

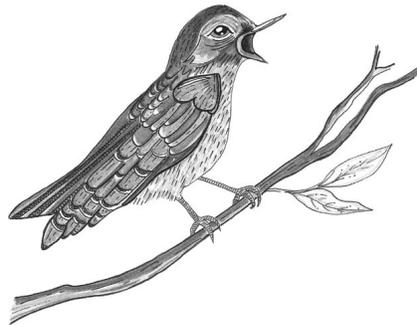
Through
the
Fairy Door





CHAPTER I

Elfa Travels



Elfa awoke with a start, silence roaring in her ears along with her pounding heartbeat. Remnants of her dream clung to her tousled hair as she lifted her head from the pillow. What had roused her from her sleep? Had she heard the nightingale's call? Suddenly a sound broke through the silence, the warbling yet clear notes of a songbird seeming to sing while sunk deep in the center of a pool of clear water. When the nightingale called, she knew what she had to do. Now wide awake, Elfa slipped out of her warm bed and fastened the top of her worn lavender nightshirt. Each infinitesimal button was shaped like a different flower, so tiny even her little fingers had trouble fitting them into the buttonholes.

What was I dreaming? she wondered, her brow furrowed, forming gentle, familiar valleys in her smooth forehead. *It was something about a Queen Cat and a dance,* she recalled. She reached deeply into the obscure cave of her mind, groping for a lucid memory of her dream. She knew that when she tried too hard to remember her dreams she

pushed them away, like a hand grasping at the fluff of a dandelion. So she relaxed, closed her eyes, and chanted, “Dreams, dreams, dreams of the night. Dreams, dreams, it’s you I invite.”

2



She was brought out of her reverie by the sound of the nightingale repeating its watery ululation. The fairies were calling her. There must be work to be done.

Elfa shared her time between two worlds—Topside and Fairyland—crossing the numinous border back and forth. She had gotten used to it by now, although she recalled how odd it was at first to try to remember her lunch or her lessons in one world and to fly or speak Elvish in the other.

She moved to the edge of her sleeping loft and took the squeaking wooden ladder rungs one by one. The steps went straight up and down, and she had to concentrate whenever she used them. She had moved to the loft two months before when she turned seven, and she was still proud of her climb up the ladder each night to her bed.

The birdcall came again, three burbling trills. Elfa had once tried to imitate the sound by taking her bluebird whistle into her bath and blowing it below the surface of the water. But she could not replicate the ethereal song of the nightingale. So pure, the nightingale only sings when the night has sufficiently softened the air and while other birds softly coo in their sleep, heads tucked into wings, all wrapped up in their own feathery beds.

As she slipped quietly out of the back door, Elfa could already feel the weight of her body lifting. Whenever the fairies called her she felt Topside begin to slip away, and by the time she reached the fairy door her feet barely brushed the ground.

There had been times in the past when she wanted desperately to go and visit the fairies, but the door remained tightly shut. No matter

how hard she tried, squeezing her eyes closed or breathing slowly or quickly, and even standing on her head, she could not make the door open. Not until she heard *Luscinia*, the nightingale, could she enter their world.

It had been a while since her last visit. Elfa did not remember the exact night, although she knew that the moon had been almost full because she had seen her way so clearly past the rose trellis and the small fishpond. But tonight she felt her way in the dark, groping past the stone fence and smelling the pungent honeysuckle vines as she moved through the creaking gate with its dragonhead posts. The solar lanterns lining the garden path held only a faint afterglow, so that she could barely make out each step in front of her. Tufts of dark grass and a daisy or two peeked out between the paving stones as she made her way to the fairy door.

She arrived at the miniature door nestled in the moss. Kneeling down she grasped the tiny iron ring in the center and pulled gently. The door eased open, the small crack just big enough for her smallest finger. When her finger slipped around the edge of the opening, she felt the change. Her human body loosened and fell away, like an apricot peeling away its skin and leaving only the pit containing the purest, clearest part of her. Clothed in a gossamer gown, she felt her shoulder blades pinch and quiver, fluttering out into two wings, and the points rising at the tip of each ear. Her breath became as soft as dove feathers. So much attention was drawn to the back of her body that she felt turned inside out and washed clean. She heard the clunk of her human cares and woes as they slid off onto the stepping-stone at the entrance, hitting it with a resounding clunk like a runaway marble rolling under a dresser.

She took a deep breath and made her way down the long, dark passage, past tree roots and the groundhog sentinel, Monax, who





always seemed to be sleeping whenever she walked by. Several beetles scuttered by without a glance, intent on their journey homeward. The tunnels went in many directions at once, serpentine through the earth like a maze. Fairy magic changed the course of the tunnels each time a mortal traveled through them, so it was impossible to come in the same way twice. This plan ensured that only the pure of heart could enter Fairyland, for the ever-changing routes would lead those of ill intent into a dead-end, forcing them to dig their way up through numerous layers of dense dirt to the air above.

The earthworms were in charge of the circuitous routes. They labored constantly, yet the wriggling and writhing of their work invigorated them, making them happy and grateful to be in their natural element, bringing space and vitality to the soil. Elfa understood the earthworms and knew how they felt. She loved to do what she was born to do, move back and forth from the luminous fairy world to the concrete physicality of Topside.



She had two lives, two sets of friends, and two sets of laws to recall. Even though she was only seven years old, she had been crossing the border for several years. Her best friend, Susan, who had been traveling for many more years than she had, was fifty-four in Topside years. Yet when they met, they played and philosophized as if they had been born in the same year. It was hard to tell whether they were children or crones, for the same light shone out of their eyes; the enchantment of fairyland always left its mark in the eyes of the changeling.

At present, one world could not mix with the other. Magic could not be used in Topside, but the lessons learned in Fairyland could easily be incorporated into everyday life. The knowledge could be put to use in trying times and be taught gently to the folks in Topside. Patience was required in teaching those who did not cross the border, for they had never felt the dropping of their mortal weight and the consequential lightness of the fairy form.

Elfa knew she was headed for a difficult challenge. Her Topside life had been stormy, and she had been wrestling with her feelings. She had felt put upon, lonely, envious of her friends, and quarrelsome with her mother for no reason she could explain. The new moon having just passed, she knew she needed a clearing, but she was not sure how it would unfold or if she would work with Andromeda, Gricilis, or another of her teachers. However, she would know from the transport that greeted her at the end of the tunnel which element she faced in her lesson: air, water, earth, or fire. From her past experiences she knew that the arrival of the bat or butterfly signaled an air lesson, the otter or seahorse came for water, the spider or snake for earth, and the firefly or moth for fire. She had been fascinated when Susan recounted the tales she had heard about the rare transport for the lesson of all elements combined. The aquaterrafierairy was a strange and wonderful



fire-breathing creature, mythically rumored to have fins, feathers, and a whirligig atop its head.

6



As she kept following the earthen path, Elfa inhaled the fresh scent of humus and saw roots stretching toward the center of the earth. She was relaxed and tense at once, glad to be going but nervous in anticipation of what lay ahead. She kept remembering to use her calming, even breath to stay in the present, although it seemed to want to slip from her with each step.

“How do you stay in the present when it is always leaving you behind?” she had once asked her favorite teacher, Andromeda. Gentle, serene, and powerful, Andromeda generously revealed many Fairyland mysteries to her.

“Being in the moment is best achieved by closing the eyes and focusing on the breath,” Andromeda’s voice intoned in her head.

She knew the feeling when she had stepped into the present. It was like walking on the moving sidewalk at the airport. It took so little effort to move her forward that she was left with heightened awareness of her surroundings. Colors were brighter and love flowed from her no matter what she encountered. Falling off the moving walkway of the present, into worry and fear, always left her despondent.

The challenges in the fairy world were different than in Topside, more like dreams where fantastical things occurred and one was suddenly interacting with surreal creatures in a shockingly strange landscape. The hardest part of the visits for Elfa was being dropped directly into the center of her stormy emotions. The fairy realm accentuated her fears and forced her to risk her routine. Whatever she would have normally done was not an option in Fairyland, as if the most familiar route home was always barricaded and she was forced to find a new way. Sometimes she purposefully chose a different route and still was

halted and rerouted as if the path knew she had tried to trick it. Fairyland was like a puzzle whose pieces kept changing shape or a game that moved off its board; the more she tried to escape, the more intensely she was forced to face whatever she wanted to avoid.

Elfa could hear the faint whisper of unearthly music coming through the underground channel, the notes narrowing themselves to reach her pointed ears. She breathed in the new scent in the air, a delicate *mélange* of flowers and sun-ripened fruit. She was almost at the border. She closed her eyes and felt her way, her hands grazing the sides of the tunnel. A myriad of intuitive clues and helpful hints always showered over her as she entered Fairyland. But it was like trying to catch raindrops with outstretched hands—the harder she tried to capture them, the more quickly they would slip away. So she had learned to walk through the exit slowly, letting the hints and clues flood her and trusting that whatever stuck in her mind would be valuable for her quest. Once through the opening Elfa paused, and a wet, quivering nose breathed warm vapor on her chest. With her eyes still closed she felt in front of her, and her outstretched hands encountered the soft, dense fur of *Lutra Lutra*, her otter transport.

