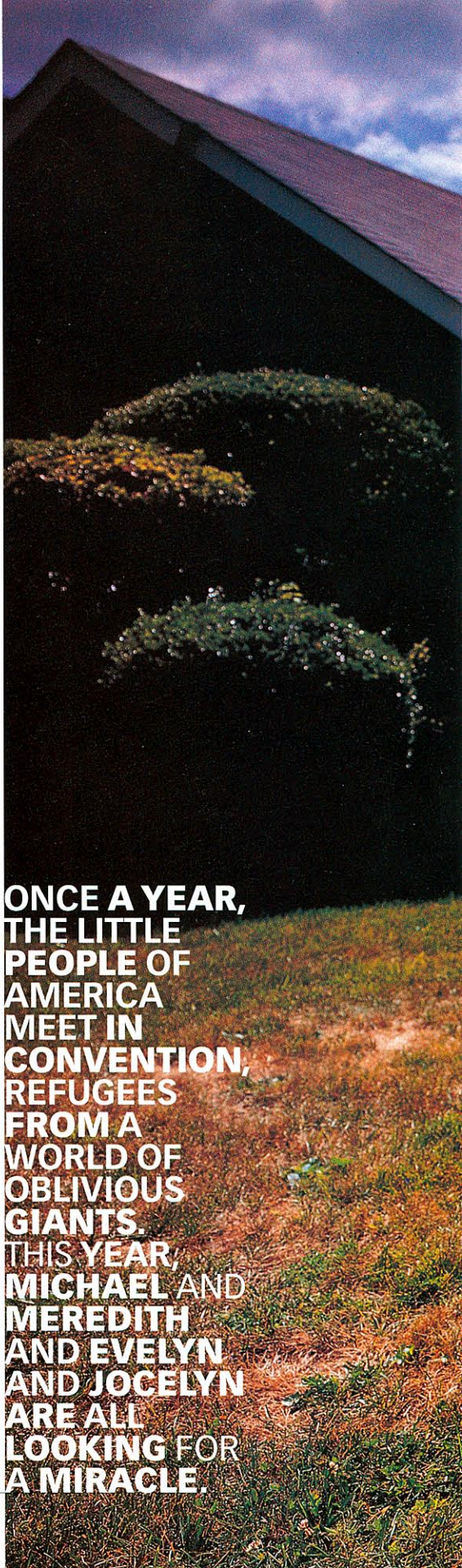


D W A R F S

A Love Story

BY JOHN H. RICHARDSON

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ONCE A YEAR,
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AMERICA
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FROM A
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THIS YEAR,
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AND EVELYN
AND JOCELYN
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A MIRACLE.



Michael and Meredith, in her front yard on Long Island: "After experiencing this with me," he asks her, "don't you want to swear off tall guys?"

This is the jam Michael Gilden has gotten himself into: Five months ago, in a chat room on America Online, he met a girl named Meredith Hope Eaton, a judge's daughter from Long Island who is funny and smart and really pretty, too—he knows because they traded pictures on the Internet. So they wrote tons of e-mail and talked on the phone, and one day he even sang to her—"Open Arms," by Journey, his favorite band—and finally he convinced her to come to Atlanta to meet him in the flesh. Which is the problem. "She's going to freak out when she comes in," he moans.

Now Michael has to face certain realities. Despite a pretty glamorous showbiz life out in California—he was in *Pulp Fiction* and will appear in Billy Crystal's next movie, *My Giant*—life is about to remind him once again that he is different, that his flesh melted a little in the womb, and so he's going to have to deal with that *again* and also with whatever might happen to Meredith when she sees him, because he's used to the way he is but Meredith has never seen a man like him before in her life.

And she's about to see hundreds of them. Right now, the lobby of the Atlanta Airport Marriott hotel is swarming with—call them dwarfs or little people or LPs or persons of short stature or whatever you want. Just don't call them midgets. And you probably also want to avoid any cutesy mythical references, like gnome, troll, brownie, munchkin, hobbit, Lilliputian, leprechaun, pixie, sylph, or sprite.

There's an old, bald dwarf wearing glasses, a hipster dwarf sporting a snazzy goatee, a gang of dwarf teenagers cruising by with the insular, insecty walk of teenagers everywhere, marching shoulder to shoulder through the clueless adult world. Some of these dwarfs have normal heads and others the classic pushed-in dwarfy look—big forehead, retracted nose, chin bulging out, as if God had placed his thumb on the tip of their noses and pushed. A few seem to have jumbo-size heads. Others zip around in motorized wheelchairs and scooters, some lying flat and some kneeling and others twisted down into their chairs like crabs into shells. Some have robin's-breast chests that make them look like tiny superheroes. There's one—over by the placard that says, WELCOME TO ATLANTA, WHERE LITTLE PEOPLE ARE SPECIAL PEOPLE—who isn't much more than stick legs jammed into a head. There's another who's folded into himself like a human pocketknife, his muscular arms festooned with tattoos.

And let us not overlook the dwarf babes, like that classic California sand tramp with the teased blond hair . . . or that Bianca Jagger look-alike . . . or that sandy-haired sweetie with a tank top exposing a well-tanned belly. Evidently flat-chestedness is rare among dwarf women—their big behinds and big breasts make them almost a parody of the *Playboy* ideal. Or a rebuke.

All these dwarfs have gathered for the fortieth annual convention of the Little People of America, a group founded after actor Billy Barty suggested some dwarf solidarity during an appearance on *This Is Your Life*. There's an unmistakable electricity in the air, part excitement and part anxiety. Since dwarfs occur in the population at the rate of about one in ten thousand, this week represents just about their only chance to meet others of their kind, and each convention sparks a dozen marriages and as many divorces. "I've had people say, 'Have a

nice vacation,' " Michael tells me. "I'm not going on vacation. I'm a single guy, and the choices I make here could change my life forever."

The LPA conventions are an alternate reality. Visitors suddenly find themselves plunged into a world where small is the norm, where there's a ramp for little people at the front desk and tall people check in on their knees.

For the dwarfs, it can be intensely disturbing. Like black people who spend their lives exposed to white images of beauty, dwarfs adapt to life in the tall world to the point they almost forget, and usually dwarfs who see other dwarfs for the first time just plain freak out. They see the big butts and big heads and little arms and little legs, and it hits them: Do I look like *that*?

A lot of times, they walk right out the door and never come back. This is what Michael has been brooding about all morning, the fear that's branded that frown onto his forehead. It's not just that he's four foot six—it's that Meredith is four foot three.

Across the lobby, Jocelyn Powell rolls toward the elevators in her custom-made wheelchair. Her mother, Evelyn—all five foot ten of her—walks alongside.

Jocelyn is sixteen years old and squashed down into the wheelchair like a piece of human dough, which she also resembles because her face is very pale and often whitens from pain. She was born blue, spent weeks in an incubator, developed arthritis when she was just eighteen months, and launched into years and years of operations, and finally she was in so much pain the doctors tried fusing her spine and screwed it up so badly she ended up with a hump and headaches so intense she'd pass out at her desk in school. She came through it all more self-possessed and unflappable than any teenager I've ever met. "At school, you've got to tell everybody you're not five and you're not in kindergarten," she says, "that you actually got a brain in your head—I can talk. There's actually a person in here."

Her mother's another tough bird. The night she found out her daughter was a dwarf, she drove home crying so much that she thought it was raining and turned on the windshield wipers. At home, she looked up *achondroplasia* in one of her old nursing textbooks and found a passage that said that achondroplastic adults often earn their livings as clowns in the circus. She hid the book under the bed and dreamed all night of her baby daughter wearing a big red nose.

Jocelyn and Evelyn read about the convention on the Internet and came all the way from Australia, spending \$5,000 they didn't have. There are only a few hundred



dwarfs in Australia, scattered widely, and Jocelyn has had little exposure to them. Already, they are struck by how much better off most dwarfs in America are—most of them can walk, aren't suffering from so much pain or from those terrible headaches. So right now, they're off to try to make an appointment with a famous specialist who is here for the week—they don't want to get their hopes up, don't expect any miracle cure, but maybe he can at least tell them what's ahead.

Then Meredith walks in. She's got black hair and black eyes and a perfect, heart-shaped face and a smile that is absolutely dazzling. She's wearing a black DKNY T-shirt and a thick gold chain, sunglasses tilted up on her head, looking exactly like the classic Long-Island-born-and-bred Jewish-American Princess she is—except her arms and legs are short and bulgy, and she's leaning on a cane, and her hips jog to the side with each step she takes, giving her a slight waddle.

A tear comes to Michael's eye.

Meredith stands at the door, frozen in place, terrified and shaking inside, just as Michael said she would be. After a moment, she turns around and walks right back out.

But a minute later she comes back, and this time Michael hurries up to say hello. "You made it," he says. "Barely."

She's stuck. She won't go any farther into the lobby. She can't. And she doesn't want to walk back out again, because that would be ridiculous. So she takes a seat right next to the door in a deep club chair. Her mother sits down right next to her. "This is just so weird," Meredith says.

"How's the surgery?" Michael asks.

She points to her right leg. "It was this one."

"They look straight," he says.

"They should be, after all I went through."

Michael smiles with infinite kindness. "You'll do some dancing tonight," he says.

Meredith was about six when she first realized she wasn't going to grow as big as other kids. She cried and cried. Middle school was "the worst," when the teasing began. In high school, her best friend was tall and really beautiful, and Meredith was always "the friend." But she stuck it out, and finally she met a guy, a six-foot wrestler who protected her, adored her, treated her like a fragile china doll, never made her feel bad about her height. She dumped him for a guy who was six foot four. When they were alone he loved her, but when they went out in public, "he'd look around, and when people would stare at me, he'd laugh nervously and go, 'Isn't she beautiful?' to try to mock them from staring. He never actually said it, but I knew inside that it really bothered him. We went out for three and a half years, and we must have gone out to dinner twice."

There's something instantly comforting about Meredith, a warmth that almost shimmers. She spent her last summer vacation working with severely disabled children and

adults and is thinking of making it her career. It's just that she's having trouble with this whole height thing. A few months ago, she had an operation to lengthen her legs, which to most dwarfs is the epitome of self-loathing, the dwarf equivalent of Michael Jackson's ongoing whiteification. Before she came to the convention, she had nightmares. She'd be walking her dog—a miniature poodle—only in the dream he was even smaller, and she lost him. She searched and searched and couldn't find him anywhere. And she'd see very tall people, who for some reason were always flying. And bugs, too, lots of itty-bitty ugly bugs.

Twenty minutes have gone by, and they're still sitting by the door. "I'd feel more comfortable if this whole lobby was all average-size people," she says.

"You talked on the phone," Michael says. "You were totally comfortable with that. . . ."

"That was different."

Another half hour and she's still sitting there, still visibly uncomfortable. "I want to say I don't look like these people like everyone else. It's something that takes getting used to."

Meanwhile, Michael's mooning at Meredith like a lover in a silent movie. He's gazing at her. He's mooning and gazing and mouthing sweet nothings across the table. . . .

"What?" Meredith asks.

"It's just everything," he says. "The face, the eyes, the twinkle, the smile—everything is confirmed."

"Stop, you're embarrassing me."

Later, Michael is in a fever. "It's not like 'Well, she's kind of cute'—I can't stop looking at her. I don't want to play volleyball. I don't want to see Atlanta. I don't want to do anything. I can't believe we're going to be in the same room, breathing the same air! And she's—she's had three-, four-year relationships with average-size guys. I don't even know if she can look at me."

And yes, he knows that would be poetic justice, because Michael is a very good-looking guy, probably the best-looking guy in the LPA, and back when he was a teenager coming to his first few conventions, he'd glance at the dwarf girls and turn away. "Oh, man," he'd think, "that doesn't look right." He was cool with the guys, but the women just looked wrong. They looked *deformed*. Michael says these things not because he's cruel but because he's maniacally analytical, a student and scholar of dwarfish emotion. Anyway, that was before he got more mature and started dating little women and even married and divorced one, which is part of the problem, because the breakup of his marriage left him derailed and humiliated for some very special reasons he doesn't want to discuss right now—oh, what the hell: She cheated on him with a guy who was smaller than he was. *Much* smaller.

"And I tried to recover from it," he says, "and my recovery was I needed *her*—I never knew who *her* was, but I needed *her* to show up—and for the last three years she has not shown up. And now she's here. Without a doubt, without a doubt, this is a girl I want to develop something with, I *know* it, and I'm wrestling with how to behave, because there's a part of me that wants to right now sit and

have a drink and have dinner with her *alone*, and I fear that because of her feelings, and because of her mom being here also, the likelihood of me doing that this week won't happen—by the time she's comfortable, she's going to be leaving, and I go three thousand miles away."

I try to calm him down. I tell him they look perfect together, and they do. I tell him she seems attracted to him, and she does. But it does no good. "The pivotal thing that will happen tonight, and I think this is extraordinarily pivotal, is when the dancing starts," he says. "She's not going to fast-dance because of her legs, but I know either Dave"—Michael already has competition, a kindly, balding dwarf who also met Meredith on the Internet—"or me or someone will approach her to dance slow, and she will at first probably say no—but the first person she says yes to *has to be me!*"

That night the dwarfs congregate in the ballroom, many of them glammed out with teased hair, ball gowns, and cleavage. The guys come in doing the Dwarf Strut: chest out, arms back, serious swagger. Soon, the dance floor is filled with little people getting down. A tall, willowy girl dances among them—on her knees.

Chatting with Emily, a pretty young woman who just graduated from Purdue with a degree in creative writing, I mention Michael. "Oh, yeah, Michael," she says, rolling her eyes. "He thinks he's six feet tall."

That's the first hint of how Michael makes many of his fellow dwarfs feel. Over the next few days, I will hear him mocked for being a jock, for the California style of his clothes, for thinking too much of himself. "A guido stud," one guy snaps. "He's in that Radio City Music Hall Christmas show playing an elf. *That's* real good for our image."

"I don't even know why he comes here," says another. "Why doesn't he just date tall women?"

Later that night, Michael shows up dressed to dance, dapper in khakis and a black shirt, looking like a classic L. A. club dude. But inside, he's still a ball of anxiety. At the pool that afternoon, he asked Meredith straight-out: "You don't see me the way you see your other boyfriends, right?"

Meredith dodged the question.

Now Michael's radar picks up movement across the ballroom. "Here they come," he says.

Meredith is holding her mother's arm with one hand and leaning on her cane, working her way through the crowd. She's wearing a silvery-gray shirt split from one button to expose her belly, which is flat and brown as a walnut. A silver clip gleams in her black hair.

Michael leads them to an empty table, whispering into Meredith's ear. Moments later, a few of Michael's friends join them. "Those are beautiful shoes," says Lila, a pretty, poised eighteen-year-old with puffy blond bangs.

"They're painful," Meredith answers. "Shoes are always painful—beautiful but painful."

Plus her leg is hurting—the humidity—so she doesn't

feel like dancing just yet. Trying to be nonchalant, Michael forces himself to dance with other women.

Taking advantage of the dark, I study Meredith and decide she looks a little bit like the queen in *Alice in Wonderland*—not her face but her body, which is squat and a bit wide. Then she notices me looking and gives me one of her dazzling smiles. "I feel better than I did this afternoon," she says. "I really, *really* like talking to people at eye level."

It's not until very late in the evening that the DJ puts on "Open Arms." Michael holds his hand out to Meredith. "You have to dance with me now," he says.

And she does.

On Sunday, Evelyn and Jocelyn go to church. Jocelyn parks her wheelchair in the aisle, and after some glorious gospel singing the sermon begins. By coincidence, the preacher takes his text from a passage in Ezekiel about when God commands a field of bones to gather and rise. "God has put into our bones genetically the structure of our lives," he thunders. "Your bones have a testimony to tell concerning your destiny—by studying the bone structure of the human body, you will find the purpose and the destiny of an individual! Without bones, we'd just be slithering creatures!"

This is so embarrassing. But of course, it's natural to make metaphors of the body. Since we all carry from childhood the memory of being small in a world of giants, we have mythologized dwarfs throughout history, the sweet ones always nicely proportioned and the nasty ones more "dwarfish." In ancient Egypt, there were dwarf gods. In ancient Rome, they were dressed in jewels and sent to fight in coliseums. In the Middle Ages, kings collected them; in the Renaissance, artists painted them; and in the nineteenth century, we began our charming modern tradition of displaying them as circus freaks. Hitler put them on his death lists.

As the sermon goes on and on—the service lasts three hours—Jocelyn begins to squirm in her wheelchair. All the dwarfs are in pain by now. Finally the preacher winds down. "Now turn to your neighbor and say, 'Hello, lovely bone,'" he orders. With awkward smiles, we repeat the line. "Hello, lovely bone," I say to a woman so small she had to struggle just to climb into the pew. She smiles back and cracks, "You don't know what you're getting into."

After the dance last night, Michael says, he got his first kiss. And Meredith said, "This just feels so right."

And she wasn't just talking emotion, although there was definitely "kissing compatibility." She was talking physical reality, because sometimes life is about accepting difference and other times it's about celebrating similarity, and dammit they lined up, knees touching and arms—not like some big octopus arms wrapping her up like an infant or something. They're *proportionate*. To each other. And Michael said, "After experiencing this with me, don't you want to swear off tall guys? Don't you want to say, 'I'm not dating another tall guy *ever?*'"



She didn't answer, but she didn't let go of him, either. Now the big problem is time—the ticking clock. Meredith's return flight leaves Wednesday morning.

The tall, soft-voiced man with the lingering Eastern European accent is Dr. Steven E. Kopits, a pediatric orthopedic surgeon from the International Center for Skeletal Dysplasia in Baltimore. Kopits has devoted his life to one idea: to learn through the study of dwarf development how to do “the most benefit with the least amount of intervention.” Today, his office is a hotel room, a dining table his examination area. “Okay,” he begins, speaking to Jocelyn and not to her mother. “Um . . . why did you come? Because Mom said you could?”

Jocelyn tells him the story, which has already acquired the patina of family legend: how they bought a computer, logged on to the Net, searched “dwarfism,” found the LPA, and decided instantly to come to the convention and worry about the money later.

“Do you think that’s a good thing?”

“Yes,” says Jocelyn. “It’s a very good thing.”

Taking his time, with long, pondering pauses between questions, Kopits then digs out every detail of Jocelyn’s medical history. “She’s had stenosis since birth?”

“No,” says Evelyn, with a trace of anger. “She had a beautiful back until the doctor operated on her about four years ago.”

“She had a straight back?”

“It was beautiful. We were very proud of that back.”

“What kind of surgery did she have?”

“A decompression,” Evelyn says. “They’ve actually taken the piece of bone out from T10 to L1, the four of them—please don’t shake your head; I’m already upset enough about it.”

“Taking the bone out is not the problem. The levels are the problem.”

As Evelyn continues, Kopits seems to suffer along with her. “Ach,” he says. “Oh, my God.” And then, Evelyn says, things got even worse.

“Wait a minute, I will get a clean sheet of paper,” Kopits says. Everyone laughs.

Another half hour passes before Kopits turns back to Jocelyn. “So, how far can you walk?” he asks.

Evelyn answers. “She walked from her room to here, and that’s it.”

“That’s probably fifty, sixty meters,” Kopits says.

“By that time, she’s dragging her right foot.”

Kopits turns to Jocelyn again. He seems to feel none of the discomfort many doctors feel when talking to a patient. “When you walk, you get heaviness, feel like falling?”

“It starts in my toes—it goes pins and needles, numb, and then lead, heavy lead. First, the right leg to the knee, and then the left leg starts.” Jocelyn’s tone is neither bitter nor self-pitying, but its analytic chill bears a whiff of protest.

Kopits gives her an amused smile. “You describe it pretty well. I’ve seen it thousands of times.”

Then Evelyn starts talking about the headaches, how the doctors said they were psychosomatic and sent Jocelyn to a psychiatrist.

“Isn’t there a neurosurgeon there?” Kopits asks.

MICHAEL WANTS MEREDITH TO KNOW THAT THIS IS WHAT IT’S LIKE TO DRIVE A CAR WITH A LITTLE MAN. THIS IS WHAT IT’S LIKE TO GO TO A RESTAURANT WITH A LITTLE MAN.

“Yes, there is a neurosurgeon there, but they wouldn’t do the intercranial pressure. They *refused* to do it.”

“They refused to do intercranial pressure?”

“They said it was too dangerous.”

“Too dangerous? You can lose a brain to this.”

“I know!”

“And go blind . . .”

By this time, everyone is near tears. Yet the room is as calm and quiet as an Anglican chapel. “What I’d like to know,” Evelyn pleads, “is where do we go from here? What are we looking at? I’m—I’m—I’m lost. I’m frustrated, I’m angry—I’m a mother.”

In his calm, kind voice, Kopits answers, “You can’t go back like this. She has to be treated. I already have the neurosurgeon for you. He’s extremely talented. The question is, how do you do that, moneywise?”

“Yeah, right,” says Evelyn, releasing tension with a burst of laughter.

“You’ll do it,” Kopits says soothingly. “This is going to be solved, and you are going to be well.”

At this point, both Evelyn and Jocelyn start whimpering softly. Maybe it’s just the sudden shock of the diagnosis. But there’s also something about the way Dr. Kopits is focused on them, an intensity of devotion—as if he is praying for them and to them at the same time. “This is sheer nonsense,” he says. “I mean, what has happened to you, sheer nonsense. This cannot continue. . . .”

“I know,” says Jocelyn.

“. . . You are too precious.”

For lunch today, Michael and Meredith go to Bennigan’s, driving in a car Michael rented so he could get away from all the friggin’ little people. Right now, they’re his biggest problem—not only the masses of them reminding her that she’s a dwarf and he’s a dwarf but also the cliques that are watching him and whispering and the other guys who keep hitting on her. His friend David. Maybe his pal Gibson Reynolds III, an ironic, urbane dwarf from New York who seems very much to the deck-shoe born. And also, he wants her to know that this is what it’s like to drive a car with a little man. This is what it’s like to go to a restaurant with a little man.

As they walk in the door, Meredith turns to him. “This is a big step for me,” she says, and he doesn’t have to ask what she means.

“How do you feel?” he asks.

She reaches over and puts her hand on his. “Nice,” she says. “I like it.”

But Michael, being Michael, can’t take that for what it is.

What about the other guys who have been asking her about her status—are you with Michael? He knows she’s been saying no. But why?

“I’d like you to say, ‘Kind of, yes,’” he says.

“I don’t know,” Meredith says. “I just don’t know.” Two more days left.

After a ferocious basketball game—his team won—Michael rushes for the exit. A blind man could read the expression on his face—somewhere, this minute, this second, some horny dwarf is almost certainly hitting on Meredith.

Then he stops. Standing at the door to the gym is a tiny, tiny woman. She’s at least a foot, maybe a foot and a half, shorter than he is, wearing a strand of fat pearls.

Michael squats down to her level. “I just wanted to let you know,” he says, “that time in the chat room, when you jumped on me, I thought that was very unfair.”

“Well, sorry,” the tiny woman answers.

“I mean, I don’t even know you. Why would you do that?”

The woman shrugs. “It had to be done,” she says.

Later, Michael tells me the story: He was in AOL’s little-people chat room, along with a bunch of his friends and a very promising potential girlfriend, when his friend Kris started teasing another woman about something or other. Then Martha—the tiny woman with the pearls—jumped in. All Kris ever did was go after the pretty girls, she said, ignoring anyone who was different or less attractive—or extra-short. And when Michael tried to defend Kris, she shot off a message saying he wasn’t any better. It wasn’t right. It was cruel. It made being in the LPA just as bad as being in the tall world. And the potential girlfriend heard Martha’s anger and felt her pain and never spoke to him again.

Confession time: After three days at the convention, I still haven’t talked to a single one of the really tiny or misshapen dwarfs. (There are more than two hundred different types.) They just seemed so damn different—unapproachable, like foreign countries with harsh, impossible languages. Instead, I ended up hanging out with the “mainstream” dwarfs, the achondroplastics—and, I must admit, not the old ones or the teenage ones, either. I seemed to be more comfortable spending time with the

ones who were more or less my age, the ones who looked less dwarfy. The better-looking ones.

I talk about this to Gibson Reynolds III, who is himself a good-looking achondroplastic. “When you’re an achon,” he tells me, “it’s almost like saying you’re glad you’re white—‘Oh, at least I’m an achon.’”

I am going to have to talk to Martha.

As Michael and his friends tell it, his marriage was a kind of *Gaslight* experience in which his wife and good friend kept telling him he was just imagining things even as they conducted a two-year affair under his nose. By the end, he got so crazed he brought in forensic scientists to do a sperm analysis on her bathroom towels. Goodbye marriage, hello short-term psychiatric care. “Did I have to wrestle with the fact that she was doing all that with a guy that I felt was physically just bizarre?” Michael says. “Yeah. Do I feel that way about the whole race? No. Because he was a friend of mine, it made it worse.”

A few hours later, at the LPA talent show—piano, violin, mimes—I’m distracted by a child who is using a custom-made walker that he drags along behind him, leaning back against two foam-rubber handles. He’s one of the extreme ones.

“Poor little guy,” I say.

The woman I’m sitting with—who has just told me that her own grandmother suggested she find a profession she could practice from home so no one would have to look at her—raises an eyebrow. “Why do you say that?”

“I don’t know. . . . He’s so little, and he’s got so many troubles.”

“But he seems happy, doesn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“So don’t pity him,” she says. “It doesn’t help him.”

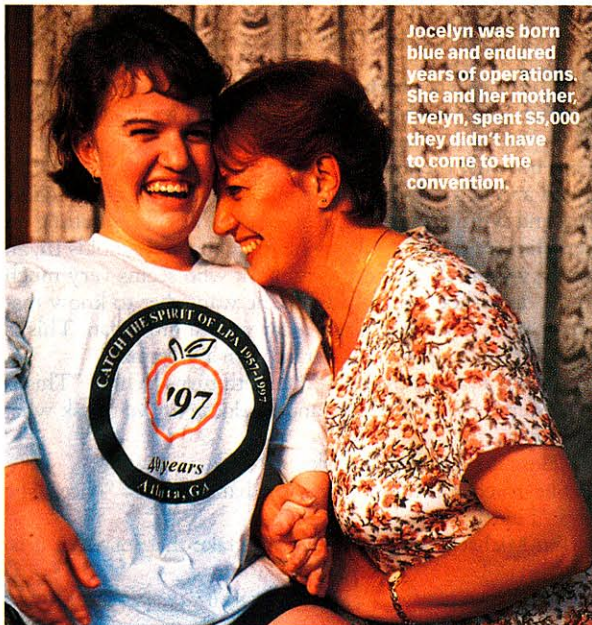
After the show, I run into Evelyn, who tells me that Dr. Kopits called that morning and told her to fly Jocelyn up to Baltimore for an emergency consultation. The threat of paralysis is that near. “I put down the phone, and I was walking around the room, saying, ‘Jocelyn, how are we going to do this? How are we going to do this?’” Evelyn says. “The ticket’s \$499 one way! For one person! So we’re talking \$2,000 to go back and forth to Baltimore. I don’t have that. I’m lost. I have no resources.”

And the consultation is the easy part—the operation itself is going to cost \$230,000.

On the verge of tears, Evelyn distracts herself with an observation: “It’s still hitting me that they are human beings with lives,” she says, looking around the lobby. “And I have a daughter who is a little person, and I am fighting for her to have a life, to have a career, to . . . to be in love, to . . . to do all the things that others just do. And yet, I watch them go past, and I think, ‘That’s a human being.’”

By Wednesday, Meredith is more relaxed—a bit. “I want to go back to my world,” she moans. “This is not my world.”

She’s gone to some of the workshops, attended events put on by the Dwarf Athletic Association of America, done some shopping, and taken some of the special tours. But, well, she’s having trouble handling all the eager men, for one thing. “It’s a little upsetting that I could walk into a room like this and get so much attention, but in the real world when I walk



Jocelyn was born blue and endured years of operations. She and her mother, Evelyn, spent \$5,000 they didn't have to come to the convention.



into a bar . . . it's getting almost a little bit exhausting."

I ask her why she came. Was she reaching out to the little world?

"Absolutely," she answers. "I really came here on like a vision quest, a search for an identity—to see what it's like to talk face-to-face, eye-to-eye with someone."

And did part of the vision quest involve a small-statured man?

She squirms. But, like almost all the little people, she wants to be understood, so she's startlingly open to the rudest questions. "I don't know. I'm twenty-two. He's much older than I am—thirty-four. He wants a relationship. I don't."

He also wants children. She's not so sure. An achondroplastic dwarf couple has a 25 percent chance of having a normal-size child, a 50 percent chance of having a dwarf, and a 25 percent chance of giving birth to a child so deformed it cannot survive. "I've had about fourteen multiple surgeries, and I deal with pain every day," Meredith says. "I would never want to do that to a child."

Then she mentions that she's met another guy here she's attracted to—an average-size guy. "And I feel almost disappointed in myself that I've come all this way to pick an average-size guy, and I have to wonder if that says something about me, that I shy from short-statured men. It's not that I don't see them as men, and I'm not superficial, but . . . I'm attracted to a tall man. There's something about them that's protecting, and it's safe. . . . I don't know—it's just something about a tall man, with a long back and long arms. . . ."

And she felt weird at Bennigan's—people were looking at them like "Oh, how cute," and she hates that. But how would Michael take it if she dumped him? He's so considerate, so caring, so . . . small. "I guess I feel like a taller guy can take it," she says.

God! The whole thing is just *exhausting*. "I think I need to sleep for like a week. For some reason, this is draining the life out of me."

Right now, Jocelyn is dreading the thought of another operation. But she sits in her wheelchair as imperceptible as a little stone idol, talking about normal sixteen-year-olds and all the ridiculous things they go through in search of themselves—like her brother, who recently shaved his head.

So what's the secret? I ask her. How did you find yourself? "I don't know," she answers. "I just came to it very quickly. I know that I'm Jocelyn, I know I'm sixteen years old, and I know I come from Australia. I'm proud to be a dwarf. I'm just me, a smaller package than everybody else. And I'm happy with that."

Does she blame God for making her this way? How does she feel about justice, about love, about beauty?

"I don't think there is any," she says, taking my last question first. "Just people's perceptions—beautiful people from my perception may be ugly people from your perception."

As for God, he made her this way, and it's for others to get used to it.

A few minutes later, the members of the convention committee take Evelyn and Jocelyn aside. "The committee wants to give you something," one man says, and then he hands over a little bag. Evelyn reaches in and pulls out a yellow LPA T-shirt. Inside the T-shirt is tissue paper, and wrapped inside that are two plane tickets—round-trip tickets to Baltimore.

For days now, I've been looking for Martha. Twice, I've stopped a tiny diastrophic woman and asked if she was Martha.

Although she wasn't wearing pearls, she had the same short arms, the same puffy robin's-breast chest. Sometimes the rule of genetics is so strong that dwarfs of the same type look very similar. I even heard a pseudo-achondroplastic dwarf mistake another pseudo for yet another pseudo. But this woman seemed to have a short fuse. The second time I asked her, she bristled a bit, and just now, as she passed, she gave me a wary look—no, I'm still not Martha, you big idiot.

Then I see her, the real Martha, wearing the same pearls. Her head doesn't even reach my hip, and there's something painful in the way her hips jog from side to side. By now, I know that means her spine is probably fused solid. Her little arms stick out from her body like—God forgive me—the arms of Mr. Potato Head. They are so short that even when she's standing with her chest pressed to the edge of the sink, she has to use hooks to turn the faucets.

She's happy to talk about Michael, thrilled, in fact.

"First of all, he's one of these guys that thinks that he's all that, okay?" she says. "Whenever I'm with a friend who looks great, and I'm just standing there, little old three-foot-tall me, he doesn't even say hi. And he's not the only one. It's always made me angry, because I have just as much of a personality as these pretty girls do."

She goes on for a while, venting her pet peeve. Although she laughs about it, she's unrelenting. Maybe it's because it's so late in the convention and there are so many broken-hearted girls crying in the bathrooms.

"All these guys care about is looks," another woman tells me. "They come up to you, they look at you, and if you're not what they like, they walk away. They don't really care what's inside."

The guys feel the same sting, of course. "There are women who are four feet tall who won't date anyone shorter than they are," one man snaps.

Upstairs, Dr. Kopits works the phone. "There's a financial problem of some significance, and the little people have organized and helped with the plane tickets, so I wondered if you could do a reduction. . . ."

A moment of Kopitsian silence follows—he has this habit of waiting and waiting and waiting until you cross the moral boundary from ordinary life to his world. Then he releases a solemn smile. "That would be great," he says.

While Kopits talks, Jocelyn walks around the room, even though her face is going pale and blotchy from the pain. She's worried about the MRI because she can't lie on her back for more than a minute at [continued on page 121]

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[continued from page 81] a time—a complication from her screwed-up spinal surgery. After ninety seconds, the pain is so intense she starts to sweat. After two minutes, she gets close to passing out. The last time she had an MRI, the doctors put her under general anesthesia, and she was paralyzed for a day and a half. Now Koptis says using anesthetic means risking permanent paralysis, and they aren't going to drug her at all.

Maybe that's why she doesn't want to get back into her wheelchair. Finally Evelyn just points at it—it's time to head to Baltimore. Jocelyn scowls and gets in.

At the airport, Michael is gazing again. Meredith's mom and I go across the room to let them say their goodbyes, and after a moment Meredith drops her head onto his shoulder. Michael lifts her fingers to his lips. Then I can't stand it anymore, so I walk over and hand them my tape recorder. "Turn it on if you feel like it," I say. Back in my seat, I watch Michael take out a gift bag. Meredith opens it with a smile.

Later, I listen to the tape. "This is the first actual present I've ever bought you," Michael says. "We've had a lot of firsts—first lunch, first kiss. . . ."

"Don't say that on the tape!"

"Okay," Michael says. "Scratch that comment about 'first lunch.'"

Meredith laughs. "That was really funny!"

She reaches into the bag and takes out a teddy bear. "Aww, it's so cuuuute!"

"It's Winnie the Pooh."

"I love him!"

Then Michael hands her three cards. "I want you to open this one now. I want you to open this one after you take off, and I want you to save this one until you get home. Can you do that? In that order?"

She agrees and opens the first card. On the tape, she gasps.

"What a cute card!"

"You like it?"

"I'm gonna cry!"

"You're gonna cry?"

"I aaam!"

They talk about the convention for a while, and then Meredith tells Michael how grateful she is for all he's done for her during the week.

"I've never in my whole life ever been so affected, so quickly, so much," he answers.

The airplane loudspeaker drowns him out. When it's over, Michael is still talking. "I'm the lucky one," he says. "I'm the lucky one. . . ."

"No, I'm lucky. So many people at that convention would love to be with you."

"But none of them hold a candle to you."

It's time to go. Michael kneels at Meredith's feet and hugs her with an intensity that's visible across the room.

Then Meredith walks down the ramp, a small, wistful figure picking her way past the elbows of oblivious giants.

Walking back through the bustling airport, Michael starts to cry. "A lot of this is exhaustion," he says, wiping away the tears.

We pass a few more gates, and he stops. "I wanted love for so long," he says. "Every year, I say, 'I'm ready, I'm ready,' but she has to show up, and she showed up."

He takes a deep breath. "At least the door is open," he says. "Nothing else matters."

Later that night, Meredith calls. She tells Michael she misses him already, talks about flying to L. A. to see him, and when he comes back down to the lobby, he's blown tight with emotion. "I'm going to do everything I can to marry this girl," he says.

He leaves the next morning, skipping the closing-night banquet. Without Meredith, what's the point?

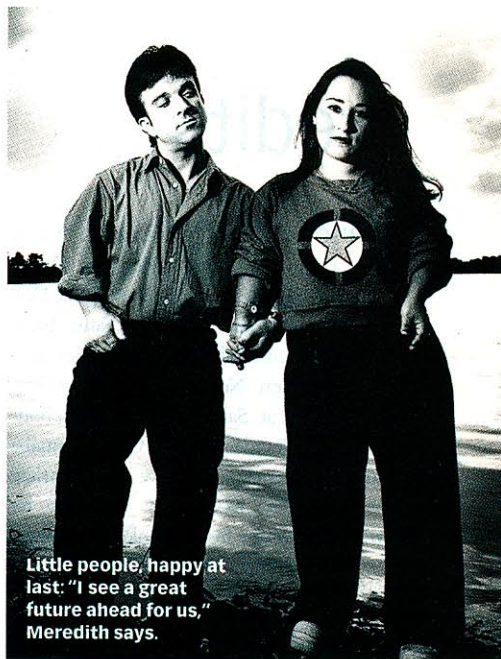
Jocelyn and Evelyn skip the banquet, too. About the time Michael is catching his plane home, the MRI technicians are rolling Jocelyn into the long white tube for her scan. That night, Evelyn writes in her journal: "J was okay for about two minutes, then she became hysterical and screamed to get out. The look of surprise on their faces! But they were so patient and supportive, nothing like in Australia where J was nothing but an inconvenience. Then I remembered when I was in labor how vital it was to hear David say, you're halfway. I knew that J would be able to control her mind and the pain if she had a goal to work toward. It worked. J focused and hung on. When she came out of the tunnel after each set she was crying and pale and after the last set she fainted. But she did it!"

At the banquet that night, the dwarfs come dressed in suits and ties, gold lamé and sequins, carrying corsages and holding hands. They exchange phone numbers and pose almost frantically for pictures. Underneath every word and every look is the prospect of the next twelve months, a year's exile in a world of difference.

In the lobby the last morning, people slump in the armchairs like travelers marooned in an airport. With each departure, the energy drains out the door.

But there's Dr. Koptis, smiling and laughing, bending down to gather his patients into his arms and beaming with visible delight at each person he hugs. There is nothing dutiful about this. His love is a reminder that with each twinge of discomfort or even revulsion these people inspire—they do look wrong, there's no getting around that—there is a corresponding exhilaration, a liberating delight that comes from encountering intelligent humanity in such inappropriate packages.

A few days later, I speak to Meredith again. "I just got a dozen roses," she says, "all pink with one red." Then she goes out to



Little people, happy at last: "I see a great future ahead for us," Meredith says.

L. A.—taking her DKNY sunglasses and Prada makeup case, of course—and meets Michael's pets and Billy Crystal and writes: "I am happy. Very happy."

With any luck, they will overcome their similarities.

Back in Australia, Jocelyn appears on television and in newspapers, at bake sales and at football rallies, and from all over the country, the checks start pouring in. My favorite story is about a blind (and somewhat deaf) man named Bob and his best friend, Steve, who raise money for Jocelyn by riding a tandem bicycle long distances. Steve rides up front and steers, and Bob rides behind, pedaling away. "There is a really steep hill near where they live," Evelyn writes, "and as they are riding down it, Steve will yell out to Bob to stop pedaling, but with the wind rushing past his hearing aid, all Bob hears is whistling, so he keeps pedaling hard. At the bottom of the hill is an intersection—and Steve is having a heart attack, worried that they won't stop in time because Bob is still pedaling!"

The support leaves Evelyn touched, overwhelmed, uplifted. But finally time runs out, and even though there isn't enough money yet—and though the hospital has put them on notice that it won't operate until all the money is in the bank—they get on a plane and fly to Baltimore anyway.

Of course, the money does come in, and the operation is a complete success. When I go down to Baltimore for a visit, Jocelyn is walking already, hard at work in physical therapy, even more certain and determined than before.

And back in New York, Michael's in town. He's moved into an apartment in Manhattan, close to Meredith's magic flame. "She's more extraordinary every time I talk to her," he tells me. "Sometimes I just pinch myself." ■