**Midnight in Gnome City**

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HAVE YOU EVER found yourself freezing, shivering in your neighbour’s front yard in the middle of the night, asking yourself how on Earth you got into this situation? No, me neither, until now. I just hope that whatever crawled over my ankle was only a bug and not a spider or something.

We’ve lived next door to the ‘gnome house’ for just over a week. I call it that because it’s got more garden gnomes than I’ve ever seen in one place. And right now I am sitting with them in the darkest part of the front yard I could find.

Like to know why?

We moved into this town called Banks’s Gully because my father lost his job. He’s working in a mine now, so we’ve moved in with my aunty for a while. I really don’t know why anyone would want to live in a town like this. There’s nothing, and no-one, here. At least no-one my age. And to make matters worse I’m starting at a new school at the end of the holidays and I don’t know anyone. I’m not happy. Mum tells me I need to give it a go and be more willing to try new things. I don’t mind new things. Disneyland would be a new thing I’d like to try. But a one-horse town with a dead horse is a new thing I’d like my worst enemy to try.

So when I ran into this kid called Dylan at the shop a couple of days ago I was pretty pleased. He seemed happy to meet someone new too. Like I said, not much happens here, so I guess a new kid could be pretty interesting. The same afternoon we went to the pool and he introduced me to another boy named Josh.

I really like the water, so I was having a great time until they started jumping off the three-metre board. I’ve never jumped off anything that high in my life. I told them I’d keep on swimming, but they didn’t want to take no for an answer.

‘What’s the matter?’ yelled Dylan.

‘Nothing. I don’t feel like it.’

‘Come on, don’t be a chicken!’

How did he know I was scared?

I walked to the board and looked up. It was a long way.

‘Just walk to the end and keep on walking,’ said Dylan.

‘That’s it,’ said Josh. ‘All you’ve gotta do is step off, and gravity will take care of the rest.’

So I climbed up with them. Three metres looks high from the ground, but it’s a lot higher from on top of the board. When I got to the end I almost didn’t care what the others thought of me; I was seriously thinking about crawling back along the board and climbing down. But there was a little girl behind me, waiting for me to move so she could jump, and Dylan and Josh were in the pool below, looking up at me, so I held my breath and stepped off.

Gravity instantly grabbed my body and turned it into a missile. When the water slapped my feet and swallowed me, I realised that the air from my lungs had stayed with my stomach up on the board. I came to the surface gasping, but I was over the moon at what I’d just done.

It was terrifying. And awesome.

I’d tried something new. Mum would be proud of me.

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Yesterday I met Dylan and Josh at the park, with another kid named Daniel. We rode our bikes out of town, to their hideout. One good thing about a small town is that everything is close to the edge of the town, so we didn’t have far to go.

Their hideout was full of cool stuff. There were hubcaps and number plates, a shopping trolley, a garden hose, a wheelbarrow, a few road signs, some books and a couple of chairs. It’s like a collection, but not a collection you could give a name to. I don’t know what to call it, other than … *stuff*.

The best thing was that they said I could join their gang. Dylan and Daniel are a bit older than me; they’re in Year 7, and Josh will be in my year.

So when they asked me if I wanted to join their gang, I had to think about it. For about one second. ‘Sure,’ I said, ‘I’m in.’

Then Dylan said there was a condition to joining. Uh-oh. There had to be a catch. ‘What’s the condition?’ I asked.

‘You have to bring something to add to our collection. That’s the initiation.’

I tried to think. ‘Mum chucked most of our old stuff out when we moved, but my aunty’s probably got something I could bring.’

‘No,’ said Dylan. ‘That’s too easy. It’s got to be a challenge. I’ll tell you what to get, and you’ll get it.’

It was only then that I realised that the stuff in the clubhouse was stolen. Dylan reckoned it’s not stealing if it’s junk. ‘We’re like the garbage man, only better. We take people’s rubbish without them even having to go to the trouble of putting it in the bin.’

Then he told me what he wanted me to get. You’ve probably figured out by now what my challenge was. Yep, a gnome.

I told him that the guy with all the gnomes lives right next door, but he just said that that made the challenge better. ‘It’s got to be a bit dangerous, James. That’s the point.’

‘I don’t know …’ I said, hesitantly.

‘It’s up to you,’ said Dylan. ‘But if you want to be in the gang, you have to pass the initiation.’

What was I supposed to do? I needed friends. It’s only one gnome, right? I could probably pick the oldest one, and then it wouldn’t be so bad, would it? There was even a pair that looked exactly the same. Surely the guy next door wouldn’t miss one if he had another one just like it? Maybe this would be like jumping off a diving board—you just stop thinking and jump.

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Things got even more complicated this morning.

I heard the postman’s scooter, so I went to the letterbox to see if there was any mail. The guy next door was in his front yard on the way to his letter box.

He said, ‘G’day’, so I said, ‘Hi.’ Mum tells me not to talk to people I don’t know, but she also tells me to be polite, and I figure if he lives next door and he’s talking to me in my own front yard, it should be okay.

He looked in the letterbox and said, ‘No mail today. That’s good, no bills.’ He didn’t look very happy, though. I think maybe he was waiting for a letter.

He asked me my name, so I told him.

‘James,’ he repeated. ‘I had a brother named James. We called him Jimmy. I’m Bob.’ It seems a bit funny calling an older man by his first name, but that’s what he said so I guess that’s what I call him.

He asked me how I liked living in Banks’s Gully. I told him it was great. I was being polite, and not very honest.

He looked at me like he could tell I didn’t mean it. ‘Where are you from?’ Country people ask a lot of questions.

I told him, ‘The Sunshine Coast.’

‘Sunshine Coast, hey? You like the beach?’

‘Oh, yeah. I’m not a surfer or anything, but I love the beach.’

‘No beaches near here,’ he said. ‘Closest thing we’ve got is a big puddle they call a dam.’

No-one had told me about that. ‘Can you swim there?’

‘Yeah, you can swim. They take boats out there, and they waterski as well. But it’s no ocean. No sharks, though, so that’s good.’

‘That’s true.’ Sharks were the one thing I didn’t like about the beach. Not that I ever saw one.

‘Yeah, there’s no sharks, because the crocodiles ate them.’

I must have looked shocked, because he added, ‘Only joking. There are no crocs within a thousand kilometres of here.’

I’m not surprised. I wouldn’t be within a thousand kilometres of here either if I had a choice.

He asked if I had any brothers or sisters and I told him I had a little sister. I asked him if he had any kids and he told me they’d grown up and gone to the city. ‘It’s just me and the gnomes now.’

I wondered what had happened to his wife, but I didn’t want to ask.

‘I noticed the gnomes,’ I said. ‘You must really like them.’

‘There’s quite a few, aren’t there?’ Then he told me how he gave his wife one for their first wedding anniversary, and she thought it was funny, so he gave her one for their second anniversary too, and then every anniversary after that. ‘I still buy one every year, even though Annie’s not here anymore. Old habits die hard.’

His face seemed to come to life more as he pointed to the gnomes. ‘That’s Rudolph. He came to live with us the year we had our first son; that’s Henry—from the year our daughter was born. Arnold arrived the year Annie’s mother died; Ian was the year our younger son came along; those are Graham and Neville. Those two ladies are Hilda and Mildred.’

I was looking at the two old ones that looked identical. He must have noticed. ‘Those two were lucky to get here. I was in the army in Vietnam, so it was a bit tricky. Luckily my brother helped me out, and we got the twins to Annie right on our anniversary. Their names are An and Bao. I named them with some help from a Vietnamese mate of mine. *An* means peace and *Bao* means protection. We were thinking a lot about things like that while the war was on. And An and Bao sound a bit like Annie and Bob.’

By now he wasn’t looking at the gnomes anymore. He seemed like his mind was in another place, or maybe another time. Then he came back and looked at me again. ‘Sorry, James. I get a bit carried away sometimes when I think about the old days.’

‘It’s okay,’ I said. ‘It’s interesting. So you were in the war? That must have been scary.’

‘Yeah, it was, but life is scary, James. The funny thing is that Annie worried like mad when I was away, but I came back here safe and sound. Then, after all the danger I’d been in, she was the one who got sick and died. Neither of us ever worried that that might happen. It just happened. It just goes to show you how much good worrying does, hey? You can worry all you like, but chances are you’re worrying about the wrong things.’

That was when Mum called me in for lunch.

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And now, here I am, on a midnight stake-out in Gnome City, and I’m feeling very uncomfortable. Not just because my knees are getting sore on the hard ground, but because I don’t feel at all right about this.

Okay, I know that technically you shouldn’t take things from other people without their permission, but after I’d talked to Dylan I thought of some reasons where there might be an exception.

Number one: it’s not stealing. It’s a dare. It’s just like jumping off a diving board.

Number two: if I do it, I’m in the gang. And when I turn up at my new school, I’m not alone.

Number three: Bob’s got dozens of gnomes. Heaps of gnomes. Nobody needs that many gnomes.

So, for him it’s not a big deal, but for me it’s huge.

So why am I hesitating? I tell myself I must just be scared. Don’t be such a baby. Just jump. Do it.

My decision is made. I reach for the gnome …

There’s a snail on its head, so I take it off.

And I leave the gnome exactly where it is.

Why didn’t I do it?

Reason number one: it doesn’t matter how many gnomes there are; they’re not mine. They’re Bob’s. How do I know which one is which, and what memories of his wife they hold for him?

Reason number two: how do I really know that Dylan and Josh and Daniel will stand by me, whether I take the gnome or not?

Reason number three: jumping off a diving board is just between me and gravity and water. It doesn’t take away an old man’s memories. So it’s not the same.

So now I’m right back to where I started. No gnome. No friends. Well, maybe one friend, but he’s a bit old for school.

Maybe Dylan and the guys will understand if I explain it to them.

Maybe not.

But that’s for them to decide.

I’ve made my choice, and I feel okay about it. I guess it’s like Bob says—you can worry all you like, but how do you know you’re worrying about the things you need to worry about?

I’ll have to leave that for tomorrow. Right now, I’m tired, and cold, and I’m going home. Have a good night, An and Bao, and all the rest of you. I’m off to bed.