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## Furries at the Bottom of the Garden

Ernie and Doris were retired. They lived in a small house on the edge of town where, most days, Ernie would be in his workshop making things out of wood that he donated to local charities. He made toys for children, and wooden garden furniture; plus his speciality - tubs and window-boxes which his wife, Doris, would put potted plants in. She had what Ernie called a green thumb because she was very good at growing flowers and vegetables; at least she had been in the past. This year, however, for some reason she had a job keeping the plants green. "I don't know why," she was saying as she put the last of the tinsel on the Christmas tree, "I water them and feed them the way I always have, but they just seem to up and die on me. Even this tree is looking sad and withered. I think I must be losing my touch with everything."

Ernie tried to reassure her: "It's not you, Doris. We've had that Christmas tree for years, and it's only plastic. You can't expect it to last forever." As for Doris's garden, he was sure something was attacking the plants, maybe a bug of some kind which had brought in a disease from outside. He had searched everywhere for the culprit, looking carefully at the leaves of flowers and vegetables, especially turning them over to see if there was something suspicious underneath. But he hadn't been able to find a thing; not until that day.

He discovered them lurking in amongst the potato plants and didn't believe he had seen anything like them before. He thought it likely that Doris would know what they were; and also whether they might be responsible for the sad state of her garden. Returning to the house, he went straight to the kitchen where his wife was about to make their lunch. "I think we have furries at the bottom of the garden, Doris," he told her.

"Don't you mean fairies?" she said with a chuckle. "If you're starting to believe in fairies, you must be losing your marbles."

"My marbles are fine," grumbled Ernie, "And I meant what I said: there are a couple of brown furry things in the vegetable patch."

Her eyes flew wide and Doris rushed to the back door to grab a fly-swat hanging there. "I bet it's those pesky hairy caterpillars after my rhubarb again! I'll give them what for!" She took off for the garden with Ernie on her heels. He tried telling her the furries were something other than caterpillars, but she wouldn't listen. Standing at the edge of the vegetable patch, she had the fly-swat raised ready to deliver a swift whack. "Right, where are they?" Ernie pointed to a

spot in the potato plants. Doris advanced slowly, fly-swat at the ready. “Here I come, you pesky critters,” she said sternly, “And you’ll be sorry you set foot in my garden!”

“Wait, Doris,” Ernie warned her, “I told you they weren’t caterpillars. If you hit them with that, who knows what they’ll do.” Doris hesitated. She bent over to take a closer look, and Ernie was saying: “They are much bigger than caterpillars. In fact, they look a bit like little people, although that’s nonsense, I know. Maybe they’re mice of some kind. Mice can stand on two legs when they want to. So can rats...”

“Rats!” spluttered Doris, lurching upright and staggering backwards. “I hate rats!”

“I only said they *could* be,” explained Ernie.

“Well, even if there’s a chance they are, I’m not going anywhere near them,” declared Doris flatly. “Rats are men’s business. You’re a man – you deal with them! I’m going back indoors; and I’m not coming out till those... those *things*, or whatever they are, have gone. See to it, Ernie!” And with that, she rushed back to the house.

Ernie stood for a moment, not too sure what to do. The furries were still there, just watching him. One of them waved. Ernie’s eyes popped. Then the other one began pushing through the potato plants towards him. It stopped just at the edge of the patch and spoke in a squeaky voice: “Hello. You’re Ernie, aren’t you? I’m Stanley. Pleased to meet you.”

Ernie couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “How do you know my name?” he asked.

The other furry pulled Stanley behind him. “We know all about you and Doris,” he explained. “You are both old, and you are finding it hard these days. That’s why we are here. Our job is to help you with things that you can’t do yourselves. Oh,” he said as an afterthought, “I’m Bud, Stanley’s watcher.”

“I don’t quite understand,” said Ernie, “Not any of this, to be quite honest. What I really want to know is exactly *what* you are. You look like little, brown furry people, but that can’t be.”

“Why not?” said Stanley.

“And you already *know* what we are,” added Bud, “You told Doris we were furries, and that’s us – we are the Furries.”

“Okay,” said Ernie, “Seems I got that right, at least. Er... you said you were Stanley’s watcher. Why does he need watching?”

“Because he’s only in training,” explained Bud.

“I’m on work experience,” cut in Stanley. He went quiet when Bud scowled at him.

“Look,” said Bud, lowering himself to the ground where he sat with legs crossed. “It will save a lot of time if I explain.” The little Furry went on to do just that. Apparently, he and Stanley came from a world right next to the one Ernie and Doris lived in. The Furries there kept an eye on things in the next-door world, and had been charged by Mother Nature to help anyone in need, as long as they deserved it. “You clearly do,” continued Bud, “Because you spend a lot of your time doing things for other people.”

“So,” said Stanley, “Maybe you could do something for me right now and give me a job.”

“What kind of job?” queried a very puzzled Ernie.

“Nothing too hard,” said Bud, “Remember, Stanley’s new to gift-giving.”

“Gift-giving?” said Ernie, becoming even more confused.

Bud stood up, caught hold of a red pouch hanging from his belt and showed it to Ernie. “This is a gift bag, and in it we have gifts we can give to anyone in need who asks for them. Is there something you would like, perhaps?”

“You mean, like a wish?” asked Ernie. He noticed Stanley grinning widely and nodding his head. “Well,” Ernie continued, “I don’t want anything for myself, but I’ve been worried that Doris has become quite concerned lately. You see, she always used to have a green thumb, but for some reason it seems to have gone. If you could help her get it back, that would be good.”

“Oh, yes, yes,” said Stanley eagerly, and he reached into his own gift bag, “I can definitely do that...”

“Be careful, Stanley,” warned Bud, “Make sure you think about the gift properly before you give it.”

“Stop worrying,” Stanley assured his watcher, “I know what I’m doing.” His hand came out of the gift bag and when he opened it, sitting on his palm was a small shining light. The next moment, it took off and went flying through the air towards the house. When it reached the back door, it disappeared.

A scream suddenly came from inside the house. “Doris!” gasped Ernie, and he rushed across the garden. Bursting through the back door, he found Doris staring in horror at her hand; and it was no wonder. Poking out from the back of it was something stubby and green.

“L-look at it, Ernie,” she stammered, “It just appeared, right after a peculiar little light landed on the back of my hand! It’s like an extra thumb, a green one!”

“That’s what it is, Doris,” mumbled Ernie apologetically, “And it’s my fault. You’d better come with me and we’ll see if we can put it right.” He guided his very worried and nervous wife into the garden, saying: “It’s okay, Doris. The Furrries aren’t rats or mice: they are just little people, and they came here to be kind. I’m sure they can do something to get rid of your extra thumb.”

Bud groaned when he saw the green stump growing from the back of Doris’s hand. “I told you to think properly before you gave the gift, Stanley. Now you’ll have to take it back; and,” he warned sternly, “Don’t make a mess of it this time.”

Stanley promised not to. Taking another tiny light from his bag, he squeezed it tightly for a second or two, closed his eyes and thought really hard. Then he opened his hand, and held his breath as the light floated over to land on Doris’s hand. The green thumb glowed briefly before disappearing completely. “Sorry about that,” said Stanley, “Can I try another gift to make up for the first one?”

Bud and Ernie weren’t too sure, but Doris was so pleased to be rid of the extra thumb that she said: “Everyone makes mistakes, and it’s always good to try again. So, how do we do this

gift thing?" After Bud explained, Doris gazed around her garden while she thought. "You know," she said at last, "I really feel bad that I haven't looked after my plants too well, and I would like them to be big, and strong and green like they used to be."

"No sooner said than done," declared Stanley. He noticed Bud opening his mouth to speak and added quickly: "It's alright: I know what I'm doing this time." His hand brought a third tiny light from the bag and he sent it spinning round the garden. As it passed over them, all of the sad-looking plants seemed to perk up. In just a few seconds, they had started to grow bigger and much greener. In a minute, they were up past Ernie's and Doris's knees; in two the entire garden was taller than them and was like a jungle. The Furrries being shorter were somewhere under the huge plants and couldn't be seen. "Ooops," Stanley's voice came from below, "I think I might have overdone the gift. I'd better put it right."

"No!" growled Bud, "Definitely not! I'll do it. Just keep your hand out of the bag."

Once the garden was back the way it was before, Bud said: "I'm truly sorry about this. I think, perhaps, the best bet is for us to go. You don't need any more problems, and Stanley obviously has to work on his gift-giving before I let him loose on good people like yourselves. Come on Stanley." He put an arm round his trainee and began to usher him deeper into the potato patch.

"Wait a minute," said Ernie, "You came with good intentions, and I can see Stanley is very upset. Maybe there's some simple gift he could give that wouldn't be too difficult for him."

"I agree," put in Doris, "And it is Christmas, after all. Everyone should be happy, especially little Furrries. I have an idea..."

Doris explained, and the others thought about her suggestion. "A real Christmas tree sounds nice," said Ernie, "Seeing as we only have that little old plastic one; but," he added, "It might be best if it was in the garden rather than the house – just in case Stanley makes it a bit too big."

Bud wasn't sure about this, but after some encouragement from the others, especially Stanley, he supposed it would be alright. "Just a small tree," he advised.

"With lights and tinsel and silver balls?" asked Stanley excitedly.

"Oh, yes please," said Doris, "That would be really special."

So, Stanley did his thing with the tiny light and the gift it made truly was special. It sat just outside the kitchen window, sparkling and flashing, and not too big at all; just right, in fact. "I've made it a real tree," said Stanley, "So it will keep growing and be here for all your Christmases to come."

Doris had started crying. Seeing this, Bud growled at Stanley: "You are incredibly hopeless. Look what you've done now – you've made Doris cry!"

"No, no," said Doris, "It's not like that. I'm crying because I'm so happy."

Ernie noticed how this puzzled the two Furrries and explained: "Ladies do that sometimes; quite a lot, actually."

“Yes, sorry,” said Doris, “I didn’t mean to upset you. It’s just that…” and she paused to think of the right words: “No-one, not even Ernie, has ever given me a gift as special as this. It is, without doubt, the best ever and absolutely perfect. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.”

Now Stanley was starting to cry, and Bud was finding it hard not to. He swallowed, then said: “Merry Christmas, Doris.” Then he turned and added: “And to you, Ernie.”

“Likewise,” said Ernie, “Is there something we can give you in return?”

“You already have,” said Bud, “By being kind to everyone else; and in particular to Stanley.”

“And,” said Stanley wiping his eyes, “By you being happy, particularly when there isn’t much to be happy about. That’s the reason we came – to gift you some extra happiness - and it seems to have worked; even if it did take me three goes.”

Doris crouched down, reached out and took their little hands between her fingers. “You two have a very merry Christmas like the one you have given us. And keep up the good work Stanley. There are many people like us in the world, and they really do need a Furry like you.”

The Furies bid their goodbyes and walked back into the potato patch. Bud could be heard saying: “You see, Stanley, this is what it’s all about; but you must remember that, if you want to make people happy, you have to get it right.”

“Well, I did eventually,” said Stanley, “Didn’t I?”

“Yes,” Bud had to agree, “You certainly did. Merry Christmas, Stanley.”