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**The Parade**

The lights appeared out of the darkness. They were almost imperceptible at first but as Fred squinted into the darkness outside he was sure they were headed towards him. Having trouble sleeping was nothing new for Fred, his doctor called it delayed sleep phase syndrome; Fred calls it insomnia. Trouble sleeping at an acceptable hour was nothing new to Fred, the procession of shadowy lights was. Upon further inspection it was confirmed; the glowing bobbing lights were most certainly headed in the direction of his house. Fred scratches the back of his head as he ponders what these glowing lights could possibly be doing trouncing around his neighborhood in the most awkward hours of morning. He slowly calculates the lights paths and traces them along his sidewalk and down the road. Fred decides to let his wife rest while he investigates this rare disturbance to their tranquil suburban life.

Fred rushes to grab his robe out of the closet and hurries down the cramped hall, clustered with the images of past relatives, in a dreamlike state. He rushes to appear natural as he smartly steps onto the porch and lights a cigarette. He sets his eyes on the sidewalk in growing anticipation for the parade of lights, thinking how hilarious it will be when he discovers that all this excitement to be the product of some late night juveniles; probably sneaking out to vandalize mailboxes. He knew that 89 percent of vandalisms occurred within this hours, or lately there has been a lost pet epidemic within the neighborhood; but he rated the chances of a neighborhood party in the low teens. Fred jolts from this train of thought as he notices the procession of lights has almost come to a pass. The hot embers of the half smoked cigarette splash across the concrete.

Fred watches in silent as he is sure that his insomnia must now be DSPs; the odd sleeping hours obviously affecting the brains processes producing odd illusions. The lights continue to pass. Fred sees them though, the lawn gnomes, with their little tin caps; armed with little steel pickaxes. He thinks back to the dreamlike state he experienced while rushing out of his house into this moment, perhaps he is dreaming; a quick pinch assures him of his reality. Yet still the little workers parade in front of him, an odd procession of fairy tale oddities turned common lawn ornament. It occurs to him that the only way to ever know if this experience is real is to emerge himself among the gnomes, maybe just touch one.

His body won't react to his will, however, as he stares, mystified, long after the parade has passed. His human instinct returns to him and he frantically scrambles to the sidewalk, tearing along the length of it looking for any proof of the tiny beings that defied logic. But there is nothing, not a stubby footprint, not even a bent blade of grass to indicate the fantastic commotion.

Fred tries to hold himself together; sure he had sleep disorders but that would not necessarily make him susceptible to fits of delusional insanity; would it? He sits himself at the coffee table taking in its faded brown hue and deep aged cracks. He watches the steam slowly from his coffee slowly dissipate into nothingness; much like his little visitors. Tracing the gashes in the table slowly with his finger, Fred isn't even aware that the kitchen light has awoken his wife.

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Martha walks into the room peering cautiously around the corner. She thought perhaps there was a burglar on their premises with things being so quiet in the kitchen. She shuffles over to Fred and gently lets her hand fall upon his shoulder. "Fred, honey what are you doing up at 4:30 in the morning?" she continues "Have you been having trouble sleeping at night again? Maybe you should revisit that doctor or get a second opinion?"

For the first time in several hours Fred peels his eyes from the table, realizing his answers are not to be found buried in the wood. "Martha, I saw something last night. I'm not sure how to tell you what I saw but I know I saw something." His tone indicates the serious line of thought he has been following, he strikes a match and lights another cigarette.

Upon glancing up again Fred sees Martha standing with a vacant look holding the coffee pot, waiting for him to continue with the story. He slowly lets the nicotine fill his lungs, savoring the sweet taste, the musky smell. His spills into the air with the smoke as he responds "Gnomes," he pauses to take in her reaction; seeing only worry he continues. "I saw these lights and I thought I might be able to catch some kids up to some sort of mischief, but it ended up being like a traveling company of lawn gnomes."

Martha raises her eyes; Fred was never a person to lie or make up fantastical stories, he definitely wouldn't lie to her; Fred was the kind of guy that you could ask what he had for breakfast a week ago and he would painstakingly try to give you the most accurate answer he could. However on this sort of topic she felt concerned that her husbands sleeping disorder could be the root cause of these hallucinations, "I think it's really a good idea for you to go visit the doctor again, perhaps some medicine..."

"I don't need any fucking medicine, I just have a simple state of insomnia, over 67 percent of Americans suffer from it on some level; nothings wrong with me."

The rest of the morning coffee is enjoyed in silence; at one point Martha gets up and sets up an appointment with the local sleep specialist, Dr. Reuter. Which is really just like her Fred thinks on his way to work, always questioning his better judgment. Once he had read an article about the health benefits of wheat bread, mainly a 6 percent increase in metabolism processes. When he ventured to furnish the fridge with it she challenged him, talking about nonsense like the kids enjoy white bread; even though the kids had been off on their own for some years. With that in mind Fred decides to skip work and anything bearing resemblance to a doctor's office; instead he goes and rents a cheap room from one of those discount motels.

The rooms are plain and dimly lit; the floral patterns on the bed remind Fred of the family vacation to Florida several years ago. For being such a dull room the lighting is more to blame then the color, obviously the designer was a friend to tropical themes. He throws himself at the desk and secretly goes about researching anything of the internet with particular insight into the lives of lawn gnomes. He can feel the waters of his mind rising as he sees from the sites that many others have witness not only lawn gnomes in their daily actions, but the same ghostly parade,

He learns the parade is something the gnomes do to celebrate their secret existence every century, although nobody knows why. This thought

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is the tipping point as Fred realizes being in his early fifties that there is no way he will ever be able to witness the parade again. In a daze he rises from the desk and stumbles towards the lumpy motel bed; drowning in his thoughts. Something about the cheap subtle floral patterns and the smell of over vacuumed floors allows him to drift to sleep. Fred takes the familiar trip home still contemplating, wondering, if he can stretch his life out to have some hope of attending the next parade. He is careful to return home at an appropriate time so as not to raise Martha's suspicions, and informs her that he met with the doctor and he was very helpful in bringing him to realize that the gnomes were likely a vision brought on by his condition. You can actually see the tension leave her body as she absorbs the news, and she quickly lets him know dinner is about done. Dinner is filled with delightful totally ordinary conversation.

It's now been several years since that dinner, and everything within Fred's household would seem to run on the status quo of normalcy. Fred can tell by the smile on Martha's face she is continually thankful he has moved on from those troubled delusions. He sits in his chair waiting for the enchanting presence of night to sweep the neighborhood, he will calmly go to sleep with his wife; and then he will silently arise in the pre dawn hours and return to his vigilant position on the porch. Fred doesn't know if the gnomes will ever cross his path again, by all accounts he will never see the trail of their little lanterns and work hats again. But Fred knows several things and one of these is that in the pursuit of a Gnome parade; a sleep disorder is a pretty helpful condition to have.