

MARC LAIDLAW_____.

Love Comes to the Middleman

Upon the wall, the neighborlings were arguing. Jack listened to the piping voices with increasing anger. The problems of the little people sounded all too much like his own, except smaller.

He opened his eyes and searched for the offending home among the array of tiny buildings stacked to the ceiling of his room. In most, the lights were dim or out completely; in a few, tiny shadows moved against the curtains. The smell of almond tobacco smoke drifted from half-open doorways; newspapers rustled. As a rule, the smaller citizens went to sleep early, and those who stayed up kept their voices down once he'd turned off his light.

Tonight, the Pewlins were the noisemakers:

"If you can't stay inside your budget, pretty soon we won't have a budget!"

"It's not me wasting money on drink and gambling."

"It's not you making money, either. I need my recreation."

"Recreation? You're a drunk with bad luck. It's not like you're developing a skill. You just get drunker and unluckier. And the next time—"

On his knees now, Jack rapped sharply on the door of the Pewlins' house with a fingernail. "Hey, in there. I've got a heavy day tomorrow."

At the sound of his voice, curtains stirred in the windows of other houses. The Pewlins, too embarrassed to face him, merely began to mutter.

"Told you you'd wake him. We're going to lose this house and end up in somebody's sock drawer."

"Oh, shut up. I'm going to bed."

As Jack crawled back into his bed—a lumpy mattress laid out on the floor—someone scratched on his door. With a sigh, he got up and opened it.

His house was halfway up the wall of the next room. The giant and his wife shared that room. She was out there now, leaning so close to his door that he could have stepped onto her nose.

"Having trouble in there, Jack?"

"It's the Pewlins again. They went to bed. Thanks for asking, Nairla."

"If they're any trouble, we'd be glad to take them out here. We can hardly hear them, they're so small. I know the neighborlings' voices can be so penetrating when you're trying to sleep."

How do you know that? he thought, but didn't ask. He had kept her awake a few times, no doubt, with his infrequent parties.

"No, seriously, it's not a problem now. Thanks anyway." He leaned out of the doorway and she turned her head so that he could whisper into her vast ear: "I think you've probably intimidated them."

She pulled back and smiled, a very nice smile. Nairla had always taken a special interest in him; for his part, he'd always been attracted to big-boned red-headed women. But not as big as Nairla. She was quite out of his league. And besides, her enormous husband lay out there like a range of hills, snoring away. The houses and office buildings along the giants' walls were all dark; Jack's samesize neighbors kept similar hours. He only wished his neighborlings could be so quiet.

"Sleep tight," Nairla said.

"Would you ask her to keep it down?" piped a voice from a corner of Jack's room. "Some of us have to get up in the morning."

Jack awoke with a groan on his lips and a vile taste in his mouth, and the complaints of the neighborlings in his ears: "Turn off that alarm clock! We're awake!"

As he reached out to switch off the alarm, he realized that he was sick. Swimming head, upset stomach—the flu had been going around at the office. This had to be it. He would just lie here a while and hope it didn't get worse.

False hope. He lurched out of bed and ran into the bathroom. When he looked up from the sink, the houses along the window

ledge were coming to life. Complaints came drifting down to him: "Was that birdsong I heard? What a way to wake up."

"Sorry," Jack said.

From bed, he called the office. The phones weren't being answered yet. He would have to lie and wait a while.

An hour later, he awoke to the sound of buzzing. Tiny private fliers darted among the buildings on his wall. Some of them maneuvered around the ceiling of the room, caught in elaborate flight patterns as they waited their turns to exit through the vents near the ceiling, then headed for neighboring pueblos in other houses. The configurations confused him; they were like specks swimming across his eyes.

Late, he thought. I'm late.

He sat up abruptly and grabbed the phone, fighting nausea as he dialed the office. Mrs. Clorn sounded mildly amused by his illness; apparently she didn't believe him. As he hung up, a tiny voice asked, "Jack, are you sick?"

He glanced up at the nearest wall. A young mother and her child stood on the ramp outside their house.

"Oh, Revlyn, hi. Yeah, I've got the flu."

"Wish I could help. I make soup for Tilly when he's sick . . . but you know how much I'd have to make for you."

"Don't worry, I'll be fine. It's a twenty-four-hour bug."

Someone scratched on his door.

"Come in!" he called.

Nairla put her eye to the opening. "I thought you were still in there. Aren't you going to work today?"

"He's got the flu," Revlyn called.

"What's that?" asked Nairla. "Is she talking to me, Jack?"

"Of course I'm talking to you, you dumb giant! Can't you hear me?" Revlyn broke off into wild laughter.

"Nice to see you too, dear," Nairla said.

"She says I'm sick," said Jack. "I've got the flu."

"The flu? Oh dear! Would you like some oatmeal? I can mash it up for you. Plenty of fluids and what else? Do you have a fever? I'd lend you a thermometer but . . . you know."

"Why don't you ask her if any of your neighbors are home," Revlyn said. "You need someone to look in on you, Jack. Seriously."

"What's that?" Nairla said.

"Nothing," Jack said.

"Ask her, Jack," said Revlyn. "You'd be silly not to. What if you get really sick?"

He sighed. "Nairla, Revlyn says I should ask you to see if any of my neighbors are home, in case I get worse."

"That's a good idea. I'll check. There are a few . . . oh, I have a wonderful idea! I've been meaning to introduce you two for the longest time. She's an artist."

Oh no, he thought. Not that.

"Nairla—" he began. But she was gone. He looked up at Revlyn. "She's going to get somebody."

"Good. That's nice of her. I'm sorry I make fun of her, but she is so deaf, you know?"

"She's big, that's all." Big and nosy.

A minute passed, in which he heard Nairla humming to herself, vibrating the walls of his house. He thought he was going to be sick again. Footsteps came up along the ramp, then a face peeked around the door. It was a samesize woman, a redhead with big bones, strong hands. As she came all the way into the room, she said, "You must be Jack. You look pretty sick."

He wondered how long Nairla had been waiting for this chance.

"I'm Liss. I brought some tea. I was just making up a pot for my morning work." She sat on a corner of the mattress and poured some tea into a water glass he'd left on the floor.

"So, uh, I hear you're an artist," he said.

She handed him the glass. "I'm a sculptor. Mostly I apply for grants."

"You're an artist and you get paid for it?"

"The Plenary Council—have you heard of them? Everything I do goes to the Council, and they arrange showings. There's a lot of interest in us, among the giants. And I'm talking about *giant* giants—bigger than Nairla. They're intrigued by our perceptions of the world. Do you realize they have to look at our art under microscopes?"

"Art, huh? So what's it mean to the little guy?"

She reached in her pocket and took out both a magnifying glass and a little box. "I'll show you. This was made by a sculptor three sizes smaller than us. He's been a great influence on my own work, though I can't say I'm nearly as good as him. The detail work is incredible."

Liss handed him first the glass, and then the box with the lid taken off. He found himself staring into a construction the size of a rice grain, elaborately carved, a piece of microscopic scrimshaw showing spiral staircases that grew smaller and smaller as they curled toward the center of the grain. On the stairs were incredibly lifelike figures, also dwindling as the steps shrank. Looking at it made him dizzy. He thought of himself looking at the tiny stairs, and of Nairla looking in at him, and of someone looking in at Nairla.

He blinked at Liss. "Do . . . do the giants have art?"

"Sure. It's hard for us to see it sometimes, though. You have to get way back. We've tried scaling it down through the levels, but it loses something. The size is part of the meaning."

"That's really interesting."

"Do you think so? It's funny, with all of us living on this wall, I spend more time talking to Nairla and the neighborlings than I ever do with people my own size."

He shrugged. "I'm like that. I have a boring job; it makes me feel like all the samesizes are boring. When I get home, I don't want to see anybody my own size."

"My husband's the same way," Revlyn called. "I can't get him to take me out. He'd rather stay home and watch the little people."

Jack held out the glass and Liss refilled it. He smiled at her, feeling better already, and raised it in a toast.

"Here's to a new friend," he said. He was gratified to see her blush.

At the doorway, Nairla blinked in and said, "Aren't you two cute?"

"Oh, spare me," said Revlyn, and went inside.