

Green Grass and Gingernuts

By Steve Rogers

The man walked along his hallway to answer the doorbell, in much the same way as he was approaching his seventieth birthday, quickly, and with ill humour.

He opened the door but not the fly screen, keeping a barrier between himself and the outside world. He recognised the boy from across the road but had never spoken to him.

“What?” He said.

“I can mow your lawn if you like?” The boy’s smile was a counterbalance to the man’s frown. “Very reasonable rates.”

“I don’t like. Go home.” As he shut the door, the boy called out.

“I’ll do it for nothing, and you can pay me what you think it’s worth.” The man stopped and reopened the door just before it had closed. The boy was looking up at him through the flyscreen mesh. “I’ve even got my own mower.”

The thought of something free was appealing, but it meant he would have to talk to the boy. Even thank him and, possibly, give him some money.

“Just go home and play, or whatever it is that little boys do.”

“I’m not little. I’m eleven, and my Mum says. ‘If you enjoy your work, then it’s better than playing.’”

“So, you enjoy mowing lawns then?”

“I don’t know yet. We’ll find out, won’t we?” He was still smiling. Surely his face was going to start hurting soon. “My mum says. ‘You never know if you don’t try’.”

“Your Mum seems to know a lot.” The man opened the flyscreen door to get a better look at the boy. “Has she taught you how to mow a lawn yet?”

“She don’t need to mister. I already know.” He took a phone out of his pocket. “I watched it on YouTube. I did our lawn yesterday.”

The man looked over the boy’s head at the opposite nature strip. It was short. “And did you enjoy it?”

‘It was okay. Better than homework.’ Somehow, the boy’s smile grew even wider. “And I’ll definitely enjoy it if I’m getting paid.”

“In that case, you won’t enjoy it because you won’t get paid.” And he shut the door.

* * *

A short time later. Lunchtime. The man was eating some slices of apple. He always ate fruit after a meal, when he heard the sound of a lawn mower starting up. And it sounded close.

That little bugger, he thought. He put the last slice of apple in his mouth and walked back down the hallway and out of his front door.

Sure enough, screening his eyes from the glare of the midday sun, he saw the boy mowing his nature strip.

“What do you think you’re doing?” The boy continued mowing, so he shouted. “What are you doing?”

The boy stopped mowing and looked over. “Mowing your lawn.” He shouted back, the engine still running.

“Why?” The man pointed, waved his hand up and down rapidly. “And turn that bloody thing off.”

The boy slid the lever on the push bar and stood upright, wiping sweat that had already formed off his brow. The mower shuddered into silence.

“We spoke about it. Don’t you remember? I said I would like to mow your lawn, and you said that you wouldn’t pay me anything for it. But my Mum says it’s ‘right neighbourly’ to do it anyway.” The boy’s smile was back. “She said that with an American accent. I think she was trying to be funny.”

“Don’t be cheeky. Of course I remember. I’m not senile.” The man glanced across the street. “You’re Mum has a lot to say for herself. Where is she now?”

“She had to go to work.” The boy’s smile had gone. “She has extra jobs on Saturday’s and Sunday’s. She says it’s the only way we can make ends meet.”

“She’s gone out to work and left a ten-year-old on his own?”

“Eleven. And I’m not on my own. I’m with you.” His smile was back with interest.

The man looked around cupping his hands over his cheeks. Like it or not, he was cornered. He didn’t want the boy left alone and he didn’t want him in his house.

“Okay. Get on with it and don’t hurt yourself.” He was going to have a word with this woman when she got back. “I’ll open the side gate so you can do the back too when you’ve done the front lawn.”

“Thanks, mister. I’ll give you a shout when I’ve finished. What’s your name?” “Mr. Buttery to you.”

“Buttery? That’s a cool name. “I’m Jamie. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Buttery.”

“Just let me know when you’ve finished.” Mr. Buttery went back inside and closed the door.

* * *

The man was finding it hard to concentrate on his crossword. It was hard enough without the distraction of the lawnmower out front and then, percolating through the back door. But it was worse when it fell silent. He expected to hear a scream as the boy, Jimmy, was it? Caught his hand in the

blade and severed a finger or worse. He did not like being responsible for that little tyke.

He peaked out of the window a few times, not wishing to be seen. The boy was either mowing diligently or carrying grass clippings to the bins. He'd better put those in the green waste, Mr. Buttery thought. After a longer than usual pause in the mowing there was a knock at the back door. Mr. Buttery, put his still unfinished crossword down and walked over to open it.

The warm smell of fresh cut grass enveloped the kitchen and Jamie, standing with the freshly mown lawn behind him, said. 'All done, Mr. Buttery.'

Mr. Buttery was alarmed. The boy had green hands, and his skinny legs, poking out from beneath his frayed shorts, also had green knees. But what was alarming was the bright red colour of his face streaming with so much sweat that his straight brown hair was plastered to his skull.

"Haven't you had anything to drink? It's bloody hot today." He looked out at the lawn. It was cut evenly, all the clippings had been cleared away and even the path was swept.

"I hope it's okay. I used your broom to clean up a bit."

"You haven't even got a hat." Mr. Buttery's Day had been completely derailed. He'd been interrupted, he hadn't finished his crossword, and, against all his instincts, someone was going to come into his home. "Come inside out of the heat. I'll get you some cold water."

"Thanks, Mr. Buttery. I only have one hat and I left it at school yesterday." Jamie couldn't hide his look of relief but, as he stepped forward, Mr. Buttery held his hand out to stop him.

"Take those shoes off first."

When he did enter Mr. Buttery noticed the boy's right big toe was poking through a hole in his sock.

"Sit there and try not to wriggle. I don't want grass all over the kitchen floor." He got two glasses and filled them both from a jug of cold water he kept in the fridge. As an afterthought, he reached his biscuit barrel from the counter. Jamie picked up his glass and downed it, almost in one go. Dribbles of water leaked down his chin and onto his sweat-stained tee shirt.

“Have a gingernut?” He took the lid off the biscuit barrel and offered it to Jamie who, grinning, plucked two from the container.

“Just one. You can have another after. They’ll still be there.” Mr. Buttery took one for himself, but he snapped it in two and put the other half back.

Taking a second bite of his gingernut Jamie took stock of his surroundings. The kitchen was old but clean and tidy, with mugs hanging from hooks under shelves supporting blue Delft plates and bowls. “Nice kitchen, Mr. Buttery. Mrs. Buttery keeps it very clean.”

“There’s no Mrs. Buttery.”

“Oh. Sorry. I thought there was? My Mum said there was.”

“Your Mum doesn’t know as much as she thinks. Mrs. Buttery left us ... Passed last year.” He didn’t care for the direction of this conversation.

“Passed? You mean died? I’m very sorry to hear that, Mr. Buttery.” The boy, sitting with his thin dirty legs swinging underneath the wooden kitchen table, drinking his water and eating his gingernut biscuits, looked genuinely concerned. It was unexpected from one so young.

The man wanted to change the subject. He had seen a man with tattoos going in and out of Jamie’s house a couple of times.

“Where’s your dad?” He said. “Shouldn’t he be looking after you if your Mum’s at work?”

The boy looked down into his empty glass and rubbed his dangling feet together.

“He’s gone.” The smile had gone too. ‘And good riddance,’ I say.”

“You shouldn’t disrespect your father like that.” He hadn’t even started his half biscuit, so he took a small bite.

“He’s no good. Mum says. We’re better off without him. Just Mum and me. We’ll be okay.” Mr. Buttery wondered who he was trying to convince. He decided to change the subject.

“What’s your favourite subject at school?”

He was amazed to discover it was music. The boy perked up, talking quickly about the songs that he liked. None of which Mr. Buttery had ever heard of. Jamie produced a cracked and scratched phone from his pocket and opened some kind of 'app'. He played some of his music for Mr. Buttery and, to his surprise, he quite liked it. Not all though.

They talked for some time. The boy was intelligent and well-mannered despite his innocent directness.

"Have you heard of Bruce Springsteen?" Jamie, mouth full of his fifth ginger nut, shook his head.

"Bruce who?" Crumbs sprayed the table.

"See if you can find him in that app of yours.

He did, and soon Born in the USA filled the room, albeit sounding tinny on the cheap phone.

Jamie said that he loved Bruce and quickly found and played many more of his most famous songs. Mr. Buttery felt that Jamie, or was it Jimmy? wasn't just being polite. Maybe he really did like Bruce. And, the redness had left his face.

"He's here a week Saturday, and I bought myself a ticket to go and see him. It's my seventieth birthday present to myself."

"Mum said you were old, but I didn't think you were that old." Again, that innocent directness. "That's older than my Grandad."

Mr. Buttery found that he wasn't offended. "I dreamed of being a rock star when I was your age. Someone like Bruce Springsteen." Why was he opening up to this little upstart? "I suppose most of the boys in my generation did. I even wrote a song when I was a young man. A long time ago now though"

The boy's eyes widened. "You wrote a song? Wow! How does it go? Can I hear it? Is it on Spotify?"

"I don't know what Spotify is. But I can assure you it isn't on it"

"Maybe you could sing it to me? I've never met anybody who has written a song before. Is it good?" The boy, his hair now dry and sticking out at all

angles, had such a look of expectancy that Mr. Buttery didn't know what to do next.

"I ... I suppose I could." He stood up and brushed his hand back across his thinning grey hair. "I ... Er... Just need to get my guitar."

The man left the room but soon came back with an old but well looked after acoustic guitar. Jamie was still sitting on his chair, smiling and swinging his skinny legs.

"It won't need tuning." Jamie looked a little confused, but Mr. Buttery didn't elaborate. He slung the strap around his neck and found that he was nervous. "I haven't played this since Nell passed ... Died. I've only ever played it for her." He paused. "Silly really, she always dreamed of me singing this in front of a proper audience. You know. Just like Bruce." He looked up, took a deep breath, looked at the boy and, for the first time, played his song for someone who wasn't Nell.

He finished. There was a pause and he felt embarrassed. His cheeks flushed. But it was only short lived. Jamie looked awestruck, and then he beamed and applauded loudly.

"That was fucking awesome, Mr. Buttery." He stopped and slapped his hand over his mouth. "Sorry. My Mum says I shouldn't swear... But she does."

"Your Mum is right. You shouldn't swear." He thought he was sounding stern but realised that he was smiling just as much as Jamie.

"That's about your wife, isn't it?" Jamie said. "It's a love song. And you wrote it just for her."

Just then the front doorbell rang. This was becoming a habit.

"Stay there." He said to Jamie as he unslung the guitar. "I'll see who that is."

He walked down the hall and opened the door. He recognised the woman standing there as Jamie's mother.

"I'm so sorry. I hope my son hasn't been a bother. It's my fault." The woman took a breath. "I'm Angelina Jenkins. Your neighbour from across

the street. My son is still here, isn't he? He's such a chatterbox." The woman would not stop talking. "I encouraged him to try to earn a bit of pocket money." She looked around Mr. Buttery. "Come on Jamie. Let's get you home. It's late." Mr. Buttery looked around to see Jamie just behind him. He realised that they had been talking all afternoon. It must be past five o'clock. Dumbfounded, he looked back at the boy's mother.

'Hi Mum. I mowed Mr. Buttery's lawn all be myself. He gave me a drink and some biscuits. He's nearly seventy years old and he's written a song. It's awesome" From behind, a little green hand slipped itself into Mr. Buttery's. "It's a love song."

"Edward," He said as he looked down at the boy's hand nestled comfortably in his palm. "You can call me Edward."

* * *

That night, Edward sat in his bed trying to finish the crossword. Today's was particularly hard and he was stuck on the last two clues. His mind wandered back to the afternoon and Jamie. Singing a song to a boy in his kitchen had not been on his list of things to do today, but it was the first time for ages that he had smiled. The first time he had even felt like smiling since Nell had died.

All he wanted was to shut the world out. Not have to try to be happy. But, he realised, he had enjoyed the boy's company? He was glad that he had given him twenty dollars as they left.

However, when he watched the boy, with his mother, stop at the gate and give her the note, and she had bent down and kissed his grimey forehead, he wished it had been a fifty.

They had agreed that he would come every Saturday, from now on, to mow the lawn and Edward hoped that his mother would be at work, so that they could spend the afternoon together to talk about music and who knows whatever else an eleven-year-old boy might be interested in.

He put his crossword aside and turned off the bedside light. He lay on his back. The pitch black subsided and gave way to his bedroom's shadowy outline. The dim streetlight's glow seeping around the drawn curtains. He considered how different his life might have been if ever he had become a singer. But that fantasy never lasted. Instead, his mind took him to the

same place it did every night. This is where I turn to my right and kiss my wife goodnight. And tell her I love her. But of course, he didn't, he just closed his eyes and whispered. "I miss you, Nell."

Then the shouting started. And it didn't sound like someone having a party. Edward climbed out of bed and peered through the crack in the blinds. Pulling them back to get a better view, he saw a man, a woman, and a boy struggling on the porch of the house opposite. The man was wearing a singlet and shorts. The woman a nightdress, and the boy wore pyjamas. But what was most distressing was that the man, well-muscled, and with tattoos, was holding the boy, kicking and writhing, under one arm like a roll of carpet. While simultaneously, fending off the women with his other arm.

Then the man wrenched his fending arm free and punched the woman in the face. She went down, and he heard Jamie scream. "Mum. Mum... you bastard"

Without hesitation, Edward rushed through his front door and across the street. He was nearly seventy years old, but he ate well and kept fit. He couldn't let this happen. As he ran, he shouted.

"Hey you. Stop. Put that boy down. I've called the police." He hadn't. He arrived at the bottom of the porch. "Leave them alone. Fuck off."

Jamie's mother was still on the ground looking groggy. The man turned, smiling, to look at Edward. It was Jamie's smile, but it wasn't Jamie's innocent grin. It was full of malice.

"Who the fuck are you?" Edward was by now close enough to smell alcohol on the man's breath in the still warm air.

Jamie shouted. "Help. I don't want to go with him." He tried to kick the man but couldn't get his leg around.

"Go home, Mr. Buttery." Angeline was up on one arm now. "You can't help. You'll only get hurt." Her lip was split and bleeding and her eye was swollen and starting to close.

"Fuck off, Mr. Buttery." The man spat this out. "Or I'll spread you all over the pavement. This is my son, and he's coming to live with me."

“I hate you. I’m not coming with you. I’ll never live with you, you arse-hole.” The whole time Jamie had been pounding ineffectual punches on the man’s chest. But one low swing caught the man in the groin. He oomph’d out a breath and bent forward. But he didn’t release Jamie.

Without any real plan, Edward leapt up the step to the porch, but the man, strong and forty years his junior, straightened up and pushed him effortlessly back with his free hand. Edward toppled backwards down the step and off the porch to crash onto the path below. Then a police car did arrive.

* * *

Jamie came to visit Edward every day while he was in hospital. Sometimes with his bruised mother. But when she had to work, he came on his own. Edward was glad of the visits. It helped take his mind off his broken ankle, now in a moon boot with three pins inserted. But mostly because he was glad to see the boy and know that he was safe. Jamie chattered incessantly. He mostly talked about music. He played songs from his own playlist as well as songs by Bruce Springsteen which they both sang along to.

When the doctors were satisfied that he could walk with crutches, and that Jamie and his mother would keep an eye on him, he was allowed home. An ambulance dropped him off, and Jamie and his mother immediately came round with some gingernut biscuits and lasagna separated into individual portions for easy microwaving.

They were drinking tea, even though it wasn’t time for tea, while Jamie devoured the biscuits. Angeline said.

“It’s your seventieth on Saturday, isn’t it?” She looked at her son. “Jamie said you are going to see Bruce Springsteen. “That’s exciting.”

“Oh, I don’t think so.” Edward looked down at his foot. “This is going to get in the way.” He took a last bite of his half-biscuit. “I think I’ll just stay home and take it easy.”

“The hell you will.” Angeline said.

“Mum’s got it sorted.” Jamie said, smiling at his mother.

“What do you mean? Sorted. I don’t want you going to any trouble for me.”

“Mr. Buttery.” She was deadly serious. “What you did for me and Jamie. I can never thank you enough. No one has ever cared for us like that. Neither Jamie or me, will ever forget what you tried to do for us.” She looked at Jamie, smiled and looked back at Edward. “You are going to see Bruce. And that’s that. They were both beaming at him now, and he had no option but to smile back.

* * *

Edward was at the Bruce Springsteen concert, sitting in a seat at the end of the front row. It was his seventieth birthday. Jamie and his mother had come round earlier with a birthday cake she had made herself. Jamie had iced it and had piped a red ‘Happy Birthday Mr. Buttery’ together with a little squiggle, that was supposed to be a guitar. They drank cheap champagne and wore party hats. Edward blew out the single candle, and his visitors sang Happy Birthday. Mr. Buttery felt happy.

Now, thanks to Jamie’s mum’s persuasive phone calls to the concert organisers, and a taxi (which he had insisted on paying for) he was sitting in the front row as the lights went down and the E Street Band started playing.

Bruce Springsteen is known for the length of his concerts. And this was no exception. It was close to midnight, with every song a banger, and the last song was anticipated. The applause finished, and Bruce stepped forward to the microphone.

“We will be doing our last song soon, but before we do...”

He waited while the house lights went up. The crowd quietened, curious. Bruce looked down toward the front row.

“There’s someone special here tonight. A man is turning seventy today. Someone who reminds us of what real rock ’n’ roll is about, courage, heart, and not giving up, even when life tries to shut you down.”

The audience murmur its interest as heads turned. Bruce raised a hand and pointed.

“Edward Buttery. Would you mind standing?”

Edward blinked, stunned. The spotlight found him. He felt every eye in the arena fall on him. Slowly, awkwardly, he pushed himself up with his crutches. An usher offered a steadying hand. The audience erupted in applause. Some people stood up near him, clapping, cheering, whooping.

Bruce smiled, a warm, well worn grin that belonged to a man who had seen it all.

“I have a letter here, sent to me from a certain Master Jamie Jenkins. It says that you are seventy years old today.” Bruce waited while everyone clapped. “It says that you are a hero, that’s why you’ve got a broken ankle, and that you are the kindest man Jamie has ever met.” More clapping. “It goes on to say that, a long time ago, you wrote a song for your wife, and it’s really good.” He was looking at Edward expecting an answer. Edward felt something was needed of him so he shouted.

“Well. I don’t know that it’s any good.” His voice sounded tiny in the large auditorium.

“Well, maybe we should be the judge of that.” As Bruce said that a roadie appeared on the stage carrying an acoustic guitar and a chair. “No pressure Mr. Buttery, but I know Jamie would love to hear you perform this song in front of a ‘proper audience’.” Bruce gestured to the side of the stage, and Jamie stepped forward. Beaming his infectious smile.

Edward was speechless. What was he to do? He knew the song. He had sung it to Nell, often for forty years. But all he wanted was to slope away back to his kitchen and his crossword. Could he let that boy down? Could he let Nell down? He didn’t think that he could. Then, the audience started chanting.

“Sing the song. Sing the song.” The usher appeared again offering help up the steps. Feeling he was in a dream, Slowly, Edward moved forward, and the audience clapped and cheered.

Once on the stage he sat in the chair. He was surrounded by lights, cables and instruments. The E Street Band gave him welcoming nods. Mister Springsteen handed him the guitar. As he lowered the microphone closer to Edward, a bead of sweat dripped off the end of his nose on to Edward’s arm. This was really happening. Springsteen’s face was close to Edward’s ear, and he said.

“Don’t worry. They’re gonna love you. Just pretend you’re singing it to Nell. Enjoy the moment.” He smiled and stepped back.

The house lights went down. The spotlight blinded him, and he squinted as a hush came over the crowd. There was silence. Edward looked to his

left and saw Jamie. He was holding his hands clasped under his chin and was smiling fit to burst. His skinny legs were performing their own jiggy little dance.

Edward looked up and took a deep breath. He looked out at the audience, but he only saw his wife smiling at him. He played his song for Nell.

* * *

Back home, it was quiet. Edward hobbled into the kitchen, where the guitar still leaned in the corner. He poured himself a small glass of port, sat down, and ran his fingers over the wood of the guitar.

Then, he looked at his calendar.

Every Saturday, a small, scribbled note read. 'Jamie. Mow lawn'.

But next to the coming Saturday, he picked up a pen and added something more:

'Teach Jamie my song'.

Mr Buttery sat back, smiled to himself in the silence, and whispered, "I did it Nell. I played to proper audience."

And somewhere in the stillness, it felt like she whispered back.