

An Old Friend

The day before had nearly killed me. Who would have guessed our teacher was a dragon? “But that’s the way of dragons,” Christopher told me sagely.

It was obviously a dangerous time to be in the third grade. Our teacher’s foul breath was a steady stream of fire, and her horned tail whipped behind her as she walked among us. A crowded lunch room was to some a hazard; to others, a sea of spies and lurking enemies. “Never look them in the eyes, Chris,” I told him, my own eyes wide and rigidly focused ahead of me. “And don’t move your mouth when you’re talking. That’ll throw them off.” Each day presented new dangers, of course. But also new chances to prove your valour in a bloody battle, or to prove your stealth in the successful navigation of an enemy lunch room.

At lunch the ceasefire was lifted and the battlefield behind the school filled once more with the silent sound of bullets whirring through the air. The older kids sometimes laughed when we were forced to crawl across the field on our stomachs, or when too many of us tried to hide behind the same thick green bush. Our commanding officer told us to ignore them, and demanded our silence. Just because the older kids couldn’t see that a war was going on, we were told, wouldn’t save us from being captured, tortured, and killed. It was a dangerous time to be in the third grade.

I never understood the older kids’ inability to see the soldiers’ eyes peeking through bushes, or the giant spiders that hid in the basement where the lunch ladies lay. It was as if they just couldn’t see the dangers and the beauties that the world offered to those who looked closely enough.

I walked to school – my mom said I could now walk to school on my own – and thought about the upcoming day. As usual, the world around me dissolved into one I found more exciting. Passing cars became bulls storming down the narrow streets of my neighbourhood. The trees became winding wood staircases to clouds thick enough to hold my weight. The sidewalk cracks itched to pull apart and drop me to an underground full of talking rats and helpful worms. I arrived at school. I tucked my imagination into the sleeve of my coat along with my hat and my gloves, and left them all at the door.

Lunch came and we flew from the classroom, birds eager to spread their wings after days squeezed tight in a cage. We flew out onto the field, each window that we passed revealing a different scene, a series of still photographs that blurred past us. But we kept going, past the garden and the field, and we circled the tall oak that stood rooted near the edge of the school grounds, an old friend who often let me and Chris perch on his outstretched branches.

He suddenly spoke. “I’m going to Halifax.”

“Lunch ends in a few minutes, you may want to make it quick,” I joked, my wings now working harder to continue circling the tree.

“No,” he said, “my parents said we’re moving.”

The rhythmic beating of my wings faltered. My gentle circling became awkward and irregular. Despite my attempts to stay a bird in flight, I began to circle downward, past outstretched branches and twigs, gaining speed. The oak tree that had always offered its help now stayed rooted in the ground, its sturdy branches suddenly lifeless and hard. I fell to the ground where Chris was waiting for me, not a bird or a soldier or a dragon-hunter, but a boy who's mind was already far away. A bell rang in the distance, signalling the end of lunch, and a few of the younger kids ran past us as we walked silently to the doors.

Morning came once again, and I left for school. Along the way, a car passed me, and a tree stood dully next to the cracked sidewalk. I arrived at school. I tucked my hat and my gloves into the sleeve of my coat, and left them all at the door.

The age of dragons had ended. A new age had begun.