

### “The Little Beast”

Our story begins in a lush meadow nestled in the center of a forest untouched by man. A circle of old oak trees and wildflowers surrounds a delicate little pond. Each of these trees is home to a gnome. The gnomes live in peace and tranquility, tending to their gardens and sharing afternoon tea each day. Their gardens are well-kept and organized, well almost all of them. One garden, in particular, is quite grown out, not following the cookie-cutter layout of its pristine neighbors. But, this garden is dearly loved by its owner.

“Agh, back ye! Back I say!” said a gruff voice from within the small jungle of wildflowers and berry bushes. Soon after a loud series of thwacks omitted from a jostling bunch of daisies and then out tumbled a stout, heavysset gnome landing belly up. The gnome struggled to his feet a moment, rolling onto his belly, before heaving himself to stand on his two stumpy ceramic legs. He wore dirty old blue overalls atop a pale yellow button-up. Bending over for only a moment, he snatched up his wide-brim straw hat placing it with a huff over his mess of curly red hair.

“Damn those green devils,” said the gnome to his little golden pocket watch, “tryin' to eat your lovely garden all te time!” Used to the old gnome’s antics by now, the neighboring garden was not surprised by the shouts and bonks erupting from beyond the bushes.

“Ah, old Fergus is at et again,” remarked the youngest of the gnomes at the table in between sips of his tea.

“He ought to put a stop to this behavior at his age,” responded the old woman across from him, she paused a moment to take a bite of her biscuit before continuing, “ets a miracle he hasn’t urt’ himself fightin them caterpillars, nasty things they are.”

“Flora had always kept him in line, right shame et is-” said the young gnome, but before he could continue another gruff battle cry boomed from the other side of the garden wall, signaling the gathering to move inside.

Later that evening, as the sun began to set on the meadow, Fergus seemed finally satisfied, having defended the garden another day. He lumbered through his beloved foliage back to his little home carved into the base of an old oak tree. He pushed through the creaky blue door, setting down his tools and muddy boots in the entryway before carrying on to the kitchen to fix himself something to eat.

The kitchen, much like the garden, was a bit unorderly. Pots and pans dangled along the ceiling next to various hanging plants and rags. The small window above the sink couldn’t close properly allowing the cool summer night’s to dance around the home. The old wooden floor creaked with every step he took toward the pale green cabinets. Each plate, cup, and bowl was not quite the same. They were different shapes and sizes but they all bore the same intricate floral detailing, delicately hand-painted across the sides. He plucked two bowls and cups from the cupboard, neatly setting them on the table along with little wooden cutlery. He then turned to the

old box stove in the corner, firing it up and scooping some leftovers from the ice box into a pan.

Once the food was ready he spooned it into each of the bowls and filled the cups with tea. Before settling into his chair he delicately placed the pocket watch opposite himself. He then sunk back with a long solemn sigh and gave the placemat across the table a soft pat before digging into his food. As Fergus ate he babbled on about his fight against the caterpillars that day to the little pocket watch. A small photo of a gnome woman lay daintily in the other half of the watch's case. She smiled warmly and listened to his talk intently.

"Alright then dear," said Fergus with a yawn, "I suppose ets off to bed wit us." Slowly he rose to his feet collecting his bowl and cup, he cast a sad look to the empty chair and uneaten food before cleaning up the rest of the table. He tottered through the cottage to the bedroom, then dressed in his night clothes and collapsed into the warm embrace of the quilted bed sheets.

It was early the next morning when old Fergus awoke. The sunlight streamed through the thick curtains as he blinked awake. Slowly he rose, stretching uneasily while shuffling to the window to open it. Little by little, the window creaked up before catching itself on the old wooden frame halfway, with what appeared to be a great deal of effort, he heaved it up the rest of the way. Sunlight poured in illuminating the room in full, and just as he turned his back to the view, a loud crunch erupted from the garden below.

“Damn!” said Fergus as his ceramic legs propelled him out of the bedroom and through the home. He threw on his boots, his hat, and grabbed a small shovel before rushing out into the garden, still in his nightshirt. His eyes darted about and he carefully rooted through the greenery looking for any signs of the plants being eaten or the culprit itself. To his horror, he found the heads of a few tulips bitten off, their petals strewn in a trail heading toward the tomatoes. The old gnome swallowed his fear of the carnage that may lie ahead and continued on. As he approached the sounds of munching and crunching grew louder. He increased his speed and leapt through the leaves.

“Rah!” he said, swinging the shovel wildly as he landed before the scene. “I’ve gotcha now you-” he started, expecting to crane his neck at a fat greedy caterpillar munching on the tomatoes, “huh?” He finished. There was indeed a fat green caterpillar but there was also a little ladybug, about the size of Fergus’ own two hands, feasting on the green monster, having already claimed the kill. “Well, would ya look at that,” Fergus said to himself. He stepped closer inspecting the damage to his plants, it appeared the ladybug had got there just in time, saving his tomatoes from the same fate as the tulips. He pivoted back towards his home to properly get ready for the day and fix up some breakfast. It was only when he reached for the door that he heard the quick scurrying behind him. Turning around he saw the little ladybug rushing over the pebbled pathway before stopping at his feet and staring up expectantly.

“Go on then, little beast,” he said to her, “ye've got a big meal back there.” He made a little shooing motion with his hands and turned back to his house, opening the door. Just as the door was almost sealed, the little ladybug quickly followed once more and attempted to squeeze inside. “Now hold on just a minute,” he said grumpily to the bug. “Just because ye've finished off the ole caterpillar for me, don't mean ya get to come inside.” Her little antennae wilted hearing this. The gnome lightly pushed her back through the door with his round foot and slowly slid it closed. He let out a soft sigh and went about getting ready for his day and doing some work around the house.

Sometime after lunch, he mosied out into the garden to tend to it. He opened the door and to his horror, a towering pile of caterpillars lay on his front step. He stared a bit in silent astonishment before the ladybug came out of the bushes dragging yet another large caterpillar, one bigger than Fergus himself, along with it. Just as he opened his mouth to scold the little creature for bringing them here, a cool breeze drifted through the garden, swaying the wind chimes in beautiful song. He sighed and stepped up to the little ladybug, who upon seeing him dropped the caterpillar and stared back expectantly once more.

“Looks like I've got myself a wee little helper,” he said patting the bug's soft shell. She seemed to agree, bouncing up and down, and then continuing to drag the caterpillar toward the slow-forming mountain at the door. “Hold on mate,” he said, “we'll bring 'em round te corner, store 'em for use later.” He grabbed a hold of the opposite end of the caterpillar and helped drag it to a small workspace where he made

fertilizer. Once the caterpillars had been packed away, Fergus went about his day, tending to the garden. All the while the little ladybug followed.

As he went about harvesting some berries the sky began to darken. He looked down at his pocket watch confused, it was only four. He then stared up at the sky and saw dark clouds rolling in. He quickly picked up his basket and packed away his tools, heading for home. As he reached the door he realized the ladybug was no longer following him. She must have finally gone home, the old gnome thought to himself. He sat quietly at the window watching the rainfall and sipped his tea. But then he saw her, the little ladybug, shivering under a leaf in the storm. He pondered for a moment before begrudgingly getting up and going to the door. Pulling on an old shawl he stepped out into the rain and raced over to the little beast.

“Come on then little one,” He said as he scooped her up and headed back to the house. Fergus set her on the floor in a small quilt before starting a fire and sinking into his wooden rocking chair. He closed his eyes enjoying the peace and warmth before he felt a small nudge at his feet. Opening his eyes he saw the ladybug staring up at him.

“Oh ho no, yer not coming up here wit me,” he said defiantly. The ladybug's antennae sank and she slowly retreated to the quilt. The old gnome felt a small pang in his heart, he glanced down to the golden pocket watch and the lovely gnome smiling up at him. “Alright,” he said softly, “come ‘ere.” The ladybug whirled around and leapt into his arms excitedly, forcing the rocking chair back a little. Fergus let out a hearty

laugh and held the little bug in his arms. Slowly he drifted off to sleep with her and dreamt of his Flora.

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