

THE EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF A LONELY GIANT

**As Told To Richard Morrison
By: COSMO DUCKWORTH**

For My Grandchildren
Sydney
Zachary
Edward
Ethan
Jacob

*“In order to attain the impossible,
one must attempt the absurd.”*

Miguel de Cervantes

PROLOGUE

Dear Reader,

The story you are about to read is one my father told me, and one I told my children when they were young. It is a story handed down from generation to generation by descendants of the hero of this story, and my very distant ancestor, Pumpkin Duckworth. Based on the information I have been able to gather, my great, great, great, great, great, great grandfather lived over 230 years ago.

It is a true story or as true as any story can be that has been told and retold from generation to generation. In such stories, a large number of mistakes and exaggerations are bound to appear. However, based on the heirlooms I inherited, there has to be more than a kernel of truth to the tale.

There is a tattered parchment that shows the various villages and hamlets that the hero of our family's story passed through at the start of his extraordinary adventure. There is a worn and wrinkled handbill announcing the arrival of The World Famous Pelluchi Travelling Circus featuring the amazing feats of strength of one Pumpkin Duckworth. There is a massive, six-pointed gold star hanging from an unusually long gold chain, which a famous court physician gave Pumpkin for good luck. And there is a gold wedding band so massive that I can squeeze two of my fingers into it and which carries the inscription "With much love - Littlebit" around its inside circumference.

But, by far, the most interesting of the artifacts is the broken half of a wooden staff. What makes this artifact so exciting and suggests that there is more truth than fiction to my distant relative's adventure is the weak but visible golden glow that surrounds it. When held, the broken half causes one's hand and then one's arm to tingle, suggesting that even though broken, the staff seems to be almost alive with energy.

To set the record straight, I am just six feet tall, and my father was only a couple of inches taller. According to family lore, you have to go back about four generations to find any Duckworth family members who were above average in height. My father believes that Pumpkin and his wife Littlebit Pinktoes Deveral were unique and that their children, while quite tall, were nowhere near as tall as their parents. He believes that gradually, over time, our ancestors became less and less unusual.

It is now fashionable to believe that giants never existed and that stories

about them were created solely to frighten young children.

In fairness to my family's history, however, I must remind you there is a biblical story about a giant by the name of Goliath, who was, by all accounts, more than twice as tall as the young man who slew him.

The story you are about to hear or read then is part of our family's history, told and retold over the centuries. It is the story my father told me at bedtime and the one I told my children before they went to sleep. I'm not at all sure when it became a bedtime story, but this is what it is now. I can still remember my father sitting on my bed and telling me a chapter from our distant relative's fantastic adventure.

What made the story so fascinating was that each chapter ended with the young giant facing a critical decision or in some sort of danger. My father would then conclude with the words "To Be Continued." I can still remember thinking about what was going to happen next before I fell asleep.

Equally fascinating was that my dad would, every so often, pause in his telling and ask me what I would do if I found myself in Pumpkin's shoes. After giving my solution, I then would find out what did happen. In this way, he made me feel that I was right there, sharing his adventure in a very personal way.

At the request of my children, who are now young adults and have children of their own, Pumpkin's story is now in book form. Because I find using the computer difficult, I have asked my friend, Richard Morrison, to write my ancestor's story as I tell it to him.

Hopefully, others will find Pumpkin Duckworth's incredible adventures, exciting, entertaining, and educational.

Sincerely,

Cosmo Duckworth

BOOK ONE

CHAPTER 1: IN THE BEGINNING

Many, many years ago, in the small village of Crumpetville, Louella and Axelrod Duckworth became the proud parents of an unusual baby boy. The newborn was by far the largest baby ever born in the village. Even the midwife who assisted in the delivery said, as she handed the newborn to Louella, "Good Lord, he's a big one. And he seems to be getting heavier and larger as I'm holding him."

What made the infant even more unusual was that he had a very round face, a shock of orange-red hair, large black eyes, and a somber expression. It was as if he anticipated that his life would not be an easy one.

Before his birth, his parents had agreed that, if they had a son, they would name him Fredrick Duckworth after Axelrod's great-grandfather. Upon seeing his son's unusual hair color, round face, and coal-black eyes, his father exclaimed with a chuckle and a smile, "My goodness, he reminds me of a Halloween pumpkin." And with that, Pumpkin Duckworth became his name.

It soon became apparent to everyone in Crumpetville that in addition to his size and orange-red hair, Pumpkin Duckworth was unusual in another way. Unlike most babies, he neither smiled nor made the usual baby noises. Instead, he studied everything going on, suggesting that he was storing information for use at some later time.

By four months, he was twice the weight and size of every other baby of that age. And by the time he turned one, he was as big as a five-year-old. As he grew, his overworked mother could hardly keep up with the sewing of new clothes, and soon all the women in Crumpetville were busy helping to clothe the youngster.

Despite the burden created by his rapid growth Louella and Axelrod adored their first and only child. To them, his unusual size was a source of great pride and wonderment. They had waited a long time to have a baby, and so they focused on how handsome he was becoming, and they surrounded him with love.

As Pumpkin kept growing, other problems arose. By the time he turned six, he was as big as his mother. His schooling, as a result, became a challenge. When he could no longer fit in the seats at the one-room village schoolhouse, it became necessary for the school's teacher to visit him at his home to help him with his studies. And, because he was so much larger and heavier than the other children in the village,

he was never invited to join them in their play and games. He spent most of his time, therefore, with his loving parents or playing by himself. Occasionally, when he was out in the village on an errand for his mother or father, he would overhear some of the older village youngsters making jokes about his size. They would say such things as, "Here comes the Crumpetville oaf" or "Ask him if he has just climbed down the beanstalk and is looking for Jack to get back his golden egg."

Once, when he mentioned to his mother what the older children were saying behind his back, Louella said to him, "They're just jealous because you're unique and extraordinary. You just pay them no mind."

While he understood that he was unique compared to the other children, understanding this did little to offset his pain and frustration at being different and alone.

To help compensate for his loneliness, Pumpkin invented an imaginary friend named Jeremy Elka. Jeremy was the exact opposite of Pumpkin in almost every way. While Pumpkin was very tall, Jeremy was tiny – so small that he could comfortably sit on his friend's shoulder and whisper directly into his ear. While Pumpkin was fair, Jeremy had dark brown hair and olive skin. Pumpkin was solemn and thoughtful; Jeremy was lighthearted and kept trying to get his friend to laugh. The two of them carried on lengthy conversations about life in Crumpetville and the challenges of being so very different from everyone else.

On one occasion, as the two were out walking on the village's main road, they passed a family of four who were not Crumpetville residents. The mother and father were on the bench in the front of the wagon. Two children sat in the back on top of a mountain of produce that they had recently purchased. All four family members were eating fresh crumpets that they had just purchased at the village bakery.

What made the visitors noteworthy was that the father and mother were considerably wider than they were tall and that their children gave every indication that they soon would be copies of their parents.

As Pumpkin and Jeremy walked past, Pumpkin nodded a greeting to the strangers who nodded back. Then, after passing, Pumpkin said to Jeremy, "Oh my, I honestly feel sorry for that poor horse." His imaginary friend replied, "The two parents should change places with their horse, and they should pull the wagon home. It will

do both of them and the horse a world of good."

Jeremy's comment, as he hoped it would, brought the tiniest of smiles to Pumpkin's face. But, the sight of an extremely tall youngster talking and joking with his friend – a friend that no one in the village could see – only served to isolate him even more.

Crumpetville was one of a series of tiny hamlets located along a stretch of a winding dirt road. The fields behind the homes were fertile, and the residents in the villages and small towns were able to grow a variety of vegetables and harvest a bumper crop of fruit from their orchards. Each community also specialized in making, growing, or raising something unique. Beesburg, for example, produced honey, Egghaven, as you might guess, had chickens and eggs, Wheatensburg produced flour, and Oak Junction manufactured lumber.

Because of its central location in this series of tiny communities, Crumpetville had, over the years, become an ideal meeting place for the exchange or sale of surplus goods. This included eggs, chickens, milk, vegetables, lumber, fruit, and every other imaginable tradable or saleable item. Gradually, as this activity expanded, the main street in the village became so congested that the Crumpetville residents found moving about almost impossible.

To solve this problem, a market area was created in a field south of the town, and a dirt road built so that wagons could bypass the village. Each community then set up a stand to show off its wares, and a thriving marketplace rapidly developed a short distance outside of Crumpetville.

The town of Crumpetville specialized in the baking of soft, bread-like muffins, called crumpets, which were cooked on a flat, iron griddle. They were served, more often than not, warm, buttered, and covered with honey. The village had learned the recipe for making crumpets many, many years earlier from a foreigner who, grateful for being given shelter, food, and a warm bed during a raging three-day storm had taught Mrs. Philpot, his host, how to make these delicious treats. Before discovering the secret to making crumpets, the village had been modestly famous for its dill pickles. When the baking of crumpets became an enormous success, the village council decided to change the village's name from Pickleburg to Crumpetville.

Over the years, the aroma from these delicious treats wafting in the air from hundreds of Crumpetville ovens made mouths water for miles around. Crumpetville and its crumpets became famous throughout the region, and a thriving business selling crumpets from its marketplace stand rapidly developed. Later, as demand continued to grow, a central crumpet bakery, just off the main road near the center of town, was created, and the delivering of crumpets to bakeries in other villages began.

Crumpetville, like all the villages situated along the main thoroughfare, consisted of a series of small, wood frame, three or four-room cottages lining both sides of the road., Each of the homes had a front yard bordered by a picket fence designed to prevent the crush of people that used to descend on the village from trampling the grass. Each also had a sizeable vegetable garden or small orchard located behind the house.

The Duckworth family, as was the case with most of the ninety-five families that lived in the village, was neither rich nor poor. Axelrod Duckworth was the only wheelwright and blacksmith in the entire area and was always busy repairing wagons and shoeing horses. His wife, Louella, had worked in the village crumpet bakery before giving birth to Pumpkin. With the arrival of their son, she found caring for a rapidly growing child a full-time job and retired from her position as an assistant baker.

The young giant, unfortunately, continued to grow. By the time he was seven, Pumpkin was taller than his father. And by his tenth birthday, he was almost twice as tall. His height made living in his parent's modest home difficult. He no longer could stand upright inside the house, or leave or re-enter through the door except on his hands and knees. And, sitting at the dinner table with his parents to enjoy a family meal was now almost impossible.

One night Pumpkin was having a difficult time falling asleep. As he tossed and turned on the layer of quilts spread out on the floor that now served as his bed, he overheard his parents quietly talking in the other room.

"What are we going to do, Papa?" he heard his mother say. "He's almost seven feet tall. He has to get down on his hands and knees to leave and enter the house. And when he is inside, he walks around with his knees bent so he won't hit his head on the ceiling."

His father did not answer for quite some time, pondering on the problem. Then

he said, “Well, we probably could cut the wall and make the door larger, but the ceiling – I just don’t know...”

“And Papa, he’s still growing,” Louella said, a note of fear in her voice. “I’m worried that soon, he won’t be able to live with us. What will he do then?” With that, Louella began to weep.

Pumpkin had never heard his parents raise such concerns, or his mother become so upset. *They’re right, of course, he thought, I’ve not given it much thought, but I’m already too big for this house. If I don’t stop growing, one day, I may be stuck inside. What could my parents do if that happened? Or worse, I could be outside and not be able to get back in. Then what would I do? Where could I go?*

As Pumpkin lay on his bed, a tiny icy finger of fear crept down his back. For the first time in his life, he realized that not only was he was an outsider and alone, but because of his size, there was no place for him to go.

TO BE CONTINUED

CHAPTER 2: NOTHING BUT PROBLEMS

The Crumpetville Village Council, realizing that Pumpkin was rapidly becoming too tall for the Duckworth's home, met in an emergency session to discuss what steps the community might undertake to remedy the situation. A few argued that since the lad was the Duckworth's child, it was up to them to find a way of dealing with this enormous problem. But the majority argued that Pumpkin and his family were members of the community and deserved the love and support that Crumpetville, traditionally, provided to anyone in need.

Many of those in favor of helping the Duckworth family also pointed out that the young giant had become quite famous, and the steady stream of visitors to Crumpetville to see him represented an economic windfall for the community. The sale of crumpets, they reminded everyone, had more than tripled since Pumpkin had become so tall.

By a wide margin, the council voted that Pumpkin was a community resource and was, therefore, the responsibility of the entire village. They decided that the men of the town should build a house of sufficient size to meet the young giant's immediate and foreseeable future requirements. They also agreed to furnish it with a table, three chairs, and a bed large enough to accommodate the young man well into the future. Feeding Pumpkin was also to become a village responsibility.

Two weeks later, Pumpkin and his parents entered the newly built home to see what the villagers had accomplished. As they wandered through the two-room house, Louella and Axelrod were overwhelmed by the generosity of the community. Even the usually serious Pumpkin had tears in his eyes as he realized that thanks to the Crumpetville community, his problem was solved. Turning to the many villagers who had crowded into the room, he said in a voice choked with emotion. "I don't know how to thank all of you. Now, I'm going to be able to move into my very own home, sleep in a comfortable bed, sit at my very own dinner table and hopefully dine with my parents and many of you on comfortable chairs."

At the age of thirteen, and just over eight-feet-tall, Pumpkin, miraculously, stopped growing. He had matured into a handsome young man, with broad shoulders, a narrow waist, orange-red hair, a fair complexion, and dark, dark eyes. Partly

because of his size, but mostly because of his serious demeanor, Pumpkin looked many years older than he was.

It is worth noting that in those long-ago days, a 13-year-old young man was considered an adult and was expected to contribute, in one way or another, to the upkeep of the home. Most young men worked alongside their father, either farming or learning a trade. Young women helped their mothers with household chores, worked at the village market stand, or became an apprentice at the village bakery.

Pumpkin, however, was much too tall to work in his father's workshop or learn another trade working as an apprentice in another tradesman's small workplace. Farming was also not an option. Because he was as strong as five other young men in the village, the village farmers were unwilling to take him on as an apprentice, concerned that if Pumpkin took-up farming, their sons would have little to do and become lazy.

Despite this, Pumpkin was determined to show everyone how grateful he was by finding ways to make a contribution to the community. He was, therefore, always looking for ways to be helpful even though his efforts to help rarely worked out as he intended. His father was continually telling him, "Son, I know you are grateful to the community. However, your life here in Crumpetville will be a whole lot easier if you would think twice before jumping into a situation." And his friend Jeremy was forever whispering in his ear as he impulsively sprang into action, "Oh, oh, I'm not sure this is a good idea."

On one occasion, he came upon a wagon filled with a load of crumpets mired in mud. The driver and five workers from the bakery had unhitched the exhausted horse and were trying mightily to lift the wagon back on the dry section of the road. Rushing to assist, Pumpkin said to the workers, "If you will all stand back, I'll get the wagon back on the road in no time at all."

Despite their protestations that his help was not needed, and despite Jeremy's whispered warning, *"I'm not sure this is a good idea. Situations like this always seem to backfire."* Nothing was going to stop him

Jumping into the mud and crouching to get leverage, Pumpkin lifted the wagon out of the muck and onto the dry land. As was often the case, his effort to be helpful produced mixed results. While he was successful in lifting the wagon onto solid ground, in the process, half the wagon load of crumpets was ruined when they fell out into the mud.

As a consequence, whenever a situation developed requiring significant strength, the villagers selected someone to keep an eye out for Pumpkin and head him off before he came upon the problem and could spring into action.

Pumpkin's size and reputation were also proving to be a mixed blessing for the citizens of Crumpetville. While the increased sale of crumpets was an economic benefit, the crowds of curious sightseers who flocked into town to catch a glimpse of the very tall young man proved to be extremely unsettling. Once again, tourists clogged the dirt road, which ran through the town's center, complicating life for the villagers. Broken fences and ruined flower gardens were just some of the problems. At times, the visitors so filled the main road that it was nearly impossible for the villagers to go about their daily routines.

Occasionally Pumpkin would overhear someone from the village complaining about the crowds and the damage they were causing. Once, he heard one of the village women saying to a friend, "Matilda dear, don't you long for the good old days when almost no one came into town. Now we have a major attraction, and it's making life here in Crumpetville unbearable."

The reference to a "major attraction," which most certainly meant him, left Pumpkin devastated.

For several months, Pumpkin found his new house and living arrangement as perfect as any eight-foot giant's life could be. He was able to come and go through his front door without having to get on his hands and knees. Villagers were forever leaving large baskets of food on his front stoop, and while the portions were not as large as he would have liked, he was never hungry. His bed was comfortable, his chair and table more than adequate, and with a thatched roof over his head, he was dry and protected during the occasional rainstorm.

Despite the improvement in his living conditions and the continual support from his parents and his imaginary friend Jeremy, Pumpkin's mood gradually darkened. He became convinced that being different was more of a curse than a blessing. The townsfolk never called upon him to help with a problem. No one ever visited his home or joined him for a meal. His parents came often but found that even with Pumpkin's assistance getting up on and down from the chairs difficult.

Moreover, the top of the table was at the level of their chins, making eating

difficult. They never stayed for very long and frequently suggested that a picnic would be great fun. Even Jeremy's constant efforts to cheer him were unsuccessful.

Pumpkin began to eat less and less. The food that the villagers left for him was, more often than not, only half-eaten. He rarely left his house. And then, one day, he stopped eating or going out at all.

Pumpkin's apparent disappearance did not go unnoticed. A delegation from the village council aware that something was very much amiss, went to his parents' home to see if they could provide any information. His parents, however, while aware that something was not right, could offer little help. So the three members of the delegation, along with Pumpkin's parents, decided to visit Pumpkin's home to get to the bottom of what was going on.

After repeatedly knocking on the door and getting no response, the five of them entered the house. They found the young giant still in bed even though it was early afternoon.

Each member pleaded with Pumpkin to get up, get dressed, and join all of them for a walk around the village on what was a beautiful early summer day. Pumpkin just sighed and said, "Thank you, but please leave me alone."

Then his mother, now in tears, came up to the bed and taking her son's hand said,

"Pumpkin sweetheart, you've got your father and me worried sick. Please tell us what is wrong."

But in response to his mother's plea, Pumpkin said in a feeble voice, "Don't worry, mother, I'll be okay. I love the two of you, but now please let me get some sleep."

It was now crystal clear that, for some unknown reason, Pumpkin Duckworth was in very, very bad shape.

Upon learning from the three council members who had visited Pumpkin that something was very wrong, the entire Crumpetville village council held an emergency meeting. Pumpkin was not well, but the question was why and what could the village council do about it.

Long into the night, they argued and discussed the why and what of Pumpkin's strange illness. Some suggested that Pumpkin might have contracted a rare disease. Others put forward the idea that maybe he had eaten a bad mushroom. But none of the many suggested reasons for what ailed Pumpkin made any sense. No one else in town was sick, and everyone had eaten the same food as Pumpkin, only in smaller quantities.

Then Cynthia Pennywhistle, after listening to what to her was utter nonsense, asked the following questions: "How many of you have ever been in Pumpkin's new house? How many of you have ever shared a meal with Pumpkin? How many of you have had a conversation with Pumpkin? How many of you would want to be eight-foot-tall and be the only giant in our village?"

The effect of these questions was electrifying. One after another, the council members answered "no" or "never" in response to Cynthia's questions. The answer to Pumpkin's illness was now clear: Pumpkin had no friends. He was one very lonely young man.

To underscore her point, Cynthia continued, "You know the saddest part is that all of us share the blame for Pumpkin's unhappiness. We've made him feel like he is an outsider, not a member of our community. We love the fact that people come from miles around to see our eight-foot-tall giant and buy our crumpets and products from the market. But ask yourselves this – can anyone of you say that Pumpkin is your friend?"

Yes, we built a home for him when he grew too tall to live with his parents, and yes, we make sure that he has food to eat, but the house and food are not the same as showing him that he has friends and that he is loved. Feeding and sheltering is what we do for our pets and our horses."

Cynthia's words stung the members of the council. She was right. They were collectively to blame for Pumpkin's unhappy state. But now they had to face the fact that they had no idea what they could do about it.

Pumpkin had shut himself away and seemed to no longer want their help. It was as if there was no solution to the crisis. One thing was abundantly clear: Pumpkin was lonely, very unhappy, and it was up to the council to find a solution.

TO BE CONTINUED

CHAPTER 3: THE SOLUTION

Once the Crumpetville Village Council members realized that they were partially responsible for Pumpkin's unhappiness, they returned to the task of finding a solution to his loneliness with a new sense of purpose. Pumpkin Duckworth was a member of their close-knit, giving, happy community – and if he needed help, then help he would get. The question was how.

They sat around the large oak table in the middle of the council chamber and stared at each other long into the night. Every so often, a member would start to say something, then close his mouth and shake his head, acknowledging that whatever he was going to say was of no help. Hours passed, but the more they pondered, the more the problem seemed unsolvable. A lonely and depressed eight-foot-tall giant who had taken to bed with no interest in talking to them appeared to be an impossible challenge.

The Crumpetville Council Chairperson Cornelius Largebottom, whose name echoed his appearance, asked for suggestions, but not a one was forthcoming. "Council members," he pleaded, "Pumpkin Duckworth is a member of this community. We have helped him in the past, and he desperately needs our help now." Once again, no one had a suggestion.

Cynthia Pennywhistle, who had put her finger on the cause of Pumpkin's depression, at last, raised her hand. When called on by Cornelius, she said, "I would like to suggest that we are all exhausted and no longer thinking clearly. It seems to me that we should end our meeting for the night and come back together tomorrow at noon. While we are back in our homes, we should ask other family members for their suggestions. Then, tomorrow, we can re-open our meeting and see if there are any new ideas."

The council members enthusiastically agreed with Cynthia's recommendation. Without putting it to a vote, they streamed out of the Chamber, eager to get some much-needed sleep and share with other members of their families the problem that had kept them up for most of the night.

At noon the next day, they gathered again in the council chamber. The members immediately began presenting new ideas that had come to mind or that had been suggested by a family member.

Thaddeus Dubpicker suggested that Pumpkin should go on a vacation. But, when another member of the council pointed out that there was no place that an eight-foot-tall giant could go that would be able to house and feed him, the idea was quickly put to rest. Roland Thistlewhaite said, "My wife believes that the answer to Pumpkin's problem is his size. Maybe we can find someone in a nearby town who has a way of shrinking him down to a more reasonable size." This idea hardly seemed plausible, but the council, in desperation, tabled it for future consideration.

On and on, the discussion droned. Council members suggested one bad idea after another, with each one quickly dismissed. Some were impractical, some too costly, and a few were just plain crazy. Tempers began to flare, and it was becoming clear that neither the night's rest nor the suggestions from the spouses had been of much help.

Conrad Littlevoice, who had been silent up to this point, raised his hand to be heard.

"This morning," he said in his very soft voice, "my wife Lydia suggested an idea that might just make sense. Pumpkin is probably not the only giant on earth. If we could find a way to contact another equally tall individual on his behalf, he might not feel so lonely. It is not an immediate solution to our problem, but knowing that there is a chance that he could find a friend his size might make him feel less alone. What do you think?"

The room was silent for a full minute, and then everyone burst into cheers and applause. Here was the first potential solution to the problem that was not impractical, not too costly, and not entirely crazy.

After Cornelius Largebottom restored silence, he congratulated Conrad, telling him that the entire village owed his brilliant wife a debt of gratitude. He then said to the council, "Now that we have an idea that just might work, how do we find this other very tall person for Pumpkin?"

The excitement and enthusiasm that had filled the room a minute earlier disappeared. Silence once again enveloped the council chamber. Pumpkin was the only giant they knew. And not one of them had any idea how to find, let alone contact another one, especially a giant whose whereabouts and whose name was unknown. They were as perplexed now as they had been the day before.

Suddenly, Conrad Littlevoice jumped to his feet. And, in a voice that for him was quite loud, shouted,

“I think I know how! If we believe that there other giants out there in the world, then the only way to find another one is to send out a message asking one of them to contact Pumpkin. And the best way to do this is by writing and sending out a whole lot of letters as far and as wide as we can.

We’ll ask Pumpkin to write a letter about himself explaining who he is and why he is so lonely. Then we’ll help make copies – many, many copies. And we will give several copies to every tradesperson, and visitor who comes through Crumpetville. We’ll ask them to distribute Pumpkin’s letter during their travels. If we ask everyone who spends his life on the road to pass some of them on, maybe, just maybe, one of the copies will find its way into the hands of another giant.”

The council chamber, once again, burst into cheers. This, at last, was a workable solution to the problem. And the letter-writing campaign alone would undoubtedly cheer up Pumpkin.

The council quickly formed a delegation consisting of Conrad Littlevoice, Cynthia Pennywhistle, and Chairman Cornelius Largebottom. They would suggest the idea to Pumpkin, and if he agreed, help him create the letter.

The entire council gathered in front of Pumpkin’s home. The three-member delegation stepped up to the door, and Cornelius vigorously knocked. “Pumpkin Duckworth,” he called out, “we have an important matter to discuss with you.” There was no response.

After a minute or two, Conrad Littlevoice tried. “Pumpkin,” he called out in his loudest but a still small voice, “we are here to help.” This time a weak voice from inside the house said, “Please go away and leave me alone.”

Cynthia then said, “Pumpkin, we are your friends, and you are an important member of this community. We have done little to make you feel that way, and for that, we are sorry. Understandably, you are lonely and unhappy, but disappearing into your house and climbing into bed is most certainly not going to help. Open the door and hear what we have to say. We have an exciting plan to help you find others who are like you”.

The door opened a crack and a disheveled Pumpkin, squinting in the bright late afternoon sunlight peered out. “Tell me more about this plan,” was all that he said.

Conrad Littlevoice explained the plan – the letter, the copies, the traveling visitors, the idea that there had to be other very tall people somewhere in the world. As Pumpkin listened, his expression began to change. For the first time in a long while he had something to look forward to

After hearing the council’s plan, an excited Pumpkin exclaimed, “What a smashing idea! I can’t possibly be the only giant in the world. Let’s get to work immediately and write a letter. The sooner we start, the sooner we can begin making copies and send my letter out into the world. Quick, get parchment and a quill pen, and let’s get started.”

News about the letter-writing campaign swept through the community, and soon an even bigger crowd began gathering in front of Pumpkin’s home. Upon hearing Pumpkin’s enthusiastic request, several villagers rushed to their homes to get the letter-writing material.

Cynthia Pennywhistle, chosen for her spelling skill and excellent penmanship, sat on the floor and began writing the letter as Pumpkin dictated. Every so often, a member of the visiting delegation, or someone in the crowd in front of Pumpkin’s home, shouted a suggestion designed to make the final product perfect.

“Put in the letter that you talk to yourself,” someone shouted.

Make sure you put in the letter that you are strong and handsome,” someone else called.

Don’t put in the letter that you talk to yourself a third person shouted

After writing and rewriting for the better part of an hour, the letter, at last, was finished. With Pumpkin’s permission, Cynthia, standing in the doorway of Pumpkin’s house, read the final version to the crowd of villagers.

To whom it may concern (Hopefully a very, very tall person):

My name is Pumpkin Duckworth. I am over eight feet tall, which makes me almost twice the height of the next tallest person in Crumpetville, the village where I live.

Everyone in my town has been very kind and good to me. They have built me a beautiful house and have made sure that I am never hungry. But, I live alone and rarely have visitors because

they cannot climb up on the chairs or join me at the dinner table. Also, despite my good intentions, I often create problems for others in the village because of my strength.

It is my hope that this letter makes its way to someone who is also quite tall and who is looking for a friend. If you are such a person, please write back to me. Make copies of your reply and give several copies to everyone who comes through your town or village. I am sure that eventually, a copy will find its way to Crumpetville.

I will write back to you as soon as your letter arrives and then neither of us will be so lonely.

**Very truly yours,
PUMPKIN DUCKWORTH**

A happy Pumpkin stood beaming in his doorway. Everyone agreed that the letter was a masterpiece and that Pumpkin would most certainly hear from another giant in short order.

With the final draft in hand, every citizen in Crumpetville who had legible handwriting began writing copies of the original Pumpkin letter. Within a week, three hundred and fifty copies were ready. They were then folded and stuffed into envelopes with the words printed large on the front, "TO BE DELIVERED TO A LONELY GIANT."

From then on, every traveler who passed through Crumpetville was given several envelopes, along with the request that they share some with other travelers they met on the road.

In less than a month, all of the copied letters were gone. And the waiting began.

TO BE CONTINUED

CHAPTER 4: THE REPLY

Optimism ran rampant in the village of Crumpetville. Everyone was convinced that a response to the letter-writing campaign would arrive quickly. Even Pumpkin was confident that he would soon hear from another giant and walked the streets with a smile on his face. He and his imaginary friend, Jeremy Elka, once again began chatting away. Now, however, the subject of their conversation was the newfound friend who would soon write back.

But, as the weeks, and then the months passed, gloom, like a fog, slowly settled on the village. Many tradespeople traveled thru Crumpetville, but none had a letter for a Pumpkin Duckworth. The unhappy young giant returned to his bed, ate very little food, and refused to see even his parents. It looked like what had promised to be an excellent idea had failed.

On a beautiful late March day, precisely nine months, two weeks, and a day after a visitor had taken the last bundle of envelopes, a stranger appeared in Crumpetville. His clothes were dirty and patched, and his shoes old and worn out. He carried a cloth bag over one shoulder, and a grinding wheel was strapped to his back.

As he walked down the main street, the first person he happened to run into was Granvill Drubwell. "I'm wondering, my good man, the stranger asked, if perchance, this is the village of Crumpetville?"

Upon getting a positive response, the newcomer said, " My name, sir, is Phineas Grimsky. Several months ago, a peddler I met on the road gave me a letter addressed to a Pumpkin Duckworth in the village of Crumpetville. Since this is the village of Crumpetville, does a person with that name reside here?"

When Granville heard that the stranger had a letter for Pumpkin, he could hardly contain his excitement. Jumping up and down while shaking Phileas's hand, he began shouting at the top of his voice, "ITS COME, ITS COME; A LETTER FOR PUMPKIN!"

Almost immediately, the stranger found himself surrounded by the entire village. Everyone was jumping up and down in excitement while shouting, "Let us see the letter! Show us the letter! Read us the letter!"

Phineas, now convinced that he had stumbled into a town filled with deranged individuals, turned to flee, but found that he was now surrounded.

Then down the main street of the village, running as fast as he could, came Pumpkin, bellowing at the top of his lungs as he ran, "HAS IT COME, HAS IT TRULY COME? GET OUT OF THE WAY, OUT OF MY WAY; I WANT TO SEE MY LETTER!"

Seeing an enormous giant running down the street, shouting like a man possessed was too much for Phineas, who promptly fainted.

At this point, Cornelius Largebottom, taking control of the situation, said in a commanding voice, "This is not the way we welcome a visitor to our village. Please, back away and give our guest some air. Pumpkin, please carry Mr. Grimsky into the council chamber and stretch him out on the table in the meeting room."

Pumpkin picked up Phineas as if he weighed no more than a sack of feathers, and gently deposited him on the table. Then he moved to the back of the room so as not to further frighten their guest when he regained consciousness. As he stood there, a cascade of thoughts tumbled through his mind. *Is the person who wrote the letter as tall as I am? Is it a he or a she who has written back? How old is the letter writer? Do they know anyone else who is very tall?*

A few minutes later, Phineas opened his eyes and, in a shaky voice, asked if he might have some water. After drinking a few swallows, the somewhat revived Phineas said, "I am looking for someone named Pumpkin Duckworth. The letter I have is in a sealed envelope with instructions on the front that say it is for him. Does someone with that name reside in your town?"

As Pumpkin approached the table, Phineas' eyes opened wide, and his jaw dropped in amazement. Never in his years on the road had he ever seen anyone as enormous as the young giant.

Cornelius, befitting his role as council chairperson stepped forward and with his hand on the small of Pumpkin's back, made the following formal introduction:

"My good man," Cornelius said in his usual pompous style, "as village council chairperson, I want to personally welcome you to our community and to apologize for the unruly manner in which the citizens of Crumpetville greeted you when you first arrived.

"The letter you carry is a reply to one that Mr. Duckworth wrote over nine months ago

and for which we have been waiting with slowly diminishing expectations.

“Now that it has finally arrived, I hope you understand our excitement and will forgive our overly enthusiastic greeting. This tall person by my side is Mr. Pumpkin Duckworth, the person whose name is on the envelope. It is our hope that the individual who wrote the letter is tall as the young man standing beside me. Mr. Grimsky, may I introduce you to Mr. Pumpkin Duckworth.”

With that said, Phineas Grimsky reached into his shoulder bag and withdrew a soiled and somewhat crumpled letter that had obviously passed through many hands. He then placed the envelope into Pumpkin’s large, outstretched hand.

Pumpkin’s fingers were so large and shook with so much excitement that he struggled to open the envelope. Turning to Cornelius, he asked, “Would you open the envelope and read its contents aloud. I think all of my Crumpetville friends deserve to hear the reply since they helped me send my letter out into the world.”

Opening the envelope, Cornelius withdrew the letter, and in his loudest and most official voice he began to read:

Dear Mr. Duckworth (or should I call you Pumpkin?),

My given name is Delila Deveral. However, because I was born prematurely and weighed less than one pound at birth, my mother immediately began calling me Littlebit. Then, when my father saw me for the first time, he gave me the nickname Pinktoes. As a result, everyone knows me as Littlebit Pinktoes Deveral.

Like you, I grew quite rapidly and am now over seven feet tall. Also, like you, the townspeople here in Minersville, have been very kind to me. They built me a house, have made sure that I have plenty of food to eat, and have been the best helpers that a very tall individual could hope for.

But it is difficult for the kind people in Minersville to find things in common with a seven-foot-tall young lady. All the other girls my age still live at home with their parents. They visit the market together, and after their chores are finished, they visit each other and gossip. Also, because the furniture in my home is much too high, I rarely have

visitors. I am truly very lonely.

Your letter clearly passed through many hands before it reached me. Because of this, I have no way of knowing how long ago you sent it or how long it will take for my reply to get back to you. I also have never heard of Crumpetville, and neither has anyone in town. I have no idea how far away you might be. By the way, I am 13 years old. How old are you?

Anyway, thanks to your wonderful letter, I am no longer a very tall, lonely young lady. I hope my reply reaches you so you will feel less alone knowing that you are not the only very tall person in the world. And I wish, more than anything, that you will write back. Also, maybe someday we can meet. That would be such great fun.

Your newfound friend,

Littlebit Pinktoes Deveral

There was not a dry eye in the Chamber when Cornelius had finished reading the letter. Littlebit's message was an answer to all of their prayers. Pumpkin now had a friend.

Turning to Phineas, Pumpkin said, "Thank you, sir, for making me a very happy young man. But I would like to know how long ago the envelope was given to you, and if you have any idea where I might find Minersville?"

"Hmmm," Phineas said, half out loud, while stoking the stubble on his unshaven chin. Those are excellent questions. I've been on the road for a very long time. So please bear with me as I try to remember."

Then finally looking up at Pumpkin, he said. "I remember now. It was in the village of Puddlestop about three months ago. I was sharpening knives in the towns and ports along the coast of the Great Sea when a tradesman gave me one of the envelopes he was carrying. He told me that if my travels ever took me to the village of Crumpetville, I was to deliver the letter to a Pumpkin Duckworth. I continued east along the coast for another two months. Then just beyond the village of Stutterville, I took a road that headed sort of south and east, and that is the road that brought me here.

“In answer to the second part of your question,” Phineas said. “While I am unable to tell you where the town of Minersville is located, this much I can tell you. I know the names of most of the cities, towns, and kingdoms along the route I take on the coast, and none of them are named Minersville. But, if I were to make a guess, I’m pretty sure that the place you are asking about is far, far to the west of where I was given your letter. Out of curiosity, why do you want to know where Minersville is?”

Pumpkin response brought a gasp from the crowd of villagers. “I have waited nine long months to receive a reply to my letter,” he said, “and that is much too long a time to wait for a reply from me. Minersville is out there somewhere, and I am going to find it. I’m leaving Crumpetville to find my new friend, Littlebit Pinktoes Deveral.”

TO BE CONTINUED

CHAPTER 5: THE CRUMPETVILLE DECISION

Pumpkin immediately left the chamber, leaving a room full of stunned villagers. They could not believe what they heard when Pumpkin told them that he planned to leave Crumpetville in search of Minersville and his new friend. As far as anyone knew, no one had ever left the village other than to deliver crumpet to other nearby communities. Crumpetville was home. Besides, who knew what dangers lay outside their very safe world?

They gathered in small groups inside and outside the Council Chamber to discuss this new turn of events. Many shook their heads in dismay, concerned with the dangers that Pumpkin might face.

Others were troubled that with Pumpkin gone, the steady stream of visitors to the village who had come for the crumpets and to catch a glimpse of an eight-foot giant, would disappear. If Pumpkin left, they worried, the prosperity that the town had enjoyed thanks to their famous friend might also vanish.

And a few were left speechless, unable to understand why anyone would want to leave Crumpetville. Only Conrad Littlevoice, who on two occasions had proven himself one of the wisest of all the members of the Village Council, appeared to accept the news with a degree of calm.

Walking over to Cornelius Largebottom, who was standing with a group of concerned citizens, Conrad whispered in his ear, "It might be a good idea to call the village council into an emergency session. We can then discuss what, if anything, the council and the community might do given Pumpkin's decision."

After thanking Conrad for his great idea, Cornelius, stood as straight and tall as he could and, in his loudest voice, addressed the gathered villagers. "My good friends, he said, "it seems to me, given this new turn of events, that the Crumpetville Village Council should meet and decide what steps, if any, the council and village should now take."

With the hall cleared of non-council members and Phineas now sitting in a chair, Cornelius called the session to order.

"Council members," he said, "We are facing a truly terrible situation. If Pumpkin leaves, economic ruin will descend upon our fair village. I am open to any suggestions as to what we should do."

The uproar that ensued was deafening. Each council member voiced an opinion about how to stop Pumpkin from leaving, and each expressed his opinion at the same time and in the loudest possible voice.

“Forbid him to leave!” shouted several Council members.

“Burn the letter!” shouted another.

“Get his parents to talk some sense into him!” a council member yelled.

And some members made all sorts of dire predictions like, “He’ll fall off the edge of the world,” “Wild beasts will eat him!” “Highwaymen will rob and kill him!”

Only Conrad Littlevoice remained calm with his hand raised, waiting for the chair to recognize him.

Aware that he was losing control of the meeting, Cornelius banged his gavel on the table so hard that its head flew off, almost hitting one of the council members. “SILENCE!” he shouted. The chair recognizes our distinguished member, Mr. Conrad Littlevoice.”

With the council members now shocked into silence, Conrad Littlevoice addressed the room.

“Thank you for recognizing me, Mr. Chairman. I realize that all of you are bewildered and upset by Pumpkin Duckworth’s decision to leave our pleasant village and travel out into the world to find his new friend. However, let me point out to you some hard, cold, unpleasant truths. First, if Pumpkin Duckworth has decided to leave our village, nothing, and no one is going to be able to keep an eight-foot-tall young man from going.

“Second, while I agree with you that he may face some dangers – do any of you honestly believe that a highwayman would try and rob a giant, even a young one? What wild animal is going to attack him? Pumpkin is now almost fourteen years old. He is an adult, although a young one. And given his age, his size, and his strength, he is old enough and big enough to take care of himself.

“Third, would any of you be happy having to wait for an unknown length of time to hear from a friend? The only way that Pumpkin is going to be truly happy is if he

meets another person as tall as he is. We cannot offer him that in our village.

“And finally, we were a prosperous and contented community selling our delicious crumpets before Pumpkin was born. And we will be a prosperous and contented community after he has gone.

“My fellow councilmen,” Conrad concluded. “What we as a village should focus on is how to help Pumpkin on his journey. He will need clothing, supplies, equipment, and a host of other things. Our role should be to make a list of what he will need and then use the resources of our entire village to help him prepare for his adventure.”

Once again, Conrad’s wise words brought the council to its feet. “Bravo, bravo,” they shouted. “That’s what we should do. What a splendid idea!”

Conrad raised his arm to quiet the council members and said, “I would like to suggest that we spend the next few hours making a list of what Pumpkin will need on his journey. We should split up into two groups. One group will focus on clothing, and the second one will focus on supplies and equipment. When we’ve completed the lists, we will come back together to review our work and consider any additional comments and suggestions.

“Once the lists are completed, we will meet with Pumpkin and his parents. It is only fair that they are allowed to hear what we propose to do and review the lists before we speak to the rest of the Crumpetville. If they are satisfied, we let everyone else in the village know what the council has decided to do and why it is the best decision. Remember, it took the whole village to help Pumpkin contact another giant. It will take the whole village to prepare him to go out into the world and find her.”

Conrad divided the council members into two groups and assigned each a specific list. Only Cornelius and Conrad were asked to remain behind as the two groups of council members departed the council chamber.

With chamber now empty, Conrad turned to Cornelius, saying, “I am sure that Pumpkin will agree to our plan and appreciate our offer of help. What we should do next is the two of us, along with Cynthia, need to meet with Phineas Grimsky and learn as much as we can about the world outside of Crumpetville. Pumpkin’s life may depend on how prepared he is.”

TO BE CONTINUED

CHAPTER 6: PREPARATIONS

The next two months were a blur of activity. One group of women worked furiously at cutting, stitching, and sewing an oversized backpack. Other women were busy creating all manner of clothing that Pumpkin might need for a trip of unknown distance, duration, and weather. Even the men, when their work permitted, helped the women as best they could or found items in their shops or farms that Pumpkin might find useful.

The efforts to help were not limited to Crumpetville. When word got out that Pumpkin Duckworth was going out on the road to look for his new friend, all the surrounding towns and villages offered their assistance. Twineville sent a very long and very sturdy length of rope. Oak Junction delivered an eight-foot walking stick fashioned from a young oak tree, and Hatsburg contributed a wide-brimmed hat.

Sparksburg's residents had been experimenting with a method of starting a fire using what they called a fire-stick. They graciously provided Pumpkin with a supply of extra-long and extra-large fire-sticks. They also gave him a waterproof pouch with a stone for striking the fire-stick sewed on and a set of instructions. They warned him, however, that since the fire-sticks were still in the experimental stage, they might prove dangerous, and there was no guarantee that they would always work¹.

Meanwhile, Conrad Littlevoice, Chairman Largebottom, and Cynthia Pennywhistle were hard at work finding out what they could about the world beyond the village of Crumpetville. They hoped to be able to tell Pumpkin the best route for him to take when he began his journey.

After learning everything that Phineas Grimsky knew, the three of them questioned every stranger passing through Crumpetville. Gradually, enough information was collected to create a crude parchment map showing what Pumpkin might find as he headed west. The map showed the larger villages and towns that lay to the southwest along the winding road between Crumpetville and Hatsburg. The plan also indicated that at Hatsburg, the roadway turned sharply south and eventually led to a bridge that crossed over a river and deep gorge. Reaching the bridge could take as long as two weeks, but it was, as far as anyone knew, the only known way to

¹ It is worth noting that while Pumpkin would have no difficulty using the Sparksburg fire-sticks during his travels, the town's efforts to perfect the product came to an unfortunate end a few years later when an improved version caused the entire town to burn to the ground. It is also worth noting that the Sparksburg "match" was an early attempt at making a friction match. It would take another thirty years for a commercially available friction match to be sold and an additional twenty-five, or so years, for the safety match to be invented. .

cross over the gorge and river. If, for some reason, Pumpkin decided to travel west, rather than follow the road south, no one knew what he would find along the way or how long it would take to reach the river.

As for what lay on the other side of the river, the information was so vague that it provided little value. There was some agreement that the river was very wild, very deep, and strewn with huge boulders. Two strangers told Cornelius and Conrad that they believed that a snow-capped mountain range was visible once a person reached the river and that there was a footpath that supposedly led to a pass through the mountains. No one, however, had any idea as to how long it would take to reach the mountains and the pass.

Another peddler passing through Crumpetville reported that he had heard that the pass was only open in mid-summer. Moreover, he told them, beyond the mountains, there was a desert so immense and so dry that anyone entering would surely perish.

When Conrad, Cornelius, and Cynthia became convinced that no additional useful information could be gleaned from individuals passing through their village, they asked Pumpkin to join them.

As Pumpkin listened to the information that the three of them had collected, he gradually realized that once he reached Hatsburg, he would be heading off into the unknown.

Most of the information they have collected, he thought, is second hand at best. Besides, none of the many travelers that the three of them have questioned knows for sure what I will find when I cross the river. Most discouraging is that everyone says that anyone heading west should be put away in a home for people who are not of a sound mind. What no one realizes is that if I stay here in Crumpetville, I'll probably go crazy from loneliness and eventually end up in a home anyways. Trying to reach Minersville and Littlebit is still my best option.

The evening before Pumpkin's early morning departure, the villagers had scheduled a going-away party for their friend. The guest list included everyone who had helped, in one way or another, providing items he might need on his journey. It was going to be the grandest party ever held in Crumpetville.

Before heading to the party to thank everyone for their help, Pumpkin began going over in his mind the various pieces of equipment and the clothing he had stored in his backpack.

“Let’s see,” he said half out loud, “I’ve packed most of the clothes that the women of Crumpetville have made for me as well as the wide-brimmed hat, a large blanket, the leather jacket, and a pair of lined leather gloves. I’ve also stored the compass, dried food and nuts, a length of rope, fire-sticks, a large goatskin canteen of water, and the extra pair of walking boots. In the space I have left, I’ll fill with the sandwiches, apples, and crumpets that the villagers gave me yesterday.

Suddenly, a familiar voice, which Pumpkin had not heard for a while, said in his ear, *Are you entirely sure this trip we are taking is a good idea?*

Ignoring Jeremy’s question, Pumpkin replied, “Where have you been?”

I’ve been trying to talk to you since Littlebit’s letter arrived. But, you’ve been so excited about the idea of leaving Crumpetville that you’ve had no time for me. Now, answer my question. Are you sure this adventure is a good idea?

Pumpkin, now more than a little annoyed, responded. “It should be clear to you that I do. Apparently, you are not in full agreement. Okay, why don’t you give me one good reason why I shouldn’t go?”

Well, since you asked, I can give you three. First, you don’t have the foggiest idea where you are going other than you are going west. Second, you have no idea how you are going to get there or what dangers are waiting for you out there. And third, other than the fact that Littlebit Pinktoes Deveral is almost as tall as you and lonely, you have no idea what you are going to find once you get there. For all you know, she weighs 600 pounds or is as mean as an angry tiger.

“Okay, I’ll agree that there are a few uncertainties in this plan, but what are my alternatives – stay here in Crumpetville and grow old with you as my only friend. Now be quiet. I’ve still got some packing to do.”

Just as he reached for the few remaining items that he planned to cram into his backpack, there was a knock on his door. Without looking up from his work, he shouted, “Come on in, the door is unlocked.”

When the knocking came again, Pumpkin stopped what he was doing, opened the door, and found his parents standing there. “Oh my goodness, come in, come in,” he said.

“I hope we are not here at a bad time.” his father said, “I know how busy you must be.”

“Not at all, not at all: I was planning to stop by your house before going to the party to thank you for being the most wonderful parents a young man could hope for and to say goodbye. I’m so very...”

Interrupting her son in mid-sentence, Louella, now close to tears, asked him. “Are you sure this trip you’ve planned is a good idea.”

“Mother, Father,” Pumpkin replied, “I know my leaving is going to be hard on the two of you, but if you’re honest with yourselves, I’m sure you’ll come to the same conclusion I have. There is no future for me here in Crumpetville. I will never have a real friend or meet anyone as tall as me. At best, I’ll always be the village oaf – a curiosity. Is this what the two of you want for me?”

With a sigh, his mother nodded, saying, “You are right, son. Finding Miss Littlebit Deveral is your best chance for any real happiness. Your father and I will miss you terribly, but go with our blessing and our prayers that you stay safe and find happiness. Finish your packing, and we’ll walk over to the farewell party together.”

With the packing finished, Pumpkin and his parents left the house. A short distance down the road leading to the party, they came upon Conrad Littlevoice, Cornelius Largebottom, and Cynthia Pennywhistle patiently waiting for Pumpkin.

Conrad, in the capacity as spokesperson said to Pumpkin, “We have put together a crude map showing what we have learned from visitors to our village. Handing Pumpkin the parchment map, he continued, “This map contains everything we could find out. It’s not much, but we hope it will be of some help.”

After thanking Conrad, Cornelius, and Cynthia and with the map (a copy of which can be found at the end of this chapter), safely folded and put in his pocket, the five of them continued on to the party.

When Pumpkin appeared at the festivities, there was a loud cheer and an immediate demand for him to make a speech.

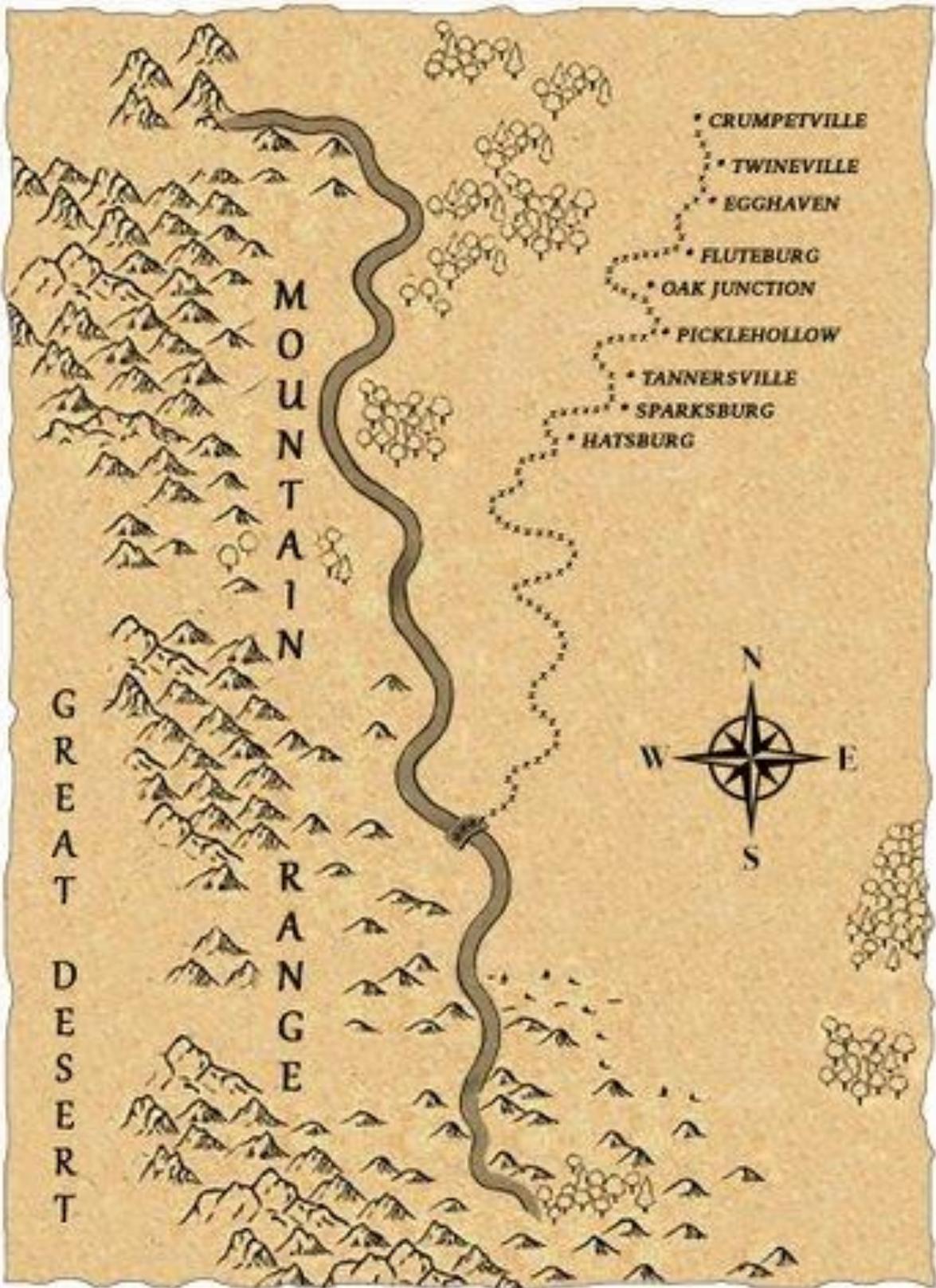
In an emotion choked voice, Pumpkin responded, "I want to thank all of you for helping me find Miss Littlebit Pinktoes Deveral and for your assistance in getting me ready for my adventure. Without your help, my dream of meeting someone as tall as I am would not have been possible.

The crowd, in turn, sang a rousing farewell chorus of "For He's a Jolly Brave Giant," a song written just for the occasion. And, with the music echoing in his ears, Pumpkin left for bed and, if possible, a good night's sleep.

Tomorrow, he knew, he would say goodbye to Crumpetville, his home, and his mother and father. He had no way of knowing what the future had in store or if he was saying goodbye forever.

TO BE CONTINUED

A MAP FOR PUMPKINS JOURNEY TO THE BRIDGE



CHAPTER 7: THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

Early the next morning, with a hearty breakfast under his belt, Pumpkin closed the door of his house, possibly for the last time. With the sun at his back and his wide-brimmed hat on his head, he started off on his adventure. He carried his compass, and the pouch of fire-sticks in his pocket, held his walking stick in his hand, and with his backpack sling over his shoulders, he started down the road to find Littlebit.

As he walked through the village, the entire Crumpetville community lined both sides of the way, waving goodbye. He could see his parents standing there with tears streaming down their faces and try as he might, he could not keep the tears from his own eyes.

Because of his long stride, Crumpetville was soon out of sight. On and on, he walked, passing through one hamlet and village after another as he headed toward Hatsburg. In each, the scene was the same. Residents lined the road waving goodbye and wishing him good luck. Frequently, sandwiches and fruit were thrust into his hands so he would not go hungry. Occasionally, a youngster would dart out of the crowd to give him flowers, exclaiming, "Safe journey, Mr. Pumpkin!"

As he strode onward, he gradually realized that for the first time in a long while, he was unbelievably happy. It was as if a burdensome weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He no longer walked with his head down so that he could be careful where he placed his feet. Occasionally he found himself humming the tune that the villagers in Crumpetville had written for his going-away party. He knew he would miss his parents and home village terribly. He also was aware that the adventure he was embarking on was dangerous. However, the idea that he was on his way to meet someone who understood what loneliness was like gladdened his heart and brought a smile to his face.

Each noon, he would stop under the shade of a large tree and eat some of the food that well-wishers had given him during the day or which he had packed away. Every evening he would find a place along the side of the road where he could stretch out and, with his backpack as a pillow, get a night's sleep.

Every so often, his imaginary friend would comment on the outpouring of love he was receiving. On one occasion, Jeremy said to Pumpkin; *It looks like you have more friends than you thought.* To which Pumpkin replied, "Yeah, sure, now that I'm leaving, they love me, but they didn't act like this when I lived in Crumpetville. I know I've made the right decision, so be still and stop trying to raise doubts in my mind."

Just before noon on his seventh day on the road, Pumpkin reached the town of Hatsburg, famous for its wide-brimmed hats like the one he was now wearing. Hatsburg, he knew, was the place where he would have to make his first important decision. For it was here, just beyond the town, that the road turned more to the south and not west where he believed he would find Minersville.

As was the case in each of the previous towns and villages through which he had passed, Hatsburg residents lined each side of the street, cheering him on as he passed through. This time, however, it was different. For standing in the middle of the road were some of the town's dignitaries, all holding up their arms for him to stop.

When Pumpkin halted, the mayor of the community came forward, and looking up at him, said, in his loudest voice,

“Mr. Duckworth, welcome to Hatsburg. As you can see, the entire town has gathered to wish you well on your journey. We realize that you are anxious to continue on your quest, but it is noon and lunchtime. We are hopeful that you might consider having a picnic lunch with us before continuing on your way. Ours is the last good size village you will encounter as you continue on the road to the bridge, and a substantial meal will help fortify you for this part of your journey. I might add that we have prepared a sumptuous spread for you on the village green just in case you decide to stay.”

Overcome with gratitude, Pumpkin was left speechless. It was one thing for Crumpetville, his hometown, to help, but to find such kindness from people he hardly knew was unexpected.

Finally, regaining his composure, he said in a voice filled with emotion,

“My good friends, I want to thank all of you for your generous offer and tell you that a meal would be a wonderful and unexpected treat. I will always hold a warm spot in my heart for this marvelous town, and every time I put your wide-brimmed hat on my head, I will be reminded of your kindness.”

The entire citizenry burst into cheers and led him to the picnic area, which completely covered the grassy field in front of the community's bandstand in the center of the town. Soon Pumpkin and the town members were enjoying the magnificent lunch.

During his meal, Pumpkin asked several of the townspeople how long it would take him to reach the bridge. He also asked what he might find if he decided to head directly west rather than follow the road.

There was general agreement that it would be difficult for him to reach the bridge, even given the speed with which he covered ground, in less than a week. The road, they explained, was not only extremely hilly, but also meandering, and in deplorable condition.

But if he did take the road south, he would find many tiny villages along the way. Given his growing fame, the villagers would most certainly be delighted to greet him and provide him with what food they could spare.

No one in Hatsburg knew much about what he would find if he left the road and headed directly west. Some believed that the fields to the west were relatively flat and that he could probably reach the river in three or four days. But, they were concerned that when he reached the river traveling this way, he might discover that the gorge the river had created was quite deep with sheer walls, as was the case at the bridge. If this was what he found, climbing down would be harrowing and the climb up, on the opposite side, next to impossible.

A few also indicated that they had heard that the river was quite wild, with swift currents, and enormous boulders scattered along its length. They believed that anyone who fell into the river would either drown or be killed, smashing into one of the massive rocks.

The general consensus was that the road south was his best option. When pressed, they all admitted that they had never actually headed west or even south and seen the river for themselves. They told him that they were only reporting what they had heard from travelers who had passed through their village.

After thoroughly enjoying the picnic, Pumpkin thanked the mayor and the good citizens of Hatsburg for their kindness and advice and again resumed his journey. As he strode down the road, he realized that his first seven days had been easy but that in a short while, everything was going to change. He would be entering uncharted territory and would have to make his first important decision. *Should I take the road heading south*, he thought to himself, *or am I better off traveling directly west.*

You know, his imaginary friend began to say, *if you take...* “Not now, Jeremy,”

Pumpkin interrupted, "I've got an important decision to make, and this is not a good time for chit-chatting."

Suddenly the answer came to him, "Of course," he shouted in a voice so loud that he startled a flock of birds nesting in the trees by the side of the road, "Littlebit's is waiting to hear from me. I remember how sad I became as each day passed with no reply to one of my letters. Since I have decided not to write but to go and see her, I owe it to her to take the quickest route possible. Anything that delays my getting to Minersville and meeting my new friend is just not right."

With that, Pumpkin picked up the pace of his walking and headed towards the bend in the road.

Two hours later, at the roads turn to the south, he paused for a moment to drink some water and survey the landscape. Then, with the sun now lower in the sky, Pumpkin left the certainty of the existing roadway and headed straight west across an open meadow. As promised, the fields were mostly flat, and while the grass and wildflowers in some sections were quite tall, they did not slow him down. Occasionally, he would travel through a stand of trees, but even these wooded areas hardly slowed his progress. That evening, he stopped in a grove, ate dinner, and settled down for what he felt was a well-earned night of sleep.

He walked steadily for the next three days, occasionally chatting with Jeremy about how easy the going was and how beautiful the scenery was. He would stop only for brief lunches in the shade of a tree and bed down when it became very dark.

.As dusk approached, on the fourth day after leaving Hatsburg, the setting sun sharply outlined the range of now visible mountains off in the west. He had hoped to reach the river, the first significant milestone on his journey, by the fourth day, so he began to walk even faster.

Climbing a small hill, Pumpkin began to hear the sound of rushing water. He quickly scrambled the top where he was able to make out a blackish ribbon, like a scar on the landscape, which stretched as far as he could see across his path. Quickening his pace, even more, he walked rapidly towards what he knew was the gorge and the river below.

At the very edge, he stopped, looked down, and shook his head in utter dismay. The river, as warned, had sliced a vast channel into the earth. At the bottom, he saw

the wildly rushing water and the huge boulders that the Hatsburg townsfolk had indicated he might find. If he lost his footing, while crossing the surging river, he would almost certainly smash into one of these boulders. To make matters worse, the sides of the gorge rose nearly straight up, making it seemingly impossible for anyone to safely reach the bottom or climb up on the other side.

As he stood at the edge of the gorge, the familiar voice of friend chided, *I know you don't want to hear it, but that was not the smartest decision you might have made. When you receive sound advice, you better learn to take it.' Now, what's your plan?*

"Oh, so now you've decided to give me advice," Pumpkin sarcastically responded. "Where were you several days ago when I could have used your advice?"

In response, his imaginary friend replied, *Oh no you don't. You can't place the blame on me for your mistake. I was just about to suggest that you listen to the advice you had been given when you told me that you wanted me to be quiet. You're in such a hurry to find Littlebit that once again you didn't, stop and think. Now, answer my question. What's your plan?*

"I'm going to get a good night's sleep, and in the morning, I'm going to follow the river south and cross at the bridge," Pumpkin replied.

Finding a spot to bed down for the night, Pumpkin thought to himself, *How could I have made such a terrible decision? Am I really really up to the task of finding Littlebit? I haven't the foggiest idea where I'm going or what lies ahead.*

As Pumpkin wrestled with his doubts, his friend Jeremy interrupted, *Okay, so we agree that you didn't make the wisest decision back there. But the best thing we can do now is to continue on. There is no way you can seriously consider going back – not after the grand sendoff you were given and the greeting and cheers you received along the way. Look, all you have to do is head west when you finally cross this river.*

Thanks to Jeremy's sound advice, the flicker of doubt disappeared. And with his positive outlook restored, Pumpkin said to Jeremy, *One thing is for sure, the next time I get advice, I'll think twice before I ignore it.* To which his friend responded. *I should certainly hope so.*

Because the early spring weather continued warm, Pumpkin was able to sleep under the stars as he followed the river south. He would stop just before the sun

disappeared in the west and rise as the early morning sun turned the snow on the distant mountain peaks a golden color. To save even more time, he did not stop for lunch but made do with a quick breakfast and a substantial supper. Despite these time-saving efforts, it took Pumpkin almost eight additional days to reach the bridge because the river had so many twists and turns.

It was late afternoon when Pumpkin reached the road and saw the bridge to his left. At first, he was encouraged to be back on track, but the closer he got to it, the more concerned he became. The bridge appeared to be quite old and in terrible condition. A few of the cross members were missing, and one section, near the far side of the bridge, sagged noticeably to the left.

However, because his mistake had cost him so much time, he felt he had no choice but to cross over the gorge before it got dark and then camp for the evening on the other side.

Pumpkin began to cross the wooden span. Gingerly placing one foot in front of the other as if his careful walking would somehow fool the bridge into thinking he was lighter than he was, he slowly made progress across the span. When new, the bridge might have been able to take the weight of an eight-foot giant. Now, however, with each step, the bridge swayed and gave out a loud groan.

He was making good progress despite how carefully he was walking. As he crossed the midway point, his confidence grew. He could see the other side drawing closer, and a smile began to spread across his face. Then, suddenly, with a loud cracking sound, the bridge came apart, plunging Pumpkin towards the surging river and rocks below.

As he plummeted towards the water, he distinctly heard the voice of his friend Jeremy saying, *ohhhhh, ohhhhh, it's a pity you never learned to swim. If the rocks don't kill us, drowning most certainly will.*

TO BE CONTINUED