

**FIRST PLACE
MIDDLE SCHOOL
6TH, 7TH, & 8TH GRADES**

**THE GARDEN GNOME
◀by Ifeoma Irobunda▶**

In the beginning, Charlie Habel had a seed. He had dreamed of this seed since before birth; in the womb. At two years of age, Charlie Habel had one aster seed, one watering can filled with water, one spade, one section of the backyard designated as his, and a gut full of determination, rice, and beans.

Charlie dug a hole with the spade in his section of the backyard. In went the aster seed. And a couple more, just to be sure that there would be germination. Charlie covered the seeds, watered them, and then, he sat.

For three weeks, through rain, sun, darkness, and cold, Charlie sat rigid in the same spot in his backyard, eyes fixed to the spot in which the aster seed had been planted. Occasionally his mother brought him food and water, but Charlie could have gone without. For three weeks, Charlie Habel sat, watched, and waited.

By the end of the third week, the aster was a green shoot, almost three inches tall. Charlie could see the almost microscopic buds. He didn't need to wait for the aster to fully bloom. The green shoot was all the reassurance he needed. Charlie Habel, two years of age, then proceeded to plant cone flowers, false indigo, asters of every kind, bee balm, butterfly weeds, cardinal flowers, fairy slippers, spiderwort, columbines, an assortment of fruits and vegetables including blueberry and raspberry bushes, and, of course, grass. And within a year, by the time Charlie Habel was three years, four months, and six days of age, The Garden had been established. Charlie stood just beyond the gate inspecting his handiwork, and gave one short, simple nod.

Charlie Habel saw The Garden, and The Garden was good.

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By the time Charlie Habel was five years old and ready to start at the local elementary school, he lived and breathed The Garden, and nobody was allowed to tend to it except him. It was solely Charlie's Garden. His father referred to it as An Unhealthy Obsession. His mother said to Let Him Have His Fun.

Fun? Charlie thought. Then, Yes, Fun. I enjoy watching living things grow and flourish, so I suppose I am having fun.

"Charlie? Would you like a carrot?" his mother asked. She was always picking carrots out of his Garden before they were fully grown—a feat so truly appalling that Charlie could not stand to even think of it—and, worse yet, eating them without washing them. That, to Charlie, was a way to guarantee premature death. Now she held out one to Charlie.

Charlie stared up at her from where he colored pictures of a smaller, less impressive garden on the floor and considered saying, No Mother, I would not like a carrot. I would not like a carrot because it is practically still an embryo and it is very dirty. You may be alright after eating one or two or three very dirty carrots, but I am smaller and weaker than you and my immune system is not fully developed. If I eat just half of one very dirty carrot, I may

have a fatal hernia and sprawl dead on the floor, and then I will go up to Heaven to meet my Maker. You will then think it is okay to care for my Garden, and I will be forced to come down from Heaven and do something bad to you, not by choice of course, but rather by default, because nobody, but nobody, is allowed to see to my Garden except me.

“Is it washed?” he said instead.

She snorted. “Do I look like a well? Or even a sink? A little nature never hurt anyone.”

I bet the people who have been attacked by bears, or sharks, or wolverines, or become homeless because of hurricanes, tornadoes, and other such natural disasters would disagree with you, Charlie said in his mind. He spoke in his mind a lot. It helped him cope with other people, mostly his guardians.

“I do not want a carrot, Mother. Thank you,” he said politely.

Mrs. Habel shrugged and bit into another one.

She then had a fatal hernia and sprawled dead on the floor.

Charlie stared down at her corpse and said, How so very anticlimactic. I guess she had one too many very dirty carrots.

Charlie Habel got up from the floor, kissed his mother tenderly on the cheek, told her he loved her, covered her face with a dish towel, and then called for Mr. Habel—“Father, Mother is dead”—from the garage.

Charlie did not attend the funeral. He stayed home by himself. In fact, he was told to stay as far away from the funeral as possible, because if not for him and his stupid garden obsession, then his mother would not be dead, because she would not have picked all those carrots and eaten them without washing them.

Charlie Habel did not bother pointing out that Mrs. Habel ate dirty carrots from the market, and not from his Garden, all the time.

Charlie Habel did not consider himself abused. He knew he was very fortunate to have a father, and previously a mother, that loved him and took care of him.

And besides, the only thing that mattered to him, The Garden, did not abuse him.

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On his first day of Kindergarten, Charlie Habel woke up by himself, washed himself, and dressed himself. His father was long gone, gone to work in his law firm fifteen miles away. He then gathered his things, ate breakfast, bid his beloved Garden farewell, and walked half a mile to the bus stop by himself. But he wasn't alone. In his pocket, he had a packet of daisy seeds, ready to be planted upon his arrival home from school.

I do not understand the point of school, Charlie said to himself when he boarded the smelly yellow school bus. If I desire only to be with my Garden, and already know how to read and write and solve quadratic equations, then why on Earth do I have to go to an institute for not necessarily higher learning and sit there? It seems to me like some sort of cruel and unusual punishment, by keeping me away from my Garden.

But my father would never torture me, Charlie continued to himself as he stared out the window. So I suppose I'll go and see what all the fuss is about, and who knows? Perhaps I'll like it, because, after all, Kindergarten means ‘garden of the children.’

Charlie Habel spoke like an Englishman from the 19th century. But in truth, he lived in Rhode Island in the 21st century. So alas, he did not fit in very well.

Charlie was in Ms. Ramsey's class, room 1B. He did not know any of the other children, as he had been homeschooled for preschool and pre-Kindergarten. He sat quietly where he saw his nametag and waited for class to begin.

There were the usual introductions and explanations, and just when Charlie thought he was going to die of boredom, Ms. Ramsey assigned something of interest.

“I’m sure all of you know about superheroes,” she said. “So right now, I want you all to pick a superhero and when I call on you, tell me which superhero you want to be and why.”

All of the boys picked Superman, Spiderman, or The Hulk. All of the girls picked Superwoman or ElastiGirl, and the occasional ditz picked Lois Lane.

Charlie very nearly clapped his hands together with glee. For how many times had he pictured this in his head? Charlie Habel was—

The Garden Gnome! Appointed Guardian and Defender of The Garden, The Garden Gnome’s sole purpose was to defend and protect The Garden from all sources of evil, potential or direct.

When Charlie announced this, there was a minute or two of absolute and complete silence in room 1B. All of the children were staring at Charlie as if he had three heads. Charlie Habel wondered briefly if, maybe, he had said the wrong thing.

Of course not, he reasoned with himself. They all said what they wanted to say, so I said what I wanted to say, and if they discriminate against me because of that, well, that’s just silly.

“A *garden gnome*?” one girl said. Charlie translated in his mind. Translation: What planet did this guy drop off of?

“No, not *a* garden gnome,” Charlie corrected. “*The* Garden Gnome. It’s capitalized, as is The Garden.”

“That’s . . . that’s interesting,” Ms. Ramsey said weakly over a slew of disparagements. Translation: There’s something very, very wrong with that child called Charlie Habel.

Is there? Charlie mused. Then, No. I’m fine.

As long as my Garden is there, I’ll be completely and totally fine.

When Charlie got home, he planted the daisy seeds, watered them, and smiled.

For the rest of Charlie’s elementary school years, Charlie was avoided at all costs, similar to the way one would treat a quarantined individual. It did not bother him one bit. Every day he rushed back home and cared for his Garden. He did his homework and made dinner for his father, and then he went back outside to tell The Garden about his day.

The carrots hummed with sympathy, and the bushes trembled their condolences. But Charlie shook his head.

“Do not pity me, friends,” he said. “For I live for you, and only you, and if you do not shun me, I will always be happy.” His Garden seemed to cheer.

It was something to be admired about Charlie, really: he found happiness in everything.

That particular night, the forecast was for clear skies. Eleven-year-old Charlie brought a blanket and a pillow out and lulled himself and his Garden to sleep by saying, “I am the Garden Gnome, appointed Guardian and Defender of The Garden. Those who bring harm upon my beloved Garden bring harm upon themselves. Sleep in peace, my Garden.”

At daybreak, Charlie opened his eyes slowly—

And screamed. It was the loudest and most impressive noise he had made since birth, shooting through a good five octaves and cracking at the end.

There, right next to his head, was a garden gnome. Wearing a green suit with a black belt and a black hat, the thing grinned devilishly at him.

Charlie jumped up and sprinted across the yard. He was not in the practice of seeking out his father, but today that would change.

“Father! Fath—” Charlie stopped, upon seeing his father standing in the back doorway.

“Good morning, Charlie,” the man said, smiling tiredly. Had he always looked so old and tired? Charlie wondered. “Good morning, Father.”

“I assume you’ve seen Tappaja?” Mr. Habel said.

“Sir?”

Mr. Habel cleared his throat and shifted his weight to his left foot. “I got you a present. For your garden. His name is Tappaja, and he can watch over your Garden when you’re not here. The man at the antique shop said he watched over an entire nursery in Finland.”

Mr. Habel smiled hopefully, and Charlie’s heart swelled. Although he was his own garden gnome, the gnome was a peace offering from his father, and he would gladly take it.

“Thank you, Father,” Charlie said, and smiled. His father smiled back, and then turned and shuffled back into the house.

Charlie deliberated a moment, and then walked back across the lawn to his Garden.

Tappaja looked innocent enough. His smile gave Charlie the creeps, but Charlie told himself not to be judgmental. He gathered his blanket and pillow and went inside to get ready for school.

As Charlie ate his usual breakfast of a poached egg on rye bread, Tappaja turned and watched him.

His smile grew just a little more devilish.

* * *

Charlie walked down the hill toward his house, glacier lily seeds rustling in his pocket. It had been a good day at school, but all he really wanted to do was see his Garden.

Charlie dropped his knapsack in his room and then headed out back. He called out a cheery hello to his Garden, and then stopped short.

Oh. He had forgotten all about Tappaja. The thing really was quite creepy. It gave Charlie an unsettled feeling, though he wasn’t quite sure why.

Charlie smiled tentatively at Tappaja, and then moved to a clear section of the soil to plant his glacier lilies. He had just dug the third hole when he happened to glance up.

Charlie dropped his spade. There, in his line of sight, were two dead spiderwort flowers. Their purple petals were half sunk into the ground.

Since he had established The Garden, nothing had ever died in it. Things had shriveled up to bloom again the next season; certainly, but nothing had ever *died*. Especially not spiderworts. They were some of his strongest plants.

Until now.

Charlie’s gaze remained on the two dead spiderworts, and then ever so slowly shifted to Tappaja, who, startingly, was facing toward him. His evil smile seemed a little wider, if that was possible.

Charlie finished planting his glacier lilies, watered them, and plucked the dead spiderworts out of the ground. Carefully he gathered every petal, fully intending to glue them back on and press the flowers.

Charlie felt as though any second, Tappaja might grab his arm and throw him to the ground. He tucked the flowers gently into his sweater pocket and all but ran away from The Garden.

Away from Tappaja.

The next day was Saturday. Charlie went out to his Garden first thing after breakfast, entered the gate, and cried out.

Four hollyhock flowers were dead.

“No,” Charlie whispered. He quickly surveyed the rest of his Garden, finding everything else orderly and intact. Scooping up the dead hollyhocks, Charlie muttered a good morning to the ever-creepy Tappaja.

Why are my plants dying? Charlie wondered as he sat in the soil next to the remainder of his hollyhocks. What am I doing wrong?

“You watch my Garden while I’m away,” Charlie said aloud, addressing Tappaja. “Do you know what’s killing my plants?”

Tappaja said nothing (not that Charlie really expected him to say anything); only smiled in the same ominous way.

Charlie spent four hours talking to and caring for The Garden, and then went inside.

Later that day, it rained. When Charlie went back out later, six of his fourteen tomato plants were dead, drowned in a puddle of water.

Funnily, it looked as though they had been intentionally bent off their stakes.

Two days, eight dead violets, and ten dead cardinal flowers later, Charlie was sure.

The Garden was being sabotaged.

And Charlie knew who was doing it, too. All the pieces fit. Up in his room that stormy Monday, Charlie made a list.

1. Father brings home Tappaja
2. Tappaja has a sinister, evil smile
3. I find dead plants, in multiples of 2. (2, 4, 6, 8, 10 . . .)
4. The plants die while I am away
5. **Tappaja is always there when I am away**

Charlie put down his pen, satisfied. Thunder crashed outside. Leaning back in his chair, Charlie thought about Tappaja. About how he was always smiling. About how he was always looking at Charlie. About how each time Charlie saw him, his smile seemed just a little wider.

He had come from Finland, his father had said. Finland

Charlie bolted upright, struck with an inspiration.

Going to his bookshelf, Charlie retrieved his Finnish dictionary. Tappaja, Tappaja . . .

Tappaja.

Killer.

Charlie dropped the dictionary and sprinted outside into the slanting rain. Tappaja would strike again, using the rain as his cover. But Charlie Habel was—

The Garden Gnome! Appointed Guardian and Defender of The Garden, the Garden Gnome’s sole purpose was to protect and defend the Garden from all sources of evil. ALL of them. Those who brought harm upon his beloved Garden brought harm upon themselves.

Charlie Habel was the real Garden Gnome.

Tappaja was going to pay.

Grabbing a rake, Charlie pushed through the gate. What he saw stupefied and terrified him. Tappaja’s short, dwarfed gnome figure was bent over the patch of dwarf irises, Charlie’s absolute favorite flower.

“Tappaja!” The rain roared, impossibly loud in Charlie’s ears, but Tappaja turned.

“Stop right there! You have killed for the last time!” Charlie spoke in ardent Finnish.

Tappaja glared. “*Tyhmä poika!*” Stupid boy. He continued ripping the petals. Nine were dead already. Three more, and his goal would be reached.

“*Ei!*” Charlie screamed. “*Kieltäydyn!*” Crossing the yard, he brought the rake down vigorously on Tappaja’s head. Once, twice—”

Tappaja shattered. Charlie slowly lowered the rake, breathing heavily as rain dripped down his face and poured down his back.

“It’s over,” Charlie said aloud. “Be at peace, my Garden.”

Charlie buried Tappaja on the other side of the yard. He pressed the nine dead dwarf irises and put the rake back in the shed.

The rain had stopped by the time Charlie went back inside. He found his father standing at the kitchen window. Once look at his face told Charlie that he had seen everything.

“I’m sorry,” Mr. Habel said. His voice sounded utterly feeble. “I didn’t know.”

“I know, Father. It’s alright,” Charlie replied quietly.

“I just wanted . . . to do something for you . . .” he croaked, gesturing helplessly with his right hand.

“You did, Father.” Charlie grinned unexpectedly. “You gave me some excitement. And better excitement I’ve never had. Thank you, Father.”

“I love you, Charlie,” his father said, smiling.

“As I love you, Father.”

* * *

Two months later, by the time Charlie Habel was 12 years and 23 days of age, The Garden’s missing entities had been restored. Charlie stood just beyond the gate, inspecting his most recent handiwork.

Charlie Habel saw The Garden, and The Garden was good.

