

Tea Party

The gnome that lived in Dakota's overgrown backyard liked to shit right by Duke's water dish. Of course, the dog ate it every time, puked, and then went ahead and ate that, too. After that, Duke would lie on his side for hours as his eyes dilated, and his drool would form a foamy pool of saliva on the concrete. Once he could move again the dog would alternate between rolling off the warm concrete patio into the grass and running to the back corner of the yard to shove his snout deep into the woodpile. When at the woodpile, he would wag his tale in furious excitement as he whined, punctuating the whole performance with short, hysterical barks.

Dakota knew his dog was stupid, but he also knew that gnome was a little bitch. The fucker did it on purpose. He'd put money on that. He suspected the thing's hideout was in the woodpile, based on the way Duke would go snooping around it after the shit-eating, but he'd taken it apart and restacked it several times already, finding nothing but a nest of mice. He had shuffled through the tall grass by the fence and peered under his shed with a flashlight. He looked in the birdhouse and in the flowerpots that had begun to crumble. He never saw any trace of the gnome except for the exact moment it was shitting in his yard. Only then was he able to get a glimpse of it before it scampered away, faster than a little thing like that should have been able to move.

Dakota wouldn't even know what a gnome was except that his ex-mother-in-law gave him a shitty plaster one two years ago. *Piece of junk*, Dakota thought when he saw her clutching it. But he'd taken it and fuckin' put it out in the yard for his buddy, Jake,

and all his other neighbors to see and laugh at. *What the hell would I want with this?* He tried not to show his disgust, but he'd never been good at hiding his emotions.

"It's a gee-nome!" his mother-in-law explained. That's how she said it, too, separating the "g" sound out away from the rest of it. She talked to him like he was slow. "S'posed to keep watch over your garden. Like magic." She looked at him knowingly.

Jeeezus.

But now he knew he had a real gee-nome. The first night he saw it was when the moon was bright. I was right there, squatting by the metal water dish. It had the red hat and everything. The white beard. All of it. Dakota might have been able to explain it away as a reoccurring dream, but there were all kinds of other clues, too: a clump of dandelions arranged neatly in an old bucket. A crappy wreath-thing with thorns hanging from his door knob. He figured the gnome wanted something from him. *Wants me to be all fancy and shit*, he thought. Of course, this hypothesis didn't explain the turds by the dog bowl.

He tried to capture it. He set traps with tuna on crackers, but all he caught was a raccoon and the neighbor's cat. He tried to shoot it once, too, but when the police showed up later that afternoon to investigate the gunshots, he decided he'd have to find another way of getting rid of the thing.

One morning when he went to let Duke out back, he saw that his patio table was covered with a faded linen table cloth. It was a yellowed, and the edges were frayed. He suspected the gnome right away and confirmed it when Duke charged the fresh pile of shit by the water dish.

“Duke, damnit... no!” But it was too late. Duke scarfed it down and went to lie down on the patio. Dakota watched to see if he would start his rolling back and forth routine. He went in closer and saw that the dog’s pupils were already wide. His tongue was out, and Dakota swore there was joy on his face. Human-like joy. It occurred to Dakota then that he might try a little taste of the gnome shit, but he was scared, and the thought of telling anybody else about the plan made him turn his head and spit. *Eating shit*, he thought. *They’d never let that one go*. He scanned the yard for the gnome and then concluded that, actually, the eating shit part would be the least shocking part of his story.

“I’m gonna beat you,” he called out. He grabbed a baseball bat and swung it at the dandelions growing up past his shins. He had a little fire pit made out of cement blocks, and he sat down on it. He noticed some of the bricks had been painted with little designs. *Jeeezus*. There was dew on the long grass. The drops pulled the blades over so that they all seemed to be bowing their head.

Dakota coughed and spit again. Then he saw his buddy, Jake, through the kitchen window.

“Out here, fucker!” Dakota shouted. Jake came out the back door and held up his middle finger as a greeting. They smiled. He wanted to explain why he was in the backyard holding his bat, but the words wouldn’t come out. Instead, he said, “Have some tea, Jake,” and he shook his head at himself, but at the same time gestured toward the empty table with a swing of his arm. Jake laughed, and Dakota blushed and coughed, as if choking on his own tongue. But then a sensation like bubbly honey made its way through his veins.

“It would be a pleasure,” Jake said, as his face fell in disbelief. “I just love...” he gagged a little... “a good cup of tea.” These last words forced their way out of him like a clump of hair being cleared by a plunger.

They sat down at the rusty patio set and engaged in polite discussion.

“It’s just too horrible to speak of,” Dakota said. “He... ah!” Dakota covered his face with his hands. “He... relieves himself by Duke’s water dish!”

“Oh, my!” exclaimed Jake. “Why, I don’t know what I would do if I had a garden gee-nome. It sounds just horrible!”

“Indeed,” agreed Dakota, feeling better now that he saw that Jake was taking the gnome seriously. He had never told anyone about it before, but now he saw that he should have confided in Jake sooner. It was as if he could finally take a deep breath. His head cleared. He considered Jake for a moment, who was sitting with his legs crossed, leaning forward, with an earnest look on his face. Dakota had never seen him looking so sincere before. He held nothing in his hands, but he pinched his fingers together as if holding a tiny tea cup. “Why, I wouldn’t wish that wretched little beast on my worst enemy!” And he laughed, but really, it was sort of a giggle. Jake gave him a funny look, but only went on sipping his invisible tea.

Then Dakota noticed a few little round turds right there by Duke’s water dish that the dog had somehow missed. He looked over at Duke now, who was down in the yard rolling over and over again, his tongue out and a blissful look on his face. He raised an eyebrow at Jake. “How would you like a special treat?” he asked.

“Oh! Don’t mind if I do. That would be just splendid,” Jake replied. At that, Dakota gathered up the little turds and laid them out on the table.

“Just a little something I whipped up,” he said, as if Jake had not just seen him pick them up off the ground. They each popped one into their mouths and chewed.

“Very nice,” Jake said, reaching out for another.

“Why thank you,” Dakota replied. As he did so, he noticed the gnome had joined them at the table, and it had dragged the plaster one over, too. “Jake, I’d like to introduce you to my friend, the gee-nome.” At this, he gave a big wink at Jake, hoping he might not bring up the unfriendly comments he’d been making previously about the gnome. Jake smiled at him and held out his hand.

“Why, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” he said. “I’ve never meet a gee-nome before.” The gnome smiled and nodded to them, but remained silent. Then he jumped down from his chair, turned, and motioned with his arm that they should follow him.

“What does he want?” Jake whispered. Dakota shrugged. The gnome started to make its way through the backyard in the direction of the woodpile. And then, to his amazement, and presumably to Jake’s as well, since he was standing with his mouth open with drool gathered along his lips, Dakota saw that it was not a woodpile at all. It was as if the presence of the gnome allowed them to see through the outer covering, which was more of a billowy canopy painted like a woodpile than actually wood, into something that stretch much deeper through the world. Inside he saw himself dressed as a gnome. He had a long beard and the pointy red hat. Jake was there, too, and so was Duke and the gnome. They were doing summersaults on a thick bed of green grass. The sun was very bright, unnaturally bright, but the three of them there on the other side of that woodpile didn’t seem uncomfortable. They seemed free. They were

unfettered by the existence of a single other being. They were free of judgment, pain, and shame.

“Jeeeeee-zus,” Dakota mouthed. And he knew that just as he was Dakota, he was also Jake, he was also Duke, and he was also the gnome.