

## The Last Gargoyle

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Art is the proper task of life.*

Happiest larks in the meadow are the idiots. Look at one of 'em sometime and tell me I ain't spot on. I know ... I know, I'm not supposed to think it, but that don't make it any less truthful. If somebody go and call you a moron how that make you feel? The whole 'created equal' deal didn't take into account the fact some got blessed with big brains and some hardly have the sense God gave a goose. I'm not all bad. I usually don't pick on the less fortunate just because I can. No. I'm all about challenges is all there is to it. I live in a free country and choose to befriend fellas who can maintain their end of a conversation. So I'm the first one to admit I got ugly when a nitwit somehow figured he good enough to befriend me.

I didn't see it coming 'til it was too late. The janitor wiped his nose on *my* sleeve. Not acceptable in my world. Oh, nobody seen him do it, but they sure heard me. I called him a thing or two. I just so happen to pack a thing called a temper, not that that's an excuse or anything. Boy, let me tell you I felt like I got it all wrong in no time flat. It was like everyone thought I should be kind and understanding and not defend myself at all. Well, I stared down the simpleton, realizing I couldn't hate him anymore even if I tried really hard. He was grinning, but not over anything he'd just did. Grinning seemed to be his preferred manner. The whole thing just bugged me enough to not go to class. I mean I'm not going to sit in class watching snot dry on my sleeve. I got pointed in the direction of my van, but flopped down on the first bench I passed. I sat tight, visualizing the act of vengeance that went from a slap to mowing down nitwits with my van. The pint of vodka came in handy. It helped fuel thoughts of what I'd do to equal

the score. Before I got going again I had decided I would avenge this great wrong. How this was to be done I did not know.

So how in the hell did I become a snot rag in the first place? Everyone parties the night before the first day of classes. We partied, I won a contest and ... okay ... stayed up all night.

My frat even toasted me with beer bong. I was the man of the hour and won the 'Hogger Contest'. My brothers called my date a Hog-o-rilla. It was just a 'fun and games' play on words.

We all knew a boar hog could never screw a gorilla and produce my date. I think her name was Sally and she was butt ugly. I got paid the pot because, through no fault of mine, she heard the laughing and comments and stormed off before I could kiss her and collect the cash. So I'm not sure if it was the partying or not, but I couldn't find my art lab. My fraternity is known for being responsible so we all pledged to make it to class either puking or half asleep. So all I want to do is make it to class and sit in the back nursing a severe hangover. My head's pounding and I'm feeling I must look like one of the freshman loose in the hallway. I ask a custodian, with the name Gary on his shirt, for directions and he wipes his nose on me. How could I know a custodian, named Gary who I hadn't even met before, was my sworn enemy?

After that unforgettable first encounter it seemed like I was always bumping into Gary. He made like he'd gained a friend while I obsessed with evening the score; how does one live with the fact an ignoramus got the better of him? Right?

Gary morphed into a big pain in the ass. I mean the tard couldn't leave me be. Last thing on my mind would be good old Gary and then he'd get to following me around telling everyone we were buddies. I wasn't sure if I was embarrassed or pissed, but the heat would roll off my forehead. There was no shaking Gary so the best I could do is hide behind a wall of laughter. Problem was, the more I laughed the more I hated myself. I knew I was nothing but a limp dick.

News would be on in the cafeteria and I'd watch it while downing a sub sandwich. Seemed like every day there'd be a story about a shooting somewhere; left me wondering why Gary couldn't be on the wrong end of a gun. Put him out of his misery and help me some with my state of mind. If I didn't have vodka, I'm serious here, I'd've never made it.

My mother had got the notion that I drank too much. Getting kicked out of my father's Ivy League school didn't help. That's how I ended up in a public school. Sometimes things just don't work out as planned. School struck me as a good excuse to party an extra four or five years. Wasn't long before I was put on academic probation. One thing led to another, and before I knew it, I was in a new school pursuing art. If an elephant could paint so could I. Not a lot of homework to mess with your vodka dreams if you're enrolled in an art program. So anyway ... mother made me promise the usual no vodka deal. I care about the feelings of others, so I would go out of my way to purchase my bottles in three separate stores. That way I avoided the look, and I always used cash. If mother asked, I always said something like I needed art supplies. The booze itself wasn't a problem at all. I used the big bottles to refill my pint which disappeared into my pocket. I needed my pint like an asthma sufferer depends on his inhaler.

I woke up on Saturday which meant exercise. A walk to the liquor store. I didn't see him until we literally bumped into each other. I had him in my speech class and he wasted little time telling me all about a problem. He needed cash for gas, to see his girl, and begged me to purchase his pistol. I'm like, "What do I need a gun for?" and he's offering to throw in a box of bullets. So I end up with a stub nosed thirty-eight. At first I didn't think I could ever kill anything for real, but that didn't stop me from thinking about it. It was like knowing I was big and bad and nobody best not mess with me. I now had the feeling others in my world were alive just because I had decided they should be. It got to the point where I wished I had always owned a gun.

Monday happened way too soon like it always seemed to do. Time for class and I'm running around with a toothbrush in my mouth wondering how the weekend had disappeared. I find a parking spot and veer to the nearest bathroom on my way to class. Got to do a watercolor picture so I make an exception and lock myself in a stall and take a couple of long pulls on my pint. I usually wait until noon for my medicine but, I got to rattle the shaking out of my hands if I'm going to nail the watercolor. The hands got to shaking after only a couple of weeks in class. Doesn't take an Einstein to figure out it's all about the gallons of coffee a guy has to pound to make it at the collegiate level. Anyways, I'm leaving the bathroom and spot Gary. He stands out like a topless woman in church in his goofy overalls. He's bent forward, grinning and trotting toward me pulling his bangs out of his face. If I had known this I would have pounded more liquid courage, but hey, I fake a smile. Someone is laughing and I wonder if it's because I am friends with Gary. Today comes with a mechanism of escape. I am late for class. We greet each other and leave it at that.

All's good in class and I nail it. Not sure what came first ... the vodka or the Masters, but you name it ... Rembrandt or any of the others could have painted better if they were half in the bag. The instructor was radiant and full of praise. She actually leaned into me enough to cause me to hold my breath. Some people come with real sensitive sniffers. Vodka was supposed to be odorless. My mother put any bloodhound to shame with her ability to smell a drop of vodka a mile away. So I'm down for a ton of praise before the instructor is replaced by one of my frat brothers.

"Dude, no worries in this class. I'm still hanging from last night and can't hold a brush but look at you. All's good."

"No worries."

The praise started getting uncomfortable. Besides I wanted to toast my performance with a sip of vodka. “If I don’t see you in the future ... I’ll see ya in the pasture,” and I make for the bathroom like I gotta piss bigtime. After a delicious gulp or two I head to the cafeteria. Stale subs were their specialty. I looked around before ditching into a dark booth to do my first food of the day.

The thought of vodka helping the sandwich down entered my thoughts. I glance around to see if the coast is clear and see him headed my way. Ahh Shit! No escape. Gary wiggled and pushed his way into the booth. I didn’t lift a finger to help him, hoping the idiot would dump his tray. Gary was outfitted in bib-overalls—complete with pencils in the chest pockets—and combat boots. The overalls barely touched the top of his boots. He topped the ensemble off with a bright white Stetson. It was like a marquee drawing everyone’s attention to the fact I was having lunch with a ding-a-ling. Gary tore open his lunch before working a dirty finger under the bun. He swept mayo out and stared at it.

I leaned back and watched Gary amuse himself with his mayo’d-up finger. He held it over the table, zooming it around like an airplane. The thought of slapping some sense into the clown tantalized me, but it was wishful thinking; kicking bulls in the nuts or messing with Gary’s mayo both would end up causing higher life insurance premiums. What Gary lacked in brains he made up for with a shit ton of muscle.

There was a rhythm to campus life. Certain students showed up at certain times. You could count on seeing so and so at such and such a place and time. I was looking for the girl, the so fine denim princess. When she finally stepped into my line of site I totally stiffened. She was one badass lady I’d love to do, but then a loud pop broke the spell. I was pissed. Gary made another popping sound by pushing on the inside of his cheek with his finger and then pulling it

out. *Just keep it quiet dude*—I’m thinking. She must’ve heard it because she glanced at us. My face felt like a radiator when our eyes met. *All’s good if I could man up and plant a bullet in his head.* I stared hard at a spot between Gary’s eyes. He’d taken to smearing mayonnaise around his paper plate with his finger. “Never seen anyone get after old mayonnaise like you, Gary.”

“Awe shuck, it just good is what I know. Wanna know sumpting?” Gary’s eyes widened.

“Oh Christ here we go—” I figured.

“Sometime ma ain’t round I put a big spoon right in mayo jar. I do. She say sumten like ‘Where hell is mayo?’ after she done work.” He looked around smiling like he was expecting a standing ovation.

“Well now ... we know the secret of happiness: one bigass dollop of mayo for you and the rest is history. Christ, normal fellas can’t figure out happiness,” Jonah cleared his throat.

“Got anymore humdingers—Gary?”

“You give that girlie-girl ‘a wanna see you buck neckud’ look.”

“What girl?” I dared him with an awful stare. “I wasn’t checking nothing out, pal.”

“You checkin’ *her* bidness out.” Gary pointed. “She givin’ you a hard-a-saurus. Uncle Jimbo, he done tell me, gawken eyes pop right out you not careful. Jimbo know it all! He showed the cement thing to me.”

“Godamnit Gary ... really. Serious here. Shut it. Please.”

Gary lowered his voice. “I figger I knows a thing even if’n I a dimwit.”

“Let’s cut the shit pal. All’s good. Right?”

“I hear stuff pushin’ on the ol’ broom. Peoples don’t see nincompoop custodians even if they holdin’ on a big broom.” Gary lost interest in the last dollop of mayonnaise on the wrapper.

“My ma done tole me it is like that—”

This was the most I heard him say so I'm like ... "I'll be screwed, blued and tattooed. So you know how to listen—"

"I good listener, and you'ze mean as a bitin' sow pig."

"Hi ya. How's my favorite sculptor this afternoon?" The denim princess smiled and patted Gary on the shoulder. His mean eyes disappeared and the stupid grin reappeared. "I can't wait. Are you done with it already? The wait is like totally killing me. Professor Walters is just going to love it. It's for her retirement. I told you that, right? The whole class is pitching in. Oh how much I owe you?" She smiled down on Gary and tilted her head back and crossed her arms. "Oh God, I'm like totally running off at the mouth." She shrugged her shoulders. "Sorry."

"I do work and ma'll do the figurin'. That how it done. I know ... then you know. I do good. You good to Gary. So I do real good," Gary pointed across the table. "Him mean an wanna have six with you but no-no to that." Gary stopped talking and resumed his attack on the mayo left on his plate. "I have good stuff. It cost more dollars ... white cement ... but it holds the paint good."

She shook her head. "Oh God, you're totally amazing. I can't wait to see it. Totally owe you Gary."

"Ma done say I nothin' but a servant. Doc tol' her I good an stupid but best—ah—when a gargoye a need makin'."

I couldn't make heads or tails out of what was happening. Gary wasn't just a simpleton. Gary made shit with cement a certain chick loves. He was a bigtime idiot savant, which means, whatever he makes must be amazing. And finally, he knew—*her*. Then he tells her I want to screw her. Good ol' Gary was headed for a dirt nap and didn't even know it. The gun would shut his ass up but good. *Shoot and shovel*. The hole had to be plenty deep. Yes, I ain't a weak tit no

more: I'm a real stud. Thinking he could pull a trigger and finish off a problem like they do in the movies or in video games released him from what he was: an art student in a two bit university leading to Loserville.

“Well you're the best. They don't call you Gargoyle Gary for nothing. And thank you. What's your name?” her glance pulled him from his gun thoughts.

Gary looked up, “That Jonah. He got a hard-a—”

“Name's Jonah. How are you? Nice to meet you. I'll help get the gargoyle thing-a-ma-jig to you.” I had to talk fast and loud. By now I knew Savants damn sure didn't seem to come with any kind of filters. If they think it, they say it. If he opened his mouth again I'd talk over him. No sense in my being embarrassed at the hands of ignorance. People just aren't supposed to say things Gary did. *Shoot ... Shovel ... Shut-up. That's how murder works.*

“Off to class and thank you guys.” She spun toward the exit and I did not take one little tiny peek. Instead, I turned and looked at Gary's blank face and inhaled. Questions. Where should I start? My jaws were clenched shut so hard they hurt. What did feel good was the thought I was something I wasn't: a killer.

“Wow. You know her. You make statues. You make statues *for* her. Ya got a nickname. I mean holy shit, Gargoyle Gary. You ... the ... man. Look. You listening to me? You weren't really gonna tell her I had a ...” I looked at the paste stuck between Gary's teeth from a lifetime of no brushing. *Just as well be explaining physics to a pooch.* I twisted a kink out of my back from setting so long. “Cement. How about that? Sounds like you kick-it makin' them-there gargoyles. Right? Who would've thunk it?”

Gary became rigid in the booth. “I got me a Yardmax point six cubic footer to mix contractor grade concrete. It come in sixty pound bags fur sure. I do two bags at time.” He held

up two fingers. “Bag’ll run me thirteen an forty seven cents, plus tax. Good stuff. Set up fast. Gotta weld rebar to make gargoyles stand nice and keep the mean inside, I do. I start at the bottom and pour buckets until the mold is full. Then I tap on it with a rubber mallet to get bubbles out. Then it get dry and stay mean forever.” Gary leaned over the table with a smug look, “I got me glass molds, mista. Fiberglass. They cost a ton more than everting else.” Gary took a quick breath. “This time ‘round I’m gonna tap in nails to anchor screen over wings. Betta take my time so they don’t fall down. That happen I get mad. That called stucco. I got it figgered if ya help me. You help ah me make it good and mean?”

I couldn’t believe how spot on and un stupid Gary sounded when yapping about cement. I cleared my throat and leaned toward Gary. “Oh I’ll help you alright. We can get it to her in no time flat.”

He needed his vodka all of a sudden worse than a babe needs formula. He felt a pint was just what the doctor ordered. If he didn’t have booze he wouldn’t be able to spend another second with Gary. He was going to do it for one reason, Gargoyle Gary made her—*happen*.

By the time he got to the van his buzz had worn thin and was replaced with a dull thud right between his eyes. He crawled into the van and sipped his medicine. He always inhaled before drinking the vodka so he could exhale the heat away. He wondered if she thought he was a big enough loser who actually hung out with the likes of Gary. That caused him to take a big gulp he choked on some. He slid the bottle back under the seat and it clanked against the pistol. Then he remembered the tiny bottles of McGillicuddy. They had been giving out free samples. He took a deep breath and hopped out of the van and dashed to the lecture. It had started to drizzle.

The two hour lecture felt like four. He sat by the door just in case a bathroom break for a drink was needed. He marshalled his thoughts. It would all be worth it if he got on a first name basis with her. All good things come to those who put up with the likes of Gary, or at least he told himself that. Then the lecture ended and he was sprinting in a steady cold rain toward the van. He spotted the dark hulk hunched over by the passenger side door. "Holy shit, Gary! You here long? Christ, let's get in the van before you catch pneumonia and die," Jonah smiled, "Jesus you're drenched." *Shoot ... Shovel ... Shut-up.*

"Janine want her a gargoyle. Thank you, Jonah, to help me. I know Janine and don't need you to hurt her." Gary, grinning, turned toward Jonah with pain in his eye. "Worse sound on this here plain-nut we live on is a heart breakin' ma say when Sally Mae got dead."

"Christ I ain't a gonna Janine none."

I noticed Gary was plenty wet. *Probably an hour or so standing in the cold rain.* Gary, grinning said the gargoyle could be done tonight. I started the van and turned on the heat. "I have just what the doctor ordered for you, Gary. Time for some fruit. You gotta have a serving of fruit every day. I'm thinking apple pie. You want some apple pie, Gary?"

"Oh apple pie. I want me some. Yeah. Gargoyle Gary like the pie with mayo!"

I reached under the seat and felt the pistol before finding the bottles of apple pie flavored Doctor McGillicuddy. "Yes, just what the doctor ordered. It'll warm ya up. An apple a day keep the doctor away." I tossed a bottle down to show him how it's done. Then I relaxed for a spell with my eyes shut breathing through my teeth. "Here. Down it. It'll cure what ails ya. Kills the worms." I like hold a little bottle toward Gary. It's hard to do when you're as thirsty as I am. Right?

“No fruit. Liquor. Liquor. Bad liquor. Drive don’t drink or die. No liquor.” Gary started pounding on the dash swaying back and forth. “No pie. No fruit. No-no-no.”

“Chill. Christ; just trying to be friendly here. ‘Never kick a gift horse in the balls,’ I always say.” So I get to thinking the hell with it and down the bottle. “You okay, pal? Do we need to talk or something?”

Gary stared straight ahead and didn’t respond. The van spun out of the lot, kicking up stones. *Long day and now I got to put up with more shit. Well screw it. I’ll kill another bottle if I have to.* He glanced toward Gary. *Nothing but shit for brains and he’s in my van. Die drinking McGillicuddy. Whatever.*

They both heard a bird hit the windshield.

“Stop. Stop. Now!” Gary howled.

“What? Shit. Now what? Jesus Christ. What’s got into you? You wanna walk in this?” Gary pushed his door open and lunged out of the van. He pulled the windshield wiper off the glass freeing the limp swallow. A delicate feather swirled away in the rain. Tears welled up in Gary’s eyes. Then he started CPR. He blew just a touch of air into the beak and pushed on the breast with a finger. “Call right this minute. You call,” he hollered toward me.

I’m totally lost. “Gary. Who do I call? What are we doing here?” I’m like holding my palms up. “I don’t get it.”

“Ambulance. EMT’s. Call. Hurry.” Then I watch him carefully breath into the lifeless bird. His shoulders heaved.

“Ahh shit, Gary, that bird’s dead. Sorry, but Jesus Christ.”

“I don’t want bird dead.”

“Don’t matter, friend, what you want. You can blow on that,” I nod toward the bird in Gary’s palm, “but it ain’t gonna change a thing. Dead is dead.”

“Then we go to the funeral home. Now.” Gary wiped his face with a drenched sleeve. “Sally Mae went there while God done make a place for her in heaven.” His head dropped and he sobbed.

I’m thinking like who is Sally but hey I ain’t all bad. I crawl out of the van and tap Gary with the last bottle of McGillicuddy. “You sure you don’t want a nip. Might help is all I’m saying with this Sally the swallow thing we got going on here.”

“No liquor. No drive. Ma say drinkin’ on a half brain leave ya no brain.”

I put the van in drive and Gary pointed down the road. I drove on pavement some miles before Gary had me turn onto gravel. Gary was thinking about if the swallow had family that was going to miss him. Leafless limbs hung over the road like old lady fingers tugging them toward their fate.

“Hey, Gary, we almost there? We can bury the bird then make that gargoyle for Janine. That the plan?”

“Yes, that the plan, you mean ol’ Jonah. Meaner you is the better.”

Gary pointed and finally told me we were there. I was totally creeped out some and pulled into the drive. The barn was long gone, but the silo looked like it was built yesterday. Not a crack in it. The house needed paint, and for some reason, it seemed like all the trees had died around the place. Gary lunged out of the van with his bird and walked toward a pole shed near the silo. I figured he was in a hurry to bury his damn swallow so I dug under the seat for my precious cargo. This business might just require drinking from the fifth. I worked my arm clear

up to the elbow feeling around for the flat bottle. Gary pulled my door open and I saw a swinging motion before my world went dark.

When I opened my eyes, the back of my head hurt bigtime. I wanted to feel my head but my arms were tied to a cage-like-thing I was in. I couldn't move my legs either. Then it all came back to me. The dead bird ... and making the gargoyle ... and the idiot. Where in the hell was the idiot? I heard the steady hum of a cement mixer, but something else caught my attention. It was sobbing. Serious sobbing. I looked around until I spotted him. Gary was tearing open bags of cement and lining them up next to the mixer. The cage I was in was made of rebar that is used to reinforce concrete. It all came to me in an instant. I screamed! I couldn't move. The cage was inescapable. Two pieces of molding were propped up near my enclosure.

“Gary. Gary. C'mon, man I don't mean to toss any shade here, but tell me this ain't happening. Bill. Is this some kind of joke?” Good ol' Bill was our very own frat jokester. This was just him being funny. I laughed insanely. The pole barn reeked of oil and I noticed a bunch of Gargoyles glaring at me. *Oh god this ain't a joke.* “Hello, Gary ... we need to talk, my friend.” My heart raced while sweat dribbled into my eye stinging it shut.

Gary stopped his sobbing. He went to the mixture and dumped cement from it into the wheelbarrow. “This easier if'en you'd stay sleepin' ... you wan' another clunk on yo head?”

“Okay I get it. We've just had a misunderstanding. How do I help you if I'm in this thing? I feel like a parakeet or something here.” I laughed. “Jonah wants a cracker.” Then I force laughed until I looked into Gary's sad eyes. “Oh totally sorry. Why ya bumming, dude?”

Gary picked up one of the pieces of the mold and leaned it against the rebar basket. “Bye-bye Jonah. You bad and make gargoyle real-real bad. Janine gonna like this here gargoyle best

because you in it makin' it mean." He made a deep growling sound. He then snatched up the other half of the form and bolted them together, making my world black.

"Oh I get it. Yup ... misunderstanding. I didn't kill the bird. Accident. The drinking and driving thing was bad. I gotta make it better. I see treatment coming my way thanks to you, Gary. Please, it's dark in here. Can you take them things down so we can talk this out? I know one thing ... you're too good a guy to hurt me."

"I jus' a big dummy, but you say Sally Mae got a boar hog for a pa and a gorilla ma. Ain't so, I'm 'nothin' but stupid but she my sista." His sobbing started overwhelming Gary. "You laughin' and Sally Mae is all time cryin' an' carrying on. She come home but I dumb all time. Don't know nothin' to make it stop. No peoples ... not ones wiff a brain or dummies gets no brain should make cryin' happen. Not never on account girls are a lady and sumptime a sista or ma or granma or auntie or sumen like that. I a big dumb-dumb, but know I never do wanna make a girl-person to cry and carry on." His sobs got louder. He pointed his shovel in Jonah's direction. "Sally Mae, she got down in the dumps bad an went an used a belt. Now she gone in a hole and it cold some down there ... and I'm all the time sad cause she gone on account of mean ol' you."

Gary paced himself, mixing cement then dumping it into the wheelbarrow. As he shoveled it into the mold, he heard words like "Please!" and "Never again!" He looked down into the mold and noticed the wet mud moving some and hoped Jonah would blow all the air out. That would save him from patching up the finished gargoyle. It wasn't more than a minute or two before everything settled and the concrete moved no more.