

The Three Little Men

For Nicholas Edward

Words by Tom Portegys

At the end of Eddie's twelfth summer, the sky was a million miles high and it was very hot. Even the trees looked sort of tired of the heat. But there seemed to be something different about this summer. Every once in a while Eddie would lift his head up from whatever he was doing for no reason at all. He would look around slowly and listen, but there was only the same old backyard he knew so well. A sandbox, a rusty swingset, a dead cherry tree, a tall evergreen, a taller maple tree, and lots of wild looking bushes around the sides. It also had Eddies' playhouse, which he shared with his sister Eva.

One time Eddie stayed outside a little later than usual after supper and was swinging on the swingset. The yard was getting dark and the fireflies were all out dancing in the gloom. Eddie was feeling mad and nasty because his parents had made him take out the garbage during a commercial in "The Simpsons", his favorite TV show, and when he got back it was over. He didn't think about how it took him more than ten minutes to take the bag out to the can beside the garage.

And so with all the dirt-kicking and chain-rattling and mumbling of mad words Eddie didn't notice the thing almost right over his head in the dead cherry tree. It should have been so easy to see. It was big and orange and even made a kind of humming-blowing noise, like birthday candles being blown out. No, it just sat up there looking down on a fuming Eddie with big yellow eyes almost breathing down his neck and with a sort of smile on its lips. And when Eddie said the words, "I wish I was never born!", the thing in the tree bounced up and down on the old dead branch excitedly. It bounced so hard that the branch broke off and fell right down on Eddie!

The next thing Eddie knew he was on his living room sofa with an ice bag on a bump that was getting bigger and more purple by the minute. Then his father came in and said, no, there was no yellow-eyed lion in the backyard, not even a flying one. But a branch must have fallen off the dead cherry tree onto Eddie's head. And so they put Eddie to bed, and that was that. They thought!

The next morning was a Saturday, and Eddie came downstairs to watch the "Mutant Ninja Turtles", but somehow they moved the starting time to 9:00 instead of the usual 9:30, so he had to watch re-runs of "Pee Wee's Playhouse" and "Earnest" instead. A great way to start the day.

Eddie's temper had always been a problem, but had become even worse ever since Grampa Joe disappeared last summer. Grampa Joe was a quiet old man, some people even thought he was a grouch, but with Eddie his laughter rung out like an old bell struck by a silver clapper. And to Eddie, even though he didn't think much about it, Grampa Joe was like a warm blanket wrapping around him that he carried with him everywhere.

Eddie and Grampa Joe used to go fishing, even in the early part of the summer that he disappeared. They would get in Grampa's old wooden boat and set out into one of the little lakes that were scattered in the country about 5 miles south of town. Grampa knew just about all of them, including which ones had fish, of course, because he had lived around here all of his life and had explored just about every inch of the area in his mushroom hunting expeditions.

One day they found Grampa's boat floating out on jellybean lake, which was called that by Eddie because it had a jellybean shaped island in the middle of it. The boat was full of Grampa's fishing stuff, but there was no sign of Grampa. The police sent divers to search the bottom of the lake, but without any luck. It was a real mystery. As the weeks went by people's hopes began to fall. Eddie was a quiet boy, like his Grampa, and didn't show much emotion. But he felt the world grow colder without Grampa Joe nearby.

One afternoon late that fall, near to Halloween, Eddie had a day off from school and decided to go out to jellybean lake. After the strange and frightening events of the previous night and this morning, he wanted to get away and clear his head. As he walked, he went over what had happened...

He had fallen asleep next to the living room radiator with his cat, Gazumba, lying next to

his head. No one wanted to disturb him, since he looked so "peaceful", he heard his mother whisper, so they just put a blanket over him and let him be.

Sometime during the night Gazumba awakened him by sitting up suddenly, with all his cat-senses at full alert. People usually find that spooky, the way cats do that, and being alone in a dark room made it especially scary. Even so, the room was quiet and dark, the clock's steady tick the only sound, and he started to drift off when Gazumba jumped up and flowed in his stalking crouch across the floor to the stairs going to the upper floor. There he froze, and when he did, Eddie saw something that jerked his head straight up.

In front of Gazumba's eyes, something was moving, something orange and lazily flowing down the stairs and out of sight around the corner. It was almost impossible to see, except that wherever Gazumba looked at it, it seemed to glow a little more. It was like Gazumba's vision was acting as a sunbeam passing through dusty air, because little flecks were floating in the stream. Naturally, Eddie had to check this out.

Following the stream up the stairs, using Gazumba as a sort of flashlight, he traced it as far as his sister Eva's room. It was flowing out from under her door. Wondering whether to wake someone up, he decided to put his finger into the stream to investigate what it was. The stream itself felt cold, and made him feel instantly sick. The thought occurred to him that it might be radioactive, and his hair would fall out like the people in Hiroshima after the bomb fell. Radioactive? Get real! What would his sister be doing with radioactive stuff in her room?

He was now sweating, and about to pull his finger out when one of the little flecks bumped against it. Instantly, he saw himself standing next to a huge upside down shark hanging from a rope in bright sunshine. It wasn't a real shark, though. It was Universal Studios in Hollywood! A couple of years ago his family had toured there and he and Eva had stood by the shark for a picture. But something was weird - why could he see himself on the other side of the shark?

come on." Eddie got up as his mother and father nodded indulgently. This is really too good to be true, thought Eddie as he headed for the TV and the Nintendo downstairs. You see, Eddie had convinced his parents, who were not very technical, that his Nintendo acted in somewhat the same fashion as the cable TV box, and that certain games came on at certain times of the day, and that if he didn't play them at those times he would miss them. This gave him a good excuse to play Nintendo almost whenever he wished. The only problem is that he couldn't brag about this to his friends - they might consider him to be the offspring of idiots.

Squatting down in a familiar position, controls in hand, the drapes blocking out the bright sunshine outside, Mario was soon happily squashing Gumbas as he made straight for the first warp zone. It was after he went down the warp tube that his controls started acting up. Mario didn't seem to want to go where he wanted, and although he wasn't getting killed (in fact, he was playing really well), Eddie got to thinking that their rabbit must have gotten loose again and gnawed the control cord. While he inspected the control cord, he noticed that Mario had picked up a fire flower and had turned a really bright shade of orange and was madly peppering the TV screen with fireballs. This was totally out of control. Just then Gazumba fell down the stairs and landed two feet from Eddie, startling the living boogers out of him.

"Geez, Gazumba, how come you're the only cat in the world who gets his claws caught in the carpet like that?" Gazumba didn't bother to answer, having noticed some small impurity in his fur that required immediate cleansing.

Just then the TV screen cracked open and Mario jumped out right onto the floor in front of Eddie. Thought Eddie: this can't be happening. I feel dizzy. My brain must be infested with cat cooties or something like that. Yow! Pain shot up from his left ankle, where a tiny hole smoked in his sock. He jerked back, but not before Mario had zinged him again with another fireball!

Then began a bizarre chase, as Eddie scrambled away and ran around the room with a tiny orange Mario bouncing and blazing away behind him. Eddie found that he could only make little squeaking sounds, like a mouse in a trap. He also noticed that each time he was hit, he felt himself growing a little weaker and slower. The air was beginning to fill up with smoke, as tiny holes were burned into the carpet and furniture. Suddenly, a thought took shape in Eddie's mind, and he headed for the aquarium. With a last burst of energy, he grabbed an old bowling trophy of his Mom's, scooped out about a quart of water and flung it at Mario. Exhausted, he lost his balance and fell down against the wall.

The water did seem to work, as the flaming glow around Mario went out. But soon Eddie was thinking that maybe the water trick was a bad idea because now he could see Mario's face really well and was he furious. All Eddie could do was stare in horror as Mario stood about three feet away and raised his arms above his head. Tiny ribbons of orange light began to stream out of his fingers and head toward Eddie. He saw himself being surrounded in a cocoon of orange filaments. The blood rushed to his face, as though a vacuum was being formed around his head, and Eddie felt as if his brain might pop out of his skull. He put his hands up to his head and was alarmed to find that it really was swelling!

Then an extra pair of eyes seemed to have grown out of Mario's head. No wait, that was Gazumba, who was in his cat-crouch about three feet behind Mario. Wham! Mario was slammed face down with Gazumba on top. The orange ribbons disentangled and dissipated like smoke rings. Then Mario was being flung into the air like one of those hapless little chipmunks that Gazumba was so fond of hunting. When he hit the ground, wham!, Gazumba pounced again.

Eddie found he was able to move and got away quick. The rest of the episode was not pleasant, to say the least. Eddie had a lot of explaining to do to his parents, who clucked their tongues as he supposed that in their minds the nightmare stories of children

possessed and driven crazy by Nintendo games were confirmed. Good thing it was dark downstairs, so they didn't notice the burnt orange look of his face. Of course, he didn't mention the bit about Mario getting out of the TV. Not even they would buy that.

But as bad as it was for Eddie, judging from the sickening little snapping and crunching sounds from under the couch, it must have been a lot worse for Mario. The chipmunks in the neighborhood received a break that day, however, as Gazumba was satisfied not to go a-hunting for the rest of the morning, so there were some winners.

Anyway, those were the events of the last 24 hours, and now Eddie trudged along the path to jellybean lake, trying to make sense of the strange stuff. He had his fishing pole in his hand, fishing gear, book, and some peanutbutter sandwiches in a bag on his back. Gazumba was in there too, probably sleeping. Eddie figured Gazumba couldn't take off if he was on the island.

He got to the lake and set right off in Grandpa's boat for the island. It wasn't long before he was set up to fish, munching on a sandwich, and settling into his book. Gazumba woke up and set off to explore the island as soon as he let the cat out of the bag. The day was hot, the fish weren't biting, and that's a sure recipe for a nap if there ever was one. Deeply Eddie fell into slumber while the slanting autumn sun grew more golden and the shadows of gently nodding reeds grew upon his flushed face.

Darkness had crept over the lake when Eddie awoke. But it wasn't the darkness that awoke him. It was voices. Opening his eyes, the first thing he noticed was what looked like ghostly flags flying from the trees. There were still leaves up there, but ragged, wispy, gray flags seemed to be flying in the same places. Two forms were moving across the lake. *Walking* across the lake, each footfall creating a small depression in the water, as though the water were covered by a thick transparent plastic sheet. They muttered to themselves as they came toward the island. As they got nearer, Eddie could make out two incredibly skinny humanoid creatures with pale gray skin, wearing only gray rags that appeared to be made of the same material as the flags in the trees. Their facial

features seemed simple, almost doll-like, except for oversized mouths. Their hands, though, were indeed exceptional: huge for their bodies, and with great curving claws at the fingertips. Eddie began to make out bits of conversation:

"Told him, told him!"

"..now look at what happened."

"So much juice, lost lost..."

" ...again, blast that cat!"

Now Eddie could see that each of them was carrying what could only be the gory remains of Mario. Legs, arms, eyeless head, and so on, all clothed in Mario's bright colors. Eddie didn't know what these things were, but he gathered enough to know that they probably weren't going to be friendly. His thoughts flitted to Gazumba. Where was he? He hoped he would stay under cover until these creatures went their way. If he could just stay still, maybe they would pass by and not notice him. They came within five feet of Eddie as they set foot on the island. Then they were moving away...

"Gotcha!", yelled one of them, suddenly appearing six inches from Eddie's face.

Eddie screamed out something like "Werf!", and jumped to his feet.

"Popcorn and pumpkins guts! Do you think a smelly mud-footed thing like you could escape our notice?", asked the creature, leering evilly.

"Hitch, the mud-foot can see us! Do you know what that means?", said the other one.

"You're right Fitch! Just a little push, and pop goes the pumpkin", laughed the one called Hitch.

"Who are you?", blurted Eddie. "What are you doing with that Mario corpse?"

Hitch and Fitch looked at each other and laughed. "We", said Fitch, "are Mynmyns. And you will soon know more about us than you would ever care to know! Now, empty out your pockets and stand still while I measure you".



"You're wacko!", said Eddie. "Go measure yourself! You know what I think? I'm still asleep, that's what. You two are bits of bad dream fantasy. Some leftovers from a cheap space vampire movie".

"You're right!", cried Hitch, "But that doesn't make us any less real, you know. Not for the person that you've become".

"You are speaking in total riddles.", said Eddie, trying not to shoot his mouth off again as he sized up the Freddie Krueger claws on these two. "Now if you will excuse me, I must be getting home. People will be getting worried."

"Nonononono, not yet, not ever yet", said Fitch. "When we get to 'yet', we'll let you know. What about those pockets - we don't have all night. You're uneasy, is that it? We know. We've ridden your kind before. Sometimes for years. We get to know what makes you quake and quiver. Hey, maybe I can ride you now". While Fitch talked, Hitch had moved around in back of Eddie, hemming him in.

They are just a couple of weird muggers, thought Eddie. But I better try to talk some more. "Look, I don't have much, but you are welcome to it. Here." He began pulling stuff out of his pockets and tossing it down on the ground. Gum wrappers, rubber bands, a few coins, stuff like that. They quickly put down Mario and snapped it all up with greedy hands.

"That's it?", gritted Fitch with feverish eyes. "I don't feel satisfied with this, not at all".

Then Eddie felt Hitch's claws begin to dig into his shoulders from behind and he knew that he was in trouble. This might be a dream, but he was fully awake in it. Fitch came forward, clashing and gnashing.

Suddenly the earth exploded beneath Fitch and a big arm shot out. It was a man's arm, and a big one at that. The arm hit Fitch right in the butt so hard that Fitch became airborne. He shot over Eddie's head, landing on top of Hitch. They both fell to the ground, screeching horribly.

The arm then pulled back into the ground, leaving a glowing opening in its place. Eddie wanted to look closer, but the Mynmyns were getting up fast. So he took off running.

He had been over the little island many times before, but never had Eddie seen the things that he saw as he ran for the center of the island, where he knew there was a little shack that could be locked from the inside. Pumpkins! Big pumpkins in shades of orange and blue and green, some over five feet tall. Some grew alone, others grew right out of the sides of trees. Others had big purple and red veins on them. Oh no! Poor Gazumba! Eddie saw Gazumba clinging to the side of a tree, with a vine in his back! The vine was connected to one of the pumpkins and something was draining from the cat into the pumpkin. Gazumba didn't look like he could move.

Even though Hitch and Fitch were gaining on him, Eddie didn't hesitate. He threw his knee into the side of the pumpkin. He was surprised when it caved in, like a big beach ball. He was even more surprised when big yellow eyes appeared on the surface of the pumpkin. The vine pulled free from Gazumba and the cat shot off. With no time to spare, Eddie resumed his route to the island center. At least Gazumba was free again.

He made it to the center clearing with his lungs bursting, and saw that the shack had been replaced by a huge eight foot tall pumpkin with a door in it. The clearing itself was a mass of pumpkin vines through which Eddie had to high-step. I just hope the lock hasn't changed, thought Eddie, as he threw open the door. A blast of scorching hot yellow light met him, knocking him back on his butt.

Through slitted eyes, Eddie made out the form of someone inside the yellow furnace. The figure slowly emerged through the door, and it swung shut behind him, extinguishing the light at once.

"Welcome, Eddie. I've been expecting you", said the figure.

The first thing Eddie did was to glance quickly around, half-expecting a mass of claws to close on his face. Instead, he saw Hitch, Fitch, and the Pumpkin-thing halted at the edge

of clearing, cursing and hopping. The Pumpkin-thing seemed to move by bouncing along the ground like a rubber ball.

"Don't worry, you're safe here.", heard Eddie. He turned and took a look at the speaker. The first thing that popped into his mind was Peter Pan, or one of the Lost Boys. He appeared to be a boy about Eddie's age, slightly smaller, with an impish expression. He had a very confident stance, maybe even arrogant. His hair (surprise surprise) was bright orange. But what was most peculiar about him were his eyes - flame yellow. He wore simple clothes, all green.

"Having a good stare? Fine. You must realize by now that you aren't in Kansas anymore, Eddie, and I have business for you. Only if you follow my instructions will you get off this island and back home again".

"That's the best thing I've heard yet.", said Eddie, and he really meant it.

"Yes, now, your mind is bubbling with questions, so let me say what I must say to keep you out of trouble. The rest is best left unsaid. You wouldn't want to have nightmares the rest of your life, would you? Sit down over there and I'll begin".

Eddie sat where the boy pointed, but moved the vines out from under him when they squirmed, remembering the vine in Gazumba's back.

"My name is Jack and I am a prisoner on this island.", said the boy.

"Just tell me this. Why haven't I seen you or any of this before?", shouted Eddie.

Jack held up one finger to shush him. "Quiet. You are still on the island you know, but it is you that have changed, not the island. I know about what happened to you with your electronic game at home, and the best way I can explain it is that you have one foot in your old familiar world and one foot in this world. There are other things which also exist in one or another or both worlds at the same time. For example, the trees on the island live in both. Your cat also. You must have noticed how he often seems to be listening to or seeing things that aren't there. Well in fact he is really sensing things that

you can't. The Mynmyns don't exist in your old world, as you might guess. Some things can only cross over from one world to the other at certain times or for special reasons".

"As I said, I am a prisoner here, and now you are too. But we are not being kept by the Mynmyns. They can be dealt with. Our real jailers are three little men who live below the island, down below the roots of the trees. They are really evil little people who want to prevent anyone from bringing any happiness to the world. They found out I was making Halloween a lot more fun for kids so they kidnapped me and took me here. You're probably wondering why they picked you. I've seen how you and your Grandpa used to come out to this lake many times and what good times you had together. The three little men saw that also and that must have really burned them up".

"So they took your Grandpa and are holding him down below.", said Jack.

Eddie was thunderstruck. He felt like crying with joy. He was speechless. He couldn't believe it. Then he remembered the arm that had rear-ended the Mynmyn. It looked like Grandpa's arm.

"You and I can get him and ourselves free if we work together.", said Jack. "How about it?"

"I'm with you!", cried Eddie, jumping up. "How and when do we start?"

"When midnight comes, the little men will go to sleep", said Jack, "That's the time to go. The trouble is, they have sealed off all the passages down to their lair, so I don't know how to get down there. We may have to dig".

"I think I know where to start!", said Eddie. Then he explained about the arm popping through the ground back by the shore.

"Great! Now we should protect ourselves and rest until midnight". Then Jack went back into the big pumpkin and came back with a black medallion and a green staff.

"Here, take these. Only someone from your world can use these successfully. One of the powers of the little men is the power of hypnotic speech. If you hear them, you will instantly have to obey them. The medallion will prevent you from hearing them. The staff will kill spiders and cut the webs which hold the little mens' magical spells of control over the island and your Grandfather."

Eddie took them. Then Jack told Eddie to sleep outside the pumpkin until he came to wake him. He brought out a sweet purple drink that instantly made him drowsy. Then Jack went back into the pumpkin. Eddie noticed that the Pumpkin-thing and the Mynmyns were gone. Eddie called for Gazumba for a while with no success. Then, exhausted and dopey, he lay down and dropped off into sleep.

Nightmares came to Eddie as he slept. First, he saw a giant Gazumba, bigger than a saber-tooth tiger, arched over Jack's pumpkin, waiting to pounce on Jack the moment he came through the door. He called to Gazumba, but he would not heed Eddie. Only once did the cat's gaze meet with Eddie's and he knew that whatever reasons Gazumba had, he really meant business. He tried to get up but his arms and legs had turned to green pumpkin vines, and he could only bounce his head up and down on the ground.

Ow! He jerked his head up after a particularly hard bounce. Eddie looked around and wondered what time it was. It must be very late. Up in the sky the moon was a wondrous disc of glowing silver. Then Eddie saw *another* smaller moon just over the trees, close and moving as fast as a jetliner. He could actually make out details on its surface, what looked like tiny lakes and hills and forests, and even what looked like villages and towns. Quickly it dipped below the tree line and out of sight. Still drugged with sleep, Eddie had no strength to consider this wonder, as his head once again began to fall.

"It's time Eddie. Let's go get your Grandfather."

Eddie opened his eyes and saw Jack, yellow eyes glowing, even in the moon's strong

light. Now he felt full of a strange jerky sort of energy, like invisible strings were pulling on his limbs. He stood up and picked up the medallion and the staff.

"I'll show you where the hole is.", said Eddie.

So off they went, backtracking the route Eddie had taken earlier. It became quite clear at once that they were being followed, probably by Mynmyns, but Eddie felt confident that Jack could deal with them.

Soon they reached the place where the arm had come out of the ground. The hole was not there, but there was a depression where the arm had pulled back under. They dug there with their hands in the loose soil, and they found a narrow passage which quickly widened as it headed toward the base of a nearby huge willow tree.

"Willows - the most evil of trees.", whispered Jack.

As they widened the hole, Eddie found that a pale blue light illuminated it, but seemed to be coming from no particular source.

"Lead the way", said Jack. "Watch out for spiders and listen for any sounds that your Grandfather might make. Let me know when it is safe for me to come down."

Eddie put the medallion in his pocket, took up the staff, and slipped into the hole. He slid about fifteen feet and came to a stop just inside a dim chamber under a massive snarl of willow roots. He waited for the dust to clear. Then he inspected the chamber.

The floor was mostly smooth powdery dirt, but Eddie could see many footprints in a line across the center of it. He followed the line to a shadowy opening on the opposite side. The footprints gave support that Jack was telling the truth, as there were a few large prints and many tiny ones. Then Eddie noticed slivers of orange light coming from a corner of the roof of the chamber. He walked over and saw a tube-like formation of roots, almost solid, but not quite. In the cracks he could see an orange substance moving through the root-tube, entering the chamber and leaving it about five feet later. The roots of the tube were withered and sweating a blood-red sap onto the floor. In one place Eddie

could get a good look at the orange stuff.

He went over to the tunnel and motioned Jack to follow. A short time later, Jack was dusting himself off with a distasteful look on his face. At once he saw Eddie in the corner, his finger stuck in the root-tube, and a faraway look on his face.

"Get away from there!", hissed Jack so violently that Eddie fell away at once.

"What is that stuff?" asked Eddie "I've seen it before. What does it mean?"

"Never mind that now. Just believe me that the little men are involved with it. Now let's go before they wake up".

Eddie led the way into the opening on the other side. A few seconds after they disappeared, a small shape tumbled down into the chamber unnoticed.

Eddie noticed that the tunnel immediately sloped downward through a tangle of tree roots. The blue light now seemed to be contained in a sort of light mist that was wafting up the tunnel, carrying a pleasantly sweet odor. They proceeded straight downward, ignoring the occasional dark side tunnel. The root-and-dirt tunnel gradually gave way to stone, and a little stream of cold clear water appeared which gurgled down the center of the passage, masking their footfalls. Eddie thought they must be heading back for the center of the island.

During the descent, there was time for Eddie's curiosity to surface. "I have to ask you - where did these little men come from and why?".

"A world far away. But I don't know why they came. Maybe to set up some plot to take over things. Maybe just to make trouble. I don't really care.", answered Jack.

Eddie followed a hunch. "Would that far away world be an invisible moon?".

Jack didn't answer right away, and Eddie noticed that he stiffened with surprise and glanced at Eddie with narrow suspicious eyes. Looks like I saw something I wasn't supposed to, thought Eddie.

"Yeah, well, it is actually a moon", Jack finally conceded.

The stream grew stronger as they went, and they could hear even louder water noises up ahead. Finally, the tunnel opened into a large circular rock room. There were other tunnels opening into the room, all with streams issuing forth from them. Eddie wondered where those other tunnels led to. The room had a rough stone floor and a huge dark design high up in the gloom of the ceiling. The streams rushed in channels over the floor to the center of the room, where they vanished down a hole.

"I want to look at the hole closer", said Eddie.

Eddie led Jack to the edge of the hole which was about five feet across. Looking down, Eddie noticed that the edge was shaped to cause the water to form a tube as it fell. He also saw that it fell directly through a hole in a room just below the one they were in. This room was lit by a silvery light that reminded Eddie of the strange moon he saw a few hours ago. The water tube continued falling, next though an area of yellow light, then blue, then silver, repeating this pattern. It looked like the inside of a beautiful multi-colored worm as it twisted through its burrow. Astonished, Eddie wondered how far it fell, as there was no sound of it hitting bottom.

The room below was blurred by the wall of water, but Eddie scanned it as far as he could see. When he bent his head to look directly under the spot where he knelt, he was shocked to see a man sitting in a rocking chair, doing something with his hands. The man was instantly familiar: it was his Grandfather! He even had on the old yellow baseball cap he always wore when they came out to the lake.

Eddie yelled "Grandpa Joe! Grandpa Joe!" several times but the water muffled his voice and his Grandfather continued to attend to his handiwork. Then Eddie had an idea. He reached his hand under the rock, stuck it into the water, and diverted some of it at his Grandfather. Eddie's watched as a big spout of cold water flopped down right in Joe's lap! He jumped out of the chair, his head snapped up, and for just a moment their eyes



met.

"Help! Help!", screamed Jack from behind Eddie. Eddie whirled around and saw no one. Jack had disappeared. Where was he?

"Up here Eddie! The staff! Use the staff!" Eddie looked up and saw Jack squirming and twisting from strings in mid-air like a frantic puppet. Then the design on the ceiling began to move, and Eddie knew he was looking at one of the fearsome subterranean spiders that Jack warned him about. Counting legs, it was about eight feet across, and it was reeling in Jack with a strand of web just like Eddie had reeled in fish up above on the lake in saner days.

But already Jack was out of Eddie's reach. Eddie could only watch in horror as Jack ascended further and further toward the spider's loathsome fangs, which were now clicking in anticipation. But when Jack reach the spider, he began to spin over and over again. The spider was wrapping him in a silk cocoon. Soon Jack had become a large pillow of silk dangling from a thread. Eddie prepared himself to fight, since he now believed the spider would try for him. However, it now seemed content to return to its motionless waiting game.

Eddie looked around the room. He didn't want to shout anymore, for fear of alerting the little men. He looked down the water-hole. Grandfather was motioning him to come down. What should he do? Try to save Jack before he might suffocate or be eaten? Or try to help Grandfather? He decided to try to get down the hole. Maybe Grandpa Joe would have some ideas. Oh, if only he had some rope!

Grandpa Joe was making motions that he would catch Eddie if he jumped, but Eddie had his doubts about that. Grandpa was strong, but Eddie was nearly 100 pounds and would be slippery wet and moving fast. He had the feeling that if he fell through the next hole, he would end up falling down that rainbow colored tube until doomsday.

Nevertheless he intended to try. He sat down on the edge, and holding the staff between

his knees, he reached across and grabbed the far edge with his hands. Then he swung himself down into the hole. Yow! The cold water immediately drenched him, and pulled down strongly on his wet clothes. Eddie quickly began to work his feet back and forth. Soon his feet were passing in and out of the water tube as he tried to build up enough momentum to leap clear of the water and land inside the lower chamber.

"Hey kid, how's it hangin'?" Eddie looked up - into the face of a Mynmyn.

"Let's see now", said the Mynmyn, carefully inspecting Eddie's hands, "'This little piggy went to market'", and he plucked one of Eddie's fingers away from the edge! "And, 'This little piggy ...', Oh I hate games.", and the Mynmyn stood up and stomped down on Eddie's right hand.

Eddie felt himself slipping away. He tried to swing one more time, but knew he was going to fall right down the center of the shaft. Over and over he went, hoping Grandpa was really as strong as he liked to think he was (and maybe really was in his prime). It seemed like he fell for hours, and then he felt hands grasping at him, and slipping off!

"Yahh!", screamed Eddie, as he prepared for a long ride into the center of the earth or wherever he was going. He reached out convulsively, and then, Boing! bounced and came to stop hanging upside down! The staff! It had jammed across the hole with his knees wrapped around it, saving him.

The next thing he knew, Grandpa was hauling him up out of the hole and into the room.

"Well hey, you little tub of guts, what have you been eating to make yourself that heavy?", asked Grandpa Joe.

"Grandpa, I don't weigh nearly as much as most of the other kids in 7th grade. Are you OK? You look OK." Well, at least as OK as an ancient old wheezer normally looks, thought Eddie.

"Well, yeah, I'm OK except for being stuck down here for now. Did you see me give a rocket ride to that Mynmyn? Then they came and got me and brought me back down

here. The food is good, and ... Hey, wait one minute, did you say the 7th grade? Your mother told me just last week you finished your last year at Pickleweed Elementary, meaning the 5th grade, right?"

"Grandpa, you don't seem to be talking like you've been gone a year. People think you are dead!", said Eddie.

"I see. Been gone a year you say?", said Grandpa, "Luckily, Eddie, I've trained my mind to deal with the strange and mysterious, or else I might take it into my head to run around in circles and scream right now. I've got to ask the little men about this".

"I've come to save you from them, Grandpa.", said Eddie, "All I need is to get in striking range with this staff and, Wack! the little men are sushi."

"Woah there, Mr. Violent!" Eddie really really hated it when Grampa Joe called him Mr. Violent. "They may be pushy and opinionated, but they don't deserve the sushi treatment. But you can judge for yourself: here comes one now."

Eddie heard what sounded like a the long neck of a water tank filling up quickly. The sound was coming from the hole. Louder and louder it got until a big clear bubble suddenly popped up and came to a stop about one foot above the hole. Amazingly, the water continued to flow down around the sides of the bubble and into the hole.

But most amazing was what was in the bubble. A wrinkled little man with a blue cap stared back at Eddie with the deepest set gray eyes he had ever seen. In fact, Eddie found it hard to notice anything else about the little man except his eyes, which seemed to reach out across the floor to him with a strange warmth, making him feel relaxed and, yes, drowsy, even in this crazy situation.

The little man stepped forward and the side of the bubble expanded through the water and finally opened up as he emerged onto the floor, not a bit wet. The bubble-door remained open behind him. Eddie found the energy to look at Grandpa Joe. His smiling expression made Eddie think that he also must be in a state where he found it hard to

think or move also.

That and the anger from the "Mr. Violent" crack are probably what got Eddie moving. He knew what he must do: get himself protected and get Jack back in action. Eddie snatched the black medallion from his pocket and looped it around his neck. Then he streaked across the floor to the bubble-elevator, knocking the little man down in the process. He was glad he was wearing the medallion, for he could see the little man's mouth moving, probably reciting some hypnotic incantation.

The bubble sealed behind him, and the extension retracted until he found himself in a perfect sphere. Now, how to get it moving? There were no controls! Meanwhile he saw Grandpa helping the little man to his feet. Desperate, Eddie pushed on the top of bubble but nothing happened. Panicking, he yelled up to Jack, and was surprised when the bubble started moving up! He yelled again and each time the bubble rose. Quickly, Eddie learned that it was his breath that controlled it. To go up, you only have to blow on the ceiling!

A few moments later, Eddie puffed the bubble to a stop in the upper chamber and looked out. The Mynmyn, who was in the process of stacking up tree roots in a pile to be able to reach the dangling and mummified Jack, took one look at the medallion, the staff, and the look on Eddie's face and slunk away into the cover of one of the entrance tunnels. The spider was still seemingly dozing in the same spot on the ceiling.

Eddie knew that it was only a matter of time before the little men would arrive. He had an idea. Blowing softly on the inside of the bubble, he was glad to notice that it could be made to move about even outside of the water column. Feeling a little like a cartoon character, he moved the bubble upward, toward Jack's still form, passing as far away as he could from the fearsome fangs of the spider. He maneuvered beneath Jack, and then was able to reach up and through the bubble to pull him in.

"Jack, are you alive?", whispered Eddie, wondering if the spider had poisoned him to

dissolve his flesh into spider soup, as many spiders do. The spider silk was too tough to rip through, but Eddie poked and squeezed Jack to get some response.

Eddie felt Jack's chest expand in a spasm, and one muffled word came out: "Staff!". Eddie understood at once, and passed the staff across the thread which still held Jack suspended. Of course it cut at once. Jack fell to the floor of the bubble with a soft bounce. Eddie then used the staff to gently free Jack's head, then shoulders and arms. Jack opened his eyes, but instead of gratitude, Eddie saw fear in them. Turning to follow Jack's gaze, Eddie's hair began to raise as he saw the huge spider's legs beginning to move.

The spider's awful bloated body came away from the ceiling as the cluster of eyes filled with menacing intelligence. Eddie immediately puffed the bubble in a downward flight to the cave floor as Jack finished freeing himself from the cocoon. Strands of sticky web slid across the surface of the bubble as the spider tried unsuccessfully to snare them. In his panic, Eddie brought the bubble down too hard on a sharp protruding rock and POP!, the bubble burst, leaving them to the mercy of the descending monster, whose size and closeness now filled almost their entire vision!

Eddie knew that he had been given the staff for fighting spiders, and he seemed to hear somewhere far off Jack's shouting about it, but Eddie found it so ridiculous that his puny staff would have any effect on something that size, that he almost broke out laughing. Unless that thing was filled with gas like a parade balloon, which he very much doubted, they were in big trouble. The only thing that made him feel a little bit secure was that Jack had been wrapped up, not eaten, at least for short time.

So the spider came down, and Eddie, feeling like a fool, held his little staff up until it came within reach, and then, bink!, he gave it a little wap like the Queen of England launching a ship with a champagne bottle. The spider didn't deflate like a balloon, but it did do something far curiouser: it turned two dimensional. Yes, it almost instantly became a flat picture of a spider. Eddie's mouth fell open as he watched the picture

begin to ascend up to the ceiling, changing into a sort of abstract art form of a spider as it went, until there it was, the same pattern that he had originally thought he had seen when they first entered the chamber.

"Come on, Jack, they've got Grandpa down below, and we've got to help him!", cried Eddie. "Jack?" Eddie looked around, and saw Jack over by a tunnel, whispering something.

"Hey Jack, watch out for the Mynmyn! It was hiding out over there a while ago.", said Eddie.

"No problem - I told you I'm not afraid of the Mynmyns. I just sent it packing. And now that the little mens' pet is out of the way, I think we can get the old man free in no time", said Jack, walking over to Eddie.

"How?", asked Eddie.

"For now we just wait. They will come to us soon enough. Then I have a plan to deal with them."

Eddie went over to the water shaft and looked down but both the little man and Grandpa Joe were not in sight. So he went back by Jack and sat down, wondering what Jack's plan was.

About fifteen minutes passed, when Eddie faintly heard that rushing, filling-up sound that an elevator bubble makes. Eddie felt very nervous, but Jack seemed just as calm as could be. Then the bubble arrived, carrying Grandpa Joe and all three of the little men. Eddie got a closer look at them this time. They looked like dwarves, but it was very hard to tell how old they were, despite the wrinkles. Eddie thought they might have always been wrinkled, just like human babies are at birth. He couldn't really tell them apart either, except by the different colored caps: blue silver, and yellow.

You could tell they were surprised and upset to see Jack there. They also pointed to the ceiling where the spider design lay. Eddie hoped they could not re-animate it. Their

mouths were moving, but of course Eddie could not hear them.

"Grandpa, are you all right?", asked Eddie.

Eddie didn't know if Grandpa answered, but he walked up to Eddie and put his arm around him. Meanwhile, Jack was either having a one-way conversation with the little men or he was able to hear them.

"You treacherous little aliens! Now you aren't so confident are you? Let's see you try keeping Jack-O-Lantern prisoner now!", exclaimed Jack.

"Jack-O-Lantern?", thought Eddie. Why would he call himself that now?

The little men's faces had grown grim, and they fanned out to face the smiling Jack. Then they closed their eyes, and Eddie could see sparks beginning to jump from their fingertips!

"Jack, watch out! They're going to zap you!".

"Not really.", said Jack. And then Eddie could hear another strangely familiar sound, a kind of humming-blowing noise, coming out of one of the tunnels. Then something came out of the tunnel that Jack had been whispering into before. It was the Pumpkin-thing, but it was glowing with an amazingly fierce orange light. As it entered the chamber, Eddie saw what must be giving it the energy to glow so strongly. The Mynmyn was following it, carrying the orange root-tube, which was somehow plugged into the Pumpkin-thing's back.

Just then the little men let loose with their attack, but instead of lightning bolts, the sparks simply streamed out of their fingertips and spread out around Jack, forming a swirling sphere of blue, silver, and yellow colors.

The Pumpkin-thing moved forward until it was next to the encapsulated Jack, and then opened its mouth very wide in a huge hideous grin. Then suddenly, an immense orange tongue snaked out of its mouth, snatched up the blue-capped little man, and gulp!, he was

gone! Gulp! Gulp! The other two disappeared into the belly of the Pumpkin-thing.

The swirling sphere around Jack grew weaker, fainter, and soon dissipated.

"We've done it!", cried Eddie, but he thought, how had Jack gotten the Mynmyn and the Pumpkin-thing to work for him. Maybe they hated the little men too?

"Yes, after all these centuries, I am free!", shouted Jack, "Free to roam the world again and make people remember the true meaning of Halloween!".

No doubt about it, Jack was one strange kid, thought Eddie.

"Jack, do you really have control over those creatures?", asked Eddie, pointing at the Mynmyn and the Pumpkin-thing. "That Pumpkin-thing attacked my cat".

"Aww, that's too bad for your cat, wasn't it? So you don't like my orange friend, do you? Too bad, since you and your Grandpa are going to become one! In fact, Eddie, if it wasn't for your wretched little cat killing my Mario look-alike servant, you'd be my round bouncing slave right now. But first, I'll need my things back." Jack motioned to the Mynmyn, who with a lightning quickness grabbed the staff and medallion from Eddie's hand and neck.

"You look confused, Eddie. Your Grandpa knows who am, so why don't you ask him now that you can hear him again. He knows that I owe him for helping to keep me here. But one thing he doesn't know is that YOU supplied the power for my triumph, ha ha!", said Jack pointing to the glowing root-tube.

"Looks like you picked the wrong horse, Eddie.", said Grandpa Joe. "But I wouldn't feel too bad. I know what a tricky guy Jack is. He almost pulled a fast one on me years ago".

"But Grandpa,", said Eddie, "what about the three little men? They had you held prisoner for a year!".

"I don't know what happened there, and I don't know if we'll ever find out, but I do know that the little men aren't bad people. Anybody that devotes themselves to keeping



Jack-O-Lantern locked up can't be all bad".

"Enough talk.", said Jack, "Get ready for pumpkin heaven!" Jack had connected the power root-tube to the end of the staff, which was raised and charged.

Just then Gazumba jumped out of the tunnel and landed two feet from Jack, startling the living boogers out of him. Gazumba yawned and lay on his back to have his stomach scratched.

"CAT! Get rid of it!", screamed Jack.

The Pumpkin-thing, no longer super-powered with the root-tube, tried to bounce forward under the heavy load of a little-men lunch, but could only manage little shuffling movements. Gazumba noticed it however, and remembering his previous encounter with it, was immediately up and in cat battle-mode, hair standing up and hissing.

During the commotion, Eddie decided to try to do something, but he found that Grandpa Joe was one step ahead of him. He had grabbed the Mynmyn by its neck and was carrying it at arm's length over to the water hole.

"Bye bye", said Grandpa, and dropped the flailing Mynmyn down the hole.

Gazumba was now circling the Pumpkin-thing, looking for a chance to strike. The Pumpkin-thing looked very nervous.

"Get away from there!", yelled Jack and pointed the staff at Gazumba. But of course Eddie had expected that, and ran head-first into Jack's stomach. The staff went off, but the blast hit the wall, leaving a smoking hole.

Eddie and Jack fell to the floor, and Eddie looked up just in time to see Gazumba, all claws extended, land right on top of the Pumpkin-thing.

POW! The Pumpkin-thing exploded, sending chunks of pumpkin guts and pumpkin skin in every direction.

Eddie could feel Jack trying to get away, but he grabbed him in a bear-hug, giving him a good knee in the butt when he wriggled too hard. Grandpa walked over to the pile of pumpkin goo and helped three little figures get to their feet. They weren't dead after all. Gazumba had shot off up the tunnel, but now poked his head around the corner.

"You have no idea how much I hate you!", hissed Jack into Eddie's ear. "I curse you forever, and forever is how long I can wait to get back at you and your family".

Eddie gave Jack an extra special knee to the butt, which shut him up.

"Let's throw him down the hole too.", said Eddie.

One of the little men spoke, and Eddie could hear him for the first time. "No, Eddie, I'm afraid that may have taken care of the Mynmyn, but it wouldn't do for Jack-O-Lantern. He can't be destroyed, you see, and must be kept prisoner forever".

"All I want to know is, why were you keeping my Grandpa prisoner? That's what allowed Jack to convince me that you were evil, and to help him", said Eddie.

"We meant only well toward your Grandpa, but now we see that we made a mistake.", said the little man with the yellow cap. "You see, we wanted to repay him for helping us keep guard on Jack-O-Lantern, and as our lives are many times longer than human lives, we thought we would extend his also by rewinding time backward every day for him."

"But that's no kind of life.", said Eddie. "I don't know how it is with you, but without memory, people are about as alive as a picture on a wall".

The little men only nodded in answer, and Eddie knew that they already found that out.

So ended the mystery of Grandpa's disappearance. Jack was bundled off to his pumpkin cell in the middle of the island, and the little men put a stop to the orange streams coming from his friends and family, which were the memories they had of Eddie, and which Jack used as an energy source. The little men said that if they had continued, eventually everyone would have been drained of all memories of Eddie, and they would have totally

forgotten that Eddie had existed.

"But how could he tap into my sister's memory, when he was a prisoner here?", asked Eddie one day a few weeks after the ruckus died down over Grandpa's return, as they sat in the same chamber where the battle had taken place.

"His orange servant, the one you called the Pumpkin-thing, was able to roam away from the island.", said the blue-capped little man. "I'm afraid he heard you say that you wished you never existed. That gave him magical permission to drain memories of you from others, which in turn fed Jack-O-Lantern's plans to escape".

Eddie also learned where the little men came from, which you have guessed, and many more amazing things, but those are tales for another time.

The story is almost over except for one little episode that happened later that school year. If you remember, there were two Mynmyns serving Jack, and only one was accounted for.

In school, Jack heard that a kid that he knew from grade school had started to act oddly. Mainly, he had gotten really greedy and selfish. Jack remembered this kid as being pretty nice, and wondered what happened to him. One day at lunch period the kid wandered into the lunch room with a sneer on his face and Eddie knew right away what had happened to him and the the missing Mynmyn, for there it was perched on his shoulders, long clawed fingers stuck right into the kid's head!

Eddie pretended he couldn't see the Mymyn, like everyone else, and formulated a plan. A few days later he got permission to bring Gazumba to school after he told his teachers that he had trained him to play tic-tac-toe as a science project (which was of course a small lie, but he needed some excuse), and arranged to confront the poor kid with the Mynmyn in a vacant hallway near the back door of the school.

"Hi Fitch, or is it Hitch?", said Eddie, holding a squirming Gazumba behind his back.

"That's not my name, dork.", said the kid, whose name was Don.

"I'm not talking to you, Don. Just shut up and trust me on this.", said Eddie, producing Gazumba from behind his back.

The Mynmyn flinched at the sight of Gazumba, and Eddie was more than happy to hold the cat closer. "Nice kitty kitty. Come and play with the Mynmyn".

That was enough for the Mynmyn. With a sick slurping sound, he pulled his fingers from the kid's head, jumped off his shoulders, and was heading for the door with Gazumba bouncing happily behind. Eddie caught the kid as he fainted.

The back door flew open and the Mynmyn ran right into about a dozen cats which were just finishing eating the fish Eddie had put out there earlier. As the door slammed shut, Eddie could barely hear the Mynmyn bellowing above the sound of a dozen cats yowling at once.

THE END