*Where are the Gargoyles?*

*by Abdul-Basit Issah*

‘City’s really gotta do some’n about dem brown stains,’ Lloyd spat at the road. He took a drag of his vape, exhaled. Grey smoke coiled into the air, far too graceful for his chapped lips.

In a pub window a red neon skull glowed, ringed by the words ‘FIRST OF THE FEW’. BrewDog, the place was called. I’d much rather have stepped in there, had a quiet contemplative night. Not that there was much to contemplate when Lloyd was the only friend I had made so far. The only one who’d hung around, anyway …

His limp wasn’t bothering him as much tonight, and he was determined to enjoy the reprieve his body, too young to have begun to fail, had granted. Why he’d waited till near midnight, I had no idea.

‘Bu dat’s ol Abdeen for ya,’ he was saying. ‘Can’t walk a mile wi out seeing some spaniel scat.’

‘How long till the club?’ I tried to rein in the edge. Not that he’d care; it was his night, and he’d made sure I understood that before we set off.

‘Not long,’ he smirked. ‘An’ don look so dim. There’s enough gals to go round, ye know?’ Another long draw, a gruff exhalation.

Two, maybe three vape pens a day. How long till his lungs gave way? *Probably be in London by then,* I mused. *Away from Lloyd, away from Aberdeen.* It all depended on the next few months. Depended on who, and what, was willing to pay me.

Around us the grey bricks and silent walls stretched on, solid shapes asserting themselves in the gloom. I wondered how old they were. A few hundred, maybe? Everything seemed to be centuries old in Scotland. Old, yet well-kept. Though Lloyd would disagree. Nothing ever impressed him.

‘So you ever hit the clubs back home?’

‘Once or twice a month,’ I replied. ‘Not much of a drinker, or a dancer.’

‘Yeah, you don’t really do much,’ he smirked.

Pale as a ghost, a large building emerged. Ornamental spires crowned the thing, claw-like, seeming to glow in the surrounding blackness.

‘Neo-Gothic?’

‘What?’ he scowled.

No need to get nerdy. ‘Is it a cathedral?’

‘No, bruv, that’s Marischal College. You know … one of em uni buildings,’ he waved a hand. ‘Science, I think. Does kinda look like a church though,’ he shrugged.

I squinted. Some distance away, a statue. A man on a horse, his pose regal.

Past Marischal, we took a turn at a steakhouse, cringing as a small, too-loud car tore past. I have no idea why anyone would do that; buy a car and then crank up the engine so the whole world can hear? Insane.

*‘Who-wee, look adat!’* Lloyd whistled.

Women, young, faces too bright for this hour of night. Barely enough clothes to protect against the cold. I used to wonder where they were off to. Heels, boots, rarely ever sneakers. Hurrying towards pubs and parties that would only start once they’d arrived.

‘That’s rude, bruh.’

‘What? They didn’t hear me. I could be louder if you want.’

‘The volume is fine. We don’t need any arrests tonight.’

‘What is it with you people an getting locked up?’

‘I meant you.’

He snickered, ran a hand through his mess of yellow hair. ‘Course ye do.’

The road became a bridge. Beneath us, tracks stretched on, bordered by a few score trees and above, terracing. Some sort of park? It looked new. I made a mental note to come back during the day. It would be peaceful then, and I’d be able to hear my own thoughts. That was the thing about Aberdeen: too many people when there was sunlight, too eerie when it was dark. Then again, you could say that about any city in the world. Especially Accra, I smiled. *Especially Accra.*

‘This way.’ He’d already started across the road, coat fluttering slightly as a breeze picked up.

I sighed. Six months, and I was yet to see this man wait for the light. My phone buzzed.

*Back soon?*

*Don’t wait up,* I replied.

*Won’t, just checking, be quiet when you get back, got an early morning.*

Still not forgiven, then. I slipped the phone back into my pocket. Whatever I’d done to rouse Maureen, I probably deserved it. The past month had been hard on me, and I’d done—and said—everything to let it show. It suddenly struck me how Maureen was a strange name for a Turk. Or wasn’t it?

‘Who was that?’ Lloyd took another puff.

‘Who else?’ I shrugged.

‘Not in trouble, are ya? Scratch that, when aren’t ya?’

‘Are we almost there?’

‘Across the street, mate,’ he pointed.

In the daytime, it would look like any other spot with a black door. At night, surrounded by reluctant lights and half-drunk walkers, it looked the sort of seedy place that might birth the very worst of the night. Just the sort of place Lloyd would want to be.

‘Cozy.’

‘Don’ drag yer feet on me now, boy,’ his smile showed stained teeth.

‘Lead the way.’

He took one last draught, then threw the pen away. It scuttled to a stop at the foot of a bin, where a small heap of trash lay. Not a heap of trash. An elderly woman, I realised, swaddled in a filthy shawl. A weak hand reached for the vape, then decided against it. Content, it seemed, to remain within what brackets the helpless defined against these most tawdry symbols of needless harm. If Lloyd noticed her, he did nothing to show it. He was already crossing the street.

‘Hey, boys!’ an excited woman screamed, eyes alive with drunken excitement.

‘Stop it, Sybil, we’re going home.’ Her companion, an Asian with bangs, wrapped a large leather jacket around her shoulders, pulling her off.

‘Oh, come on,’ she protested weakly. ‘The black one was cute!’

‘No, he wasn’t, let’s go …’

‘Shame,’ Lloyd’s eyes followed them as they walked along a graffitied wall. ‘Should’ve met her while she was sober.’

‘Thank God you said *sober*.’

‘Never been a creeper, never will be.’ His face went rigid, and for just a moment I was reminded of those rare bursts of righteous indignation that had first drawn me to him.

‘No, you’re not,’ I smiled.

He nodded emphatically. ‘Come on, now.’

‘Twen’ pound ta enter,’ said the bouncer. He was hardly more than a stooped lump of flesh, more likely to need protection than to give it.

‘Twenty?’ Lloyd frowned. ‘Was ten last time.’

‘Diffr’n day, init?’ the man shrugged. His hand found his belt, thumb shifting his coat slightly to show the baton strapped to his waist.

‘For him too,’ Lloyd jabbed a thumb back at me, squeezing a pair of notes into the man’s wiry hands.

The sudden blare of music as a club door opens will always be a jolt of lightning. You can always hear the rhythm, feel the vibrations rippling within you. Then that instant dash of melody … I’ve always found it as foreboding as exciting. Like a temptress. Fitting, I decided. Such is Aberdeen. Don’t snicker—I tend to have my own take on things.

*Don’t be a nerd,* I chided myself.

A disco ball flashed its vibrant lights onto the bodies crammed on the dance floor. Glowsticks, indicative of too-young patrons, coloured the air, waving as celebrants danced way off-beat.

‘Let’s get somena sip first, then we find some gals an see what happens.’

‘Sounds like a plan,’ I whispered. I had a sudden mental image of Maureen staring at me from above, giving that thoroughly disapproving stare only she could muster. But Maureen wasn’t here, and I didn’t intend to dishonour her.

The bar was a slab of mahogany, chipped and cracked with age. Behind it, a young man stood mixing drinks. Give him a tie rather than a scarf, and he’d have been a banker.

‘Shots. Any kind,’ said Lloyd.

‘And anything with no booze in it,’ I added.

‘You’re no fun, you know that? Robert Gordon men are supposed to be.’

‘Most Muslims aren’t.’

‘Wouldn’t swear on it if I were you. And speaking of …’ his gaze drifted.

A pair of women had just appeared. One was blonde as the sun, the other had white locks, face pale as porcelain. Both wore knee-length dresses, and seemed to have come from the dance floor — they were sweaty.

‘Alone, ladies?’ Lloyd grinned.

I had always found his smile lopsided and strange, but women seemed to enjoy it.

‘Came with a guy but he’s got two left feet and can’t hold liquor,’ the blonde one rolled her eyes. ‘So we called him ComCab.’ Her full lips stretched into a wide, wholesome smile.

My eyes found her friend’s. She gave a bashful grin, then turned to the bar.

‘So you *are* alone. Well, so are we.’ He lifted a glass as the barista placed his shots on the ugly wood. ‘Wanna see my moves?’

He made a motion, half-shrug, half-jerk. The women laughed. How on earth was *that* funny?

‘You know what?’ Blondie grabbed his hand, paying no attention to the glass. ‘See you later. Chat to him, Beth,’ she pushed her friend towards me, ‘so we have something to gossip about later.’ She winked once at me, and pulled Lloyd into the crowd.

‘Unbelievable,’ Beth shook her head, leering.

‘Now you get a free shot,’ I pushed Lloyd’s untouched glass towards her.

‘Isn’t that yours?’ As her lips moved, I noticed her septum ring.

‘No, I don’t drink.’

‘Oh,’ she straightened. ‘OK, then.’ She downed the glass, then slammed it down. ‘That was something.’

‘I like your hair.’

‘Thanks,’ she beamed. ‘Been growing it out for a year and a half now. You should’ve seen me when I cut everything off.’

‘Sure you were just as pretty then,’ I smirked. ‘One for her too,’ I said as the barista placed a large bottle of cider before me.

‘Thanks,’ she grinned. ‘The compliments weren’t many back then.’

‘Somehow I don’t believe you.’

‘Aren’t you sweet?’ she drew closer. ‘Well, I’ve got my orders,’ she jerked her neck towards Lloyd and her friend who, surrounded by a gaggle of dancers, were a flailing of arms and legs. ‘Where’re you from, mystery man?’

‘Accra.’

‘That in Nigeria?’

I laughed. ‘Ghana.’

‘Oh yeah … had a roommate who was Ghanaian. Never cooked me jollof though, the selfish hag.’

‘Can’t promise I’ll be much better,’ I raised my hands in surrender.

‘Oh, you’ll have to be.’

Her bottle arrived, and she raised it. ‘Cheers.’

‘Is that a Band-Aid?’ I pointed to her shoulder.

‘What?’

‘Plaster? Did you fall or something?’

‘Oh, that. No, that’s a nicotine patch. I’m tryna quit smoking.’

The thing glistened there, beige against beige.

‘Does that actually do anything for you?’

Her smile faltered. ‘Helps keep me stable. You know, withdrawal symptoms and all that.’

‘You come here often?’ Sensing her discomfort, I changed the subject.

‘Been here twice before, told myself I wouldn’t be back here.’

‘What happened?’

‘Fight. Saturday night, football knobheads. Dandies and Hibs. Bottles smashed, people scattering everywhere.’

‘Must’ve been thrilling,’ I laughed.

‘Yeah, too much of a thrill,’ she shook her head, drank long. ‘Watch football, go home and sleep. But no, the game just *has to* go on, you know? Crazy stuff,’ she shook her head. ‘You a fan?’

‘Not really. I’ve only been to Pittodrie once. Maybe when I find a real job, I’ll go again. For now, penny-pinching.’

‘What do you do?’

‘Just the odd gig helping students with their essays. Still searching, really.’

‘Yeah, it can be tough. What’re you looking for?’

‘Anything, really. As long as it’s good and pays, I’m there. Why, you’re hiring?’

‘Me?’ she chortled. ‘Hell, I’m in need of hiring too.’

I took her in: the unblemished skin, the well-done hair, the beautiful dress … nothing about her screamed ‘needy’.

‘I know what you’re thinking. Everyone thinks it. But truth, I’m twenty-nine, and I still live with my parents. So yeah, I’m not in a good place right now.’

‘I wish I could live with *my* parents.’

‘Not out here, you don’t.’

‘Is that right?’

‘Trust me. Especially in the winter. Turn on a heater, they start chatting to you about energy costs. Do your laundry, you’re racking up the water bill. Always something.’

‘Always something, all right. Do you live nearby?’

‘I’m near the bridge. Bridge of Don,’ she added.

‘So you get to see the river. Nice.’

‘Get to see the river? It’s just water, mate. Not that great.’

‘I love it. I actually take walks to the bank and back.’

‘Are you serious?’ her eyes widened. ‘Walk all the way from—where is it you stay?’

‘I’m near the RGU campus.’

‘And you come all the way from there to just what, sit beside the water? By yourself? Not gonna lie, that sounds sad.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes, very,’ she nodded.

I enjoy the walks. Just me and my AirPods.’

‘Let me guess, you listen to podcasts?’

‘Usually it’s music. Don’t assume too much. I’m much more than I look.’

‘I’ll take your word for it.’

‘So aside costing your folks your weight in retirement money, what do you do?’

‘Babysit sometimes. Only when I’m *really* up to it, cos these kids, man …’ she rolled her eyes.

‘What about them?’

‘Wanting to grow up quicker than they should. Other day, caught my neighbour’s son with pills. Percs, if you can believe that. New cool thing at school, it seems.’

I tried to come up with something witty. Nothing. Perhaps drug-munching kids wasn’t the sort of thing to joke about. ‘So you flushed them down the drain, then?’

She smiled. ‘I kept them. Don’t look at me that way, I don’t intend to use them, they’re just in my drawer. Can’t tell you why they’re there, they just are.’

‘I’ll take your word.’

‘You know what, I *can* tell you why … it’s a way to test myself, I think. I have a history, I’ve told you that. So now I’ve got in my possession the very things that nearly destroyed me, and I’m choosing not to use them, you know? Sounds like something you’d see in a movie or read in one of them smug books but it’s true for me.’

‘That’s all that matters,’ I replied.

Quitting smoking, recovering from drug use … what else have you done in the past?

*‘E don cast, last last … na everybody go chop breakfast …’*

The lyrics stirred to life, and the crowd buzzed. Over a year, and Burna Boy’s summer track was still firing people up.

‘Well, there’s your Afrobeats,’ she snickered. ‘You wanna hop on the floor?’

‘I’m not much of a dancer,’ I smiled.

‘Come on,’ she grabbed my wrist. ‘I’ll make one of you.’