

Consequences of a prank

When the vandals took Art's gnome, they took his joy.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [March 13, 2019](#) issue



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Four words comprise the eighth commandment, “You shall not steal”—brevity that disguises the breadth of expectation. Our minds think first of stolen physical property. But in a virtual world laden with opportunities for stealing identities and intellectual property, we’re aware of thieves who steal those distinctive facets of our lives. There’s yet another cruel form of stealing. It robs innocent people of their joy, deprives them of their happiness, all for the sake of a laugh.

Take the case of Art Grabeklis, born in Daugavpils, Latvia, 100 years ago this spring. Art escaped Soviet oppression in 1950 and immigrated to America, eventually becoming a proud United States citizen. He married, raised three children, and made a modest living as a laborer in a wire factory outside Sterling, Illinois. Art’s frugality helped him stretch every dollar. When a burglar slashed his front door screen, Art mended the screen with blue acrylic yarn. To make the birds of the neighborhood happy, he glued a carpet patch to the roof of a weather-beaten birdhouse. Such was his resourcefulness in life, living one Social Security check to the next in his later years.

Art's backyard rock garden was his sanctuary. That's where he sat and prayed for hours on end after the kids had left home and his wife had been moved to a nursing home. He painted the names of departed friends on smooth stones and sat on a bench in their midst to pray. Prayer was his salve for loneliness. Cheap yard statuettes kept him company. A stone rabbit. Plastic geese. A 15-inch-high concrete gnome. The gnome was his best friend. He'd put a knit cap on it when the weather turned cold. He'd check on it when going out to pick up the mail.

Two years ago, something possessed Art to move the gnome to an old tree stump in his front yard. He'd been scared to do it for fear of vandalism from kids who regularly taunted him. His daughter believes he wanted to share his happiness in the gnome with the neighborhood. The gnome didn't last long. Within days, a thief in the night had stolen it.

Art was crushed. His happiness had been violated. He couldn't figure out why someone would inflict such gratuitous meanness. The trauma caused him to stop eating. His wiry body declined. He'd cry over the phone when talking with his kids. The gnome wasn't coming back, nor was its thief stepping forward in remorse.

I attended Art's funeral last year, a happy event centered on the little joys that made his simple life so rich. The eulogies toasted his authenticity. When the guests departed from church, I drove by Art's house in the middle of his working-class neighborhood. It was a pilgrimage of sorts for me, a chance to see that tree stump in the front yard and the stones of saints in the back. I thought of the thieves who laughed at their midnight prank.

"Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep." Those words of Jesus have long puzzled me. I think now, though, of the shame that must come upon certain thieves when they realize they actually stole some innocent person's joy. That must be when tears replace their laughter of old.

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