

I was seven years old when my grandfather kidnapped me.

He about sixtyish at the time, almost seventy, and had been without his wife—my grandmother—for about five years, then. She'd been killed in a car accident. I hardly remembered her, but he talked about her all the time and kept a picture of her in his wallet.

The man enjoyed beetles (the insects, not the band), curry in the Peranakan style, and talking in long, odious sentences when my father was around. I enjoyed the way he would tie my hair up into a ponytail at the top of my head so I looked stupid, the way he would break out into *Jerusalem* every time he saw my father walking into a room, and the stories he would tell me—my favourite one of which he told me one sizzling, sparkling day in September, when he kidnapped me and took me across the Straits of Malacca.

I was at home when he showed up. Just after school and on my own, socks off and a red-bean bun in my hand. He showed up at the door and shouted my name.

He squinted at me through the grille; I stared back at him.

“You opening this door or what?”

I sniffed and made for the keys. With the afternoon sunlight coming in from behind him he looked beatific, blessed.

“Did you parents tell you, Emily?” He asked as I pulled the grille open for him.

“Tell me what?”

“That we were going on a trip?”

I shook my head. My parents had not told me because they had not known.

“Well, we *are*. An excursion. Today, you and me. You know where your passport is?”

I nodded. The old man shuffled in and settled down onto the sofa. He had a fanny pack clenched around a pair of pants the colour of a camel drawn high up his waist; two bright pink spots bobbed on his leathery cheeks. I gave him the remainder of my bun and went into my parent's room, excited at the

thought of an excursion—all the more so at the fact that it was one that required a passport.

Beneath their marriage-bed were the family passports, hidden in a wax paper wrapper, which was in turn locked into a cherry-wood box, the key of which lay in an old powder-compact of my mother's, stuffed unceremoniously into the back of her makeup drawer. The smell of faded flowers danced from the old wood when I pulled the drawer open and settled heavy into the sunlit amber of the room.

After getting the passport I changed into a blue dress that I liked, with a sunflower stitched onto the skirt pocket, and went out again into the living room. My grandfather was standing with his back to me, turned towards the window that faced out into the open air—from which you could see the tops of trees. The faint quiet of the mid-afternoon that had descended all over the block, with parents at work and children at school, mostly. And only the very young and the very old in their flats, to either make memories or revisit them.

I made a sound and my grandfather turned around. There was a strange, wistful look on his face.

“Come on, Emily,” he said, “it’s time for our adventure.”

“Have you ever seen a waterfall?” He asked me as our train trundled north. I had packed a water-bottle, another bun, and an Enid Blyton for our journey, which was open now on my lap.

“Yah, on tv. In storybooks.”

“Television,” the old man snorted. “Well, Emily, I’ll be taking you to a *real* one.”

My interest was piqued.

“We’ll have a picnic, would you like that? Cake if you wish.”

“Yes.”

His eyes were half-open. Across from me a girl older than I was engrossed in a book of her own. When I turned back to my grandfather he had leaned his head against the window and his eyes were closed. I turned back to my

storybook. There was a witch in it; she hated children and turned them into toadstools. I turned the page. I was certain she would get her comeuppance.

We made it to the Woodlands border alright. My grandfather was not senile; he was capable of simple travel. Directions were written clearly in marker. Explorers would not get waylaid by cunning foxes; our noble steeds were rickety buses that puffed out exhaust and grime. When the bus to the waterfall pulled out of the customs (spelled with a k!), my grandfather leaned his head against the window, drew a deep, rattling breath, and closed his eyes in a contented way that I knew would precede sleep. I poked him.

“What?”

“Tell me a story.”

“Haven’t you got a book?” He rasped despairingly.

“*You* brought me here!”

“Fine,” he muttered aloud, before pitching his voice low and saying something intelligible to himself.

“Tell me a story about a *princess*.”

This was a departure from tradition, I knew; usually his stories were about a brave child of poor stock, who bested the troubles that plagued him with wit and courage. In my grandfather’s stories if the monarchy existed it was only in the form of an arrogant prince or an errant king—who would eventually come to learn that “all men who wield the sword of wealth will have it soon pressed against his own neck”.

“What the *hell* do I know about princesses?” He asked loudly. A lady two seats down from us craned her bird-like neck at us, lips trembling in disapproval.

“You’re old,”—and this was true; I was still at the age to believe wholeheartedly in the wisdom of ancients—“you must know *something*.”

By this time, if I followed the anxious timeline she had drawn up in her version of my kidnapping, my mother would have come home. Outside the sky had begun to yellow and soften: early evening creeping towards us. We

were about an hour away from our destination. My mother would come home, expect me there, and panic when I wasn't.

A silence, and then—

"There was once a girl," my grandfather began. Then he frowned. He knew little of princesses. "There was once a girl with—with dragons."

"With dragons? Did she own these dragons? Like pets?"

"Like pets? No, no. They didn't like her. They didn't like her at all." I could see *the cogs working*, as he would have put it. His brain whirring and the words coming off his tongue. "Made her life a living hell, actually. Always burning up this, tearing down that."

"Where did she grow up in?"

"Eh? A... kingdom."

"What kind of kingdom: what was the climate like—(I fancied myself very intelligent for my age)—was it like, a *temperate* climate, or was this a—"

"It was bloody *hot* was what it was," he grouched, pulling at the damp collar of a ridiculous flowery shirt that no one had told him to wear and which my father hated.

But even as he spoke something was happening to the weather; through the smudged Plexiglas of the bus windows I could see that the sky's pale yellow had deepened to that of an old storybook, feathered with the ominous pewter of gathering clouds. A ferric tang in the air, electric, something *different* about the wind—something like a portent. A promise. The sunlight fleeting. The bus rattled on.

"So the princess," I pushed.

I looked at him; he shrugged.

"This was... I suppose... fifty years ago?"

I frowned; most fairy-tales I knew were never so specific—but fifty years I could live with. Fifty years was ancient, after all.

"So it was fifty years ago," he continued, "and there was a war. In this kingdom she lived in. The girl."

"The *princess*."

"Yes, whatever. There was a war and it begun with... fire. Yes, fire coming from the sky from the mouths of these dragons, and people died, and then

the dragons came closer and we tried to fight but we didn't succeed and one day the dragons were in our streets, and our beds, and they changed everything—from language to the birthplace of light—to the very hands of our clocks—”

“I don't understand.”

He pursed his lips.”

“Say it *slower*.”

“The dragons came, and they took everything.”

A rain that fell like fire; a fire that fell like rain. When he had awoken it was into chaos, scrambling. His mother had come to him with a face blackened from soot, had thrust his baby brother into his arms. Only one thought in his mind, then: don't drop him. For God's sake. His eyes followed them, steel beasts iron bellied. Blooming red discs on their wings, rays spreading outwards. Orange flowers from black earth, and the wailing of a babe in his seventeen-year-old ears. His mother's hand on his arm leaving behind fingerprints the colour of ash. Her name in his mouth; manna in the heat.

“Now the townspeople fought bravely against these dragons,” my grandfather said. “They fought bravely, and there were many that perished against the horde. You know the word *horde*, Emily, what it means—”

The first flakes of rain had started to fall: sharp shards smattering against the grimy glass. When I put hand against the window it was cold.

“Yes, I *know* what it means. You can continue.”

“Well, yes. So: they came, they saw, they conquered.”

“But this was the *princess's* kingdom, right?”

“Yes, yes, of course. But her kingdom was everyone's kingdom—I mean, by God, Emily, just concentrate on the *dragons*.”

I glared at him, but he seemed quite interested in his own story now, no longer sleepy, and continued with some gusto. The driver had switched the radio on but not the in-built light so that the old man's voice was overlaid over wistful, despairing Malay, and his face was overlain with shifting shadow and the brittle light coming in from the softening skies.

"But anyway, no matter whose kingdom it was before the dragons—all the inhabitants wanted the dragons out, for they soured their crops and stole their maidens, and killed their men. But the dragons were tough, with scales so hardy that it seemed that no blow could harm them, with teeth so sharp that they could furrow into anything that stood in their way—and more than that, Emily: they possessed a *determination* that made anything that stood against them seem futile—*determination*, Emily, is—"

Sensing him wafting into a lecture, I interrupted:

"And then?"

"Well, so they were... hard to beat." He finished, somewhat lamely. But he was put out only briefly; he continued again:

"But all dragons have a heart Emily; they tire, they have a core—they can be defeated. And this is a story about two kids—"

"One's a *princess*"

"One's a *princess*, yes—you monarchist-loving *rat*, you tsarist apologist—a *princess*, that decided they were going to try and beat some dragons."

After they had come they had taken his father; they had left hers alone, for her skin was bronzed when his was pale, her hair swept off her brow, leaving whorls of down at her temples as she stroked his head and he pledged vengeance against every one of them, against armies, against what lay east of them, against the very year that he had been born in so that now he had to live in a year such as this, when a life and all the empires that were contained in a single vessel of flesh could be snuffed out at the whim of men who had never before seen them, who could come into a land that was not theirs, through a jungle they did not understand, and decide with a single word that a life could be extinguished as if it was as light as a feather.

The storm was rattling in earnest when our bus spat us out. My grandfather shouted a thank-you to the bus driver as we got off.

For a while we sat at the rickety bus stop: corrugated tin roof, seats with the paint scratched off. Tic-and-toe games sharing breathing space with vulgarities. The rain bounced off the roof in fluid sheets, and everything was warbled, garbled. I stared out in the deep blue of the sky, in the quiet we were in—all trees and rocks—and for a moment I feel a strange sort happiness.

“We will wait for the rain to stop.” He announced.

“And then what happened, in the story?”

“Now there were many ways they attempted to fight the dragons: some of the ways were foolish—nothing more than childish whims, like throwing rocks at them from afar—but this story is about one such mission, in which the princess and some random boy—let’s call him, say, let’s call him...”

“Richard?” I volunteered.

“Richard, then. If you like. Now the princess and Richard had grown up together—”

“So he was her *page* then.”

My grandfather turned to look at me; his eyes had gone large, disbelieving.

“*Page*?”

“Errand-boy?” I volunteered, “Servant? Like Dmitri, in Anastasia? Daddy teach—”

“*Taught*—and dear *God* no wonder you’re like this, if you think Rasputin single-handedly caused communism—”

“Taught me this word—he has a big book, you know, of castles and stuff, but kind of boring and not a fairy-tale, history—”

“Of course he does—”

“And he taught me this word, P-A-G-E—”

“Your father should read a P-A-G-E of Marx—”

“And he said—”

“No he was not a page!”

I shut my mouth.

“Anyway—this princess, and *Richard-not-a-page*, they had been *friends* since childhood; had grown up together. And they were in love.”

“Was he going to marry into her kingdom?”

“For God’s sake, Emily.”

“Well was he or not?”

“No—*no* kingdom—you know what, the dragons, Em, have you forgotten them? The *dragons*. The princess—heaven knows I can’t say *that* word, let’s call her *Liz*—how about that?”

“No.”

“Alright, fine. You want to know how Richard fell in love with the princess?”

“Yes.”

A thin skewer of lightning turned everything white, robbed my grandfather of his wrinkles so that he looked young, invincible.

“Now this was before the dragons—and Richard and the... princess, they’d known each other since they were kids, lived on the same street. But when they fell in love it was because Richard was telling a joke—”

“So Richard was a court jester?”

“No. He was telling her a joke when they were walking back from school with some... knights, whom Richard was in awe of. He’d heard this joke from his father, and—” my grandfather’s voice caught, but it was only for a moment, “—and Richard wanted to impress the present company, the princess included, so he told this joke, but the catch: it wasn’t very funny, no one laughed, and Richard had gotten embarrassed, but then the best thing—”

He grinned—

“But she laughed then, the princess. Into that embarrassing silence. She started to laugh. The clearest, brightest laugh that you’d ever heard. Later, that evening, he’d gone over to her house to give the family some fruit and because he heard the princess’s voice from inside their house, he had stopped outside to listen before going in, and he had heard the princess tell



the mother of the joke, and you know what she said, Emily?”

“No.”

“She said: *well, the thing is, it was actually not funny at all.* And that was when he fell in love.”

The rain had started to ease up.

“Where is our picnic?” I asked my grandfather. I was getting hungry. I kicked a small pebble into a puddle and watched with some satisfaction as it plopped in right in the middle. A distant, long keel of wind lifted my hair off my shoulders.

He gestured down the path, riddled with pointing fingers drawn by a man who would have been an artist in a better life. The waterfall was 500 metres away.

“There are shops further down, once we enter. Before the waterfall. What do you want?”

“Bread.”

He nodded, “Give us until the rain stops. Then, I promise you, Emily, all the bread you want.”

We’d started our way down the path; the rain was barely a drizzle now, and my grandfather was continuing his tale. So far the princess and Richard had gotten together in a way that was entirely unromantic if you asked me (he asked her if he could hold her hand and she said yes), and he was back to the dragons, who they had decided to defeat one day by making a dragon of their own—kind of stupid, I thought, but I wasn’t allowed to say that word so I didn’t—except they couldn’t make the dragon on their own, somebody older had to (always) and so their job was to transport the materials which a dragon was made of (hate, gold-leaf, fish scales)—to somebody who could. This was essentially the story that my grandfather was telling me as we made our way to the entrance of the waterfall.

Midnight then, far past curfew. In another life they'd be home, sleeping. But this was the life they had, and this was the year they were alive, and so this had to be done. He met her in a grove of trees. They were twenty now. They should have been married, but on the lip of a continent in the home of the men who had colonised them, boys his age were preparing to be thrust into France. If they could do that, he could do this. He hadn't wanted her to come, but she wouldn't be dissuaded. Two was always best, so that if one failed—well. She took his hand into hers and in so doing, calmed him. The moon on her skin like the grace of leaf whittled down to a ghost. This was to be their most dangerous mission yet. He pledged then if they survived the night he would marry her, and in so doing he got on his knees in front of her, and he swore to love her in peace as he did in war: grandchildren and a house full of light. He drew her towards him and the package in crinkled paper between them pressed against their ribs. The individual parts nothing, but together an explosive. The ticking heart between their hearts.

My grandfather took off his jacket and put it around my shoulders. I was beginning to get tired, and was feeling cold already. At home my parents were frantic. We had turned into the path that led to the waterfall; rain clung to the trees, birds flew in the skies above us, bound for India, and I could see the torn-off wing of a butterfly swirling in a puddle. I stepped into it, watched the wing glint like a jewel. My grandfather was walking slowly, and he had started to wheeze. I realised he was old.

“Do you want to go home?” I asked.

The old man coughed, shook his head. “No—no we have to continue. It has to be today.”

I held on to his arm. We shuffled together down the darkening street.

We had turned into the entrance towards the waterfall. I began to worry—there was a road, to be sure, but it seemed slippery. I couldn't as yet see this waterfall, and darkness was falling fast. But there were lights—shops that ploughed on, stayed open in the hope of last minute sales. There were only a few people: young folk who had braved the storm but were required by safety regulations to stay underneath shelter, and all of them seemed to be walking

the opposite way of us.

“Closing soon lah, uncle!” A teenage boy shouted as he sauntered past. My grandfather ignored him.

“Hurry Emily,” he said to me.

“I’m hungry,” I said softly, rubbing my arm. That seemed to jostle him. He changed the direction of his shuffle to the shops to buy me some bread. The lady manning the booth looked at him pityingly.

“They’re closing soon,” she said as she bagged my bread: cold sausage and a muffin.

“I’m deaf.” My grandfather said. I peeled the plastic off my bread and begun to chew.

We walked up the path, the trees sparkling with the remnants of the storm. I was getting lightheaded with fatigue. But I could hear the babbling of the waterfall nearby, and I so I soldiered on.

“And so oft they set,” he continued, his voice pitched at a wheeze, “through the night they went, the princess and Richard. To meet the man who could help them craft a dragon; but on their way there they awoke the dragons themselves—and the great beasts gave chase, through the streets, past the trees—” it was dark enough that I could imagine it: the princess with her long hair streaming behind her like pennants; Richard in neither armour nor silk, but with sweat staining his tunic, his hand on her elbow, goldleaf glinting at their collarbones, their faces turned to twin suns from the dragon fire behind them, the scales they carried shimmering in the night as they went onwards, in flight—

A loud siren echoed once: they were closing up the waterfall. For safety’s sake: night was undeniable now; there was a moon clinging to the sky, as wispy and forgettable as a barley husk. I had grown up in a city—there had never been so many stars in front of me as they were tonight, and when we turned the corner and faced the waterfall, the water was sparkling with them: pearls in a shimmering net. My heart lifted, and I heard the old man laugh. Foam sparkled at the waterfall’s foot, crashing against rocks that looked like myth. Squirrel eyes like glittering beads stared out at me from the

undergrowth.

“We made it!” he triumphed, “we made it!”

The thundering of a waterfall. The air around it luminous. In the darkness, only darkness; but the rocks they knew were punctuated with caves. Shifting their packages to one arm, they clambered up the slippery slopes with their free limbs, until they reached one of the many caves that populated the rock.

A flurry of bats from within, whirlpooling out through the cave’s mouth; a thin spiel of light from the break in the roof of the cave, rippling around the stalactites, the teeth of them glimmering with water and light.

Sweat has matted her fringe of hair. They can hear distant shouting; the air sliced apart by the Japanese tongue. She reaches forward for his wrist, which she takes in her hand, pulls him deeper into the cave, which is small and damp, and together they huddle behind a fixture of rock. In the silence their breathing is a conversation. Everything smells of wet earth.

When they hear the voice of a soldier at the lip of the cave they both shut their eyes. Her fingernails dig into his skin, breaking the crest, he clenches his eyes in pain, there is a short second, a beam of light, her hair is on fire, the black turned to gold, sanctified, her eyelashes glinting, he opens his eyes, just a little, can see nothing but her and the ancient rock beyond, hears a shout in Japanese, the voice youthful—how much older is the soldier?—but then the beam of his torchlight snaps into nothingness. Her eyes open into the dark.

“When were the dragons defeated?” I sat timidly on a rock. For a while, my grandfather had his eyes closed, was merely listening to the waterfall instead of seeing it. But after a few breaths he opened his eyes again.

Unbeknownst to us, someone had seen us from the bottom of the slope that led up to the waterfall: one of the shopkeepers, who sold kites shaped like fish that lit up at the tails. Seeing an old man and a young girl, she hurried back to her contemporaries who were closing up their booths and tried to get help. But we stayed, my grandfather and I, by the waterfall—lulled in by its

soothing dribbling, by the flashes of silver we saw that signalled fish.

“It would take some time, but finally they would be—just not *only* by the princess and Richard. Didn’t you listen—to me, my little monarchist?” He reached forward to ruffle my hair and I was seized with love for him, hunched over as he was, his expression rapturous in the phosphorescent gleam of the waterfall. “It would take a kingdom to defeat them.”

Back in Singapore, the police were telling my parents that you had to wait twenty-four hours to report a missing person. At the foot of the slope a group of people who meant well had called the local police and were waiting for them to show up. They were coming up with torches, pinprick fireflies. I could close my eyes and imagine something wider than this—wider than an old man and the girl he had brought with him, whom he had stolen quite peaceably; instead I imagined myself lost in the woods, and if I clenched my fist just so around the circle of people coming towards us, I would be holding a fistful of light. I would throw it across the scales of the beast that wanted me to burn. Light would decimate light.

“But the two of them, did they survive?”

Half an hour has passed, or thereabouts, their legs are aching, their bodies cramped from squatting still behind the fixture of rock that has saved their lives. The grace of the soldier’s stupidity and negligence—his not bothering to venture further within the cave. On his wrist there are five bloody half-moons. *Is it safe?* It must be—I don’t want to wait any longer—*is it safe?* I’ll stand first—

But they both straighten up at the same time; there is blood on his wrist, there is something creaking in the hollow of his throat, his chest. No sound. Together, hand in hand for the want of comfort, to die without loneliness, they walk towards the lip of the cave. Passing beneath the spiel of light they are consecrated. Their footsteps are cautious, slow. No sound. Their hearts in their throat.

The well-meaning band were ascending and shouting towards us. My

grandfather winked at me.

“Let them come up and get us.”

“You’re deaf.” I smiled.

The police shouted at us to come down; the shopkeepers were more imaginative and shouted at us to raise our hands and drop our weapons.

“Oh yes Emily, they did. They had plenty of life left to live.”

One of the policemen swung his torch at my grandfather and bathed him in a pool of light. He closed his eyes and turned away from me. The policemen kept shouting, but we ignored them; for me it was easy—I didn’t understand the language.

“Thank you, Emily,” my grandfather said, quietly, “for coming with me.”

Of course the police caught up to us eventually, and they brought us down to the station, and my parents were contacted, and we were soon on a bus back across the border. My mother hugged me when she saw me until I felt my ribs would break, and my grandfather crept quietly to the bathroom to have a hot soak, and years later when dissecting his story I realised that it had been a bit of a mess, but I loved it all the same, because sometimes the story isn’t about the story at all. It’s about something wider, and deeper, and you love it for everything it is or isn’t.

My grandmother had been killed two years shy of her sixty-fifth birthday. When she and my grandfather had been young he had promised her that he would take her back to the waterfall with the grandchildren they would have on her sixty-fifth birthday, and they would celebrate the place where they had lived when they had expected to die. But she had been hit by a driver going a little too fast and she had died on a hospital bed instead. My grandfather hadn’t been able to hold her hand before she died; he’d been on a train on the way to her. My father never would have allowed him to bring me across the border alone, and both he and my mother had been working that whole day. And so grandfather had brought me to the waterfall himself, had kidnapped me for a few hours, and had closed his eyes, and had kept his promise. It was all that he could have done.



They make it, finally, to the open. There is nothing, no one, apart from a ferric tang in the open air that predicts a rainfall: a calamity of white noise, the glistening leaves of elephant plants, beetle wings swirling in puddles. Her face, in the moonlight, reminds him of a statue, but he has known her first as a human crouched upon the earth and ready to die. She turns back to him with a hard, blazing look on her face, and pulls him out of the cave.

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