

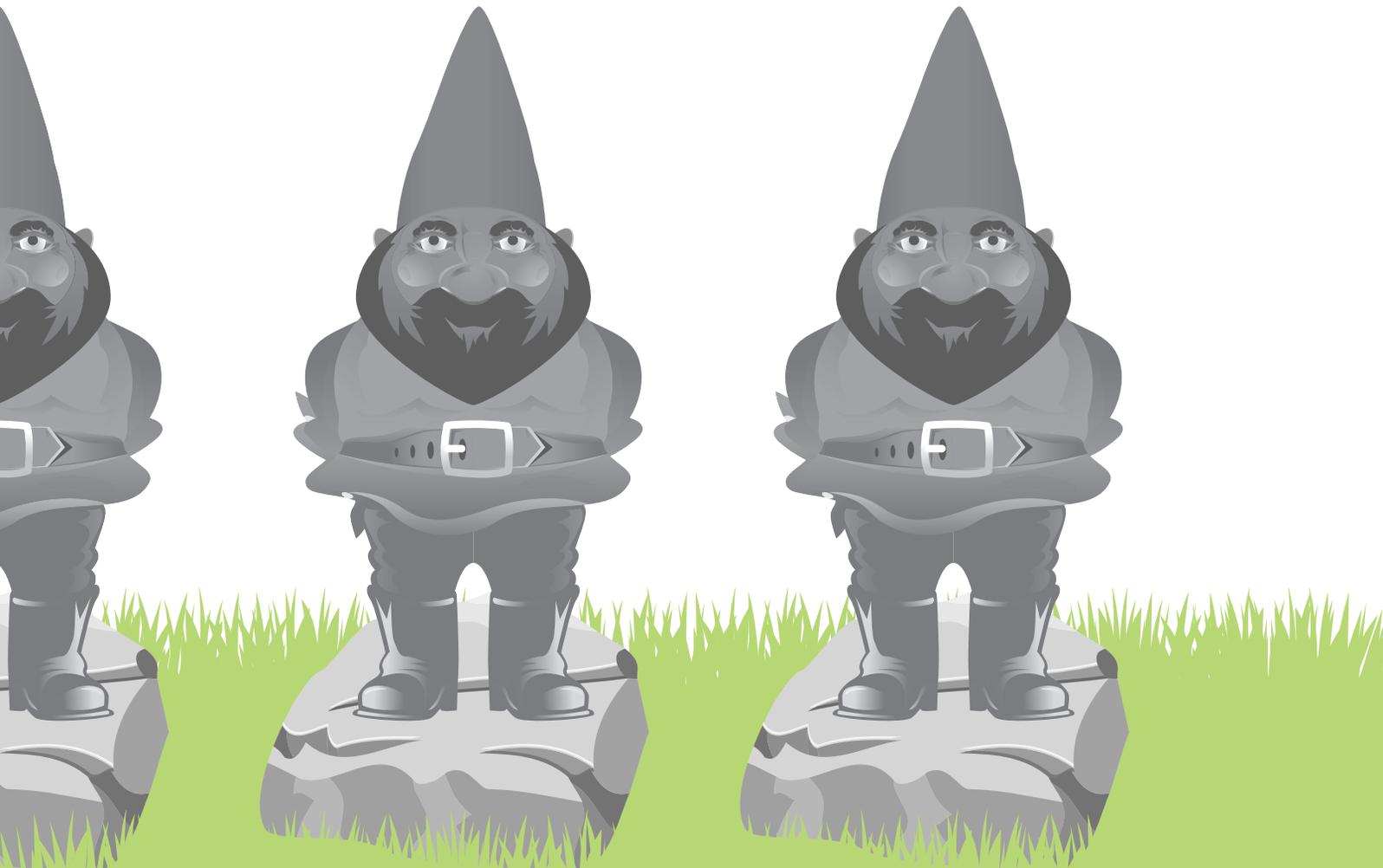


Self Help

By Bradley M. Elbein

Mrs. Herman Baker stands at her picture window in the light of the new day, a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice in her hand and a satisfied smile on her face. She surveys her domain through the spotless picture window that overlooks her perfectly coiffed lawn. The Baker Estate is in perfect order, if she does say so herself.

And then Virginia Alethea Brown Baker's satisfied gaze dissolves. She gasps, nearly collapses, grasps with her free hand for support as the drinking glass threatens to fall. When she finally catches her breath, she begins to shriek.



The bylaws of the Merry Hills Subdivision Homeowner's Association required a monthly meeting. For 30 years, that meeting had taken place in Mrs. Herman Baker's living room. At each meeting, the Association surveyed issues of prime importance to the neighborhood: crime, county code violations, and the annual Best Lawn Award.

The Merry Hills homeowners, on the other hand, met less formally but more frequently. They met in ones and twos: over back fences, beside roaring lawn mowers, between dogs pulling at their leashes, on their evening walks. They too discussed issues of prime importance to the neighborhood.

"She says we have to get rid of the compost pile or she'll call the county," said the bearded man to his neighbor. The speaker was shoveling biodegradable scraps into the compost pile that defined their joint property line.

"Outta control, man," the neighbor drawled. "The other day, she left a note on the bus that said the county didn't allow RVs to be parked on the street."

"Ridiculous," his neighbor said as he stirred the aromatic mixture with his shovel. "A hippie bus isn't an RV."

"Somebody's got to do something about her," said the driver of the hippie bus. "Otherwise, our lives are going to be hell."



Herman Baker comes running.

"I. Hate. Gnomes," Mrs. Baker hisses.

"I know that, dear."

"There's. A. Gnome. In. My. Yard."

For a moment Mr. Baker thinks that she must be making a joke. Then he sees it. Short and gray and ugly, it peers at the house from where it hides under a bush. It is unmistakably a garden gnome.

"How could you?" Mrs. Baker demands, near tears.

"Me?"



"So, I'm standing on the driveway," the lawyer said as he took the mail out of his mailbox, "and she comes out on her



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front porch and stares at me like I'm putting a '57 Chevy up on blocks in the front yard."

"I don't know how you can stand living so close to her," the advertising executive interrupted.

"I just bought the damn boat," the lawyer continued. "I backed it into the driveway so I could put up the mast and dry out the sails and she comes out on the porch and starts yelling —"

"Once," the advertising man started, "she —"

"She starts yelling, standing on her little porch and yelling back into the house to her husband." The lawyer mimics Mrs. Baker's voice as a high falsetto: "'Herman! Now they're parking boats in their driveway!' Like it's the whole Sixth Fleet, not one little sailboat on a little friggin' trailer."

"She does care," the advertising executive allowed. "Bless her heart."

"Screw her heart," spat the lawyer. "People have a right to live without having to answer to the likes of her." He looked up from his mail and peered at his neighbor. "Somebody needs to do something," he said, a week before the appearance of the gnome.



The garden gnome disappears from the Baker's lawn within minutes of its appearance, thanks to Herman Baker's heroic work. It disappears mysteriously from the Baker's trashcan almost as fast. Then it reappears, this time on the agenda of the Merry Hills Homeowner's Association. The Board resolves to act and act aggressively to combat the vandalism sweeping the neighborhood. Vandalism is the first foothold of crime and a harbinger of the destruction of the values that have always made Merry Hills home. If Code Enforcement isn't up to handling it, then the police must be brought in.



A second garden gnome appears on the Baker's lawn a week after the first. It stands shoulder-to-shoulder in silent solidarity with the first, now making its second appearance. Both interlopers stand at the frontier of the Baker domain, their backs turned toward the street, their eyes silently watching the house.

Mrs. Baker screams. Mr. Baker rushes to her side.



"But what are we supposed to do about her?" the salesman demanded. The lawyer had caught him as he was loading his sample cases into his car. "I mean, they've lived in that house since they were married what, 50 or 60 years ago? You can't exactly evict her, for Christ's sake."

"Evict her," repeated the lawyer. Then he repeated it again, thoughtfully, scratching his chin and staring off sightlessly over the lawns and gardens lining the street. "Yeah. Eviction."

"I don't getcha," the salesman said. "She's not my landlord. I'm not a tenant. I don't get —"

"Constructive eviction," the lawyer said, turning his hawk eyes on his neighbor. "That's what you call it when the landlord doesn't let you have quiet enjoyment of your property."

"I don't know what you're talking about," the salesman complained, wishing the lawyer would just go away.

"I think you might be a genius," the lawyer said, slapping him heartily on the back.



The third gnome appears on the Baker Estate on a stormy Sunday morning. Mr. Baker is sitting in his easy chair in the living room, minding his own business, reading his magazine. Mrs. Baker stalks over to the window. She stands, quivering, pointing mutely out the picture window, her face contorted in a silent scream.

Herman Baker stands and looks. There on the lawn stands the third gnome. With it are its two predecessors, back again, staring in sightless accusation at the house.

Mr. Baker turns and heads for the mudroom to find his overalls.



A few days before the first gnome appeared, the Merry Hills homeowners met together as a group for the first time. There was one item on the agenda. The lawyer, who had organized the meeting, sat as chairman.

"We could write her a letter," a gentle neighbor suggested. "Tell her how uncomfortable she makes us."

"We could take our dogs over and let them take their dumps right there on her yard," one of the yuppies cackled.

"There might be better solutions," the lawyer commented, trying to drive the meeting toward a more effective resolution.

"I don't own a dog," the fourth-grade teacher complained. "Why we don't just use our words?"

"The time for talking —" the lawyer started.

"My partner and I tried talking to her," the advertising man interrupted. "The woman thinks it's her God-given duty to keep the neighborhood straight, pun very definitely intended."

"Why," asked the rabbi's wife thoughtfully, "why don't we all just join the Homeowner's Association and just vote her and her cronies out?"

The lawyer interrupted. "I think it's time for a little self-help."



The fourth gnome and the fifth appear together in the sullen company of the first three. The first three have been out on the Baker's lawn several times, and each has been captured by Mr. Baker and unceremoniously deposited in the trash. Yet within a week, each invader has made his way back to his post again, and each time with new friends.



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“They’re just coming right back,” Mrs. Baker complains from the porch. “Perhaps you need to destroy them, Herman.”

“How would I do that, Dear?”

“There’s a hammer in the garden shed. I’ll go get it for you.”



“This is getting expensive,” whined the salesman. “I can’t keep doing this every week.”

“You don’t have to,” said the lawyer. “Just every couple of months. All of us are sharing the cost. Look what you get for your money. She hasn’t been bothering anybody since we started.”

“A few more times,” the salesman conceded, reaching for his wallet. “Then I’m done.”

“It will only take a few more times,” the lawyer promised. “Then we’ll have Mrs. Baker out of our hair for good.”



The weeks pass. The garden gnomes sprout up in the Baker yard like fungi. Thick and gross, fragile and painted, well mannered and garish, an ever-growing gnome army masses on the frontiers of the Baker Estate. No longer can Mr. and Mrs. Baker look out on their lawn with pride or contentment.

With each new gnome, another wave of trepidation crashes against the Baker estate. Mrs. Baker will shake and shriek. Mr. Baker will don his gnome-killing overalls. They will meet on the front porch, where Herman Baker will take the hammer from Virginia Baker’s shaking hand and totter down the front steps to do what must be done.



“Did you put the garden nymphs there?” the rabbi demanded.

“Aren’t they incredible?” the lawyer exclaimed. “It must drive the old woman batty. I love the way they painted the nipples all red.”

“This is a family neighborhood. Children shouldn’t be exposed to such obscenity.”

The lawyer hurriedly backtracked. “Oh, well, I’m sure nobody in this neighborhood would — ”

“Have you seen him out there with his hammer?” the rabbi added. “I’m afraid he’s going to have a heart attack.”

“Maybe we should loan him a sledge hammer,” the lawyer said with cold-blooded satisfaction. “It would be the neighborly thing.”



“Oh my God,” Mrs. Baker moans, grabbing the windowsill for support. Her husband hobbles to her side, pain shooting down his leg from his aching back. “Look at all of them out there,” she says through the fist at her mouth. “Just look!”

Five of the concrete monstrosities had grown to a dozen. A dozen had become two dozen. Now there are gnomes interspersed

with garden nymphs, gentle St. Francis shoulder-to-shoulder with gargoyles and the occasional lawn donkey and even (this is not funny!) the rare curbside jockey. Cars begin pulling up the curb, drivers getting out to stare, passengers getting out to take pictures.

Without warning, Mrs. Baker shrieks and collapses. “They’re coming closer,” Mrs. Baker cries, her eyes squeezed closed. “They’re almost up to the front steps!”

The ambulance arrives minutes later.



Now the Baker home sits dark and deserted, the lawn untended, the flowers dying. The Homeowner’s Association has fallen into disorganization. The Code Enforcement truck comes to the neighborhood no more, though if it did, the inspector might justifiably cite the knee-high weeds of the Baker Estate.

The lawyer has taken to strutting the neighborhood, slapping his neighbors on the back and trumpeting a personal triumph. “Didn’t I tell you?” he demands. He’s talking earnestly about running for president of the Homeowner’s Association. He’s talking about making some changes: he has plans for making this neighborhood something special. He’s glad to explain the plans, at some length, to anyone willing to sit and listen.



Yet, one Sunday in the near future, the lawyer will shuffle down his driveway in his ratty bathrobe and slippers to pick up his morning paper. He will bend and then, as his fingers touch the newsprint, freeze. He will feel the cold gaze of something evil tickling the hairs on the back of his neck.

From the hedge that borders his yard, he will make out a dark form. He will peer at it, trying to focus. The vague form will slowly resolve into a tiny figure, ill formed and ugly. From empty eye-sockets, the garden gnome’s stare will pierce him.

The good news is that on the first morning, there will be only one.



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