



## [NOTES ON A STRANGE WORLD] MASSIMO POLIDORO

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# The Return of the Fairies

One winter evening a few years ago, G.F., a banker in Cesena, Italy, was traveling with his wife in the Apennines Mountains. Their destination was the hut that the two owned within the Lama Forest. Since it had snowed and the road was getting icy as they climbed, the banker decided to stop the car to apply tire chains. As he was about to begin, the man realized he was not alone. A few meters away from him in the fresh snow there was something unusual.

Instinctively, the banker took out his cell phone and took a picture with the flash on. In the grainy image, there is a creature with human features on its hands and knees, perhaps busy eating snow, looking at the viewer. There's only one problem: the creature looks smaller than normal and resembles in every way an elf, including its elongated ears.

On August 2, 2001, Mr. Pierluigi Ricci went to the Command Station Bagno di Romagna of Forestry to make a very peculiar complaint. As he was about to drink from a well within the Armina Park, Mr. Ricci said there came upon him "a being high around 25 centimeters that I consider to be a 'gnome' of the woods."

He then gave a fairly detailed description of it: human appearance and clothing consisting of a blue jacket, brown pants, beige fur boots, red and white beard; in other words, a textbook gnome.

Are these perhaps jokes or the ravings of mad men? The State Forestry

doesn't seem to think so, since an Italian news agency, Adnkronos, found a green folder of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry created about fifteen years ago titled "Gnomes and Fairies of the Woods."

It contains information, reports, and photographic material relating to alleged sightings of mysterious creatures in the woods. All of them concentrated, curiously, in a particular area: the Apennines between Tuscany and Romagna, in particular around the area of several municipalities such as San Piero in Bagno and Bagno di Romagna.

"We receive all kinds of reports," says Stefano Cazora, chief press officer of the State Forestry Corps. "In this case, the gnome is seen as a guardian of nature, just like our Corp is recognized as the environmental protector."

### Origins of the Fairies

Sightings of fairies and gnomes are far from a contemporary discovery. The origin of fairies can be traced back to the figure of the *Parcae* of classical mythology, otherwise known in Latin as *Fatum*, and it was in the Middle Ages that their appearance became that of young girls with pointy hats; the addition of wings came only in the Victorian era.

It was slightly later that the first and most famous "sighting" photo in history came, made famous in the 1920s by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes. Doyle came into possession of photographs taken at the



English village of Cottingley by two girls and was amazed when he saw that they portrayed some fairies in flight and even a gnome handing a flower to one of the girls. He dedicated articles and a book, *The Return of the Fairies*, to the episode.

In more recent times, fairies have appeared in photographs and even home videos, always very grainy and shot in poor lighting conditions. In 2008 in Argentina, for example, a video surfaced that kids shot one night where a gnome, with his typical pointy hat, can be seen jumping to the side. The film was taken seriously, especially by some British newspapers, but it turned out to be a hoax.

### The Fruit-Like Creatures

If fairies and gnomes really existed, however, we should occasionally find their remains because, as living creatures, it is assumed that sooner or later they too must die. In reality, strolling in the woods or during a picnic, one can find carcasses of other, far more familiar, woodland creatures, such as squirrels, rabbits, or sparrows—yet never the dead body of a fairy or an elf. Yet, according to some, the bodies of some fairies were actually found. In a Buddhist temple on the outskirts of Bangkok, Thailand, there is a glass case in which are stored the tiny bodies of what seem to be two little deformed fetuses. There they are known as “Naree Pon,” which, according to local legends, are hybrids of plants and animals. They are born like fruit from a tree and then transform into beautiful female creatures that live only a few days. Aside from these two specimens, however, it does not appear that any have ever been found.

### April Fool's Tricks

In March 2007, a man taking his dog for a walk in Derbyshire, England, stumbled upon the tiny body of a mummified humanoid creature, about twenty centimeters long and with a pair of wings. The uproar caused by the news died down only when it was learned that it was an April Fool's joke. The dehydrated fairy was in fact the work of a creator of tricks and illusions for

magicians, Dan Baines, who had published the photos on his website, receiving more than 20,000 visits in one day. Baines revealed the joke on April 1 of that year.

The Cottingley fairy photographs taken by the girls also began as a joke that got out of hand. They had drawn and carved in some cardboard the silhouettes of fairies and a gnome, photographing them using their father's camera. It was intended to be just an innocent joke for the family, but the photos ended up in the hands of Doyle, who took them for genuine. Embarrassed, the girls kept the secret for fifty years and only when everyone involved had already died did they decide to reveal the hoax.

### Figments of Imagination

When the fairy report or image is not based on deception—however innocent and playful—how can we explain the sightings? Sometimes, especially in the dark or in a forest, we can catch the sight of some animal or form, and the power of suggestion turns it into a creature of the imagination. At other times, it's the photos themselves that unleash the imagination: the more the picture is grainy and blurred, the more easily our brains find a meaning. It is the classical mechanism known as *pareidolia*, the cause of many UFOs, ghosts, Marian, and fairies sightings.

As for the Ranger files, the provincial command of Forlì-Cesena made it clear that there are no recent sightings and that it is not exactly an open case file, since there are no elements for an official crime or offense. It's just an outdated dossier collecting stories that, at the time, encouraged local newspapers' attention but ended up forgotten after a while.

However, these stories had at least one result: stimulating a brand new form of tourism. In Bagno di Romagna, a “path of the gnomes” theme walk has become popular, and another hiking area where nature hikes mix with fairy tales has been named after Mentino, a popular gnome. Fairies and gnomes are only figments of the imagination, but if they can encourage people to rediscover and preserve the authentic wonders of nature, they are welcome. And then—who knows—maybe one day we could even

find some unknown “little people” actually hiding in our gardens.

### The Rossdale Fairies

That was exactly what seemed to happen when, in 2014, newspapers reported that a professor in Manchester, John Hyatt, had photographed a group of small creatures, oddly looking like fairies, in flight. The picture indeed showed small winged creatures whose bodies resemble that of tiny human beings.

His images were “genuine and have not been altered in any way,” he told the newspapers. “The message to people is to approach them with an open mind. There are stranger things in life than fairies, and life grows everywhere” (Slater 2014).

However, after examining the photographs, Erica McAlister, an expert on insects at the Natural History Museum in London, recognized them. “My first impression was they can't be fairies as there is no wand. But that is like saying mosquitoes aren't flies because they don't look like your typical house fly, so I had to approach this more taxonomically” (Freeborn 2014).

She finally identified the insects as “small swarming midges such as chironomids” that resemble mosquitoes but have longer limbs. They possess a more slender body and long slender legs that, in flight, hang down, in fact, resembling the limbs of a human being. “There are many undescribed species on the planet,” says McAlister, “and who knows what lies out there—we are still determining new species all the time, including large mammals. But as far as I know, no magical beings have turned up yet. Personally, I'm holding out for a unicorn.” ■

### References

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