

THE LITTLE PEOPLE

By Krishan Coupland

1: The Little People At Dawn

Before the light is up they rise to stretch and shower and mumble about the sharehouse in a state of bleary semi-wake. Lives lived by a different clock; a foreign clock that some still set their watches by. Wash quietly, brush teeth quietly, dress in such silence that the clink of a belt buckle is painfully loud. They hold whispered, tame conversations in their native tongue:

"Are you awake?"

"Not yet, you?"

"Not yet."

They are polite, always polite. They eat liquid breakfasts and wrap tiffin lunches in tinfoil, sling the cords of cartoon-character lunch pails over taped-up puffa jackets. They set

out weary (their whole lives are lived weary, the Little People) and into the lucid dawn. The minibus is waiting, throbbing placidly in the quiet, hazard lights reflecting now and now and now again through a wet mask of dew.

All aboard, they set off. No chatter. The minibus smells of cigarette smoke, its floor wet with footprint mud. A metal box of half-asleep Little People, alone on the streets. As they drive the streetlamps flutter off one by one. The sun slicks its way through the clouds. Only the driver knows where they are going. If he were to leave them on the streets here they would be as isolated and in danger as if he left them on the moon.

#

2: The Little People At Work

The minibus pulls up at a gate. The window rolled down, cold air admitted. They shiver. Words are exchanged with a man in a blue jacket, and the bus is allowed in to the compound. It deposits the Little People at the delivery door, turns in a slow arc and trundles off into the rising day. Bereft of it, of their tiny island of warmth and motion and safety, the Little People huddle together and smoke and talk in whispers. Eventually the foreman arrives, clipboard and yellow hat and overalls. Wordless, for he knows they do not speak his language, he directs them inside.

The Little People are given overalls still sweat-smelling from the last temporary owners. They are given boots and face masks and helmets. There are plastic gloves filled with powder that pull up to their elbows. When they are dressed they do not recognise themselves. The foreman comes again and ushers them out of the changing room and down a narrow, tiled corridor. With each set of double doors the noise and the heat increase, until they push out onto the factory floor.

Fearful, the Little People huddle. The foreman directs them, wordless now because any words would be lost in the all-consuming noise.

For eight hours they stand at conveyor belts and quality control cigarettes. An endless white stream of the things roll past and they reach out and pluck away the bad ones, the damaged, the split, the bent and the broken. Around them the shop floor is humid and loud and eternal. The bass of it travels through their feet. Their eyes blur at the endless stream of white and brown. Their hands are quick. They work close together, but they do not talk. Too noisy.

On their breaks they occupy a corner of the staff room. Pick over their now-lukewarm lunches with unease. Stretch stiff backs, stretch fingers, yawn into powdery hands.

#

3: The Little People Lost

The minibus is late picking them up; they are shown out through the front gate by the foreman and have to wait on the grass verge. The Little People are happy that work is over, happy to have completed another day. They page through the bundle of notes the foreman gave each of them, counting tens. They pluck up stems of grass and play, idly talking. A few of them sleep there on the ground, arms splayed over eyes to keep away the weak hurt of the sun.

Half an hour passes, then an hour. They worry that the minibus will not come, that they will be left here alone. They debate urgently in their mother tongue. They watch as the factory staff depart through the gate, shelled in cars.

Eventually they decide that they will have to walk. They set off up the road. No pavements, they walk on the very white line itself, and when a car approaches they pile themselves onto the verge, pushing back into the bushes, against fences, flattening their backs to dry stone walls.

The sixth time this happens, it is the minibus. It stops a hundred yards down from them, and they run to meet it and, grateful, waving, laughing, climb aboard.

#

4: The Little People Shopping

After work they go to the supermarket. It is open late, few customers, the staff already beginning to put out new stock. Aisles narrowed by discarded boxes, curlicues of plastic wrapping, mechanical trolleys. The Little People take a cart and hustle it slowly around the aisles. They pick out food they recognise from the arrays of brightly coloured packs and boxes. They bag up some fruit, weigh it, then add some more. They cluster around the trolley and debate the quality of pre-packed rice. Still polite. Always polite.

They walk home with their purchases. The minibus is off in the city, ferrying another band of Little People home or to the cigarette factory, to a building site, to the abattoir, to the dock. It is a long way to walk, but the Little People are used to such journeys. They stay close. They follow the roads they know, cross at the green man, part respectfully for oncoming pedestrians. When they enter the suburb of the sharehouse they shush each other and talk in whispers, knowing that their neighbours have children, knowing that the children should not be woken.

#

5: The Little People At Dusk

After eating the Little People sit in the garden, on the patched grass or in decrepid deck chairs scavenged from winter alleyways. They light tea lights and play quiet games of cards with a deck so old its corners are worn to cloth. Inside the house is busy with workers returning, workers leaving. People rising from sleep and people falling to it. The house is crowded and humid and as never-ceasing as an anthill. The garden is quiet. Removed. Shoes piled on the concrete step. Pot plants cared for by nobody and by everybody lined up along the wall.

There is one phone in the house. A late-90s mobile fitted with a no-brand sim made for calling abroad. They take it in turns to pass it around, to stand in the doorway and call home and talk in lowered voices. It is a warm day. Some of the Little People sleep out there in the garden. Some of them dream.

Hours pass. The candles burn down. Cold draws. Insects rise from the grass. The garden is quiet and dim.

These are the Little People. They are dear and innocent. They are far from home.