



## *Gus Duff*

*by*

*Vixxy Fox*

“It’s not ‘Lead on Macduff!’” Gus yelled out at his bar mates. They had been needling him again concerning his name, for which he had a whole repertoire of defense gained from a lifetime of living with the name his parents had given him; Gus Duff. “If you morons had ever actually read Shakespeare you’d know it was ‘Lay on Macduff,’ which in ‘your’ lingo would constitute, ‘Bring it on!’

“Shakespeare... He was a halfback for Notre Dame; All American in 1935!”

The bartender reached out and rang the bell hanging behind the bar. “You are correct!”

“Do I get a free beer?”

“No! But you are correct.”

There was a good deal of laughter as the group knew they’d scored a point at the lack of a reply from the one who was the source of their mirth.

“You raised a jolly good point,” the smallish Fox sitting on the stool next to him said softly. His accent marked him as ‘not from a’rund here’ and Gus raised an eyebrow as he’d not been there a moment ago when he sat for his first beer of the day... not that he’d ever actually seen a talking Fox before.

“Fear not,” the fellow told him placing a paw on his arm, “Though I might seem a figment of your imagination; I certainly am.”

“Is that a fact?”

“Indeed it is.”

“Who ya talk’n to Gus?” came a voice from the other end of the bar, “One of yer imaginary storybook friends?”

“What kind’a animal is he?”

“Or is it a she?!”

“Has ‘she’ got tits?”

“Fair breasts of mother to be,” the Fox muttered, “Would’st that thou were dry when yon heathen was born that he might have starved to death before inflicting his ignorance upon the world.”

Gus snorked and beer ran out of his nose.

To that there was a heckle and several hoots as the usual bar bunch had their fun at his expense. Unlike them, he’d actually gone off to the ‘big city’ and attended college. Pretty much it was the same there concerning his name and the whole experience of how he was treated. Other than the education he’d received it was a four year wash.

“Perhaps we should take our conversation to a booth?” the Fox suggested.

Looking at his beer and not the seat next to him, Gus muttered, “That might be a good idea. If I’m going to hallucinate I suppose it would best be done in private.”

“What might be a good idea?” asked one sharp eared twit a few seats down.

“Naming a beer after myself,” Gus responded with a false smile. “It seems to be a really good seller in that cartoon you guys watch; why not in real life?”

Since they all knew of the TV show no one rose to the bait and conversation went back to the football game of the day before – so and so stunk, so and so looked pretty good; and if the one team or the other had played a better defense everything would have been so much different.

Taking a bowl of pretzels with him, the writer made his way over to the furthest booth and sat down. The Fox hopped up and sat opposite, his head just above the table top. Looking up at the man he said, “You’re probably wondering who I might be.”

“Nope.”

“Surely you’re curious?”

“Nope.”

The Fox scootched forward in his seat slightly and reached for the pretzel bowl but couldn’t quite reach it. “Do you mind?”

Gus moved it over and tipped it up so his imaginary guest could help himself. “I am the one they call ‘The Bard,’” he said while chewing on a pretzel. “I have come to answer your questions.”

“My questions?”

“Yes. Certainly you have questions.”

Gus chuckled. “Why is there air?”

“Because.”

“That’s it?”

“It certainly is for a question like that,” the Fox told him. “Rather than accept the fact that you breath, and it is good to breath, you seek to piece life apart like it was a pizza pie. This slice is air, this slice is water, this slice is females.” The Fox narrowed his eyes and told him, “You are a writer... you have questions... all writers have questions. Ask me something about my writing.”

Gus thoughtfully sipped at his beer. “Okkkkk... ‘Lay on MacDuff’; why did you have so much sword fighting in your plays?”

The Fox popped another pretzel in his mouth and munched on it, speaking around the morsel in a rather uncivilized way. “And here I thought you were going to ask me something hard. The answer is ‘know your audience’.”

“That’s it?”

“Certainly.”

“Can you demonstrate that principle?”

The Fox snapped his fingers and the electricity failed. In the darkness that ensued the emergency lights came on shining directly onto the booth they were sitting in as if they were stage spotlights. Behind the lights he could hear the sour grumblings of the bar’s patrons.

“Tell them a joke,” the Fox whispered, “One that you’re going to make up right now.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

Standing, Gus took a last sip of his beer. There was an immediate silence in the bar as if the fellows who had teased him earlier automatically expected something from the college graduate.

“How about a joke?” he asked them.

“Other than your name?” one of the men asked.

“Yeah, sure... other than that.”

“You make me laugh and I’ll buy you a beer,” one of them from the darkness.

Gus thought for a moment – beer drinking sports fanatics – football – who’s their favorite team (cowboys) – opposite team (Jets)... “What’s this?” he asked, striking a pose and holding his arms behind his back. He kept his hands clasped tightly (playing on something that had happened in a game the week before and talked about incessantly since then).

“I don’t know,” someone asked from the darkness, “What is it?”

“It’s a Jets wide receiver trying to catch a pass.”

The laughter was instantaneous and the lights went back on. The bartender was instructed to deliver a beer and everything went back to normal. Gus sat back down and just as he did, the bartender came over with his reward. “You need anything for your Fox?” he asked.

“You can see him?”

“Sure.”

“Do you have any jerked mice?” the Bard asked the man.

“No... never had a call for any. How about a couple of pickled eggs?”

“That sounds delightful. Thank you.”

Gus looked at the Fox. “Really? Just like that he can see you and doesn’t even raise an eyebrow?”

“Why not?     The fool will see nothing.  
                  The King sees even less.  
                  The man in the middle  
                  Truly is the fountain of understanding.  
                  This he hides well;

Fearing for his safety.

You passed the first test and so I will show you why I had so many swordfights in my plays.”

Once again things went dark but this time all sounds of modern living passed away. In front of the pair was an entrance to an open air theatre which was surrounded by men holding torches. Near the entrance was a fellow banging on a drum. He was obviously acting as an announcement that the nights entertainment would soon begin. In the near distance there was a cheering of men just as if a touchdown had been scored.

“What was that?” Gus asked the Fox.

“It was a professional sword fight. From the sound of that cheer I would guess one of the combatants has been mortally wounded.”

“They did such things in your time?”

“That and worse. Normally the swordsmen fought to so many cuts and the winner would receive the prize. Those watching would wager on the match. Since it was not considered a noble thing and held outside what laws there were, they could only hold the event outside of the city limits. You will notice that this is where the playhouse has been set up too. Actors, you see, as well as professional sword fighters, were considered the lowest of low and so banned from entering the town proper. Because of this we had to set up outside of the city. Those same gentlemen, now done with their blood sport, were our patrons.”

“Know your audience,” Gus muttered in understanding.

The Bard smiled a foxish smile as the first of the theater patrons emerged from the darkness. “If the fight scene was not done well, it was possible one of these drunkards might pull out his own sword to give a lesson. There were no laws to prevent this from happening and many were the poor actor who was killed in such a manner. If the play was going well and the brigand was only a minor player in such things he would be yelled down.”

“And your story lines? Why are they written in such a style as they are?”

“These are plays. The lines are meant to be memorized. Which is easier to that purpose; long or short?”

“That makes sense,” Gus agreed. “From where did you draw your inspiration then?”

In the blink of an eye they were again sitting in the booth at the bar. “Taken from every day events,” the Fox whispered and then pointed with his nose towards the bar.

The writer turned to look and found the place empty but for the bartender who was holding a baseball bat and a fellow wearing gang colors standing in front of him holding a pistol in his

extended hands. “TRY ANYTHING AND I’LL PUT ONE IN YOUR HEAD!” the man yelled, “NOW GIVE ME THE MONEY!”

Without thinking, Gus rose from the booth, picked up a chair by its back, and then crept up behind the hoodlum managing to crash it down upon his head.

The bartender, coming out from behind the counter cursed the gang represented and then proceeded to break the kneecaps of the person who’d been just about to shoot him. Looking up at Gus, he told him, “Calling the authorities is worthless. They’d haul him in and he’d be back on the streets in the morning. Break their kneecaps cuz it takes a long time to heal and it’s painful as hell. That gives them time and reason to think about what they did.”

He then picked up the gun and stuffed it behind his belt after which he dragged him out to the alley behind the bar. After a few more good kicks he came back in and closed the door. Winking at Gus, he said, “Welcome to the family.”

“What do you mean?”

A small paw found his hand and he was directed back to the booth. “Wolf’s run in packs,” the Fox explained, “Humans come together in families.”

“Romeo and Juliet?”

“That was one, yes. If memory serves me that was the Capulets and the Montagues.”

“So that was something you witnessed in your life?”

“Partially correct,” the Fox told him as they sat back to their booth. “We are writers.

‘The writer listens and watches  
The streets; alive with the fodder  
That feeds his imagination  
Which creates the story he tells of life.’

It’s that simple, is it not?”

“I suppose it is,” Gus replied and then took a deep drink of the amber in his glass. “But why such tragedy?” he asked. “People like happy endings.”

He set his empty glass back on its coaster. This was immediately replaced with a fresh one by the bartender along with a large bowl of pickled eggs for the Fox.

“This is true,” The Bard admitted, “A happy ending is always a preferred ending. But if you are to mirror life and make a difference by altering the way people think, there must be a moral to the story. Wrong actions demand consequences. If said consequences are naught but a slap on the wrist then who will pay attention?”

A very large hand grabbed Gus by the shirt collar and pulled him from his seat. “You hurt my brother really bad! Now I’m gonna hurt you!” the puller yelled at the top of his lungs.

Gus was immediately thrown to the floor where he found himself looking up at a huge tattooed bearded biker type. There was a shout from the bar and Biker Guy found himself looking into the double barrels of a sawed off shotgun. “He’s family,” the bartender yelled at the thug.

“I got words for your family and they all start with this one!” Biker Guy yelled back, holding up his middle finger.

With his attention diverted, Gus called upon the few martial arts classes he’d been forced to take by his father and kicked out at the mountainous form’s right knee, causing him to topple like a tree. Gus then came to his feet and stood as close as he dared, shouting,

“Nay brute; I wish no trouble this day!  
Blood bespeaks blood  
Dark thoughts fester  
Like a wound naught  
Bound properly by the surgeon.”

He blinked, and looked over at the Fox who replied, “Well delivered. And so the underdog, no pun intended, shines forth.”

Movement caught Gus’ eye and he turned back to Biker Guy expecting to be pounded into the floor for his actions; only to find Biker Guy’s sister standing over the huge moron with a hand on his shoulder. This kept said moron from said pounding. She was incredibly beautiful... a twenty on a ten scale and Gus wondered how it was such beauty came from the same thighs that birthed such ugliness first. She spoke and her voice was sweet and soft.

“Fair Biker Guy rest your heart  
In the knowledge that  
A sawed off shotgun will kill you as  
Dead as the last gangbanger you fought.

Truly such a monstrous weapon  
Would kill us both  
And it is not my wish  
To die such a gory death  
For no fair-minded gain.”

Gus turned to The Bard and whispered, “That’s not fair.”

“And it is most likely not true to life, but who would care if she were to look like her brother with breasts?”

“I catch your point.”

He blinked and found himself back in the booth. There was no one sitting opposite him but there was an empty bowl with the remnants of pickled eggs sitting on the table.

“You really put a hurting on those eggs there Gus,” the bartender told him, setting down a fresh beer. “I’d hate to be around you later when the farts come a’knocking.”

The writer looked up at the man, realizing he’d just been addressed by his name. “Yeah, they were good,” he told the fellow. “Put them on my tab, please.”

“Tab?” the bartender laughed. “You’re drinking free tonight buddy. The cops came and hauled that sorry assed punk off to the pokey. They told me it was his third strike so he’s going away for a long time. Don’t worry, I didn’t involve you. I told them I pounded him a good one and the surveillance camera was broke... which it really is.” He held out a meaty hand and Gus shook it. “Welcome to the family,” the bartender told him. “So long as you want to come here, you’ll always be welcome.”

He then went back to his bar and, as life demanded, took up his bar rag and began washing glasses.

From the shadows of the far end of the booth, Gus Duff heard the whispers of The Bard.

### **The Bard**

A happy peace this morning will bring

The sun, in joyous revelry of the day.

Go hence one and all to work

Amidst pleasant talk of happy thoughts.

Know that in life, some shall be pardon’d

While others will be punished for their foul deeds.

And still others will be accepted into the folds

Of family’s loving embrace for bravery not thought possible.

Go forth and write!

The story has legs; let it run.

The world surely is your playground.

