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Once there was a little girl named Lobelia Squagg. At the time of this story she was nine years old, and she was a horrible little girl. I am sorry I have to tell you that, because when she was older she got much nicer. I wish I could start this story when she was ten years old. Then I could tell you about what a wonderful person she was, and how nice she was to everybody, and how everybody loved her. But the adventures that I am about to describe to you happened to Lobelia when she was nine years old, and happened, in a sense, *because* she was such a pest.

When Lobelia was nine years old all she ever did was lie on her bed watching TV and eating Salami Surprise Deluxe Potato Chips, straight from the bag. Her fingers were always greasy and covered in bits of potato chip. Her favorite drink was Coconut Bacon Cheddar Cola, and after every gulp of this poisonous

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liquid she would let out a huge burp full of salami, cheddar, and bacon. Her bedroom smelled awful.

If anything ever got between her and the television she would scream and throw the nearest object, like a clock or a glass of soda, at whatever was in her way. The Squaggs used to have a cat, but Lobelia had thrown so many things at it that it finally ran away.

Whatever Lobelia saw on TV, she wanted. “Mommy,” she would screech, “I want a Mighty GI Tract Action Figure Robot! I want it now! Go buy it now!” Or maybe she would screech, “Daddy! Come over here right away and fix the antenna! The picture is fuzzy!” She was too lazy to do it herself.

Her bedroom floor was a jumble of all the things her parents had bought for her. Six radios, fifteen pairs of athletic shoes, a stuffed monkey, a stuffed hippo (that looked very nearly like Lobelia herself, except handsomer), an entire arsenal of plastic machine guns, five personal computers (her parents were rich), and countless other items still in their original packaging. Everything was strewn about and forgotten. She never wanted to play with anything—only to own it.

There was one thing she wanted, however, that her parents could never get her. Magic. Sometimes on TV, children would drink magical potions given

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to them by little old men in pointed hats; or they would run into magical fairies behind a shrub in the backyard; or they would open up a bottle of soda and let a genie escape in their faces. And wonderful exciting things happened to those children. They went exciting places and saw exciting things.

To tell the truth, Lobelia didn't care much about going places or seeing things. She was content on her bed watching TV. But she really did want a magical potion, or a genie, just to try it out during a commercial break, especially if it was a boring commercial like a used car ad.

For the past several months she had been screeching on and off, "Mommy, I want a magical potion like that girl has! Go buy me one, right now!" Or, "Daddy, I want a magical wand like that boy has! Go drive to the mall and get one, right this minute!"

Of course, her parents could not buy her these things, and so she was kept in a state of dangerous disappointment.

One evening after a dinner of Salami Surprise Deluxe Potato Chips, Lobelia was throwing an especially violent fit, yelling and howling and gurgling and kicking in bed. The TV, sitting on the mattress at the foot of the bed, rocked forward, and rocked back, and rocked to one side, and rocked to the other side—all the while Lobelia was watching it carefully,

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her putty face tilting forward, and back, and to one side, and to the other, along with the TV.

Her parents were hiding downstairs in the living room. Neither of them wanted to go upstairs and tell their daughter that the local mall did NOT sell elves. Not even at Aglibink's Exotic Pet Store. So they pretended that they couldn't hear her; which was absurd, because half the neighborhood could probably hear the terrific screaming.

All of a sudden, the screaming stopped. The house was silent, except for the very faint murmur of the TV.

Her parents glanced at each other with white, frightened faces. They weren't worried about the sudden quiet, because that is how Lobelia's fits always ended. They merely thought that the next TV program had captured her attention. What frightened them was the thought that, in a few minutes, at the next commercial break, Lobelia's tantrum would start up again.

This time, however, they were wrong. Something had happened to Lobelia Squagg that would change her life forever.



A Pickfloo

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Lobelia stopped screaming when she saw a little man standing on her bed in front of the TV. She was so startled that she didn't even remember to get angry at him for blocking the view. He was no taller than the screen of the TV. He was slender and dapper and dressed in a tiny gray business suit, neatly buttoned. He didn't have any shoes or socks, and his hairy feet stuck out from the bottom of his trousers. He had a hat, a chapeau you might say, and a pointy mustache.

“Mademoiselle,” he said, bowing. “Permit me.” He reached behind him and turned off the TV. A noisy TV is inconvenient when you are trying to talk to someone. The murmuring sound that Mr. and Mrs. Squagg heard from a distance was not another TV program; it was a conversation between Lobelia and the little man standing on her bed.

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The conversation went like this:

“Do I have the pleasure of meeting Mademoiselle Squagg?”

Lobelia stared at him with her eyes as round as golf balls and her mouth open (showing him a mouthful of chewed-up potato chips, but he was too polite to comment).

“Am I correct in presuming,” the little man asked again, “that you are the ever charming Lobelia?”

Lobelia burped and said, “Who are you?”

The man made a sweeping bow. “Monsieur Fondue LeFuzz, at your service.”

“Are you an elf?” she said. “I want an elf. Did Mommy and Daddy finally get me an elf?”

Lobelia’s parents had nothing whatsoever to do with the little man standing on her bed. He had been sent by the Bureau of Emergency Magic. For months, Lobelia had been clogging up the Division of Wish Monitoring with her incessant and very silly wishes. She had become such a nuisance that the authorities had finally decided to take action, and consequently dispatched Mr. LeFuzz, who was an expert in these matters.

“Strictly speaking, my tres charmante lady,” Mr. LeFuzz said, “I am not an ELF!”

He leaped up in the air in his excitement at that last word, and Lobelia was so startled that she

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burped again, a great big round burp that reverberated throughout the room.

“What are you, then?” she said, beginning to get interested.

He said, very rapidly, and with great excitement and enthusiasm, jumping up and down on the bed, “I am a Lesser Spotted Pickfloo, remember it, a fine old name, corrupted through 300 years of ignorant English usage until it has been modified into the term ‘Genie,’ which I don’t like. I am a Genie, if you will, but I prefer the correct name. I am NOT an ELF. Certainement not! We must get that very clear!”

Lobelia stared at the Lesser Spotted Pickfloo with all her capacity; and being used to staring at TV screens, she had developed a lot of capacity in that direction. After a while she said, with an unaccustomed amount of respect creeping into her voice, “Where do you come from?”

“Paris!” he said. “Where else do you suppose? I live at the top of the Eiffel Tower. Actually, I do not like heights very much, but the rent is surprisingly cheap and the scenery is, ah, magnifique! I am in America on official business for the week, so you are lucky to have gotten me at all. There is no telling what silly elf they might have sent you. Why, I leave this evening! But, dear Lobelia Squagg, lovely

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Lobelia Squagg, let us talk about you. I have come to bring you magic.”

Lobelia’s putty face began to light up with a slow joy. “What kind of magic can you do?”

Speaking very rapidly again, and jumping up and down in his excitement he said, “I could put your arms where your legs are, and put your legs on the top of your head! Yes! Oh! What a lovely spectacle! Or, I could turn your nose into a gigantic alligator, and nobody would ever dare attack you! Very useful, extremely, the Probosco-croc, a specialty of mine.

“I could send you to Egypt to the deepest darkest center of the Pharoh’s tomb, a mile under the sand, where you would find gold and jewels such as no mortal eye has seen for three thousand years, if you could survive the total lack of oxygen. I could send you to Pluto, or Ganymede, or even to the center of the Sun, a trifle hot I should think, but still very instructive, if you like astronomy. I could disguise you as the president of the United States, how would that be, and disguise him as you, and everything would get so delightfully topsy turvey in no time flat! I’m sure you would do an excellent job as president. If not, you could always hide in the Cabinet.

“I could conjure up a gigantesque green pelican in the corner right there, and it would be your faithful companion and friend until it got hungry and ate

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you up, not to mention your dear mother and father! Or, I could make you invisible, odorless, soundless, and without a thought in your head, in short, do away with you altogether, with the clap of my hands! Oh! How exciting to see the other side of Nothing! BUT, dear Lobelia,” he said, suddenly dropping his voice to a whisper.

Lobelia stared back at him. Her mouth was still open and bits of potato chip were beginning to fall out. She didn't much like any of these suggestions and was beginning to feel very uncomfortable.

“Dear Lobelia, I must warn you, whatever I do now is the last piece of magic that you will ever receive in your life. Every person gets one allotment. Section 12, Paragraph 3, Rules and Regulations for the Distribution of Magic. Voted almost unanimously by the 1823 Congress of Magical Creatures. I was there myself and voted in favor of it. Too many people were hogging the magic and keeping it from everybody else. Whatever I do to you now, you must be content with it. Do I make myself clear?”

Lobelia said in a quivering voice, “Maybe, if it's okay, Sir, I could just, not have any, you know, magic?”

“WHAT?!”

The little man jumped backward, crashing into the TV and knocking his chapeau over his face. “What

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is that? Mon Dieu!” He adjusted his hat again. “Of course you will have your magic,” he said, firmly.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, he was holding a glass full of bubbling, orange, flashing, gurgling, squelching, steaming liquid.

“This,” he said, “Chere amie, is a Magical Potion.”

Lobelia sat up straight. She had always wanted a Magical Potion and was curious to see one up close. All the same, she didn’t know what it might do to her.

“Do I drink it?” she said.

“You pour it up your nose! My dear, of course you drink it. BUT,” he said as he handed it to her (and she held the tiny little glass very carefully and a little fearfully), “BUT, you must drink it at midnight tonight. If you drink it before midnight, Mademoiselle, it will make you violently ill, cranberry juice will squirt out your ears, and your toes will swell up to the size and shape of elephants. Imagine, ten elephants in bed with you for a week! Amazing! Wonderful! After a week you will recover, and go back to exactly what you were before. The magic will be wasted. And you will never have any magic again, for the rest of your life, however long or short that may be.”

“And . . . and . . . what if I wait till after midnight?” Lobelia asked.

“Then, dear Mademoiselle Squagg, I suggest you

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run. As fast as you can. To the cellar. Or outside the house. Dive to the ground and cover your head. Because at exactly 12:01, if the potion has not yet been drunk, it will EXPLODE, sending quadrillions of pieces of you spattering all over the city in every direction! What a mess! What an inconvenience! That is why you must remember to drink it AT THE RIGHT TIME.”

“I DON’T WANT IT!” she said suddenly, trying to give it back to him.

“CAREFUL, STEADY, HOLD ON, DON’T SPILL IT,” he said. “And don’t be silly. Of course you want it. Set it on the bedside table, exactement, and at midnight, Bon Appetit! It is Deeee-licious!”

“But, but,” Lobelia said, “what happens if I drink it? I won’t explode?”

“Certainly not,” he said. “It will, Mademoiselle, it will give you everything you desire, it will make you happy, it will fill your life with contentment! (I hope.)”

Lobelia thought of infinite bags of potato chips, and a plastic tube that perpetually fed soda into her mouth, and a television screen that curved all the way around her head so that she could see everything no matter which way she faced.

Monsieur LeFuzz, however, was thinking of a different kind of contentment. He expected his potion

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to cure Lobelia of her love of the TV, and make her jump up out of bed and run outside and dance in the sunlight, and jump rope, and read books, and climb trees, and wonder about the stars and the moon and the sunset and the blue skies.

“Mademoiselle Squagg, the pleasure of your company is immense, but I have a submarine to catch. Adieu! Bon Soir! Remember, midnight exactly!” He bowed, and in the middle of his bow, was suddenly not there.