

Frank Jones

Wish You Were Here

Lawn ornaments are not capable of writing postcards from faraway places. Or are they?

They were walking towards the car when Dorothy noticed him. "Isn't he darling, Norah," she said, stopping and pointing. On the way home from Norah's cottage they had made their usual stop at the doughnut shop and, coming out, Dorothy's eye had been caught by an object in the garden centre next door.

"Kinda cute," her friend agreed. "If you like that sort of thing."

"But I do," said Dorothy. "And I know exactly the place for him. You know that spot alongside the irises in the rockery-sort of an arbor?"

Norah nodded.

"Well, can't you just see him perched there? Come on, Norah. Let's see how much they want."

The sign said "Van Houten", and it wasn't hard to place the ruddy-faced man taking off his leather gloves as a Dutchman. "Can I help you ladies?" The rolling L-sound was a dead giveaway.

"I was interested in that gnome," said Dorothy. "How much are you asking?"

"He's a cute little rascal, isn't he," said the nurseryman. "Well, he's marked at twenty-five dollars." He seemed to be thinking. "Look, I'll tell you what happened. I sold him once already, but the people brought him back for credit. Didn't suit their garden, I guess. I'll let you have him for twenty dollars."

"Do you really want it?" Norah asked in an undertone. "Don't you think it's a bit, well, corny?"

Dorothy walked around the gnome, admiring the red and white toadstool on which he sat and the mischievous expression on his face. "Yes," she said at last. "Yes, I really want him. Norah, you don't mind, do you, if we put him in the trunk? Will you put him in the back of the car for us?" she asked the nurseryman.

When they got to Dorothy's place, Norah went to give her a hand lifting the gnome. "Wait, I'll get the wheelbarrow. He's heavier than I thought," said Dorothy. They trundled him across the lawn and then, bracing their feet against the rocks, lifted him into position.

"Doesn't he look just perfect there?" Dorothy bubbled. "As if the spot had just been waiting for him."

"Not bad," said Norah.

"Ted, when he was alive, never liked ornamental things in the garden, but now there's

only myself to please. No," she said, putting her hand on Norah's arm, "I'll put the wheelbarrow away later. Come inside and I'll put the kettle on for tea."

When Norah had gone home, Dorothy went out again and swiveled the gnome until his lop-sided grin was directed towards the living-room picture window. "There, Mr. Gnome, now I'll be able to enjoy you winter and summer." she said. The gnome, one eye half -closed in the beginnings of a wink, seemed to be agreeing with her.

"He sure looks cute, Mrs. Graham." She gave a start and turned around. It was only Norman, the mailman, standing there with his empty bag, but she felt her cheeks flush at the thought that he might have heard her talking to herself.

"Just puts a nice finishing touch to the garden," he said, flicking back the lick of hair that always got behind his glasses. Norman was only in his mid-twenties, but he took an almost fatherly interest in the older people on his route. If he didn't see one of his customers for a couple of days, he'd make a point of knocking to make sure everything was all right.

"That's just what I thought," said Dorothy gratefully. "The spot seems made for him."

She had her housecoat on and was having breakfast in the kitchen next morning when the doorbell rang. Through the window the side door she could see it was Norman, and she wondered who would be sending her a registered letter this time of year. "Morning, Mrs. Graham," he said. "Thought I better tell you some kids have been up to mischief again. Look what they did to your dwarf."

"Gnome, Norman," she said, stepping out onto the porch. The gnome had been tipped from his perch and was lying face-down among the sweet william.

"I'll put it up again for you," he said, resting his bag on the steps. "Maybe it was those Allen boys." He and Dorothy had talked before about the random incidents of petty vandalism that seemed to plague the neighborhood in cycles. "For sale" signs would be pulled up in the night and stuck in front of other houses, lawn chairs would be tipped over, and flowerbeds trampled. Dorothy realized it wasn't fair to blame the Allen boys, but sometimes when they went down the street shouting obscenities with their friends and hitting every road sign they passed, it was hard to believe they were not behind the mischief.

"Well, thank you, Norman. It was very kind of you," she said as he picked up his bag after righting the gnome.

After breakfast she took a damp cloth out to the garden and wiped away the earth staining the gnome's face. "There you are, old fellow," she said. "Feel better now?" He smiled his slightly conspiratorial smile.

For a couple of days nothing more happened. Then one morning, when she went to the window, she was surprised to see that he had been pushed over again. "This is too much!" she said furiously. "Too much! I'm going to put a stop to it right now."

She put on her shoes and, not even bothering to lift the gnome up again, strode up the street to the slightly run-down bungalow where the Allens lived. Old yellowed newspapers clung to the fence and a tired-looking dog rolled off the step and sniffed Dorothy's leg half-

heartedly.

"Look, Mrs. Allen," she said when the pasty, somewhat overweight woman she knew only by sight opened the door, "I don't want to make any trouble, but I'm afraid those boys of yours have been causing damage in my garden."

"My boys?" She grabbed the elastic of her underwear and yanked it up under her stained yellow dress.

"Yes," Dorothy went on. "Someone keeps pushing over my garden ornament, and I'm sure they know something about it."

"My boys, eh? Well, let me tell you something, you snoopy old bat. My Tom's gone out to Calgary to visit his uncle, and Fred's working up north with the forestry. So don't be so bloody quick to blame people what ain't done nothin'." And she slammed the door.

Dorothy stood for a moment at a loss. Her face was hot with embarrassment as she turned and walked down the path, not daring to turn around in case Mrs. Allen was watching her from the window.

Next morning the gnome was gone. At first Dorothy thought he must be concealed among the clump of day lilies at the foot of the rockery, but when she went out to the garden there was no sign of him. This time her anger was mixed with other feelings. She was a little bit afraid, she realized. She looked up and down the empty street, but no curtain moved. Most of the people were at work. She went inside, found the number she kept handy by the phone, and called the police.

"We'll get someone around as soon as we can," said the police operator when she explained there'd been a robbery. He didn't seem to be giving it very high priority. She made herself a cup of coffee and noticed that her hand was shaking as she poured it. She drew the living-room curtains halfway to. When a car pulled up outside she was relieved to see it was Norah, and then she remembered that her friend was leaving that afternoon to visit her sister in Charlottetown and had said she would drop by to say goodbye.

"What a dirty trick!" Norah said when Dorothy told her what had happened, and they went to look at the empty spot where the gnome had stood. A few moments later a young policeman arrived, but he seemed to lose interest when Dorothy explained that it was a garden ornament that had been stolen. "Okay, ma'am," he said, taking out his notebook with a resigned air. "Let's get the particulars."

As he was going out of the door afterwards, he stopped. "Frankly, ma'am, I wouldn't get my hopes up about seeing your gnome again. There's been a lot of vandalism going on, and it's probably kids who've chucked it somewhere now."

"Norah," said Dorothy after closing the door, "would you help me? That's exactly what I was thinking before you arrived. That maybe some kids threw the gnome down the ravine. I know I won't be able to sleep tonight for wondering. But down there's not a place I'd dare to go on my own."

"Well ... " said her friend looking at her watch. "If we're not too long, because I have

to do some things before I catch my plane."

The two women went cautiously down the steep stairs that the over-optimistic parks department had sign-posted "Nature Trail". "Booze Trail" is more like it, Dorothy thought to herself as they picked their way past the beer bottles discarded by teenagers and the empty wine bottles left by the decrepit men in bulging raincoats whom she had seen emerging from the ravine.

"It's just that I'd feel better knowing," said Dorothy as they reached the viaduct. "Even if he's smashed into fragments by now."

Pigeons rattled up noisily at their approach, and as they probed the undergrowth, a man lying on a pile of newspapers startled them by suddenly snorting in his sleep.

"Just don't let this affair get to you," Norah said after they had climbed panting back up the steps. "Look, I'll tell you what we'll do. Next time you come to the cottage, after I get back, we'll go into the garden centre and see if they've got another one."

Back home, Dorothy put on a cheerful front as Norah started her car. "Have a safe trip, dear," she said. "Don't make too much of a pig of yourself at those lobster suppers!"

Walking up the path she couldn't help looking sadly at the vacant spot in the rockery. It became a routine every morning for her. First thing she'd pull back the living-room curtains, half-expecting to see him back there. Darn it, she missed him, just as if he'd been a person. She'd shrug it off and after breakfast get out her gardening gloves and tools and busy herself with the weeding.

The first postcard arrived the following Wednesday. Finding it in the box, she assumed it was from Norah. But instead of a picture of Prince Edward Island, it had a photograph of the Rockies. It was postmarked Calgary, and the message, in a neat, round, almost childish hand, said, "Dear Dorothy, Having a great time. Saw a rodeo yesterday. Wild! Love, Mr. Gnome."

She sat down on the chair in the hallway. Her heart was racing. A trick. It had to be a trick. But who would go to such lengths to scare her?

Two days later there was another postcard in the box, this time from Vancouver. She didn't even bother looking at the picture. "Dearest Dorothy," said the message. "What a wonderful city! You really should see it. Just spectacular! See you soon, Mr. Gnome." The handwriting was the same. Angrily she tore it into pieces until her fingers hurt trying to reduce it to smaller and smaller scraps. She took them into the living room, put them in the fireplace and, lighting a match, watched the blue flame dance until the little heap was reduced to ashes.

She didn't tell Norman about it, but each morning she watched for him to come, sometimes giving him a cheerful greeting, then anxiously going through her mail. To her relief no more cards arrived, except one from Norah. A week went by and she was beginning to forget the whole thing, when one morning a card with a foreign stamp turned up in the mailbox. Without even reading the caption she recognized the picture as that of the flying full wings of the Sydney Opera House.

"Dear Dorothy," she read. "Here I am in Sydney. Never thought I'd make it this far. Australians super-friendly. Love, Mr. Gnome." She walked unsteadily into the dining room, got out the bottle of brandy, and poured herself some in a wine glass. Australian brandy, she noticed with a tiny shudder. Now she knew for certain there would be more cards.

The next one arrived a couple of days later. "Norman!" she called as he walked across the lawn towards next door. "Would you mind coming here a minute?"

"What's the matter, Mrs. Graham?" he said, flicking back his hair. "You look pretty shaken. Bad news?"

"Well, it's not that. But would you mind reading this card for me?"

He gave her a funny look. "Sure, Mrs. Graham. If you want me to." Maybe her eyes were playing up.

"Dear, dear Dorothy," he read in a monotone. "Please don't worry, but I'm laid up with some sort of bug. I'll keep you posted. Love, Mr. Gnome." Norman shook his head. "That's what it says, Mrs. Graham. Funny sort of message. Why is it signed like that?"

She asked him if he wouldn't mind coming inside and, sitting at the kitchen table, she showed him the first card she'd received.

"Look, Mrs. Graham, I don't know who would do a rotten thing like that, but what you've got to do is pay no mind to it. You hear me? It's just someone trying to scare you, eh? Well, don't think about it." He slung his bag over his shoulder as he got up to go. "This is what I'll do. I'll keep an eye open and if any more cards come like that, I'll knock and give it to you so you don't get a scare, like. I mean finding it in the box."

That night Dorothy had a strange, mixed-up dream in which she looked outside and the gnome had come back. Only when she looked again it wasn't the gnome at all, but Ted who was sitting in the middle of the rockery in his pajamas. "Come on inside, Ted. You'll catch your death," she called. "I can't, Dorothy," he replied. "I'm too ill. Help me, please!" Then he got smaller and smaller, and his voice became squeaky until she could no longer hear or see him.

In the morning Norman met her at the door looking worried.

"Fact is, Mrs. Graham, there's another card," she said, handing it to her. It was another view of Sydney. She turned it over quickly. "Dorothy," it said, the handwriting spidery and sprawling now. "So ill. Miss you." The signature was almost illegible, but she knew well enough what it said.

"This really is beyond a joke," she said, leaning her head against the doorpost. "Norman, I think I'm going to call the police about t."

It was an older officer who came this time. She told him her story and showed him the postcards, except for the one she'd burned. "I can see how you'd be upset, ma'am," he said in a kindly voice. "It's a very unpleasant thing to have happen. Is there anyone you can think of who has a grudge against you?"

She couldn't, and finally he left with the same sort of reassurances Norman had given her. "If anything unusual happens, if you see any strangers hanging about the street, anything like that, you just be sure and call us," he said.

Norman looked almost shamefaced when he brought her the postcard next day. "I've read it. I suppose I shouldn't have. But you mustn't get upset," he said handing it to her. "Would you like me to stay while you read it?"

She shook her head. "I'll be okay. Thanks, Norman," she said, and took the card with her other mail into the kitchen. She sat down dully at the table and studied the picture of Sydney harbour for several moments before turning the card over. "Dorothy. Doc says operation my only hope. Pray for me. Feel so bad." The writing trailed off and this time there was no signature. She felt her eyes stinging. She took off her glasses, and put her head down on her arms. "Oh, please," she sobbed. "Leave me alone. Whoever you are."

She worked in the garden most of the day to distract herself, then went out to dinner at the little French restaurant that had just opened at the shopping mall. Coming home, she turned on the television and then, unusual for her, watched not only the eleven o'clock news, but a late movie that didn't end until one. Even then she couldn't sleep when she finally went to bed, so she turned on the light and read a biography of Catherine the Great. It wasn't until three in the morning that her eyes drooped and she reached out sleepily to turn off the bedside light. It seemed as if she hadn't been asleep more than a few minutes when the phone rang. The red glow of the clock radio told her it was 5: 14 a.m. Dorothy grabbed her robe from the foot of the bed and, bumping her shoulder on the door, stumbled down the hallway to the phone table.

"Yes, hello," she said.

"Is that Mrs. Dorothy Graham?" It was a male voice, official sounding and faintly bored.

"Yes, who's calling?"

"This is CNCP Telecommunications. We have a telegram for you. Shall I read it to you?"

"Yes, yes. But just a minute please while I turn the light on. I'll get a pen."

It was unlike Dorothy not to be home at breakfast. Norah let the phone ring a few more times then put down the receiver. She had thought of calling the night before but it had been rather after when she had arrived home from the airport, so she'd waited until the morning. Perhaps Dorothy had taken ill. Norah got her handbag from the bedroom, picked up the car keys from the mantelpiece, and went out to the garage.

She passed the ambulance as it pulled out of Dorothy's street. It didn't seem to be rushing, and there was no siren. Probably dropping someone off, coming home from hospital, Norah thought.

As she walked up the path she was surprised to see a young man in a mailman's uniform sitting on the steps with his head in his hands. "Where's Mrs. Graham?" she asked.

He looked up startled. "They just took her away. Are you Mrs. Graham's friend, the one that was in P.E.I.?"

Norah nodded. "She told me about you," he said. "I'm Norman."

"Well, where on earth did they take her?" she said sharply. "What's the matter?"

"It's terrible really," he said, almost as if he hadn't heard her. "I found her, see. I had another one of those cards for her and I knocked on the door but she didn't come. Well, like, I looked in the window and I could see her lying there on the living-room floor, right in front of the big window. She wasn't moving, eh? So, well, went round the back and smashed open the window.

"She just looked sort of blue. I gave her mouth-to-mouth," he went on quickly. "I tried everything, but it wasn't no good. So I called the ambulance. She was gone."

Norah steadied herself against the wall. "Gone?"

"You look pretty shook up. You better come inside and sit down," said Norman. "I'm not feeling too good myself."

They went around to the back, and Norman showed her where he'd broken the window and put in his hand to open the back door. Norah walked through the empty rooms, then back to the kitchen where Norman was making them instant coffee.

"I figure the postcards must have had something to do with it," he said. "That was a dirty trick."

"What postcards?"

"Didn't she write to you about them?" He looked around the kitchen then reached up on the shelf above the sink. "Here they are. Someone took her gnome then started sending her postcards from all over. They're signed 'Mr. Gnome'. Pretty weird, eh?"

Norah read the cards then laid them out on the table in front of her. "This one came only today," said Norman, pulling another card from his pocket and handing it to her. The picture was of Adelaide. "Dear Dorothy. Just here for a couple of days before returning Sydney. Beautiful spot. Love, Mr. Gnome," the message read.

Norah compared the date marks. "It must have been held up. It was written before some of the later ones," she said. Norman had put his cup in the sink. "Anyway, I better get back to work. I'm way behind."

"Look Norman," said Norah, making up her mind. "This is all pretty fishy. I think we should call the police. How do we know something didn't happen here last night? You carry on with your route, but I'll stay here for the police. Where can they reach you if they need to?"

"I'll give you my number at home as well as my work number," he said, pulling a red pen out of the holder in his shirt pocket. He looked around for a piece of paper, then pulled over one of the postcards and wrote in an empty space. "See, that's my name, Norman Stannard," he said, handing her the card. "Bye now."

Norah went into the hall to phone, the card still in her hand. As she dialed her eye caught a message scribbled on the pad by the phone. "The gnome died today," it said.

She put the receiver back. Her heart was pounding. She looked at the card in her hand. "Beautiful spot," she read. Something tickled at the back of her brain. Two things trying to come together. She looked at the card again, at the round, childish handwriting. Then she noticed. The writing in which the name and phone numbers had been written above the address.

She got up and went to the front window. Norman, his bag slung over his shoulder, was walking down the street. She could hear him whistling. The tiny hairs on the back of her hands tingled. She knew someone was watching her. She didn't know how it was that she hadn't noticed before: the gnome was back in his old place. His smile had the same insolence she had noticed when she had first seen him at the nursery.