

Little Love

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What you are about to read is the first story I've ever written and published. Hopefully, it won't be the last one. I'm currently writing under the synonym of C.R.Christophers, but if this work is well received enough, I might start working under my actual name. I began writing this story a little more than a year ago, around the time I graduated with my Master's degree (in Theology and Religious Studies). However, it's been inside my mind for much longer, and I eventually gathered the courage to write it down.

Before we begin this story, I wish to thank you buying this book and for taking the time to read it. I also wish to thank my parents and every other family member and friend who proofread it, suggested improvements and encouraged me to continue working on it and eventually publish it. It has been a long, extensive process, but I believe that it was all worth it.

Chapter 1:

Adina Bowman had never been the most independent person. For all her life, she'd to deal with some noticeable shortcomings, the greatest of these (no pun intended) being her short height. Even at the age of twenty-two, she was still only 4'11 feet tall (1,50 m). She tried to hide it by wearing platform shoes, but it was still very noticeable. This wasn't made any better by the fact that she had never been the most athletic person, and despite her frequent attempts at building muscle this had not changed.

These things made her life rather difficult. Not only were gym class and other physical activities always a problem for her, but there were plenty of cases where she was singled out, like when her class visited an amusement park where she was the only one too short for most of the rides. She just had to sit on the bench most of the time, waiting for the others to be finished and go into excessive detail about everything she missed out on. Even around the age of 20, being the oldest member of a group could still make her the only one who had to show her ID when visiting bars or R-rated films. Besides that, she also frequently needed help with physical activities, such as reaching for something on the shelf or moving heavy objects. She knew that most people were just trying to help, but she couldn't help feeling embarrassed by it, especially when the taller ones helping her were younger than her (like her fifteen-year old cousin).

There were also plenty of times when she was the butt of jokes from her classmates and people around

her. Sometimes these jokes were malicious, but usually they were meant to be harmless teasing by people who didn't bother to think about whether or not she liked to hear those things. She did manage to have a few dates, since plenty of guys found her short height attractive, and her long black hair and pale skin didn't hurt either. However, the dates often didn't go that well or the relationships didn't last that long, since they often brought up her height through the same unintentional but hurtful mockery as she suffered from others. She also found out that most of them cared less about her skills and interests and more about the pleasure of having this fragile little lady to protect and guard, which made them feel more manly.

By the age of twenty-two, she had graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, and was looking for her own place to live. Her parents weren't exactly pushing her out of the house, but she wanted to live independently as soon as possible. Eventually, she was given that chance, but unfortunately not in the most ideal way.

Just a little while before, her grandmother, Cynthia, had died of old age. More precisely, she had suffered a heart attack while taking a walk around town near the forest where her cottage was located. Adina was saddened by this, since she and her grandmother greatly enjoyed each other's company. Cynthia was also very short, although that had more to do with her becoming shorter as she aged. Robert, Adina's father, had frequently tried to convince Cynthia that she should move into an apartment in San Francisco so they could visit her more easily when she had problems. However Cynthia preferred to stay in her old house, because it

was quiet and because she was fond of the nearby town called Hiddengrove.

Cynthia knew her grand-daughter was looking for a place to live, so according to her will, Adina inherited her house as well as the few thousand dollars she still possessed. Adina's parents didn't really know what to think about this, since the house was pretty isolated, and they felt the lack of public transport would be a problem, since Adina wasn't the best at walking or cycling great distances. However, Adina insisted that they let her move in, both because she was tired of living in San Francisco, a massive, busy city, and because she wanted to challenge herself.

Eventually came the day when Adina left San Francisco for Hiddengrove. Robert traveled with her, both to help with her baggage and to pick up from Cynthia's house the things that he himself had inherited. They drove all the way to Hiddengrove (they would have gone with a plane if they didn't have to bring so many boxes with them). Along the way, they stopped by some places to stretch their legs, get lunch, and do some sightseeing, arriving in Hiddengrove in the afternoon. It was a relatively small town surrounded by forests, except for the part where it connected to a large lake. While not a large town, it had all the things that Adina could ask for, so she didn't have to travel to another town for a few hours just to do some shopping or have an injury patched up. Besides the facilities one would expect most towns and cities to have, like a school and doctor, the town also had a few restaurants that Adina was looking forward to trying out. Even if her new house wasn't separated from the town, she was probably going to have her meals delivered so she

wouldn't have to walk all the way for food that she preferred to eat at home but would probably be cold by the time she returned.

They parked by the local Chinese restaurant to get dinner. Chinese food was her favorite, and she wanted to know if this restaurant was good and whether or not it was willing to deliver to her house. Before they could go inside, Adina noticed the Welcome Centre right across from it.

"Excuse me Dad," she said. "Do you mind if I look inside the Welcome Centre first? Maybe I can learn a few things there that I don't know yet."

"Sure", Robert said. "I'll order something for you in advance, which means you'll probably have around 15 minutes before it arrives. Do you want the regular thing?"

"That would be great", she said.

"Then go. Just don't spend too much".

She went inside the Welcome center which also doubled as a gift shop, even though the building wasn't that big. Adina always loved visiting these kinds of places. She rarely bought anything, but she just liked walking around looking at every book and other item they had. She tried to learn a bit more about just what the town was like. While she and her parents had visited the town a few times when they visited Cynthia, Adina never paid much attention to the town itself. A lot of books and pamphlets in the store were the kind of things you would expect in the welcome center of a town like this; maps of the forest, pamphlets about hiking routes, guides with noteworthy locations like the house of a famous painter, etc. However, there were a few things that got her attention, especially a series of

small figurines and dolls of people in loin cloth and other makeshift clothes. She picked one of them up and looked at the label which read, - Hidden -.

"Does it interest you?" - Adina nearly yelled in surprise. She was focusing so much on the figurine she was holding that she didn't notice that the woman who ran the shop had walked up behind her. She nearly dropped it, but managed to catch it just before she would have been forced to pay seven dollars for something she probably wasn't even planning to buy intact (not that it was bad craftsmanship, but she was just not interested in buying merchandise).

"I'm sorry if I scared you", said the shopkeeper. The woman was slender, close to 6 feet and in her early thirties, with short, platinum blond spiky hair and a noticeable transatlantic accent. "I didn't mean to sneak up on you".

"That's okay", Adina said.

"I see you're interested in those figurines".

"I was just curious. I don't think I'm going to buy one - but I wanted to know what these are supposed to be".

"Have you ever heard of the Hiddens?", the shopkeeper asked.

Adina had only vague memories of hearing her grandmother mention them, but she couldn't recollect much.

"No I haven't."

"They are like human beings, about the size of the figurine you're holding right now".

Adina was surprised to hear this, and looked back at the figurine she was holding, which was only a few inches tall.

“How is that possible?” – Adina asked somewhat skeptically.

“I don’t know”, the shopkeeper said. “Nobody has ever managed to find the remains of a real one to have it analyzed. There were a few cases where someone supposedly found one, but all of these were either dismissed or straight-up proven to be hoaxes. One researcher once claimed to have found one, but once he was proven wrong he lost his position at the university where he taught. Because of that, no-one does serious academic research on this topic anymore. However, several people over the decades claim to have seen one or more of them in the forest and some claim that Hiddens live in their houses. They believe that the reason small things often go missing is because the Hiddens take them”.

“So they are like Borrowers?”, Adina asked.

“What are they?”

“You know, the little people from those British children books? They even made a Japanese animated film about them once”.

“I don’t know about them, but I’ve never heard anyone talk about a Hidden giving back something they stole, so I think the term – thieves - is a bit more accurate than – borrowers –”.

Adina chuckled a little at this, but she tried to hold it back. She had a loud snorting laugh she was always embarrassed by, even though some people thought it was cute.

“Anyway”, the shopkeeper said, “for a few decades, there was enough buzz about the Hiddens to make this town a successful tourist spot. My dad ran this store before me and he definitely made more money

than me. After the whole thing was debunked a few times, people lost interest, especially since many other countries and cultures have their own myths about tiny people, so this town just wasn't interesting anymore".

"I'm sorry to hear that", Adina replied.

"But anyway, what exactly brings you to this town?", the shopkeeper asked.

"I just moved here. Well, sort off. I inherited my grandmother's house in the forest, although I'm not sure if that technically counts as "in the town."

"You inherited it yourself? Aren't you a little young to be living on your own in such a remote house?"

"I'm 22. I think I can manage it."

"I'm sorry, I thought you were a high school student."

"Happens all the time", Adina said, slightly frustrated at how often this had happened to her.

"Anyway", the shopkeeper said - "I don't think I remember seeing your grandmother in town often, but I do remember hearing about her accident".

Adina looked a little sad at being reminded of it, and the shopkeeper quickly apologized and offered her condolences.

"Anyway", the shopkeeper said. "I hope you enjoy it here".

"Thanks you", Adina said. She suddenly noticed her dad sitting inside the Chinese restaurant, clearly trying to signal her that the food had arrived some minutes ago. Adina quickly ran out of the center and into the restaurant.

"I thought you knew how long 15 minutes lasts", Robert said both humorously but with a bit of noticeable annoyance.

"I'm sorry", Adina said with an understanding smile while she started eating her Chicken fried rice. "I was looking around in the shop and I ended up talking with the shopkeeper for a while".

"Did you hear anything interesting from that woman? And please tell me you didn't spend too much money there. You know those shops would sell a tree branch for 10 dollars if they could call it a souvenir."

"It's fine Dad, I didn't buy anything". Adina knew that her dad wasn't a fan of those kinds of shops, since he always felt like they ripped people off for stuff they put away in their closets the moment they got home, or they give it to people who end up doing the same thing. "She did tell me about these things called Hiddens".

"Oh god", Robert said mildly annoyed while rubbing his forehead, "not that nonsense again. Your grandmother used to constantly tell me that she saw those things running around in the woods. She once pulled a few planks out of her floor because she swore that a bunch of them were living underneath it. I swear, it's all because of those guys who will Photoshop any "proof" just because they can't think of anything else about their town to promote."

"Can you please calm down a little Dad?", Adina responded, knowing that if she didn't say this, she would have to listen to that noise for several more minutes.

"Sorry. It's just that your grandmother hasn't really been right in the head the last few years. That's

the main reason why I kept asking her to move to San Francisco, so we could keep an eye on her."

"I get it Dad. I just think you're being a little harsh on the subject".

"What's the matter? Do you actually believe in that little people stuff?", Robert asked with a cheeky grin.

"I haven't decided yet. I don't think they actually exist, but it is kind of a fun idea".

"Yeah, sounds fun, if you like tiny people entering your house, taking your stuff and watching and listening to you while you're doing your business. Sounds awesome..."

After they had finished their dinner, Adina and her father drove to the edge of the town, where they had to park the car because they couldn't drive it into the forest. Robert carried most of the luggage while Adina only carried a light backpack and one small box. She initially brought more with her, but her father had to take these from her after only fifty meters. They followed the forest path uphill for about 10 minutes, although they also took a small break to drink some water. Not only because of the weight they had to carry all this way, but also because it was late July, and it was a pretty hot day. The trees blocked some of the sun's rays, but even in the shadows it wasn't that cold.

They eventually arrived at the house. It was located in a large open space between the trees, with enough room in front to accommodate parking two cars (if any roads had actually led to it). The house consisted of a ground floor with only a few rooms, similar to a city apartment. All the rooms and closets were accessed through the hallway, which because of its relative

narrowness had nothing standing in it. However, the walls had a few pictures of relatives (including Adina as a little girl) hanging on it, as well as a coat rack and a tiny shelf for keys and other small items.

The largest room doubled as living room, dining room and kitchen. Like the hallway, the floor was covered with light-colored floor planks. The kitchen was located in the upper-west corner (from the perspective of the entrance), the dining table in the lower-west, and the other side consisted of a large cabinet and a coffee table partly surrounded by a dark-blue couch facing a flatscreen tv standing on top of a small table. There was also a small fireplace in the upper-east corner, which Adina was probably not going to make much use of.

The bathroom had a bath (which doubled as a shower), a toilet and a mirror hanging over a small sink, and a floor made of white floor tiles and partly covered with a blue carpet. There was a medium-sized bedroom with red floor covering, a bed standing against a wall along with a window, a desk against the other one, and a cabinet against each of the other two. And finally, there was a separate room to store things, although Adina's grandmother also used that room to work.

Once they had put down all the baggage and boxes they were carrying, Robert went back to the car once more to pick up the remaining boxes. Adina stayed behind to take a look around the place and unpack some of the stuff. While inspecting the living room, she noticed that a few planks were newer than the others.

"I guess these are replacements for the planks grandma removed when she was looking for tiny people", she thought to herself. She wasn't really taking the whole thing seriously, but she wasn't opposed to her

grandmother or the shop-owner being right about it. She tried to imagine a tiny family living underneath the floor, hiding from the big people walking around above them. "At least then I would actually be the tallest one in the house for a change", she thought to herself.

However, when she walked up to one of the cabinets, she noticed a small hole in the floor underneath. The hole was just big enough for a mouse to crawl through. Adina was worried for a moment that there might be vermin in the house, but she believed that it was possibly another hole that her grandmother made during her search, and that no-one had noticed it yet. At least she knew that it was not a rat, since the hole wasn't big enough for one.

She looked through the room to find something to cover the hole with, both in case some animal was indeed using it and to make sure that her dad didn't notice it. After all, her dad might look at it and think that moving here was a mistake, and she was not going to go back on her decision to stay here for something that might not be that big of a deal. She found a cutting board in the kitchen, which covered the hole. It wasn't something rodents could burrow through as easily as they could through a book or something similar, and wasn't easily noticed.

Robert returned with the last few boxes, and they began to unpack them. Adina's original room back in San Francisco didn't have that much space to fill, thus she didn't have too much stuff with her. Her wardrobe was small, and she didn't have many books since she mostly read e-books and online comics on her tablet. She also brought only one console which she also used for playing DVD's. She and her father also didn't need to

bring much furniture since her grandmother's furniture wasn't that old-fashioned, so it could be used. As her grandmother had been pretty short herself, a lot of the furniture and equipment was made with short people in mind. Adina wouldn't have to put many things on the ground to step on in order to reach any high places.

However, she did bring a lot of drawing equipment, since her job was making drawings on the internet. While she did a lot of the final work on her tablet, she still liked to actually use pencil and paper for a lot of it (after which she used a scanner to put it on her tablet). Luckily for her there was a shop in town where she could get more supplies, so she wasn't screwed the moment she broke a pencil or lost an eraser.

Once they were done unpacking, Robert began packing some of the things from the storage room that Cynthia left him. Some of these were things that he wasn't too interested in, so he asked Adina if maybe she wanted to keep some of them. Adina looked through them, the only thing of note being a few dolls and small chests filled with outfits for them.

"What's with all of these doll clothes?", she asked her dad.

"Your grandmother collected them over a long time", her dad said. "Her parents and grandparents often bought them for her, especially when they were overseas. When we went on vacation, she would always stop by gift shops and other stores so she could buy some that she couldn't get in California. She spent so much time at those places or looking for them that your grandfather always searched for routes that avoided them so he didn't have to wait around."

"Was it really that bad?"

"Belief me, there were times where he had to listen to another guy going on about how much it sucked that he had to go clotheshopping with his wife. Those moments, all he wanted to do was tell that guy that at least he would see his wife wearing that new bathing suit instead of putting it on some child's toy."

"Suddenly your little gift shop rants make a lot more sense."

"Come on, it's not like I do that all the time."

"So why did she like them so much?", Adina asked while looking through the chests.

"I never really asked her. You know how she started talking for hours whenever someone showed the slightest bit of interest in her hobbies."

Adina nodded. While she enjoyed hanging out with her grandmother, there were moments when she couldn't help but shut down her brains and just nod when she spent too much time talking.

"Maybe she was keeping them for the little people", her dad said sarcastically.

Adina spent a few more minutes looking through the chests. The outfits were very diverse, and some of them clearly had a lot of work put into them. Her grandmother had worked as a fashion designer before she retired, and this could have been the reason for her career choice. She thought some of the outfits were pretty cute, while a few others were the kinds that she would rather not show to her non-caucasian acquaintances.

By the time they had unpacked everything and then packed up everything Robert was going to bring back home, it was already around half past ten. They both felt exhausted from all the work so they went to

bed early. Adina slept in her own bedroom while her dad simply slept on the couch in the living room, which could fold out into a bed in case someone was staying over. For Robert, falling asleep was a little difficult, as soft noises woke him up and he wondered if some animal had come in. However, the noises quickly stopped, so he slept well during the rest of the night. For Adina, going to sleep was never difficult and this night was no exception.

When they woke up the next morning, they had a quick breakfast, after which Robert finally left. On his way to the car he looked back a few times to see if Adina had possibly changed her mind and came running after him. By the time he reached his car, he realized that she wasn't going to follow him, and she had made up her mind. He tried to accept this, telling himself that at her age, she wasn't going to stay his little girl forever.

The next few days were uneventful for Adina. She spent the time in peace, mainly drawing new stuff for her art-blog and a few crowdsourcing sites. She mostly worked on a few commissions that she probably should have finished a little earlier, but moving into her new place took up a lot of time and energy. Fortunately, most of her customers weren't too strict about deadlines, especially as she only charged them once the drawings were completed. She also worked on some of her own original characters and stories, while building up the courage to post them online for feedback. She hoped to eventually get work at a major comic company, but every time she sent in her resume, she would end up not hearing from them again.

She spent the rest of the day buying some groceries, sleeping, playing video games and trying to

do some exercise, which mainly consisted of lifting weights while watching things on her computer or doing air chair while drawing or gaming.

However, she soon began to notice some strange things. She began hearing soft noises underneath the floor, and small amounts of food had gone missing. She also noticed the disappearances of small items, like tissues and the caps of a few pencils and markers. She began to wonder if there might really be a mouse inside her house and she shuddered at the possibility of it being a rat. She looked under the closet again, and noticed that while the cutting board still covered the hole, it had moved slightly, as if it had been moved out of the way and then put back again. Just to be sure, she went online to see if there were any pest exterminators in the surrounding area. She found a company located in a different town, but when she called them, she found that she would have to wait a few days before they could come.

In the meantime, she decided to go into town to see if she could buy some mousetraps. When she went outside, she noticed a cat standing in front of her house. The cat had been showing up frequently for the last few days, but Adina didn't do anything about it aside from give it some food when it seemed hungry. She tried not to get too close to it, since she wasn't sure if it would attack her. It was also because its fur was very dirty. However, she finally decided to go up to it, and noticed that it wore a collar around its neck, meaning that it belonged to someone. She took a picture of it with her smartphone, and decided that if she was going into town for shopping, she might as well see if someone was looking for it. Unfortunately, she wasn't too sure about