

HERE BE DRAGONS

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“Here Be Dragons” was nominated for the Pushcart Prize and is a clever take on the dragon-slayer trade.

The one rule Géorg and I had when it came to slaying dragons was this: never let them see the dragon. And it was all well and good until we started throwing the money we’d made at our collective drinking problem and yammering on about how we had been milking Saint Beatus near the Nidwalden Forest for the better part of five years. Word got around that the dragons weren’t real and Géorg and I ended up at home with the kids while our wives shuffled off to work every morning, hands red-chapped and bleeding, to help keep the moneyed Count Heldenbuch in clean laundry.

Géorg was a new father and I’d barely seen my daughter, Constance, in two years. We’d been so busy hauling swords and crossbows and other fake dragon weaponry all around the valley that neither of us had been home much except for the odd rollick with the wives.

A few days after I'd been back, my daughter looked at me across our one-room shack and asked if I'd ever met her daddy the Dragon-slayer.

"I'm your daddy," I told her.

"My daddy's stronger," she said. "And a knight." She was playing on the floor with a sack of grain. My wife had dribbled berry juice on the front to make eyes and a mouth. Constance looked up again and asked, "Where's my mommy?"

"At work," I told her. "I'm here now. Quiet, Daddy's thinking." I went back to whatever important thing I thought I was doing, and she threw me a look that suggested my out-of-work ass was hopefully just a temporary inconvenience in her world.

We were living nine furlongs from Feldkirch, which was twenty furlongs from nowhere, and it was hard to keep from wanting to rip every goddamn thing apart being cooped up like that. The rain never stopped, and the cold wind would barrel through the valley and find you no matter how thick the wool on your tunic. My wife would come home after a long day of laundering and Constance would go from the utmost nuisance to daughter-of-the-year in two seconds. "What did you and Daddy do all day?" Gerta would ask, and Constance would shrug her little shoulders and roll up on her mother, arms outstretched, offering up the hug of all hugs. It was hard for me to watch. There I was, at home with the kid all day, and you didn't see me on the receiving end of something like that.

"Try taking an interest in her," Gerta told me one night after we'd put Constance to bed and taken up some renewed passion in front of the cookery.

"What's so interesting about a child?"

"How about the fact that she's yours," Gerta said coldly. She pulled herself off of me, re-buttoned her frock, and told me what I could expect as far as lovemaking if I didn't pull myself together and at least try.

So, for a minute, I stopped daydreaming about the fake dragons, and Géorg, and all the money and trouble we used to make for ourselves, and focused on Constance. When I'd see her talking to her sack doll I'd ask her what she was saying. If she was off in the corner playing Bury the Stone, I'd pull up next to her and see if I could join in. If she needed help doing her business I'd take her outside and help her dig the hole and stand there, shielding her from the wind as she squatted over it. It took about a week, and then one day as we were outside watching the storm clouds gather, she reached up and took hold of my hand.

Géorg lived a plot of land away. We were neighbors if you consider a half-hour walk neighborly. Since I'd been back I hadn't worked myself up to visiting him, but eventually I took Constance across the muddy field that separated our hut from Géorg's to check on how he was making out in the fatherhood department. At his front door Constance asked if her doll could do the knocking.

"Of course," I said, and lifted her up so she could reach high on the door. Earlier that week I'd given her doll a pair of arms by tying a rope around the middle of the sack and letting the ends hang loose. She grabbed one of the arms and knocked a ropy knock. "Great job," I told her, and placed her down. She took my hand again and we stood there as the fog and rain rolled in from the valley and set upon Géorg's hut like it could tear the roof off the place.

"No one's home," Constance said.

That's when I heard the baby scream.

When I pushed open the door, Géorg's hands were around little Jonah's throat. There was water all over the floor and he was thrusting the baby's head into a soot-stained cauldron of dirty water.

"Stop!" I yelled, and pushed Constance aside. The drink fell off Géorg so strongly I could smell it across the room. I jumped in, kicked

him, and tried to pry his fingers from the baby's neck. I took a fistful of his hair, yanking it so hard that he dropped the child and collapsed, sweaty, drunk, and sobbing on the floor.

"I can't do this," he kept saying. "I can't do this!"

Jonah was motionless on the ground, his eyes open, staring into space like he was watching the last bit of his short life slip away and didn't want to miss a second of it. I picked up his body and held it out in front of me. They say time stops in the moments we wait for our children to breathe, and I can tell you it's the gods' honest truth. I remember thinking so much in that moment. Like, what would we do if the kid kicked it? Or how long can a child go without breathing? Mostly what I was thinking was, *We could really use a little more kid experience in this hut*, because Jonah's skin was a bloodless shade of purple and we were about to lose him.

Then it was like some unseen force reached down and gave the boy a slap across the ass. He coughed and screamed as his tiny lungs struggled to expel the water that had been forced inside. He cried with an intensity I'd never heard from a baby before. The child was back from wherever he'd been, and either he did not want to return, or he was outraged at the brutality of the world and what he'd just come to understand of it.

"Look!" I said to Géorg, still lumped up on the floor. "He's alive!"

"So I hear," Géorg said from behind strands of soaking wet hair. It was the crying, he told me, that drove him to it. "Like a damn banshee," he said. "If drinking can't drown out the sound, then what choice do I have?"

Later that evening, when I told my wife what had happened, she marched across the dark field in only a smock and broke the news to Hildegunn, Géorg's wife. Even over the wind that night you could hear her yelling clear across the valley. Winkelried the Elder often said his goats stopped giving milk when Hildegunn tore into it, but this time he worried he might have to put a few of them down. My

wife asked if I'd ever seen Géorg try anything like that before, and I lied and said I hadn't. But I knew better. I'd seen him threaten a local mouthpiece with a lot worse when the dragon scam was falling apart, and then there was the time during the Lenzburg job when a hunter caught us in the forest pumping the bellows for sound effects. What Géorg did to that man I can't bear to think about. But he had a dark resolve, Géorg, a grim sense of purpose that made anything possible. The head of a goat, the head of a hunter—these things were equal to him. He had asked more of me but the best I could do was hold the guy down.

After Jonah and the cauldron, Géorg kept himself scarce and drunk in the village for a long while. Then word got out that Hildegunn required his fix-it skills to thatch some roof that had given way to the weather, and suddenly he was home again.

"That idiot's back?" Gerta said. She was at the hearth stirring a pot of goulash.

"He's not so bad," I said.

"You'd forgive him for kicking in your face," she said without turning around.

"He's my partner."

"I'm your partner," she said.

Géorg and I were a team if ever there was one. It was common knowledge among every clan in the valley that when it came to a certain brand of surliness, we were not to be messed with. We were destruction in the wake of confidence. Strength where it mattered and deception when it counted. "We're men being men," Géorg used to say, and that was usually good enough for me.

After Hildegunn took Géorg back, things were actually pretty good for a while. On days when it wasn't pouring rain, Géorg and I would take the kids into the middle of the field and set up a mock

dragonslaying. We'd bring out the old swords and I'd do the whole bit where I pretended to hear a dragon approach and Géorg would come in with the bellows. Constance was nearly four and she loved it. "How do you make the growling sound, Daddy?" she'd ask, and I'd show her the gadget Géorg had built from two pieces of bark and a catgut string that vibrated just right. Jonah was still too young to understand. He was barely crawling, but the swordplay seemed to calm him.

Those were the days of the barley blight and rotten beetroot, so Géorg and I weren't the only ones lacking in gainful employment. Pretty soon, other out-of-work dads from the village brought their kids around and Géorg and I would drag out the catapult, battle axe, and other heavy artillery and put on a real show.

Géorg would run around and cue me when I was to trigger a piece of equipment. The dads would cheer when something big like the catapult went off, and a thick, vigorous energy would wrap itself around all of us. Lots of snorting and clapping and spitting on everything, and it felt good to be back doing our thing, even without the thrill of the con and the promise of money.

Afterwards, we'd break open a cask of ale and watch all of our kids play in the mud. We'd talk about our wives, and the kids' teething, we'd argue about the best way to cobble solid footwear, and trade recipes for stews that required the least of our attention.

"It's a load of shit," Géorg said one afternoon. He stood apart from the group of us, gnawing on a twig and rolling it around in his mouth. "Listen to yourselves. You're men for fuck's sake." He threw his mug on the ground and wiped the snot from his face. "You're an embarrassment, all of you."

He spit and walked back across the field, dragging Jonah behind him like some kind of dead animal. The rest of us watched in silence, wondering what it was exactly that Géorg had just pointed out about our sorry lives. Constance came up to me and started going on about

her doll's arms. They needed mending, but I wasn't in the mood, so I pushed her. She fell back into the mud and the men started laughing and pointing at her. I laughed too and a few of us bumped chests like I'd just taken out something evil. Constance stood up and ran back to the house in tears. "Guess I better go take care of that," I told them.

"Daddy's sorry," I said to Constance, after she'd calmed down and it was just the two of us at the hearth. Gerta wasn't home yet and I was trying to convince her that what happened would never happen again. She softened and looked up, eyes twinkling from the light of the fire.

"Are you going away again?" she asked.

"Why would you ask that?" I said.

"I don't know." Her finger made little circles in the dirt floor. "Maybe because it's funnier?"

"You mean, more fun," I said, and scooped her up in my arms. We danced around the room as I sang her one of the funny rhymes she'd taught me. *Cock a doodle do! My dame has lost her shoe, My master's lost his fiddlestick, And knows not what to do.*

Then Géorg was gone. No goodbye, no nice-swindling-the-countryside-with-you-for-the-past-five-years. "Not even a note," I told Gerta, once it was obvious he wasn't coming back. She rolled her eyes and said life was better off without him. "Best place for a man like that is a dungeon," she said.

"Every kid needs a father," I told her.

"And where have you heard that one before?"

She was talking about the salad days when I'd only be home for a minute or two between jobs. Géorg and I were bringing in serious riches back then. I'd stop home to drop off what money I hadn't blown on ale and prostitutes, pick up a spare mace or scabbard, then be back on the road again for months.

We'd work our way through the valley, putting three days between every town we hit so as to not arouse suspicion. If we found ourselves in need of provisions, we stole them. If we were hungry, we killed what we needed. Cat, dog, it didn't matter. Géorg had a taste for uncommon game and I learned to stomach his instincts.

Besides, he was on the cutting edge back then as far as fake dragonry went. It was intoxicating to stand next to that kind of talent. He was building all sorts of equipment and had even more breakthroughs in mind—the sound effects were just the beginning.

Géorg always stressed that the setup was the most important. "Like baiting a hook," he said. When starting in on a new village we made sure a few local livestock went missing, but they had to vanish without a trace, like they'd been plucked clean from the pasture. Géorg invented this cart-and-catapult combination for launching the animals we killed into the forest without leaving so much as a wheel track. The thing was a work of art. We'd roll in at night and by the time the sun came up the whole village would be in a frenzy, wondering who was terrorizing the sheep. We'd drop a few hints about seeing a dragon in the depths of whatever forest was nearby, and pandemonium wouldn't be far behind. Géorg even fashioned dragon claws from blocks of wood, strapped them to my feet, and had me walk miles in the mud to simulate the animal's propensity for stalking. There wasn't a forest or cave in three hundred miles that he couldn't turn into a town's worst nightmare. Once we had the villagers convinced a dragon was upon them, the money for slaying came rolling in.

I was younger than Géorg and looked knightly in a pair of tights, so once we were done taking a town for all they had, it fell to me to parade the fake dragon parts through town for all to see. I'd dress up in my armor and have the sword in one hand and a dripping piece of dragon in the other. It was usually the entrails of a local pig we had slaughtered, or several organs pieced together by Géorg to make them unrecognizable. Once, while conning Brierley, he covered me

in a mixture of pitch and oxblood that when lit gave the impression of scorched remains falling from my limbs. In Leurbost he hung cow intestines from my leather to suggest I'd kept the best parts of the beast for sustenance. The gore was always secondary, however—it was the show that made them believe. They would line the streets and I'd raise my sword in the air and take a bite from the entrails. Blood ran down my face and into the plates of armor on my chest. Géorg would thread through the crowd shouting high praise to get everyone going, and when it was all over I'd walk out of town with a heavy bag of loot under my arm. Géorg would meet me a few miles down the road and we'd find a spot to divvy it up—70/30, with Géorg taking the lion's share. That was the deal. He said it was due to his legal right to the inventions and if I wanted to argue he could always find someone else to play dress-up.

After Géorg left, Hildegunn started bringing Jonah by our place every few days while she went into the village to do God knows what. Géorg's leaving had extinguished that fire in her, you could see it in the way she moved. One day she brought the child over, said she was running to town to see about fresh work, but never came back.

"What do we do now?" I asked Gerta when she got home from work. Jonah was already cruising our one-room hovel, holding fast to whatever he could as he baby-stepped his way around. Constance moved her sack doll from the bed to the floor and told us Jonah could sleep with her.

"You're better at the fathering than you think," Gerta said.

"Well, don't spread it around," I said. "The kind of men I used to run with would see me beaten for it."

So there I was with two kids under the age of five living under a leaky thatched roof with winter on the way. Gerta was working longer hours, leaving before the sun came up and returning long after

it had gone down. I'd have the kids cleaned and asleep as best I could and be well into my third mug of ale by the time she walked in. "Look who's never home now," I'd say, and kick my feet up on the table with a look like, *Check out the Duke of Daddyville*. One day I guess I pushed it too far, because after I gave her my usual flack she buried her face in her wimple and started to cry. I rethought my welcome-home routine after that, because even back then I was starting to understand what it might be like to miss your children that much.

The upside was that Gerta seemed to take a renewed interest in carnal relations. Whatever I was doing in the dad department seemed to be paying off, because no matter how tired she was after work, I was in for some serious copulation when the candles went out. Before I knew it Constance was six, Jonah was nearly three, and we had another little one crawling around in the mud.

That's when the livestock started to go missing.

At first everyone in the village chalked it up to theft. A sheep here, a goat there. But I knew better. There was something familiar about the way the animals were disappearing. It was classic Géorg. The dads group was still getting together once a week and a few of them said they had spotted a strangeness flying around in the sky the week the animals had vanished.

"Did it look like a cow tossed from a catapult?" I asked.

"Not hardly," one of them said.

"It had wings," said another.

That night over dinner I told Gerta a little too excitedly that I thought Géorg might be back. She sighed and set her wooden spoon next to the stew I'd spent the day preparing. The kids fell quiet and you could tell they were wondering what was wrong with Mommy.

"Who's Géorg?" Jonah asked.

Even the little one seemed to understand something was up. She sat in the rickety high chair I'd made for her and pointed at the sky through the latest hole in our roof.

Over the years, the field between Géorg's place and ours had become overgrown. The weeds were the height of two men in some places. There was still a trail however, as I'd been going there nearly once a month to watch his house sink into the earth and reminisce about the glory days. I'd sit on one of the wooden stumps littered around his land and stare at what was left of his front door. It was my only break from the kids. Constance was old enough to watch the others for a while, so I'd often find myself over there thinking of Gerta and the kids and what might be coming next in my life. I'd check the shed where Géorg kept the dragon equipment and sometimes pull out a gauntlet or rusted crossbow and aim it into the sky like we used to do. Then I'd head back home toward my family, stretching out the walk as long as I could.

The footprints showed up a week after the missing livestock. First near the ruins of Géorg's house, then stamped lightly into the mud on the path between our land. They were always fresh, like whoever it was had slipped into the mucky weeds seconds before I found him. Géorg and I knew too much about covering tracks; if they were his, he wanted them seen. I'd kneel down, touch them with my fingers and look around, yelling Géorg's name as loud as I could.

There were signs that someone was poking around our place too. Sometimes late at night, in the midst of a fitful sleep, I'd get up and check on the kids to make sure the three of them were at least breathing. I'd spend a moment at the window, look out into the darkness and swear someone was standing in the yard.

Once, Jonah and I were outside playing catch with rocks when I sailed one over his head and it rolled a good distance to the edge of our property. He ran to collect it, and before he picked it up he stood facing the weeds like he was talking to someone. I yelled, "Jonah, what is it?" He ran back waving a different rock above his

head, saying a man had found a better one in the weeds and given it to him.

Then came the actual dragon. Mrs. Grundlsmere swore she'd seen the beast land in her backyard and wrap a forked tongue around her prized ewe, suffocating the poor animal with one squeeze. Bruno, my neighbor a few furlongs away, said the dragon had confronted him and his oxen while they were on the way to market. "It let loose a fire from its jaws that scorched my cart and ruined a season's worth of squash," he said. "I was lucky to escape with my life."

Eventually, I saw the dragon too. I was at Géorg's place again, hoping he'd finally show up, when its shadow passed over the ground. By the time I looked up it was high in the sky doing strange acrobatic maneuvers, dipping and weaving and spinning corkscrews through the air. Something that looked like smoke billowed from its hindquarters and became a long white trail as the dragon moved across the sky. It disappeared into a bank of high clouds in the west and I remember thinking at the time that there was something unnatural in the way it moved, something that no God would ever imagine putting upon the earth.

The reports piled up. Everyone in town figured since I knew so much about fake dragons, a real one must not be all that different. Soon I had a mob at my door, led by the village elders, asking for help. My hut was complete domestic mayhem when they showed up—Constance had refused to churn the butter and was pouting in the corner. Jonah was running around the shack naked in one of the moods that brought me closer to understanding why Géorg had tried to drown him. I hadn't had time to get the youngest out of her sleep sack yet and she was knotting herself up inside it writhing on the dirt floor. But here's what they offered me: enough money to send Constance and Jonah to a private tutor three towns over, the deed to Géorg's land, and above all, a chance to work again.

That night I pumped out a family meal that I must say was pretty

stunning. One of the guys in the dads group gave me the recipe and told me of a farmer in Motala that had the freshest produce around. I had walked there with the kids in tow and told them to keep quiet because Daddy was making a special dinner for Mommy.

And did I—this was first-rate cabbage and a gopher I'd killed just the day before, stewed in a delicate broth with the slightest hint of fresh honey and wood cherries. When Gerta got home I had the place looking fine. I'd swept, the table was set, and I even put out the good candles.

"And to what do I owe the pleasure?" Gerta said as she sat down and pulled off her sandals. The kids had all washed in the creek and I had them lined up from tallest to shortest. Their faces were shining and I could tell that the remnants of any kind of miserable day drained out of Gerta right there. The kids ran to her and each found a spot to hug. "Daddy's got a surprise," said Constance, and Jonah echoed the same.

"A surprise?" Gerta said, looking at me. I was in the middle of whipping the cream for dessert and putting the finishing touches on the gopher, so I told her to just take a seat and I'd let everyone know in good time. Constance strapped the little one into her high chair and Jonah found his seat at the table. He was holding the small dagger I'd given him for his birthday the week before. "No weapons at the table," I said, and he sighed and climbed off his chair to put the knife in his bunk.

"It all looks wonderful," Gerta said when I brought out the main course. The gopher was still sizzling and the whole shack smelled of wood smoke and sweet onion. Even the little one seemed excited; she had a few words by then and was rocking in her chair saying what sounded like "yummy" over and over. Never had we eaten so well. I waited until dessert to tell them Daddy was going back to work. After I broke the news, Gerta put her elbows on the table, dropped her head into her hands, and let out a long sigh.

"I thought you'd be excited to be back with the children again," I told her after we got the kids to sleep. The candles were low and their light danced around the room; the sound of summer insects was loud outside. Gerta had the front door open and was staring out into the darkness of the valley.

"I don't want my children staking hope on a father who drops in whenever he pleases," she said. "I've lived that way once. I won't do it again. Give me dirty laundry any day."

I could feel the evening air press its way into the room; it swirled around us and snuffed out a few of the candles. One of the children shuffled in their bunk as I sat there and tried to embrace what Gerta was telling me. "I don't know what it is with you," she said. "You have everything and it's not enough." She closed the front door and walked back toward our bed. "If you leave," she said as she passed, "feel free to stay gone this time."

Géorg had always had a wizardly look about him, with tangled hair that hinted at years of restlessness and a smart mouth that always let you know what Géorg thought of Géorg. No one ever could get a leg up on him and he never let you forget it. Sometimes on our walks between towns he'd share what he had up his sleeve in the invention department. I remember we were halfway to Grimsby when he showed me his plans for a type of flying machine. It was a crude mechanism that used coal and a furnace made from this lighter-than-iron metal Géorg said he had a line on. "Just think of the terror we could rain down with this," he'd said, and I'll never forget the look in his eyes, like he'd swallowed the world's biggest secret and was caught up in the thrill of finally telling someone about it.

"If you talk of this to anyone," he said, "I'll do to you worse than what I did to that hunter."

And I believed him. We'd been through some good scrapes and

logged serious miles, but Géorg was short on pleasantries and long on ideas, and it was this idea, this flying machine, that stuck in my mind at the sight of whatever it was flying over Géorg's place that day. I had imagined a lot of dragons but never anything that moved quite like that. I knew in my heart, in the part of my soul that locked away the kind of darkness a man craves from the world, that Géorg was calling me back with the promise of the life I'd left behind.

The town elders gave me half the silver up front. Gerta quit the laundry gig, and for a few days when we were all home together I took on the job of rebuilding some of Géorg's old weapons. I pulled the crossbow and battle axe from his ruined shed and had Constance and Jonah help drag them back to our place. I took Jonah to the blacksmith with me for crossbow parts. Conversation around the shop was all dragon, and Jonah took pleasure in showing off the new dagger I'd given him, pretending to stab at whatever piece of equipment he found threatening. The blacksmiths laughed and said the boy was a natural fighter.

"If you only knew," I said.

A few days later Constance helped me strip down the battle axe, and when I wasn't looking she carved five small figures into the handle. "What is this?" I asked her.

"That's us," she said. And it was. Carved into the handle were five stick figures of Gerta and me and the kids. Constance smiled at me with a look that said she had every confidence I wouldn't be away long this time. I swung the axe over my head and growled like I used to do when putting on one of our victory performances. Constance shrieked and ran about the yard, yelling, "Catch me, Daddy!" and Jonah fell in too with his knife, protecting his stepsister from whatever he imagined I was. Gerta was holding the baby on the new porch I'd started, and the sun was out for the first time in months. My old tights barely fit

anymore and the armor looked altogether ridiculous. I gathered up the weapons and slung them over my shoulder, all of it much heavier than I remembered. Constance and Jonah bolted to each of my legs and held fast, both of them crying and carrying on.

"I want you to take Valentina," Constance said. I took her doll, placed it in my satchel, and pried the children from my legs. They ran toward the field, Constance tickling Jonah along the way. Their tears became laughter that hung gayly in the air. The wind was picking up, and the rye I'd planted next to the house was swaying in the breeze, its stalks tall and strong. I remember thinking it would be a good year for the harvest. From my spot in the yard I could see where I'd mended the roof, how I'd taken grass and thatched it watertight with my own two hands. Smoke leaked from the chimney and I could smell the faint hint of onion and ash. I took one last look at Gerta on the porch and waved. She turned and walked into the house.

What a sad sight I must have been, waddling off toward the road that led into town. Daddy off to fight the good fight. Daddy walking away for good from the one honest and beautiful thing he'd ever done.

I almost didn't make it, sweating as I was. I had to stop many times to catch my breath and readjust the equipment. I kept looking back to see if Constance and Jonah were following but there was only the empty road. The masses were gathering in the village; I could hear them in the distance, chants and cheers and even the sound of bagpipes. I picked myself up, hiked up my tights, pushed on.

And then I was there, wielding an axe through the middle of town and pulling out all my old moves. Men lined the streets, women threw flower petals, and children raced about my feet with wooden swords. I looked for Géorg in the crowd and I could have sworn he was there, laying the foundation for whatever adventure we were in for next. Everyone cheered, and each voice in that madness unlocked the darkness in my heart that had lain dormant there. I looked up, and for that brief moment, the sky was clear of dragons.