

Once the prince of the Lilliputia Nation had a strange dream...

This dream really fascinated me and I was going to start this story with it. I changed my mind, though. How can I expect you to care about the prince's dream when you don't know a thing about the Lilliputia Nation?

To tell you the truth, you can't find the Lilliputia Nation now, even if you're a famous explorer. But I know for a fact it existed in the past. Times were different then. The whole Earth was covered with beautiful countries described in stories and legends and those countries were inhabited by all your favorite fairy tale characters.

All the fairy tales you've read or heard of are from those times.

So, okay, let's start at the beginning.

From really high mountains, the Splashtup River rushed to the lowlands, passing through dense woods in its hurry to get there.

Once it came out in the open, the Splashtup split into two branches. And exactly between those two branches was the beautiful country of the small people-- the Lilliputia Nation.

The Lilliputia Nation was ruled by King Putian XV.

King Putian XV was proud of being a king. He was especially proud of being Putian the Fifteenth, not more or less. It would have broken his heart if he'd been Putian the Fourteenth or Putian the Sixteenth.

What can I say? Human beings are like that.

The Lilliputia Nation also had a queen, of course. Her name was Lilly. Apparently, Lilly was gorgeous when she was young, but after she gave birth to the prince, she put on a lot of poundage.

The first vizier of the king, Lilliputinorder, had much to be proud of.

To avoid being thought of as arrogant, though, he only prided himself on his ginormous nose and especially a ginormous wart growing on top of his ginormous nose. When he sneezed, the sound was so loud, birds in the forests far away would fly up in surprise. And Lilliputinorder tended not to stop after only one or two sneezes, either: he would keep going, making such a noise, you'd think a war had started.

The vizier's daughter, Nosegay, looked as much like her father as possible. Lilliputinorder loved Nosegay and he said to her every day: "if you want to become a real beauty, don't let the sun see you." He had high hopes for Nosegay and had his palace built so her window was right opposite the prince's.

Just once, the prince caught sight of Nosegay's ginormous nose and after that, he made sure not to look in that direction ever again.

Oh, I completely forgot! The prince's name was Putty and, like I say, once he had a very strange dream. He probably had this strange dream because of his storyteller.

As soon as Putty fell asleep, his storyteller would sit by his bedside and start doing what a storyteller does-- telling stories. The stories he told were almost certainly the cause of Putty's dreams: Putty saw in his dreams whatever the storyteller described.

Putty sort of grew up in his sleep.

He slept at night, of course. But he also slept a great deal during the daytime. For this reason, he dreamed a lot. But the dream I want to tell you now was completely different from his normal dreams.

After a delicious dinner, as usual, the prince took a nap. It was daylight when he fell asleep, but in his dreams, it was night. This, too, was probably the storyteller's fault. Normally, the storyteller had the

prince dream about food. But I guess he was fed up, so to speak, with telling stories about buns and rolls and pies and sizzling frying pans, and he told the sleeping prince, instead, a story about a beautiful girl from the country of the fireflies.

The prince really saw the country of fireflies and a beautiful girl in his dream. Camellia, the beauty, wore a dress made of yellow petals, and was walking through a forest with fireflies swirling around her.

Oh! How beautiful Camellia was!

The glowing fireflies shed light for her to walk, as they spun around her head. If a firefly got tired, it would nap for a moment in Camellia's hair.

Then it would fly up again and help to show her the way.

The fireflies frequently took turns at hair duty. For this reason, Camellia's hair shone as if set with diamonds.

Putty woke up in amazement. He'd never had that kind of dream before. Before, he'd always dreamed about a pie baking in the oven, or different kinds of sausages sizzling as they fried, but in this dream, he'd seen Camellia, a beautiful girl, and from the country of the fireflies, no less!

The unusual dream transformed the prince.

He was a different person. He didn't eat or drink. He left his favorite foods untouched. The old cook was fired, a new cook was hired.

The storyteller was also fired, but none of this hiring and firing did Putty any good.

"Bring me Camellia, from the country of the fireflies!" he screamed. "I want to play with her!"

The royal court was completely befuddled. Nobody knew who Camellia was or where to find the country of the fireflies.

### Piccolo and the Lazy Ladybugs

In the whole wide world, only one boy, Piccolo, knew where the Land of the Fireflies lay. Piccolo herded ladybugs east of the Lilliputia Nation, on the ninth mountain. It might seem to some that ladybugs don't need herding and watching over. That's a serious mistake. In those times, there were no weather bureaus, and ladybugs provided an important service. All one had to do was to ask, "Ladybug Lady, make your wings not together. Tell us the news of tomorrow's weather" and the ladybug would spread its wings and fly away. After an hour or two, it would return with all the weather news. Even in those days, travelers needed to know what to expect on their way-- whether to head out early in the morning or to wait out a storm. Travelers in those times always had ladybugs stashed away in small carrying cases.

Even today, you can catch this beautiful, gentle insect, place it on the palm of your hand and repeat a few times: "Ladybug Lady, make your wings not together. Tell us the news of tomorrow's weather."

The ladybug is certain to unfold its wings and fly away. And if it does not return, that is only because you get a weather forecast every day on the radio and on TV, and so you don't really care very much if it comes back. You, unfortunately, don't depend on its return.

The shepherd was named Piccolo because, they say, he was born with a little flute in his hands, though I am not going to insist on that. Every day he was up at the crack of dawn. He would pull soft leather boots on over his colorful woolen socks, rinse his face with dew from lily leaves, stick his arms into a red-and-black polka-dotted jacket, clap his hat onto his head and be on his way. He would take his little flute from his sash and put it to his lips, and from the flute would flow the song of the dawn. Nature would wake up and breezes would rustle in the leaves.

When they heard the flute, all the red and yellow ladybugs hiding in the grass would wake up and gather round Piccolo. The little shepherd would send off two ladybugs: a red one to the Land of the Winds and a yellow one to the Land of the Rains. Sometimes he would send young ladybugs with them to learn the way. Then, from behind the mountains, a giant sun would come up, and Piccolo would play a new melody to greet the sunrise. When the warm rays of the sun reached the green slopes, he would let his ladybugs out to pasture, like a flock of sheep.

One day, Piccolo sent two ladybugs, a red one to the Land of the Winds and a yellow one to the Lands of the Rains, as usual. But it got close to noon, and they still weren't back. Piccolo started getting worried. People from the village came to him, asking what kind of weather there would be the following day, and he was unable to tell them anything, because the ladybugs hadn't shown up. The people left, dissatisfied. And Piccolo went to look for the ladybugs.

He walked and walked, sometimes playing his flute, so that the lost ladybugs would hear the familiar sounds and fly to him. Finally, Piccolo came to a fork in the road. One way, the right, led to the Land of the Winds, and the other, the left, led to the Land of the Rains. Piccolo stood there thinking, unable to decide which way to go.

Then, all of a sudden, what should he see but the two missing ladybugs, snuggled up, unhurt by the blades of grass, their front legs tucked under their cheeks, sleeping like logs. "Hey, sleepy heads!" Piccolo shouted. Startled, the ladybugs jumped about eight feet high. They unfolded their wings and were just about to fly away when Piccolo stopped them. "What kind of lazy ladybugs are you? Get over here right now!" The ladybugs felt ashamed and hung their heads. They were ready to fly to the Land of the Winds and the Land of the Rains immediately. But now, with the sun setting, it was too late to fly anywhere. Bitten by their little consciences, they returned to their pasture. What else could they do?

A Storm. Meeting in a Forest Clearing

The next day, just as Piccolo was again about to dispatch two ladybugs to get the weather forecast, the sky turned black with clouds, and Mother Earth was shaken by thunder. A storm began. The sky tore open and it started raining as if water were being poured from a clay jug. Neither Piccolo nor the villagers had expected such a torrent. Streams overran their banks, threatening to flood the village. Piccolo's ladybugs were scattered by the storm! Soaked from head to toe, he ran to and fro in the wind and rain, looking for them. "This is all because of yesterday's laziness," muttered Piccolo. "If we had known yesterday about today's weather, this would have never happened."

Finally the sky cleared a bit. The sun, already in the west, peeked through scattered thunderclouds. Piccolo gathered his ladybugs. Thirty were missing! Horrified, he counted them over again. Thirty were still missing, among them the two lazy ones. He played his flute, climbed the mountain, and then, tired and dejected, went down to the forest. He sat down on a rock and looked around. Where on this vast earth could he look for his lost ladybugs?

The sun was settling amid the mountains. Evening dusk shrouded the green slopes. Piccolo started playing a mournful evening tune and got so carried away he didn't notice when night crept in. The stars came out. Piccolo looked at the sky in amazement. He had heard about night and knew the night sky is filled with stars. But never before had he seen the night sky and never before had he seen such shimmering stars, because normally he would go to sleep in the evening and get up with his ladybugs at dawn.

The moon sat on top of the forest trees, casting a golden glow on everything around. Piccolo smiled at her as at an old friend. The moon sometimes is out during the day too, even though in daylight her light is not very bright.

Now Piccolo stared at the forest, and it seemed to him that the forest, too, was full of shimmering stars. But the forest stars, in contrast to the sky ones, were in motion. They would disappear and flash, disappear and flash again. Piccolo sprang to his feet and fell silent; he took a few steps towards the forest and stopped because he heard a song. A girl in a yellow dress stepped out of the forest, singing. She was surrounded by innumerable sparkling stars, shining so brightly in the night that it hurt your eyes. But they weren't stars at all. She was escorted by a host of fireflies.

The girl was singing. Calmed by the night, the forests, mountains, and meadows were under the spell of her song. Piccolo liked the melody so much he pulled his flute from his sash, and sweetly echoed what the girl had been singing.

As soon as the girl heard the flute, she stopped singing. The fireflies encircled Piccolo, too, so that now in the dark you could see a flute-playing shepherd boy in a red and black polka-dotted jacket.

"Who are you?" asked the girl in the yellow dress.

"I'm Piccolo. I'm a ladybug shepherd."

"Why are you here at night then?"

"I've lost some ladybugs. I was looking for them, and it got dark."

"Did you think I could find them for you?"

"No. I'm here by chance. But if you could find them, I'd be really grateful."

"I'd be glad to help you."

"What's your name? Who are you?"

"I am a shepherdess, too. Except I take care of fireflies. My name is Camellia."

"Camellia! What a beautiful name! I have seen a beautiful yellow flower, also named Camellia. Your dress must be sewn from its petals."

Camellia smiled but did not say anything.

"So how will you help me find my ladybugs?"

"I'll send my fireflies after them. They're sure to find them. Fireflies are wonderful. At night they find those who have lost their way and shine a path home."

And the fireflies immediately flew off in all four directions, piercing the darkness with their light while following Camellia's instructions on what to look for and how to look for it.

Camellia and Piccolo's Talk; A Night Song and Good-bye

Piccolo and Camellia sat in a forest clearing, waiting for the fireflies who had been sent to look for the missing ladybugs.

"I didn't know how beautiful night was!" Piccolo said. "I always go to bed and wake up with my ladybugs, so I've never really seen the night at all. How nice it is!"

"And I always go to bed and wake up with my fireflies. So I've never seen the light of day. I really don't know what day is like."

"You've never seen the light of day?" Piccolo was surprised. "You've never seen the sun?"

"No."

"How is it possible not to have seen the sun?"

“I have to sleep during the day so I can look after the fireflies at night.” There were tears in Camellia’s eyes: she really wanted to see the sun.

“You’ve got to see it!”

“How?”

“Tomorrow I’ll come and look after the fireflies instead of you, and you’ll sleep during the night. I’ll wake you up just before dawn, and we can watch the sunrise together.”

“But if you don’t sleep at night, who will look after the ladybugs during the day?”

“We’ll take turns sleeping.”

“Okay,” Camellia agreed.

“After sunrise, I’ll leave.”

The fireflies sent to look for the ladybugs had not yet returned.

“Play something,” asked Camellia.

“What?”

“Something about night.”

“I don’t know any night tunes. I only know songs for dawn, sunrise, noon and dusk.”

“Play the sunrise song!”

“You want me to play a morning song at midnight?” Piccolo smiled.

“If not that, then what?”

“I’ll try playing the night song.”

“I thought you said you didn’t know it?”

“I’ll play what you sang. From now on, that will be my night song.”

And so Piccolo played the song of the night. Camellia listened attentively. She was amazed. How quickly Piccolo had learned the melody! It was truly the song of night! The sounds flowing from his flute seemed to make the moon grow bigger and the stars glimmer magically in the sky above the forest. They seemed to praise the breeze that made leaves in the forest rustle and cool Mother Earth, after the heat of the sun.

“I’m really happy,” said Camellia when Piccolo finished playing. “I’ll never forget this night. This is the most wonderful night I can imagine.”

“I’m happy, too, because you taught me your song.”

Camellia jumped to her feet when she spotted the fireflies she’d sent to look for the missing ladybugs. Piccolo got up too. The fireflies brought good news: the ladybugs were safe and sound, sleeping all together at the crossroads of night and day.

Piccolo thanked Camellia and the firefly messengers. He was glad his little friends had been found. Gratefully, he played his night song again.

Then the sky began to turn pale, the moon slowly slipped behind the mountain, and the stars began disappearing one by one. The fireflies paled, too.

“It’s time to go to sleep,” said Camellia, as she watched the fireflies’ light go out. “It’s their turn, to sleep.”

“Good-bye, Camellia!”

“Good-bye, Piccolo!”

“Camellia, do you really want me to show you the sunrise?”

“Yes I do!”

“I’ll come tomorrow night, then, and we’ll take turns herding the fireflies.”

“I’ll be waiting, Piccolo!”

“I’ll be there for sure, Camellia!”

“Goodbye, Piccolo!”

“Goodbye!”

So that was how Piccolo and Camellia parted from each other. Camellia took the fireflies and went her way. Piccolo went back to the crossroads of night and day, where the lost ladybugs were waiting for him.

the Lilliputia Nation Again; Misfortunes of a Famous Soccer Player

Before Piccolo finds his ladybugs, though, let’s revisit the Lilliputia Nation, Land of the Little People. How is Prince Putty doing – the one who saw the beautiful girl with fireflies in his dreams?

Putty actually started eating again on the second day, but Queen Lilly could tell his one-day hunger strike had not passed without consequence. The thought of the beautiful firefly shepherd would not leave the Prince, and that worried Queen Lilly a lot. After a consultation with the King, she decided Putty needed entertainment to make him forget his dream.

“Why don’t you play soccer?” the Queen asked the sad Prince.

“Soccer? What’s that?” inquired Putty.

“What? You don’t know what soccer is? It’s a terrific game!” responded the First Vizier, Lilliputinorder.

“Then let’s play!” agreed Putty.

Immediately, they sent a messenger to the famous soccer player Ron Around.

Of course, they loved soccer very much in the Land of the Little People, but unfortunately, they had no team of their own. There was only one soccer player, Ron Around. Ron would go out on the field alone and kick the ball first into one goal, and then the other. The soccer-loving Lilliputia Nation fans applauded him wildly. But the Little People knew not only how to be jubilant; they could also be merciless. If Ron Around missed the goal, they would whistle and jeer and make a horrible racket.

Whistling and hooting could be heard much more frequently from the bleachers than applause. And that was because the famous soccer player’s right leg was a bit crooked, so he hardly ever made a goal. In spite of that, the Lilliputia Nation was very proud of its single soccer player.

Ron Around came to the palace with a ball. Prince Putty came out to meet him in the courtyard. Ron Around had to teach him how to play soccer and thus entertain him. Ron put the ball on the ground, stepped ten paces back and then started running towards the ball at an incredible speed. King Putia XV, Queen Lilly and the First Vizier were watching from the palace windows. They all hoped soccer would make Putty to forget the discomfiting and disturbing beauty he had seen in his dreams.

So the famous soccer player rushed towards the ball and kicked with all his might. But, as you already know, his right leg was a bit crooked. The ball traced a rather complicated trajectory, whizzing through the air, until it hit the window from which the First Vizier Lilliputinorder was watching the game. The windowpane, of course, shattered, showering the courtyard with glass. The First Vizier grabbed his nose. One glass shard had got right into Lilliputinorder’s wart. Doctors immediately extracted the shard from his wart, but they could not stop his sneezing. He started sneezing so loudly some of the other windowpanes began vibrating. Some even exploded with a ringing sound.

“I don’t want to play soccer!” bawled the Prince, and the famous soccer player Ron Around was sent to prison for insulting Lilliputinorder and breaking windows. “He’s no soccer player, he’s a scoundrel!” said the First Vizier, gingerly checking his wart with his index finger and sneezing one more time.

How Twenty-Three Poems Written in a Single Night Were Destroyed

Another development at the palace was that when the court poet Hilaria Bolero learned of Prince Putty's dream, he immediately sat down at his desk and, in a single night, he wrote twenty-three poems about the Indescribable Beauty from the Land of the Fireflies. Bolero was not the poet's real last name. If you want to know his real name, I'll explain something to you: his father's name was Donald the Doughmaker, and all of the Lilliputia Nation people knew him as the best baker in the land. The father dreamed of turning his son into a good bread-maker, but his dream did not come true. The son preferred writing poems to baking bread. The family name of Doughmaker did not suit him, so he changed it. "A great poet should have a made-up name," said the famous verse-writer. He himself did not know what "Bolero" meant, but he liked the sound of it: Hilaria Bolero!

"How is that, my friends? Hilaria Bolero! How does it sound to you? It's wonderful, isn't it?" he asked all of his acquaintances.

"Wonderful, wonderful," he heard from everyone.

Only one acquaintance dared somehow to disagree and said, "I think it's silly." Hilario stopped greeting him, and when a poet does not greet you in the Land of the Little People, that is considered a great insult.

Never before had Hilaria Bolero written twenty-three poems in a single night. What an inspired night it was! True, when he was composing his twenty-third poem, he did fall asleep, but as soon as he woke up, he finished it and was quite pleased with himself. He appeared in front of the Prince that very morning with his new notebook of verse. He did not let the Prince sleep in—he pulled out his poems right away.

Prince Putty had awakened completely by the time Hilario was reciting his thirteenth poem. The Prince sat up on his bed, rubbed his eyes, and then, his attention finally on the verses, began to whimper. Encouraged by this, Hilaria Bolero continued reciting with increased fervor, while the distraught Putty cried rivers of tears. By the final lines, the Prince had begun to moan. Whose heart, after all, can resist such words:

"I've learned that it's true  
I'll never meet you,  
Sweet indescribable beauty.  
My duty's not done  
I'll never have fun--  
I yearn for a lady not seen by the sun!"

As it turned out, though, Putty was not alone in listening to the poet. The First Vizier had a magic bowl. If he wanted to know what was happening or being said in the next room, he could put the bowl against the wall and hear everything. On this occasion, he did just that. He took his magic bowl and placed its base against the wall. The voice of Hilaria Bolero came through so loud and clear you would have thought some poet from our time was reciting one of his poems on television.

Pleased with his success, Hilaria Bolero finished his reading, bowed to the Prince in a most respectful fashion and stepped out of the room. As soon as he came out, someone grabbed him by the arm. Startled, the poet looked at his assailant.

"Oh, Your Respectfulness!" exclaimed the poet. "Good morning!"

"What sort of poems were you just reciting to the Prince?" the angry Vizier asked.

"Just a few verses." The poet smiled modestly. "I wrote them last night... About a beauty..."

"What beauty was that?"

"The Beauty of the Fireflies..."

“Ah ha!” the First Vizier interrupted him. “It’s not only forbidden to write poems about that disgraceful personage. It’s forbidden even to mention her name-- or title.”

“I didn’t know. I was inspired.”

“To write twenty-four poems in a single night— My God, you poets are insane! Twenty-four poems!”

“Twenty-three, Your Respectfulness,” Hilaria Bolerocorrected him.

“OK, twenty-three. Twenty-three poems! That’s an enormous number!”

The poet was silent. What could he say?

“Where are these poems, where do you have them?” asked the Vizier.

“I have them here in my breast pocket.”

“Burn them immediately-- in front of my eyes!” ordered the Vizier.

It was just the poet’s luck a fire was already burning in the fireplace. Hilaria Bolero obediently took out his notebook of poems and threw it into the flames. The famous poet was thus saved from the anger of the First Vizier; twenty-three poems, however, all written in a single night, were lost to future generations...