



PROMPT #1: The garden is being infested by a particularly troublesome family of gnomes.

Gnome: More Mr. Nice Guy

by **Oliver Hall**

Poor Reno. He really truly believed that his emotions wouldn't get the better of him. All week long – and even in the car on the way to the cemetery – he had managed to stifle any tears that threatened to breach their containment. He had remained strong even as he entered the church and found his seat. It wasn't until it was his turn to approach the coffin that he finally lost control, letting the floodgates open once and for all. It was irreversible. He attracted many eyes as he was escorted back to his pew, heaving and gasping for breaths; already his eyes a puffy pink mess. In the car ride home, it was much of the same – Reno lay in the backseat of his mother's car blubbering loudly, pausing intermittently to force a breath in and cry out "Pampy!" Reno was the only one who called him by that name. All of his brothers and sisters referred to their father's father simply as "Grandad". They all, save for Reno, had too much dignity, it would appear, to call him "Pampy" as he insisted.

Presently, Pampy was many feet under the earth; but just one short week prior, he was as full of life as ever. It was the annual Monterey-Jack family cookout and Reno hadn't been happier or more excited since one year before at the last family cookout. The annual Monterey-Jack family cookout was just as it sounded: a once-a-year gathering of all who hailed from the Monterey-Jack family, and it was the one place Reno could go to indulge in all of his favorite things at once. He loved being able to eat as many hamburgers and wieners as he pleased, and he loved getting to see all of his family. He loved dancing to the music with his mother and he loved playing baseball with his older brothers (although he wasn't particularly skilled at either). He loved piñatas and pony rides and the clown who made everyone hats and swords and little animals out of balloons every year. It was like magic to Reno and the person who shared his love of this magic most of all was his Pampy. At last year's cookout, Reno's Pampy had taught

him a card trick which he had since forgotten, and the year before that he taught Reno how to spit watermelon seeds really really far. Reno didn't know it, but this year his Pampy had planned to teach his grandson how to find truffles in the forest behind his house without the use of a truffle pig. Before he could accomplish this however, he intended to finish out the baseball game he had started with his grandchildren.

At the top of the ninth, Reno was up to bat. He stood nervous but resolute at the empty pizza box that indicated the batting plate, and his sister, Spiffany, found her way to an area in the front yard that felt well enough like a pitching mound. She wound up her arm and tossed her brother the ball at a comfortable but not insulting speed, underhand. He truly did put up a good effort but try as he might, Reno could not fight his reflexes. He shut his eyes tightly as the ball sailed toward him, dropping the bat and turning around with his hands over the back of his head, as if he had had a turtle shell affixed to his back all his life. Luckily for Reno, the ball never even grazed him. Instead, it sunk to the ground and rolled right in between his legs and into the street. The whole family watched in panic as the ball rolled further and further down the lane until Pampy, always the hero, sprung into action. He leapt into the street with incredible poise and grace and began clamoring down the hill after the ball – eventually breaking out into a full sprint on all fours. He looked as though he might succumb to his own momentum and begin rolling down the hill like a wheel of cheese but by God was he gaining on the AWOL baseball. He had nearly gotten it within his grasp when he was met with a force quite unstoppable. Once again, the family looked on, horrified, as the attacker fled the scene. Reno was the first to come to his Pampy's aid, running into the street, flailing his arms and shouting. He came upon him, sprawled out in the middle of the road, motionless and breathless, with the mirror image of the FORD logo imprinted on his forehead.

Reno was reliving the experience as his mother pulled into the driveway. He thought to himself that he had never felt worse than he did in that moment. He wanted to stand outside in the dead of night as rain poured down upon his head and fall to his knees and tear open the chest of his shirt as he screamed up toward the heavens. He had seen enough movies to know that that was what the situation called for and he thought that only then would he begin to heal from this terrible, *terrible* ordeal. As his mother shepherded him from the back seat of the car to the front door of their home, Reno thought that maybe his tears were finally beginning to subside; maybe had cried all he could cry and now he was entirely cried out. Entering into the living room, however, he made a beeline for the couch where he curled up into a ball and continued his sobbing after spotting a baseball sitting upon the shelf, encased within a glass box. It was the baseball Pampy had died trying to save.

It was at this time that Reno's mother decided that perhaps she ought to do something. She had just finished pouring herself a drink which she brought along with her into the living room before pulling up a chair and sitting a short distance across from the disheveled Reno. She clasped his hand as she began, "Reno, Honey," before notice the mess being made of her couch. "Oh, good lord!" she exclaimed, fishing in her purse for her handkerchief and handing it to Reno. "Reno," she began again. Reno clutched the handkerchief around his nose and peered despondently at his mother as she went for her purse once again, this time producing a thin packet of papers. "I was gonna wait until you'd calmed down a bit, but I figure now's as good a time as any." Reno, intrigued, gradually returned to a relatively calm state, and began to sit up. "This here is your grandad's will. Do you know what a will is?"

Reno answered quietly, "Yeah". He did not.

"Well, Grandad wrote in his will that he wants you to have his house. That sounds nice, right?"

"I have to live at Pampy's house? But then, where will you live?"

"I'll stay here. You're 30, baby, this is normal." Reno was, in fact, 25 but he saw no need to correct his mother. "It's a good thing. You can move out and be like all your brothers and sisters. You can have cereal whenever you want. You can even hang up your posters in the bathroom like you always wanted." Reno liked the sound of that.

And so, that very day, Reno packed up all of his things and was shipped away to the now empty home of his late grandfather, with the big front yard and the even bigger back yard and the pretty garden and the truffle forest. Anyone familiar with the area would tell you that a drive from Reno's home to Reno's Pampy's home was no less than a 35-minute journey, but nonetheless, Reno's mother made the trip in 20; and after a hug and a kiss, two goodbyes and some more crying on Reno's end, she was off again.

Reno didn't quite know what to do. Once his mother had gone, he sat out on the curb for a while, picking grass and letting the wind carry it into the street. Then he decided that he would circumnavigate the house. His adventure took him from the front yard to the back yard, where he saw a rabbit, and finally back to the front yard. From there, he elected to go inside – it was becoming dark outside after all, and his long day of adventuring and crying had made him quite sleepy. So, Reno used the key he had been given to unlock the front door of his new home, and he entered. He saw the living room and how empty it was, and he became sad when he remembered how he could always find his Pampy there in his recliner watching something or other on the television. He noticed the study and how quiet it was, and he remembered how

many years ago, his Gammy would play him songs on the piano when he would come to visit. He entered the kitchen and thought to himself how this time, there was nothing good in the oven to fill the house with enticing aromas. He opened the pantry door to find nothing at all. Now he wanted cereal and he could not have it. And so, with the vague notion that his mother had pulled a fast one on him, Reno retired to the living room couch to sleep. Lying on the sofa, Reno thought once again about his Pampy and the funeral and the Monterey-Jack family cookout incident; but now, he truly was all cried out, and so he fell nigh immediately into an uneasy sleep.

“HOYA! HOYA!” Reno was in a deep sleep.

“BAB’TUM BOYA!” Reno began to stir a bit.

“RACH’GU FLAG U’ MAK THO YOYA!” Reno had just opened his eyes when he was roused by a noise. CLACK! CLACK! CLACK! Reno was wide awake now and was situated in a strange, contorted state of repose on the couch. Shaking the sleep out of his eyes, he noticed how the entire living room was bathed in an orange glow. Then he heard a familiar noise, “HOYA! HOYA! BAB’TUM BOYA! RACH’GU FLAG U’ MAK THO YOYA!” It was coming from the backyard. Reno raced to the window to see what the source of such ado could possibly be. As he peered into the backyard, he was taken aback by the immense burning bright light that was emanating from it. He shielded his eyes and took another look. There, he saw the backyard, populated in full with a cavalcade of tiny, humanoid creatures, orbiting about a raging bonfire. As they circled they fire they chanted, “HOYA! HOYA! BAB’TUM BOYA! RACH’GU FLAG U’ MAK THO YOYA!”, clapping their hands thrice after each chant. Reno watched in awe for a while before he finally processed the danger the fire might pose to him. He hurriedly flung open the backdoor and almost started hyperventilating when he saw the creatures up close. Unsure of what to do, Reno began spitting at the fire before giving up shortly after when he ran out of saliva. By now all of the creatures had ceased their dance and were staring intently at Reno, still huddled around the fire. He hadn’t noticed it before but now Reno’s attention was drawn to a rather tall object carried by one of the creatures. Upon closer inspection, it appeared to be an approximation of a human figure, constructed out of various fabrics, leaves and sticks, and scraps of newspapers – held high in the air atop a long stick. Upon even closer inspection, Reno thought that the effigy looked suspiciously like his Pampy. It had his same big fat cheeks, and his bushy brows, and his little gray mustache and even his great big bulbous nose. Reno became frightened for a moment, believing that this may actually be his Pampy being carried on top of a stick by mysterious little creatures; but then Reno remembered that if his Pampy was going to set foot outside, he would never do it without his handy dandy walking boots,

and this imposter Pampy was not wearing them. Confused, Reno stared at the creatures in his backyard, and they stared back at him, and Reno stared back at them. And so it went for quite a while without a word being spoken. The silence was broken, however, when the flames of the fire reached out to touch Stick Pampy and he burst rapidly into flames. Everyone at the scene was startled by this. The creature carrying Stick Pampy dropped him to the ground where he was consumed voraciously by the flames and the creatures all scattered into the forest. Reno fled the other way, back into the house where he watched the backyard all the rest of that night safely from the window.

When morning came, Reno couldn't decide whether what he had seen the night before was real or not. He had been known to have particularly vivid and imaginative dreams in the past, but Reno knew that this hypothesis could never explain the charred remnants of Stick Pampy that lay smoking in the backyard. He decided that he needed help. Rifling through the phone book that was kept in the kitchen, Reno searched desperately for someone who might help him. He was becoming anxious – already he had searched through nearly the entire 'M' section and had not found the number for "Mother". He had all but lost hope when he came upon a promising entry: "Mystical Investigations, Appraisals and Exterminations".

Reno was catching up on lost sleep in the living room when the doorbell woke him. It was enough to wake him instantly – waking up on the couch had become something of a traumatic experience for him. When he answered the door, a tall and slender man stood before him. He wore a thick brown business suit and had a toothy grin which protruded through his lips even when his mouth was closed.

"Hello, hello there," he began, extending a bony hand. "Mr. Reno, I presume?" He spoke with an English accent, something Reno had never heard before.

"That's right." Reno thought that if he had known that he was inviting yet another anomaly to his home, he would have never called.

"A pleasure," the Englishman started. "Me name's Dan, Dan Tastic."

"Follow me," Reno said as he led Mr. Tastic into the foyer. He led him across the living room and into the backyard.

"Blimey!" exclaimed Mr. Tastic as he came upon the mountain of ash and the burned effigy. "What's all this?"

“Little creatures.” Reno was having a hard time finding the right words. “They did this last night.” Then he remembered something. He reached into his pocket and produced a piece of paper folded into a small rectangle. He unfolded it and passed it over to Mr. Tastic who gazed at it very seriously. On the paper was a crudely drawn picture of a stumpy little man with a long beard and a hat that looked like a triangle. Reno had drawn it the night before while waiting by the window. After a while of looking, Mr. Tastic raised a monocle to his eye to get a better look at the picture. Then he looked up from the paper, contemplatively, at the forest that lie beyond the backyard. In an instant, Mr. Tastic was on his hands and knees with his face level with the ground. He took a moment to inspect the forest from this angle, then with his index and middle finger, he imitated a small creature taking steps through the grass. Finally, he began smelling the earth. Shuffling about the yard, still on all fours, he sniffed around as if following some kind of trail before popping up and exclaiming “I’ve got it!” Reno had been somewhat entranced watching the man work but was now very curious as to what his verdict could be. “If you’re sure that this is what you saw,” he said waving the picture in the air, “then I believe that what you’re dealing with is most likely a family of Alpine Stump-Legged Gnomes.”

“Stump?”

“Exactly right, my boy. The name is actually a misnomer, you see. This species of gnome traditionally wears a very stumpy, cloggy kind of footwear but they actually have incredibly defined legs.”

“Oh. Ok. Then...” Reno was having even more trouble now putting words together. “So, are they going to come back?”

“It’s very likely. Families of the greater genus of Alpine gnomes typically reside in dense forested areas with plenty of wild food to forage for - things like acorns, berries, mushrooms, you know. Once they’ve settled into one area, they do tend to expand. It looks like you just got unlucky eh?”

“So, these... gnomes,”

“Yes, incredibly defined legs.”

“Last night they set the backyard on fire, and they had a fake Pampy. Why’d they do that?”

“That I can’t tell you. Each species of gnome has their own traditions and holidays and whatnot. Unfortunately, I’m not an expert on gnomean cultures of the world, but” Mr. Tastic reached into his jacket pocket and retrieved a small brochure which he handed to Reno, “I’m sure you’ll find everything you’re looking for in this brochure. Our gnome encyclopedia set is

going for six ninety-nine ninety-nine USD only until Christmas. Everything you could ever hope to know about the gnome world, from culture to infestation prevention lies within those pages.” Reno was not going to pay seven hundred dollars for a set of encyclopedias. He didn’t even have any money to pay Mr. Tastic for his visit. In the end however, he resolved to call it even if he could just keep Reno’s gnome drawing. “It’s an important primary source. Might go in the new encyclopedia,” so he said.

Reno was once again left alone, not understanding anything much more than he had before. Finally having a moment to himself, he realized at once just how hungry he had become. With no car and no money, Reno decided that if the forest was bountiful enough to feed the gnomes, then so too would it nurture him.

As he started toward the tree line of the forest, Reno began to wonder just what it was about his Pampy’s backyard that drew in such strange and scary creatures. He wondered if his Pampy had known about them, and if so why had he never told anyone about them? Why did they burn Stick Pampy? Did they intend to burn Reno too? It was too many questions for Reno to consider on an empty stomach, so he just kept plodding forward toward an uncertain goal. He searched high and low for something to eat but he didn’t know what he was looking for. Part of him still expected to find a bowl of cereal waiting for him – his mother had promised after all. It wasn’t long after he had entered the forest that he began to feel that the trees had swallowed him up in a strange twist of fate. The light from the sun was blocked out by the forest’s dense canopy and Reno could hardly see anything at all. He decided to take a rest to catch his breath and to allow his eyes to adjust to the dim light. He sat with his legs crossed in the damp undergrowth and he thought for a moment that he might just fall back into sleep, until he saw a shadow move out of the corner of his eye. Fearful that he was going to be put on a stick and set ablaze, he leapt to his feet. Reno squinted at the object and discovered that it was none other than a serpent slithering toward him. He was somehow relieved and frozen with fear all at once. The snake wriggled and writhed closer toward him, hissing all the while. Reno thought for sure that he would be swallowed whole by the beast but before it could reach his leg, something came crashing through the brush. Whipping around to face the commotion, Reno was faced with the most outlandish thing he had ever seen – even more so than the Englishman and his funny accent. What he saw there in the dark wood was a stumpy little man with a long beard and a triangular hat riding atop a grungy looking feline. He carried with him a long wooden spear and he used it to jab fiercely at the snake which was now attempting to flee. Together, along with the cat he rode in on, the two made quick work of the snake and turned to approach Reno who had assumed a crouched position with his hands clasped over the back of his head.

He watched nervously as the gnome approached him slowly. He did not know what would happen. Whether the gnome would lead him out of the forest and back home or whether his picture would one day be found in the gnome encyclopedia in the “wrath” section was entirely in the hands of fate. Slowly, as if trying not to provoke a wild animal, the gnome removed his hat and pulled out of it an envelope. He approached just close enough to extend the envelope to Reno who took it with a shaky hand. It smelled like truffles. Then, as quickly as he appeared, the gnome vanished into the dark forest. Reno wasn’t sure what to do. For a very long time, he sat in utter silence before finally opening the envelope. Still squinting to see in the dark, Reno began making out the words.

“Reno, this is a secret message from me to you. I could never risk anyone else reading it, so I’ve arranged for it to be delivered to you through alternative means. If everything has gone according to plan, you should have just received this letter from a little gnome man with incredibly defined legs. His name is Yakety Axe and he’s a good man. All of the gnomes are good. I hope you’ll come to realize that. You may not know it, but you’re very special, Reno – the kind of special where you don’t fit anywhere. You and I are a lot alike in that way. The rest of the family, though they mean well, doesn’t exactly know what to do with you. I can see that. Maybe nobody will ever figure it out, but I know that these little fellas have kept me happy here for a long, long time – and if anybody deserves that, it’s you Reno. They can keep you fed and healthy, so let them. Let them teach you about things like they taught me. I want to leave behind a world that you can be happy with. I want you to look forward to hosting the family cookout every year. I want you to live a life of magic like I have. It’s all because I love you, Reno. Please never forget that. Good luck, my boy – and have fun. You really are the best.

Love, Your Pampy”

Reno was crying again but he didn’t know why. Poor Reno couldn’t make heads or tails of it.