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opening extract from

a very messy inspection

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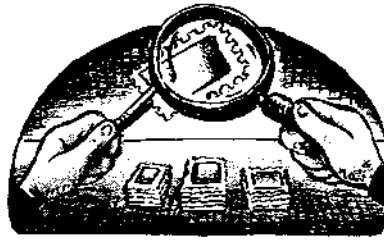
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CHAPTER ONE
On a Grey Afternoon



Piccolo Grande, a boy aged nine, lived alone in a fine old house at the end of a long gravel driveway. He carefully tended the gardens there and his special fish pond. He washed his dishes, brushed and flossed his teeth, and did his homework on time and sometimes early. In the morning he quietly got himself off to school and came home again in the afternoon.

Now, you may be thinking, What a dull, boring and lonely life! But Piccolo, being a thoughtful and well-organized sort of boy, did not mind too

much. Although sometimes he was a little lonely and sad.

He became sad when he thought about his dear missing parents. It was now eighteen months since they had disappeared. Their yacht, the *Leaping Susan*, had sailed into a thick, mysterious mist somewhere in the tropics. They had not been heard of again. Most people thought that they had perished. Piccolo did not. Day by day he lived carefully in his fine house and waited for them to come home. He knew they would. He was sure of it, as sure as the sun rose and set again. Often he would sit with his toes in the perch pond, his most special place, staring at the passing clouds. He could see his parents, Peter and Marjorie Grande, living happily enough on a deserted island, but missing their boy terribly.

One grey Saturday afternoon Piccolo was upstairs thoughtfully sorting old postage stamps into tidy piles. He had weeded the long gravel

driveway and finished ironing his handkerchiefs in the morning, and this was his time to relax. As he tidied a pile of rare Lithuanian stamps, an unusual sound passed through the curtains. *Ffffwwwunnngh*, it went, *fffwwwunnngh*; a sort of grunting flapping sound which seemed to be getting closer. As Piccolo watched, a round pink object bobbed into view. He left Lithuania to stand at the window. The thing seemed to be flying with a great effort, just clearing the tree-tops. Piccolo's eyes widened as it came closer. It was a person, furiously beating small feathered wings and carrying two bulky floral bags.

No, I'm not seeing this, thought Piccolo. There was a crunching thud of breaking branches and the sound of falling fruit as the thing flew directly into a pear tree.

No, that didn't happen, Piccolo decided. I must have had too much sun, weeding the drive. That's it. Sunstroke.

He sat back down to his tidy piles—Romania,



An unusual sound passed through the curtains.

Bulgaria, how did this Russian one get into Latvia? . . . until the doorbell rang.

'No, that's not the doorbell.'

But it was, and after a full two minutes of ringing and a high voice calling 'Yoo-hoo!' Piccolo left his desk and walked slowly downstairs. Warily he opened the front door.

'HELLO, PICCOLO!' yelled a breathless little lady. 'Did you get my letter?!' A red round face grinned at him.

Pear twigs were poking out of her wild red hair.

'I am your great-aunt Annabelle—COME TO MIND YOU!' she grinned and fidgeted with her untidy pink shawl. She wore peculiar ancient looking clothes, and smelt of rainforest.

'We're going to get on splendidly!' she shouted. Piccolo, stunned, sincerely doubted it.

'Well? Am I going to grow old and die on the doorstep!?' she bellowed cheerily.

Piccolo thought, Suit yourself, but he gathered his manners and ushered her inside.

'I'd kill for a cuppa!' She flumped onto the ottoman, a big stuffed sofa.

'Please take a seat,' he murmured. 'I'll put the kettle on.'

Piccolo shuddered as Great-Aunt Annabelle, or whoever she was, slurped on dunked biscuits. She chattered away endlessly. Piccolo sat stonily, waiting for her to go away. He had important stamps to attend to.

'You are a quiet one, aren't you?' She sprayed soggy biscuit in Piccolo's direction. 'Would you have any fruit, my dear? Bananas perhaps? I've come a long way and . . .'

'My parents never mentioned that I had a great-aunt,' he interrupted stiffly, 'especially not a *flying* aunt.'

'Oh, I'm from a distant branch of the family tree,' she fidgeted. 'Did you call me a "flying" aunt! Ha ha ha! What a strange thing to say!' The great-aunt was clearly bothered.

'You are a fairy or something. I saw you fly into the pear tree,' said Piccolo flatly.

'Oh dear, you weren't supposed to see . . . how embarrassing . . . well . . . dear oh dear,' she burbled as she fished about in a floral bag. She found a little spray bottle and gave her face a few squirts.

'This is for stress. Very soothing. You try it.'

Before Piccolo could blink she sprayed him firmly in the face.

Piccolo spluttered, wiped his eyes, and said 'No, thank you!' too late.

'How was that? Do you feel better? A little sleepy maybe?' she enquired, watching him very closely.

'No. I feel damp, and you are not my aunt, great or ungreat!' Piccolo was losing his manners, his patience, and his temper.

'I'm sorry, dear. The spray usually works. Most odd,' said the strange woman. She continued, 'You are right, Piccolo dear. I'm not exactly

your great-aunt, although I'd be a very good one. You saw me flying, you say?'

'Yes. And not very well either.'

'Aha, yes! I'm a bit rusty, must admit. So you think I'm a fairy?' she asked as she busily sprayed more stress relief about the room, mostly towards Piccolo.

'An angel or a tooth fairy or something.



Would you please stop spraying me?' He sneezed.

Annabelle was watching him closely again.

'Are you sure you don't feel like a nap—forget all your troubles?' she asked.

'No,' said Piccolo firmly, 'and I don't have any troubles, or I didn't until very recently,' he added pointedly. The great-aunt seemed to make up her mind about something, then put the sprayer away.

'Well then, I am certainly *not* a fairy. I am an angel, Piccolo. I am your own personal Guardian Angel!'

She took a big breath and began talking in a rush.

'I'm not a perfect angel, to be honest. I'm a bit rough around the edges and my flying is hopeless, as you know. I can be a fumble bum and I can only cook fruit. I'm told I can talk a bit too much sometimes, and I get excited but . . .' she paused to take a big dramatic breath, '. . . I have a heart of gold.' She smiled sweetly and looked appealingly at Piccolo.

'I'd love to look after you. What do you say? Will you let me stay?' She breathed again and held it.

Piccolo sat and blinked at her. He was quite sure he did not need a guardian, especially not a noisy, foolish, round, feathered one. Life was orderly and comfortable in his lovely old home, if a little lonely at times. Very lonely, if he was honest. The peculiar being before him, still holding her breath, was turning crimson. It was very strange being asked for a job by an adult. Her eyes were watering now. He wondered if she might explode.

'I suppose you can stay, for a while,' he said at last 'just until . . .'

'OH JOY!' Annabelle exhaled explosively, and she lurched forward, smothering poor Piccolo in her bosom.

'You won't regret this, Piccolo my dear! We will have a wonderful time together!'

'I really like things quiet, you know,' he said, muffled in pinkness.

'Oh yes! I love the QUIET TOO!' said Annabelle, her voice rising happily.