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The Last Lesson

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THE LAST LESSON

TRAVIS LYONS

Transmission sounds like it's got maybe a day left in it before I really got to take it in. Put it off long enough now; ain't like I've had any spare cash to pay for it. So now the damn thing sounds like it's had enough. Fucking lovely. Refrigerator blew out yesterday; dropped my last light bulb while trying to replace the one in the kitchen. At this

point, I got maybe two things to make me happy: I got the tools to deal with the silverfish cropping up under the sink, and it's the middle of December, and I got no children, so I don't have to tell em they ain't gonna be getting Christmas presents. Fact that I actually smile at that is fucking disturbing.

On the whole, it's looking to be a bad day. Hell, been a long stretch of bad days. Why should today be any different?

Arcadia Avenue's cropping up on my right; I swing the van around at the stop sign. Been a bad week, and I don't see any cops. Anyone bothers me about it, they can go fuck themselves.

Little just-below-middle-class street; ain't exactly high cotton, but still better than the shithole where I live. Don't get many calls out to places as bad as mine; people who live like me get used to working around pests. Maybe I'd be a bit cheerier if I saw shit like that sometimes. Maybe feel like I wasn't so fucking alone.

1835 Arcadia Avenue. Little place off to the side; little rose garden under a dirty window, not-quite-healthy looking patch of grass in front of the garage. Four-plex, looks like. Painted red on the outside; convertible in the driveway. Visitor, probably; people living here can't afford a car like that. No way.

I pull in, turn off the van. Transmission grumbles and groans before finally rolling over and going back to sleep. I get out, mumbling to myself.

I get the spray can and the mask; slip the mask over my head and walk up to the door. I knock once and wait.

A frumpy looking lady with tired eyes shows up a few seconds later. She's got stringy blondish hair, maybe a bit of red to it. She looks halfway between pissed off and crying. Behind her, I can hear a little girl squalling about something or other.

"Simonson Exterminators, ma'am," I say. The name's always been bullshit; it's just Norris Simonson and a spray can. 'Exterminator' by itself doesn't exactly sound professional. "You Mrs. Allen?"

She looks at my nametag on my coveralls and nods. "Reckon you would be," she says. She turns around and gestures for me to follow. "C'mon in," she says. I follow her.

There's a little girl sitting on the carpet, playing with some doll or other. Can't tell what she's crying about, except that it probably ain't the mother's main concern. A doll's head probably came off, or something like that. From the look of this place, she ain't gonna be buying a new one any time soon. She watches me as I walk past, still crying, and I nod at her. Doesn't help much; I probably look like fucking Darth Vader to her with the mask on. I never claimed to be good with kids, though.

I turn the corner and go into the little kitchen. It's small, of course, but it's bigger than mine. They always are. There's a mean-looking cat sitting on the table; it ain't the kind of animal I'd trust around a little girl. Least, not the kind of little girl who cries like the one in there.

"Been hearing noises in the walls in here for three days now," the lady says. "Yesterday I almost caught something running in here, but whatever it was scattered when I hit the lights. Couldn't find it again; not even a hole."

"There's a hole somewhere," I say. "Always is, if they're running around out here."

She nods. "When do you need us to leave?"

I look around. "Let me find the hole first, then I'll tell you." I don't see it right off; might not even be in here. "What's through the door over there?"

"Laundry room and the door to the backyard. Laundry room's through the door on the right once you're in there."

"Alright," I say. Little places like this always have little laundry rooms right near the kitchens; just something I've noticed over the years.

She walks away, and I set the spray can down. I pull the mask up and open the cabinets under the sink; I move the bottles of Comet and Joy around, feeling for any little holes or openings. Jack shit down here; wish my kitchen was that lucky.

I look through the other cabinets and don't find anything; I go through the ones up top, where they keep the cups and plates, and I still don't see a thing. Whatever pest's in the house, it ain't in the kitchen.

I turn around and open the door to the tiny hallway. There's nothing in here except an old shirt; far as I can see, nothing a bug or a rat could use to get in. Saves me the trouble of searching. I go into the laundry room.

The washing machine looks pretty old; it might be a hand-me-down from a relative, or it might just be something the lady's been milking for as long as she can. Like

my transmission, I guess. The dryer's in better condition, but the whole room's covered in cobwebs. Seems like the day's starting to perk up; this lady might not be a whole lot worse off than me after all. Leastways when I go to bed tonight I won't feel like I'm the only one going through this shit.

At first it doesn't look like there's anything in here. Might be in the kid's bedroom or the lady's; might just be air in the pipes. From the look of this place, though, it probably ain't air in the pipes. Might as well be a law for a place like this to have pests.

I see the hole once I'm all the way in the room. The washer's tilted a bit, and there's a little dark patch in the wall right in the crack between it and the wall. Bingo.

I grab the washer and lift it a bit; I set it down a few inches from the wall so I can have a better look. Sure enough, there it is, plain as daylight: a three by three hole in the drywall, with little plaster crumbs all around it. Fucking rats.

"I found the hole," I call over my shoulder. "Right behind the washer."

I hear her footsteps on the linoleum as she walks over to the little hallway. "How big is it?" she says, and she turns the corner.

“Looks about three by three,” I say. “You can take a look if you want.”

I point down at the hole and start gesturing for her to come over. I stop when I see what I’m pointing at.

Something’s poking its head out of the hole.

It looks a bit like a rat at first, but that’s just because it’s so damn hairy. It peeks around the little corner, and I can see a long nose there, and what look like little slits of eyes. It might be some kind of animal, but it almost looks—

“What the fuck is that?” the lady says, right as I’m thinking the same thing.

Damned if it doesn’t look like a little hairy old guy.

You can’t really see his eyes around all the hair; there’s just hair-covered spots where it looks like his eyes might be. The hair is gray colored, like cobwebs or dust. His nose is real visible, though; it juts out like a pointy hatchet from his tiny face. It’s all red, like he drank too much, and his lips are about the same shade through his...well, his beard, I guess.

“Jesus, mister, what is that?” the lady says, and she sounds like she thinks I brought it or something.

I’m all set to say You got me, when the little fella steps out of the hole and takes a couple of steps forward. And that just about completes it for me; he’s got little arms and little legs, and he’s got what looks like a tiny toga made out of burlap slung over one shoulder. He looks up at us and sorta cocks his head, like he’s trying to figure out what we’re about. He keeps looking up at us, and then he says something that sounds like “Muh-beebloh guh-goobloh?” His voice is high-pitched and reedy, sort of like Alvin and the Chipmunks, but less perky.

The lady laughs and leans forward. “What the fuck?” she says. I’m about ready to tell her to shut up if she can’t think of anything else to say.

The little fella keeps looking up at us for a few seconds, and then he moves forward a little bit. Behind him, another one sticks its head out and looks around, this time with a brown beard. It looks a little bigger than the first one, and it’s holding something in its right hand. Looks almost like a tiny harpoon.

The lady laughs again, but she doesn’t say anything. The brown-haired one takes a few steps, and then another gray-hair steps out behind him, holding the same kind of harpoon. Two more come out behind it, one with muddy reddish hair and the other with black. They all stand there in a little group, looking up at us.

The first one, the gray-hair, says something like, “Agga-gagga ree goo mocka,” and looks back at us. The brown-hair says “Noo gut eeko,” and then the rest all start chiming in with little bits of gibberish, waving their harpoons over their heads.

“You ever see anything like this before?”

I turn and look at the lady. I don’t say anything, I just give her a look that says it’s a miracle I haven’t hit her yet.

The little red-haired gnome—cause I guess that’s what they are, gnomes—looks up at me and points. “Naggee! Naggee! Eebulah gabbalah!”

The brown-hair smacks him on the arm. “Jockalooluh nee! Pattaluh!”

I almost say Huh? before I realize how stupid it’d sound.

The lady starts to lean forward, hand extended, and says, “What the hell are they?”

I reach out to stop her, but the black-haired gnome grunts and points. “Guh!

Guh!” The others all look up and make what sounds like a tiny screaming sound.

The black-hair tosses his harpoon. It catches the lady in the palm.

“Ow!” she shouts, and turns her hand over. “Little fucker! He poked me with something!” The little spear is sticking straight up, right between two of the lines on her palm. She plucks it out and tosses it back down.

“Little shit!” she says, and moves toward them again.

They shriek, and all of them toss their harpoons at once.

I don’t see where they land; she’s wearing a gray shirt, and the tiny things blend right in. She takes a couple steps backward and bumps into the washer.

“God damn it!” she says, and I see her pull one of the little prickers from her waist. “The li—” she starts to say, but that’s as far as she gets. She coughs, and the word

dies in her throat. She coughs again, like maybe she’s got a tickle in there or something, and then her eyebrows furrow. She coughs again, her eyes widening, and she starts grabbing at the dryer.

Uh-oh, I think, but I don’t know what to do. I’ve seen that look before; my cousin’s allergic to shellfish. It’s how you look when your throat’s closing up. She raises a hand to her throat and makes a little waving gesture at me; it almost looks like she’s trying to tell me to step back. She makes another grab at the air and then falls on her knees.

She keeps clutching at her throat as she slumps against the dryer, and then as she sinks toward the ground. By the time her head’s on the floor, her eyes have started to bulge, and her tongue is sticking out between her lips.

A minute, maybe even a few seconds, and she’s gone.

I look back at the little gnomes, huddled around in a circle there, and I do what any sane person would do.

I run.

As soon as I’m in the kitchen, I see the spray can and grab it up from the floor. I don’t turn around and go back; the little bastards might have more harpoons in there somewhere, or they might just pull out the ones in the lady’s belly. I’m not gonna try and kill them; I just want something to use on them if they come after me.

I hear them behind me, making little cooing and squelching sounds. I don’t know if they’ve even left the laundry room yet; I don’t care, and I’m not going to look back. Just slows me down if I do.

I bolt toward the living room and almost make it before my feet slip on something. I look down at the last second and see something black and furry lying in a ball on the floor; I tripped on the fucking cat.

I land on my shoulder; the pain shoots up my arm and into my stomach. Something pops, and the spray can rolls out of my hand. If it had hit the ground as hard as I did, I’d be breathing in fumes right now. Thank God for little favors.

I rub my arm and sit up. There are two little prickers sticking out of the cat’s face; one beneath the eye and the other in the forehead. Gnomes’ve been here, too.

Fuck.

I scramble away from it and grab the can. I push myself to my feet, one hand on the counter, and rub my shoulder some more. The little bastards that got the cat didn’t hang around, or if they did I don’t see em. Whatever, time to run.

Don't know where the little girl's at. Maybe she ran when she saw the cat die, maybe she's in another room. Don't know, and I don't have time to find out. There's four of the little bastards huddled around in the living room where the girl was, jibbering and jabbering at each other in those tiny voices. They've all got harpoons, and now I notice that they've got little slings over their backs full of em. They look ready to hunt.

I pause for a second, swinging the spray can out toward them, and I notice what they're all looking at. Blondish strands of some kinda string all off to one side, little smiley smile on its face. The sight's so damn ridiculous I almost forget that the little bastards have just killed a woman.

They're standing there staring at the little girl's Barbie doll. Staring at a woman who's the perfect size for em.

One of em, a little bugger with salt-and-pepper shagginess, kinda circles around her and nudges her with his foot. He makes a little noise and nudges her again; one of his buddies does the same thing, and they kinda glare at each other.

Unbefuckinglievable.

I spray the four of them three times. By the time they even notice that it's me doing it, they're bumping into each other and gagging. I don't stick around to see what happens; I'll let em choke over their ideal woman in peace. Better them than me.

I step through the door, slam it behind me, and bolt away.

I'm around the corner when I realize what I just saw. What just happened in there.

I just saw a woman killed by gnomes. Gnomes who lived in her wall.

I know I shouldn't, but I start to laugh. Hell...just thinking about that is too fucking ridiculous. Fucking gnomes in the walls!

It's not that funny. I know it's not. But I'm not gonna think about it, because if I do I might start to go a bit crazy. Get that feeling I got when I heard the sirens behind me

a few years ago and realized I had grass in the glove compartment. The feeling I had as a

kid, when I realized I might be about to have another seizure. That the shit's hitting the fan, and I'm stuck in the middle.

Panic.

No. Not now. Not going to lose it.

But I'm still laughing.

Got to get a hold on myself. The door was hanging wide open when I left (guess the girl must've gotten away after all), and some of the little bastards might've gotten outside. Wait till I'm farther away if I'm gonna panic.

Not here. Come on, Norris, get a hold of yourself. Not gonna do yourself any good if you go apeshit out here.

Heart's racing, and that's a bad thing at this age. Forty-eight-year-old man living on canned beans and chili never likes to feel his heart acting like that; if I wasn't so afraid

of getting a little pricker in my ankle, I might start worrying about my heart, too. No time for that, though.

I close my eyes and hug myself; take a couple deep breaths and a few steps back and forth. Shit.

I manage to get the laughter down to a few giggles, and then finally to just a few chuckles here and there. After a few minutes of deep breaths, I can think straight again. Heart's still racing, but not as bad as before.

Alright, old man, let's get out of here.

I look down for a second; there are two little black eyes staring up at me from the weeds by the road.

I have a second to think that they look like two little blots of ink before I take a step back and kick out at the thing. Whatever it is goes flying with a little cry; its voice is a little lower than the gnomes', but it sounds similar. It goes arcing upward, hangs in the air for a second, and lands in the street with a little crack sound. It tries to get up once, makes a little hacking noise that sounds like Gak, and then falls back down.

Ticker's going crazy again. I have to close my eyes for a few seconds before I get myself back under control.

I take a few steps toward the little thing twitching on the road; I don't want to, but I need to see what it looks like so I can watch out for more. Every nerve I got is screaming at me that it's a bad idea, but I can't stop myself. Feel like a kid who thinks he's got a monster under his bed and looks anyway.

Little thing's lying in a pool of its own blood; the puddle looks closer to purple than red. It's twitching, but if it's still alive, there ain't much left it can do to me. Looks broken in about fourteen places.

Thing looks like it might be about six inches tall standing up; maybe a bit higher. Whatever it is, it's got greenish looking skin and pointy ears. Nose looks like a beak covered with warts; it sticks out maybe two inches from its face. Little guy's got a piece of cloth wrapped around his waist like a loincloth; it's probably burlap, but the blood's stained it so I can't tell.

Fucking goblin, I think. Never could figure what a goblin would look like, but if I took a guess it'd probably look like this thing lying in the road.

Gnomes and goblins in the same damn day. Maybe the fumes in the back of the van have finally got to me, and I've gone crazy. Maybe the lady in there had a heart attack or something, and I put the gnomes in myself.

Except she saw em too. That's why they stuck her; she tried to touch em.

So that explanation's out the window. The only other explanation is the one I don't want to listen to. The one that says it's all real.

I spray the goblin once for good measure. He looks good and dead already, but I ain't exactly an expert on how much damage goblins can take. Better safe than sorry.

I have to get the hell out of here. All of the sudden I don't think running's a good idea; even if I don't run into any more gnomes or goblins, my heart might just decide to quit on me if I put it through too much.

I left the van at the lady's house, halfway down the block. I don't want to go back, but it's all I've got right now. I take a couple more deep breaths, look over my shoulder, and head back the way I came.

I don't see anything on the way back. I think something moves in the grass a couple times, but it's just leaves falling out of the trees. Heavy wind today; surprised the goblin didn't just blow away from where he landed.

I get back to the lady's house; no gnomes in sight yet. I open the door to the van

and look around inside for a second, just to make sure I don't got anything hiding in here.

Nothing I can see. I get inside.

For a couple seconds I just sit there, leaning my head against the wheel and trying to calm all the way down. I can feel my heart gradually going back to a normal pace, and that makes me feel a bit better. Just gotta hope these things are local; if here are any back at home, I don't know what the fuck I'll do. But let's worry about one thing at a time here.

I sit back and look outside. Hood of the van's covered in brown leaves; just adds to its almost-dead look. I put the key in the ignition and try to get the transmission to give me one more drive. It whines a few times, growls, groans...then starts up in a rickety, broken-sounding rhythm. Thank God.

I put it in reverse and back out as quickly as I can. I want to get the fuck out of here, now. The tires screech, and I put the van in gear.

The leaves on the hood start to shift, and then something raises its head up from under them. I nearly swerve into a ditch. I slam on the brakes, trying to make the little thing go flying, but it hangs in there and just keeps looking straight at me.

It looks like an angry little woman, except her she's got bark for skin. Her face has a little scowl on it, and her "eyes" are two little holes carved out of the wood. The leaves on her back stand up and spread out, and I realize that they're her wings.

She reaches out with little barky arms and starts crawling up the hood; behind her, a couple more sit up and look around. A few seconds, and they're all sitting up and moving around; there are about eleven of them all together. They stretch their arms, and the little leaf-like wings stretch out with them.

Little bark-skinned fairies.

What the fuck is happening?

I turn on the windshield wipers; only one of them works, but it seems to scare them back a little bit. The one who was crawling toward me recoils and watches the wiper moving.

I put it in park, grab the spray can, and jump out the door. Something very, very wrong is happening here, and I don't have time to think about it.

I take off running. I don't care about my heart; if I stay around there, I'll probably die anyway. The gnomes killed the lady at the house, Ms. Allen, and the fairies looked about ready to do the same to me. I'm not going to give them the chance.

As I run, I see a group of three gnomes standing around a little picket fence, chattering in their little language. I barely look at them.

I turn the corner; there's a man lying on his back in the weeds. Four goblins are standing on his chest, each one of them holding what looks like a tiny knife. He's bleeding from about a dozen little cuts on his face, and he keeps trying to stop them from stabbing at him.

Something lands on my neck and I bat at it absently. I feel something sharp rake across my palm, and pain flares through my hand.

Oh shit.

I turn around and shake my head, trying to toss whatever it is off of me. Something else lands on my arm, and I feel the sleeve of my coveralls tearing.

Oh shit!

I swat at the thing on my neck again, and this time I get enough of it to knock it away. I turn around quickly and see one of the little wooden fairies floating there, her face still wearing that horrible angry expression.

Should've stayed in the damn van.

I spray at her and she falls away, coughing and sputtering. I look down at my arm and see another one there, clawing at me with her sharp little wooden fingers. Three big red gashes stretch for a couple inches, and the blood's already started soaking my sleeve.

I swing the can at the little fairy and she goes flying backward, catching herself mid-fall.

I take off running before she can figure out what happened. I can still breathe, so the fairies must not be poisonous. At least, not in the same way as the little spears.

At the intersection, I see a car stalled at the side of the road. Something big and hairy is reaching in through the driver's window; it's got greasy black hair reaching down to its ass, and all it's wearing is a dirty loincloth. It makes weird grunting sounds as it tries to grab the driver; they sound like Boog, boog. Might be a troll or something like that; I don't care at this point. I'm not dead, and that's what matters.

Something's buzzing behind me; I turn around and spray before I even see it. Couple of fairies flying after me; I get one, but the other moves out of the way. I spray at her and miss again.

Fuck!

Off to my left I see two more trolls hitting a man with big clubs; he's screaming and squirming around on the ground, and they just keep making those chuckly grunts and

saying Boog! A third one rips a door off its hinges and tosses it behind him. He goes through the doorway, and I hear a woman scream inside.

In the gutter, there are five wood fairies perched on a dead opossum. I think they might be eating it.

A little man about as tall as my knee with a big red beard and a broom in one hand runs by on the sidewalk, shouting in something that sounds like German and laughing to himself. There's a meat cleaver strapped to the belt around his waist.

The fairy lands on my shoulder; I swat at her with the can and she scratches my knuckles.

Sounds kind of ridiculous, doesn't it? The whole thing, I mean. Gnomes, goblins, trolls, fairies. Just showing up one day and killing people. It'd be funny if I wasn't surrounded by it. If I didn't just see two identical dwarfs bashing in a window with hammers. If I couldn't hear the screams as a man has his back broken by a hungry troll.

If there wasn't a fucking fairy made of wood on my shoulder, biting at my ear.

It'd be funny.

Kinda wonder where they came from, but I guess it doesn't really matter. Maybe we just fucked up too many times. Run out of chances. Always hear people saying fairy

tales is old ways of teaching people lessons. Maybe this is all one big, final lesson for the fuckups of the world. The damn things got tired of whispering and decided to shout. I don't know.

There's another fairy now, this one grabbing onto my elbow. I'd try to shake it off, but it's got its little claws dug in pretty tight. I can't spray em, either, because I'd get it all over me.

Who really knows? Where'd these things come from to begin with, anyway? Back in the old days, who thought em up and spread em everywhere? Trolls and goblins and suchlike. Who thought em up?

Maybe they've always been there, or something like that. Just waiting. Hell, I don't know. I'm just an almost-fifty exterminator who's a hair above the welfare line and who never got around to having his first heart attack. Just a man with enough luck to keep himself out of real trouble.

Might be that sort of luck that makes me plant my foot in a pothole and crack something in my ankle. I go down hands first, and the spray can goes flying out of my hands. It bounces twice and lands near a little bush. I can't reach it from here.

The fairies buzz away from me as I fall; don't want to get crushed.

I bang my head on the sidewalk and for a second the whole world spins. I see stars in front of my eyes, and when my vision clears there's a mean-looking little fella standing about six inches away. He's about the size of a gnome or a goblin, but he doesn't look like either. He's got a little beard that goes to about his chest, and curly white hair down to his shoulders. He's got pants that look like khakis on, and boots with tiny little buckles that glimmer in the sun. On his head, he's wearing a little cap like a biplane pilot might have, only it's a bright cherry-red.

I don't like this little guy's eyes.

Maybe I'm not so lucky after all.

He takes a couple steps toward me. I try to knock him away, but he just scratches at my fingers, and I pull back. His nails are sharpened into points.

He says something to me that sounds like, "Nur kablah," and his voice is deep and vaguely British. He cocks his head at me and steps forward.

I try to say something to him, to tell him to go away, but all that comes out is a little hissing groan. I try to hit him again, but he just raises his claws and I recoil.

He steps up to me and puts one hand under my chin. There's a quick tugging feeling, like suddenly a lot of pressure's been put on my throat, and then it dissipates. My

coveralls suddenly feel all hot and wet.

I see him take his cap off, looking like he was about to bow to me or something, and he dips it down near where he tugged a second ago. It doesn't hit me till he stands back up and puts the cap on that he's slit my throat. His cap is dripping wet, and little rivulets of my blood are dripping down his forehead and into his snowy hair.

Trying to breathe now. Can't do it so well. Not much of a surprise, considering. It's starting to go kinda black out here. The little red-capped fella is walking away now, I think; I can't see him too well.

I'm dying, I think. That should bother me more than it does, shouldn't it? After all, I was running away for a good ten minutes, trying to stay alive. I should feel scared or

something. Disappointed, at least. But I don't. Suppose I feel almost...relieved, really.

Then again, all I really had going for me was the fact that I knew how to get rid of the silverfish in my kitchen. I guess when the only thing keeping a man on his feet is knowing he can clean out the cabinet under his sink, dying just isn't that big of a deal.

My last thought before the lights start to go entirely would make me laugh if the situation was different. If I read it in a book, I'd probably think it was stupid. But right now, it seems like the most logical thought in the world:

It could be worse. I could've been eaten by a troll.

Everything goes dark