

The Dragon and Me

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I was exactly eleven years, ten months and twenty days old when I saw the dragon. It's a day I remember down to the exact second. Even down to the individual wrinkles on that creature's scaly face. But first, some backstory.

The old man was out looking for work, again. No surprise there. The post-war boom had begun to fade and Pops was right in the thick of it. The war had brought unemployment rate right down close to that illusive zero number. The war was a beast that needed the whole country to feed it, but the war had ended over three years ago and things went back to normal soon after. Back to the poor and rich. The usual. Or so Pops said. Now, he was just an engineer without a job.

Suffice it to say, I didn't see him much those days. It was the summer of forty-nine to be exact. June fourteenth. And it was hotter than hell itself. Like I said, Pops was working. And Mom? Well, I'd rather not talk about that if that's okay. This is a story about a dragon and not family issues. Enough background.

It happened like this...

I was tramping around Vern Forest, about a mile away from our house. Before I go further though, know this—the word forest is a tricky one. This wasn't a forest in terms of what I was reading at the time—Thoreau or Tolkien. This was a cheap knockoff—a pit stop to something better—to a flood of trees that were greener, brighter and much more majestic and worthy of the word “forest.”

But, here's the thing. It didn't matter. I was eleven years old, ten months, and twenty days old and I didn't give a damn about words and definitions yet. At that age, it was anything I wanted it to be. To me, it was a forest that stretched as far as the eye could see.

That day, a Saturday, was the first day I began to build my tree house. I had come down with a strange summer fever a few days before and was stuck in my bed coughing out my lungs. I woke up in the middle of the night during my battle with the fever and came up with the best plan for a castle in the trees. It'd have it all. A bedroom, a majestic hallway and a dungeon for all the people I hated at school. It'd be a king's paradise built high up in the trees. None of those bullies would ever find me or make fun of me again. And if they did, I had plenty of hidden pathways and traps to stop them.

The second I was better, I dashed out of the house and set about my work.

Side story. It's hard not to yell at my children now. "Hey! Don't run with sharp objects! How many times have I told you?" Every time I do, I try not to give into smiling.

On June 11th 1949, I ran like The Flash himself through those woods, hollering out a battle tune that I made up word-by-word. I had nails jingling in my pockets, a saw in one hand and a hammer in the other.

I was unstoppable in Vern Forest.

The other neighbor kids grew up months ago and decided to leave it alone.

So, my age made it mine by default.

I was the forest.

But I'm losing track. I found the dragon that day.

You don't have to believe me, it doesn't really

matter, but I saw it while picking through these vast, lush green plants that looked like they were from some ancient era or a planet made entirely of a sea of green. I was going to camouflage my castle so that once it was done, it'd be my secret. Forever.

And then I saw it. I didn't scream or anything. I knew what it was right away. I ripped away a branch, and there it was, snoozing away in the dirt, tucked away in a little hole it had dug.

Why was it sleeping in a hole in the ground and not in some epic perch on some far away mountain? Why was it in my forest and not defending unknown lands from invaders with fire and destruction? Why wasn't it out guarding a princess somewhere?

Hell if I knew!

All I knew is that I found my castle's official guard. All I needed to do was ask.

It was a baby dragon—that was obvious.

I poked it with a stick (*real smart*, is all I can think of now) and its eyelids sprang open. Thin slivers of green met mine.

My heart leaped in my chest, but I stood my ground.

'Don't run,' I thought to myself.

'Don't act scared,' I remember told myself,
"Dragons know if you are terrified."

Its thin neck stretched out as its odd shaped head pointed toward me. Its lips pulled back, barring its teeth like the neighbor's dog. A faint smoke wiggled out its nose. It crawled to its feet and his head went crooked. It snorted, as though laughing. I put out my hand and hoped it couldn't hear my heartbeat pounding through my ribs. It waddled over to me, slowly, scared. Its scales sparkled like

diamonds in the sunlight that filtered through the cracks in the trees. Its wings flapped slightly—ready to take off at a moment's notice. It sniffed my hand, looked me in the eyes, and smiled at me.

I told it my name and that I was building a fort and that there was an open position for an official guard. I couldn't pay him anything, but I could try to sneak some steak his way as much as possible from my dinner plate every night.

The dragon nodded in agreement. It seemed to understand me. It took off then, and I couldn't help but jump back. It hovered in mid-air and watched me. I backed up and he moved toward me. I stepped back again and he moved forward. I smiled at him and asked him his name. He just did another sigh.

I said, "Stryker will be your name," and that was that.

He followed me around the rest of the day as I gathered my supplies. A large tree grew smack dab in the middle of where I was going to put the barracks and its trunk was much too wide for me to cut with my little saw. So, Stryker blew it down with a gust of scorching flames which exploded from this mouth. The trunk burned to black ash in seconds and I roared with excitement right there next to him. His wings beat faster. I think he liked it when I sang my battle tunes. So I did. The whole night. And he didn't mind at all.

We got pretty far before the sun started to fade. I gathered some wood and he started the fire. I told Stryker to wait so I could go run and grab dinner and return. Pops wouldn't mind. He'd have been asleep by then anyway.

Stryker was there on Sunday, too. We continued to build...and build... and build. By the time we knew it, it was already getting dark. I told my best friend Jim Stuart about it the next day. I never thought he'd laugh at me. He didn't even ask me to prove it. Jim was one year older than me.

Maybe he was too old to understand. I didn't really know.

The next day, while walking home from the general store with more supplies, I got jumped by Tom Morris, the class bully, and his friends. They beat me until I could taste the blood in my lips dripping down from my nose. He and his cronies kept laughing about how I still believed in dragons and how much of a sissy I was.

I went home that day and Pops freaked out. He took me to the backyard and showed me how to fight back. After he was done, he asked me why they had hit me. I told him that they always did that, but this time they did because I saw a dragon. Pops laughed, too. He told me dragons weren't real. I offered to take him to the woods to show him. He said no, that it was all too silly for someone my age. He was an engineer, concerned with facts, and there were no facts to prove the existence of dragons.

I felt like a fool and left to the forest.

Stryker wasn't where he usually was and I panicked. *'Had I been making it up?'* I thought to myself. Luckily, I found him many minutes later lounging behind a burnt shrub. I asked Stryker, feeling pain in my chest with every breath, if I could touch him. I needed proof that he was real. That I wasn't crazy... or silly... or childish.

He flew past me with such force that the wind took me clean off my feet. I didn't need to feel him then. That was enough proof for me.

We worked together the rest of the summer. He'd burn trees right at their trunks so I could get the best wood. I didn't even need a saw and kept me company. I'd sing my battle songs and he would flap his wings to the beat. Some days he just slept, but I didn't mind.

Then, one day in late summer, it was done. The castle was completely finished. If I were to go back there now, if it was even still there and not bulldozed over, I swear it'll look exactly like it sounded—a piece of shit

tree house that barely held one kid without buckling under the weight. But at that time, it was exactly what I had imagined. It was gigantic and hidden. I looked to my loyal guard and nodded with approval.

I was ready to rule the kingdom of Vern Forest and my faithful guard would protect me from any bully that came my way. Stryker flew in circles with excitement.

I never got to say goodbye to him.

The next day he was gone. Just like that.

I cried. I'll admit it. I'm old enough now to do so.

Every day I went back He never showed. Never came back to give an explanation. Soon enough though, I was back in school and it felt like a distant memory. Only, it wasn't. I had a castle in the trees to prove it.

And then I grew up.

I graduated high school, went to a technical college and got a degree in engineering (same as the old man). I got married in my mid-twenties, had two beautiful children of my own and began creating the plans for the rest of my life. In fact, it was the most typical life anyone could imagine. I worked the nine to five, came home to the wife and kissed the kids. I try to write in this journal every night, but then again, it's just boring stuff really. I'm no longer the same kid. I have mortgages to worry about, defaulted loans, healthcare and retirement where forests and dragons once lived. I should be miserable. I live a mundane life with little to make it truly exciting and new. Every day is exactly the same and it makes a man question what the purpose of it all is. Live, work and die. Right?

While writing down my thoughts at night and looking out the window I wonder whether miles and miles away if my tree house is still standing. The thought makes me smile.

And once, just once, for one summer... I became friends with a dragon.

That is something that no one else can claim.

In a life of the ordinary, I experienced something one can only call one thing...a word that has lost its power of seriousness and beauty over time.

I experienced something magical.

And in a life of mundane, I sometimes feel that maybe, just maybe, that's just enough magic to make it through the rest. In my old age I sometimes, very rarely, have the question pop into my head, '*Was Stryker real?*'

I never actually touched him...

The other day, my son Billy came rushing into the house. He was panting like an old motor and sweat clung to his shirt. I asked him if everything was alright and he told me that it was. Something crazy had happened but I'd never believe him. I asked him what it was, but he just shook his head. A few seconds went by and he blurted it out.

He'd seen an elf.

Suddenly, that question about whether dragons were real disappeared from my mind.

Billy asked if I wanted to come along and see it for myself so I'd believe him. I told him I didn't need to go with him for proof. Instead, I asked my son to sit down and tell his old man every single detail he could remember.