



CAROLYN KRAUS

GARGOYLES

As I pulled into the driveway with the kids and the groceries, Marvin was on fire on the roof. He was flailing his arms and stamping his feet, flames shooting from his boots and adding the stench of burning tar to an already suffocating Detroit afternoon. I leapt from the car and raced to the side of the house.

“What do I do?” I yelled up at him. “Get the hose? Call the fire department?”

“Nothing. Shit. Sheeee-it,” Marvin hollered down from inside the flames. “Everything’s under control.”

No point arguing. Marvin was invincible, even when he was on fire. Besides his periodic self-immolations, he claimed to have fallen off a dozen roofs in his forty-two years and broken about every bone in his compact, wiry body.

Marvin beat out the flames with the red flannel shirt he wore knotted around his waist, but after I went inside I could still hear him cursing and thumping around as he gathered his tools, then the creak of his steps on the ladder as he clambered down from the roof. Soon he was slouched in a chair at my kitchen table, entertaining my two sons by sketching on a napkin with the pencil he kept perpetually tucked behind one pointy ear. As I dumped two boxes of Kraft macaroni into a pan of boiling water for lunch, Marvin delighted the kids by doodling a modern-day, illustrated version of Dante’s descent into Hell.

“What’s that guy?” asked seven-year-old Alexander. He pointed to a fiendish horned figure lurking at the bottom of a series of circles Marvin had drawn.

“Ahh! He’s the devil,” Marvin said, leaning toward baby



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Nicholas and baring his brown teeth like a wolf about to pounce. Nick gurgled and whacked at Marvin with the butt of his baby bottle.

“Here’s what happens to people when they kill themselves,” Marvin said as he drew a cluster of frowning heads stuck onto a bush with flaming twigs. Alexander climbed onto Marvin’s lap for a closer look.

“Why do they kill themselves?” my son asked, immediately forgetting the question and turning his attention to Marvin’s newest creation—a ruffian with teeth growing out of his neck.

“What’s wrong with him?”

“This guy started a lot of fights. He was always biting people,” Marvin explained. “So his body’s been rearranged—it’s to punish him.” Carter the cat sauntered across the cracked tile floor and brushed up against Marvin’s tar-stained jeans.

“Don’t bite people,” Alexander recited. “Don’t steal stuff.”

“Don’ bite, don’ bite, don’ bite,” the baby chimed in, stabbing the air with an index finger like a television preacher.

“You got it, pal,” Marvin said. He stretched one arm down to scratch the cat’s extended chin. “And here”—Marvin pointed with his free hand to one of the upper circles—“is where the people who never looked up at the beautiful sky get drowned.”

“Why didn’t they look up at the beautiful sky?” Alexander asked.

As the questions and answers continued, I ripped open two packets of powdered cheese and stirred it into the macaroni, then scooped neon-orange mounds onto the plates. I had mixed feelings about Marvin’s telling my kids these horror stories. On the one hand, they were frightening; on the other hand, Marvin’s enchantment with the gory tales was contagious. The boys loved them. At the very least, as a single mother, I was grateful to Marvin for reliably providing a male figure in my sons’ lives. Plus, I rationalized, Marvin’s stories always came from the classics he’d studied in graduate school at Wayne State before he had dropped out back in the seventies.





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As I set the plates of macaroni on the table, Marvin caught my eye, smiled, and winked as if he'd read my thoughts. He intended the look to be reassuring, but when he grinned, his eyes sparkled incongruously in a pockmarked face that was singed and smudged. A little crooked.

Marvin wasn't merely ugly. His face was unnerving, especially when he smiled and those blue eyes narrowed to glittering slits. With his unshaven cheeks, his knife-scarred forehead, his broad and mottled bare chest, and that barbarous grin, he was easily the most disreputable-looking man I'd ever known.

Marvin lit a cigarette. When he exhaled, he turned away from the table so as not to blow smoke in the kids' faces. I'd asked him not to smoke around them, but now when he glanced at me sheepishly, I merely frowned, and Marvin resumed his explanation of why the figures he'd sketched next to the Eighth Circle of Hell had their heads on backward.

"How come? Are they looking behind them?" Alexander asked.

"Naw," Marvin said. "Their heads are actually reversed on their bodies. They've gotta walk backward to see where they're going." The baby clamored to be lifted out of his high chair and then wobbled around the kitchen backward until he stumbled over the gap where some floor tiles were missing and landed on his butt in a fit of laughter. I leaned across the table and pushed aside the polka-dot curtains I'd inherited from the house's previous occupants. As I cranked open a screenless casement window to let out the smoke, I felt Marvin's hand brush my back. I pretended not to notice.

Marvin prided himself on drinking hard, chain-smoking unfiltered Camels, and speaking the language of the street. But he also saw himself as an artist and scholar, a classicist-medievalist. He'd put in time as a Latin tutor before dropping out of graduate school. He didn't talk much about his past, though. Instead, in his personal idiom, a mix of erudition and slang, he'd hold forth at the dinner table on Sumerian art or Thales of Miletus or the epic saga of Ilya Murametz. At





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night in his ratty loft across town, above the Stone Adult xxx Theater on Woodward Avenue, he chiseled rock. His specialties were Madonnas and gargoyles. Madonnas were remnants of his Catholic upbringing; the gargoyles were a little more complicated.

Several years back, Marvin's work was featured at a Detroit gallery where he'd displayed his Virgin Marys amid griffins, fanged parrots, and leering wolves. The publicity had gotten him some jobs, and he'd branched out from tarring roofs to refurbishing damaged angels and crumbling saints on the cornices and parapets of local churches. One way or another, Marvin would often wind up on a roof.

Some months before the day he burst into flames on my roof, I first spotted Marvin tarring and shingling a house down the street on a drizzly spring afternoon. Noticing me watching him, he turned and leered, a wisp of smoke rising from his cigarette. Alarmed at this first glimpse of his face, I speed-walked away.

But a few days later, I set out to track him down. The roof of my upper-story flat had been leaking ever since I'd moved in. When it rained, water streaked down a peeling, sulfur-colored wall, over the cherry-wood fireplace mantle that hinted at the house's former elegance, and ran across the slanted floorboards, pooling in a low-lying corner. The plaster wall moldings were crumbling. The marble windowsills were chipped and cracked. The house's only undamaged feature was a pair of varnished cherry-wood columns that stood in the living room on either side of a fissured bay window. When a chunk of waterlogged plaster thudded onto the floor one morning, I squinted up at the black hole in my ceiling in defeat. I was alone with two kids. Our sole means of support was my lousy job teaching freshman composition for eight hundred dollars a month at a suburban college. And now the goddamned ceiling was coming loose. I had no savings, no prayer of another loan. There'd be no help from Michael, my kids' father. Michael's incompetence in practical matters was





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legendary. He had other problems, too—a Percodan addiction and a doomed tenure struggle underway at Wayne State, where he was about to be canned. With nowhere to turn, I sank down onto the wet hardwood floor and sobbed until an idea occurred to me: Somewhere out there was the ugliest man in the world. Dangerous, too, probably. But I needed him. I discovered Marvin leaning against a dumpster in the alley, inspecting a jagged cut he'd torn into his palm after losing his footing and sliding off my neighbor's roof.

"Son of a bitch," he muttered.

"I could drive you to Detroit Receiving," I offered. The cut was bad, maybe bone deep. But Marvin just laughed, baring his jagged teeth.

I ran home and returned with a bottle of iodine, but Marvin waved it away and tied a rag around the wound. "It's cool," he said with what I'd soon recognize as his trademark bluster. "I don't get infections."

While Marvin's blood dripped through the rag onto the dandelions on my neighbor's lawn, I described my roof problem and offered Marvin fifty bucks for a stopgap repair.

"Hell, I'll lay on the leftovers from this job," he said. His blue eyes flashed as he gestured with his bloody hand to the shingles piled high on the grass. "No charge." Grinning, he added, "Sometimes I take on love jobs." I didn't ask what he meant. It didn't matter.

A few months earlier, I'd gotten a zero-down-payment land contract on a two-story HUD house near a stretch of freeway and abandoned factories in downtown Detroit known as "Mexicantown." My neighbors were Hispanics and blacks with a scattering of whites—mostly elderly people or single mothers like me. Though pocked with boarded-up houses and marshy fields, Mexicantown was a step up from Marvin's neighborhood. At two hundred dollars a month, my land contract was cheaper than rent. I could earn a few bucks by renting out the lower floor, which was already occupied by Maria, a single mother and part-time waitress in her early thirties, and her four little girls. After signing the contract for





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the house, I'd promised Maria that for half my monthly house payment, she could stay forever as far as I was concerned. She threw her arms around me and invited me in. During the first of countless discussions we'd have in her bright yellow kitchen over coffee, Maria clued me in about my new neighborhood.

"Don't let the kids play in the yard," she warned in her heavily accented English, twisting a strand of her long, dark hair. "Don't let them walk to the park."

A drunk down the street had attacked Maria's oldest girl, and now none of her kids was permitted even the four-block trip to Clark Park except under close supervision. Like the streets, the park was nearly deserted except for derelicts, and each excursion involved being accosted by at least one of them. Last month a guy from the bustling drug house down the street had stabbed his girlfriend, and two of Maria's girls, returning from the corner store, had glimpsed the body slumped in the front seat of a Lincoln parked in the driveway.

"Don't go to the store by yourself," Maria cautioned me. "Knock on the door. We'll go down there together. Don't let the cat out." Through the window came the growing, receding pulse of a siren as a police car raced down our street, which was so narrow the cop had to steer up onto the glass-strewn sidewalk to avoid hitting parked cars.

At first, I'd thought of Marvin as an eccentric loner, but one day he showed up with some friends. I didn't object when he greeted me with a proprietary kiss on the lips—something he'd never have done if we'd been alone. After talking to these men, I realized Marvin belonged to a small group of educated Marxist artist/tradesmen. Mostly white guys, they lived in lofts and downtown apartments in Detroit's devastated black neighborhoods. Like Marvin, they saw themselves as rough-cut intellectuals—and they were. They'd been to college, even started graduate school. But sooner or later, they'd all dropped out. In pursuit of moral purity, they'd turned to carpentry, roofing, or miscellaneous odd jobs.





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Some of the fix-it men lived on the Cass Corridor, a shabby university quarter inhabited by derelicts and starving artists, as well as students. But Marvin lived farther downtown in a yet more forsaken corner of the city known as Brush Park. Marvin's neighborhood was gap-toothed, with empty fields between six-dollar-a-night flophouses and gutted Victorian mansions that had once housed Detroit's commercial elite. Now, a century after the neighborhood's heyday, late-model cars cruised by and stopped when teenagers emerged from burned-out buildings to conduct hushed transactions through car windows. Shattered bottles and skeletons of cars cluttered the vacant lots. Drifters dozed on porches. Bedsheets nailed over window frames flapped in the wind. Hanging on in a city devastated by racial divisions and middle-class flight constituted a moral commitment for Marvin and his fellow fix-it men. Plus, it took balls.

"The Shitstorm," Marvin dubbed his neighborhood. He said it with pride.

I'd been lucky to happen upon Marvin that first spring after Michael and I had split up and I'd moved with the kids into the upper flat of our new house in Mexicantown. By now, Michael had lost his tenure fight and was unemployed, sinking deeper into a Percodan haze. I had no investment in Detroit but no real roots elsewhere either. I was barely getting along through a series of makeshift arrangements, leaving the baby downstairs with Maria and shuttling Alexander between his elementary school and a daycare center at the suburban college where I taught composition.

I wondered often whether I should just pack up the kids and walk away. But where would I go? Partly I stayed from a failure of will. But something else kept me here. Like Marvin and his band of Detroit fix-it men, I couldn't bring myself to abandon anything. I didn't want to be someone who bailed. So I settled into this decaying house with its leaky roof and mice skittering in the walls at night while raccoons crashed around out in the alley, tipping over trash cans, strewing garbage everywhere. Following Maria's advice, I made the kids





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play inside. Even Carter, a big, gray fighting tom with a tattered ear, hadn't gone out since we'd moved in.

In early summer during our first year at the new house, Marvin had stripped the roof, then tarred and shingled the whole thing, but he kept showing up to add "the finishing touches." By August, when he caught fire on the roof, he'd become a permanent fixture. He went on to repair a broken stair railing, a light switch, a sticky closet door. Whenever he showed up, I'd give him a platonic hug. He'd pull me closer. I'd lean away. We'd struck a compromise, and I tried to put the whole matter out of my mind. Clarifying our relationship was something neither of us was willing to risk.

I worried about becoming so indebted to him, but Marvin never took any money from me. Once, early on, I tried to write a check for some supplies he'd bought, but he just waved it away.

"It's cool. I don't have a bank account," he told me. Marvin's driver's license was expired. He'd never once paid taxes.

"I don't exist," he added proudly. "I'm not on the rolls." His bank account consisted of a thick wad of bills shoved under the floor mat of the incontinent Chevy pickup that dripped oil wherever he parked it.

Maria wasn't surprised when I told her about Marvin. "Sounds like Louie the carpenter," she said. "And that fat guy, Ronnie. He painted my kitchen. Three coats of paint." She pointed to a bright yellow wall. "Now he's hanging around down at Celia's. Seems like he's been fixing up her house for about a year." Fix-it men were the saviors of all the single mothers in my new neighborhood, Maria told me. Most of these women had part-time jobs or marginal careers like ours, and they relied on their own Marvins. Ronnie the fat guy often dropped by to sit in her kitchen, feast on her home-made tamales, and "talk, talk, talk," as she put it. In deep winter, when snow piled up hard and made the driveway impassable, she'd worry about getting to work, then she'd hear the scrape of Louie's shovel—the sound was "like the singing of angels," she said.





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I wondered what arrangements the other women made with the fix-it men. Some of them probably slept with the men out of loneliness, gratitude, or love, Maria guessed. In those frantic days of working and raising our toddlers, of trying to ignore the fraying edges of our lives, these garrulous handymen were the closest thing most of us had to suitors. In exchange for a woman's making them lunch and listening to them talk for two or three hours, the fix-it men would repair the roof or the toilet. They were compulsive talkers. The women were survivors. The men talked. We listened.

One Saturday morning at the end of that first summer, Marvin arrived loaded down with artichokes, mushrooms, and fresh spinach he'd picked up cheap across town at Detroit's Eastern Market. After tasting a few of my scorched meals, he took over the cooking whenever he was around. The kids called out "Marvin's here!" and Alexander ran to the kitchen to help stash the food in the refrigerator. As Marvin described the elegant supper he planned to cook that afternoon, he noticed that the kitchen faucet was leaking. He went back down to his truck to get his tools and returned, toolbox in one hand and a wrench in the other.

"Ya know what this is?" Marvin asked, stretching out the wrench to Alexander. My son shook his head of disheveled blond curls.

"Will you hold it for me, buddy?"

Marvin lifted up Alexander, plunked him down on the counter by the sink, and handed him the wrench. Alexander sat there in his Superman cape, banging his heels happily on the cupboard door and handing Marvin his tools like a surgeon's assistant. As the two of them clanked around in the kitchen, I bounced the baby on my lap and pretended to grade compositions while eavesdropping from the next room, my eyes tearing up, my heart overflowing with gratitude.

"Ya know Alexander the Great was a famous hero," Marvin was saying.

"That's my name, too!"

"Yeah. It's a cool name."

"Who was the other one?"





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“Well, he was a soldier, son of a king. He lived in a place called Macedonia more than two thousand years ago. And he had this teacher named Aristotle. This guy Aristotle was a great philosopher.”

“What’s a philosopher?”

“Here, this thing needs to be twisted open. Can you hold this a minute?” Marvin said. After some muffled cursing, he continued, “So, a philosopher’s a guy who asks a lot of questions, like Alexander.”

“But you said Alexander was a soldier.”

“Yeah, but he was kind of a philosopher, too. Aristotle the philosopher taught Alexander the soldier always to be curious about the world and to learn things for himself. In a lot of museums, there’re these statues of Alexander the Great. He’s always looking up, like he wants to see everything and know everything.”

“So he’d see the blue sky?”

“Yep.”

“And not go to hell like those guys you said?”

Marvin laughed.

“*Did* he see everything?” Alexander persisted.

“Well, he tried. He tried to march his soldiers all the way to the end of the world.”

“Did he?”

“Not exactly, but he marched from Macedonia across Turkey all the way to India. That’s about four thousand miles. In India he runs into this wall of elephants with soldiers riding on them. He’s never seen an elephant before, and he’s gotta think of a way to fight them. So he orders his army to shoot arrows at the elephants’ knees. They slump to the ground in these big pools of blood you could swim in. Then Alexander takes his time picking off the guys on the elephants.”

“That’s really neat,” I heard my son say.

I coughed. Marvin must’ve caught the hint, because he abandoned the Indians drowning in elephant blood and moved on.

“Alexander kept marching east, and when he’d reach a new place, he’d name it after himself.”





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“Why’d he name it after himself?”

“Dunno. Maybe he wanted to own the whole world. So, he names about a hundred cities Alexandria. Even after two thousand years, you can still look at a map and see them all over the place.”

“Did he find the end of the world?”

“Nope.” The faucet came on and Marvin said, “We’ll have to crawl under the sink, so down you go . . . Man, we’ve gotta put some putty under those tiles tomorrow . . . Actually, there isn’t any end of the world. Ya know what a globe is?”

“We got one at school.”

“So, ya know, you’d just keep going around in a circle. But Alexander saw the whole world they knew about at the time. Anyway, his chicken-shit soldiers kept griping. They wanted to turn around and go home. But Alexander made them keep going.”

“Cause he wanted to see everything?”

“Yep. That’s why. Now, we have to get in under here.”

Their voices grew muffled, and I glanced into the kitchen to see the two of them scrunched down under the sink. All I could see of my son was the back of his red cape. I carried the baby into his room. As I was tucking him into his crib for a nap, I glanced out the window to see Alexander and Marvin walking out to the truck with its duct-taped windshield, its seat strewn with crumpled Camel packs. When the two of them returned, Marvin was carrying a box packed with white cloth napkins and long-stemmed wineglasses in two sizes. When he finished fixing the faucet and we’d gotten supper underway, Marvin riffled through my silverware drawer, assembling enough bent forks and spoons to set a formal table. Meanwhile, I swept the drift of freshman compositions from the library table I’d picked up at a garage sale and covered it with an extra bedsheet. Marvin and I lifted up the table and set it down in front of the bay window between the cherry-wood pillars.

Hearing excited voices and unwilling to miss anything, Nick climbed out of his crib and toddled groggily into the living



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room. I plopped him into his high chair next to the table with a bowl of spaghetti and returned to the kitchen to chop onions and pine nuts for Marvin's feast.

Marvin held up a fork to Alexander. "Salad fork," he said, and showed him where to place it next to a plate. "Soup spoon," he continued.

"Mommy doesn't do it this way," Alexander commented.

"Mommy doesn't know the rules," I called out from the kitchen, laughing, my eyes watering from the onions. But I understood. Marvin saw himself not only as a scholar, but also as a lapsed aristocrat. It didn't matter that the plates were red plastic. They were symbols. To Marvin, this ritual was a Holy Communion.

"Let's have five spoons each," Alexander said. "Is that the rules?"

"Naw. It's not about rules," Marvin told Alexander. "It's about how you want to live." As I carried in a pot of leggy geraniums and set it down in the center of the table, my eyes met Marvin's. He meant what he'd said. Still, I couldn't help myself. I laughed. And then Marvin laughed and both of the kids laughed, and we were all shaking with laughter, maybe about nothing at all. Kind of like a family.

"Dessert spoon," Marvin continued when we'd all quieted down. Then he showed Alexander how to select the proper glass for the Beaujolais as Nick lobbed pasta onto the tablecloth.

When the elegant table was laid, Marvin rattled around the kitchen with the sweeping gestures of a television chef, putting the finishing touches on the artichokes Dijon, the pesto, the eggplant Parmesan. The kitchen smelled so strongly of garlic that I drew aside the polka-dot curtains and opened a window. But noticing Carter the cat poised on the sill about to pounce at something skittering around outside in the gutters, I cranked the window shut again as Marvin stirred the *crème brûlée*.

While I was washing the dishes after supper, I looked outside to see Marvin eyeing the garage roof with Alexander by his side.





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“Boy,” Marvin said when I appeared downstairs, “we ought to do something about that sagging ridge line.” He gestured toward my dilapidated garage that was crammed with boxes of books I hadn’t yet unpacked, along with broken rakes, bicycle frames, mufflers, exhaust pipes, tire rims, and what looked like the rusted blue roof of a car abandoned by some former resident. Marvin stepped inside and sized up the garage’s interior.

“How ’bout we put in a cathedral ceiling,” he called out. It wasn’t really a question.

I was horrified. The garage was mainly rotting boards that probably hadn’t sheltered a working car in decades. It reeked of must, rot, and cat pee. I hadn’t ventured in since the spring we first arrived, when I’d held my breath and shoved the boxes inside. I was about to protest, but Marvin was already heading back up the stairs with Alexander at his heels. I found them at the kitchen table bent over a napkin. Marvin was sketching what looked like a series of embedded circles.

“Is that more Dante and Hell?” I asked him.

“Naw,” Marvin said. He was working out the details of his plan to slice off the top of my garage and replace it with a soaring, vaulted pinnacle, complete with a stained-glass window.

“The idea is that all these arches and buttresses pull your eyes up,” he told Alexander. “That’s called the Gothic style. The building never seems cold because your eyes automatically reach up to this window that’s glowing with colored light, even in the winter.”

“What’s this for?” Alexander asked, pointing to what looked like spokes of a wheel within Marvin’s circles.

“That,” said Marvin, “is the most beautiful thing in the world. It’s the northern rose window from the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. This artist named Jean de Chelles made it about seven hundred years ago. It’s still up there.”

“It looks like a Ferris wheel.”

“Yeah. It does kinda. And like a flower, too, if you look at it. See?” Marvin traced his pencil over the rows of inner and outer petals. “It’s called a rose window because it’s shaped





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like one. The rose is a symbol for Mary—she’s the mother of Jesus. The cathedral was built for her.” Marvin penciled in the graceful figure he’d sculpted so many times in stone. “That’s her, Our Lady of the Flowers,” he said. “She sits here in the middle of the rose with Baby Jesus on her knee. These spaces around her are for the sixteen prophets, then the thirty-two kings. The thirty-two priests are out here.” Marvin sketched a bearded head as a sample. “The whole window’s bigger than your house.”

“How’re we gonna fit it on the garage?”

“Well, we’ll have to make ours on a smaller scale. I’m thinking three feet across, leave out the prophets and kings and stuff.”

Within a week, Marvin had cleared the junk from my garage, hauling it off somewhere in his truck. He’d piled up stacks of sturdy boards and roof sheeting. “They were just lying around my loft,” he said.

A couple of months later, I stood at the foot of a ladder in the garage staring up at my vaulted ceiling with its “temporary” plain glass window. I was heaving twenty-foot rolls of fiberglass insulation up to Marvin. “Leftovers from another job,” he’d explained. My skin itched, my eyes watered, and I wore a surgical mask to protect my lungs against the thick cloud of dust and fiber.

“Put this on. Catch,” I said, pitching a second mask up to Marvin.

“Hell,” he said, tossing it back. “The Camels’ll kill me first.”

Month after month, Marvin watched over us. Eagerly adding the role of guide to his duties, he drove us off on excursions. A sort of Virgil in Hell, he shepherded me and the kids through the desolate city he knew so well.

Marvin had lived in Detroit all his life. For the last ten years, he’d made his home in the loft, laundering his clothes and showering at the downtown YMCA that stood in the shadow of the empty twenty-five-story Hudson’s building, once the world’s tallest department store. Gradually, Marvin





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sketched in the outlines of his earlier life. The oldest of nine children in an Irish-Catholic family, he'd once been an altar boy. Later, he'd been expelled for fighting, first from one Catholic school, then another. Still a teenager, he enlisted in the Marines, headed for Vietnam, and found himself at Khe Sanh during the deadly siege of 1968. He loaded his AK-47 and, night after night for weeks, he fired into the darkness.

"I've cut up plenty of guys in bars," he admitted with pride, but he wouldn't say—maybe he didn't know for sure—whether he'd ever killed anybody.

One misty Saturday morning during our second winter in the new house, Marvin rattled up in his pickup and announced to the kids that we were going on a gargoyle hunt. Alexander scrambled around excitedly, rounding up jackets and mittens. As I bundled up Nick in a double layer of winter sleepers, Marvin was on his knees, lacing up Alexander's boots and fielding questions.

"What's a gargoyle?" Alexander asked, his small hand resting on Marvin's shoulder, his Superman cape peeking out from under his ballooning winter jacket.

"You'll see," Marvin said. "They're up on the roofs all over town. Detroit's loaded with gargoyles." He held out his arms for Nick and carried him out to the truck. Opening the passenger door, he brushed dozens of wadded-up cigarette packs from the seat onto the floor with some torn-up parking tickets and a current issue of the *New York Review of Books*, stamped underfoot and soaked with brown slush. I squeezed onto the seat, edging both boys onto my lap. As we set off, the duct-taped sheet of plastic covering the missing window fluttered in the wind.

We drove down Trumbull Avenue over potholed streets that, all winter long, exhaled thick steam through vents reaching deep underground. A couple blocks before Tiger Stadium, Marvin pulled up in front of soot-blackened Trinity Church. He pointed through the truck window at a pop-eyed, snaggle-toothed, winged stone beastie jutting from a parapet. A tongue of ice hung from the creature's gaping mouth.

"Wow," Alexander said. As I opened the door, he jumped





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out of the truck onto the curb ahead of us. Looking up at the gargoyle instead of his feet, Alexander stumbled into an old man who was standing at the bus stop in front of the church.

“Looks like he’s gonna pounce on somebody,” my son said to the stranger, pointing to the gargoyle.

“Yep,” said the old man, turning his face upward to study the stone figure, one hand shading his eyes as if to salute, “and he don’t care who.”

The man said he’d never noticed the faces on the wall behind his regular bus stop. Stroking his chin, he scrutinized them.

“It’s a copy of a fourteenth-century English parish church,” Marvin said, clearing his throat and launching into one of his lectures. At first the group at the bus stop eyed Marvin suspiciously, but soon they joined in. They were discovering gargoyles everywhere. Half-camouflaged beneath layers of soot, gargoyles lined the church’s gutters, dotted its walls and parapets.

“That one looks like a freaky chicken about to peck you into jelly,” the old man observed. Another was a warty, slit-eyed humanoid with a bulbous nose. A fifteen-foot drainage pipe had been shoved into the creature’s mouth. The old man gazed at the beast, then at Marvin’s pocked face, at Marvin’s beaky nose with its broken blood vessels, then back at the gargoyle.

“Looks like someone tried to shut that one up,” the man said. Probably he intended the comment for Marvin, who now held both of the boys, one in either arm, and was expounding on the semantic origins of the word *gargoyle*. “It comes from an Old French word meaning *throat*,” Marvin said. “It’s the root of our English *gargle*.” To Alexander, he added, “Like when you gargle salt water for a sore throat.”

A family of East Indians hurried across the street to the bus stop. A man in a torn jacket shuffled over, cradling a whiskey bottle in a paper sack. Several more elderly people joined us to wait for the bus.

“So,” Marvin was saying, “gargoyles spit rainwater away





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from the foundations of the building. They'd hook them up to the gutters. They're built for drainage, but they're a lot more than gutter spouts." Marvin was basking in his more-or-less attentive audience, who now and then glanced down the street for the overdue bus.

"Man, they're evil," the fellow with the torn jacket said. "That guy looks nasty." He pointed to a snarling toad jutting out from the roof.

"Oh, no," Marvin said. "Actually they're the good guys. They're supposed to be the guardians of the church. They've got to be fierce-looking to scare off the forces of evil. Tough dudes for a tough job. The uglier, the better."

"That one looks mean, though," the man said. "You can't tell me he's some angel."

"OK, he's no angel, but no devil either," Marvin said with his unsavory grin.

As Marvin continued his commentary, still more people drifted to the bus stop. Finding the rest of us gazing upward, they naturally had to take a look for themselves and offer opinions. Marvin had this effect on people. His odd appearance drew your attention. Then he'd overwhelm you with information, draw you in by virtue of his own fascination. By now the group at the bus stop included not only the East Indians, the derelict, and the elderly bus passengers, but also a couple of neighborhood teenagers and a bag boy from the King Cole market across the street. Amid vapors swirling up from the storm drains, Marvin's impromptu band of gargoyle-fanciers stood arguing, analyzing, gesturing into the winter sky.

Eventually, the bus rumbled up through the mist and carried off most of the crowd, but my sons were reluctant to leave. The closer they looked, the more faces emerged, like the old puzzle-page game of Find the Hidden Animals. Finally, Marvin and I coaxed the boys back into the truck, and he pulled away from the pool of oil it left by the curb.

We turned off Woodward onto Adelaide Street near Marvin's neighborhood, passing the abandoned Renaissance





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City Car Wash, a field of shattered whisky bottles, the boarded-up Stephen Foster Elementary School. Marvin took a detour through an alley where a taxi had pulled over behind a White Castle. The driver had unzipped and was “watering” a hedge beside a crumbling, three-story Victorian mansion. A single amber-glass pane glinted in an upper-story window.

“Detroit’s like ruins,” Marvin said. “It’s a shithole all right. But people think that’s all it is. For artists”—he meant himself—“it’s one of the coolest places to be outside of Florence or Rome.”

The phone rang at three one morning.

“I got stabbed,” came a barely audible voice.

“Marvin.” Who else could it be?

“I was in a fight,” Marvin said breathily. “The bastard stabbed me.”

I tried to keep him talking. He was at his loft. A couple of hours earlier at a bar on Woodward, someone had insulted him—he didn’t say how. Marvin had dragged his tormentor out into the alley where the guy had whipped a knife out of his sock.

“My arm keeps bleeding,” Marvin said. “I’m tired. Gotta sleep.”

Deathly silence. The phone must have slipped from his hand.

After my frantic phone calls for help, the police battered down Marvin’s door and, finding him passed out bloody on the floor, carted him off to Detroit Receiving. By the time I reached the hospital, Marvin had already been discharged.

“That creepy-looking guy?” a nurse said when I asked for him. She scrunched up her face. “They took him down to the police station.”

As I walked toward the holding cell, I could see Marvin sitting on the thin mattress of a metal cot attached to the wall. His arm was swathed in a white bandage. His T-shirt was spattered with blood. A white pad covered one eye like a pirate’s. When Marvin saw me, he grinned, stood up, and



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walked up to the barred metal door. “Everything’s under control,” he muttered softly.

“I’ll take you home.”

The sound of shouting beyond the cinder-block cell wall startled Marvin, and he looked away.

“Why are you here? When are they going to let you out?”

Marvin turned back and looked at me distractedly. “Dunno.”

Maybe he’d given me the story a little wrong on the phone. Had Marvin started the brawl? Was there some confusion? Alone in the dark, empty cell, without his usual cockiness, Marvin looked small, vulnerable.

“I’ll take you home,” I repeated.

“I can’t.”

“But what are they charging you with? Did they get the guy who did it?”

“It’s no big deal.”

“Do they think you started it?”

“They’ll figure it all out.” He didn’t look so sure, though.

This was a Marvin I’d never seen. We were both at a loss for words.

“I’ll talk to the cops,” I said as I turned to leave. The least I could do was bail him out.

“No big deal,” he called after me softly.

At the front desk, I asked a cop, “What are you charging him with?” I explained that Marvin had phoned me last night, that he’d told me the other guy started the fight. “Why don’t you let me take him home?”

“We’re gonna hang onto him for a couple of weeks. We ran a check,” the cop told me. As it turned out, Marvin hadn’t been arrested because of the barroom brawl. “That ugly bastard is ten years behind on his child support. Forty grand, plus interest.”

I stared at the cop blankly.

“You also oughta know this guy’s got an impressive record. Two convictions for assault and battery, one of ’em for stabbing his wife.”

I should have been outraged, but I wasn’t. This story of



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betrayal had a familiar ring to it, even though, in the four years I'd known him, Marvin had never mentioned a wife or his three teenaged sons. None of it felt real to me. I could never be scared of Marvin, despite his lurid grin, his hellish tales. He'd spoken occasionally of his street-fighting childhood, of lethal nights in Vietnam, of a tough-guy roofer's life—though he much preferred holding forth on Medieval France, Greek sculpture, or the declensions of Latin nouns. For years he'd talked and talked. He'd hovered over us. He'd guided us through the streets.

I sat at the living room table with a stack of unpayable bills, deciding which creditors could be put off with the least dire consequences. Carter the cat leapt onto the table and settled over the pile, strewing bills around as he stretched out in the morning sunshine. I stroked his rat-gray fur as I contemplated my first honest-to-god house, my gaze wandering over the buckled hardwood floor and up a cherry-wood column that glowed in the light coming through the bay window.

Both kids were in school now. I'd gotten a small raise from the college and a second job writing columns for a local magazine. Maria had fenced in the yard and now ran a bustling illegal day-care beneath the soaring, light-flooded ceiling of our garage. The cops had appeared one morning and shut down the drug house that once dominated our street, nailing plywood up over its doors and windows. Life was better.

My eyes scanned the swampy field across the street. It was covered with bulrushes and brown cattails, and purple loosestrife was taking over. I thought of a time Marvin was driving me and the kids somewhere, when he slowed down in front of another weed-choked lot on a desolate downtown street. He pointed out the truck window to a fenced-in patch where an old man stood leaning on a rake. It was cold, maybe early November.

"Jimmy," Marvin called out, and the man waved back. When we stopped, the kids and I could see that Jimmy's patch was dotted with ten or fifteen cracked toilet bowls painted





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red and green, along with some groupings of white plastic ducks. I remembered Marvin telling us that in the spring all the tulips would come out. “I’ll bring you back here then,” he said. “Jimmy’ll have flowers sprouting up out of the toilet bowls. Yellow, red, orange—you name it. God, it’s a sight. He’s got his initials spelled out there in roses.”

We didn’t go back the next spring, though. By then my spirits had recovered from the split with Michael, and a more conventional brand of suitor had begun to appear at my door. The first time Marvin came by after the jail incident, carrying a shopping bag stuffed with sprigs of feathery dill weed, I noticed hesitation beneath his trademark bluster. There were some awkward jokes about jailbirds and knife fights, but I kept the rest of what I’d learned to myself. He must have known, though. After that, Marvin had shown up less and less frequently.

As I turned from the window and back to my pile of bills, I realized that the kids and I hadn’t seen him for over a year. Still, I couldn’t let go of Marvin up there on the roof, flames licking his tar-smearred boots, his sky-blue eyes glittering. Maybe he’d turn up again. The kids would cry out, “Marvin’s here!” as he clattered up in his pickup, swerving onto the lawn to avoid dripping oil on the driveway. I wouldn’t ask questions.