

THE IMPROBABLE WONDERS

of

MOOJIE LITTLEMAN

A Novel

by

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PROLOGUE

Once I dreamed of being crippled and lost in the woods. Using umbrellas for crutches, I circled back to a giant oak tree three times, fell to the ground, and burst into tears. The leaves of the tree rustled, and I looked up and asked, "Which way from here?"

"Depends on where you're going," said the tree.

"I want to go home."

"You are home."

"But I want to find my real home."

"You don't have to go anywhere," the tree said.

I cried all the more.

The tree continued, "All right, go on a journey, if you must. Just get up and walk."

"But that would take a miracle."

"A miracle, you say?"

"I don't believe in miracles."

"Why, you're talking to a tree, aren't you?"

—M.L.

PART I

The Year of the End and the Beginning—1892

Chapter 1

SAINT MOOJIE

He arrived on the heels of an earthquake. A minor hiccup as disasters go, the murmur rippling undersea, causing dories in the bay to bob and spider crabs to flood the beach like a ghostly pink tide. It was the sort of earthquake that hushes everything for an instant before nesting birds and sleeping butterflies burst out of trees. It makes your heart jump for joy because you realize the earth is flying through space at one thousand miles per hour and you have been spared the dreadful experience of the whole world falling apart and having to put it back together. It was the sort of earthquake that the nuns of San Miguel de las Gaviotas would call a mystical grumble. Really, there was nothing about it to suggest the terrible wonders looming on the horizon.

At a quarter past seven, the candelabras in the chapel stopped swaying. The nuns crossed themselves, went outside and found a wooden fishing bucket on the porch. Expecting the catch of the day, they were nothing short of horrified to see a baby boy bundled in fur and tucked inside it. He had bright black eyes, enormous ears, and his hair was the texture of caterpillar fuzz.

“He’s a Hostile, if I ever saw one,” said Mother Teagardin.

The word *Moojie* had been smudged across his forehead. And that was what they called him—a peculiar name for a peculiar boy, who wasn’t particularly welcome. Against her better judgment, Mother Teagardin, who always said the natives were ill-suited for local society, hadn’t the heart to surrender him to the local Bureau of Questionable Peoples. She appealed to the local families to adopt him. But the villagers were a superstitious lot. They believed the mysterious child to be, well, too mysterious.

It didn’t help that before he cut his first teeth, Moojie amused himself by magically snuffing out candles with the blink of an eye, and by sending objects into flight with the power of his mind. When he didn’t get his way, he caused the wind to rip off the nuns’ veils and flash their knickers. Like Odysseus, he was quick to act and slow to regret. Meanwhile, the sisters clicked their clickers, and swatted his bottom, and continued looking for a family for him.

Except for one early chapter of his childhood, Moojie was a virtuosic flop when it came to the only thing he cared about: finding and keeping a family.

This golden parenthesis began just before he was one year old, when Henry and Kate Littleman, a childless couple who had moved from the East Coast to San Miguel—along with hundreds of recent immigrants from Europe and the Far East, since America had opened her doors to the world—took him home to raise as their own. Mamma immediately left her post as a science and French teacher at the Charles Darwin Free School to look after him. Mornings, she tucked him into a knapsack suspended from a tripod, and went about her housekeeping. He grinned and giggled as she baked bread, smoked little cigars, knitted hats and booties, and arranged his wet flannel diapers on a drying rack near the fireplace. She wheeled him to the beach in a wicker pram, where they collected spider crabs and napped in the salty sand; she rocked him before a glowing wood stove; she bathed and cuddled him. He watched Papa, a mapmaker, spin his curta and level his transit, slurp scalding tea, and leap out the door every morning in a pocketed vest. Sometimes, in the afternoon, Papa played piano for him or showed off his soccer moves in the backyard.

In those days, Moojie was a model child, the ambassador of lovability. He delighted at being the center of attention, always looking intently into people's eyes, always smiling, as if he were in on some cosmic joke. In those days—before San Miguel de las Gaviotas had gone the way of Atlantis, that is to say, before it fell out of favor with the gods—Moojie was passed around at church like a peace pipe. Warmed by his charm, suspicious villagers now lined up after the service to take turns holding him. Once Mrs. Littleman contrived a plot to put the smiling Moojie into the arms of a miserable scrooge,

and everyone sighed with awe as the long-suffering soul wept and sang praises to God in heaven.

“Have you noticed, my cupcake?” Mamma said to Papa as she pushed the pram home from church. “This is no ordinary child.”

“He’ll make a fine field hand, lovey,” Papa said.

At the time, San Miguel de las Gaviotas was a nick on the Pacific Coast of America, a clammy, cluttery mishmash of thatched rooftops, crumbling walls, and crooked towers surrounded by rugged mountains that rose out of fog like ancient pyramids. Moojie’s new home, Number 11 Wimbley Wood, a mildewy cottage with a drip line and assorted mushrooms growing in the basement, appealed to otherworldly visitors. Only Moojie could see the celestial bodies spinning and whirling all about him. And he sometimes heard voices beyond the range of normal hearing—gifts, of course, that he did not yet understand. In the witching hours, lights floated down through the ceiling over his crib. He giggled and tried to grasp them as they bobbed playfully into and out of his hands. Mamma came in and held him in the rocker, while moths and flower flies haunted the spirit lamp—like all that is born, seeking to return to light.

Having landed in the nucleus of love, charming, handsome Moojie surpassed his parents’ every expectation, blessing them with unmitigated joy.

But all of that was soon to change.

Moojie didn’t talk or walk when he should have. As well, his left arm seemed only half-awake.

“I don’t expect he’ll ever teach school or fly air machines,” said the doctor. “He’ll be lucky if he can tie his own shoes.”

“This is a disaster, Kate!” Papa said.

“Fiddlesticks, my darling!” Mamma said, as if something fierce and silvery had risen from the depths of her being, surely as a sword. “This boy will show you both just how wrong you are.”

To his father, Moojie became a pair of legs to be trained, something to toil after. In a panic, Papa took him to the backyard often to entice him to play soccer. “Send it, son, send it!” he said, waiting for him to stand on his feet, which had grown quite large. Day after day, Moojie just sat there smiling, while Papa worked up a sweat.

As if it were her personal mission to prove Newton’s First Law, Mamma hired Orangie the circus clown to come every Wednesday to move Moojie through a vigorous exercise regimen. Outfitted with carnival knick-knacks and full of good cheer, Orangie trained the boy wonder to sit with a duck perched on his head, to ride a goat, and to crawl through a burning hoop. He applauded when Moojie lifted a ten-pound dumbbell over his head with his mighty righty, and he cursed when he ripped off his rubber nose and wig.

All the while, Mamma forbid Papa’s use of the words “crippled” or “moron,” and coined the term “diff-abled” to describe their son. She stretched and pulled and massaged Moojie’s arms and legs. She baked him Graham Green Gem muffins; she sang to him and recited French nursery rhymes and made animal sounds to try to get him to talk. Even so, he never repeated so much as one *moo* or one *baa*. On the contrary, he seemed quite

content to observe the world in silence, as if he were the watcher in the story of his own making.

Worried that Moojie might fall down or fall behind or fall into bad company, Mamma kept him home from school and became his private tutor. Other children his age were learning reading, writing, and arithmetic. Never mind that. He and his mother were experimenting with balloons and bottles, straws and bubbles, traveling nuts and plummeting potatoes. As well, Mamma, being a lover of stories—for what is science but stories?—often read aloud to him. In English and French. He preferred classic tales and fables over nursery rhymes, especially stories involving magic and great acts of courage. With rapt, wide-eyed attention, Moojie’s days were filled with mad hatters and swirling atoms and genies, with falling apples and sea gods.

In light of the fact that Moojie wasn’t improving, Mamma eventually forsook science rooted in the past and sought alternative means and methods to cure him—means and methods dubbed by Papa as “tomfoolery.” She got hold of a book entitled *The Waltzing Lobster*; and could hardly tear herself away long enough to cook lunch. “Oh, the wonders that await discovery!” she chirped, marking pages with dried bay leaves and puffing on a cigar.

“Did you know there are ancient aliens living on Earth?”

“Did you know there are monks who can sit naked on frozen lakes at the height of winter, and thaw, by their own body heat, icy, water-soaked sheets wrapped around their bodies?”

“Did you know there are tribes who hold down their boys while loved ones slash off little pieces of their flesh?”

“I tell you the high road is not plum pudding!”

She positioned Moojie on the living room sofa so he could look out the window. She wound up a little music box with a revolving nativity scene, placed it beside him, kissed the top of his head, and left him to daydream to a lullaby while she studied.

Plagued by loneliness, Moojie watched the neighbor boys, Royce and Bentley Markham, ride bicycles up and down Wimbley Wood, hair flying in the breeze, charging invisible enemies.

It was a mixed blessing when Moojie finally started walking. His oversized, pigeon-toed feet were buckled into knee-high braces, but his legs weren't weak by any means. Quite the opposite, they were tighter than fiddle strings and just as hard to move. Mamma strapped cushions to his front and backside, and he humped about the house on crutches, demolishing everything in his path—chairs, doorjambs, walls, piano legs, shins, and anklebones—making his father curl his fists and howl in frustration.

“He's no field hand; he's a wrecking ball! Look at this mess! And sardines for supper again! I can't take it anymore. I can't concentrate. I can't even keep my pencils sharpened.”

Once Moojie tried to befriend the Markham boys. “What kind of name is *Moojie*?” they asked. “Sounds like a half-wit.” They locked him inside their mother's potting shed, and he broke out by pulverizing the door with a shovel. Making his escape, he stumbled away on his crutches, toppling into the path of a runaway horse. By the grace of heaven,

the horse performed a spectacular jump over him, and not one fuzzy hair on Moojie's head had been touched. His knees were skinned and trousers ripped, but it was his pride that was most injured.

In Moojie's lonely world, great warriors were born out of heads and auspicious children had their very own planets. Lying in bed at night, he stared out his window imagining stars to be bright insects captured in the web of a very clever spider. Occasionally, dark warriors galloped through his dreams lopping off people's heads. Such terrors inspired him to push *The Waltzing Lobster* across the kitchen floor to his mamma, wanting her to read him a certain passage, time and again:

It is said that they appeared on Earth many, many centuries ago, when great beasts, and barbarians, nomads and warring hunters, ruled the land. They came in silent, heavenly legions, walking in the shadows of trees, among few followers, speaking of their visions, enshrining the way of peace. For a long season, the people had been warring and brutal. They had been trapped in the endless midnight, worshipping beasts and heeding the forces of darkness. Suddenly, in the twinkling of an eye, everything began to change.

The people heard these words in the depths of their souls:

'You have called and we have answered.'

*They were the first wayshowers, sent to liberate the world from darkness,
the Akil-Nuri—heavenly messengers, otherwise known as the Light-Eaters.*

Moojie would have liked his parents to play with him and to hold him in their arms more often, like they had before the doctor's proclamations. But they were too busy trying to fix him. After a while, this made him nuts. Without the benefit of words, his only recourse was to stage a convulsion fit. A surge of fire would run up his spine, he shuddered, he roared, and as if by magic, books, pots, plates, toys, and mops got swept into an indoor tornado, impelled by the dynamism of his rage.

"There, there, Moojie," his mother would say in French, slipping a gumdrop into his mouth. "Mamma loves you. Mamma will always love you. Now, stop behaving like a brat."

Moojie didn't notice the effect he had on his parents. In fact, he wasn't all that interested in the way other people felt. He cried like thunder if he was made to wait for a gumdrop or when his parents ignored him while talking to one another.

"You needn't be sad, Moojie, darling," Mamma said. "You're very special. Why, in fact, I believe you have an auspicious destiny. If life were all sunshine and chocolate, there wouldn't be any saints, and we'd never find our way back to heaven."

This gave Moojie an odd sense of hope.

Phineas, the chubby cat with a cantaloupe head, gold eyes, and great clumps of brown fur which no one was allowed to brush, was Moojie's only friend. And Phineas suffered for it. Deaf as a turnip, Phineas never heard the flying objects falling around him. Having

gotten shaved on occasion, he hid under the furniture, tail twitching, even in his sleep. And yet, Moojie and Phineas had an understanding.

Gradually Papa's face weazened, as if the wide, bright world had leaked out of it.

Mamma tried to cheer him up by making his favorite meal: fried tomatoes, green corn, and Finnan Haddie. But he was so overwrought he didn't take a bite. In fact, he didn't speak a word. He just rose from the table and withdrew to his dim, tidy cubbyhole of maps and bevels upstairs in the attic.

"Stubborn fool," Mamma said, scraping the dinner dishes. *Crash*, went a plate, breaking on the floor. "Miserable fool!"

Moojie slammed a piece of broken plate against the cupboard.

"Moojie, darling, you're going to kill your father if you don't stop your shenanigans."

Around the age of six, Moojie finally started talking—a French word here, an English phrase there, a stutter, a stammer—but he talked nonetheless. "You had us all fooled," Papa said. "You're smarter than you look."

And then, the summer of his eighth year, Moojie's golden chapter came to a close, and all because of a seagull.

It happened one day, during a beach picnic, that Moojie and his mother discovered a badly injured seagull. Moojie put down his sandwich and studied the poor creature, whose wing was turned inside-out and hanging loosely from its mantle. Their eyes met in an eerie recognition and Moojie's heart welled up with a new feeling. A great pulse of warmth poured out of his chest, and when this light and heat surrounded the seabird, it suddenly and magnificently took to the air on two perfect wings. All at once, Moojie's

world was filled with light and butterflies and soft white clouds. Too young to realize what had happened, he believed it was the most wondrous bird in all the world.

Astonished, Mamma told Papa what had happened, but he didn't believe her. They argued furiously, making the house throb with tension. Phineas threw himself against the window screen, hanging by his claws like an obese housefly. Feeling the first of many premonitions, Moojie hid in his room, covering his ears to try to stop the icy, tingling sensation.

Only minutes later, Mamma bolted out of the house in her nightdress and met with a terrible end. Heaven knows where she was heading. There didn't seem to be a cause for the accident other than carelessness; a moment of distraction, a lapse of reason, and too quickly it was over. In the village she had sometimes wandered in front of horses while stargazing, which always drove Papa crazy. "For the love of God, Kate," he would say, "watch out." A neighbor said later that he had come up the road, joyriding in his new auto buggy, when Mamma stepped directly in front of him. He tried to steer out of her path and when he did this, the vehicle flipped onto two wheels, tossed him into the Littleman's hedge, and killed Mamma on the fly. In a state of shock, Moojie tried to buck up when he heard the news. He turned to his father for comfort, but was met with a stiff, flat expression that he couldn't read.

Lying in bed that night, Moojie heard the sound of silk brushing against silk. Was it the wind against the curtains? No, it wasn't the wind; it was his mother's spirit—only he didn't know this at first. In her nightdress, she sat on the bed. Phineas leapt to his paws and hissed.

“Mamma!” Moojie said.

“I’m sorry, darling,” she said. “But I can only go this far. It hurts me so much to leave you. Don’t worry, you’ll be fine. I’ll be fine. Don’t be sad. I love you, darling. I will always love you.”

Moojie didn’t know what to do. He had never said he loved anyone.

With a queasy feeling, he watched her get up and fade into the night. He looked out the window at the moonlit sea. He pictured a young mariner with the weeping and wailing dead grabbing at his ankles, a demon spirit breathing fire at his back. Behind the ship, a mad sea god swinging an oar. Moojie blinked and they were gone. Like his mother: he had blinked and she was gone.

The next morning, he got out of bed and peered into his parents’ bedroom. She wasn’t there. Nor was she in the living room. He found Papa in the kitchen curled over a whiskey crock, dressed in yesterday’s clothes.

“Where’s Mamma?” Moojie asked.

“What? For Chrissake, she’s gone, son. Gone.”

Who will look after me?

How will I get along without her?

Who will make me muffins?

All well and good for Mamma in the afterlife; but there Moojie was, left to manage his own befuddled self without her. He wished he had taken her hand the night before. He wished he had followed her spirit. Sadly, he knew this would have been impossible. That

was how it was with spirits. He had not learned this from catechism or fables or missals; he just knew that it was true. Like the earth being round, he knew.

In the space of one day, eight-year-old Moojie had witnessed a miracle and lost a mother. And he was, for the first time in his life, afraid.***