

Mist Nets

by Mary Pat Lynch

Hannah stepped into silence, exhaling softly. Her timing was good; she hadn't missed it. She winced as the car door slammed and her shoes crunched on the gravel. But once under the trees, her footsteps disappeared into the waiting stillness.

She had only a few minutes to reach the valley. The blue-gray darkness was already thinning. Moving quickly, she hiked along the ridge past massive columns of oak, beech and hickory, patient guardians of this ancient wood. Soon the trail began to switchback downhill. Dogwood, azaleas and mountain laurels found foothold on these slopes. She knew their shaggy shapes in the pre-dawn light, friends from many walks.

A few more turns and the valley opened up. It was wider than you'd expect, a swath of brushy field where the eye expected unbroken canopy, with a stream curving through its center. Mist crawled across the damp ground like thick blankets shifting over sleepy forms.

Suddenly, hundreds of tiny somethings stirred in the trees. She stood very still, wrapping her arms around a smooth beech. All at once it erupted: the trilling voices of every bird in the wood singing together to wake the sun. She gloried in the volume of rushing sound. It lasted only a few minutes, but always left her grinning. She walked down the last turns of the path as dawn light found its way into the sheltered space. Time to get to work.

The mist nets hung across the narrowest part of the valley, attached to stout trees on either side. Hannah McBride, graduate student in avian field biology, had arrived this April morning to log in birds caught in the nets and release the captives to continue their spring migration.

In the growing light, she saw about a dozen birds in the nets. Not bad. Hannah hated to see birds trapped, but knew this research was critical to the worldwide effort to create sanctuaries. A world without songbirds was not a livable world, as far as she was concerned. These nets were designed for warblers, tiny beautiful birds who flew thousands of miles each year, wintering in Costa Rica, Jamaica, Brazil, heading north each spring to nest and raise their young here in these woods, or farther on.

Grabbing the first bird with a practiced turn of her wrist, Hannah held the tiny ball of fluff gently in her left hand. A male Yellow warbler, the red streaks on its breast looked freshly painted in the dawn light. She checked 'Yellow, male' in her log and opened her hand to release the little flyer to the sky. She found two Tennessee warblers, which they were banding this year, and gave each one a new plastic ring crimped carefully around its right leg. She worked her way down the nets, handling each bird as little as possible. Fourteen times, she held a small miracle in her hand, recorded its data, and let it fly.

Hannah was leaving when she noticed fluttering down in the far corner of the net, not a place birds usually got caught. Concerned, she walked over and crouched down. She looked, and looked again, blinking. She had expected a moth; once a huge Cecropia had blundered into the nets, damaging its soft wings. This was not a moth, nor a bird. This was... It looked like... a tiny person with wings. Hannah stared, mouth open. She blinked again. Was the sun in her eyes?

A small but imperious voice said, "Do you plan to release me, or will you simply continue to stare?"

Startled, she flipped open the net and scooped the winged creature into her hand. In her open palm stood the tiny figure of a man. He was clothed in red and green, and looked quite sturdy; nothing wispy or ethereal about him. Russet brown hair hung in a thick braid over his left shoulder. He stood stiffly, arms crossed, wings folded behind him.

"You're not Professor Graham," he stated firmly.

"No," Hannah replied, "I'm not. I'm Hannah McBride."

"One of Professor Graham's students, I presume?" he queried.

"Yes, a graduate student, third year. I'm working the field station for the spring migration." For some reason, it seemed important that this small individual be fully informed

His stance relaxed. "You seem a sensible girl," he said. "I think Professor Graham has chosen well." Hannah felt oddly gratified. "I do appreciate your releasing me," he added smiling. "I admit I felt foolish being caught. I was in a hurry to get back, you see, and forgot the nets were up again."

"You're most welcome," said Hannah, engulfed in a feeling of total unreality. "I'm only sorry you were detained."

The little man inclined his head graciously. “You are most courteous,” he said. “You know that tonight is May Eve?”

“No, I didn’t,” said Hannah, confused. “Although, come to think of it, today is April 30.”

“May Eve,” he corrected sternly; as if this were something she ought to know. “One of our most important celebrations. Perhaps you would care to join us this evening?” Unfolding his wings, he lifted effortlessly off Hannah’s palm. “If you wish to, come into the garden after moonrise.” With that, he was gone.

Hannah stared at her now empty palm for several moments. Flushing, she shook herself, stuffed her notebook back into her field bag, and headed back to her car.

At the lab, she filled the electric kettle and put a teabag into her mug. She raised the blinds on all the windows and opened a few to let in the morning air. The lab was little more than a shed with electricity and plumbing added; too cold to use in winter, it still smelled musty from its long hibernation. She flipped on the computer, watching tiny green letters crawl across the screen as it booted up. She needed to put this morning’s data into the database: the new band numbers, the birds, the fairy...

Abruptly, she sat. The hard wooden seat jarred her back as her legs gave way. What was it she had seen? She had not been dreaming. She was working; this was her job; she got paid to do this. There had been a field station here for ten years, and observations for who knows how many years before that. Ah, there’s an idea: If there were something, well, unusual in the valley; something real, not a projection of her subconscious, someone else might have seen it—him.

“I am a field scientist,” Hannah said aloud, as if addressing a class. “Empirical observation is the hallmark of our work. It doesn’t matter if what we observe is unusual, or contrary to accepted theory. We observe; then verify our observations.

“It doesn’t matter what I believe,” she added stubbornly. “I know what I saw... and spoke to.” She opened her field notebook and began keying in data.

Finished, she asked to see all entries in the “Other” field since the database was created six years ago. Nothing. Not one entry. OK, no one else

had entered the little people into the database; she was certainly not going to be the first.

Maybe in the original field notes, she thought; but realized there was nothing in her notes. Still, you never know. Old notes were stored on rough wooden shelves lining the north wall, along with field guides and miscellaneous biology journals—the joke was that they were the only insulation in the place. Hannah pulled out notebooks at random and flipped through them, finding nothing. Then she noticed, at the end of the bottom shelf, what looked like a field guide, except the spine was turned toward the wall so you could only see the page edges.

She eased the book from the shelf, releasing a cloud of dust. Turning it over, she read, “Fairies, Sprites and Goblins of the British Isles.” The title page showed it was a Dover reprint of a book published in Edinburgh in 1879. In the top right-hand corner of the flyleaf was written, in faded ink, ‘Charles Graham.’ So, it was the Professor’s book, was it? That didn’t surprise Hannah in the least. If anyone could commune with fairies, it would be Professor Graham. Most of the students called him “the Gnome” anyway, and this was his lab. She wondered if she would ever have the nerve to ask him whether he’d... She couldn’t picture it.

She stood, shaking more dust from the book and brushing at her jeans where most of it seemed to have landed. Taking the book, she headed out in search of lunch. Maybe she’d find a description of her new friend.

Hannah got back to the lab around four to see a pickup truck she didn’t recognize in the drive. She walked in to find two grad students from her program, Rob Stevens and Marissa Petrie, looking quite at home. Bags and coolers were scattered across the floor, backpacks sat on the counter where Hannah usually put her field bag, and Rob sat in front of the computer.

“Not much happening here lately, Hannah, eh?” he said, flashing his toothy grin. He closed the file and pushed back from the computer. “Well,” he drawled, “Things’ll be picking up now, I imagine.”

Hannah sighed. It was so like Rob to assume that the entire spring migration waited only for his arrival. But she didn’t want to argue. Right now, she was more interested in why they were here.

“Where’s Professor Graham?” she asked.

“Not sure, actually. We got a message from his secretary that he’d been delayed, and figured we’d better get down here and help out. Something wrong?”

“I hope not,” Hannah said. “I just wondered when he’d be here.”

“Don’t know,” Rob answered with another wide smile, “but I’m sure we can handle things.” He nodded firmly and would have patted her arm if she’d been closer to where he was sitting. She stayed where she was.

Marissa handed Rob a cup of coffee and seemed to notice Hannah for the first time. “Sorry,” she smiled, “did you want coffee, too? I’m not sure if there’s another cup left, but...”

“Nope,” said Hannah. “Never touch the stuff.” Walking past them, she filled her electric kettle, flipped the switch, and set out her mug and tea bag. “Have you sorted out places to stay yet?” she asked. “I’ve got a room at the Newman farm and I know there are other...”

Rob waved away her suggestion. “I brought my tent. Rissa and I will stay right here,” he said, with a grin at Marissa that made her blush.

Hannah sighed again. She might have known. Marissa was new to the program; she wondered how much she’d heard about Rob Stevens, and whether it would make any difference if she had. Oh well, not her problem. At least, if they were bunking together, they weren’t likely to make it to the mist nets at dawn and she’d still have the chorus to herself. The kettle started to whistle; she poured her tea.

Hannah didn’t stay long at the lab, having no desire to watch Rob and Marissa setting up the tent. After an early supper with her landlady, Mrs. Newman, she wound up at a bluegrass bar on the edge of town. That night two of the meanest banjo pickers in the county were playing, and Hannah stayed longer than she’d intended. It was after midnight when she left to walk the half mile up the road to her room.

The night was clear, the spring moon nearly full and bright enough to cast shadows. Dogwood flowers and star magnolias glowed in the pale light and apple buds seemed ready to burst. As Hannah stepped through the picket fence bordering Mrs. Newman’s front flower beds, she remembered her invitation: Come into the garden, he had said, after moonrise.

Hannah followed the path around to the back garden, which ran down a gentle slope to a creek. She breathed deeply; the night air was cool, almost chilly, but full of the mingled scents of jonquils, hyacinth, new lilacs, and wild flowers from across the fields. No May Eve party, though, at least none that she could see. Well, the whole thing was probably a dream anyway. What were those lights?

Up in the branches of the dogwoods and all through the thick boughs of the ancient apple trees, there were lights. It might have been stars shining through the spring leaves, except they were moving. It might have been fireflies, except it was too early in the year. Entranced, Hannah walked toward the largest apple tree and gazed up into its branches. The lights were dancing! She heard the voice, the one from this morning, say, "Ah! You have come," and gave herself over to the dream.

What Hannah experienced that night she could never fully express in words. When she found just the right person, she might try to describe sights, sounds, scents, or tastes, but the quality of the experience as a whole was indescribable. It was, however, unforgettable and stayed with her always.

Her friend from the mist net presented her to the company. For a while, it seemed as though the fairies grew to human size and they walked together over open fields, or danced to wild music. Pipers and fiddlers sat in the trees playing jigs and reels, or plaintive tunes that made you want to cry and laugh at the same time. Everyone looked very fine. Their clothes were more like costumes; everything from medieval dresses, Elizabethan silks and petticoats, gypsy skirts and blouses tied with ribbons, and even short shimmery flapper dresses for the women, to leather breeches and linen shirts, satin knee breeches with stiff brocaded coats, and full Turkish pants and pirate shirts for the men. Despite the finery, Hannah's short spiky hair and blue jeans did not feel out of place.

Later it seemed that Hannah had shrunk to fairy size and sprouted wings, because she remembered playing hide and seek among the dogwoods, and sitting inside the yellow trumpet of a daffodil. At some point, a line of poetry came into her head, something from Rumi about 'sweethearts in the pomegranate blossoms' and the fact that it was a love poem did not seem out of place. It was all quite wonderful.

She woke next morning to find herself still in the garden. She was in a hammock, in fact, covered by a homemade quilt. The sun streamed down through the trees. Mrs. Newman stood beside the hammock with a cup of tea in her hand and a quizzical look on her face.

“I thought a cup of tea might be welcome right about now,” she said.

Hannah tried to sit up quickly and almost tipped herself right out of the hammock. “Oh, thank you, Mrs. Newman,” she said, her face flushing. “Thanks a lot. Did you bring me the quilt last night?”

“I did,” said Mrs. Newman. “I happened to look out and see you sleeping here so peaceful I hated to wake you, but I didn’t want you to catch a chill, so I brought the quilt. Beautiful night last night, wasn’t it? And a good crowd for the music, too, I hear.”

Hannah managed to sit up, and accepted the tea gratefully. Mrs. Newman clearly thought she had come home tipsy, if not dead drunk. Hannah certainly had no alternative explanation for her. Well, at least she didn’t seem to mind, and it had been kind of her to bring the quilt. So, after thanking her landlady several more times, Hannah went upstairs to clean up, and make sense of her experiences the night before.

And that is how it happened that Rob and Marissa arrived first at the mist nets on that first May morning.

Hannah pulled into the parking lot to see Rob’s truck already there. Worried, she headed straight out along the ridge trail. Before she reached the switchbacks, she heard Rob and Marissa rushing up the trail, thrashing through trees and shrubs, and talking loudly, if breathlessly, to each other.

They met Hannah at the end of the ridge and stopped dead. After a silent moment, Marissa said, “Hi! You won’t believe what we...”

Rob shushed her with a slice of his hand and moved forward, ready to continue on to the parking lot. Hannah stayed right where she was in the middle of the trail, a heavy feeling gathering in her stomach. “You guys have some luck this morning?” she asked in as neutral a voice as she could manage.

Rob’s eyes narrowed. He brushed past her, pushing her off the trail and almost off her feet. Striding away, he said only, “We’ll tell you back at the lab. We’ve got work to do.”

Marissa shot Hannah a startled look and scurried after Rob. Hannah stepped back onto the trail and watched them go, breathing deeply to steady herself. Had they found fairies in the nets? What had they done with them?

She stood still a few moments, waiting to see if any tiny messengers approached her, but no one appeared. She decided she'd better get to the lab.

Hannah opened the door as quietly as she could, wanting to know as much as possible before Rob started in with his spin on things. Rob sat at the computer. Marissa was at the counter, looking at something Hannah couldn't see. When Hannah heard what she was saying, she felt ill.

"What do you think they eat, Robbie?" Marissa said, her voice breathy and excited. "They look so cute! Shouldn't we put some water in there? Maybe some food? Flowers or something?" She turned toward Rob. Seeing Hannah at the door, she said, "Oh!" and Rob looked up from the screen.

"Helloooooo, Hannah," he said in a long drawl. "We're about to blow the lid off science and become famous in the process. Sorry you were late this morning."

"Let them go, Rob," Hannah said flatly.

"You must be crazy," he said. "I thought you were a scientist. This will make the front page of every paper on the globe: 'Fairies Caught in Biologists' Nets.' This is a genuine phenomenon, real physical evidence for something that's been myth for millennia, and you want me to let them go?"

"You're an ass, Rob, you know that?" Hannah said. She strode to the counter. Marissa stepped aside, clearly nervous. Hannah saw a small insect trap made of wire mesh, maybe eight inches long and six inches high and wide. Inside, two fairies, a young man and a younger woman, stood upright, looking very angry indeed.

Before Hannah could reach for the cage, Rob's hand shot out and lifted it away. "Oh, no, you don't," he said. "This is my find, and you're not touching it."

Hannah started to reach for his hand when she heard the fairies speaking. Startled, she stopped to listen. "Don't worry," the young man said. "Don't fight with him. We are angry, of course, but we are not hurt. Once the sun sets, our friends and family will come to release us. Then this oaf will realize his mistake. It's best not to fight with him now."

"It's our own fault," the young woman said, smiling a little. "We were celebrating last night, and not paying much attention on our way home. Don't worry, we'll be fine."

“OK,” Hannah said hesitantly, unwilling to let Rob imprison them even until nightfall.

“OK?” said Rob suspiciously. “You’re done arguing? That’s not like you, Hannah, what gives?”

Hannah was astounded. Had Rob not heard what the fairies said? She looked at the cage, and both fairies, small as they were, shook their heads ‘no’ with great vigor. Apparently they had spoken only to her. All right, she would follow their lead.

“OK for now, Rob,” she said, “but this isn’t over. I don’t want them hurt.” She looked at him, standing there smugly holding the cage. “You really are an ass, you know that?” she said, and left the lab.

The rest of the day passed in a blur of anxiety. Yes, she believed the fairies could do what they said, but what if Rob did something in the meantime? She went out to the nets much earlier than usual that afternoon, logged and released the birds, and stayed until dusk to make sure nothing else happened. Rob and Marissa never even showed up, which didn’t surprise Hannah at all.

Once the sun was down, Hannah decided to drive out to the lab. Worried that the sound of her car would give her away, she parked out on the main road and hiked the mile-long access road that led to the lab. The moon was rising; there was no need for a flashlight. As soon as she could see the lab she knew they were already there. The building was surrounded by hundreds of glowing lights. Soon she was surrounded by lights as well.

“Miss McBride!” “Hannah!” “Hannah McBride!” she heard many voices saying, “Thank you for coming so quickly!” The lights seemed agitated; she could not make out any of the figures distinctly and did not understand what they meant. Had they called her?

Her friend from the nets landed on her arm. He waved his arms and the other voices fell silent.

“Miss McBride,” he said, “you find us in great distress. Will you help us?”

I should never have left the lab, Hannah thought. Fighting off panic, she answered, “Of course I will. What has happened?”

“He has bound the building with iron,” the fairy said. “We cannot enter, and our kin cannot leave. If you could remove it, all will be well.”

Hannah was puzzled. She had read that fairies cannot abide iron, but how could Rob have bound the building? She walked to the lab and saw what he had done. Clever bastard, she thought. Across the threshold and along the windows ledges, cast iron nails were scattered in a thick line. She took a cardboard box from the recycling bin and tore off one of the top panels. Using the torn piece as a scoop, she went around the building pushing nails into the box. Setting the box in the parking lot, she turned to see fairy lights disappearing through the door and windows.

To her surprise, they poured out immediately, rushing toward her in even greater agitation and shouting in many voices: “They are hidden!” “We cannot see them!” “He has taken them!” “Please help us!”

Hannah rushed in and flipped on the light. If the light woke Rob or Marissa, too bad. She looked around. The fairies were right. The cage was no longer on the counter and nowhere else in plain view. Then she saw something unusual; realizing what it was, she felt chilled.

On the floor sat an old Dutch oven, one of those deep round things they used at summer camp for baking peach cobbler. Dutch ovens were big, deep, heavy--and made of cast iron. Hannah grabbed the lid and lifted it. Inside was the cage, which she carefully set on the counter.

The fairy man sat holding his companion in his arms. She appeared to be unconscious, but as soon as they were free of the iron, she raised her head and sighed happily. In seconds, the two prisoners were flying free. Hannah sighed in relief; the jubilation among the gathered fairies was loud and sustained.

She felt a touch on her arm and saw her friend had alighted there once more. “Thank you, Hannah McBride,” he said with great formality. “I name you fairy friend. When you have need of us, know that we will be there.”

At that, the whole multitude gathered around, thanking her, laughing, and touching her lightly as they flew in exuberant spirals. Hannah felt as if she stood in a shower of golden light. Then, with many farewells, they were gone.

The silence they left behind was deep but peaceful. A barred owl hooted in the woods. Hannah decided to leave the lab as it was, and walked back to her car. Sleep, once she reached her bed, was not a problem.

Hannah made sure she was first to the nets that morning by setting her travel alarm. Low clouds hid the sun. Ground fog again covered the stream and spread out through the fields, muffling all sound. There was no sign of Rob or Marissa, and no fairies in the nets. She made notes and released the birds as usual, feeling a bit flat after the events of the last two days. Back at car, she decided not to face the lab quite yet. She headed back into town for buttermilk pancakes and blueberry syrup.

It was almost 11:00 when Hannah rolled up to the lab. Rob's truck was gone. Marissa seemed to be packing, although it looked more like throwing things randomly into bags.

"What's up, Marissa?" Hannah called, getting out of her car.

Marissa glanced at her and a look of almost-panic crossed her face. She turned abruptly away, then back, wilting and desperate. "Oh," she said, "can you help me with this tent? I can't get the stupid thing rolled up right and Rob said I'd better be ready to leave in half an hour."

"What's going on?" Hannah asked, genuinely puzzled. She had expected Rob to be furious (most likely) or to pretend the whole thing had never happened (possibly) but not that he would leave like this. Seemed like deserting the field, so to speak.

"It's the truck," said Marissa, the panicky look back in her eyes. "It wouldn't start this morning. He had to have it towed. The guys at the station couldn't fix it; they only got it running well enough to get back to the dealer. Something's wrong with the lights; we have to get there before dark." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I think they did it," she said.

Hannah choked back laughter, but didn't say a word. Working together, it took only fifteen minutes to pack the tent and get the last of the gear into bags and backpacks. Rob still wasn't back from the gas station, so they sat together on the grass.

Marissa touched Hannah's arm. Hannah looked over to see tears welling in her eyes. "I know what we did was wrong," she said. "I couldn't get to sleep last night, thinking about... I woke Rob and tried to tell him, but he got really angry. I was too scared to do anything myself." She took a deep breath in, then out. "All day yesterday, it just didn't seem real, you know? It was like a game, or a dream. Then, last night, I knew it was all wrong, but I couldn't... I'm glad you did, though... Didn't you?"

Hannah nodded. It was hard to put into words. They sat quietly together a few minutes. Marissa spoke again. "I really am sorry. Is there some way I could tell... You know, tell them?"

Hannah started to say she had no idea, but stopped. Marissa looked sad and defeated. With a little push, maybe she'd start standing on her own two feet. "Look, I'm no expert, but if it was me, I'd go into the woods right over there. I'd stand under the trees, and just say what I wanted to say. I kind of doubt you'll get an answer, but I bet they'll hear you."

Marissa stood up resolutely and walked straight into the woods until Hannah could no longer see her. She was still out of sight when Rob pulled up ten minutes later. He climbed out, scowled at Hannah, and began throwing gear into the back of the pickup. A few moments later, Marissa walked out from the trees, looking almost happy and much calmer. The truck was loaded and Rob sat grimly behind the wheel, so Marissa climbed in. She looked nervously at Rob as he gunned the engine, but waved quickly at Hannah as the truck turned and drove away.

The phone in the lab started ringing. Hannah had a feeling it was the Professor, checking in. She grinned at the disappearing truck and went inside to answer it.