

FICTION

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## LITTLE MAN

BY MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM

ILLUSTRATION BY ZOHAR LAZAR

**W**hat if you had a child?

If you had a child, your life would be about more than getting through the various holiday rushes, and wondering exactly how insane Mrs. Witters in Accounts Payable is going to be on any given day. It'd be about procuring tiny shoes and pull toys and dental checkups; it'd be about paying into a college fund.

The unextraordinary house to which you return nightly? It'd be someone's future ur-house. It'd be the place that someone would remember, decades hence, as a seat of comfort and succor, its rooms rendered larger and grander, exalted, by memory. This sofa, those lamps, purchased in a hurry, deemed good enough for now (they seem to be here still, years later)—they'd be legendary to someone.

Imagine reaching the point at which you want a child more than you can remember ever wanting anything else.

Having a child is not, however, anything like ordering a pizza. Even less so if you're a malformed, dwarfish man whose occupation, were you forced to name one, would be . . . What would you call yourself? A goblin? An imp? Adoption agencies are reluctant about doctors and lawyers if they're single and over forty. So go ahead. Apply to adopt an infant as a two-hundred-year-old gnome.

You are driven slightly insane—you try to talk yourself down; it works some nights better than others—by the fact that, for so much of the population, children simply . . . appear. *Bing bang boom*. A single act of love and, nine months later, this flowering, as mindless and senseless as a crocus bursting out of a bulb.



It's one thing to envy wealth and beauty and other gifts that seem to have been granted to others, but not to you, by obscure but undeniable givers. It's another thing entirely to yearn for what's so readily available to any drunk and barmaid who link up for three minutes in a dark corner of any dank and scrofulous pub.

**Y**ou listen carefully, then, when you hear the rumor. Some impoverished miller—a man whose business is going under (the small-mill owners, the ones who grind by hand, are vanishing; their flour and meal cost twice as much as the big-brand products, which are free of the gritty bits that can find their way into a sack of flour no matter how careful you are), a man who has no health insurance or investments or pension plan (he's needed every cent just to keep the mill open)—that man has told the King that his daughter can spin straw into gold.

The miller must have felt driven to it. He must have thought he needed a claim that outrageous to attract the attention of the King.

You suppose (as an aspiring parent yourself, you prefer to think of other parents as under-deranged) he is hoping that if he can get his daughter into the palace, if he can figure out a way for her to meet the King, for the King to see the pale grace of the girl's neck and her shy smile, and hear the sweet clarinet tone of her soft but surprisingly sonorous voice, the King will be so smitten (doesn't every father believe his daughter to be irresistible?) that he'll forget about the absurd straw-into-gold story.

The miller is apparently unable to imagine all the pale-necked, shyly smiling girls the King has met already. Like most fathers, he finds it inconceivable that his daughter may not be singular; that she may be lovely and funny and smart but not so exceptionally so as to obliterate all the other contending girls.

The miller, poor, foolish, doting father that he is, never expected his daughter to be locked into a room full of straw and commanded to spin it all into gold by morning, any more than most fathers expect their daughters to be unsought after by boys, or rejected by colleges, or abused by the men they eventually marry. Such notions rarely appear on the spectrum of paternal possibility.

It gets worse.

The King, who really hates being duped, announces, from the doorway of the cellar room filled with straw, that if the girl hasn't spun it all into gold by morning he'll have her executed.

What? Wait a minute . . . .

The miller starts to confess, to beg forgiveness. He was joking; no, he was sinfully proud. He wanted his daughter to meet the King. He was worried about her future. I mean, Your Majesty, you can't be thinking of *killing* her. . . .

The King gives the miller a glacial look, has a guard escort him away, and withdraws, locking the door behind him.

Here's where you come in.

You're descended from a long line of minor wizards. Your people have, for generations, been able to summon rain, exorcise poltergeists, find lost wedding rings.

No one in the family, not in the past few centuries, at any rate, has thought of making a living at it. It's not . . . respectable. It smells of desperation. And—as is the way with spells and conjurings—it's not a hundred per cent reliable. It's an art, not a science. Who wants to refund a farmer's money as he stands destitute in his still parched fields? Who wants to say, "I'm sorry, it works most of the time," to the elderly couple who still hear cackles of laughter coming from under their mattress, whose cutlery still jumps up from the dinner table and flies around the room?

When you hear the story about the girl who can supposedly spin straw into gold (it's the talk of the kingdom), you don't immediately think, This might be a way for me to get a child. That would be too many steps down the line for most people, and you, though you have a potent heart and ferocity of intention, are not a particularly serious thinker. You work more from instinct. It's instinct, then, that tells you, Help this girl and good may come of it. Maybe simply because you, and you alone, have something to offer her. You who've never before had much to offer any of the girls who passed by, leaving traces of perfume in their wake, a quickening of the air they so recently occupied.

Spinning straw into gold is beyond your current capabilities, but not necessarily impossible to learn. There are ancient texts. There's your Aunt Farfalee, who is older than some of the texts but still alive, as far as you know, and the only truly gifted member of your ragtag cohort, who are generally more prone to make rats speak in Flemish, or to summon beetles out of other people's Christmas pies.

**C**astles are easy to penetrate. Most people don't know that; most people think of them as fortified, impregnable. Castles, however, have been remodelled and revised, over and over, by countless generations. There was the child-king who insisted on secret passageways, with peepholes that opened through the eyes of the ancestral portraits. There was the paranoid king who had escape tunnels dug, miles of them, opening out into woods, country lanes, and graveyards.

So when you materialize in the chamber full of straw it has nothing to do with magic. The girl, though, is surprised and impressed. Already you've got credibility.

And at first glance you see why the miller thought his gamble might work. She's a true beauty, slightly unorthodox, in the way of most great beauties. Her skin is as smooth and poreless as pale-pink china, her nose ever so slightly longer than it should be, her brown-black eyes wide-set, sable-lashed, all but quivering with curiosity, with depths.

She stares at you. She doesn't speak. Her life, since this morning, has become so strange to her (she who yesterday was sewing grain sacks and sweeping stray corn kernels from the floor) that the sudden appearance of a twisted and stub-footed man, just under four feet tall, with a chin as long as a turnip, seems merely another in the new string of impossibilities.

You tell her you're there to help. She nods her thanks. You get to work.

It doesn't go well, at first. The straw, run through the spinning wheel, comes out simply as straw, shredded and bent.

You refuse to panic, though. You repeat, silently, the spell taught to you by Aunt Farfalee (who is by now no bigger than a badger, with blank white eyes and fingers as thin and stiff as icicles). You concentrate—belief is crucial. One of the reasons that ordinary people are incapable of magic is a simple dearth of conviction.

And, eventually . . . yes. The first few stalks are only touched with gold, like eroded relics, but the next are more gold than straw, and, soon enough, the wheel is spitting out strand upon strand of pure golden straw, not the hard yellow of some gold but a yellow suffused with pink, ever so slightly incandescent in the torch-lit room.

You both—you and the girl—watch, enraptured, as the piles of straw dwindle and the golden strands skitter onto the limestone floor. It's the closest you've come yet to love, to lovemaking—you at the spinning wheel and the girl behind you (she forgetfully puts her gentle hand on your shoulder), watching in shared astonishment as the straw is spun into gold.

When it's all finished, she says, "My lord."

You're not sure whether she's referring to you or to God.

"Glad to be of service," you answer. "I should go now."

"Let me give you something."

"No need."

But still she takes a strand of beads from her neck and holds them out to you. They're garnets, cheap, probably dyed, though in this room, at this moment, with all that golden straw emanating its faint light, they're as potently red-black as heart's blood.

She says, "My father gave me these for my eighteenth birthday."

She drapes the necklace over your head. An awkward moment occurs when the beads catch on your chin, but the girl lifts them off, and her fingertips brush against your face. The strand of beads falls onto your chest. Onto the declivity where, were you a normal man, your chest would be.

"Thank you," she says.

You bow and depart. She sees you slipping away through the secret door, devoid of hinges or knob, one of many commissioned by the long-dead paranoid king.

"That's not magic," she says, laughing.

"No," you answer. "But magic is sometimes all about knowing where the secret door is and how to open it."

With that, you're gone.

**Y**ou hear about it the next day, as you walk along the outskirts of town, wearing the strand of garnets under your stained woollen shirt.

The girl pulled it off. She spun the straw into gold.

The King's response? Do it again tonight, in a bigger room, with twice as much straw.

He's joking, right?

He's not joking. This, after all, is the King who passed the law about putting trousers on cats and dogs, who made laughing too loudly a punishable crime. According to rumor, he was abused by his father, the last King. But that's the story people always tell, isn't it, when they want to explain inexplicable behavior?

**Y**ou do it again that night. The spinning is effortless by now. As you spin, you perform little comic flourishes for the girl. You spin for a while one-handed. You spin with your back to the wheel. You spin with your eyes closed.

She laughs and claps her hands.

This time, when you've finished, she gives you a ring. It, too, is cheap—silver, with a speck of diamond sunk into it.

She says, "This was my mother's."

She slips it onto your pinkie. It fits, just barely. You stand for a moment staring at your hand, which is not by any standards a pretty sight, with its knobbed knuckles and thick, yellowed nails. But here it is, your hand, with her ring on one of its fingers.

You slip away without speaking. You're afraid that anything you say would be embarrassingly earnest.

**T**he next day . . .

Right. One last roomful of straw, twice the size again. The King insists on this third and final act of alchemy. He believes, it seems, that value resides in threes, which would explain the three garish and unnecessary towers he's had plunked onto the castle walls, the three advisers to whom he never listens, the three annual parades in celebration of nothing in particular beyond the King himself.

And . . .

If the girl pulls it off one more time, the King has announced, he'll marry her, make her his queen.

That's the reward? Marriage to a man who'd have had you decapitated if you failed to produce not just one but three miracles?

Surely the girl will refuse.

You go to the castle one more time and do it again. It should be routine by now, the sight of the golden straw piling up, the fiery gleam of it, but somehow repetition hasn't rendered it commonplace. It is (or so you imagine) a little like being in love, like wondering anew, every morning, at the outwardly unremarkable fact that your lover is there, in bed beside you, about to open her eyes, and that your face will be the first thing she sees.

When you've finished, she says, "I'm afraid I have nothing more to give you."

You pause. You're shocked to realize that you want something more from her. You've told yourself, the past two nights, that the necklace and the ring are marvels, but extraneous acts of gratitude, that you'd have done what you did for nothing more than the sight of her thankful face.

It's surprising, then, that on this final night you don't want to leave unrewarded. That you desire, with upsetting urgency, another token, a talisman, a further piece of evidence. Maybe it's because you know you won't see her again.

You say, "You aren't going to marry him, are you?"

She looks down at the floor, which is littered with stray strands of gold.

She says, "I'd be queen."

"But you'd be married to him, the man who was going to kill you if you didn't produce the goods."

She lifts her head and looks at you.

"My father could live in the palace with me."

"And yet. You can't marry a monster."

"My father would live in the castle. The King's physicians would attend to him. He's ill—grain dust gets into your lungs."

You're as surprised as she is when you hear yourself say, "Promise me your firstborn child, then."

She stares at you, dumbfounded, by way of an answer.

You've said it, though. You may as well forge on.

"Let me raise your first child," you say. "I'll be a good father. I'll teach the child magic. I'll teach the child generosity and forgiveness. The King isn't going to do much along those lines, don't you think?"

"If I refuse," she says, "will you expose me?"

Oh.

*"I got that one for being a good boy."*

You don't want to descend to blackmail. You wish she hadn't posed the question, and you have no idea how to answer. You'd never expose her. But you're so sure of your ability to rescue the still unconceived child, who, without your help, will be abused by his father (don't men who've been abused always do the same to their children?) and become

another punishing and capricious king, who'll demand meaningless parades and still gaudier towers and God knows what else.

She interprets your silence as a yes. Yes, you'll turn her in if she doesn't promise the child to you.

She says, "All right, then. I promise to give you my firstborn child."

You could take it back. You could tell her that you were kidding, that you'd never take a woman's child.

But you find—surprise—that you like this capitulation from her, this helpless compliance, from the most recent embodiment of all the girls over all the years who've given you nothing, not even a curious glance.

Welcome to the darker side of love.

You leave, again without speaking. This time, though, it's not for fear of embarrassment. This time it's because you're greedy and ashamed; it's because you want the child, you need the child, and yet you can't bear to be yourself at this moment; you can't stand there any longer enjoying your mastery over her.

**T**he royal wedding takes place. Suddenly this common girl, this miller's daughter, is a celebrity; her face emblazons everything from banners to souvenir coffee mugs.

And she looks like a queen. Her glowy pallor, her dark intelligent eyes, are every bit as royal-looking as they need to be.

A year later, when the little boy is born, you go to the palace.

You've thought of letting it pass—of course you have—but, after those months of sleepless musing over the life ahead, your return to the solitude and hopelessness in which you've lived for the past year (while people have tried to sell you key chains and medallions with the girl's face on them, assuming, as well they might, that you're just another customer, you, who wear the string of garnets under your shirt, the silver ring on your finger) . . . you can't let it pass.

Until those nights of spinning, no girl ever let you get close enough for you to realize that you're possessed of wit and allure and compassion, that you'd be coveted, you'd be sought after, if you were just . . .





Neither Aunt Farfalee nor the oldest and most revered of the texts has anything to say about transforming gnomes into straight-spined, striking men. Aunt Farfalee told you, in the low, rattling sigh that was once her voice, that magic has its limits, that the flesh has, over centuries, proved consistently vulnerable to afflictions but never, not even for the most potent of wizards, subject to improvement.

You go to the palace.

It's not hard to get an audience with the King and Queen. One of the traditions, a custom so old and entrenched that even this King doesn't dare abolish it, is the weekly Wednesday audience, at which any citizen who wishes to can appear in the throne room and register a complaint.

You are not the first in line. You wait as a corpulent young woman reports that a coven of witches in her district is causing the goats to walk on their hind legs and saunter into her house as if they owned the place. You wait as an old man objects to the new tax being levied on every denizen who lives past the age of eighty, which is the King's way of claiming for himself what would otherwise be passed along to his subjects' heirs.

As you stand in line, you see that the Queen has noticed you.

She looks entirely natural on the throne, every bit as much as she does on banners and mugs and key chains. She has noticed you, but nothing has changed in her expression. She listens, with the customary feigned attention, to the woman whose goats are sitting down to dinner with the family, to the man who doesn't want his fortune sucked away before he dies. It's widely known that these audiences with the King and Queen never produce results of any kind. Still, people want to come and be heard.

As you wait, you notice the girl's father, the miller (the former miller), seated among the members of court, in a tricorne hat and an ermine collar. He regards the line of assembled supplicants with a dowager aunt's indignity and an expression of sentimental piety—the recently bankrupt man who gambled with his daughter's life and, thanks to you, won.

When your turn arrives, you bow to Queen and King. The King nods his traditional, absent-minded acknowledgment. His head might have been carved from marble. His eyes are ice blue under the rim of his gem-encrusted crown. He might already be, in life, the stone likeness of himself that will top his sarcophagus.

You say, "My Queen, I think you know what I've come for."

The King looks disapprovingly at his wife. His face bears no hint of a question. He skips over the possibility of innocence. He wonders only what, exactly, it is that she has done.

The Queen nods. You can't tell what's going through her mind. Apparently, she has learned, during the past year, how to evince an expression of royal opacity, something she did not possess when you were spinning the straw into gold for her.

She says, "Please reconsider."

You're not about to reconsider. You might have considered reconsidering before you found yourself in the presence of these two, this tyrannical and ignorant monarch and the girl who agreed to marry him.

You tell her that a promise was made. You leave it at that.

She glances over at the King, and can't conceal a moment of miller's-daughter nervousness.

She turns to you again. She says, "This is awkward, isn't it?"

You waver. You're assaulted by conflicting emotions. You understand the position she's in. You care for her. You're in love with her. It's probably the hopeless ferocity of your love that impels you to stand firm, to refuse her refusal—she who has, on the one hand, succeeded spectacularly and, on the other, consented to what must be, at best, a chilly and brutal marriage. You can't simply relent and walk back out of the room. You can't bring yourself to be so debased.

She doesn't care for you, after all. You're someone who did her a favor once. She doesn't even know your name.

With that thought, you decide to offer a compromise.

You tell her, in the general spirit of her husband's fixation on threes, that she has three days to guess your name. If she can accomplish that, if she can guess your name within the next three days, the deal's off.

If she can't . . .

You do not, of course, say this aloud, but if she can't you'll raise the child in a forest glade. You'll teach him the botanical names of the trees, and the secret names of the animals. You'll instruct him in the arts of mercy and patience. And you'll see, in the boy, certain of her aspects—the great dark pools of her eyes, maybe, or her slightly exaggerated, aristocratic nose.

The Queen nods in agreement. The King scowls. He can't, however, ask questions, not here, not with his subjects lined up before him. He can't appear to be baffled, underinformed, misused.

You bow again and, as straight-backed as your torqued spine will allow, you stride out of the throne room.

**Y**ou'll never know what went on between Queen and King once they were alone together. You hope that she confessed everything and insisted that a vow, once made, cannot be broken. You even go so far as to imagine that she defended you for your offer of a possible reprieve.

You suspect, though, that she still feels endangered, that she can't be sure her husband will forgive her for allowing him to believe that she herself spun the straw into gold. Having produced a male heir, she has now, after all, rendered herself dispensable. And so, when confronted, she probably came up with . . . some tale of spells and curses, some fabrication in which you, a hobgoblin, are entirely to blame.

You wish you could feel more purely angry about that possibility. You wish you didn't sympathize, not even a little, with her in the predicament she's created for herself.

This, then, is love. This is the experience from which you've felt exiled for so long. This rage mixed with empathy, this simultaneous desire for admiration and victory.

You wish you found it more unpleasant. Or, at any rate, you wish you found it as unpleasant as it actually is.

**T**he Queen sends messengers out all over the kingdom, in an attempt to track down your name. You know how futile that is. You live in a cottage carved into a tree, so deep in the woods that no hiker or wanderer has ever passed by. You have no friends, and your relatives live not only far away but in residences at least as obscure as your own (consider Aunt Farfalee's tiny grotto, reachable only by swimming fifty feet under water). You're not registered anywhere. You've never signed anything.

You return to the castle the next day, and the next. The King scowls murderously (what story has he been told?) as the Queen runs through a gamut of guesses.

Althalos? Borin? Cassius? Cedric? Destrain? Fendrel? Hadrian? Gavin? Gregory? Lief? Merek? Rowan? Rulf? Sadon? Tybalt? Xalvador? Zane?

No no no no no no no no no no no no no no and no.

It's looking good.

But then, on the night of the second day, you make your fatal mistake.

You'll ask yourself, afterward, Why did I build a fire in front of the cottage tree and do that little song and dance? It seems harmless at the time, and you are so happy, so sure. You find yourself sitting alone in your parlor, thinking of where the cradle should go, wondering who'll teach you how to fold a diaper, picturing the child's face as he looks up at you and says, "Father."

It's too much, just sitting inside like that, by yourself. It's too little. You hurry out into the blackness of the forest night, amid the chirruping of the insects and the far-off hoots of the owls. You build a fire. You grant yourself a pint of ale, and then you grant yourself another. And, almost against your will, it seems that you're dancing around the fire. It seems that you've made up a song:

    |           Tonight I brew, tomorrow I bake,  
          And then the Queen's child I will take.  
          For little knows the royal dame . . .

How likely is it that the youngest of the Queen's messengers, the one most desperate for advancement, the one who's been threatened with dismissal (he's too fervent and dramatic in his delivery of messages, he bows too low, he's getting on the King's nerves) . . . how likely is it that that particular young hustler, knowing every inch of the civilized kingdom to have been scoured already, every door knocked on, will think to go out into the woods that night, wondering if he's wasting precious time but hoping that maybe, just maybe, the little man lives off the grid?

How likely is it that he'll see your fire, creep through the bracken, and listen to the ditty you're singing?

**Y**ou return, triumphant, to the castle on the third and final afternoon. You are for the first time in your life a figure of power, of threat. Finally, you cannot be ignored or dismissed.

The Queen appears to be flustered. She says, "Well, then, this is my last chance."

You have the courtesy to refrain from answering.

She says, "Is it Brom?"

No.

"Is it Leofrick?"

No.

“Is it Ulric?”

No.

Then there is a moment—a millimoment, the tiniest imaginable fraction of time—when the Queen thinks of giving her baby to you. You see it in her face. There’s a moment when she knows that she could rescue you as you once rescued her, when she imagines throwing it all away and going off with you and her child. She does not, could not, love you, but she remembers standing in the room on that first night, when the straw started turning to gold, when she understood that an impossible situation had been met with an impossible result, when she unthinkingly laid her hand on the sackcloth-covered gnarls of your shoulder, and she thinks (*whoosh*, by the time you’ve read *whoosh*, she’s no longer thinking it) that she could leave her heartless husband, she could live in the woods with you and the child. . . .

*Whoosh.*

The King shoots her an arctic glare. She looks at you, her dark eyes avid and level, her neck arched and her shoulders flung back.

She speaks your name.

It’s not possible.

The King grins a conquering, predatory grin. The Queen turns away.

The world, which was about to transform itself, changes back again. The world reveals itself to be nothing more than you, about to scuttle out of the throne room, hurry through town, and return to the empty little house that’s always there, that’s always been there, waiting for you.

You stamp your right foot. You stamp it so hard, with such enchantment-compelled force, that it goes right through the marble floor, sinks to your ankle.

You stamp your left foot. Same thing. You are standing now, trembling, insane with fury and disappointment, ankle-deep in the royal floor.

The Queen keeps her face averted. The King emits a peal of laughter that sounds like defeat itself.

And, with that, you split in half.

It's the strangest sensation imaginable. It's as if some strip of invisible tape that's been holding you together, from mid-forehead to crotch, had suddenly been stripped away. It's no more painful than pulling off a bandage. And then you fall onto your knees, and you're looking at yourself, twice, both of you pitched forward, blinking in astonishment at a self who is blinking in astonishment at you, who are blinking in astonishment at him, who is blinking in astonishment at you. . . .

The Queen silently summons two of the guards, who pull you in two pieces from the floor in which you've become mired, who carry you, one half apiece, out of the room. They take you all the way back to your place in the woods and leave you there.

There are two of you now. Neither is sufficient unto himself, but you learn, over time, to join your two halves together and hobble around. There are limits to what you can do, though you're able to get from place to place. Each half, naturally, requires the coöperation of the other, and you find yourself getting snappish with yourself; you find yourself cursing yourself for your clumsiness, your overeagerness, your lack of consideration for your other half. You feel it doubly. Still, you go on. Still, you step in tandem, make your careful way up and down the stairs, admonishing, warning, each of you urging the other to slow down, or speed up, or wait a second. What else can you do? Each would be helpless without the other. Each would be stranded, laid flat, abandoned, bereft. ♦

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**MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM**

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