

Bad-Ass<sup>2</sup>Faeries

# Just Plain Bad



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# Bottle-Caps And Cigarette Butts

Bernie Mojzes

IT ROLLED LIKE TUMBLEWEED DOWN THE STREET IN THE WAKE OF the SEPTA bus. Rolled like an empty beer can, fluttered like crumpled newspaper and yellowed ginkgo leaves and pigeon feathers, then slipped through a storm grate, where it watched me suspiciously with eyes like cigarette butts and bottle-caps. Watched me watching it, then blinked twice and dropped out of sight.

Can't say I begrudge its circumspection. The city requires a bit of wariness from us all, don't it? Whether we be human or critter or something else entirely, we all show a bit of the same behavior. We all keep an eye out for shadowy doorways. We all take particular notice of those who're giving us a bit more attention than we want. In the end, we're all potential predator, and we're all potential prey. And why should the Fae be any different? At least, that's the way I figure it.

I jaywalked at a break in traffic and peered down the storm drain. Didn't see anything, of course. I might've been looking right at it, but if so, it blended in so well with the trash that had collected at the bottom as to be invisible. I fumbled in my laptop case and found a package of Starburst candies and half a Mounds bar. I opened one of the Starbursts and popped it in my mouth, then dropped one through the grate. Never hurts to leave an offering. Once upon a time these folks were Door Things and Kitchen Things and Stable Things. The spirits of trees and streams and rivers and rocks. I think. But there's no room in this world for Door Things and Kitchen Things. Not anymore.

And the trees are all caged and replaced before they can push up the sidewalks. The streams are all paved over. People

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don't even have time to notice the Place anymore, much less the Spirit of the Place.

As I walked away I felt eyes watching me—an itch in the center of my back, hair raised at the base of my neck. I turned to look at the storm grate but I saw no hint of the Street Thing I'd seen. Still, the disconcerting feeling remained. I threw another Starburst at the grate (and missed), attracting the attention of a handful of jeering children as they passed me on the street. A flash of movement caught my eye as I turned to walk away. When I looked back, the candy was gone.

I smiled as I continued walking, ignoring my lingering apprehension.



That evening I had dinner with Amy and Taylor, who were visiting Philly for a week, and my friend Stephen, at a small restaurant on Fifth and South. A bit pricier than my post-student budget could comfortably accommodate, but how often do I get to see Amy and Taylor, since she got accepted at the University of Washington and he followed her and became a programmer for the very same Evil Empire he'd spent years mocking?

We were well into our second bottle of wine by the time the appetizers arrived and I was well into a fantasy in which the evident tension between Amy and Taylor turned into a full-fledged fight, and she turned to me and said, *I should never have left you.*

And she turned to me and said, “Why do you keep looking over your shoulder?”

I hadn't realized that I had been. But I had. I kept stealing glances out the window to the street, but there was never anything there. You know. Except for people. And cars.

“I don't know,” I said. “I keep feeling like I'm being watched. It's been going on all day.”

Taylor grinned. “You become a spy since we've been gone?”

“No.”

“Witness in a mafia trial?” Stephen offered.

I rolled my eyes.

“Nikki's stalking you.” Amy looked over her wine glass at me. Taylor and Stephen laughed, but Amy didn't. She knew better.

“Gods, no. She's, I dunno, off stalking someone else. I think she moved out of town.”

“Good.” Amy's lips curled into a crooked smile. “So who's watching you?”

I felt my face flush. “It's nothing. It's silly.” I shook my head. “You'll think I'm crazy.”

“So what's new?” Taylor flinched as Amy backhanded him.

“All right,” I said. I rubbed my temples. “It's like this. I see faeries.”

Stephen cocked his head. “Hello? You're just now figuring this out?” His grin would've shamed Puck.

“Drink your wine.”

“I hear and obey.” He waved the near-empty bottle at the waiter.

I ignored Taylor’s mocking look and focused on Amy’s skepticism. “Told you you’d think I was crazy.”

She gave me a wry grin. “I like your brand of crazy. And I think we most definitely need more wine for this conversation.”



There should have been sound. The throaty flutter of giant wings, the grinding of stone on stone. Something.

We’d been somewhat fairly quite thoroughly tipsy when we’d left the restaurant, drunk and pissy, the tension between the fiancé and the ex-boyfriend moving from playful jabs to blatant hostility quickly as Amy played us off against each other. I pretend to think that I understood why she was doing this. Stephen, neutral as Switzerland, but a lover of drama in all its forms, had settled in to enjoy the show, only pitching in to throw some fuel on the fire when things started to die down. He didn’t much care about the outcome—it was the battle he loved.

Out on the sidewalk, Stephen gave Amy and Taylor cursory hugs. “Hate to bitch and run,” he said, “but I have a date tonight.” He smiled and kissed me on the cheek. “If you get lonely, text me. We’ll make it a threesome.”

“Hot faerie action,” Taylor muttered.

“You bet your sweet virgin ass, honey!” Stephen smirked, and then, with his habitual flourish, he was off, leaving us to our anger.

“I’ll walk you to your hotel,” I said.

“That’s not necessary,” Taylor said, and Amy scowled.

I shrugged. “It’s on the way to my apartment. But if you want I’ll walk on the other side of the street.”

“Works for me.”

“Don’t be an ass.” Amy linked her arm in mine, and her other in Taylor’s.

That’s how we negotiated the sidewalk, winding like snakes around signposts and pedestrians, partially parting like retarded nematodes for parking meters and fire hydrants. Taylor kicked an empty Coke bottle in front of him, swapped it for a crushed beer can when we came across one, and traded that in for a broken piece of masonry after Amy almost sprawled on her face tripping over it. We were all a few sheets to the wind, but it was pretty clear by the time we’d traveled a few blocks that Amy was using us for support as often as not.

“Wait,” I said, pulling us to a halt. I recognized this spot. This was the storm grate the Street Thing had disappeared into. “Gotta do something.” I untangled myself and fumbled in my bag. Yep, still had some Starbursts. I dropped a couple through the grate. I think I may have seen something move.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Taylor was shaking his head.

“An offering. It’s good to make friends. It’s like that old Gang of Four song, ‘Make friends quick, buy them beer!’”

Amy laughed. “I love Gang of Four!”

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“You don’t even know who Gang of Four is.” Taylor tugged at her arm. “Let’s go.”

Amy tried to shrug him off. “*The girls they love to see me shoot, the girls they love to see me shoot.*” She was off-key and adorable, and I’d have fallen in love with her right then and there if I hadn’t already done that years ago.

Taylor dropped her arm, and she swayed. “So there’s something down there.”

“Maybe,” I said.

“There’s a faerie down there.”

“Maybe. Or maybe there’s just rats.” I grinned. “As above, so below.”

“*I love a man in a uniform. Shoot! Shoot!*” Amy sang.

“I suppose next you’ll be telling us that the gargoyles are alive, too,” he said, pointing up.

“Don’t be stupid,” I began, and then stopped. The building next to us was host to dozens of gargoyles, winged and fanged, with clawed hands and feet whose talons gripped the stone with ease. They adorned the ledges under each row of windows. They were completely motionless. “They’re just stone,” I said. But I saw. Those eyes. Oh, yes, I saw.

Maybe if I hadn’t been drunk, I’d have been fast enough to stop him. Of course, if I hadn’t been drunk, I wouldn’t have been telling anyone about faeries, and Taylor and I would still be pretending that we were still friends.

He reached down and picked up his piece of brick. “Then nobody will mind this,” he said, and heaved it at the closest gargoyle. It turned in the air as it flew, shattering as it hit the gargoyle’s face. There was a moment when I dared hope we were safe. Fragments of brick showered us, getting in our hair and eyes, but the gargoyle appeared undamaged. Then stone lips curled into an angry grimace, and the air filled with dark grey shadow.

They dropped soundlessly, the air heavy with granite and cement. It was almost impossible to breathe, the air was so dense. I saw them move. I believed they could, and when they did, I knew what I was seeing. Maybe that’s why I was able to duck and squirm and rip myself out of their grasp. Maybe that’s why when Amy and Taylor were taken, screaming, I was left torn and bleeding, lying on the ground under the bumper of a parked car.

Or maybe that was just part of the game.

A few feet away, bottle-caps and cigarette butts stared at me out of the darkness.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

They blinked and were gone.



I called cell phones, called the hotel, took a cold, sobering shower while mainlining a giant cup of coffee. Not enough Band-Aids to deal with the gouges on my arm and shoulder, so I tore up an old t-shirt and did the best I could. Then I made more phone calls.

Still no answer from Amy and Taylor. Stephen texted me back, suggesting that I hurry if I want in on the fun. He, at least, was safe. But there was nothing I could do for Amy. Or Taylor.

God. I could still feel her arm linked with mine, her body pressing against mine as she swayed, as we dodged other people on the streets. She and Taylor weren't getting along.

*I like your brand of crazy*, she'd said.

She still loved me. How could I abandon that? How could I let that go?

Half an hour later I was standing in front of the gargoyle building, holding a lead pipe, staring at an unadorned edifice. Where the gargoyles had perched, only claw-prints remained, sunken into the stone. I think I screamed at the gargoyles, at the wall, at the heavens. At myself. And then darkness dropped from the sky.

I held the lead pipe like a baseball bat and waited. The gargoyle landed silently in front of me, out of range unless I leapt for him. It. It was smaller than I was, but I looked at two-inch fangs, ancient and rain-stained, looked at claws that dug holes in cement, and decided to maintain my distance.

It stretched its leatherstone wings, settled them against its back, and spoke. The sound tore through my marrow, a saw drawn across slate. "You seek something," it said. "Something precious to you."

"Yes." I didn't have to look to know the pipe was trembling in my hands. Formidable I was not. But I didn't wet myself. It's the small victories, right?

"Then you must ask." It grinned, revealing more teeth than I could have imagined, and malice more pure than I'd ever dreamed. So much for small victories. I don't think I noticed until later, though. "But choose your words wisely. Every question must have its answer, as every king must have his queen. A poor choice yields unpleasant consequences."

"Yes, sir," I said. I bit my lip. "Would you please bring Amy back to me?"

It smiled, almost kindly. "Of course." Bat wings stretched and the air thickened, pressing against my chest and throat and driving me to my knees. "We'll bring what's left when we come for you."

There should have been a sound as the immense wings beat against the soupy air, but there wasn't, and then the creature was gone. I could breathe again, and I retched and sobbed until I was empty.



Morning brought the sun punching through the inadequate shades of my easterly facing bedroom windows, burning in throbbing pulses past my sheltering arms and through my eyelids. I'd run home after the confrontation with the gargoyle, stripped and showered. This time instead of coffee, I brought a half-full bottle of tequila into the shower with me. I'm pretty sure that I'd made a significant dent on it before it slipped through my fingers and shattered in the tub. I cut myself less than I should have, and then started in on a bottle of cheap vodka that someone had been so kind as to leave at my house, leaving a trail of blood and water from the tub to the freezer. That one at least was safe. It came in a plastic

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bottle. I don't know how much of that I drank either. The uncapped bottle had spilled and soaked into the bed at some point in the night.

I buried my head under the pillow and wished for stellar cataclysm, but no such luck. Instead, there was a tap at my window. A minute later, again, something hit my window.

I'm on the third floor. People don't tap on my window. But still, there it was. A few times every minute, now. Insistent. I ignored it for as long as I could, and then I dragged myself out of bed and pulled the shade.

Three Starburst wrappers were stuck to the glass.

I rubbed salt and sleep and tequila and vodka out of my eyes and looked again. Still there. And outside, yes, the Street Thing, huddled inconspicuously between a trashcan and a signpost, watched me. It motioned somehow, and I waved to it.

I was out the door before I realized just how desperately I needed a cup of coffee. I stood there, blinded in the morning sun, while a small bundle of trash bounced against my leg.

"Coffee," I said. Inhuman eyes looked at me with confusion. "I need coffee to think."

The Street Thing rolled down the sidewalk, then clambered up the side of a trash can. It reappeared a minute later holding a coffee cup. It was a little stained and crumpled, about a third full, and not entirely cold. Not the time to refuse a gift. I tried not to think about what else might have been in the trash can, pulled the lid off and downed the contents, trying to minimize the amount of contact my lips had with the cup. It helped.

A couple waiting at the bus stop were staring at me. In retrospect, I wonder what it was they had seen happen. At the time, I didn't really care. The coffee was cold and nasty and full of what I needed. That's all that mattered.

The Street Thing started rolling off down the street and I followed. It took me down 22<sup>nd</sup> Street to Panama, down to 23<sup>rd</sup> and into Fidler Square, Center City's nigh-forgotten park. There it scurried toward the bushes near the statue of the ram. A handful of other Street Things waited there. They looked at me with a mixture of apprehension and curiosity.

"Hullo," I said. Then, feeling stupid but not knowing what else to do, I gave a small bow. There was a soft noise, like plastic grocery bags blowing in the wind. "Can you help me get Amy back from the gargoyles?" The noise repeated, and then the Street Things pressed into and under the bushes. The last of them, possibly the one I'd followed, motioned me to follow. I hoped no one saw me.

Safe under the cover of the bushes they spoke to me in their soft voices, voices that echoed the flutter of pigeon wings, the hiss of tires on wet roads, the click of high heels on concrete. And when they were finished talking, I knew exactly what I needed to do.



My quest took me to a place of stone and air. The Benjamin Franklin Bridge rose on massive granite anchorages. I entered through the riverside door at the