

MUSIC OF THE ~~METROGNOMES~~



Glenn Slade Clark, Jr.

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Music of the Metrognomes

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ALÍK LOOKED OVER THE FRESHLY marked scroll of his apprentice with disapproval, shaking his heavily bearded head almost crossly.

“You know your glyphs better than this, Ak’ten.” A thought came to him, and he peeked over the top of the boy’s work. “Tell me, lad. What is it that has you so distracted that you forget even the most basic of your writing lessons?” He rolled the small scroll and placed it gently down on a small table, which

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he then leaned back on, as he waited for the young gnome's reply.

Ak'ten looked away, towards the small window of their little home beneath a great tree root. He was only ten years old, not even nearly matching the nine and a half centimeter height of his fully grown master Malík. He knew that the old gnome would not approve of the truth, but would accept nothing less. Malík was a shaman, after all, and it was useless to lie to such powerful beings as the gnome shamans. One day it would be the same with Ak'ten. At least, that's what Malík hoped. Ak'ten, however, had his doubts. He knew that he had been a disappointment at times. It was only because he had difficulty with rules. "I don't know." He looked at Malík quickly, before turning his gaze to the floor. "It's nothing, Malík. I just don't want to be inside today." Even as he spoke the words, Ak'ten did not know what had possessed him to lie. He consoled himself with the fact that it had only been half a lie. He really didn't want to be inside that day.

"Hm." Malík glared at Ak'ten with gentle accusation in his centuries-old eyes. "Even half-lies will do you no good with a shaman, my lad. Try again."

Ak'ten swallowed. He fidgeted, scratching the tip of one of his two pointed ears, even though it did not itch. "Well...I was just thinking about something else is all."

"About what?"

Ak'ten made up his mind then to be bold. Malík loved it when his apprentice displayed his courage. Such a change would come over the boy. He knew it would serve him well in the future. That is why Malík never settled for letting the lad get away with even the whitest of lies, or half-lies for that matter. Ak'ten met Malík's stare. "I met someone. A gnome from outside the forest. A Techgnome."

Malík stood up from his relaxed pose, eyes wide. "What do you mean, exactly, Ak'ten? Do you mean to tell me that you *spoke* with a Techgnome?"

"Yes," Ak'ten said. "And I couldn't see what was so wrong with him that I should be forbidden to do so. He seemed a nice enough gnome. Strange perhaps, but I thought he was..." Ak'ten struggled to put a word to his feelings, "...interesting." He stood poised, waiting for Malík's inevitable rebuke.

"Ak'ten." Malík released a great sigh. "Have you forgotten all of your lessons? Do you remember nothing of the history I've taught you? The philosophy? There is a very good reason that we forest gnomes do not speak with the Techgnomes. Of course, he may have *seemed* a harmless creature, but his very words can be tainted with the heresy of his kind."

Malík grew frustrated and concerned over the lack of understanding in the boy's ever calculating brown eyes as they followed him. The old shaman was pacing now. "How can you not understand this? It's the simplest truth, really. It's what keeps us alive. Of course," he stopped, a more understanding thought

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entering his mind, “you’re only a boy. You’ve never actually *met* a Techgnome before this.” He turned to meet Ak’ten’s questioning stare, and he smiled through his very long beard. “I suppose their appearance can be disarming...to a lad. Especially one born in this age.

“I remember a time when very few humans from the other side of the world had even settled here. My own master can remember a time when they hadn’t even arrived. Those were the days when we could live in peace with humans. They were very similar to us, in fact. Unfortunately, the humans from the other side of the world did come, and they brought their horrible weapons, their disregard for sacred things, their diseases, and, in time, their vile technology. This corruption led to the destruction of any humans who ever knew the true nature of the gods. And, to the shame of our race, it seduced some gnomes as well.

“We are the same sort of creature, head to toe, as the Techgnomes, you and I. However, there is one underlying difference that will separate us for all time. You see, the Techgnomes have no souls. They fell away from our rich culture to live in secret beneath the homes of humans, to imitate them. They forgot about the gods. They forgot about their magic. They became a threat to us by living so close to these dangerous humans from across the endless sea. You must understand, Ak’ten, a Techgnome can pollute your mind. He can speak sweet words, all the while filling your mind with the most vomitous philosophies. If you speak for too long with such a being, you

will begin to envy his technology, his knowledge of the human world that has destroyed so many of our forests for their great, unnatural monuments that spring up from the earth to surround us, their terrible liquid rock that gives passage to their iron beasts who roar at all hours and light the night with their lifeless eyes. Ak'ten, the Techgnomes *love* these horrible things. They want this soulless power for their own. They will fill your mind with wonder at the human world, and you will forget the gods. You will even forget your magic.”

Malík snapped his fingers, and a very tiny butterfly appeared in a flash of light above them. Ak'ten watched in awe as the beautifully colored wings flew the creature right out through the window. He smiled.

The old shaman noticed how Ak'ten's gaze lingered on the window. He called the boy's attention back with a grumble, as he cleared his throat, remembering the grain of truth that had been in Ak'ten's half-lie. “We can continue this discussion another time. For now, since it is *clear* that your thoughts will not allow you to write like an educated gnome, I suppose you should practice on your flute.”

Ak'ten waited.

“Which,” Malík turned away, playing the part of a rigid instructor, “I suppose can be done outside.”

Ak'ten sounded a triumphant cry as he ran to his room to pick up his flute. When he returned to the main chamber and headed for the door, Malík added, “See if you can master the

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birdsong we went over last week. See if you can soothe them into joining you.”

Ak'ten was a bit disgruntled at an academic challenge having been added to his escape, but he nodded his head, as he made his way out the door.

Resna Davidson followed the sounds of little beeps and large explosions to her son's bedroom door. She knocked and heard the auditory twinkle of the pause button having been pushed. She opened the door to find her son pretending to sleep. “I think you must be well now, Pete. Maybe you should do something with your time more constructive than playing video games, since you would otherwise be in school today.”

Resna's nine-year-old son sat up in bed. “Jeez, Mom! I'm tryin' to sleep!”

Resna looked at her son's disheveled blonde hair and laughed. “Well, maybe you would sleep better with the *Gnometendo* turned *off*.”

Pete looked over to the little TV screen that he'd forgotten to turn off after hitting the pause button. “Good point, dude.”

“I'm your mother, Pete. Don't call me dude.”

“Sorry, Mom. Can I go play outside?” He noticed her disapproving look and added with a clever smile, “It's better than me playing *Gnometendo* all day.”

Resna rolled her eyes and shook her head. Her son had no shame.

Pete, never one to sit still doing nothing for more than a heartbeat, bounced out of his bed and went to his bathroom to smooth out his hair. “Hey, Mom?” he shouted.

“Yes, dear?”

Pete walked out of the bathroom and gave her a serious look. “Why the f... I mean, why the *hell* can’t we hang out with Old World gnomes, anyway?”

“Pete, you know why! You do spend *some* time paying attention in class don’t you?” She shook her head with wonder at her son’s ignorance, then quickly tacked on, “And watch your language.”

“Sorry.” He shrugged and laughed.

“Why do you want to know anyway, Pete? It’s not like any of your friends at school are Old World Gnomes. You’ve never even met one.” Though she spoke these words, Resna, knowing her son, was beginning to doubt them before they’d even left her lips.

“Oh, yes I have! I met one just the other day. I thought he was pretty kick....pretty cool. Well, he was kinda stupid looking and all, but he wasn’t so bad a gnome. Ya know? Mom?”

Resna had gone pale. “Pete! Do you mean to tell me that you actually, quote-unquote, *‘hung out’* with an Old World Gnome?”

“Jeez, woman! It’s not like I got an apartment with him!”

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“I’m your mother, Pete. I am not to be called *woman*. And it doesn’t matter *how* much time you spent with this Old World Gnome. You know how dangerous it is. You know how your father and I feel about you doing dangerous things. We love you, and we want you to grow up to be a normal gnome.”

Pete started to laugh, as he flopped down and sat on his bed, looking at his worried mother. “What’s so dangerous about a guy who runs around half naked and doesn’t even know what rollerblades are?”

“Nothing on the outside, dear. It’s his philosophy.”

“His *what?*”

Resna smiled. “The way he looks at things.”

“You mean his vision?”

Resna sighed, and she sat down on the bed beside Pete. “Sort of. See, this Old World Gnome may seem harmless, but the fact is that Old World Gnomes are pagans. They believe in gods and ghosts and magic. They aren’t very practical gnomes at all. That’s the danger. That, and they detest the human world. They don’t see the marvel in it. They fear it. And what has history taught you about fear?”

Pete tried to come up with a good answer. “That fear keeps great things from getting done?”

Resna wondered where he’d learned that, but had to agree. A particular moment in her own past popped into her head, and she shuddered, quickly putting the thought away. “Fear also causes people to lash out. You could be in danger if the Old

World Gnome you met were to realize that you're what they call a *heretic*, Pete. You don't worship their gods. You don't believe in magic or fairies. You see humans as more than giant monsters who tear down trees. You have a different perspective. Religion causes gnomes, and even humans, to fear and detest anyone with a different perspective. Why do you think we did away with it so many centuries ago? See, Pete, an Old World Gnome might be fun to talk to for a little while, but he would surely say things that would make you question your own way of life. If you talk to one of these simple creatures for too long, you'll begin to feel that something is missing in your life. You'll be wondering, 'Where's my magic; where's my purpose?' And you'll think, 'Maybe there is a god, maybe he has all the answers. Maybe when we die, we continue to live on in another form, so that it doesn't matter whether we amount to anything in this life or not.' You see, Pete, the way gnomes in the forest think is dangerous. And they view us as dangerous. You must stay away from this forest gnome."

Pete looked intently at nothing. "So...does that mean he can't come over and watch *Star Wars* the next time the humans have it on?"

"Yes! Pete, you didn't invite him, did you?"

"Not yet. I just thought it would help him out a little bit. You know, make him stop being such a freak job who's never seen a movie and all." He looked at his mother with wonder. "He didn't even know what a movie *was*!"

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“Pete, promise me you won’t go looking for this gnome again. You met him. It was a learning experience. But you have to put the notion that you can civilize him out of your mind.” Resna hated saying the words that she heard herself saying, but there was good enough reason to say them after all. Reasons that Pete might *never* have to know. This was for his protection just as well as anything. “It just won’t work.”

Pete looked somewhat disappointed. “I guess so.” He suddenly perked up. “So can I go outside?”

“Pete...all right.”

Pete cheered and sprang from the bed. He quickly slid into his already tied shoes.

“But...” his mother stopped him, “you have to do something constructive. How is your keyboard practice coming along?”

“Um...fine. I can play just fine. There’s no challenge in it, really.”

Resna raised an eyebrow. “Really? Have you ever tried to get the little birds to sing along with you?”

Pete looked at his mother as if she were insane. “What? No. Are you serious? Are you on crack?”

“Pete!”

“Sorry.”

“You’re very good with the instrument, but I think you are no musician at all until you can make the birds sing.”

Pete just stood in the doorway of his room and looked at his mother, waiting for the punch line.

Resna went over to the corner his keyboard was in, checked to make sure the batteries were all there, and handed it to her son. “Now, go and make the birds sing. I’m serious. Any musician worth the air he breathes can make the birds join him.”

Pete was beginning to take offense. “I can make the birds sing! *Anybody* can do that! It’s kid stuff.” Pete giggled as he took the keyboard from his mother and bounded out of his room.

Pete went outside playing his keyboard. He did all he could think of to try and sound like a bird. Nothing seemed to work. Pete wandered on, mindful not to stray into cat territory. He thought about what his mother had said, and the gnome he’d met at the edge of the forest. Before he knew where he was going, Pete had returned to the very spot. He stopped playing for a moment, and he stepped over a small mountain of branches and leaves. The forest smell was so wonderful to him. He found a very large toadstool, and he excitedly climbed to the top of it and sat. He began to play again. Pete wanted to be able to tell his mother how the birds had joined in. He wanted to tell her honestly. Pete really wasn’t much for lying, though he tried from time to time, like when he had put the Gnometendo on pause. Pete laughed at that. He just couldn’t be serious enough about any given lie to really give it his all. So he kept on trying with his little keyboard.

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No birds came. His music was lovely, but there was something missing. Something Pete couldn't even guess at. Still, he continued to try.

Ak'ten had been trying to soothe the birds for a while now, and he was beginning to get frustrated. He knew that he was good at the flute. So many gnomes had complimented him on his skill. He wanted to be able to show Malík how he had brought birds from the sky to accompany him. He wanted to be better than he was. He put the flute back to his lips and blew, making such lovely sounds that he couldn't imagine any bird resisting it. Still, no matter how hard he tried, there was just something missing. Something was not quite right. Unable to place it, Ak'ten simply carried on with his beautiful tune. It was a tune that he was making up as he went along. A tune he hoped would woo the birds.

Ak'ten soon realized that he'd come to very near the spot where he'd met that Techgnome Malík had warned him against. Ak'ten thought about that other gnome, and he still couldn't see why Malík had been so against him. A strange sound caught Ak'ten's ears then. It was a *very* strange sound. A musical sound. Like no music he'd ever heard before. Ak'ten found the tune to be similar to his own. He began to harmonize with it. It sounded so like Malík's magical birdsong...and so very unlike anything

he'd heard from any instrument he knew. Ak'ten followed the tune ever nearer to the forbidden edge of the forest.

Ak'ten saw all the signs of the human world beyond, as he followed the strange and beautiful music. He passed translucent sacks made not of cloth or hide. He passed painted, cylindrical metal objects that the Techgnome had said humans took drinks from. They didn't look like anything *he'd* want to drink from. The can in particular that he was looking at was painted red like blood, with white, wavy lines that the Techgnome had said were human writing. Ak'ten wandered and finally passed through some very tall grass, where the music had grown so loud.

Pete was enchanted by the music he'd heard in the forest, the music that was a harmony to his own tune. The music that was growing louder and louder. It seemed to fit so eloquently with the notes of his keyboard, so gloriously. Pete felt sure the birds would come, if the strange harmony from the forest would just get a little bit closer. There was a rustling in the grass near his toadstool. Pete looked over as he played and saw to his surprise the very gnome his mother had told him not to hang out with, playing a sort of flute.

At the instant their eyes met, both gnomes suddenly stopped playing, the words of their guardians coming back to mind,

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neither of them really knowing what the other meant to do. Then, just as suddenly, the two young gnomes broke into smiles and began to laugh. Ak'ten joined Pete atop the big toadstool, and they began to play again, without a word. They harmonized with a natural grace. The technological precision of Pete's keyboard blended perfectly with the wind and wood of Ak'ten's spiritual theme. It was not long before both gnomes noticed, to their great excitement, that other notes had joined them. Several other songs had blended with their own. They looked, as they played, to see little birds flying about and hopping on the ground, singing along with their instruments.

Of course, the moment could not last forever. It was not long before both Resna and Malík found the boys at play. An awkward moment passed between the two adults, who opted not to speak a word to one another, in which they had almost seemed to recognize each other. Each had just wanted to get their child away from the other and once again forbid them to see each other. They had each been concerned that the other child would change their own child's perspective, and, no matter how hard they might try to correct their young gnomes after that day, they had both been right; for as Ak'ten and Pete were taken from each other, their music stopped, each of them was in a state of wonder at the other. Each of them had heard the sweetness of their duet.

Each of them had been left with the thought, “What else could our two societies accomplish together, that we cannot do apart?”

About the Author

Glenn Slade Clark, Jr. is the author of ten books, including the novel *Cry, Wolf: Shadow of the Werewolf*, the short fiction anthology *The Great Debate*, the Gothic horror series *The Chronicles of Night-fire, Texas*, and two fantasy series: *Metrognomes* and *The Legends of Nod*. He lives in Dallas, Texas, where he is currently hard at work on his next book.

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