

## Raising Archie

By  
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The bedside phone trilled, dragging me through several layers of warm slumber. I sat up and swept the bedside cabinet with the flat of my hand before I realised I didn't need my glasses to answer the phone.

Brenda turned to face me, concerned. Dead of night calls are not the norm in our household.

"Hello? Dave?" I looked at Brenda. "It's Dave."

She rolled her eyes.

"What? You've got a what, Dave? Can't it wait until tomorrow?" I checked the glowing red digits of the clock-radio and corrected myself. "Later *today*?"

Dave apologised for disturbing me and admitted he ought have known better. He just thought that with us being best mates and everything...

"Goodnight, Dave." I put the phone down.

Brenda murmured, "What did he want, James?"

I reviewed Dave's excited rambling. He'd seen a listing on an auction website for some kind of big egg. A few left-clicks and £30 and one penny later, the egg was his. Now, apparently, an animal had hatched.

"He wanted to show me his new pet." I paused, then picked the phone up and dialled. "Dave? I'll be there in 20 minutes."

"You berk," Brenda said, and rolled over.

I shrugged, unable to explain the contagious excitement, the sense of curiosity awakening in the marrow of my 39 year-old bones.

All the windows of his house glowed in the blue-blackness. This, I thought as I shut my car door and walked up the path, had better be good.

Dave snatched the front door open, dragged me in, and slammed it. I started to complain, but he spun me 'round. "You've got to help me find him! The little sod disappeared while I was on the phone to you. Whatever you do, watch you don't tread on him. He's grey and," he made a fist, "about so big." He dashed up the stairs, leaving me in the hall, blinking.

I sauntered into the lounge and found the shards of a dull, mottled gray eggshell nestled in cotton on a glass coffee table. I examined a piece. Less than an half an inch across, the shard was both thicker and heavier than its chicken counterpart. I sniffed it and detected a faint scent that reminded me of... schooldays. After a few moments, I realised it smelled like chalk.

Dave had thoughtfully rigged a heat lamp. I angled the light obliquely across the glass table top and noticed a few motes of dust glinting on one edge. Encouraged, I picked up the lamp and, as far as the lead would allow, followed a thin trail across the carpet. It ended in a small drift of whitish powder in an inner corner of the room.

I looked up. "Oh, *very* funny. Dave!"

He crashed down the stairs. "What, what, have you found him?" He followed my eyes to where a putty-hued face peeked from a ragged hole in the plaster cornicing.

"Stone me." Dave smiled. "Ah well. At least that confirms what he is."

"You are kidding me, right?"

“What do you think gargoyles eat?” Dave sat on the sofa watching the stone gargoyle do nothing, as stone gargoyles invariably do.

I shrugged and sipped my tea. While I felt annoyed about leaving my warm, comfortable bed to witness such an elaborate hoax, I found myself humouring him just to see how long he would continue it. The hole he’d knocked in the cornicing alone demanded a level of respectful cooperation from me.

“How about coal, Jimbo?”

“Maybe. But I think I saw it on telly once that some birds nibble their eggshells, for vital minerals and stuff.”

Dave plucked a shard of broken shell from the coffee table and offered it up to the gargoyle. When the piece wasn’t snatched from his fingers, he rested it on the lip of the hole and sat down again.

“The shell seems to be made of chalk, Dave. I don’t suppose you happen to have any chalk lying around, do you?”

“Yeah, there’s some in the middle drawer over there.” He indicated the sideboard with his chin. “Pass him one, Jimbo. Go on.”

I set down my tea and opened the drawer. A packet of blackboard chalk lay among a mess of staples, paper clips, rubber bands, pencils, and biros. “How convenient.”

“How do you mean, mate?” He looked puzzled.

“Never mind.” I slid a chalk stick from the packet and offered it to the gargoyle.

A piece of eggshell was protruding from its mouth.

“How...?” I looked at Dave.

He beamed. “You were dead right about the eggshell.”

I placed the chalk next to the gargoyle and walked backwards to my chair, staring at the ugly stone head.

Dave rose and peered closer at the thing, and while his head blocked my view, I heard a distinct *crunch*. He jerked back and exploded with laughter. “Look at him go! He likes that.”

I jumped up to stand beside him. The chalk, like the eggshell, had gone.

Dave said, “I think I’ll call him... I don’t know. What should I call him?”

I reached up and prodded the creature’s face. Stone. Solid, immovable stone. “Dave, listen. Did you actually see— No, I meant to say, do you *think* you saw that thing eating?”

“Yeah, didn’t you?”

“No!” I was growing agitated.

“Curious. I wonder if it only moves when it thinks it’s not being watched. Me excepting, of course. I suppose he thinks I’m Mummy.”

I clapped my friend on the back. “He’s got your nose.”

“Bog off. Anyway, what should I call him?”

“I dunno.” Boredom was replacing agitation. “How about Archie?”

“Why Archie?”

“Why not?”

“Can’t argue with that. He does look like an Archie, doesn’t he? Yeah, Archie the Gargoyle, I like that. Nice one, Jimbo.”

“Look, as much as I’d like to stay and look at a garden ornament you’ve embedded in your wall, and as much as I admire the trouble you’ve gone to in setting that little lot up,” I indicated the remains of the egg on the coffee table, “I’m going home now.”

I waited for Dave to relent. I’d played my part. Surely, he could drop the act now?

“Okay, thanks for coming. I know it’s late, but I just had to show someone. He is amazing, isn’t he?” His ingenuous gaze met mine.

I shook my head and left.

Dave related his diet experiments. Although Archie liked sticks of chalk fed by hand, Dave guessed that an exclusive diet of chalk would not be healthy for a growing gargoyle. He invested in a cement mixer and tried various combinations of sand, cement, and gravel.

I sat on an upturned bucket in Dave's yard and smoked a cigarette while he shovelled more sand into the mixer. "What's on the menu today, Mummy?"

"Two parts fine gravel and sand to one part cement with just a hint of silica and graphite for seasoning. I've told him if he eats it all, and *only* if he eats it all, he can have two chalk sticks as a special treat. I'm trying to wean him off the chalk. Isn't that right, Archie?"

Archie, squatting before a smaller bucket, reacted with stoic indifference. He was, I noticed, a slightly larger figurine than the one I'd seen a week before, more canine. He had a muzzle and pointed, upright ears. A rough tongue protruded from fluted lips.

"How long are you going to keep this up for, Dave?"

He turned Archie's dinner a couple of revolutions before adding water from a hosepipe. "Keep what up, mate?"

"This! I mean, what do the neighbours think?" As the local planning officer I was accustomed to disgruntled citizens complaining about their neighbours. "Do you take him walkies?"

"I take him out in the car, up Stretford Hills. You know, he hates being watched and it's nice and quiet up there. Not too many folks about after eight. He's learning to fly!"

I looked at Archie's stunted wings and grunted.

"I ride around on my bike and he follows, flapping his wings and trying to keep up. I wish you'd come and watch." His face became animated when he talked about his pet gargoyle.

"Maybe I will someday," I said, meaning *never*. I wasn't buying any of it...but, hey, he was within his rights to be eccentric. Eccentricity was a noble British trait. Someone should have slapped a preservation order on him and paid him his dues for keeping old traditions alive.

I smiled as he tipped some sandy gruel into Archie's bucket and patted the statue fondly on the head. I enjoyed the role of passive observer, but the milk of kindness flowing through my veins was somewhat soured by the niggling question of why he had chosen *me* to take for a ride.

Three weeks later, I put the same question to my wife over our evening meal.

"Because he knows you'll humour him, that's why." Brenda forked the last scrap of cauliflower into her mouth and folded her cutlery on her plate. "Anyone else would have called in the men in white coats ages ago."

"That's a bit harsh, isn't it? Mind you, he's making a hell of a mess of his house. Archie's this tall," I held my hand two feet off the ground, "and yet he still climbs— No, Dave still *puts him* up in the corner of the lounge wall. The hole's massive. All the plasterwork's gone. It won't be long and Archie's arse is going to be poking out the exterior wall."

She narrowed her eyes. "Have you asked yourself what Dave is getting out of all this?"

"I think it's a game to him, like chess or something. Every time I go 'round he plays it like Archie is real, alive. How the hell do you argue with someone when he tells you he keeps a grotesque statue as a pet?"

"Perhaps if you could find some incriminating evidence, like gargoyle moulds in his shed?"

“Do you think I haven’t looked? There are no moulds, and if he had the necessary skills to sculpt one, I’m pretty sure he couldn’t carve successively larger ones at the rate he’d have to. Archie gets a little bigger each week, like he’s growing.”

“But are you sure it’s made of stone and not some sort of fibreglass or polystyrene?”

“It’s stone all right. Dave’s being very crafty about all this. Either that or....”

“Or what?”

I retreated under Brenda’s scrutiny. “Nothing.”

“He’s taking you for an idiot, James.”

“He wouldn’t do that. Not deliberately. We go way back, Dave and I.”

“Give him an ultimatum: stop messing you about or you call the men in white coats.”

“But he’s a mate and he’s not harming anyone, is he? I wouldn’t expect you to understand that. It’s probably a bloke thing, but we mates stick together!”

“I’m telling you now, James—”

“Stop calling me James!”

“What?” she said, derailed by my sudden change of direction.

“I said stop calling me James. Please.”

“But, but that’s your name.”

“Yes, I am aware of that.”

Brenda took our plates into the kitchen. I knew she didn’t understand my little outburst. I wasn’t sure I understood it. I’d set out on life’s road as “Little Jimmy,” entered my teens as “Jimmy,” and exited them as “Jim.” Somewhere in my late twenties, I morphed into “James.” People called me that as a joke with a sort of mock seriousness, winking at my inevitable slide into middle-age. Only Dave called me “Jimbo,” and without a trace of sarcasm.

I twiddled my thumbs and stared at the tablecloth, hoping I hadn’t jeopardised my chances of dessert. Thursday meant sticky toffee pudding, my favourite.

Brenda switched the radio on in the kitchen. “All I’m saying,” she raised her voice above the singing, “is that sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind.”

Dave and I were sitting in his lounge on a pleasant summer evening, the windows flung open to birdsong, ice-cream van chimes, and the clatter of lawnmowers as *homo suburbia* tamed squares of nature.

I waved a tin of lager at the statue in the corner. “He’s looking a little cramped there, Dave.”

“D’you think so? He seems happy enough to me.”

“But are you being fair to him?” I persisted. “Think about it, his natural environment is up on a church roof or a cathedral somewhere, looking out over grand vistas. Baked by the sun one day, rimed with hoarfrost the next. This corner of your lounge, Dave, it’s not natural for such a noble creature.”

He took a sip of his beer. My words had struck home.

“And,” I continued, “you have no way of knowing how big he’s going to get. I mean, are gargoyles like poodles? Do they come as miniature, toy, and standard? What are you going to do if he keeps on growing? What is he now, three-foot, three-foot-six?”

Dave straightened. “I know! I’ll build a small church in the garden. Nothing fancy, just enough for Archie to sit on and feel at home.”

“You cannot be serious.”

“Why not?”

“*Why not?* Because you’d never get planning permission for a start.”

He smiled. “Well, I’ve got this friend who works in the Planning Department of the local council.”

“No way, Dave. Forget it. You’d be asking me to compromise my integrity. People think they can just bypass regulations by bugging a planning officer a few quid. I deal with that sort of crap every day, but I certainly didn’t expect it from you.”

Dave eased back in his chair. “No, Jimbo. You’re right. Sorry.”

“Yeah, well. A church in your garden’s a stupid idea anyway.” I took a photocopy from my top pocket and flattened it out on the coffee table. “Listen, I’ve been doing some research at work. There’s this church in Llywny— Llywnyw— it’s in Wales. It dates back nearly 500 years.” I swivelled the paper so Dave could see it. “It’s covered in carvings of masks, gargoyles, weirdy beasties.”

“So?”

“So, he would be among his own kind, Dave. This is where he belongs, out there in the open. It would be perfect. Look, I’ll leave this here with you. Think about it, mate. You’re going to have to come to some sort of decision about what to do with him sooner or later. You’ve known that all along, haven’t you?”

He shrugged.

“He’s becoming reliant on you,” I said. “You’ve done a great job bringing him up so far, but leave it too long and he’s not going to be able to fend for himself in the wild. He needs to be among his own kind, Dave. Let him go. It’s a kindness.”

“It’s just that I’ll miss him.”

“And, I’m sure he’ll miss you.”

The Church of St Eilfyw overlooked farmland to the east and north, the graveyard and a narrow country lane to the west, and a caravan park to the south. Once we had located the village of Llwynwygogog, the church had been easy to find. Three grotesque gargoyles topped its solid, squat tower thrusting into the darkening sky. Contorted faces peered at us from every surface.

I pulled in to the lane leading to the caravan park and climbed out to open the gate, the salt tang in the air reminding me that we were near the coast. Archie will like it here, I thought, and then shook my head at the unconscious slip.

Once we were in the park, I lifted the rear door and reached for Archie. “Come on, Dave. Let’s get this over with before it gets too dark to see. The last thing we need is for someone to come along and start asking us daft questions.”

Or, rather, questions that would solicit daft answers.

I slid the stone effigy along the floor and tipped it over.

Dave appeared at my side. “Careful with him.”

He took the head and I grabbed the feet.

“On the count of three,” I said. “One, two, three, *lift*.” Due to the confined space, I failed to raise Archie over the tailgate. There was the painful screech of stone dragging on metal and I was looking at a nasty scratch in my paintwork. “Oh, for crying out loud!”

“Leave me to it, Jimbo.”

“There’s no way you’ll get him out by yourself.”

Dave huffed as if dealing with a wayward child. “He’ll get out the same way he got in – by himself. Just bog off and leave us alone.”

I bogged off. First, I sought out the toilets, then took a wander around the park. Brenda had talked often about us getting a caravan for weekends away. Llwynwygogog looked a good place to stay – pleasantly pastoral, historic, romantic even – but the swarming gnats drove such thoughts away and me back to the car.

Dave had managed to manhandle Archie out on to the grass and was squatting before the stone effigy. I walked around to the back of the car to close the door when I saw a chip of masonry just inside the tailgate. A claw. I must have knocked it off the gargoyle on our

abortive attempt to get it out. Still annoyed at the scratch in the paintwork, I slipped the claw into my pocket and slammed the door down. “How long are you going to be, Dave?”

He looked drawn. I’m sure if the light had been better, I would’ve seen tears coursing over his cheeks.

Embarrassed, I said, “I’m going to turn the car ’round and make ready to go. Come when you’re ready.”

Then, because it seemed the decent thing to do, I said goodbye to Archie. I opened the gate, got in the car, and headed back down the narrow lane. I pulled over on to the grass verge and switched off the engine. All was quiet. In my mirror I could just make out the silhouette of St Eilfyw’s against the purple sky. A handful of stars had appeared.

Three, four minutes passed. I rolled the window down and stuck my head out. I was just about to holler for Dave to get his arse into gear when I heard a scream. The fuzzy hairs on the back of my neck stood on end.

A thick silence descended. I began to wonder if I hadn’t imagined the cry. Then, there came a rhythmic sound, hard, like leather on rock. I was running toward the park when Dave came charging down the lane.

“Get going, Jimbo. Please, just get going.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but the anguish on his face stilled my tongue. I spun around and jumped in the driver’s seat. “What the hell happened?” I asked once we were moving.

Dave struggled for breath. “He wouldn’t stay. I couldn’t make him understand that he had to stay. At first he seemed interested in the church tower. He flew up and had a sniff around the other gargoyles, but then flew back down and started following me off the park. I turned on him and raised my arms. Shouted at him. Yeaaghhh! He just looked at me with his head on one side as if to say ‘What’s up with you?’ He couldn’t understand why I was leaving him.”

“What was that noise I heard?”

“Probably me slapping him.” Dave smiled through his tears. “I don’t know who it hurt more, me or him. It is for the best, isn’t it, Jimbo? I have done the right thing?”

“Yes, mate. You have. Don’t forget your seatbelt.”

We sped away. Game over. Checkmate to me. I’d only made one move in the entire game, but I had outmanoeuvred him.

“I hope the other gargoyles accept him,” Dave said quietly.

A shiver went down my back. He was acting, of course. He *had* to be acting. I had to *believe* he was acting, because the alternative – that my friend had gone completely insane – was too frightening.

The car headlights framed Dave’s house as we pulled into the drive. I turned the engine off. “Any chance of a cuppa? I’m parched.”

“Hm? Yeah, sorry. I was miles away.”

He shut the door and I followed. As Dave walked up his drive, he stopped suddenly, peering into the bushes that fringed the garden. “What was that?”

“What was what? I didn’t hear anything.”

Dave crossed the lawn in three strides and parted a barberry. There, glowing dully in the feeble light of a street lamp, was Archie. Dave dropped to his knees and threw his arms around the gargoyle.

I ground my teeth. “How the hell do you explain that?”

Dave turned to face me. “It’s Archie! He flew home!”

“On those little wings?” I hammered my head with my hands. “No, no, no. I’m getting as bad as you. He can’t fly because he’s a *statue*. We left a hunk of bloody rock in

Wales two hours ago and now there's *another* one in your garden. It's not fair, Dave. You are not playing by the rules. I beat you fair and square. Well, I'm sick of this whole bloody charade. This, this farce!" I ran across the lawn and kicked the statue before collapsing, clutching what felt like five broken toes. "*Ya bugger!*"

Dave watched me without moving. "Game, Jimbo? I don't know what you mean." He nodded at the gargoyle. "That's my Archie."

I sat up. "It is *not* your Archie. You must have made it and put it there before we left. Come on, Dave," I said miserably. "Why not admit it? This has gone on long enough."

He shook his head. "I had no idea."

I pushed myself to my feet and hobbled to face him. "Dave. I want you to tell me truthfully now, do you really believe that you have a pet gargoyle and that he flew over 80 miles back to your house tonight?"

"Yes."

I grasped his hand and shook it. "Then, that's it, mate. I can't deal with it. You're out of my depth. Brenda was right. You should be seeking professional help."

"Where are you going? I thought you wanted a cuppa."

I was limping down the drive. "I'm going home, Dave. Perhaps I'll see you around." I fumbled in my coat pocket for the keys. Something hard dug into my finger.

I spun back. "Last chance, mate. Admit I beat you fair and square."

"It is not a game, I keep telling you."

"Oh, yes it is, and what's more, I've won."

I marched back with as much dignity as bruised toes would allow and flashed my trump card.

"What's that?"

"It's a claw. It came off the gargoyle we left behind at St Eilfyw's." I bent down to the statue in the bushes and examined its feet. "So, whereas that one is short a claw, this one...."

Within three months Dave's garden had become a trench. I left Brenda in his kitchen and ducked as a digger bucket narrowly missed my head.

"Sorry, Jim," the operator called down.

"No worries," I shouted back. "Where's Dave?"

He pointed out in the street to Dave facing a neighbour who was gesturing angrily.

I ambled over to mediate. "Good morning, gentlemen."

"It would be a better morning if this lot packed up and went home!"

"Ah. You wouldn't be Mr Watkiss by any chance?"

The man eyed me warily. "That's me."

I turned to Dave. "You go and supervise the workmen."

He didn't need telling twice, and trotted off to a safe distance.

"This building is going to be an eyesore," complained Mr Watkiss.

"Well, you're welcome to your opinion, of course, but the fact remains that the occupant of this property has been given full approval by the local Planning Department."

"Aye, I know. I phoned them up. Fella there gave me some guff about exemptions for certain types of buildings."

"My card." I handed him my office number.

"What's this?" He frowned. "You! Listen to me, you smartarse. You're going to regret this. One phone call to your superiors and—"

"There won't be a phone call to my superiors, Mr Watkiss, from you or anyone else."

"Oh aye? We'll see about that."

“Is that your house over there?” I gestured down the street. “It’s just that I’ve noticed it has a recent loft conversion that is not on our files.” I let him absorb the ramifications before raising my eyebrows and politely asking if there was anything else he cared to discuss.

He stamped away, muttering.

Dave clapped me on the back. “I owe you one there, Jimbo. Thanks.”

“Think nothing of it, mate. I had no idea compromising my integrity could be so much fun.”

We surveyed the battlefield of his front lawn where he had been permitted to build a chapel. Fortunately for Dave, the planning officer who received his application had uncovered a little known statute allowing an exemption for building line infringements *if* the building was religious in purpose. I only hoped no one ever asked me more about it; I’d have to write it myself.

Brenda came out of the kitchen carrying a plate of beef sandwiches. Dave and I grabbed two each. “Thanks, Brenda.”

She took the rest to the workmen.

“Your Brenda’s been a real brick, Jimbo. S’funny, but I’ve never really got to know her that well. You’ll have to bring her ’round more often. Does she know about...?” He tipped his head at Archie who was sitting by the door watching the construction of his new home.

“Kind of. She will, given time.”

Dave sauntered off, humming contentedly.

I fished in my pocket for a stick of chalk and placed it in the gargoyle’s muzzle. “Don’t tell Mummy I’m feeding you these,” I said, and chuckled as a rough tongue licked the dust off my fingers.

THE END