

© Richard Romano. All rights reserved. Unauthorized reproduction is prohibited and is really creepy, too.

"Postcards from the Gnome"

by Richard Romano

"Probably the most distinctive thing about the town of Port Dennis," Clyde was telling the out-of-towner, "is that it is located at least 500 miles from any real water. Oh, sure, there's Morgan's Pond downtown, and Sponge Lake – a re-naming of Lake Galumpki after a nearby sponge factory had what was described as an 'industrial accident' that caused thousands of kitchen sponges to be spilled into the water. It was said that half the lake had been absorbed, although the skeptics disputed that figure. But however much actually had been absorbed, two weeks one summer saw throngs of local environmentalists in canoes wringing the lake out of the recovered sponges.

"But the reason the word 'Port' appeared in the name of the town has been lost to the mists of time. It couldn't even be said that Port Dennis had even at one time been located on a waterway; none had ever come anywhere near the town. There has been much speculation, of course; some have said

that the founder of the town, Dennis Langley, was especially fond of port wine cheese. There were those who pointed out that perhaps the town had been founded by liberal-leaning sailors: wouldn't they be considered 'port-wing' as opposed to the more Republican 'starboard-wing'? Those stories (and others, whose veracity is in no way to be believed even remotely) are generally held to be apocryphal, and the most popular theory in the State Capital (whenever anyone in the State Capital thinks about Port Dennis, which is never) is that 'Port' was added many years later to give the illusion that the town was far more cosmopolitan than it really was and that its residents were not just 5,015 descendants of the original town fathers, but in fact had a more lively, disparate populace. Why they should have wanted to have given this illusion is anyone's guess. But the truth of the matter is that no one in town ever really thinks about it at all, just as no one in the optimistically named Johnson City ever thinks twice about the rather contradictory highway sign that reads, 'Welcome to the Village of Johnson City.' It's just one of those things."

The out-of-towner digested that, thanked Clyde for the directions back to the Interstate, and left in a rush.

I certainly never thought about the name of our town, and I've lived in Port Dennis all my 59 years. I was born here (Zelda McBeth the local midwife delivered me and my two brothers and, many years later, my own two daughters), I went to school here, I learned a trade here, I got married here, and I will probably die here—sooner rather than later, my wife keeps telling me, if I don't do something about the hedges. Most folks in town are pretty much the same way. That doesn't always sit right with some people, for some reason. Like the exchange I once had not too long ago one evening at Clyde's. This twenty-something-or-other comes in and right away I can tell he's not from around here. First of all, the foreign car is a dead giveaway. The second was the nose wrinkle as soon as he walked in the door. Clyde's isn't the fanciest place in the world, but he knows his beer and he'll talk your ear off if you let him—or even if you don't let him, come to think of it. The place is clean, if by "clean" you mean the roaches are smaller than Clyde's basset hound.

So this guy's obviously just passing through and he walks in the door. He's well-dressed, if by well-dressed you mean the stains on his jeans are less than two days old, and immediately he does the nose wrinkle. Clyde catches it and is about to tell the guy to get back to New York City or

Binghamton when the guy sits at the bar right next to me and orders whatever beer has the biggest sign.

"How you doing," he says to me, more as a statement than as a question.

"Can't complain," I say. I ask him if he's just passing through (he is), where he's from (Philadelphia), where he's headed (Chicago), why he's headed there (no particular reason, just had to "get away"), and so on. I ask if he has a family, he says, "No, I want to see the world before I get shackled in one place." To which Clyde says, "Starting with Port Dennis is bound to set you up for disappointment everywhere else." (Clyde was kidding of course.)

The guy tells us he plans to see it all—after Chicago, he's off to L.A., then San Francisco, then to Japan, Asia, Europe, even Africa, he says. He then asks if we've ever been anywhere. I shake my head. "Never could afford it. I was never some spoiled trust fund baby. My dad painted houses and now I do, too." Clyde opts for a more generous route.

"I've got my family, my friends, everything right here in Port Dennis. I'm 82 now, and I never wanted to spend a minute away from them just to go look at a bunch of old goddamn buildings and rampaging wildebeests. People who

want to 'see the world' just aren't happy where they are. Well, I am."

And the guy was floored; he couldn't imagine anyone content to stay where they were. So it went on like that for some time, till the guy finished his beer and had to be on his way.

It was getting on to suppertime, so I had to be going, too. I walked home down Main Street, thinking about travel. Yeah, I would have liked to have traveled. I don't regret it—I have a decent business, a good family, my kids turned out all right. So I don't have pictures of me and my wife standing in Bermuda shorts next to the pyramids, big deal. Yeah, travel broadens you, but first you have to broaden your bank account.

I made a left onto Avenue Street (according to Clyde, the guy who was naming all the streets in town claimed he ran out of names by this time) and took note of everyone's front yard. Now, never let it be said that small towns in what some folks would call the middle of nowhere don't have fads and fashions. We certainly do. And that summer the big thing in town was garden gnomes, for some reason. I walked in the front door and the first thing my wife says to me, is, "We need a garden gnome."

"We do?"

"Oh, yes."

"I can see where we'd need food, clothing, a house, and maybe my pickup truck, but I can't say that we'd ever need a garden gnome."

"Sarah next door just got one, and almost half the block has one. We need one."

As I went out back down to Clyde's after dinner, damned if there weren't gnomes propped up in half the yards on the block, having seemingly sprouted up like mushrooms. Well, mushrooms wearing light blue frocks and tall, pointed red hats, but mushrooms nonetheless.

"Okay," I told my wife when I got home later that evening, "where would one get a garden gnome if one were so inclined?"

"Well, there's a new gnome store down in the Mall."

Of course.

So that weekend, we trucked on down to the Mall and damned if there wasn't some chain store called Gnome World. Inside were more gnomes than I'd ever seen in my life. Well, okay, I had never really seen any gnomes in my life, but if my life had been nothing but gnomes from sunup to sundown 365

days a year for 59 years, this would be even *more* gnomes than I'd have seen in my life. Some were less than an inch high, some were taller than me, and I'm 6'5". There were male gnomes, female gnomes (they were the ones without the beards, I think), gnomes with pipes, gnomes with large cups of some drink or other, gnomes that had T-shirts on that had little sayings on them like "World's Best Grandma" or "There's No Place Like Gnome for the Holidays," and so forth. There were posters of gnomes, books about gnomes, gnomes holding other gnomes, gnome earrings, gnomes in the form of those Russian nesting dolls, cheeses in the shape of gnomes. In a word, there was a shitload of gnomes. My wife, of course, was in gnome heaven. I just wanted to run. "Honey," I said, "I'll be down in the Sears. You come get me when you're done here."

"No, stay. We need to pick one out together."

"Huh? We didn't even pick out our furniture together. What do I know about gnomes? Just keep it under 30 bucks."

She seemed disappointed as I turned and left, but there was something about that place that just creeped me out. It wasn't just my usual distaste of arts and crafts type stuff. You, know, the sort of crap my wife likes to fill the house with. Heck, we could probably afford a round-the-

world cruise if we hocked all the dolls, commemorative plates, needlepoint patterns, and other random stuff that I couldn't even categorize. And I can usually put up with your average craft fair or flower show for a few hours without wanting to scream, but these gnomes were way too much.

A short time later, I was crouching in the hardware section at Sears checking out a new socket wrench set. I'd probably have to do some work on the pickup truck (it was making that noise again, the one that sounds like a humpback whale is under the hood) so I should probably get a new wrench set. How much was this anyway? Damn, do they think everyone reads those goddamn bar codes. Where was the sales guy? I turned around...

A giant gnome!

"Hi, dear, look what I got," she said.

I lay prostrate on the floor until my heart began to beat again. I sat up.

"Are you trying to kill me?"

"Isn't he great?"

The sales guy wandered over and saw me sitting on the floor clutching my chest. "Is everything all right?"

"Where's your defibrillator section?" I asked, not entirely as a joke.

"Just wait until Sarah gets a load of this."

"How much was it?" I asked, apparently eager for another mild heart attack.

"Promise you won't be angry."

"Okay, that's all I need to know. Back it goes."

"But it was only \$110."

Yep—shooting pains though my chest.

The argument continued like that, and I simply could not convince her that \$110 far exceeded our gnome budget. Yes, I was the old meanie as I made her go back in and exchange the gnome for a cheaper one.

"Fine," she said. "You pick one out."

There was just no winning. I poked through the store, hoping to get it over with as soon as possible. Damn, there were a lot of gnomes. I reached the back of the store, where several large shelves hung from the wall. I saw one on the top shelf that looked like a decent compromise between size and price. I reached up to grab it but, as luck would have it, I lost my balance, and grabbed the shelf to keep from falling. No luck. I still crashed to the

floor, but brought the entire shelving unit down, too. I covered my head as gnomes rained down on me. One in particular bonked me good and hard on the head. I think I lost consciousness for a moment, although I recall my wife torn between being concerned and pretending she didn't know me.

When my vision cleared, I was face to face with a four-and-a-half-foot gnome, who was also lying on his side. He had the usual blue frock, white beard, and tall, pointy red hat. His face was ruddy. He kind of reminded me of my grandfather after an evening at Clyde's. A crowd had gathered, and the manager rushed over.

"Jeez, Mister, are you okay?" he asked in the tone of voice that unmistakably implied "You're not going to sue us, are you?"

I stared into the eyes of the gnome and thought I saw something there. A glint, perhaps, a sign of life... Nope, just the sort of tricks a nasty headwound can play on the mind.

I struggled to my feet. "I think so. The concussion will go well with the heart attack I had in Sears." The guy turned completely white. These kids—they don't know when an old guy is kidding.

So, long story short: the store manager was so terrified that I was either going to sue him or drop dead in his store (or perhaps even both) that he let me have the gnome that nearly killed me for free. An \$80 value. Not too shabby.

So anyway, that was how we got our gnome.

Despite the inauspicious start, I'd be lying if I said that the gnome didn't eventually grow on me. My wife had named it ("Justin"—I have no idea why) and even I found that I would occasionally talk to it. It started as a joke, a little comedy routine I'd do for the grandkids ("Hey, Justin, how's it hangin'?...What?...You don't say?...Put \$20 on Little People in the third race?...You know I don't gamble anymore...What's that?...The meaning of life?...Really?...I'd have never guessed..." And so on...) but eventually it became completely ordinary to say, "Hey, Justin, have a good day" when I left for work in the morning, and "Hi, Justin, how was your day?" when I got home at night. On the weekends, I'd rinse him off with the hose and rub him down with a cloth. I knew enough not to take him to Clyde's with me (that would have been completely nuts) but I still began to regard him fondly. I was sad to think that the gnome fad would probably be over

soon and he'd be confined to the basement with the lawn jockey, the pink flamingos, and the giant fluorescent hamburger (don't ask).

One morning in late summer, I was sitting at the breakfast table eating a bowl of some kind of cereal my wife had bought for the grandkids. According to the box, it was "marshmallow-blasted." I wasn't exactly certain how the marshmallow blasting process takes place, or why anyone would want anything to be blasted with marshmallows at all, but far be it from me to stand in the way of progress. I guess it complements some snack crackers my wife bought that, according to the package, were "flavor-blasted." I'm beginning to think that perhaps I should start wearing protective goggles while eating.

Anyway, my wife went out to get the morning paper and came back in a tizzy. I had never previously witnessed a "tizzy" but the state my wife was in came as close to it as anything I had ever seen before.

"He's gone!" she cried.

"Huh?"

"Justin—the gnome. He's gone."

I went outside to have a look for myself. Yep; he was gone. He was not standing in his usual place in the front garden. I walked around the house, thinking that perhaps he somehow ended up in the backyard or under the porch or maybe even in the toolshed. Nope. No sign of him. I walked down the block and back up the other way, casting glances into the neighbors' yards. We had all known each other for years, if not decades, and the thought that we would steal each others' property was pretty much out of the question, but leave no stone unturned, as they say.

It was just as Harry Berman was walking out his front door that I caught myself doing it. I was calling "Justin! Here Justin!" I looked over to see Harry staring at me expressionlessly.

"You looking for someone?" he asked me.

I walked up to him. There was no way I could lie to Harry. I suppose I could have said we got a new puppy and it had run off, but Harry had just been over to play cards the previous evening and he knew we didn't have one.

"Damnedst thing, Harry," I said. "The garden gnome is gone."

"That so?" said Harry. He looked behind him toward his house. "Ours is still there." He turned back to me. "Why were you calling for it?"

I smiled sheepishly. "Just a joke, I guess."

"That used to be a big college prank about 20 years ago or so," said Harry. "Stealing people's lawn ornaments."

"The nearest college is 50 miles from here. Who'd drive 50 miles for a garden gnome?" I ignored the fact that the Mall where we bought the goddamn thing was about 45 miles away.

"Beats me. I'm sure it'll turn up."

My wife was a little upset, but we had had it for a few months, and the novelty—and perhaps even the craze—was wearing off. So the missing gnome went from concern about where it had gone to simply being a weird story to tell the neighbors.

But, in about two weeks, we'd have an even weirder story to tell the neighbors.

As was my usual habit after work, I parked my truck at the house and walked around the corner to Clyde's for a couple, then ambled back home down Avenue Street. Still out of habit, I looked in the direction of where Justin had used

to stand, and started to say, "Hi, Jus—" but caught myself just in time (so to speak).

My wife was in the kitchen when I walked in the front door.

"You're not going to believe this," she said before anything else.

I was still distracted. "You know, I still wonder whatever happened to Justin."

"He's in Los Angeles," said my wife forcefully, without missing a beat. She was very quick sometimes.

I laughed. "Right. Soaking up the sun. And you know what they say about those California girl gnomes..."

"No, I mean it, he's in Los Angeles."

"How do you know that?" I asked. "Did he send a postcard?"

"As a matter of fact, yes." She handed it to me. It was a picture postcard containing a triptych of West Coast beach scenes. The script across the top read, "Greetings from Los Angeles—Life's a Beach!" With reluctance, I flipped it over. It had me and my wife's names, our correct address, and it was indeed postmarked Los Angeles, three days earlier. The message read, in an impeccable cursive hand, as follows:

Hiya,

Sorry to run off as unexpectedly as I did, but when the opportunity comes along, you gotta grab it, right? I arrived in L.A. two days ago, and it is great here! the beaches are fantastic, the weather couldn't be better, and I even saw some celebrities on the Third Street Promenade in Santa Monica. I did the Walk of Fame on Hollywood Boulevard and checked out the hand- and footprints at Mann's Chinese Theater. I leave for Honolulu tomorrow—I've always wanted to see Hawaii. I'll write you when I get there. Anyway, thanks for everything, and I'll keep in touch.

Justin

P.S. I think I saw one of those babes on the front of this card on Venice Beach. Hubba hubba!

My wife and I were silent for a moment. All I could think to say was, "Does anyone really say 'hubba hubba' anymore?"

"Dear, you're ignoring the larger question which is how does a garden gnome not only get to Los Angeles but then send us a postcard?"

"Oh, come on, this is a joke of some kind. One of the neighbors or maybe your brother probably went to L.A. and thought it would be a kick to send a postcard from our gnome."

"I just spoke to my brother and he's at home two blocks away. And when's the last time he went further than the Harley shop in Opa City? In fact, who do we know that would even go to California at all? And then go straight to Hawaii?"

"So what are you saying, that we have a mobile gnome? I'm telling you, it's a joke. Harry told me the day it was missing that taking lawn ornaments—and garden gnomes—used to be a big college prank. I'll bet some kids were passing through town, they saw the gnome and thought it'd be fun to take it and then send us postcards."

"But, dear, how would some college kids know that we called it Justin?"

She had a point there.

Over the next few days, we spoke with just about everyone we knew, and no one had left town at all nor did they know anything about the wandering gnome.

A couple days later, we got a second postcard, postmarked from Hawaii. The picture was of Diamond Head, and the message detailed all the things that Justin had done while there, and it mentioned that he was next headed for Japan.

After the Hawaii card showed up, I told Clyde the whole story. He was the smartest guy I knew. Maybe he had an explanation.

He laughed. "There's one way we can find out if there is some truth to this." He reached under the bar and pulled out an old telephone and a phone book. He looked again at the postcard. "So this gnome of yours says he went to Waikiki 'yesterday,' which, according to postmark, would have been last Wednesday." He opened the phone book. "Area code for Hawaii is 808." He started dialing. "You realize that I'm going to add the cost of this call to your bar tab."

"Fine. Who are you calling?"

"Hello, Operator? Could you get me the Waikiki Police?...Right, then whoever would have, uh, jurisdiction there. Thank you kindly." He paused. "Yes, hi, I have an unusual question. Last Wednesday, did your department receive any reports of a guh-of someone dressed like a gnome hanging out on Waikiki Beach?...I see...Thanks, officer." He hung up.

"I can't believe you did that."

"Like they'll find me."

"So what did you find out?"

"That Hawaiian police officers wouldn't know what a gnome looked like if they had seen one. And I think I learned the Hawaiian word for 'fruitcake.'"

"That's a big help."

"Hey, I tried."

A week later, we received a postcard from Kyoto, Japan. Same basic thing as the others. "Having a wonderful time, blah, blah, blah." But that night, I had a strange dream. For some reason, I was wandering around downtown Tokyo. It was the most vivid, detailed dream I've ever had in my life. The stores were as real as life, I could feel the press of the crowd, hear the clamor of the street and the traffic, smell the aromas wafting out of restaurants. I went inside a sushi bar. Now, I had never eaten sushi in my life and even though the idea revolted me, I tried it without hesitation and it was delicious! I had several cups of sake and began to feel a little tipsy.

What was so amazing was that I had never been to Japan, of course. How could I dream about it in such detail? Granted, I had no idea how accurate my vivid depiction actually was, but I don't recall dreaming this vividly about places I've been my entire life.

I woke confused and disoriented. My wife swears I spoke something that sounded Japanese to her.

Two days later, I dreamt I was in China—walking around on the Great Wall, etc. etc. The next afternoon, we got a postcard from Justin—postmarked Beijing.

I mentioned all this to Clyde several days later, after I had had a few more very vivid dreams, this time from Bangkok, Cambodia, Nepal. And I had started keeping a dreamlog, and let Clyde read it. I then showed him some of the postcards that had shown up. Japan, the same day of the Japan dream, China a few days after the China dream. I expect I'll be getting a Bangkok postcard at some point, allowing for the usual vagaries of the international mail system.

"Did you ever hear of what is known as a 'familiar'?" he asked.

"A what?"

"'Familiar.' In witchcraft and other disciplines of the supernatural, familiars are animals who are the companions and assistants to witches or magicians. Basically, they are magic entities who help cast spells, or in some cases act as the disembodied eyes and ears of the magician."

"Do I have to point out that I'm a house painter, not a magician?"

"Common familiars are cats, dogs, pigs, rats, rabbits, or toads."

"But garden gnomes?"

"It can happen."

"It can?"

I remained dubious of course, but night after night the vivid dreams would come—this time I was touring Russia and it seems I developed a dreamtaste for vodka. Despite the fact that I rarely drank much more than two or three beers at Clyde's, I woke up with a hangover after the Russian dream. And the postcards kept coming, too, and after a month or so, word got around town and many would gather at Clyde's and listen as I read from the detailed dreamlog and passed around the postcards. No one believed for an instant that I was receiving mental transmissions from a roving garden gnome—or that said gnome was sending me postcards from around the world. However it was happening, it was a lot of fun, and I began to feel as if I actually had been traveling. I remembered the taste of exotic foods, conversations with locals and other tourists. A deeper understanding of the ways in which different cultures are

all really the same when you think about it, and that the differences are fun and exciting, not dangerous. So this is what real traveling is like? It seems like less of a hassle, if you ask me. And it's certainly cheaper. All it takes is a spooky garden gnome.

As for Justin, I didn't know if he would ever come back, I didn't know what would happen when the dreamvisions came full circle, nor what would happen with the postcards.

There certainly is no shortage of places on earth to visit—at least in dreams.

One final note, that may add a slight new perspective on the whole thing. One night we were at Clyde's, and I was regaling the crowd about my dreamtour of Jerusalem. Clyde had a TV installed over the bar and it was tuned to CNN, although no one was really watching it. As I spoke, I could see it out of the corner of my eye, and as the channel cut to live footage of some new violence in Palestine, I could have sworn, for a moment, just for a moment, that the camera panned over a figure—a short, stout bearded figure wearing a light blue frock and a tall, red hat.