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Where There Be Dragons

In my sister's garden, I tend dragons. They emerge from the soil and shake earth from their scales. *Hello, little ones*, I say. With bodies no bigger than my palm and small spires pressing from their backs, they are vibrant. They blink in the bright sunlight and snort, catching the dried leaves on fire, fires that smolder quickly. I feed them the roots of the weeds I'd pulled this morning. The dragons snap at the bits of dead matter.

"Who are you?" I ask.

I am Rage, the first one says.

Despair, the second one answers.

And the third, a magnificent creature with black scales that shimmer like crow feathers, says, *I am Gentleness*. I brush away the flecks of dirt that cling to her tail.

"May I take you with me?" I ask her.

Of course, she says. Peace settles in my chest. I open the pocket of my hoodie, and she crawls inside. Far beyond the garden wall, a cat screeches in the morning.

Outside the garden, my father is dying. A bay window lets sunlight into his hospice room. I pour lukewarm tea into a sippy cup, and his hands shake when he takes it. Some of the tea dribbles down his chin, despite the child's lid. I wipe it away with the edge of the bed sheet.

Thank you, tootie-pie, he says. He smiles, then his forehead creases in pain. I want, without explanation, to run. I slip my hand into my pocket instead and feel the small, comforting warmth of my dragon.

An infection, the nurse tells my sister and me an hour later, privately. *We could treat it, but if it's not this one, it will be the next. Do we have your permission not to treat it?*

I take a moment to myself in the hallway. I register the distant clatter of a hospital tray, the muffled complaints of a resident. I hold my dragon near my eyes, look at her directly. I want to shake her for her powerlessness. "I should have brought the others," I say. "Rage, he is fierce. He could stop this."

She shakes her head. In that moment she feels old, older than any of the others, born from roots and gardens planted long before my own.

I am fierce too, Gentleness says. *Keep me with you.* I press my fingers against a tightness in my jaw and feel it soften.

I breathe deeply, return to my sister, and we agree: *You have our permission not to treat the infection.* The nurses increase my father's morphine, and he slips into sleep.

The afternoon turns into evening. We keep vigil. My sister lays a blue tapestry with feathered illustrations radiating from the center over my father, covering him in something elegant. I tell him about the garden, but not the dragons. I tell him that the beds are almost clear, that yesterday's rain soaked the earth and threw the trees into saturated greens, that we will plant sunflowers, sunflowers that will grow tall and bow over with seeds. When I mention the

sunflowers, he raises his index finger, and I decide that it means he can hear me. We fill the room with quiet and beautiful things, perhaps for ourselves as much as for my father.

Sometime before midnight, my brother-in-law brings takeout noodles. While time brings my father closer to death, it has made my sister and me hungry. My brother-in-law gazes too long at the man who is almost the body of my father, then promises to pick us up when the night is over. I do not want the night to be over.

I am tidying the takeout away when my sister whispers my name.

"Rose," she says, without taking her eyes from our dad. I turn and kneel by his bed. His chest is motionless, still, and still again, until, like magic, it rises. Then deflates. We hold our own breath. A second passes, then another, and in the next: nothing. In my pocket, my dragon wails.

My sister leaves me alone with the body. With no one to see, I let Gentleness on the bed. Now that my father is not here but his corpse is, I am afraid. I don't know what to do. I have no ritual or ceremony for this. I twist my hands. My dragon, her talons tucked away, uses her snout to smooth his hair, then looks at me, expectant. I understand what she is doing. The light from the bedside table casts deep shadows by the bridge of my father's nose, in the canyon where his cheeks sank in, and in the gentle recesses under his eyes. I stroke his hand, tuck the tapestry around his body, and comb the grey wisps above his forehead. I tend to my father for the last time.

I press my head to his chest and listen to the silence. Gentleness comes to me. I scoop her into my pocket and walk into the hallway, where I wrap my arms around my sister. Together, we weep.

It is past midnight, but I return to the garden anyway, feeling a strange mix of relief and fear. I pull up more roots and feed them absentmindedly to the bed of dragons. Rage and Despair have grown older, their bodies filling with muscle.

I look to Gentleness.

"Thank you," I say, stroking her snout.

Of course.

"Will you stay with me?" I ask, thinking of the new demands of the morning -- a funeral to arrange, friends to inform, and, eventually, a journey back to my own home. These demands feel like hawks seen through a foggy window. They are far away and powerless next to the holiness of the garden tonight.

I'll stay with you, she says.

"What about the others?" I ask, looking at Rage and Despair asleep in the soil. "Where will they go?"

They will perch on your curtain rods and nest in your kitchen cupboards now, she says.

You will know them. But they will not destroy you.

I nod. We watch the silhouettes of the trees along the horizon. A street cat stalks along the garden wall, alive and rippling with movement. Gentleness follows it with her gaze, then steps into my lap, circles once, and curls into a ball. I carry her into the house where together, we fall asleep.