along, around by the log. He'll know what to do about Alsendrendelglorienduluciendesanto's wing." The gnome squatted back down and went back to looking just like a frog. Andrew almost expected him to let out a loud RIBBET.

Jason and Andrew resumed their walk along the trail, which was a little easier to follow now, as if it was getting more traffic.

"Say, Al?" Jason had an idea. "Grimpen sure looks like a frog. Until he stood up, that's what I thought he was. Is that what grown-ups think gnomes are, frogs?"

"Grown-ups? What's that?" Al was also humming a happy little tune that Andrew and Jason couldn't help but hear.

"You know, the big big people, like my Dad. You said he probably wouldn't see well enough to tell you're not a dragonfly. Does that mean that he wouldn't be able

to tell that Grimpen isn't a frog?" Jason began to hum Al's tune, too.

Al thought for a minute. "Right. Big big people just don't get it. They think that we're dragonflies and that gnomes are frogs. It's not that they're stupid, but they just don't see well enough to tell us apart. And what they can't see, they don't believe in. And because the big big people don't hear so well, we can't tell them anything different."

Andrew had also started humming the tune. Having it going around inside his head from Al's humming made it impossible to ignore. So it was all three of them, humming together, that came upon the log and found another green dragonfly busily making a pile of moss and algae. Except when Andrew and Jason looked closely, they saw that it wasn't a dragonfly. It was a tiny little boy with wings, dressed in what looked like a green jogging suit. When he saw them, he leapt into the air and flew around with a distinct buzzing noise, looking just like a dragonfly.

"Bee!" Al's voice echoed louder in their heads. "Bee, come back here! It's OK, these are my friends. And I've got a hurt wing. Also, forget that tadpole food. We've got cherries!"

It was probably the comment about cherries that really got Bee's attention, because instantly he was buzzing around the front of Andrew's shirt, by the

pocket Al was in. Jason fished a cherry from his pocket and held it out in that direction. Bee did a nifty spin in mid-air and grabbed the cherry from Jason's fingers, and then proceeded to do a nose-dive with it into the pond. The boys heard a distinct OOOOF at the same time as the splash.

“Sheesh. Bee's not the smartest pixie in the swarm, that's for sure. He forgot that cherries are too heavy to fly with.” Al was trying not to laugh too hard.

Jason and Andrew watched in fascination as the cherry appeared on the surface of the water and seemed to float over to the pond's edge by itself. Once there, it was rolled up onto the mud by a very wet, green pixie, who proceeded to gobble it down to its pit in a matter of seconds. As usual, this was accompanied by the chomping and chewing and swallowing noises in the boys' heads. And the BURRRP, a bigger, somewhat more disgusting one than Al's had been.

“That, my new friends, was just flat-out wonderful, and I thank you heartily. Now, if you'll excuse me for a minute or two, I'll go find some help so we can carry Al there off to bed. She needs to rest.” Bee had zipped into mid-air in front of Jason and Andrew and made this little speech with appropriate flourishes and gestures, and a little mid-air bow. Then he zipped off across the pond. Jason and Andrew emptied the cherries out of their pockets into a little pile on the log.

Shortly, Bee returned with several others, and it indeed did look like a swarm of sorts. If they hadn't known what to expect, Andrew and Jason would have just assumed it was a swarm of dragonflies, but when they looked closely they saw several tiny little boys and girls, all dressed in green. Al had climbed onto Jason's finger again, so he had the strange experience of having a pixie plucked from his pinkie by several others.

As they were flying away, they heard Al's voice for the last time. "Thanks, guys, thanks so much. And, say, I hear your Dad calling. 'Bye."

"Al, Al, how do we get back?" Jason had the presence of mind to ask.

"Same as we got here, only backwards. 'Bye, thanks!"

## Five

“DAD’S CALLING?! Oh, no, we’re in for it. I bet he wants us there so we can go shopping like he said. C’mon, run!” And Jason dashed back up the trail. Andrew took off in pursuit.

“Jason! Slow down! I can’t run that fast.” Andrew didn’t want to get left behind. Even though he thought he could probably, maybe, hopefully, find their house, he didn’t want to have to by himself.

Besides, he knew that it would be better if both of them came back together.

Jason slowed a little, and Andrew caught up. Then they hurried together on up the trail, back along the stream.

It seemed like a long way, longer than when they had come downstream. They ran past little waterfalls that they hadn’t noticed before, and every time they came around a curve in the trail, there was just more trail. They couldn’t see any houses because of the weeds and bushes and trees, so they didn’t know how far they

had to go. They just kept on and on, sometimes running, sometimes walking as fast as they could, and the trail seemed like it had no end.

And because it was uphill, it was harder work than before. They were both sweating despite the cool day, and breathing hard, almost too hard to talk.

But Jason knew he had to. “Andrew, what are we going to tell them? They’re going to want to know where we’ve been.”

Andrew thought about this as they hurried along. “Well, if we tell them we were rescuing a hurt pixie, I don’t think they’ll believe us. Do you?”

“No way. I don’t think I’d believe us if we hadn’t been there when we did it.” Jason remembered Al’s comment about how grown-up couldn’t tell pixies from dragonflies. “Well, what if we tell them we were rescuing a hurt dragonfly? If they saw what we were doing, that’s what they would think, right?”

“Yeah, rescuing dragonflies and talking to frogs. ‘Sorry, sir, Mr. Frog.’” Even though he was out of breath, Andrew had to laugh.

And Jason started laughing, too, and they laughed together all the way back up the stream. But when they finally got back through the gate into the back yard, the grownups were both there, and they definitely were not laughing, not at all.

“There you are! Well, I’m glad you’re back. We need to have a Talk.” When Dad said “talk” with a capital “T”, Jason and Andrew knew they were in for it.

They all went up onto the deck to sit in a little circle. Dad’s face was unusually calm, a bad sign.

“Now, Jason, Andrew, you know you’re not supposed to play down in the arroyo there, in the gully, right?” The Talk had started.

“Yes, but ...” But Jason’s explanation was stopped when Dad held up his hand.

“Let me explain why. See, that gully, even though it has just a little stream in it, it’s really a dry stream bed. It’s main function is to carry rainwater from storms way upstream, where we can’t see them. And on cloudy days like this, it might be raining up there, and there might be lots of rainwater coming downstream. You just never know. And if you’re down there when this happens, well, you could get washed away and drown. Even though you’re both pretty good swimmers, there are logs and all sorts of stuff in these floods, and you’d probably be in big trouble. That’s why we don’t want you to play down there.” He maintained a stern gaze at the boys. Everyone sat quietly for a minute.

“Well, we understand, Dad. But, see, we weren’t exactly playing.” And Andrew proceeded to tell the story of the hurt dragonfly and how they had taken it back to

where the other dragonflies lived, at the pond, and then come straight back home. Jason helped out by nodding in agreement.

When Andrew was through, everyone sat quietly for a another minute. The two grown-ups looked at each other for a while.

“You were rescuing a hurt dragonfly?” Dad seemed to want to make sure.

“Right,” said Jason.

“Yeah,” said Andrew. “Remember before lunch, when I said I had a pixie in my pocket? Well, it was the dragonfly. I found it on the net on the cherry tree. It couldn’t fly.”

“I do remember that. I thought you were pretending.” Elaine looked surprised. “And I guess you were, pretending that the dragonfly was a pixie. Hmm.”

“Hmm, indeed,” said Dad. “Well, OK, tell you what. Rescuing a hurt dragonfly is a fine thing to do. But, look, if you really need to go down there, not to play, but to do something important like this, how about telling us about it so we can check the weather? We can look on the computer and see if it’s raining anywhere that could cause a flood. OK?”

“OK,” said Jason, relieved. “And, um, we’re sorry that we’re late to go shopping. We just forgot about that.”

“Yeah, we’re sorry,” said Andrew.

Elaine looked thoughtful. “Well, I’ll tell you what,” she said. “It’s too late for you to go shopping today, but I’ve got an idea. Why don’t you guys pick some cherries, and we can have them with vanilla ice cream after supper? Then maybe we can take the net down and prevent any more hurt dragon flies.”

Andrew smiled, and Jason laughed. They both knew that a swarm of pixies would be eating themselves silly tomorrow, chomping and chewing and swallowing like crazy. And, after that...

**BURRRP**