

THE LUG NUTS

(Author's Note: This story was inspired by an incident that happened many years ago. Strange though it may seem today, owning a "foreign car" used to brand you as an oddball, and most car parts stores didn't carry parts for anything that wasn't made in Detroit. That situation has changed, but you will still have trouble convincing most parts salesmen that old British cars aren't metric.)

The MG owner stared at the lug nut in his hand and silently cursed the gas station mechanic. Then he looked back up at the parts store. "Tiny's Auto Parts." The words were painted on the storefront window of a narrow brick building, sandwiched between a dry cleaners and a shoe repair. A dusty collection of hydraulic jacks and grease guns was barely visible through the grimy window. Not much to look at, but it was the only parts store within walking distance of the gas station. With a sigh of resignation, he walked inside.

"Tiny" was standing behind a wooden parts counter, talking on the telephone. He must have weighed at least 280 lbs, and was wearing what had once been a light blue work shirt. He glanced at the MG owner but continued talking on the telephone. The conversation seemed to be about a television show from the night before.

The MG owner sat on one of the cracked, red barstools in front of the counter and surveyed the store. Under different circumstances, he would have considered the place a classic piece of automotive heritage. A few small displays of brake tools and automotive chemicals graced the customer area in front of the counter, but this was obviously not a self-serve store. Long racks of parts bins stretched from the work area behind the counter to the rear of the store. On the end of each rack, facing the counter, red pegboards held a variety of chrome plated hand tools. Beyond the racks, the back wall held a jumbled assortment of mufflers and tailpipes. Fan belts hung from nails driven into the top edge of the walls, just below the ceiling. The ceiling itself was an ornate pressed tin affair, caked with peeling paint and decorated by a few well populated fly strips. A large ceiling fan turned slowly above the counter.

"Whatcha want?" Tiny was off the phone now, ready for business.

"I need some lug nuts." The MG owner placed his lug nut on the counter. Tiny picked up the nut and chuckled.

"Bet you just came from old Dean Wilter's place. He just got hisself a new air wrench. This is the third time this week he's buggered up a lug nut. This one don't look too bad. You could still use it."

"This isn't one of the ones he stripped. I brought in a good one so you could see what I needed."

"What'd it come off of?"

"It's kind of an oddball. I'm sure you don't have any catalogs for it, but I thought maybe you could match the threads."

"I got a whole shelf 'a catalogs. What's it offa?"

The MG owner hesitated a moment before answering. "A 1957 MGA"

"Ain't got none."

"You didn't even look!"

"Don't hafta look. I know what I got and I ain't got these. Ain't got any metric nuts."

"This isn't metric. It's SAE. Same as a Ford or Chevy."

"You said it was an MG, didn't ya? That's foreign. All them foreign cars use metric nuts."

Hell, sometimes even American cars use 'em now. It's a scam to sell more wrenches. I don't believe in it, and I don't stock metric. If God had wanted us to go metric he woulda give us ten disciples."

"This is British. The Brits invented the inch. We got it from them."

Tiny looked at the nut suspiciously. "Ain't never yet seen a foreign car that wasn't metric."

He thought a while longer. Then he put the nut back down on the counter. "Buddy 'a mine had a British motorbike once. The fuel pump went bad and we couldn't find no wrenches nowhere that would fit it." He looked at the MG owner in triumph.

The MG owner closed his eyes in resignation. "It must have been Whitworth" he whispered.

"What?" asked Tiny.

"Whitworth. I said it must have been Whitworth."

"Nah. It was a Triumph or somethin."

"Not the bike, the threads. The British used to use Whitworth nuts and bolts. They come in truly weird sizes. No other wrench will fit."

"Thought you said they invented the inch."

"They used Whitworth before they invented the inch."

Tiny looked at the MG owner suspiciously. Then, with an air of finality, he declared

"Don't matter. I don't got none of these."

Sadly, the MG owner picked up his lug nut. As he was turning to leave, he stopped, and looked back at Tiny. "Are you a betting man?"

Tiny eyed the MG owner warily. "Might be" he replied.

"I'll bet you a dollar that if you take a 7/16" bolt out of your parts bins it will thread right into this nut."

Tiny took the nut in his hand and examined it carefully. "OK" he said. He stepped back into the parts area. A few moments later he emerged with a smile on his face. "Don't fit. Told you it wouldn't. Gimmie the buck."

The MG owner placed his dollar on the counter. "Let me see that" he demanded.

Tiny took the dollar and handed over the nut and bolt. The MG owner looked at it a few seconds and then he put another dollar on the counter.

"All right. I'll bet you another dollar that if you take a 7/16" *fine thread* bolt out of your bin it will fit this nut."

Tiny hesitated a moment, but realized he couldn't back out. He took the nut and disappeared between the shelves again. "Hey" he said with surprise. "It fits!" He started to take a dollar out of his wallet.

"You can keep the dollar" the MG owner said. "Just get me four 7/16" fine thread lug nuts."

"Don't stock 'em that way. I stock 'em according to what they fit."

"Well, can't you take that bolt back and find a lug nut that will fit it? If it fits that bolt, it

will fit my car."

"That could take hours. I can't afford to spend that much time helping one customer search for some oddball part. I got a business to run."

The MG owner scanned the store. There was not another customer in the place, and the sidewalks outside were empty. He was about to ask Tiny if he had any other pressing transactions to attend to, but thought better of it. Instead he decided to try a direct appeal. "Look. I'm stuck here. I'm driving cross country to visit an old friend and be the best man in his wedding. I pulled off the Interstate to get gas and while I'm filling up I see a sign "We fix flats." I've got a slow leak in my right rear tire, so I figure what the heck. Might as well get it fixed. Next thing I know, this ham-handed grease monkey strips my lug nuts and I'm stranded. You've got the only parts store for miles around, and I think you've got the nuts I need in stock. But if you won't look for them, I'll miss my buddy's wedding."

Tiny appeared to soften a bit. Then he said "I'll see what I can find." He began rummaging through his parts bins, and in a few minutes he returned with four lug nuts. "Great!!!" The MG owner almost jumped for joy. "Thanks for finding them. What do I owe you?"

Tiny consulted a small paper chart taped to the cash register. "That'll be forty one dollars and sixty cents."

"What??"

"Yep. That's ten bucks apiece for the nuts, plus a dollar sixty for the Governor."

"Ten dollars apiece... for lug nuts????!!!"

"Hey. These ain't just any nuts. These fit one of them fancy British sports cars!"

With the help of a good lawyer, the MG owner was able to prove that he was a victim of customer abuse. His long, unhappy history of searching for British car parts elicited sympathy from the jury. Cramming the lug nuts down Tiny's throat was found to be justifiable homicide.

*For more stories about British sports cars, read
"Flaming Floorboards," available from [Amazon](#) and [Barnes & Noble](#).*