The Ugly Old Gnome, the Picture Frame and the Poppies Pot

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I hated that stupid garden gnome. But I wasn't really being fair. I hated all gnomes in general. No matter their gender, outfit or the expression carved into their faces. It was something about the potential of life trapped inside an inanimate object that scared me.

"I've noticed your staring," my dad chuckled, a sound I hadn't heard in a while. "But glaring at Gnorma isn't going to make me get rid of her."

I rolled my eyes, tearing my gaze away from the window. "Maybe if you'd spent the forty dollars Mum had given you more wisely at the garage sale …" I trailed off, realising that would now only be a distant, bittersweet memory, and Dad and I shared a sad smile.

My eyes flitted back to Gnorma, noticing the carefree expression on her face; hints of desire and wonder written all over it. Her ocean-coloured overalls glimmered in the sunlight and her rosy cheeks glistened as drops of dew fell on them from a nearby sunflower. She looked innocent, but I knew better. She was just ignorant. She didn't know what emotions felt like. Love, hate, grief, especially not loss. What could I expect from a mass-produced, hideous, cheeky piece of clay?

She sat atop a misshapen rock, her smile joyful as her hands rested on her hips. A crimson pointed hat sat atop her head, and I shook mine in disbelief. I had to appreciate the details, but sometimes I didn't know what limits her life-likeness could go to.

"A-Alice, could you come look at this?" My twelve-year-old brother's voice carried from across the hall and knocked me from my train of thought. I stood up from my spot on the couch, one of the only pieces of furniture left in the house. Tomorrow, it would be taken with the rest of our belongings into the new house. Briskly walking to his small bedroom, I found Thomas sitting next to his bed and a couple of boxes. The walls were bare, and the beige colour I hadn't noticed before when it was filled with pictures made the atmosphere feel uncomfortable and uneasy. We were moving in two days, but most of the boxes still hadn't been packed for the truck. It was too hard to pack my life into dull pieces of cardboard, especially since we more than downgraded with our new house and would barely have any space.

Mum wouldn't have wanted this, a small voice, clear and insistent, whispered in the back of my head. I shook it to silence and glanced over at Thomas where he knelt beside the bed in a clearing of some small weary boxes.

In Thomas's hand was a small picture frame, lined with beautiful mahogany-coloured wood. But that wasn't what caught my breath. The picture did. It showed us four years ago, sitting cross-legged on the sage green grass in our backyard. We all smiled with bright eyes, not knowing the shocking future of our mother's stage four glioblastoma brain cancer. And especially not knowing it would take her life away one year later.

"Should we give it to Dad?" Thomas asked me, a smile lighting his tone as I swallowed and covered the frame in bubble wrap, before placing it carefully in the box. It was small, but I knew it would fill the new house nicely. "He knew how much she loved the designs on the frame."

"Yes, that's a g-good idea. He'll love it." I wrapped my arms around Thomas, hugging him closely. His head fell just beneath my chin, just like how my head used to fit below Mum's before she was taken from us. I left his room, returning to the floor-length window near the kitchen that led to the small garden. Gnorma stood in the same position, but I felt her expression shift. Not as innocent anymore. Something else filled her smile. Understanding. I narrowed my eyes, then turned back around, spotting the lopsided magenta flowerpot holding dark orange and red poppies on the kitchen table.

I bit my lip as my eyes stung with tears and blinked quickly before they could fall. The pot wasn't deformed and I knew it. I knew it when my Mum brought it home with a big smile on her face, talking about how it was on sale, and trying to convince my dad it was useful, especially since we were tight on money. I knew it when it took up all the space on a windowsill in our old house, but my Mum said the flowers needed sunlight for optimal growth. And most of all, I knew it when we placed it next to Mum's bed in the hospital. Just a little bit of colour to brighten up the space. To give us hope.

I wished none of it mattered, but that wasn't the truth. I tried to tell myself she wasn't coming back, and the sooner that reality set in, the sooner I could move on.

I looked back out at the garden one last time, but before I could turn my head back, I did a double-take. Gnorma's head was tilted now, just slightly, the way Mum used to tilt hers when she was pretending not to worry. Her painted eyes caught the light for a moment, and they weren't empty at all. They were patient. Knowing. Like she could feel the pain I felt whenever I thought of her. Like she could feel my heart racing whenever I saw the medical bills in the mail.

My breath hitched, and suddenly something lightened slightly on my shoulders, a thin barrier breaking between us, the voice in my head quieting. I let out the breath I didn't know how long I had been holding. "You always hated being cold," I whispered, my fingers reaching out. The crimson hat sat snug over her ears, exactly the way Mum used to pull her beanie down, even in summer.

Gnorma smiled. And now, it didn't feel like Mum had left at all.