

The gargoyle.

THE GARGOYLE beckoned Codell as he walked to the Bronx for a beer. A dwarf stone beast like some statutory embodiment of Detroit's Nain Rouge, it squatted impishly at 700 Prentis on its haunches, knees to its chest, claw-like paws clutched in front and feet splayed as if it were about to pounce. Between sharp teeth its long tongue stuck out, a narrow trough for water that no longer gurgled from its fountain throat. It wore a snarky, menacing grimace. Was it merely a whimsical decoration? Was it meant to scare people, or worse?

It was the end of the day; the wind had died; the air hung heavy and motionless the way it does before something bad happens. Everything was less than slow-mo; it was no-mo. The setting sun swelled on the horizon, glazing the gargoyle red. The gargoyle shimmered and shimmied. It watched Codell. What did it want; what would it do? It was certainly breathing. Is that the smell of sulfur?

Codell pulled himself away from the creature and quickened his pace. When he stepped into the Bronx, he did a double-take. His bar buddy was not alone on his customary stool at the end of the bar. Instead, Buddy sat at a table with a woman.

She was built like a file cabinet, short and solid. She looked strong and capable. Her face was round and pleasant, her features proportionate and her complexion smooth. Her thick brown hair was bound girlishly in two tight braids. She was, perhaps, twenty years younger than Codell's buddy. She was closer to Codell's age than to Buddy's.

Codell got a bomber, quaffed off the head, and watched the reflections of his buddy and the woman in the mirror behind the bar. His buddy wasn't himself. Buddy giggled and blabbed, his hands keeping pace, his face a bundle of expressions that Codell had never seen on him.

The woman got up to leave. Codell's buddy escorted her to the door, exchanged pleasantries, and returned, not to the table they had sat at, but to his usual stool next to Codell, nodding to Codell as he sat down. Buddy perched on the front edge of his stool, knees raised, both feet on the stool's middle rung. His face was flushed and he was mouth-breathing. His teeth were sharp and yellow. Codell wished that the rupture in his face would close and the face return to its normal pallor.

Leaning into Codell, Buddy clenched his hands, his fingers long and pointed. Their faces were inches away; Buddy's breath smelled like rotten eggs. The corners of his mouth pulled up in a smirk. His incisors grew longer. Codell trembled.

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