When Women Were Dragons



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1

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For Christine Blasey Ford,
whose testimony triggered this narrative;

And for my children—
dragons, all.

The dragon is in the barrow, wise and proud with treasures.

—ANGLO-SAXON PROVERB

They were ferocious in appearance, terrible in shape with great heads, long necks, thin faces, yellow complexions, shaggy ears, wild foreheads, fierce eyes, foul mouths, horses' teeth, throats vomiting flames, twisted jaws, thick lips, strident voices, singed hair, fat cheeks, pigeon breasts, scabby thighs, knotty knees, crooked legs, swollen ankles, splay feet, spreading mouths, raucous cries. For they grew so terrible to hear with their mighty shriekings that they filled almost the whole intervening space between earth and heaven with their discordant bellowings.

—*LIFE OF SAINT GUTHLAC* BY FELIX,
AN EAST ANGLIAN MONK, APPROXIMATELY AD 730,
IN WHICH THE GOOD MONK DESCRIBES THE ORIGINAL
OCCUPANTS OF THE BARROW WHERE THE SAINT
HAD ATTEMPTED TO BUILD HIS HERMITAGE

If I, like Solomon, . . .
could have my wish—

my wish . . . O to be a dragon,
a symbol of the power of Heaven—of silkworm
size or immense; at times invisible.
Felicitous phenomenon!

—"O TO BE A DRAGON" BY MARIANNE MOORE, 1959

When Women Were Dragons

Being the Truthful Accounting
of the Life of Alex Green—
Physicist, Professor, Activist. Still Human.
A memoir, of sorts.

Greetings, Mother—

I do not have much time. This change (this wondrous, wondrous change) is at this very moment upon me. I could not stop it if I tried. And I have no interest in trying.

It is not from any place of sorrow that I write these words. There is no room for sorrow in a heart full of fire. You will tell people that you did not raise me to be an angry woman, and that statement will be correct. I was never allowed to be angry, was I? My ability to discover and understand the power of my own raging was a thing denied to me. Until, at last, I learned to stop denying myself.

You told me on my wedding day that I was marrying a hard man whom I shall have the pleasure to sweeten. "It is a good woman," you said, "who brings out the goodness in a man." That lie became evident on our very first night together. My husband was not a good man, and nothing ever would have made him so. I married a man who was petulant, volatile, weak-willed, and morally vile. You knew this, and yet you whispered matronly secrets into my ear and told me that the pain would be worth the babies that I would bring to you one day.

But there were no babies, were there? My husband's beatings saw to that. And now I shall see to him. Tooth and claw. The downtrodden becomes the bearer of a heavenly, righteous flame. It burns me, even now. I find myself unbound by earth, unbound by man, unbound by wifely duty and womanly pain.

I regret nothing.

I shall not miss you, Mother. Perhaps I won't even remember you. Does a flower remember its life as a seed? Does a phoenix recall itself as it burns anew? You will not see me again. I shall be but a shadow streaking across the sky—fleeting, speeding, and utterly gone.

—From a letter written by Marya Tilman, a housewife from Lincoln, Nebraska, and the earliest scientifically confirmed case of spontaneous

dragoning within the United States prior to the Mass Dragoning of 1955—also known as the Day of Missing Mothers. The dragoning, per reports from eyewitnesses, happened during the day, on September 18, 1898, as a lemonade social was underway in the garden of next-door neighbors, to celebrate an engagement. Information and data regarding Mrs. Tilman's case was suppressed by authorities. Despite the sheer amount of corroborating evidence, including the accidental capture on a daguerreotype taken next door which showed in shocking clarity the dragoning at its midpoint, and signed affidavits by witnesses, it was not covered by a single newspaper—local or national—and all studies organized to research the phenomenon were barred from both funding and publication. Scientists, journalists, and researchers were fired and blacklisted for simply asking questions about the Tillman case. It was not the first time such research blackouts occurred, but the sheer quality of the evidence, and the vigor of the governmental effort to suppress it, was enough to trigger the formation of the Wyvern Research Collective, an underground association of doctors, scientists, and students, all dedicated to the preservation of information and study (peer-reviewed when possible) of both spontaneous and intentional dragoning, in order to better understand the phenomenon.

***Gentlemen**, it is not my place to tell you how to do your jobs. I am a scientist, not a congressman. My task is to raise questions, carefully record observations, and vigorously analyze the data, in hopes that others might raise more questions after me. There cannot be science without the interrogation of closely held beliefs, as well as the demolition of personal aversions and biases. There cannot be science without the free and unfettered dissemination of truth. When you, as the creators of policy, seek to use your power to curtail understanding and thwart the free exchange of knowledge and ideas, it is not I who will suffer the consequences of this, but rather the whole nation, and, indeed, the entire world.*

Our country lost hundreds of thousands of its wives and mothers on April 25, 1955, due to a process that we can barely understand—not because it is by its nature unknowable, but because science has been both forbidden from searching for answers and hobbled in its response. This is an untenable situation. How can a nation respond to a crisis like this without the collaboration of scientists and doctors, without sharing clinical findings and laboratory data? The mass transformation that occurred on April 25, 1955, was unprecedented in terms of its size and scope, but it was not—please sirs, it is important that you let me finish—it was not an anomaly. Such things have happened before, and I will tell you plainly that so-called dragoning continues to this day, a fact which would be more widely known and understood if the doctors and researchers who studied this phenomenon hadn't lost their positions and livelihoods, or faced the horror of their labs and records being rifled through and destroyed by authorities. I know full well that speaking frankly and candidly to you today puts me at grave risk of harpooning what is left of my career. But I am a scientist, sirs, and my allegiance is not to this body, nor even to myself, but only to the truth. Who benefits when knowledge is buried? Who gains when science succumbs to political expediency? Not I, congressmen. And certainly not the

American people, whom you are honor-bound to serve.

—From the opening statement given by Dr. H. N. Gantz (former chief of Internal Medicine at Johns Hopkins University Hospital and erstwhile research fellow at the National Institutes of Health, the Army Medical Corps, and the National Science Administration) to the House Committee on Un-American Activities, February 9, 1957

I.

I was four years old when I first met a dragon. I never told my mother. I didn't think she'd understand.

(I was wrong, obviously. But I was wrong about a lot of things when it came to her. This is not particularly unusual. I think, perhaps, none of us ever know our mothers, not really. Or at least, not until it's too late.)

The day I met a dragon, was, for me, a day of loss, set in a time of instability. My mother had been gone for over two months. My father, whose face had become as empty and expressionless as a hand in a glove, gave me no explanation. My auntie Marla, who had come to stay with us to take care of me while my mother was gone, was similarly blank. Neither spoke of my mother's status or whereabouts. They did not tell me when she would be back. I was a child, and was therefore given no information, no frame of reference, and no means by which I might ask a question. They told me to be a good girl. They hoped I would forget.

There was, back then, a little old lady who lived across our alley. She had a garden and a beautiful shed and several chickens who lived in a small coop with a faux owl perched on top. Sometimes, when I wandered into her yard to say hello, she would give me a bundle of carrots. Sometimes she would hand me an egg. Or a cookie. Or a basket full of strawberries. I loved her. She was, for me, the one sensible thing in a too-often senseless world. She spoke with a heavy accent—Polish, I learned much later—and called me her little *żabko,* as I was always jumping about like a frog, and then would put me to work picking ground-cherries or early tomatoes or nasturtiums or sweet peas. And then, after a bit, she would take my hand and walk me home, admonishing my mother (before her disappearance) or my aunt (during those long months of mother-

missing). "You must keep your eyes on this one," she'd scold, "or one day she'll sprout wings and fly away."

It was the very end of July when I met the dragon, on an oppressively hot and humid afternoon. One of those days when thunderstorms linger just at the edge of the sky, hulking in raggedy murmurs for hours, waiting to bring in their whirlwinds of opposites—making the light dark, howling at silences, and wringing all the wetness out of the air like a great, soaked sponge. At this moment, though, the storm had not yet hit, and the whole world simply waited. The air was so damp and warm that it was nearly solid. My scalp sweated into my braids, and my smocked dress had become crinkled with my grubby handprints.

I remember the staccato barking of a neighborhood dog.

I remember the far-off rumble of a revving engine. This was likely my aunt, fixing yet another neighbor's car. My aunt was a mechanic, and people said she had magic hands. She could take any broken machine and make it live again.

I remember the strange, electric hum of cicadas calling to one another from tree to tree to tree.

I remember the floating motes of dust and pollen hanging in the air, glinting in the slant of light.

I remember a series of sounds from my neighbor's backyard. A man's roar. A woman's scream. A panicked gasping. A scrabble and a thud. And then, a quiet, awestruck *Oh!*

Each one of these memories is clear and keen as broken glass. I had no means to understand them at the time—no way to find the link between distinct and seemingly unrelated moments and bits of information. It took years for me to learn how to piece them together. I have stored these memories the way any child stores memory—a haphazard collection of sharp, bright objects socked away on the darkest shelves in the dustiest corners of our mental filing systems. They stay there, those memories, rattling in the dark. Scratching at the walls. Disrupting our careful ordering of what we think is true. And injuring us when we forget how dangerous they are, and we grasp too hard.

I opened the back gate and walked into the old lady's yard, as

I had done a hundred times. The chickens were silent. The cicadas stopped humming and the birds stopped calling. The old lady was nowhere to be seen. Instead, there in the center of the yard, I saw a dragon sitting on its bottom, midway between the tomatoes and the shed. It had an astonished expression on its enormous face. It stared at its hands. It stared at its feet. It craned its neck behind itself to get a load of its wings. I didn't cry out. I didn't run away. I didn't even move. I simply stood, rooted to the ground, and stared at the dragon.

Finally, because I had come to see the little old lady, and I was nothing if not a purposeful little girl, I cleared my throat and demanded to know where she was. The dragon looked at me, startled. It said nothing. It winked one eye. It held one finger to its lipless jaws as though to say "Shh." And then, without waiting for anything else, it curled its legs under its great body like a spring, tilted its face upward toward the clouds overhead, unfurled its wings, and, with a grunt, pushed the earth away, leaping toward the sky. I watched it ascend higher and higher, eventually arcing westward, disappearing over the wide crowns of the elm trees.

I didn't see the little old lady again after that. No one mentioned her. It was as though she never existed. I tried to ask, but I didn't have enough information to even form a question. I looked to the adults in my life to provide reason or reassurance, but found none. Only silence. The little old lady was gone. I saw something that I couldn't understand. There was no space to mention it.

Eventually, her house was boarded up and her yard grew over and her garden became a tangled mass. People walked by her house without giving it a second glance.

I was four years old when I first saw a dragon. I was four years old when I first learned to be silent about dragons. Perhaps this is how we learn silence—an absence of words, an absence of context, a hole in the universe where the truth should be.

2.

My mother returned to me on a Tuesday. There was, again, no explanation, no reassurance; just a silence on the matter that was cold, heavy, and immovable, like a block of ice frozen to the ground; it was one more thing that was simply unmentionable. It was, if I remember correctly, a little more than two weeks after the old lady across the alley had disappeared. And when her husband, coincidentally, also disappeared. (No one mentioned *that,* either.)

On the day my mother returned, my auntie Marla was in a frenzy, cleaning the house and attacking my face with a hot washcloth, again and again, and brushing my hair obsessively, until it gleamed. I complained, loudly, and tried unsuccessfully to wriggle out of her firm grasp.

"Come now," my aunt said tersely, "that's enough of that. We want you to look your best, now, don't we?"

"What for?" I asked, and I stuck out my tongue.

"For no reason at all." Her tone was final—or she had clearly attempted it to be so. But even as a child I could hear the question mark hiding there. Auntie Marla released me and flushed a bit. She stood and looked out the window. She wrinkled her brow. And then she returned to vacuuming. She polished the chrome accents on the oven and scoured the floor. Every window shone like water. Every surface shimmered like oil. I sat in my room with my dolls (which I did not enjoy) and my blocks (which I did) and pouted.

I heard the low rumble of my father's car arriving at our house car around lunchtime. This was highly unusual because he never came home during a workday. I approached the window and pressed my nose to the glass, making a singular, round smudge. He curled out of the driver's-side door and adjusted his hat. He patted the smooth curves of the hood as he crossed over and opened the pas-

senger door, his hand extended. Another hand reached out. I held my breath.

A stranger stepped out of the car, wearing my mother's clothes. A stranger with a face similar to my mother's, but not—puffy where it should be delicate, and thin where it should be plump. She was paler than my mother, and her hair was sparse and dull—all wisps and feathers and bits of scalp peeking out. Her gait was unsteady and halting—she had none of my mother's footsure stride. I twisted my mouth into a knot.

They began walking slowly toward the house, my father and this stranger. My father's right arm curled around her birdlike shoulders and held her body close. His hat sat on his head at a front-leaning angle, tilted slightly to the side, hiding his face in shadow. I couldn't see his expression. Once they crossed the midpoint of the front walkway, I tore out of my room at a run and arrived, breathless, in the entryway. I wiped my nose with the back of my hand as I watched the door, and waited.

My aunt gave a strangled cry and peeled out of the kitchen, an apron tied around her waist, its lace edge whispering against the knees of her dungarees. She threw open the front door and let them inside. I watched the way her cheeks flushed at the sight of this figure in my mother's clothes, the way her eyes reddened and slicked with tears.

"Welcome home," my aunt said, her voice catching. She pressed one hand to her mouth, and the other to her heart.

I looked at my aunt. I looked at the stranger. I looked at my father. I waited for an explanation, but nothing came. I stamped my foot. They didn't react. Finally, my father cleared his throat.

"Alexandra," he said.

"It's Alex," I whispered.

My father ignored this. "Alexandra, don't stand there gawping. Kiss your mother." He checked his watch.

The stranger looked at me. She smiled. Her smile sort of looked like my mother's, but her body was all wrong, and her face was all wrong, and her hair was all wrong, and her smell was all wrong, and the wrongness of the situation felt insurmountable. My knees

went wobbly and my head began to pound. I was a serious child in those days—sober and introspective and not particularly prone to crying or tantrums. But I remember a distinct burning sensation at the back of my eyes. I remember my breath turning into hiccups. I couldn't take a single step.

The stranger smiled and swayed, and clutched my father's left arm. He didn't seem to notice. He turned his body slightly away and checked his watch again. Then he gave me a stern look. "Alexandra," he said flatly. "Don't make me ask again. Think of how your mother must feel."

My face felt very hot.

My aunt was at my side in a moment, sweeping me upward and hoisting me onto her hip, as though I was a baby. "Kisses are better when we can all do them together," she said. "Come on, Alex." And without another word, she hooked one arm around the stranger's waist and placed her cheek against the stranger's cheek, forcing my face right into the notch between the stranger's neck and shoulder.

I felt my mother's breath on my scalp.

I heard my mother's sigh caress my ear.

I ran my fingers along the roomy fabric of her floral dress and curled it into my fist.

"Oh," I said, my voice more breath than sound, and I wrapped one arm around the back of the stranger's neck. I don't remember crying. I do remember my mother's scarf and collar and skin becoming wet. I remember the taste of salt.

"Well, that's my cue," my father said. "Be a good girl, Alexandra." He extended the sharp point of his chin. "Marla," he nodded at my aunt. "Make sure she lies down," he added. He didn't say anything to the stranger. My mother, I mean. He didn't say anything to my mother. Maybe we were all strangers now.

After that day, Auntie Marla continued to come by the house early each morning and stay long after my father came home from work, only returning to her own home after the nighttime dishes were done and the floors were swept and my mother and father were in bed. She cooked and managed and played with me during my mother's endless afternoon lie-downs. She ran the house, and only

went to her job at the mechanic's shop on Saturdays, though this made my father cross, as he had no idea what to do with me, or my mother, for a whole day by himself.

"Rent isn't free, after all," she reminded him as my father sat petulantly in his favorite chair.

During the rest of the week, Auntie Marla was the pillar that held up the roof of my family's life. She said she was happy to do it. She said that the only thing worth doing was helping her sister heal. She said it was her favorite of all possible jobs. And I think this must have been so.

My mother, meanwhile, moved through the house like a ghost. Prior to her disappearance, she was small and light and delicate. Tiny feet. Tiny features. Long and fragile hands, like blades of grass tied up with ribbon. When she returned, she was, impossibly, even lighter and more fragile. She was like the discarded husk of a cricket after it outgrows itself. No one mentioned this. It was unmentionable. Her face was as pale as clouds, except the storm-dark skin around her eyes. She tired easily and slept much.

My aunt made sure she had pressed skirts to wear. And starched gloves. And polished shoes. And smart tops. She made sure there were belts properly sized to cinch her roomy clothing to her tiny frame. Once the bald spots began to disappear and my mother's hair returned, Marla arranged for the hairdresser to come by the house, and later the Avon lady. She painted my mother's nails and praised her when she ate and often reminded her that she was looking so much like herself. I wondered at this. I didn't know who else my mother would look like. I wanted to question it. But had no words to form such a question.

Auntie Marla, during this time, became my mother in opposite. She was tall, broad shouldered, and took a wide stance. She could lift heavy objects that my father could not. I never once saw her in a skirt. Or a pair of pumps. She wore trousers belted high and stomped about in her military-issued boots. Sometimes she put on a man's hat, which she wore at an angle over her pinned curls, which she always kept short. She wore dark red lipstick, which my mother found shocking, but she kept her fingernails trimmed, blunt, and

unpainted, like a man's, which my mother also found shocking.

My aunt, once upon a time, flew planes—first in the Air Transport Auxiliary, and then in the Women's Army Corps, and then briefly in the Women Airforce Service Pilots during the first part of the war until they grounded her for reasons that I was never told, and had her fixing engines instead. And she was good at fixing engines. Everyone wanted her help. She left the WASP abruptly when my grandparents died, and worked as a mechanic in an auto repair shop to support my mother through college, and then simply continued. I didn't know this was a strange occupation for a young woman until much later. At work she spent the day bent over or slid under revving machinery, her magic hands coaxing them back to life. And I think she liked her work. But even as a little girl, I noticed the way her eyes lifted always to the sky, like someone longing for home.

I loved my aunt, but I hated her too. I was a child, after all. And I wanted my *mother* to make my breakfast and my *mother* to take me to the park and my *mother* to glare at my father when he was, once again, out of line. But now it was my aunt who did all those things, and I couldn't forgive her for it. It was the first time I noticed that a person can feel opposite things at the same time.

Once, when I was supposed to be napping, I crept out of bed and tiptoed into my father's study, which adjoined the master bathroom, which adjoined my parents' bedroom. I opened the door just a crack and peeked inside. I was a curious child. And I was hungry for information.

My mother lay on the bed with no clothes on, which was unusual. My aunt sat next to her, rubbing oil into my mother's skin with long, sure strokes. My mother's body was covered in scars—wide, deep burns. I pressed my hand to my mouth. Had my mother been attacked by a monster? Would anyone have told me if she had? I set my teeth on the fleshy part of my fingers and bit down hard to keep myself from crying out as I watched. In the places where her breasts should have been, two bulbous smiles bit into her skin, bright pink and garish. I couldn't look at them for very long. My aunt ran her oily thumbs gently along each scar, one after another. I winced as

my mother winced.

"They're getting better," Auntie Marla said. "Before you know it, they'll be so pale you'll barely notice them."

"You're lying again," my mother said, her voice small and dry. "No one's meant to keep on like—"

"Oh, come now," Marla said briskly. "Enough of that talk. I saw men with worse during the war, and they kept on with things, didn't they. So can you. Just you wait. You'll outlive us all. After all my prayers, I wouldn't be surprised if you turn immortal. Next leg."

My mother complied, turning away from me and lying on her side so my aunt could massage oil into her left leg and lower torso, the heels of her hands going deep into the muscle. She had burns on her back as well. My mother shook her head and sighed. "You'd wish me to be Tithonus, would you?"

Marla shrugged. "Unlike you, I didn't have a big sister to browbeat me into finishing college, so I don't know all your fancy references, Miss Smartypants. But sure. You can be just like whoever that is."

My mother buried her face into the crook of her arm. "It's mythology," she explained. "Also it's a poem I used to love. Tithonus was a man—a mortal—in ancient Greece who fell in love with a goddess and they decided to get married. The goddess, though, hated the very thought that her husband would die someday, and so she granted him immortality."

"How romantic," my aunt said. "Left arm, please."

"Not really," my mother sighed. "Gods are stupid and shortsighted. They're like children." She shook her head. "No. They're worse. They're like men—no sense of unintended consequences or follow-through. The goddess took away his ability to die. But he still *aged,* because she hadn't thought to also give him eternal youth. So each year he became older, sicker, weaker. He dried out and shriveled, getting smaller and smaller until finally he was the size of a cricket. The goddess just carried him in her pocket for the rest of time, often completely forgetting he was there. He was broken and useless and was utterly without hope that anything could change. It wasn't romantic at all."

"Roll all the way onto your stomach, darling," my aunt said, eager to change the subject. My mother groaned as she readjusted herself. Marla tinkered with my mother's muscles the way she tinkered with cars—smoothing, adjusting, righting what once was wrong. If anyone could fix my mother, it was my aunt. She clicked her tongue. "Well, with this much oil, I can't imagine you drying out all that much. But after the scare we had, after you almost—" Auntie Marla's voice cracked just a bit. She pressed the back of her hand to her mouth and pretended to cough. But even then, as young as I was, I knew it was pretend. She shook her head and resumed her work on my mother's body. "Well. Carrying you around with me in my pocket forever doesn't sound half-bad. I'd take it, actually." She cleared her throat, but her words became thick. "I'd take it any old day you like."

I shouldn't remember any of this exchange, but strangely, I do. I remember every word of it. For me, this isn't entirely unusual—I spent most of my childhood memorizing things by accident. Filing things away. I didn't know what any of their conversation meant, but I knew how it made me feel. My head felt hot and my skin felt cold, and the space around my body seemed to vibrate and spin. I needed my mother. I needed my mother to be well. And in the irrational reasoning of a child, I thought that the way to do this was to get my aunt to leave—if she left, my thinking went, then surely my mother would be all right. If Auntie Marla left, then no one would need to feed my mother, or do her tasks around the house, or rub her muscles, or make sure she got dressed, or keep her safe in any kind of pocket. My mother would simply be my mother. And the world would be as it should.

I went back to my room, and I thought about the dragon in my neighbor's yard. How it seemed to marvel at its clawed hands and gnarled feet. How it peered behind itself to look at its wings. I remembered the gasp and the *Oh!* I remembered the way it curled its haunches and arched its back. The ripple of muscles under iridescent skin. The way it readied its wings. And that astonishing launch skyward. I remember my own sharp gasp as the dragon disappeared into the clouds. I closed my eyes and imagined my aunt

growing wings. My aunt's muscles shining with metallic scales. My aunt's gaze tilting to the sky. My aunt flying away.

I wrapped myself in a blanket and closed my eyes tight— trying as a child tries to imagine it true.