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THE VERY BEST OF TRICKS AND TREATS

It was very close to Halloween and the gnomes were becoming excited, because this was the one day in the year when something magical happened - they would be able to move around! The rest of the time they could only stay where they had been put by the people who owned the house. They could talk, of course, but they never did this when humans were present. "They wouldn't understand," explained Stanley, the gardening gnome, leaning on his shovel, "To them, we are just little statues made of plaster."

"Is that really all we are?" said Ahab, the fishing gnome, sounding rather disappointed. "Maybe that's why I never catch any fish."

"You don't catch any," Dapper reminded him, "Because there aren't any fish in the pond."

Ahab figured he must be right. Although Dapper didn't actually do anything useful and merely stood around all day, apart from looking handsome he was also very smart. "Oh, okay," said Ahab. Then he had an idea: "When Halloween comes and we can move around I could walk to the other side of the pond and try there. How about that?"

"You'd be wasting your time," said Dapper, "There still won't be any fish."

"That's strange," said Ahab, "I seem to remember that there always were before."

"There were," said Stanley, "But the people who used to live here sold the house and took the fish with them."

"If you're lucky," Dapper added, "The new owners might put fish in the pond."

"That would be marvelous," chirped Ahab, "Then I can be a proper fisher-gnome again. When do you think that will be?"

"Soon, I imagine," said Stanley, "From where I'm standing I could see the For-Sale sign out the front; and someone took it down yesterday. I guess that means whoever bought the house will be moving in any day now."

Three days later, a large truck pulled up on the driveway and Stanley watched as people started going back and forth, carrying things into the house. There were chairs and tables, sofas and cupboards, and all kinds of other things that humans needed to make themselves comfortable. They also brought shovels, and rakes and a lawnmower which were put in the garden shed; and some other bits and pieces that were left on the lawn and looked as if they were for the garden. A lady brought a model house that was nothing like an ordinary house.

This one seemed foreign somehow. Then Ahab saw something being brought along that really cheered him up. It was a large glass tank with lots of beautiful gold and orange fish swimming around. "Over there, please," the lady said to the delivery men, "That's where I'll be putting my Japanese water-garden." Just when the gnomes thought everything was now going to be fine, the lady picked up Dapper and scowled at him. "Dear, oh dear, these will have to go. I can't believe anyone would want something this ugly in their garden."

"I'll get rid of them as soon as I've emptied the trailer," said a man who was pushing a wheelbarrow towards the shed. "They can go down to the rubbish-tip with the rest of the junk."

This was terrible news, and there was nothing the gnomes could do to stop what happened next. True to his word, the man returned to the garden, picked the three of them up and took them out to the front driveway. He was none-too gentle as he tossed them into the trailer. Fortunately, the other junk they landed on was mainly cardboard boxes, so they weren't hurt; but they weren't happy either, especially not Stanley. "I know all about rubbish-tips," he told the others, "They really are awful, smelly places buzzing with flies."

"How do you know that?" asked Ahab.

"Because the people who had this house before found me there and brought me home."

"I often wondered where you came from," said Dapper.

"Well, now you know," grumbled Stanley, "And I do not fancy going back there one little bit."

Over the following two days more junk was loaded into the trailer and the gnomes were buried under it. "I don't like not being able to see anything," moaned Stanley, "The man threw an old rug right on top of me."

"Think yourself lucky," grumbled Ahab, "At least a rug's soft, not like this wooden crate on my head; and I've got my fishing line caught on something. What are we going to do?"

"If we're lucky," said Dapper, "The man won't be taking us to the rubbish-tip today, and tomorrow's Halloween. Then we'll be able to move and we can climb out."

That day seemed very long, and each time more junk was put into the trailer the gnomes were worried that it would be the last and they would be going to the rubbish-tip before they could escape. When night eventually came and the trailer hadn't moved, Dapper said: "Just a few more hours and it will be Halloween. If we can get out of here very early in the morning there will be no people around to see us."

"Umm..." mumbled Stanley from beneath the rug, "What are we going to do then? Where will we go?"

"I do have an idea about that," replied Dapper, "But I won't tell you yet. I don't want to tempt providence."

"Who's Providence?" asked Ahab.

"It's not a WHO, it's a WHAT," explained Dapper, "It means if you do or say something too soon, it might not happen."

So, they waited. As soon as the sun started to rise and it was light enough to see, the three gnomes struggled their way through the junk to the top of the trailer. Ahab peered over the edge to the driveway below. "It's a long way down and if we jump we could break when we hit the concrete."

"That's something I hadn't thought about that," admitted Dapper dismally.

"I had," said Stanley, feeling quite pleased that he had come up with something before Dapper, "This rug that's been smothering me is just the ticket - it's big and it's soft. All we have to do is..."

"Alright," cut in Dapper, "You don't have to draw us a picture - we're not stupid." He paused to look at Ahab who was frowning and seemed quite confused. "Well, not all of us."

The plan worked, and with the old rug lying on the concrete of the driveway, they were able to drop down without hurting themselves. "Right, where now?" asked Stanley.

"Along the street and as far away from here as we can get, I'd say," said Dapper, "Perhaps we can find a nice garden to hide in, one where the people who live there like gnomes."

"Maybe one with a fish pond?" urged Ahab hopefully.

Dapper sighed. "Yes, Ahab, maybe even one with a fish pond."



For a good part of the day the three gnomes walked along first one street, then another; hiding in bushes and behind garbage bins whenever people came along who might see them. They were becoming very tired and, in particular, disappointed because they hadn't found a garden that even looked like they might be able to stay without the owners throwing them in the rubbish like the other people had. And as the day wore on, it was getting difficult to avoid humans. Once school had finished, lots of human children had dressed up in their Halloween costumes and were going from house to house, knocking on doors. "Why are they doing that?" asked Ahab. He was peeping out from behind the garbage bin where they were hiding.

"They are trick-or-treating," Dapper explained. "If the people in the house give them a treat, the children won't play a trick on them."

Everything went quiet as a new group of children approached and walked past the garbage bin to the front door. After a few moments it opened. A man stuck his head out, his eyes glared at the children and he growled at them: "Go away! I don't believe in Halloween, and if you dare to play a trick on me, you'll be in big trouble!" With that, he slammed the door.

"That was really mean," whispered Stanley, "There's a man who really deserves a trick being played on him."

The children were already walking away from the house towards the street. One of them was saying: "Why do we say trick or treat when we never trick the people who don't give us a treat?"

"Because," explained the girl who was much bigger and older than the other children, "Trick or treat is just something we say. Tricking someone who doesn't give us a treat would make us as unkind as they are. We mustn't do things like that."

"Oh, isn't that nice," whispered Ahab.

"Sshhh!" hissed Dapper, "They might hear us."

It seemed one of the children did hear something, because a little boy came over and looked behind the garbage bin. "Hey, there are gnomes here."

The others joined him and the older girl said: "He must be throwing them out."

"Well," said a younger girl, "If the grumpy man doesn't want them, we could take them and it would be like a trick, only it wouldn't be mean if he didn't want them anyway."

"That's all very well," said the older girl, "But what are we going to do with them? We can't take them home - Mum's got enough gnomes already. She won't want any more."

"But I know who would," said the little boy, "Those nice old people down the road, the ones who gave us loads of treats. Don't you think it would be kind to give them something back - like these three gnomes? They must like them - I saw one in the front garden."

Not wanting to let the children know that they could actually move, the gnomes kept very still and never said a word. They just let the children carry them along the road to the house where the elderly people lived. The older girl knocked on the front door. It opened and a lady came out. "My word," she said cheerfully, "More trick-or-treaters." Then she frowned and looked closely at the children. "Don't I remember you visiting just a short while ago?"

"You did, Ma'am," said the older girl, "But this time we're not here to trick-or-treat, just to treat; but only if it's what you want."

"What I want?" puzzled the old lady, "I'm not sure I understand."

"We'd like to give you these gnomes," said the little boy, "They were being thrown away and we thought you might be kind and give them a home."

"Well," said the elderly lady, and she turned to call back into the house, "Henry, come here! Those children we saw just now have brought some gnomes. They want to know if we can take them in."

Henry appeared in the doorway and looked out. He frowned, then said: "I don't see why not, Mabel. They'll be company for Charlie."

"Who's Charlie?" asked the younger girl.

Mabel pointed to the gnome sitting in the front garden-bed. "That's Charlie. I've had him since I was a young girl like you. I wouldn't be without Charlie - he's one of the family. I'm sure he would love to have friends to talk to."

The little boy screwed up his face and said: "That's silly. Gnomes can't talk,"

Henry smiled. "Maybe you're right, young man. But many times I've heard Mabel talking to Charlie, and if she wants to believe Charlie can talk back, where's the harm?" He lifted up his hand to look at the watch on his wrist. "It's getting a bit late. I think it's time you youngsters were going home. You have a good evening, and thank you for the treat. It was very nice, and really special."

Once the children had gone, the old couple took the three gnomes into their back garden. As Mabel was placing Ahab down in a flower bed, she said: "What's your name, fisherman?" Before he could stop himself, Ahab spoke his name out loud. Instead of being shocked as the gnomes might have imagined, the old lady said: "Ahab is it, just like the sea Captain in Moby Dick?" Then she turned to her husband. "Ahab's got a job for you, Henry - he needs a pond to fish in. Do you think you can manage that?"

Before Henry could answer, Dapper cut in: "Excuse me, but how do you know gnomes can talk?"

"I'm old," said Mabel, "I know lots of things younger people don't."

"So do I," added Henry, "And before we can all have a nice chat, I think you ought to go and fetch Charlie."

"You know we can move too?" exclaimed Dapper in surprise.

"Certainly we do," replied Mabel, "But only on Halloween, so you'd all better hurry. When tomorrow comes you'll have to wait another year before you can move again."

"But what about talking?" asked Ahab.

"Oh," said Henry, "You won't have any problems there. Mabel never stops talking, but YOU may have a job getting a word in. Still, you can always try."