

Lawn Gnomes on Spikes

Dressed in a plaid work shirt, Bob was cutting the weeds in his front yard when Julia parked her Volvo in front of her brother Danny's large, run-down house. She got out of the Volvo and walked around to the backyard holding a tray of gingerbread cookies. Bob cut the weeds in his yard without stopping.

Danny's unmown back lawn was bright green, the weeds near the back patio yellow. A hammock was hung between two metallic poles at the far side of the lawn, next to a lopsided shed. In the center of the lawn a dozen red and green lawn gnomes were mounted on copper spikes a few feet high. Danny was on the patio flipping burgers on a charcoal grill. Julia set the tray of cookies on the picnic table. Her brother turned around but didn't smile. She set her business satchel off to the side and looked over the yard.

"It's been awhile," she said. "The yard looks good when it's cleaned up. Now you can finally invite friends and family over."

"Don't patronize me," he said, laying slices of provolone cheese on the burgers. "Do you want one burger or two?"

"One, please. And I wasn't patronizing. The yard was a pigsty. How could you expect to raise Liam with junk all over the place?"

"I'm raising him just fine."

"I was only trying to be thoughtful. Cary, you know, confided in me before she passed away. She was worried about you."

"Do we have to talk about Cary?"

"You were married to her for three years."

"Yeah, but I don't want to talk about her."

"Whatever you say."

He set the burgers on separate plates and set them onto the table. "You shouldn't have brought all these cookies."

She didn't say anything.

"Do you want something to drink? I have soda and beer."

"Water, please."

He went into the house and came back with a pitcher of water and a can of beer. She sat down at the picnic table. Her nose crinkled. "What's that smell?"

"A possum died in the shed a couple days ago. The smell decided to linger."

"It must've been a large possum."

He poured her a glass of water.

"I'd rather not talk about a dead, smelly animal right before lunch."

"Fine." She stared at the lawn gnomes. "Why do you keep those lawn gnomes?"

"Just to spite you."

"Don't try to be funny."

He opened the beer can. She hadn't touched her burger.

"I didn't poison it."

"I hate provolone. Over the phone I told you I wanted cheddar."

"Then don't eat the burger. Eat the cookies."

"I made them all for us."

He poured her a glass of water. She peeled off the cheese and ate a piece of the burger.

"It's still pink in the middle," she said. "But it tastes good."

"I'm so glad you like it."

They ate in silence. He watched her take several small bites of the burger. She looked at the patio door. "Where's Liam?" she said. "Isn't he hungry? It's lunchtime."

"I already fed him. He's sleeping."

"I want to see him before I leave."

"Yeah. I don't want you to disturb him while he's napping."

"Why?" she said. "I just want to make sure he's okay."

"Okay?"

"You know what I fucking mean."

From his back pocket he drew out a pack of cigarettes, lit one with a red lighter, and blew smoke into the air. She took a sip of water and cleared her throat.

"Eva used to smoke," she said.

"I remember. Is she allowed to smoke at the asylum?"

"Asylum is old-fashioned. It's a psychiatric hospital."

"Fine. Whatever."

He took another drag, swung one leg over the picnic table bench, and sat half-turned away from Julia.

“It was seeing Rupert in bed with one of his students,” Julia said.

“You think she’s just depressed?”

“She’s not just depressed.”

“How is she now, though?”

“She doesn’t talk to the doctors,” she said. “She draws a lot of pictures.”

“Pictures of what?”

“Childhood.”

He took another drag.

“Why do you care?” she said.

“You brought her up.”

“Well, she draws pictures of herself as a child. Naked pictures.”

“Like her in the bathtub?”

“No. In the pictures, she’s in bed with a boogeyman. He’s always lying on top of her. Eva told me he’s always naked. But you can’t see that in the pictures.”

Danny grunted.

“He’s always a black blob with red eyes.”

Julia looked at the yard. A blue jay landed on the head of one of the pierced lawn gnomes. It looked at her and flew off again. The air was warm. She wiped sweat from her brow. He waited for her to speak. “The boogeyman’s hurting her,” she said.

“Yes?”

She took another sip of water. “The boogeyman touches her,” she said. “He makes her touch him below the waist.”

“Could mean anything.”

“It’s pretty obvious what it means.”

“I haven’t got a clue.”

“Are you sure?”

He looked her in the eye. “Why the fuck are you asking me?”

She finished her burger without saying another word.

He cleared the table with a cigarette in his mouth and left to get the dessert. She watched him disappear into the house. When he returned, he set two bowls of chocolate ice cream down and put his cigarette on the edge of the table. She ate a spoonful of ice cream but left the rest to melt. She laced her fingers on the table and leaned forward. He looked at her.

“I’ll visit Eva more often. I promise.”

“It’s not that.”

“Then what?”

“I came to talk about Liam.”

“We already talked about Liam. He’s asleep. I don’t want you to bother him.”

“I bought him a pacifier,” she said.

“That’s very nice of you, but you know the agreement.”

“What agreement? Are you talking about that chat we had about the guy who stopped over to look at the house?”

“You agreed.” He took a drag on his cigarette and flicked it into the weeds. “Do you know how embarrassing it was for me to have that guy ‘stop over’?”

“He declared the house unlivable.”

“And that’s why I cleaned it. I didn’t want to lose my kid.”

“So I did Liam a favor,” she said. “Get over it.”

“Get over it? Are you retarded?”

Her face turned red. “Don’t ever use that word. You should be grateful to me.”

“What the fuck for?”

“Look, Cary asked me to file that CPS report on her behalf.”

“Did you think you were going to adopt him?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t be such a . . .” He trailed off.

“What?”

“A bitch!”

She stood up and slung the satchel over her shoulder. He lit another cigarette and watched her step onto the lawn.

“I want to see Liam before the end of the week,” she said.

“You agreed that you wouldn’t see him until I was ready.”

She stepped back onto the patio.

“Ready for what? I’m Liam’s godmother.”

“I don’t give a shit.”

He stood up.

“It’s time for you to go. Tell Eva I’ll visit her soon.”

He walked to the shed. She looked on in silence.

A minute later, Julia returned to the silver Volvo, set the satchel in the back, and took a seat behind the wheel. The inside of the car was humid. She undid the top two buttons on her dress shirt and rolled down the window. The sound of Danny’s buzz saw filled the air. She covered her ears and closed her eyes. Moments later, she got out of the car and returned to the backyard. Danny was still in the shed, cutting something. She walked through the yard and stepped onto the porch. He was not looking at her through the shed’s broken window. She went to the porch door and entered the house.

She walked down the hallway, moving between piles of Time magazine, Maxim, and Better Homes and Gardens. The air smelled. She covered her nose with her hands. There were broken rattles, a red and white baseball cap, and discarded fast food wrappers and soda cups on the floor.

She turned into the living room and paused. It was full of autographed pictures of famous Hollywood impersonators, tiki dolls, homemade blankets, bobbleheads of various baseball players, overflowing boxes filled with mittens and scarves, more food wrappers, parking tickets, a spilled gas can, wilting aloe vera plants, old CDs and cassettes, empty soda cans and beer bottles, plastic bags in plastic bags, plastic and wire clothes hangers, rusty microwaves, and a large CRT TV. Julia pressed her hand tighter over her nose and started to cry.

She crossed the living room and went into the hallway on the other side, the nursery. She entered. The smell was even stronger inside the nursery. She gagged but didn’t vomit. The room was covered in green deodorizing air fresheners and lime powder. In boxes and totes around the room were green and blue pacifiers, stacks of unopened diapers and wet wipes, unworn onesies and bibs with sewn-on giraffes and elephants, and folded baby blue blankets. There were stacks of boxes and totes on the floor on either side of a path leading to the far corner of the room. Around her feet were crushed rattles, unused baby bottles, baby bottles filled with curdled milk,

unopened jars of baby food—peas, corn, and peaches—and dismembered stuffed animals: a frog, a lizard, and a cat.

She walked down the path to the baby's crib, stepping over a bassinette and a musical mobile. Inside the crib were mice pellets and dust on a seafoam green pillow. The words "It's a Boy!" were stitched onto the pillow. She lifted the pillow and dropped it onto the floor.

Liam was in the crib. His skin was sallow and light blue, his mouth open and his eyes unmoving. His skin was loose around his bones. A mouse walked across his forehead and through the bars to the floor. She shuddered. She covered him with a blanket, picked him up—his stiff body didn't move—and walked back the way she came. There was no longer the sound of a buzz saw in the air.

She stopped. Danny stood in the middle of the living room.

"I didn't give you permission to come in."

He stepped forward. She stepped back.

"What happened?"

"I cleaned the house."

"I'm not talking about the house!"

"Then what?"

"He's dead!" she said.

"He sleeps all day."

He reached out. She shoved him back.

"Give me back my kid," he said.

"Did you kill him on purpose?"

"He's not dead."

"What about Eva?"

He said nothing, pulled out a cigarette, and lit it with his lighter. He looked at Liam. He was still silent.

"You molested her, didn't you?" she said.

"You don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

He stepped forward. She stood still.

"Look what you did!" she said. "He's not sleeping, Danny!"

She held Liam up to face him. He stared and didn't say anything.

“How can you live like this?”

He pointed the cigarette at her face. “Take that back.”

She tried to go around him. He grabbed her arm. She tried to shake him off but couldn't. He waved the lit end of the cigarette in front of her face.

“You can't save everybody, Julia.”

She shoved him. He fell backward into a pile of boxes and tipped over the gas can. The large TV fell on him. She ran to the other side of the room and watched him try to push the TV off. He dropped the cigarette, and it landed on the spilled gas.

The carpet was soon on fire.

“Help me, Julia!” he said.

She didn't move.

“For fuck's sake! Please!”

She didn't say anything. The room was filling up with smoke.

She carried Liam onto the back patio and looked at the lawn gnomes. Smoke was pouring from the doorway. Danny was screaming inside.

Minutes later, Bob from next door ran into the backyard. “I was just cutting some weeds in my yard when I noticed the smoke,” he said. “What the hell's going on?”

She looked at Liam's glossy eyes. “It's Danny.” She looked up. “He's still in the house.”

“I'll go call 911!” he said.

“The house is on fire,” she said. “He started it. He killed Liam. He molested Eva.”

He ran back to his house to call for help. The porch door was soon engulfed in smoke and fire. She set Liam down on the grass next to the spikes.

“I wouldn't save him.” Her voice was soft. She was shaking.