

# The Lovely Man, the Mysterious Box, and Marge

written by Holly  
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*Some days, you wanna talk like a pirate, or walk like an Egyptian. Some days, however, you want to write like Rudyard Kipling, O Beloved. Which is how this story came to be.*

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Once, oh once, just once upon a fine old time in the deep dark forest way out at the edge of beyond, a woman whom we shall call Marge, though that likely was not her name, spun out of her wishes and dreams and lonely fantasies (and a deep need to get the five acres at the back of the house tilled before spring planting passed her by) a man of such extraordinary beauty that he near took her breath away whenever she looked at him (not helping her allergies one bit in the process.) He came to her from over the water and across the way in a coracle boat woven of reeds and rushes and little bird feathers, and spelled with the soul of a trout named Brad so that it swam beautifully through the rough seas and only occasionally chased minnows.

He was everything she could have hoped for in a man. He was charming, he looked excellent from all angles (and Marge spent a great deal of time trying different angles just to be sure), and he knew how to dig and plant, and wasn't afraid of spiders, and he didn't mind putting the worms on the hook, or taking the fish off, even though he got spined by them just as badly as she ever had. He treated her like a princess ... an angel ... a goddess. He worshiped the ground she walked upon,

and rubbed her feet at the end of each day, and was also a pretty decent cook so long as charcoal was involved somewhere in the process.

He would have should have could have been perfect.

But he was not.

For he had a secret that he kept in a box held close to his heart and locked with a key, a box that was always with him (the straps that held the box over his heart were, in fact, the first known use of rip-stop nylon webbing), and no matter what Marge tried to do she could not get him to open the box, or tell her what he had inside it, or divulge the location of the secret key.

“My princess,” he told her when she asked, in ever more irritated tones, “it’s nothing. A gift from a friend, given to me on the day you called me forth, that I might remember him with fondness and never yearn for my faraway home.”

“But what IS it?” she would demand.

And he would kiss her on the nose, or take her out to see something wonderful he’d done in the garden, or tickle her until she fled, laughing, with all thought of her question vanished.

But the box would not let her rest.

It rattled while she was ... um ... checking new angles of his perfection; and it clattered while he was digging in her rhododendrons; and it jingled just slightly while he was reshingling the roof.

It also made his shirts hang funny, which was an esthetic issue that irritated Marge no end; and while she could, and eventually did, demand that he go around shirtless, she could not be satisfied with that, because the rip-stop nylon webbing was an unattractive flat black, and her beloved was a Winter,

and you know bad flat black looks on Winters.

“That box has to come off,” Marge finally decided. “And I have to take it off, and find out what’s inside of it.”

And so she devised a plan.

She worked for four straight days in a lovely, sunny, but as-yet-unlandscaped section of the yard. She put in (and anchored with deeply-poured concrete) four little bronze statues of fairies that she’d bought off a one-eyed peddler at the Market of Fleas and Other Insects; the peddler, when she’d described her plan, had set them out for her as the answer to her prayers and showed her how to work them.

Each of them was a slender, sweet-faced winged creature who held aloft one of the Lamps of Virtues (which are, as everyone knows, Truth, Simplicity, Hope, and Buying Things on Sale), and reached out with one of the four Rings of Happiness (and these, of course, are Work, Play, Hot Showers, and Good Sex And Lots Of It). Around the anchored lamps, she weeded and rolled down quality perennial sod and watered heavily and was careful not to fertilize too much, and by the end of the fifth day, she had a marvelous little nook, lightly shaded by the dappling of aspen and birch leaves, to show for all of her effort.

She’d been planning to wait until the next morning for what she thought of as Phase Two, (or The Good Part), but impatience got the better of her. The sun had already set by the time she and her beloved had finished eating and washing and drying the dishes together, (with much towel-snapping on his part and much laughing and jumping and promising “... what I’m going to do to you ...”) on her part, but she thought, Darkness will be as good as daylight. I have the lamps out there, after all.

And she said, “I have a surprise for you. I’ve been working on it for days.”

"This is your project back of the garden that you wouldn't let me see?"

She nodded, and he grinned a winning grin at her and she led him out.

The warm, soft, plush grass awaited.

"Lamps on," she said softly, and at the four close corners of her hidden lawn, the fairy-lights sprang to life, casting soft stars into the air and scenting the corner of the yard with the sweet smell of distant gardenias (because close gardenias are so strong sometimes they can make your eyes water, and besides, Marge was allergic to them.)

"Wow," he said, as tiny fireflies of pink and green and gold and white and deepest sapphire blue spiraled out of the lamps and zoomed (in a spark-like but Absolutely-Guaranteed-Not-To-Be-A-Fire-Hazard) way up into the treetops. "This would be a great place to get laid, princess." And he gave her a solid smack on the rump and spun her around so he could kiss her.

"Just what I had in mind," she said, and pushed him down to the grass, neatly in between the four lovely fairy lamps. She lay on top of him, aiming his arms over his head by stroking them and making sure his legs were nice and straight and nibbling on his neck so that he wouldn't be paying much attention to anything else, and under her breath she whispered, "Rings on."

And the fairies' Rings of Happiness sprang out and caught him, wrists and ankles, and then the fairies reeled their rings back in, and she had him, quick as spit and neat as a cat's whiskers, and though he struggled she just laughed at him and tickled him in a good-natured-but-persistent way (to take a small revenge for all the tickling she had taken.)

And then, though he was clearly delighted by this ploy of hers and had other things in mind, she got down to **her** business.

She pulled her good fabric shears out of one pocket of her long, full skirt and clipped the ugly black webbing, and took the box. She pulled her hammer out one of her other pockets, and while he protested and yelled and begged her not to, she smashed the lock on the box and, when the lid sprang open, reached inside and pulled out the contents.

She felt feathers, and fur, and something hard and lumpy and rock-like. She had no idea what he had in there, so she held it up to the faint light cast by the fairy lamp to study. It was a little round doll of sorts, with a leather head with little black eyes and huge white circles painted around them, and wooden feet and wooden arms sticking out from a little barrel-shaped body of cloth, and the body was covered with feathers and fur and bits and pieces of bone and stone, and a single tiny silver bell.

She stared at it, turning it over and over in her hands.

“What the hell is this?” she said after some moments.

“I don’t know,” he said, frowning at it.

“You ... don’t **know**?”

“Never saw it before. My buddy Widdershins was at the castle the day I got your ... summons—” He gave her a dreamy smile. “—and I told him what had happened and where I was going and who I hoped to find, and he ran off and came back with that. He strapped it on me, told me that I was going to find the perfect woman I’d been looking for all those years, and that since he was not likely to see me again, he was giving me something that would keep me from being homesick, and that would do a couple of other good things. I don’t remember what they were now, my princess, but they can’t have been too important. He’s a strange little guy, Widdershins – one of the wee folk. He hangs around the castle and spies on my older brother and runs errands for his wife, and cadges milk from anyone who will give it to him. Nice guy and a loyal friend,

though.”

Marge sat digesting that for a while. “You’re a real prince.”

“Of course, my princess.”

“And you stayed here.”

“I’m the fourth son. I’m not in line to inherit squat. You have a nice place here, even if it did need some work.”

“But ...” She shook her head. “But you love me.”

“You are the light of my life, the angel of my every waking hour and the goddess of my dreams, beloved. And you’re devilishly ticklish, which is always fun.”

“Do you feel homesick?”

“Not in the least,” he told her.

“Have you forgotten your friend?”

“Of course not.”

“Do you feel any differently at all?”

“Nope.”

She tucked the little doll into her pocket and said, “Still want to have some fun?”

“Are you the most beautiful woman on the planet?”

She laughed, and the two of them had a deliciously wicked time, at last unhampered by the ugly box on his chest.

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She woke the next morning to see him staring down at her with an expression on his face that she had only seen once before, and that when he discovered slugs had invaded the tomatoes.

“Beloved—” she started to say, but he held up a hand to silence her.

“You’re almost fifteen pounds overweight,” he said.

“I’m ... what?”

“You are starting to get crow’s feet at the corners of your eyes, and your hair is curly. And darkish blonde, not bright blonde. And it’s tangled—“

“You just noticed it’s curly? And it’s tangled **every** morning before I brush it,” she protested.

“And your thighs are neither perfectly smooth nor the exact color of cream. And you have a ... a **mole** on your left cheek.” He leaned in close, and his eyes narrowed, and he sniffed. Once. And backed away fast. “And your breath smells **nothing** like roses and cherries and orange marmalade.”

Marge sat up. “I just woke up!”

“Babe,” he said with a voice that dripped disdain, “I have dated some real bowers in my time, but you are ... you are ... good God .... Arf! That’s all I can say. Just Arf!”

And the lovely dark prince from across the water rose up with the grace of stags and fled with the speed of rabbits chased by foxes out to his coracle, and leapt in shouting, “Home, Brad, and be quick about it!” at the top of his lungs. Leaving the woman whose name was not Marge, though it could have been if it hadn’t been something else, standing open-mouthed at the kitchen window watching him leave while trying to get that third fastener on her bra to close so that she could at least pull on a shirt to run out after him, because in full daylight the neighbors were nosy and she didn’t want to give them a show.

By the time she reached the shore, he was nothing but a speck on the horizon.

She shoved her hands into the pockets of the same skirt she'd worn the night before, and she blinked back tears and muttered all the things she wished she'd thought to say to him while he was insulting her and then leaving her, and her hand brushed feathers and wood and leather and stone.

She pulled out the doll and stared at it.

In the daylight, it looked rattier than it had by the gentle glow of fairy-light. It looked, in fact, like it had been put together by a not-very-careful child with coordination issues. And bad glue.

She turned it over, and for the first time saw a little tag sticking out of the back. She held it closer, then farther away, and realized she was, in fact, starting to get a little far-sighted, too. Hell and damnation.

But she made the tiny print out at last.

**Product of Wee Folks' Workshops, Haptiga.**

She frowned and turned the tag over.

**Widdershin's Remarkable Perpetual Magical Shield of Beer Goggles, it said, Cure for overly-finicky men. Keep dry and avoid exposing to light – warranty voided if surrounding box opened.**

Once upon a time, a relatively pretty and very pissed-off woman went to see her lawyer about bad and possibly unsafe product labelling and maybe an alienation of affection suit ...

But that's another story.

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