

## **"The Gwladis"**

by Dan Watkins

In Memorium: Ray Bradbury

Arvi climbed the redwood tree with such confidence that the tree limbs seemed perfectly staggered for his eight-year-old arms and legs to reach. Indeed, the branches of the tree seemed to respond to that confidence by bending down ever so slightly to accept Arvi's grasp.

For the last two summers, that's all Arvi did in the woods around his grandparents' cabin. He yearned to climb the tallest trees in the forest. He didn't know why. He just needed to get to the peak, then climb down to find the next tree.

The tree Arvi now climbed was exceptionally old and wide at its base. It's what caught Arvi's attention as he wandered the forest looking for his next climb. It had density and patience. And it had room, with no other trees crowding around it, as if they respected it too much to grow near it.

Leaning against its course and venous bark, Arvi looked up to see how its trunk, haloed by its own clusters of foliage, seemed to disappear into the blue sky above. Arvi had found his next tree.

As Arvi climbed, he glanced up to see how close he was to the top. But the top never came into view. Even after Arvi left the ridge of peaks from the surrounding trees, and continued to climb into the air, the top of the tree remained out of sight.

Arvi continued to climb nonetheless, certain he would eventually reach the top. But he never did. Instead, he reached some kind of end when his head bumped against a barrier and he stopped climbing.

He couldn't see the barrier, just the continuation of the tree up and up. But the barrier was there anyway. It was invisible, but he could feel it with his hand. It wasn't hard, but heavy and soft, like the surface of a water bed.

Arvi poked the barrier with his finger, and his finger went through. He could feel his finger, but could see it no longer. It was just not there. Then he extended his whole hand through. His hand felt different on the other side of the barrier, warmer, and in a denser environment.

Then he felt a new sensation -- something firm and hard pinching his wrist on the other side of the barrier. He panicked and tried to pull his hand back, but it was too late. He was wrenched up by the wrist -- head, torso, legs -- through the barrier.

Arvi was suddenly in a new, liquid world. It was like a bizarre fish tank bathed in a deep, throbbing emerald. Spongey rocks strewn on the bottom of this world had tendrils waving back and forth in a liquid wind. The redwood tree rose up out of the rocks and soared into the murky, dense "sky." But the tree trunk was purple in color, with orange, glowing worms crawling up and down the trunk and clouds of a pinkish hue dancing like schools of fish around the tree far above.

Arvi was hanging from his wrist gripped by a metallic claw connected to the end of a shaft. The shaft was held by a large creature with the body of a slug and the head of a moose. It was pushing what looked like a shopping cart, with colorful rocks heaped in the basket.

A second creature like the first stopped pushing its rock-filled cart at the sight of Arvi hanging from the claw of the rock collector. A series of bubbles escaped the second moose-slug's nostrils. It was how the creatures communicated. The sequence of bubbles roughly translated to: "What the hell is that?"

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Late that afternoon, Arvi hurried back to the cabin and found his grandfather at his desk. He was a rabbi, engrossed in his study of Torah. But he always had time for his grandson. He gloried in Arvi's adventures. As a child, he used to climb the trees in the forest too.

"What tree did you climb today, my Arvi?"

"I climbed the Gwladis," said Arvi excitedly.

The rabbi's smile faded. "The Gwladis?" he said after a pause. "What is that?"

"It's a time traveler," said Arvi. "The Brindhl told me all about it with their bubbles. I could hear the words from the bubbles in my head. The Brindhl collect the rocks pushed up by the Gwladis as it grows. They trade the rocks, like baseball cards."

The rabbi looked concerned. "Arvi, what are you talking about?"

"The Gwladis grows forever," said Arvi. "It grows through our world and into the next. It grows through all worlds. It always has. It teaches all things how to grow. All the trees in our world are following the Gwladis. That's why trees go up."

The rabbi grabbed his grandson around the shoulders. "Arvi, you're not making sense. Did you hit your head?"

Arvi shook his head. "The Gwladis just grows up and up, papa. The Brindhl told me that's why I climb trees -- to grow. We all grow up and up because of the Gwladis."

The rabbi's face went ashen, even as his eyes grew wild. "Stop it, Arvi. You are frightening me. You are blaspheming HaShem, His book. Everything I've taught you."

Arvi blinked at his grandfather. "But, papa, they said you climbed the Gwladis when you were my age."

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Arvi didn't know what he said wrong. He went to bed early because his grandfather was angry. He wondered why papa could not remember the Gwladis.

Late into the night, he was awakened by the blare of fire engines and a menorah of flames on the horizon of the dark forest seen out the cabin window.

Arvi's grandmother herded him in his pajamas into the station wagon. The car was already packed for the sudden escape. Arvi watched the flames out the rear window as the car sped away. His grandfather never looked back. The Brindhl said Arvi would never forget the Gwladis, no matter how hard he tried.