

THE RADIANT MOUNTAIN

By
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At the top of the Glass Tower lives a little boy as transparent as glass himself. Day by day he grows thinner, vanishing like a cube of sugar in a glass of water, and no one can name his illness. For a long time he has been without a father and his mother spends hours and days in the city, earning their living. How can she possibly spend time with him?

And the Tower is high, oh how high the tower is! The sounds of people walking don't reach the boy. Voices and cloud shadows flee. The boy lives like a little fish in an ice cube. Not a bird flies by, no dog barks for him, no leaf rustles. If only a little mouse would appear from somewhere, or a dwarf come out of the wall. Then he would have someone to play with, to talk to. He's been talking to himself long enough.

The boy turns to the wall and looks, and rubs his eyes in wonder. Where has this crack come from all of a sudden? It wasn't there last night or this morning; what's it doing there now? The boy pinches his arm, in case he's imagining things. It's only in wild dreams that a little manniking appears out of the wall, bows, and says,

“You called me?”

An icewater chill runs down the boy's back, “How could I have called you if I don't even know who you are?” The boy shakes his head and the little creature smiles and come closer.

Now the boy can see him clearly. By his size, the uninvited guest could be a dwarf, but all the rest doesn't fit. Dwarves are tiny little old men with beards and pointed hats. This one has neither beard nor hat, his eyes are blue and smiling, the skin of his face is rosy smooth. This can't be a dwarf, decides the boy, but the little guest smiles and says,

“And why wouldn't I be? Before they get old, dwarves are children too, you know!” The little one comes up to the boy's pillow and touches his brow with a light hand. “Come on, get up! Let's play!”

The boy bows his head in confusion. He's forgotten what he used to play, it's been so long since he has even been out of bed. How can he tell

that to his little guest? “I won’t be able to play until I get better”, the child whispers, and the little man frowns and tells him not to make a fool out of himself.

“Get up and come”, he orders him, and the boy feels his feet moving on their own, even though all the specialists have long since agreed that he will never walk a step again, never again leave his bed. The boy closes his eyes, afraid it’s all a dream; when he opens them again, he’ll see a blank wall. He squeezes his eyes shut, wanting to forget what he saw, but when he opens them, the little man is still there and says they should play a game of “Sorry!”

“See, you got up. You’re walking!” the dwarf laughs, and little scraps of sky gleam in his eyes. It reminds the boy of the Prince of the Clouds, who roams the sky and comes down when the sun is setting to play with lonely children. Could his guest be that Prince?

“Tell me, do you live in a cloud?” asks the boy, and the dwarf smiles and shakes his head.

“The place where I live is called the Radiant Mountain, and my name is Micky. The Prince of the Clouds doesn’t look like me at all. Play!” Micky moves and sits right next to the boy, but he’s so small that he barely reaches his outstretched knee. To the boy’s enormous amazement, there is a playing board next to them, with men on it, ready to play. But he has no time to exclaim, because the stranger lifts a finger sternly and cautions him to look sharp; if he loses the game, this will be Micky’s first and last visit. If the boy wins, the little man will come every day, but it will have to be their secret. The boy can’t tell his mother or anyone else at all.

“Now play!” whispers Micky, and leans forward confidentially. Carefully, as though we were gambling for his life, the boy throws the dice and moves his men. Luck seems to be on his side. his green men are getting near and nearer Home.

“Sorry!” mocks the boy as he bumps the dwarf’s blue piece back to start. Just six squares left. Breathing hard, the boy throws the dice. “Come six, come six!” And it’s a six.

“I win, I win”, yells the boy, and a flush rises to his face. “And Micky’s going to come, and I won’t ever be alone anymore!”

The boy scoops the dwarf up in his hand and then gasps. Micky has his face, laughs the same way, frowns the same, folds his arms the way the boy does. How come he hasn’t noticed that before? Why hasn’t it hit him? And the voice, the voice is the same as mine, thinks the boy, and the way

he brushes his hair back from his face. He even bites his nails! Is Micky a little me?

But the boy has no time to ask. The little man spins around on his hand, crawls up his shoulder inside his shirt, tugs on his ear and grins. “Now put me down and go to sleep!” The dwarf gets serious again. “You don’t need specialists anymore. When you wake up, I’ll be here. But don’t even whisper my name. Not a word! It’s our secret.”

Did Micky touch his eyelids, or was it number? The little boy was almost afraid to wake up from his deep, wonderful sleep, but when he opened his eyes, there was Micky, ready to play.

On the things he knew, the games he could come up with! Laughter filled the Glass Tower brimfull. The little boy forgot his aches, began to walk, and then to run. But what he liked best was the little things, the bustling of dust motes in a beam of sunrays, the passage of clouds, patches of light on the floor, stripes on flower petals. Only fools think that clouds are for driving across the sky and not enchanted riders and girls with silver hair. Only the deaf don’t hear the sound of flowers talking to each other. And how far the sunbeam travels. The boy was bemused by her tales of adventures from the Kalahari Desert to the North Pole, where white bears and seals greeted her like a queen.

“Look at the Queen!”, laughed Micky, and the boy laughed too as the sunbeam nestled in his hand, already eager for her next voyage.

“Oh, but I’m going to keep you!” cried the boy, suddenly stubborn, and squeezed his fist tight. But the sunbeam pulled free and flew away angrily, without a good-bye. The little boy couldn’t imagine why she had run away.

“But I would have protected her, Micky. I would have loved her. I never would have given her to anyone. I would have kept her safe in a box, the way Mama keeps a loose pearl. Why did she run away?”

“That’s exactly why. Because you wanted to keep her in a box. Love your friends, but don’t squeeze your fist around them. The same goes for me, because I’ll have to leave some day. But as long as you love me, as long as you remember me, I’ll be your friend. I’ll be with you whether I’m on the Radiant Mountain or anywhere else.”

Micky smiled and began a new game. The boy tried to imagine the Radiant Mountain but he couldn’t, and he couldn’t imagine how to get there. Finally he decided that the Radiant Mountain was wherever Micky

was, shrugged his shoulders, and plunged into the game. The Tower rang with their laughter and shook with the running of their feet.

The boy threw off his illness like a tight shirt. The doctors looked at each other, baffled, and the mother's eyes were round with astonishment. Only a few days ago, the boy had been as translucent as glass, what had changed him so? What was the commotion in his room? Where was that laughter coming from? She started asking his questions, looking for his secret, but the boy only shook his head.

"Don't ask me anything, Mamma. I can't tell you." But he wasn't old enough to know that curiosity is worse than the damp and the mold; it can find a way through the strongest mountain, eat through the rock. The mother began to spy on her son. She found an old woman to look after him. The child's face lost its glow; his laugh was choked out. Micky came less and less, and their games lasted only a few moments, when the old woman left the room or his mother was away. As soon as footsteps sounded in the hall, Micky would leave.

But what is Micky, the boy began to ask himself. "A dwarf? The Invisible Boy? Marsh fire? The Prince of the Clouds himself? He found no answer. But it wasn't important; Micky kept on visiting him. Only for a short while to be sure, but what visits those were! Such happiness, so much brightness. The boy stopped fearing loneliness and became careless.

"Micky, Micky!" he shouted, running toward his tiny friend. He laughed and forgot to shut the door. It didn't help, later on, to regret that his mother had chosen that very moment to burst through the doorway and squeal with surprise. All he knew was that Micky disappeared and never came back again. Quiet and loneliness gripped the boy's throat like an iron ring.

"Micky, Micky", he whispered in the dawn and in the twilight, when everyone else in the Glass Tower was asleep, Gradually, he almost gave up hope that Micky would ever return and he sank into silence. The days went by. Emptiness pressed down, but he kept on waiting.

One morning he heard the door open, then a light step and a familiar voice saying,

"Get up and come, boy!"

"Micky!" cried the boy. "I can't see you!"

"No, you can't." Micky's light hand touched the boy's cheek. "But I'm here, in you, in the grass, in the leaves, in the frog, in the stars. I'm in the grains for dust and the rays of the sun. Look carefully! I can't escape

you as long as you are waiting for me, as long as you are thinking of me. Don't you see that even the cloud in the sky has my face?" The little guest's laughter flowed all through the room.

"And now, get up and come. It's a long way to the Radiant Mountain?"

Translated from Serbian by G. G. Champe