

A TINY FEAST

By Chris Adrian April 13, 2009



Illustration by Yvetta Fedorova

It took them both a long time to understand that the boy was sick, though she would point out that she had been the first to notice that he was unhappy, and had sought

to remedy his discontent with sweeter treats and more delightful distractions. She thought it was evidence that she loved him more—that she had noticed first that something was wrong—and she said as much to her husband, when they were still trying to outdo each other in love for the child.

Neither of them had much experience with illness. They had each taken many mortal lovers, but had cast them off before they could become old or infirm, and all their previous changelings had stayed healthy until they were returned, unaged and unstuck from their proper times, to the mortal world. “There was no way you could have known,” said Dr. Bork, the junior partner in the two-person team that oversaw the boy’s care, on their very first visit with him. “Parents always feel like they ought to have caught it earlier, but really it’s the same for everyone, and you couldn’t have done any better than you did.” He was trying to make them feel better, to assuage a perceived guilt, but at that point neither Titania nor her husband really knew what guilt was, never having felt it in all their long days.

They were in the hospital, not far from the park on the hill under which they made their home, in the middle of the night—early for them, since they slept all day under the hill and had taught the boy to do the same, but the doctors, Beadle and Bork, were obviously fatigued. The four of them were sitting at a table in a small windowless conference room, the doctors on one side, the parents on the other. The boy was back in his room, drugged with morphine, sleeping peacefully for the first time in days. The doctors were explaining things, earnestly and patiently, but Titania was having trouble following along.

“A boy should not be sick,” she said suddenly to Dr. Bork, cutting him off as he was beginning to describe some of the side effects of the treatment they were proposing. “A boy should play—that is his *whole* purpose.”

“It’s hard to see him like this,” Dr. Bork said, after a glance at his superior, “and I’m so sorry that your beautiful boy is so sick. It’s going to be a long haul, and he may be sicker before he’s better, but we’ll get him through it.” He started talking again then about the specifics, the drugs they would use—the names seemed rather demonic to her—and the timing of the treatments, which parts could be done at home and which parts must be done in the hospital. This was all of a sudden very boring. She waved her hand at them,

a gesture practiced over centuries, and even though there was no magic in it, Blork was instantly quiet.

“You will do your mortal thing,” she said sadly. “I know all I need to know.”

“Pardon me?” Dr. Blork said.

“Leukemia!” Oberon said, breaking the silence he’d maintained all through the meeting, and it sounded as if he were somehow trying out the idea behind the word. He was smiling, and crying into his lovely beard. “Can you cure it?”

“Yes!” said Dr. Blork. But Dr. Beadle said, “Maybe.”

She could not remember the quarrel that had brought her the boy. A real or perceived dalliance or slight, a transgression on her part or her husband’s—who knew? They had been quarrelling for as long as they had been in love. She forgot the quarrels as soon as they were resolved, but the gifts her husband brought her to reconcile—even when she was at fault—she never forgot. The boy had been one of those gifts, brought home to the hill, stolen from his crib in the dark of the night and presented to her by dawn. “That is not sufficient to your crime against me,” she remembered saying, and remembered as well that she barely paid the child any mind during her restless sleep, except to push it away from her when it rolled too close. Oberon had rubbed poppies on its eyes to quiet its crying, so it was still sleeping soundly when she woke. For a while she lay on her back, watching the stars come out upon the ceiling of her grotto, listening to the little snores. Oberon was snoring more magnificently. She turned on her side to better look at it, and noticed for the first time how comely it was, how round and smooth were its face and shoulders and belly, how lustrous was its hair. It made a troubled face as it slept. She put her hand out to touch it, just very lightly. Right away it sighed and lost the troubled look, but then it gave a moan. She draped her hand over its shoulder, and when it did not quiet she rolled it closer to her. It stopped moaning only when she held it in her arms, and put her nose in its hair, and breathed in its scent—poppies and milk and warm earth. Oberon had woken, and was looking at her and smiling, propped on one elbow with a hand against his ear, the other lost under the sheets, but she could hear that he was scratching himself. “Do you like it?” he asked.

“I am indifferent to it,” she said, holding the boy closer, and squeezing him, and putting her face in his neck.

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“This place is so ugly,” Titania said. “Can anything be done about that?” She was talking to the oncology social worker, one of a stream of visiting strangers who came to the room, and a woman who had described herself as a person to whom one might address problems or questions that no one else could solve or answer. “Nonmedical things,” she had said. “You know—everything else!”

“But you’ve made the room just lovely,” the woman said. Her name was Alice or Alexandra or Antonia. Titania had a hard time keeping track of all the mortal names, except for Beadle and Blork, but those were distinctive names, and actually rather faerielike. Alice gestured expansively around the room, not seeing what was actually there. She saw paper stars hanging from the ceiling, and cards and posters on the wall, and a homey bedspread upon the mattress, but faeries had come to carpet the room with grass, to pave the walls with stone and set them with jewels, and to blow a cover of clouds to hide the horrible suspended ceiling. And the bedspread was no ordinary blanket but the boy’s own dear Beastie, a flat headless creature of soft fur that loved him like a dog and tried to follow him out of the room whenever they took him away for some new test or procedure.

“I don’t mean the room,” Titania said. “I mean everything else. This whole place. And the people, of course. Where did you find them? Look at you, for instance. Are you deliberately homely? And that Dr. Bork—hideous!”

Alice cocked her head. She did not hear exactly what Titania was saying. Everything was filtered through the same normalizing glamour that hid the light in Titania’s face, that gave her splendid gown the appearance of a tracksuit, that had made the boy appear clothed when they brought him in, when in fact he had been as naked as the day he was born. The same spell made it appear that he had a name, though his parents had only ever called him Boy, never having learned his mortal name, because he was the only boy under the hill. The same spell sustained the impression that Titania worked as a hairdresser, and that Oberon owned an organic orchard, and that their names were Trudy and Bob.

“You need to take care of yourself,” Alice said, thinking that Titania was complaining about feeling ugly. “It might feel a little selfish, but you can’t take care of him if you can’t take care of yourself. Did you know we have a manicurist who comes every Wednesday?”

“You are so sweet,” Titania said, “even if you are homely. Did you ever wish you had the eyes of a cat?”

“A hat? You can buy one downstairs. For when his hair falls out, you mean? That’s weeks away, you know. But the baseball caps are awfully cute. But, listen, not everybody wants to talk about this at first, and not everybody has to. I’m getting ahead of myself . . . of ourselves.”

“Or would you rather be a cat entirely? Yes, I think that would make you lovely.” Titania raised her hands and closed her eyes, seeking words sufficient to the spell she had in mind. They came to her in an image, words printed on a little girl’s purse she had glimpsed in the waiting room outside the surgical suites downstairs. She started to speak them—Hello Kitty!—but Oberon walked in before she had the first syllable out.

“What are you doing to the nurse?” he asked her.

“She’s the social worker. And we were only talking.” Alice’s head was turned to the side, and she was staring at Titania with a mixture of curiosity and devotion. The glamour

had slipped as Titania was about to strike, and the woman had seen her true face. “Her name is Alice.”

“Stop playing,” Oberon said. “He’s almost finished. Don’t you want to be there when he wakes?” The boy was downstairs having things done to him: a needle in his hip to take the marrow from his bones, and another in his neck to give him a special I.V. that would last through the weeks and months of the treatment.

“I’ll just stay here and wait,” she said, sitting on the bed and idly petting the Beastie when it sidled up to her.

“He’ll be looking for you,” Oberon said.

“You’ll tell him I’m waiting here with his Beastie.” She lifted it into her lap, as if to show him the truth of what she was saying. Alice, still standing between them, was looking back and forth, catching glimpses of their majesty as their mounting anger caused them to let it slip, and getting drunker on them.

“Did I give you your meal tickets yet?” she asked them. “The cafeteria is really not so bad, for what it is.”

“You’d rather rest your terrible ass than comfort him. Do you love him at all?”

“More than you do, and more than you’ll ever understand. You like to see him undone and ailing, but I can’t bear to look at him like that.”

“Those are very normal feelings,” Alice said. “I validate those feelings. Haven’t I been saying how hard it is to see him like this?” She turned to Oberon. “Haven’t I?”

“Heartless and cowardly,” Oberon said. “A most unattractive combination.”

“That’s normal, too,” Alice said. “The anger. But don’t you know it’s not her that you’re angry at?”

“You stupid sour cock,” Titania said, and then they just called each other names, back and forth, while Alice turned back and forth so swiftly it seemed she was spinning.

“How can I make you understand how totally normal all of this is?” Alice cried aloud at last, just before collapsing in a heap. The Beastie, whose nature was to comfort, tried to go to her, but Titania held it back.

“Now look what you’ve done,” her husband said.

At first he had been like her own sort of Beastie, a creature who followed her around and was pleasant to cuddle with. It didn’t take long before he stopped his agitated weeping for the mortal parents he’d hardly known, and then he smiled for everyone, even Oberon, who barely noticed him for months. He was delightful, and she was fond of him in the way she was always fond of the changelings, and yet she had dresses and shoes of which she was just as fond. She liked to dress him and feed him, and took him to bed every night, even when Oberon complained that he did not like to have pets in the bed.

He grew. This was unexpected—she had completely forgotten even this basic fact of human physiology since the last changeling—but quite exciting. He didn’t fit anymore in the footed pajamas in which he’d been stolen, and so after that she kept him naked. Many evenings she would stare at him hoping to see him get bigger. She liked to feed him. Milk and dew and honey on her finger to start. Then she woke one morning to find him attached to her breast, and she wondered why she hadn’t fed any of the other changelings this way. It was easy enough to make food come out of her nipple; not quite ordinary milk at first, and then less usual substances—weak wine and chocolate and peanut butter and yogurt.

It wasn’t long before Oberon regretted his gift, and started to hide the child elsewhere on the hill, attended by faeries, so that he could have his wife to himself. She tolerated that for a few weeks, but soon she couldn’t stand to be apart from the boy, though she couldn’t really say why. Perhaps it was because he smiled at everything she said and never argued with her; for months and months he never even said a word, only babbled.

The child grew, and changed, and became ever more delightful to her, and she imagined that they could go on forever like that, that he would always be her favorite thing. Maybe it would have been better if he had stayed her favorite thing—a toy and not a son—because now he would just be a broken toy. She ought to have had the foresight to make him dumb, or Oberon ought to have, since the boy had been his terrible gift to her.

But one evening the boy ran to her and climbed upon her throne, and giggled at the dancing faerie bodies leaping and jumping all around them, and put his face to her breast, and sighed a word at her, “*molly*” or “*moony*” or “*middlebury*”—she still didn’t know what it was exactly. But it was close enough to “Mommy” to ruin everything.

They poisoned the boy exquisitely. Beadle and Blork had reviewed it all with them, the names and the actions and the toxicities of the variety of agents they were going to use to cure him, but of that whole long conversation only a single sentence of Blork’s had really stuck. “We’ll poison him well,” he’d said, rather too cheerily, and he had explained that the chemotherapy was harder on the cancer than on the healthy boy parts, but that it was still hard, and that for the next several months he would act like a boy who had been poisoned.

The chemotherapy came in colors—straw yellow and a red somewhere between the flesh of a watermelon and a cherry—but did not fume or smoke the way some of her own most dramatic poisons had. She peered at the bags and sniffed at the tubes, but there was nothing in them she could comprehend. She was only reluctantly interested in the particulars of the medications, but Oberon wanted to know all about them, and talked incessantly about it, parroting what Beadle and Blork had said or reading aloud from the packets of information that the nurses had given them. He proclaimed that he would taste the red liquid himself, to share the experience with the boy, but in the end he made a much lesser faerie do it, a brownie named Doorknob, who smacked his lips and proclaimed that it tasted rusty in the same way that blood smelled rusty, and went on to say that he thought he liked the taste of it and was about to sample it again when he went suddenly mad, tearing at his hair and clawing at his face and telling everyone that his bowels had become wild voles, and perhaps they had, since there was an obvious churning in his hairy little belly. Oberon knocked him over the head with his fist, which brought him sleep if not peace, and it was weeks before he was himself again.

The boy had a very different response. Right away the poisons settled him down in a way that even the morphine did not. That put him to sleep, but in between doses he woke and cried again, saying that a gator had his leg or a bear was hugging him to death or a snake had wound itself around the long part of his arm and was crushing it. Within a few days, the poisons had made him peaceful. Titania could not conceive of the way they were made, except as distillations of sadness and heartbreak and despair, since that was how she made her own poisons, shaking drops of terror out of a wren captured in

her fist, or sucking with a silver straw at the tears of a dog. Oberon had voiced a fear that the boy was sick for human things, that the cancer in his blood was only a symptom of a greater ill—that he was homesick unto death. So she imagined they were putting into him a sort of liquid mortal sadness, a corrective against a dangerous abundance of faerie joy.

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He seemed to thrive on it. If she hadn't been so distracted by relief, it might have saddened her—or brought to mind how different in kind he was from her—that a distillation of grief should restore him. His whole body seemed to suck it up, bag after bag, and then his fever broke, and the spots on his skin began to fade like ordinary bruises, and the pain in his bones went away. She watched him for hours, finally restored to untroubled sleep, and when he woke he said, “I want a cheese sandwich,” and the dozen faeries hidden around the room gave a cheer. [#unhandled_cartoon]

“You heard him,” she said, and ordered them with a sweep of her arm out the door and the windows. The laziest went only to the hospital cafeteria, but the more industrious ventured out to the fancy cheese shops of Cole Valley and the Castro and even the Marina, and returned with loaves under their arms and wheels of stolen cheese balanced

on their heads and stuffed down their pants, Manchego and Nisa and Tomme Vaudoise, proclaiming the names to the boy as if they were announcing the names of visiting kings and queens. The room rapidly filled with cheese, and then with sandwiches, as the bread and cheese were cut and assembled. The boy chose something from the cafeteria, a plastic-looking cheese on toast. Oberon, asleep on the narrow couch beneath the window, was awakened by the variety of odors, and started to thank the faeries for his breakfast, until a pixie named Radish pointed and said in her thin, high voice, "He mounches! He mounches!" Oberon began to cry, of course. He was always crying these days, and it seemed rather showy to Titania, who thought she suffered more deeply in her silence than he did in his sobs. He gathered the boy in his arms, and the boy said, "Papa, you are getting my sandwich wet," which caused some tittering among the faeries, many of whom were crying, too, now, or laughing, or kissing each other with mouths full of rare cheese. Titania sat down on the bed and put a hand on the boy and another on her husband, and forgave Oberon his showy tears, and the boy the scare he'd given her.

Just then Dr. Blork entered the room, giving the barest hint of a knock on the door before he barged in. The faeries vanished before his eye could even register them, but the cheese stayed behind, stacked in sandwiches on the dresser and the windowsill, wedged in the light fixtures and stuck to the bulletin board with pins, piled in the sink and scattered on the floor. He stared all around the room and then at the three of them.

"He was hungry," Titania said, though the glamour would obviate any need for an excuse.

"You have poisoned him masterfully!" Oberon said, and Titania asked if they could now take him home.

He was never a very useful changeling. Oberon had trained previous changelings to be pages or attendants for her, and they had learned, even as young children, to brush her hair in just the way that she liked. Or they had been instructed to sing to her, or dance a masque, or wrestle young wolves in a ring for the entertainment of the host. But the boy only hit her when she presented him with the brush, and instead she found herself brushing *his* hair.

And she sang for him, ancient dirges at first, and eldritch hymns to the moon, but he didn't like those, and Oberon suggested that she learn some music more familiar to him.

So she sent Doorknob into the Haight to fetch a human musician, but he brought her back an album instead, because it had a beautiful woman on it, a lovely human mama. She looked at the woman on the cover of “The Best of *Carly Simon*,” golden-skinned and honey-haired, with a fetching gap in her smile, and put on her aspect, and spun the record on her finger while Radish sat upon it, the stinger in her bottom protruding to scratch in the grooves, and Titania leaned close to listen to the songs. Then she sang to the boy about his own vanity, and felt a peaceful pleasure.

Oberon said she was spoiling him, that she had ruined him and that he had no hope of ever becoming a functional changeling, and in a fit of enthusiastic discipline he scolded the boy and ordered him to pick up some toys he had left scattered in the hall, and threatened to feed him to a bear if he did not. Weeping, the boy complied, but he had gathered up only a few blocks before he came to a little blue bucket on the floor. “I’m a puppy!” he said, and bent down to take the handle in his mouth. Then he began to prance all around the hall with his head high, the bucket slapping against his chin.

“That’s not what you’re supposed to be doing at all!” Oberon shouted at him, but by the time Titania entered the room, warned by Radish that Oberon was about to beat the changeling, Oberon had joined him in the game, putting a toy shovel in his teeth. Titania laughed, and it seemed to her in that moment that she had two hearts in her, each pouring out an equivalent feeling toward the prancing figures, and she thought, *My men*.

They were not allowed to go home. It was hardly time for that, Dr. Bork told them. The boy was barely better at all. This was going to be a three-year journey, and they were not even a week into it. They would have to learn patience if they were going to get through this. They would have to learn to take things one day at a time.

“I like to take the long view of things,” Titania said in response, and that had been true as a rule all through her long, long life. But lately her long view had contracted. Even without looking ahead into the uncertain future, she always found something to worry about. Oberon suggested she look to the boy, and model her behavior after his, which was what he was doing, to which she replied that a child in crisis needed parents, not playmates, to which he said that that wasn’t what he meant at all, and they proceeded to quarrel about it, very softly, since the boy was sleeping.

Still, she gave it a try, proceeding with the boy on one of his daily migrations through the ward. Ever since he had been feeling better, he went for multiple promenades, sometimes on foot and sometimes in a little red buggy that he drove by making skibbling motions against the floor. He had to wear a mask, and his I.V. pole usually accompanied him, but these seemed not to bother him at all, so Titania tried not to let them bother her, either, though she was pushing the pole, and had to stoop now and then to adjust his mask when it slid over his chin.

The ward was almost the ugliest place she had ever seen, and certainly the ugliest place she had ever lived. Someone had tried, some time ago, to make it pretty, so there were big photographs in the hall of children at various sorts of play, and some of these were diverting, she supposed. But the pictures were few. In other places on the wall, someone had thought to put up bas-relief cartoon faces, about the size of a child's face, but the faces looked deformed to her eye—goblin faces—and they seemed uniformly to be in pain.

The boy was not allowed to wander beyond the filtered confines of the ward, so they went around and around, passing the posse of doctors on their rounds, and the nurses at their station, and the other parents and children making their own circumnavigations. The boy called out hello and beeped his horn at everyone they met. They called back, "Hello, Brad!" or "Hello, Brian!" or "Hello, Billy!" since he answered to all those names. People all heard something different when they asked his name and Titania replied, "Boy."

She walked, step by step, not thinking of anything but the ugliness of the hall, or the homeliness of Dr. Blork, or the coarseness of Dr. Beadle's hair, or the redness of the buggy. There is no past and no future, she told herself. We have been here forever and we will be here forever. These thoughts were not exactly a comfort. She considered the other parents, staring at them as she passed, remembering to smile at them when they smiled at her. It seemed a marvel to her that any mortal should suffer for lack of love, and yet she had never known a mortal who didn't feel unloved. There was enough love just in this ugly hallway, she thought, that no one should ever feel the lack of it again. She peered at the parents, imagining their hearts like machines, manufacturing surfeit upon surfeit of love for their children, and then wondered how something could be so awesome and so utterly powerless. A feeling like that ought to be able to move mountains, she thought, and then she wondered how she had come to such a sad place

in her thoughts, when she meant to live entirely in the blank present. They went back to the room, where Oberon was playing a video game, a brownie perched on his head.

“I hate this place,” she told him.

The doctors called the good news good news, but for the bad news they always found another name. Dr. Bork would say that they had taken a little detour on the way to recovery, or that they had encountered a minor disappointment; rarely, when things really took a turn for the worse, he'd admit that the news was, if not bad, then not very good. It was an unusual experience, to wait anxiously every morning for the day's news, and to read it in the slips of paper that detailed the results of the previous day's tests, and in the faces of the people who brought the news, in the pitch of their voices, and in the absences they embraced—the words they did not use and the things they did not say.

Oberon said the way that good news followed bad news, which followed good news on the tail of bad news, made him feel as if he were sailing in a ship on dangerous swells, or riding an angry pony. Titania was the only one among them ever to have ridden on a roller coaster, but she didn't offer up the experience as an analogy, because it seemed insufficient to describe a process that to her felt less like a violent unpredictable ride than like someone ripping your heart out one day and then stuffing it back in your chest the next. She was starting to believe that more than anything they had only lucky days and unlucky, that some cruel arbitrator, mightier than either she or her husband, was presiding over this illness, and she wasn't always convinced when Beadle or Bork told them that something was working, that something they'd done was making the boy better.

His leukemia went away, which was good news, but not very quickly, which was bad news. His white blood cells would not grow back, which was bad news, and yet it would have been worse news if he had had too many of them. He had no fever, which was good news, until he got one, and that was very bad, though Bork seemed to intimate, in his stuttering way, that there were worse things that might happen. It meant that they could not go home, although Beadle and Bork were always promising that a trip home was just around the corner. In the third week, the fever went away, and the white blood cells began to come back, but then Dr. Bork arrived with a droopy slip of paper announcing that the white blood cells were the evil, cancerous sort, and Titania could tell that there

was not much worse news he could think of to be telling them. Beadle and Blorck shuffled the boy's poisons, and brought him shots of thick white liquid that they shoved into his thighs. The shots made him scream like nothing else had, and she could not bear to be in the room when it happened, because she could not bear the look the boy gave her, which asked so clearly, "Shouldn't you kill them for hurting me like this?" The new poison turned him around again; the evil cells began to retire from his blood and his bones. But then his innards became irritated, and they decided that, though he was always ravenous, he couldn't eat.

"It's a crime," Oberon said. "Damn the *triglycerides*, the boy is hungry!" The nurses had hung up a bag of liquid food for him, honey-colored liquid that went directly into his veins. Oberon slapped at the bag, and said that it didn't look very satisfying. He fed the boy a bun, and a steak, and a crumpled cream puff, pulling each piece of food from his pocket with a flourish. Titania protested, and threatened to get the nurse, and even held the call button in her hand, almost pressing it while the boy shoved steak into his mouth and Oberon laughed. The boy threw it all up in an hour, the steak looking practically unchanged, and became listless and squash-colored for three days. When they were asked if the boy had eaten anything, Oberon only shrugged.

But as soon as the boy recovered, he was crying again for food, pleading with them all the time, no matter how the nurses fiddled with the bag that was supposed to keep him sated. One morning, the whole team showed up: Beadle and Blorck and the junior-junior doctors whose names Titania could never remember and Alice and the nurse and another two or three mortals whose function, if it was something besides just skulking about, she never did discover. When Dr. Blorck asked him how he was doing, he pleaded with the doctors, too.

"Can't I have one tiny little feast?" he asked, and they laughed at him. They chucked his chin and tousled the place where his hair had been, and then they went out, leaving her with this dissatisfied, suffering creature. "Mama, please," he said all day, "just one little feast. I won't ask again, I promise." Oberon was silent, and left the room eventually, once again crying his useless tears, and Titania told the boy again that he would only become sick if he ate. "Don't think of eating," she said. "Think of this bird, instead." And she pulled a parrot out from the folds of her robe. But the boy asked if he could eat it.

He wore her down toward evening. Oberon had still not returned, and every time she sent Radish to fetch him the pixie said, “He’s still weeping. See?” And she held up a thimble brimming with tears. Titania sighed, wanting to run from the boy and his anxious, unhappy hunger, which had seemed to her, as the day dragged on, to represent, and then to become, a hunger for something besides food. He didn’t want food. He wanted to be well, to run on the hill in the starlight, to ride on the paths in the park in a cart pulled by six raccoons. He wanted to spend a day not immersed in hope and hopelessness.

“All right, love,” she said, “just one bite.” And she took out a chocolate from her bag, but before she could give it to him Oberon returned, calling for her to stop because he had something better. He cleared a space on the bed and put down a little sack, and very delicately, pinching with his thumb and his forefinger, removed all the elements of a tiny feast and laid them on the bed.

“It will be faster if you help,” he told her as he squinted to chop up a mote-size carrot. So she picked up a bag the size of her thumb, emptied out the beans from within, and began to snap. The boy kept trying to eat things raw at first, but Oberon slapped his hand away and told him to be patient, and eventually he helped as well, twisting the heads off the little chickens when Oberon handed them to him, and laughing when they danced for a few seconds in his palm. It took a long time to prepare the feast, though they had more and more help, as more faeries popped up in the room, some of whom were better sized for the work. Still more of them gathered round in an audience, stuck to the walls, crowding the shelves, perched on the lintel, all of them muttering opinions as the preparations went on—they would have baked, not seared, that fish, and salted the cabbage but not the asparagus, and chosen caramel over fudge for the cake.

When it was done, the boy ate the whole thing, and did not share a morsel, which was exactly as it was supposed to be. Aside from the size of it, there was nothing magical about the food. It shouldn’t have sated him any more than half a dozen peanuts, but even the aroma calmed him down as they were cooking, and by the time he had finished off the last tack-size pastry and dime-size cake he was very quiet again. He looked around the room, as if for more food, and when he opened his mouth wide Titania thought he was going to shout or cry. But he burped instead, a tiny little noise, commensurate with what he had eaten.

She had lost him once, just for a little while. He liked to hide, but didn't do it very well, too giggly to ever keep his location a secret. But she woke one evening to discover him gone from his customary place underneath her arm, and she couldn't find him in the usual spots, in a lump under the covers at the foot of the bed, or on the floor next to the bed, or even under the bed. "Is this a game?" she asked her husband, shaking him awake, and she demanded, "Where have you hidden the boy?"

He had not hidden him anywhere, and no faerie had made off with him, or used his parts in a spell, or put him in a pie to eat. But all through the early hours of the evening he was nowhere to be found, though she commanded the whole host to search for him under the hill. She began to suspect that his mortal mother had stolen him back, and without even doing her the courtesy of returning the hobgoblin that had been left in his place. Oberon could not convince her of how extremely unlikely this would be, and she strapped on her armor, greave by greave. For a while Oberon was able to get it off of her as fast as she could put it on, nuzzling her and speaking ever so soothingly about how the boy would be found. But eventually she outstripped him. She placed her helm on her head and called the host to war, and all the peace-loving faeries of Buena Vista Park reluctantly put on their silver mail and took up their ruby-tipped spears and made ready to stream out into the Mission to slay the woman who had stolen their mistress's child. In the end, Doorknob found him before they could march out of the woods. He was under a cupboard, sound asleep, and one had only to sniff at him to understand that he had wandered thirsty from bed to the kitchen and drunk at length from the wine bowl instead of the water bowl, and perhaps had had a solitary toddling drunken party all his own before hiding himself away to sleep. Titania wanted to kiss him and hold him, of course, but it occurred to her that there were other things she could do right then instead: shrink him down enough to carry him around in her mouth, or make him a hump on her back, or chain him to her, foot to foot. He woke as she was considering these things, and blinked at her, and then at the faeries, all attired for war, and turned on his side and went back to sleep.

"What a terrible gift you have given me," she said to her husband. They were sitting at the boy's bedside, not holding hands, though their knees were touching. There had been bad news, and then worse news, and then the worst news yet. The evil cells were back in his blood, and he had a fever, and there was an infection in the bones of his face. Dr. Blork had said that a fungus was growing there, and had admitted that this news was, in fact, bad, and he had looked both awkward and grave as

he sat with them, twisting his stethoscope around in his hands and apologizing for the turn of events, though not exactly accepting responsibility for the failures of the treatment. Oberon had said that mushrooms were some of the friendliest creatures he knew, and that he could not understand how they could possibly represent a threat to anyone, but Blork shook his head, and said that this fungus was nobody's friend, and further explained that the presence of the new infection compromised the doctors' ability to poison the boy anymore, and that for that reason the leukemia cells were having a sort of holiday.

The boy was sleeping. They had brought back the morphine for his pain, so he was rarely awake, and was not very happy when he was. Titania moved from her chair to the bed, and took his hand. Even asleep, he pulled it away. "A terrible gift," she said.

"Don't say such things," Oberon said.

"Terrible." She sat on the bed, taking the boy's hand over and over as he pulled it away, and told her husband that she was afraid that when the boy died he would take with him not just all the love she felt for him but all the love she felt for Oberon, too, and all the love she had felt for anything or anyone in the world. He would draw it after him, as if in obeisance to some natural law that magic could not violate, and then she would be left with nothing.

"Do not speak of such things, my love," her husband said, and he kissed her. She let him do that. And she let him put his hands inside her dress, and let him draw her over to the narrow couch where they were supposed to sleep at night. She tried to pretend that it was any other night under the hill when they would roll and wrestle with each other while the boy slept next to them, oblivious. They were walked in upon a number of times. But everyone saw something different, and none of them remembered what they had seen after they turned and fled the room. The night nurse, coming in to change some I.V. fluids, saw two blankets striking and grappling with each other on the couch. A nursing assistant saw a mass of snakes and cats twisting over one another, sighing and hissing. Dr. Blork actually managed to perceive Oberon's mighty thrusting bottom, and went stumbling back out into the hall, temporarily blinded.

One evening, Dr. Beadle came in alone, Blorkless, and sat down on the bed, where the boy was sweating and sleeping, dreaming, Titania could tell, of something unpleasant. "I

think it's time to talk about our goals for Brad," he said, and put a hand on the Beastie over the boy's foot, and wiggled the foot back and forth as he talked, asking them whether they were really doing the best thing for the boy, whether they should continue with a treatment that was not making him better.

"What else would we do?" Titania asked him, not understanding what he was saying, but suddenly not wanting him in the room, or on the bed, or touching the boy.

"We would make him comfortable," he said.

"Isn't he comfortable?" Titania asked. "Isn't he sleeping?"

"Not . . . finally," Dr. Beadle said. "We could be doing more, and less. We could stop doing what isn't helping, and not do anything that would prolong . . . the suffering." Then Oberon, who had been eying the man warily from the couch, leaped up, shouting, "Smotherer! Smother doctor! Get back to Hell!"

"You don't understand," Dr. Beadle said. "I don't mean that at all. Not at *all!*" He looked at Titania with an odd combination of pleading and pity. "Do you understand?" he asked her. In reply, she drew herself up and shook off every drop of the disguising glamour, and stood there entirely revealed to him. He seemed to shrink, and fell off the bed, and while he was not purposefully kneeling in front of her, he happened to end up on his knees. She leaned over him and spoke very slowly.

"You will do everything mortally possible to save him," she said.

The night the boy died, there were a number of miraculous recoveries on the ward. It was nothing that Titania did on purpose. She did not care about the other pale bald-headed children in their red wagons and masks, did not care about the other mothers, whose grief and worry seemed to elevate their countenances to resemble Titania's own. Indifference was the key to her magic; she could do nothing for someone she loved. So all the desperate hope she directed at the boy was made manifest around her in rising blood counts and broken fevers and unlikely remissions. It made for a different sort of day—with so much good news around, it seemed as if hardly anyone noticed that the boy had died.

Oberon sat on the floor in a corner of the room, trying to quiet the brokenhearted wailing of the Beastie, but not making a sound himself. Titania sat on the bed with the boy. A nurse had been in to strip him of his tubes and wires, and had drawn a sheet up to just under his chin. His eyes were closed, and his face looked oddly less pale than it had in life and illness. The glamour was in tatters; Oberon was supposed to be maintaining it, and now Titania found she didn't really care enough to take up the work. No nurse had been in for hours, and the last to come in had lain down upon the clover-covered floor and giggled obtrusively until some thoughtful faerie had put an egg in her mouth to shut her up. Before she had gone drunk, she'd mentioned something about funeral arrangements, and Titania was thinking of those now. "We should bring him home," she said aloud, and no one stirred, but she said it again every few minutes, and by twos and threes the faeries crowding the room began to say it, too, and then they started to build a bier for him, tearing out the cabinets and bending the I.V. pole and ripping up the sheets and blankets. When they were done, the walls were stripped and the furniture was wrecked. Twelve faeries of more or less equal size bore the bier, and they waited while another dozen brownies hammered at the doorway to widen the exit. When they were ready, they all looked to Titania, who nodded her permission. Oberon was the last to leave, standing only when Doorknob tugged at his arm after the room had emptied.

There was no disguise left to cover them. People saw them for what they were, a hundred and two faeries and a dead boy proceeding down the hall with harps and flutes, crowded in the service elevator with fiddles and lutes, marching out of the hospital with drums. Mortals gaped. Dogs barked. Cats danced on their hind feet, and birds followed them by the dozens, hopping along and cocking their heads from side to side. It was early afternoon. The fog was breaking against the side of the hill, leaving Buena Vista Park brilliantly sunny. They passed through the ordinary trees of the park, and then into the extraordinary trees of their own realm, and came to the door in the hill, and passed through that as well.

They marched into the great hall, and put down the bier. The music played on for a while, then faltered little by little, as each player came to feel unsure of why they were playing. Then the hall was quiet, because they didn't know what to do next. They had never celebrated or mourned a death before. They were all looking to Titania to speak, but it was Oberon who finally broke the silence, announcing from the back of the room that the Beastie had died of its grief. ♦

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