

“GARDEN GRUMPS”
By Alexander G. Tozzi

Old man Stinson’s wizened mug stared out at Edmond as he walked to school. That sourpuss was always there, like a dog, staring at Edmond as though he were going to leap the split-rail fence and make off with one of those crusty lawn gnomes.

Edmond shifted his back-pack and grinned. Those crummy things were uglier than their owner, but worth a lot. *People go crazy for those ugly midgets*, he thought, entering the school. The bell rang and he went to math class. While his teacher yammered on about the hypotenuse or something, Edmond read a motorcycle magazine, his eyes transfixed on a spiffy new engine.

After he had failed his math exam, he cut geography to sneak out of the building and walk to the lawn care store in town. BLOSSOM’S GREEN was a store that revolted him with its whirligig flamingos and blinding chrome balls, but the old woman who headed the place, Blossom herself, might just be the buyer he had in mind.

“Do you like lawn gnomes?” he asked her, straight up. She laughed like a grandmother being told her cookies were the best in the world. Of course she loved lawn gnomes, bought them like hot cakes. Edmond grinned ear to ear. *Bingo!* he thought, and told her he had a whole set of gnomes that he would be glad to sell to her at a low, low price.

“Bring those little guys here whenever you can,” she told him, “and I’ll pay you on the spot.” And she handed Edmond a strawberry lollipop and sent him on his way.

Sneaking back into school, Edmond stared at the motorcycle engine through each of his remaining classes. If he sold those gnomes at just the right price, his beat-up hog would have this new engine in less than a week—just in time for vacation!

He should have spent the rest of his day planning the theft,

but instead of ropes, masks, and alibis, Edmond's mind swam with visions of tearing up the turves by the power lines, roaring through the neighborhood at one a.m., and kicking up dirt in every yard he came across.

In other words, doing exactly what you're supposed to do when you have a motorcycle.

When the setting sun turned the sky a mellow purple, he started to get serious. Stealing gnomes was not going to be as simple as stealing a mailbox-which he had done once. Gnomes are pretty heavy, and he knew he would have to lug those ugly things back one at a time, hiding them in the toolshed.

While the sky turned to starry blackness, Edmond dressed himself in equally black jeans, sweater, and pulled a brown ski mask over his face. It itched like a case of poison ivy, but it was a small price to pay for a new engine. He waited by his door until he heard his parents' snoring, grabbed a flashlight, and crept out of his house, into the cold night.

Being out at night was always a thrill. Something about the way the neighborhood is asleep, not a single light to be seen, except maybe a kid's nightlight. Even the doghouses were empty, and Edmond almost snuck into one of those mutt-motels to steal their stinky meat bones. But that was another theft for another night.

This was work after all, and Edmond always finished his work. . . if he got something good in return.

Old man Stinson's house came into view. It was a canary yellow which was heavily shellacked, as though some monster had come along and raked its claws along each side. Star light glinted off the cracked windows, and when he squinted Edmond could make out the gnomes' pointy caps.

He felt a rush of adrenaline as he leapt the split-rail fence. This was it.

First he checked the window, the window that the sour puss always stared through at him. Even in the dark Edmond could see that there was no wizened face peering out, no crabby old man who didn't trust anyone who stepped by his

lawn.

Grinning, Edmond flicked on his flashlight, swept the beam to a nearby gnome. *If only he knew. . . if only he knew I was out here, stealing his precious garden grumps.* For they all shared the same grumpy expression as their owner.

All jokes aside, Edmond flexed his muscles and wrapped his arms around the closest gnome. It was a heavy thing, that gnome, weighing nearly a ton. Whatever it was made of was rough, and scratched through Edmond's sweater. He had to take deep breaths before he could even swivel the gnome from its resting place.

On one of those tugs he felt a pain shoot up his arm. He must've pulled something, but then he screamed in agony as his bone snapped in two! He looked down to see the gnome holding onto one half of his severed limb, mouth wide open and moving in for a bite.

Edmond screamed louder now, bashed his flashlight against the gnome until the plastic shattered and the light went out. It was a good thing that beam went out, because Edmond would have fainted had he seen the gushing blood, the flecks of splintered bone. Whatever meat held his arm together peeled away as he tore from the gnome and ran, too frightened to feel pain, too frightened to stop the bleeding.

As he tore down the street, Old Man Stinson watched through his attic window, his wizened face pinched even further as he laughed at the work of his loyal garden grumps.

THE END