

D r a g o n

A Fable

by b. b. brown

To shores surging with the rhythms of wind and sea, where life abounds in a million shapes hidden by earth, water and rock, a family came to nestle on ancestral lands. Descended from wind-reddened fisher folk, the Father had suckled on the rocky land, trained in the lavish cities, then gouged bold, rhythmic visions out of the rock called the "Marrow of God". The Mother, a writer who crafted miniatures with words, had held vigil as her mate's eyes became hidden and ceaselessly watchful. And so they fled their tainted lives to the soil and rock of this ancient but fertile land in search of rebirth.

Their children were three. The eldest two flew about as if grafted to an invisible cord that dragged them running, fighting, jumping, and laughing in a brash but intimate chorus of two. By contrast, the youngest child rambled alone, seeking quiet in every crevice and nook, accepting solitude as the surest companion. The child was the Father's image.

The local folk were wary of the newcomer. Although his ancestors once nested on their land, the Father had left to immerse himself in city life; and cities, it was felt, were soft and treacherous. Therefore, they had assumed that not this "artist" but those known to them, some local family of proven character, would in time take the cottage. They respected this man who created beautiful things. However, they were not sure that he could remain loyal to their customs; after all, he made money by his art.

But the folk of the land embraced the children with the mature passion for youth felt by any aunt or uncle or grandparent, and secretly confessed to the young creatures vivid stories of heroes, pirates, ghosts, and dragons. The youngest child in particular hoarded all tales about dragons, which might be glimpsed frolicking in the moonlit sea waters during this very season of the year. Knowing only curiosity and wonder about this new world, the child took their tales down deep inside and secretly carried them to purpose. Searching the edge of the sea, the child spent days on end probing every shoreline crag and crook for the secret beasts. And then, an uncommon thing happened: in a deep and hidden cavern of this sea-kissed ledge of the rocky land, the child did truly discover dragons.

No fairy tale behemoths with fire and wings were these, however, but great sea mammals unknown to the world of civilization and progress. This community of dragons embraced less than a dozen adults, including the lead Dragon who was the acknowledged rock of the clan. Beside him was his pride, the Dragon's Mate. Opposite was a rogue, a creature severely afflicted, with parasites infesting its hearing passages driving it to volatility and viciousness. (Because the rogue had in desperation rubbed away its external "ears" in an attempt to relieve the pain in its head, the child dubbed it, "No Ears".) Lastly, smallest but most important, came the off-spring of the dragons: only three in number and each of a different season, for the dragons bred slowly, if at all. The child named the youngest and smallest dragon, "Peeper", because of all the off-spring and adults, when the child peeked around rocks and out of shadows, this curious little dragon was the only one to peep back.

As is the heart to the body was the Mayor to the village, a man gray and solid, who was intimate with the sea and her wiles and had tramped the solid world in his youth. The community solicited his word frequently on daily matters, but now they sought him with apprehension. For while gathering in the pub to debate again the new folk, report came of slaughtered sheep that had been torn apart but not eaten. Vigorous discourse flared, not the least because such a thing had never happened within village memory. The "new" man, in particular, was held to merciless inspection in the village imagination. Yet the Mayor calmed their harshness and fears, while advising them to take precautions for their stock. They were to closely watch. The truth, he said, cannot stay hidden.

The piece was of steel lying flat, then curving upward into a fleshy mass, but the steel was mute and gave nothing back. The Father, when he looked at his new metal sculpture, saw nothing but pitted steel--an empty piece of metal squatting on the rich earth like indissoluble excrescence. He should never have abandoned stone, he thought, it was never flat or without heart. In the distance, as through a great tunnel, the Father could see and hear the child running and singing by the shore. There again, he thought, is my youth. Where did I lose myself?

On a day when the dragons took shore leave from the sea, No Ears snapped at Peeper when the little dragon accidentally bumped him while playing. The lead Dragon quickly put No Ears in his place, but the tension of those few moments foreshadowed a fight. This momentarily blew over with the capitulation of No Ears to the leader. So the child and Peeper, who had become fast friends, played a game of hide-

n-seek among the boulders of the cavern. As they chased each other over the wet rock, Peeper leaped upon his playmate accidentally cutting the child's hand with its scaly hide. Wrapping the cut with a handkerchief, the child swore Peeper to secrecy.

Although some protested that it was too soon for a matter too grave, the Mayor felt they should entrust the new man with their most precious secret. Having been treated with suspicion since his arrival, however, the Father was edgy about this unexplained though informal ritual. But his own suspicion turned to amazement when told that the community protected the spawning grounds of a race of almost extinct "dragons". No one came to the ritual until they were adults, explained the Mayor, while children heard dragon stories that were never treated as real. The Father was aghast at this lack of practicality. Why not start a tourist attraction? Use the money for the dragons's care and to improve the village? In essence, replied the Mayor, protect the creatures by caging them. Without intending it, the Father had stated the argument of one faction of the village.

The child woke late that night with fever, got out of the house without being seen, and ran to the seashore in the full moonlight, where the dragons could be seen leaping and splashing in the deep water. Although without the bulk of whales, they could twist in the air and slap the water with their tails. The child leaped about in feverish imitation. Suddenly, a squeal of pain rang in echoes through the night air. At the edge of the shore, in the bright moonlight with the waves rushing over its feet, the rogue, No Ears, crouched gripping Peeper's neck with his teeth, holding the young creature in the air. No Ears dropped Peeper to the sand and held him with a foot while bellowing a challenge to the Dragon. Then, snatching up the little dragon again by the neck, the rogue stalked across the rocks and into the woods.

In the pub, the Father and the Mayor were debating how best to care for dragons, but the subject quickly turned from sea beasts to the Father. Why had he come back instead of pursuing his career? The answer, said the Mayor over the Father's hesitation, was that he sought to renew his vision. The city crowd confused him with adulation and commissions until he could no longer distinguish between tricks and the truth. So he had come back--not thinking but feeling his way back--to what he knew was solid and true, seeking to regain balance in his mind and feelings. Those creatures of the sea are the same, the Mayor said, they need the balance of life. It's a delicate balance and can never be maintained by mere profit--only with the heart and the head. It was then that the distant roar of something other than sea interrupted their talk.

The child ran into the woods after the rogue. He followed it to a clearing, where it waited with Peeper lying dead at its feet. In a few moments, the Dragon slid through the trees into the opening, paused as it stared at its dead off-spring, then extended its head with a roar. The two creatures circled one another, slapping the ground with the bottoms of their massive jaws. And the Dragon charged.

The bellowing of beasts drew the Father and others to a sight unseen for millenia by the human animal: two dragons of the sea fighting to the death. In the clearing, amid the thrashing of the raging creatures, the hysterical child ran about screaming for them to stop. Rushing across the clearing, the Father snatched up his child and carried it back to one side.

In the ensuing death match, the Dragon killed the rogue. Then it roared at the dead rogue, roared at the villagers, and roared at the vast empty sky. Gently picking up its off-spring, the Dragon went back to the sea. While the villagers called scientist friends to come deal with the carcass of the rogue, the Father took his child back home.

The child died within two days: an unknown disease had permeated his body. In silence, the father and mother endured the funeral where dirt thumped the coffin. In silence, they packed away their lives to leave the land swept by wind and sea. And, in silence, the village awaited something terrible to which they could not put a name.

In the next season of the dragons, the Father returned alone. When he wasn't pacing the shore relentlessly staring at the water or clambering over the rocks marking land's edge, he practiced with a hunting rifle. Setting targets at different levels in different locations, he shot them one at a time, counting, "One, two, three..."

After weeks of searching, the Father found the cavern of the dragons. Waiting for them to return, he sat in silence and darkness. When they came, he located the Dragon leader through his rifle scope, then sought out the romping little dragons, counting, "One, two, three..."

He was going to scour away the pain within him. But the rifle wavered, then lowered to the ground. The little dragons continued playing without the slightest concern. "I could have!" shouted the Father as he shook the rifle in the air. "I could have!"

The next day the Father left the land of sea and wind and dragons.

Dragon

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