



Larger than Life

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No one who knew Vern—and there wasn't anybody who really knew him—would suspect he'd get one of the cursed cookies. Most of them went to friendly people. Vern lived a surly life of growls at neighborhood children and snarls at most people he came into contact with out of necessity, such as grocery clerks or the change-apron lady at the Laundromat. He was only ever pleasant to people who ran yard sales, and then only when they were selling something he wanted.

Who knew relaxing the habits of a lifetime would have such devastating results?

Vern's house lay at the end of a small muddy lane. Ages of ivy had grown over it, tugging at the bricks, nibbling at the mortar, attaching sticky millipede feet to the window glass so half his windows no longer opened and most didn't let in much light. Vern didn't care about the outside of his house—the more decrepit it looked, the better, if it discouraged people from approaching.

Inside was where his life's treasure lay.

Here in the little living room were polished floorboards that smelled faintly of vinegar and lemon, here small perfect Persian carpets, hand-crafted shelves that held precious objects gleaned from years of meticulous yard sale searches.

Here was his jewel of an office, the walls draped with warm dark fleecy cloths, the desk a marvel of efficiency, everything he needed in reach, with the computer where he could work for hours without ever coming into face-to-face contact with another human being.

Here was the tiny glossy kitchen where he prepared the same three meals every day exactly on time, here the table topped by a mosaic of grape bunches where he ate them.

Here was the room where he packed small fragile objects in bubble wrap and packing peanuts to ship to people he did not know; he only knew they had agreed to pay him enough so that he could bear to part with his special finds.

Here was his bedroom, small but perfect, the bed high and firm, the walls covered in shelves that held the things he most liked to see before he slept.

Here was the walk-in closet that served as his library, all the walls covered with shelves, each book precious, the product of extensive consideration and care, all outfitted with library-quality mylar dust jackets.

Here was his bathroom, wiped down with antiseptic after each use, and his shower with its panoply of soaps and shampoos, a different one for each day of the week and two on Sunday.

Here was where he felt safe and happy.

Friday night's classifieds lay on the kitchen table, the grape mosaic covered by a piece of butcher paper to protect it from newsprint ink and to soften the bumpy texture that would interfere with Vern's mapping. He was planning Saturday's yard sale route. Pickings were slim during the winter, but there were still a few prospects. He highlighted all the interesting yard sales that started at eight in green, those that started at nine in red, and those that started at ten in blue. He laid out his city map, one of the free ones from the visitor's center, where he went often for a new supply, and put dots on the map in the right colors for the various yard sales he wanted to go to.

Finally he had a route map laid out. He went to bed.



The next morning he got up at seven, showered, and left home. He parked near his first best prospect, drank coffee from a big thermal cup, and sat with Sausage McMuffin in hand. NO EARLY BIRDS, the ad had said, but early birds were a constant in the yard sale biz. He would wait until a couple other people had invaded before he did; better not to be the most irritating person at a sale if he could avoid it.

He got out his binoculars and sighted across the street as a man and a woman put out things for the sale. The furniture bore masking-tape price tags—didn't they know anything about how adhesive could ruin a finish? On the other hand, a sign of inexperience was good. Maybe they hadn't checked eBay or other price guides, and he could get some bargains.

Would he find a perfect thing today? Sometimes Vern visited as many as twenty yard sales in a day without finding anything worth buying. He had learned to live with the disappointment. Sometimes it was a relief not to buy anything. Saturdays exhausted him; he had more contact with people that day than any other in the week.

Someone knocked on the driver's side window of his car, startling him into dropping his binoculars.

Magda Henry, a scourge and a thorn, an affliction on his Saturdays. She had almost the same sense about what was important as he did, and she grabbed faster, despite her pink, fringe-draped bulk and waddling gait. Her broad face could break into a smile that charmed sellers into knocking down their prices into highway robbery range. Bargains based on charm were much sneakier and more effective than bargains based on logic, Vern's trademark. Besides, Magda had quite a supply of lies she used, starting with, "Oh, my mother had one just like it, but it burned up in a house fire in eighty-three, and I've despaired of ever finding another. She's in a nursing home now. I'm sure she'd love to be able to look at this. It's just like the one she had when she was a child."

Vern steadied his cup in the console cupholder, set the Sausage McMuffin on the McDonald's bag on the passenger seat, and lowered his window six inches.

"Hi, Vern," Magda said. Her voice was deep, pleasant, jolly. He resented it.

"Hi, Magda," he mumbled.

"Look. The Linkletters are already over there, pawing through things."

Vern checked his watch. Only seven-thirty. Most sellers would forgive fifteen minutes early, even if they said "No Early Birds." Half an hour early went beyond the limits of good taste.

“Don’t you just want to strangle them sometimes?” Magda asked.

“I think more often about hit and run, with a short stop between to relieve them of their goods.”

Magda laughed. “Hey, want a couple cookies? New neighbors stopped by my family’s house last night and gave us some Christmas cookies. They’re surprisingly good.”

Vern made it a habit to avoid eating food cooked by other people. One never knew if their hands or their dishes were clean.

“You gotta keep up your strength, to beat out the Linkletters,” Magda said.

Surprised by the faint warmth in his chest Magda’s conspiratorial air had inspired, Vern lowered his window and held out his hand. Magda put two large gingersnaps into it, then reached into her ZipLock bag for two more, which she ate as she stared at the action across the street.

Vern lifted his binoculars. Were the Linkletters closing in on that glinting glass thing he hoped was a genuine crystal ball? Not that Vern dabbled in the occult; he stayed away from most things that involved interacting with people, especially people from other planes. There’d been that unfortunate haunting by his mother’s ghost before he got rid of her favorite porcelain statue of a Pekingese dog after she died, and that pesky demon curse on the Japanese mask he had bought at a curio shop going-out-of-business sale. Since then, he’d been wary of buying anything that might carry the taint of spiritual contact into his home.

But he had always wanted a genuine crystal ball.

He would kill the Linkletters. At least in his mind.

Preoccupied, Vern bit into a cookie. Ginger exploded in his mouth, sweet and burning, making the hair on his head stiffen and bristle. As the heat died, a wave of buttery sweetness washed across his tongue. Possibly the best cookie he had ever eaten. The second one tasted just as exciting, violating the one-good-bite-and-the-second-is-never-as-good rule he had established for everything in life.

“Magda,” he said. “These are delicious!”

"I know. I have to get the recipe. You know what else is weird? I like them so much, but I can eat two and stop. That's why I could even consider giving any away. I want to share them, somehow. Well. It's time. Say, what if I hold Mr. Linkletter and you handcuff him? Think we could get hold of whatever it is he's buying this time?"

"It's lovely, but it's only a dream." Vern climbed out of his car and wandered across the street with Magda. "Anyway, Mrs. Linkletter is the dangerous one. That little bird fluttery thing she does is just a front. She's vicious."

Magda laughed again, and again Vern was startled at the warmth he felt from that friendly sound. He wondered where Magda lived, whether her home was full of fine collectibles, as his was. If he visited her, and somehow something small from her collection made its way into his pocket, would she notice it was missing right away? He remembered a Chinese snuff bottle, delicate scenery of misty mountains and twisted trees painted on the inside of the glass, that Magda had bought for five dollars before he could even bid. The seller thought it was Avon. Vern had lost it to Magda six years ago, and that loss was only one of the many thorns that pricked him when he thought about her.

"Wait." Magda touched his arm. He shuddered. "They're getting kicked out." She gripped his arm and pulled him behind a neighbor's hedge.

"We said no early birds, and we meant it," said the woman in a loud, stiff voice. "We're starting at eight, and that's that. Anybody here early forfeits their right to buy anything. Good day."

"But I'll give you two hundred dollars for—"

"Damn," whispered Magda. "They never pay that for anything. Must be good."

"Four hundred," said the man.

"Two fifty."

"Three twenty-five."

"Damn, damn, damn," Magda muttered.

Vern peeked around the hedge. Mrs. Linkletter was clutching the bright, gleaming orb he had seen from the car.

“Done,” said Mr. Linkletter. He wrote a check, ripped it from his checkbook, nodded thanks. He and his wife hurried off, still clutching their find. Mr. Linkletter was chortling in that sniffy obnoxious way of his.

The one perfect thing had just walked out of the picture. Vern knew it. The rest of the day was shot.

He went through the motions. He wandered around the sale without his usual energy; everything looked like repeats of things he had rejected for the last month of Saturdays. Magda loaded up on fifties fabrics and waved a cheery farewell to him as she hustled off to her car. They met again at the next six sales, but Vern’s heart wasn’t in the search.

“Want to stop at my house for some lemonade?” Magda asked between sales seven and eight. She had never invited him before, and if Vern had been in shape instead of discouraged, he would never have accepted, but he had lost his goal, even the one where he drove home after shopping and sagged with relief as soon as he entered his own house and smelled the lemon polish and antiseptic.

But “Sure,” he said instead, and followed Magda’s pink Volkswagen beetle in his blue Toyota Tercel.

At first he thought Magda was taking him to his home. She turned down his street, the paved part before his almost private muddy cul-de-sac. How did she know where he lived? But no, she pulled into a driveway only a block from his house and drove around behind a slate-blue house with white trim and gingerbread eaves, while he parked on the street.

He had noticed and mocked the collection of lawn gnomes at this house before. That argued against his theory that his tastes were similar to Magda’s.

He climbed out of the car and studied the gnomes. He realized for the first time they were not standard pseudo-Scandinavian red-capped white-bearded gnomes, but a group of squat, unpainted, concrete grotesques, caricatures of the characters in Chaucer, charming in their ugliness.

Soon Magda returned, striding down the driveway majestically in her pink fringes, spinning the frilly parasol she had bought at the last sale. “Come on inside, Vern,” she said in her throaty voice. Hypnotized, he followed her through the front door.

Her front parlor was everything he had dreamed of: bric-a-brac everywhere, many of the objects instantly interesting. A glass-fronted shelving unit with many small compartments, each home to a bone or wooden carved netsuke, drew him immediately. Here a rat curled around a peach; there a monkey rode a goat; there, a small happy fat man raised a hammer. His heart flamed with desire.

His jacket had good pockets. He might be able to slip something into one of them, provided she left the room to put together a lemonade tray.

The Chinese snuff bottle, with its intricate inner landscape, held pride of place on a pedestal on a round table in the center of the room. If he pocketed that, she would notice for sure. He studied it instead.

“Please have a seat.” Magda gestured toward an overstuffed couch. “I’ll be back in a moment.”

Vern sat. He wanted this whole room and everything in it. It would never fit in his pocket.

Magda returned with a tray that held two glasses of ice-clinking lemonade and a plate of dark molasses cookies sprinkled with sugar crystals. She placed a coaster on the table beside him and handed him a glass, then put three cookies on a small plate and handed that to him, along with a napkin. She sat beside him, helped herself to refreshments, set the tray on a nearby table, sat back, and sighed.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I’m losing my fire,” she said.

He drank lemonade and set the glass down on the coaster, then contemplated the cookies in his lap. They didn't appeal to him the way the gingersnaps had, though they smelled lovely, like the kitchens of childhood, when his mother wore an apron with rickrack around its hem and small hard candies in twists of waxed paper in the pockets. He was here. He supposed he might as well pretend interest in Magda's problems. But really, why was he here?

"It happened to you, too, Vern," said Magda. "Didn't the spark go out of you when the Linkletters made off with that orb? I just wanted to come home and look at what I've already got. I'm not on fire to own things anymore."

"Give me the snuff bottle."

"What? Absolutely not! I got that in a fair fight!"

"By tripping me when I was heading for it?"

"That's right." She smiled her frog smile, mouth wide and partly open across her broad face.

"So you still have fire." Vern lifted a cookie and sniffed it.

"Huh? Oh. Oh! You're right. Do you still have that bisque Elvis mask?"

He had bought it for resale; there was a whole niche market of Elvis buyers out there. But instead, it hung on his office wall. The benefit of having a slightly faster car than Magda, and for once knowing a shorter route. Although most Saturdays they ended up at a few sales apart from each other; their reading of the ads giving them slightly different tea-leaf interpretations of where the best things would be.

"Still got it," he said.

"I've been watching your seller's site, and I didn't see it come up."

"How much would you pay for it?"

She studied his face, then shook her head. "It's one of the prizes you never want to part with, isn't it?"

He nodded, though he didn't even like Elvis. Something about this mask, the embodiment of someone's idea of the perfect godlike being, imbued it with a strange and seductive power.

Vern often wondered who the Makers of his things were. Did they live in windowless basements, working with materials to create things that in no way resembled real things, so isolated they went mad enough to envision a weirder world?

“Do you ever think about going on a yard sale vacation? Just not even going out some Saturday?”

Vern shuddered at the thought.

“I feel that way too,” she whispered. “Did you ever dream of a country where every day is Saturday?”

He shuddered again. Put in this concentrated effort every day? No, thank you. Though he did go to sales on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. First-look Fridays sometimes yielded strange things, and there wasn't quite the competition for them, and low-price Sundays meant he got some decent bargains for resale from people who despaired of getting rid of their junk. But Saturdays were the days when most treasure emerged from attics and bad housekeeping, wiped off with rags and stuck with price stickers.

Vern bit a molasses cookie. It tasted storebought, which should have been reassuring, but it didn't give him the same high as the gingersnaps had. He set the cookie back on the plate. “Why did you invite me over, Magda?”

“I've been watching you for weeks. Well, years, really.”

“Why?”

“You're the only rabid dog of Saturday morning I have some fellow feeling for.”

He gaped at her, then remembered who he was and frowned, pinching everything forward in his face into the expression that frightened the Dahl kids from next door, who had some weird fascination with his house no matter how many times he chased them off the porch or out of his weedy flower beds.

Magda's broad smile faltered.

What was he doing here, drinking lemonade and eating cookies whose provenance was unknown? Just because Magda shared his particular love for the absurd didn't mean she and he matched each other in any other way. Getting to know her would just complicate his life in ways he didn't need. He stood up.

"I just thought," Magda said, "that you had the same sag in your step. That you lost the fun the same moment I did. Do you think we'll ever get it back? What's happening to us, Vern?"

He pulled his list of sales out of his jacket pocket and opened it, eyed the ones he hadn't been to yet. "While we're wasting time here, they could be snatching something else out from under us."

"They won't be. Didn't you notice? They weren't at any sales after that first one."

He clicked through scenes of sales in his head and realized she was right.

"Odd," he said. "Well, you think about that. I'm going out again."

"I'm staying in. Good luck, Vern."

He took one more sip of the lemonade— it was good, and he didn't see any horrible hairs in it— and shrugged his way out of Magda's house.

In his car he got out the list of sales, but he turned and headed for his home. Magda was right. He had lost the fever to possess. All he wanted to do was sleep it off.



He woke cramped and uncomfortable, curled up and unable to move. Even opening his eyes was a struggle. What was this pain in toes and knees and elbows and shoulders? What pressed so hard on the back of his neck that he had a headache? All his body parts were shoved against some surface where they weren't up against each other. Beneath him, a number of small hard items dug into his thighs and buttocks. It was dark, and he couldn't move.

What had happened? He was inside a box. Maybe someone had boxed him up to ship him somewhere, only they hadn't bubble-wrapped him separately from other things, or included any packing peanuts, and the box was too small.

He strove to stretch, finally pushed outward violently with his elbows. Crack! Creak! Good. His elbows broke through his containment, though he heard breakage, the falling of small tinkling things, felt objects slide past his thighs. His elbows hurt, too, with the sting of bleeding scratches. He banged his head against the top of the box. On the third painful bang, he burst through the top of the box, only it was more than cardboard; there were splintering sounds, and his head punched up through several different layers of something, sending dust flying and making him sneeze.

He could not at first make sense of what he saw. His head rose above the top of the box, only it seemed he was looking into another box now, gable-topped, pierced with a square of brightness not too far from where his head emerged, filled with a clutter of objects stacked on one another, perfect in their miniaturization.

Too close for him to focus on stood some doll furniture, perhaps a dresser and a table, and beyond, just within focus range, stood a lamp whose beaded shade was exquisite in detail. He saw fine carving on a chest; each drawer pull was a blue delft knob. He turned toward the light and saw silhouetted against it several ornate many-roomed bird cages, surely too fine to be made of toothpicks— drawn wire? Stacked on another low dresser were dolls, some with porcelain heads, hands, and feet and soft chamois bodies, others dressed in frilled splendor. Everything was dusty but tiny and exquisite.

Everything was familiar.

Where had he last seen these things? Whom did he know who had such wonderfully artful doll furniture and accessories? What doll house came with an attic, and why was its attic sitting on top of the box he was in?

Someone had shoved him into a doll house? How, when, why?

There was a steamer trunk, plastered over with stickers from various countries. He remembered buying that at a yard sale eight years ago. He had spent some time studying each sticker and imagining its previous owner, a person who changed every time he thought of it, going to each of those countries, buying a sticker to commemorate the visit.

When he bought the trunk, it was big enough to store a body in; something he had imagined packing a whole life in, to travel the way one used to when porters were plentiful and the rich never packed light.

Why had it changed from full sized to tiny? How?

He turned his head. The box material scratched at his neck. Scattered around him was detritus of his explosion upward through the box—

—The ceiling. Somehow he was looking into his own attic from the level of the floor.

How— what— who— what had happened to him? Had everything he owned shrunk? Or had he grown?

Ridiculous!

He panicked then, pushed and shoved at the walls below him, broke through, heard crashes, thuds, and tinkles as his flailing arms sent things flying and breaking. It took him several minutes to calm himself enough to stop thrashing.

He was a giant in his jewel box of a home. A giant? He was bigger than a giant. His bedroom was ten by ten square feet, with nine-foot ceilings, and he couldn't even fit into that space anymore.

What was he— how was he—

His things. His wonderful things. How many of them had he already broken? His carefully chosen and collected life—

He stilled. How was he going to get out of this without breaking everything he owned? How had it happened in the first place? Maybe this was a dream. What was wrong with him?

Maybe if he just stayed quiet, someone would come to investigate—

No, that wouldn't happen. Even the Dahl children didn't venture into his yard much anymore.

Where was the phone?

He had probably crushed it.

He felt gently with his fingers. Given the direction he was facing now, his left hand had probably broken through into the kitchen, and his right into the back parlor, his shipping office. Slippery small things slid around his left hand. He moved slowly, trying to feel each thing. There was a phone in the shipping room, another in the kitchen. His seeking hands found neither. More crashes of dropped crockery from the kitchen. His Fiesta ware?

Then a small shape— he was sure it was the phone, and tried to close his hands around it, but it squirted between his fingers like a watermelon seed.

He couldn't phone anyone.

Could he scream? He swallowed, and his throat was scratchy. Maybe he could scream,

He had better not move. He would only break more things.

But his bladder—

Maybe if he waited long enough, he would shrink again.

Nothing made sense.

He didn't want to wet himself, or what was left of his bedroom.

But what was he going to do?

He waited until the internal pressure was so unbearable he had to move, and then he pulled his hands back into the bedroom, set them on the floor as best he could beside his cramped and crumpled legs, and shoved up.

He crashed up through his roof, knocked half the attic away. He winced as he listened to stored possessions fall about the house. He was bruised, scraped, and bleeding from dozens of scratches. His legs prickled, pins and needles from being uncramped after too long a confinement. The outside wall of the house came up to chest height. He was tall enough to look out through the punctured roof, only he faced the woods at the back of his property.

It was early, early morning; the sun wasn't up yet, but the sky was light.

Should he call for help? How could anyone help him? Did he know anyone who would want to?

Oh, God, he had to pee. He didn't want to pee in his house. All his treasures. He had to get out.

He pushed against the outer wall of the house. It resisted only a moment before he tore through it. The ivy held onto bits of wall and windows as they tore away. Parts of the house crashed around him, and he was sad, sore, and ashamed, but he didn't know what else to do.

He was naked. Oh, God. Giant and naked, and no yard sale full of clothes for the giant and naked in sight, let alone how could he get money to pay for them out of his wallet now that it had shrunk down to the size of his smallest fingernail? He had to cover himself, but he couldn't think of anything in the house that would do. It would take a fumigator's tent, maybe.

First things first. He pushed his way into the woods. The trees were only a little taller than his head, and he couldn't see his feet through the canopy; he didn't get very far. Too many things poked and stuck him. Facing away from the road, unable to see himself, he went ahead and pissed. He could only hope there was no one out walking a dog on the woods path at the moment.

Afterward he felt much better, even though he was troubled. They could arrest him for public lewdness and exposure. Then again, no jail was big enough for him, so where would they put him?

He had to cover himself. God. He was as big as a tree. A sheet might work as a kind of loincloth. He returned to the wreckage of his house and poked through the rubble of the bedroom. The bed, box springs and mattress, was crushed fairly flat. He fished the bedspread out. It was almost intact. By folding it diagonally, he created a length he could tie around his waist. It hung down over his privates in front. He rescued the blanket and tucked it into the tied bedspread to cover himself behind. He glanced at the sky: winter morning, with squiffs of cloud, but no rain in sight. He was chilled but not freezing. It was early yet. The cars of the commuters up the street were still parked in their driveways.

What next? If he knocked on his neighbors' doors, they would scream, he was pretty sure, not just at the shock of his giant self, but at the fact that Vern the Grouch was making contact.

But what else could he do?

Magda.

Barefoot, he set out. Freezing mud from the road caked on his feet; he liked the way it squished so energetically between his toes, though he didn't like the temperature. He liked, too, his new view from above; he could look into the windows of the second stories of his neighbors' houses, where some of his neighbors yawned and stretched and dressed. Nobody glanced toward him; too wedded to their routines, too busy with their belongings. He saw how they decorated their bedrooms, which curtains they had. What he saw of other people's lives reassured him; he had much neater stuff than they did.

Or he used to.

The back of Magda's prim little house lay in ruins. She sat, enormous and naked, on her back patio, her hands cupped under something. Tears flowed down her broad cheeks.

He squatted beside her and looked into her hands. An elegant doll, its dress velvet and lace, its hair long and wavy blond. He remembered when it had held pride of place on the mantel in her front parlor; now it was a froth across her huge hands, fragile and small. Its delicate porcelain face was half-crushed, the eye socket where a glass eye should be empty. Magda stared at him. "Oh, Vern," she said.

"I know."

She turned and set the doll gently in her second-story bedroom where it had crashed down into the first-story kitchen. "What happened to us?"

"Don't know."

"Oh, Vern." She sniffled, then straightened. She had been massive before; now she was mountainous, and he could see every bulge. Her breasts were the size of watermelons now. Still, she was more compact than he had thought when she had been disguised by all that fringe. A strange figure, but not unattractive.

And he wasn't a giant alone.

What was he thinking?

"What are we going to do?" she asked.

"Don't know."

"I'm hungry."

They moved things out of her kitchen and searched the ruins for anything to eat. They shared two loaves of bread; peeling the plastic off them was challenging. Apples were the size of grapes; they chewed and swallowed them whole. Magda tried to go through her fridge, which lay leaking on its side, but most of the compartments were too small.

"Hey!" cried someone in the street. "What are you doing?"

Magda straightened and looked over the top of her house.

The man in the street screamed for a long time, then ran.

Lights went on in houses up and down the street.

Vern found some boxes of cereal. They were like those individual serving size boxes now. He tore the top off one and poured cereal on his tongue. Its texture had changed; it was like sand now, dry and small. He wished he had something to wash it down with. He handed the second box to Magda.

Sirens screamed up the street. Cars screeched to a stop in front of Magda's house. Doors opened, feet thudded on the pavement. Police with drawn guns rounded the house, stopped when they saw Vern and Magda. Vern raised his empty hands. Magda sat back, knees up, arms crossed over her chest in a futile attempt to hide her abundance. She was crying again.

"Another couple cases," one of the police said into the radio on his shoulder.



The internment camp for victims of the Cookie Curse was set up in a circus tent on the fairgrounds. There were twenty-seven victims, most from one family, the Henrys, father, mother, three kids, a grandmother, and cousins who had been visiting for the holiday. Magda was one of the Henry cousins. The others were all friends of the Henrys. Vern didn't feel he qualified. It made him grouchier than usual.

A jealous, spiteful, loner neighbor had given the Henrys the tin of cursed cookies; she thought they spent too much time showing off what a wonderful life they had, that they lived just to smack sadder people in the face with their happiness. "You're so proud of everything you do, why not show the world?" she told them after the curse had taken effect. "No hiding from the limelight now. Share your every little moment."

Whether they wanted to or not, they were now living on stage. Scientists tested them daily. Local pagan groups asked them questions and begged for any cookies they had left. The tabloids were especially enchanted with the story. Vern caught photographers sneaking in under the edge of the tent at all hours of the day and night. He noticed them first because he was outside the circle of family, and had nothing to do but sit far to the side and watch for pests. He picked them up and set them outside the tent, threatening to crush them if they returned. Some did. He never actually squashed one, but he did pinch a few cameras into metal smears.

He found the Henry family as irritating as the witch who had cursed them had. They spoke in greeting card clichés, and, despite their size, seemed to take everything in stride. Their church group had put together a sewing circle to make clothes for them; local food companies donated free food in exchange for product placement at the daily news conferences and interviews.

Vern now owned a giant jogging suit in acid green—fabric donated by a local fabric store, which hadn't been able to sell it. He hated it, but it was the only outfit he had. He had nobody to go home and make sure that whatever possessions had survived his growth spurt stayed where they belonged. He thought about asking the Dahls for help, but after how he had terrorized their children, he doubted they would come through for him.

Magda, colossal in a full-length pink muumuu, brought him a salad-bowl of chamomile tea on a welcome-mat coaster. She sat down beside him on a giant bench custom-built at a lumberyard run by someone in the Henrys's church group. Vern and Magda gazed at the Henrys, most of whom were gathered around a giant table playing rummy with cards on posterboard made at a local Kinko's. Difficult to shuffle in a traditional fashion; you had to toss the cards in the center of the table and mix them around. Only ten of the Henrys could sit down at a time; the others stood back and kibitzed. There was much loud, good-natured arguing, most of it repeats from previous conversations the giants had had a day or an hour earlier.

None of the other Henrys talked about anything below the surface, even though they were now so large they had outgrown most surfaces.

Vern sipped tea. He scowled. Magda offered him a soup bowl of sugar with a ladle in it. He sweetened the tea and sighed.

Magda said, "I sent a couple of my not-cursed cousins over to your house to clean up and secure your valuables."

"Secure them where?" Vern asked.

"In my storage unit. Unless you want them to rent one for you?"

No way could Vern run his various computer businesses, the shape he was in now. He had no income. He was glad Magda had storage. He had fairly comprehensive insurance, but he hadn't included the clause about acts of magic. None of his neighbors were witches, as far as he knew; he was scrupulous in his on-line dealings and never had any complaints from customers, and nobody else paid any attention to him; he had figured he was safe from things like this.

“That’s fine. Thank you.” He drank again. “The Chinese snuff bottle? Your netsukes?”

“Fortunately my bedroom is toward the back of the house, and I fell into the kitchen. Everything in the front parlor was pretty much okay; I had my next-door neighbor pack up everything right after I left.”

“Any news on when this is going to wear off?”

“They have police wizards working on it now. Nothing definite. My cousin, she’s a dispatcher there, she says they’ve never run into such a big and successful spell before. They don’t know where the energy came from. They’re calling in a specialist. Vern, I’m so sorry. I never meant— “

He set down the tea bowl. “Why did you speak to me that day, Mag? You never did before, except to insult me.”

“That’s how I tell people I like them. My family knows that about me, but I could tell you didn’t. I decided it was time to try a different approach.”

“You like me,” he muttered.

“Didn’t you sense it, too? The connection between us? The way we always want the same thing?”

“That’s a connection? I thought it was competition. More than one Saturday I wished I knew where you lived so I could sneak in and put sleeping powder in your coffee to keep you off me.”

“Is that why you came to my house? To find out where it was so you could drug me?”

“No,” he said. “You understand I would never have done it.”

She smiled. “But, you know, it’s a sweet thought. At least you weren’t thinking of killing me.”

Vern remembered that taciturnity had always served him well. He stared down into his tea bowl, then slid a glance at Magda. She wore a small smile, not her usual grin that was now big enough literally to welcome a whole pie into her mouth, more of a thinking and knowing smile.

“We always want the same things,” Magda said. “If we combined our households, we could have them. I mean, once the spell is broken and we can rebuild. We’re going to have to rebuild anyway. Why not plan ahead?”

Vern felt a jolt under his sternum, a flutter near his heart.

She was crazy.

In a good way.

He thought of the Chinese snuff bottle. He set down the tea bowl and dropped his hand beside hers on the bench, and she edged her hand closer to his, until they touched along the outsides of their hands and little fingers. The giants at the card table howled with laughter at some joke they had probably made sixteen times already. Vern tangled fingers with Magda. Would she like his tin toy collection?

He knew she would.

The End.