

Sea Dragons

The first thing he noticed was my hair, I'm sure of it. Mother and I had curled it into loose spirals that fell to my shoulders and bounced when I walked or shook my head. I was sitting alone at a lunch table and staring down at my food to avoid the hundreds of teenage eyes studying me. He crept across the linoleum floor like an oil spill and positioned himself just in front of me. Slapping his palms down on the table, he dropped his name.

"Hi, I'm Icky. Just move here?"

I didn't ask him about his name. I finished chewing my sunflower seeds, then raised my head to answer.

"I'm Windsor, and yes."

I moved here from a small town where garden parties were more important than attending school and debutante balls were as necessary as church service. A town in Northeast Florida with trees as lavish as the people. We lived on oceanfront property that inflated as investors scoured the east coast for new areas to build high-rise condos. My parents sold the two-story memory of my childhood for more than it deserved and we migrated north.

Icky sat down across from me on a grey plastic chair.

"So, Windsor, what's your poison?"

I was a bit unnerved by his morbid shift in the conversation. I leaned forward, crushing my feathers beneath me, the quills bending where they met my skin at the base of my tailbone.

"What?"

He was indifferent to my ignorance. "You know, like, what do you like to drink?"

"Oh, well," I looked at the eight ounce carton sitting by my lunch bag. "I like orange juice I guess."

He laughed.

He put his elbows on the table top and rested his chin on his hands, his muck colored bangs fell across his eye and he blew them away by directing air through the corner of his mouth. He studied me with tadpole eyes, two unformed frogs swimming in bright blue bubbles.

“Windsor, where did you come from?” He smiled and I was assured that he was just teasing. The bell rang for the end of lunch.

“Hey, meet me out front after school.”

I must have looked at him like I thought he was going to throw a black bag over my head and shove me into a white van.

“It’s nothing bad, I promise. I just want to show you around Boston.”

My feathers stiffened at his forwardness and the barbs started tickling the back of my thighs. I gathered my trash, responding with my eyes focused on the empty Ziploc bags.

“Thank you for the invitation, but my mother wants me to come straight home after school.”

I had a perfectly legitimate excuse. Icky looked at me and the baby blue house dress I was wearing.

“I’ll take you to the aquarium,” he said, lowering his voice.

The words of my mother and the matron of my etiquette class floated into my head: *Refusing an invitation because you have “better” things to do is a surefire way to get dropped from all the guest lists.* I considered this and decided to take advantage of the opportunity.

“I guess I could tell her I’ll be back later.”

Victory marched across his face, “Wicked. I’ll meet you out front.” He got up and crossed the lunchroom with smooth confidence, joining his group of friends at the door.

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I managed to doodle my way through the rest of the day. When the last bell rang, I gathered my books and notebooks and found my way to the front doors of the school. Icky was waiting outside on the steps, standing with a mixture of younger girls in pig and pony tails and older boys in baggy pants. He saw me standing at a distance from them and made his excuses to the group as he came over to join me.

“I knew you’d show.”

I looked over his shoulder at the group he’d left and they were all staring at us. The girls put on scrunched up pouty faces while the boys exchanged one word commentary with each other. I asked,

“How far is the aquarium?”

“Twenty minutes if we take the T.”

I didn't ask what he meant by T, I just followed him down the rest of the stairs and out onto Fenwood. We walked in silence, him springing off the balls of his feet ever so slightly with each step, making his head bob up and down as he walked. I kept up, marveling at the trees that grew out of tiny squares of dirt in the middle of the sidewalk.

"The station's down here." Icky stopped at the mouth of a descending staircase and handed me a dirty golden token. "Here's a T coin" he said and I watched him drop it into a slot in the turnstile.

I repeated his movements and followed him down more flights of stairs and out onto a platform. There were people waiting across from us on a separate bank and two sets of tracks, littered with fast food wrappers and napkins and Styrofoam cups. We sat down on a bench near the wall and Icky turned to me.

"There's a bunch of seals right out front, and there's this big thing of penguins once you get inside, and there's this huge tank in the middle with like five sharks in it," his face glowed as he described his favorite exhibits.

"Wow," I smoothed out my dress and my quills jabbed into my bottom, "I went to Sea World once, but my parents thought it smelled bad so we didn't stay very long."

"Cool," he said and looked off down the tunnel.

We were in the depths of the earth, hundreds of feet below the street, and the muted light threw strange shadows across Icky's profile. I noticed that he had dark moles on his cheek and a few along his hairline. They weren't the gross hairy ones that stick out like giant pimples; they were nearly flat and perfectly round. I tried to play connect-the-dots with them, forming first the Star of David and then some sort of animal. Then a roar came from the tunnel he was watching so vigilantly. Everyone around us got up and hurried towards a yellow line near the edge of the platform. Icky got up too and I followed. We boarded the train and there were no seats, so I stood next to Icky and held onto the silver bar.

"We're getting off at Government Center, its right after Park Street." he said.

"We have a Park Street where I'm from," I said, rather excited to hear a familiarity.

"Then we have to get on the Blue Line." He was watching the grimy walls of the tunnel fly by through the glass.

We didn't say much for the rest of the ride. When our stop came and we disembarked and climbed up the stairs back into the open air, I realized just how cramped I had felt underground and I could feel the soot clinging to my plumes. We walked for a couple blocks and then I smelled it, something that was so recognizable to me. It reminded me of my old house, the fragrance of the marshy breeze that greeted me every morning when I came down the stairs. As we walked, I felt the ocean coming closer. Then I saw it through a gap in the buildings, glittering in patches of sunshine that broke through the clouds.

“There’re the seals,” Icky pointed up ahead to a large glass tank where brown torpedoes were darting about under water.

We walked up to the glass and watched them. Some of the seals were doing underwater acrobatics, twisting and tumbling for their spectators. Others were bobbing at the surface, dozing with understandable indifference. We watched them for a while, then Icky pulled at my arm.

“We should go see the other stuff.”

I nodded. His tone had an urgent ring to it and I wondered what he wanted to show me. We entered the main building, paid our admission, and headed for the penguin enclosure at the very front. Most of the birds were perched atop giant rock formations in the water and they were paired off, quiet couples snuggled against each other, playfully kissing their lovers with their beaks. Their mannerisms were so human that I felt a sort of connection to them. I glanced over at Icky, but he didn’t look like a penguin.

“Wait for it,” Icky said pointing at a penguin that had stood up and was flapping his wings. Then the bird defecated all over the rock.

He smiled at me, “They’re always shitting.”

“Gross,” I covered my mouth and turned away.

We walked down a hallway lined with tanks built into the walls. I had never seen so many terrifying fish. All the tanks were dark and menacing faces would suddenly appear in the dim light and I’d jump back and Icky would laugh.

The hallway continued on and we came up to a tank that bowed out into the room. Bright, wild colors danced around inside it; deep red, fiery yellow, luminous green. “Sea dragons,” read the plaque on the wall. I peered through the thick glass and saw only colored seaweed and kelp fronds. Then the seaweed twitched. It bent forwards and moved on its own towards the glass and I saw it had eyes, tiny conical ones that were striped and nearly blended into the brilliant colors. It had an elongated snout, rounded torso, and curling tail. Each of the leafy branches sticking out from the creature’s body were the devices that gently propelled him around the tank. He was an indescribable wonder disguised as marine plant life, a stranger trying to blend in with the rocks and coral. I couldn’t take my eyes off of his deception.

Icky tapped loudly on the glass, “Pretty wicked, huh?”

I’d forgotten he was there.

“They’re amazing . . . so beautiful.” I said.

It happened so unexpectedly, I wasn’t even aware of the change in sensation coming from beneath my dress. The tingles of awareness ran down my neck, through my shoulders, the length of my spine, and into the nerve bundle at the base of my tail bone. Before I could rush to the bathroom I felt the back of my dress rising, lifted by the eager feathers beneath it.

With my muscles unable to control the reaction, my plumage burst out from under its cloth covering and snapped to attention, each quill erect and quivering.

I saw the brilliant white reflecting against the glass, distorted by the curvature of the tank; the snowy eyes staring back at me from every direction; the shafts supporting the feathers were rigid and imposing, extending three feet from my body on all sides. I was framed by a hundred or so shooting stars all escaping from the base of my spine and leaving a trail of fine white dust.

Oh God, I thought. My dress was hiked up in the back, exposing everything.

I saw Icky's eyes blink once, then again. I thought he would run, I thought he would say something nasty, point me out to everyone, and then security would take me away. But he just stared, the hair on his arm standing on end. Then he reached out and touched one of my feathers with the tip of his finger, ever so delicately, and I pulled away.

"Damn, Windsor. Now I see why you are so beautiful," he said.

It was a cheap line, I knew that. But I was so relieved that Icky didn't see me as an albino monster, that he was able to look past my abnormality, that he'd discovered all that was a part of me and found it beautiful.

"You mean it?" I asked.

He nodded as he took my hand and held it in his dry palm. The distinctive smirk perpetually on his lips had faded into a quiet smile.

My senses began to relax again and the feathers behind me sank down and down until I felt them brush the backs of my legs. I pulled my dress back over them, Icky watching the whole thing like a child who'd just discovered where his mother hid all the Christmas presents.

We walked around the rest of the aquarium, and when it was time to go, we rode the T back to Fenwood. Icky saw me to the door of my townhouse and released my hand as I climbed the front steps. He said goodnight and dug his hands into his jean pockets as he turned to head home. Later that night, I lay in my bed in a stuffy room on the third floor of our brownstone and stroked the feathers splayed out on the bed around me. Icky had touched them.

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"My real name is Icarus," Icky was explaining the next day as we were standing in front of the school before class began, "My parents are into Greek mythology and all that crap. So I decided to piss them off and shorten it to Icky," he grinned at his own ingenuity and the girls around him giggled like they were hyenas. I smiled, standing at the edge of the circle, watching Icky perform. He had adopted me into his group of friends and they'd seemed obliging enough to accept me. The girls were always trying to out-compete each other for Icky's attention and the boys were focused on undoing bras with one hand through the girl's shirts. I stuck to myself. Sometimes Icky would single me out and direct his questions at me.

“Hey Winnie, wanna come to a party this weekend?”

“When?” I saw the girls crouch into attack mode.

“Friday at 9, Vince’s house, I’ll give you directions.” He pulled out a sheet of paper from his friend’s backpack and scribbled some street names and a number. He handed me the slip and met my eyes.

“Are you gunna be there?”

“Definitely,” I said, and then he went back to telling a story.

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I wanted the days to pass as quickly as I could tear their pages off of the calendar. Friday was where I wanted to be, but I had to get through Wednesday and Thursday. Icky would talk to me at school, but there were always other people around. He had personally invited me to Friday night’s party. I remembered my mother had told me once: *personal invitations admit only the guests to whom they are addressed*. This somehow reassured me that I was privileged. When Friday finally came, I laid out my pink evening dress on my bed and practically ran the ten blocks to school.

Icky didn’t speak to me until the end of the day when everyone was filing out of the building.

“I’ll see you tonight,” he winked and slung his back pack over his shoulder, walking next to his friends as they headed home.

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I groomed myself for hours, adjusting and readjusting, my mother curling my hair and doing my makeup simultaneously. She took pictures in the foyer of our townhouse and my father kissed me on the cheek and told me he’d pick me up at midnight.

My mother dropped me off in front of Vince’s house a little after nine and we saw cars lining both sides of the street. I got out of her Mercedes and waved as she rolled down her window and kissed me on the cheek saying: *Honey, don’t forget to thank your host before you leave*.

My dress kept hiking up as I got closer to the scene and I had to hold it down while I rang the doorbell. When Icky opened the door, I let out my breath.

“Come on in,” he said, a plastic Solo cup in his hand.

I stepped through the door, meeting his wide, glassy eyes and feeling the heat that emanated from his body. He sipped anxiously at the liquid in his cup and led me through the house. I was surprised to see that the place was quite empty.

“Everyone’s out back,” he led me through the kitchen and out into a small yard fenced in with huge wooden planks. They were all sitting in a circle in

plastic lawn chairs under the second story deck. A few seniors were out in the grass smoking, friends of Vince's I assumed.

"You want some orange juice?" Icky offered, laughing.

"Sure" I laughed with him. He disappeared through the back door.

I started talking with Vince, who I'd found standing near one of the thick wooden posts supporting the upper deck.

"Is this your parent's place? It's pretty big."

"Yeah, but my parents are in New York for the weekend," he started to tip over but caught himself, "I didn't wanna walk around a bunch of fuckin' museums."

Icky reappeared beside me and handed me a plastic cup full of orange juice. I took a sip and nearly choked.

"What kind of orange juice is this?"

He started laughing again and then Vince looked at Icky and started laughing too.

"Chill, Windsor. I just put some vodka in it," Icky said.

"Jeez, it's so strong," I took another sip and forced the burning citrus liquid down my throat.

"Hey, I'll be right back," he waved at me and walked over to the circle of boys and girls. He started talking to them in a soft voice that I couldn't overhear. I looked over at Vince and he was staring out across the yard. Every couple of seconds he'd throw his hand out for support against the post, as if the earth was unexpectedly shifting beneath him. I stepped clear of the overhang and looked up at the sky. I couldn't see any stars. While I had my head up towards the sky, I felt a quick sting, right on my rump, and whirled around to see Icky, dashing to the circle of chairs holding one of my feathers above his head triumphantly. I twisted around to examine the spot where he'd plucked the quill, finding a little red drop of blood seeping through my dress. I rubbed it with my finger and felt the tender skin cringe under my touch.

"Look at this! I told you!" Icky shouted from the circle, displaying the feather in front of their faces; it was intensely colorless under the porch light, "I told you she was a peacock!"

Icky ran around wildly, dangling the feather just out of reach as his friends tried to snatch it from his hands.

"You can't touch it! You can't touch it!"

• They all degenerated into a band of greedy thieves, chasing Icky around the back yard. He possessed a prized jewel and they wanted to look at it, to feel it in their hands, claim it for themselves. Then some of the bandits got wise. They turned upon me like I was a case of diamonds, first asking if they could see them and then demanding I give them a feather too.

"You can't see them," I tried to be firm, to stand taller than them, intimidate them, but they pressed on me, backing me up against the side of the house.

“Give us a feather!” They all chanted, their greedy fingers reaching for my dress.

Vince was at the front of the group, his hand was already close enough to touch me. I bolted. I felt the sharp sting again and knew Vince had seized a feather as I’d pulled away, but I didn’t look back or think about the throbbing empty space. I found the back gate against the fence in the yard, flung it open and slammed the door behind me. I ran up the street, not knowing where I was going, not knowing how late it was. I put six blocks between me and the others, veering into a convenience store to call my parents and wait for my father to come pick me up.

I pushed open the tinkling door of the store and went straight to the counter where a tired middle-aged man was reading a comic book.

“Can I use your—”

I stopped. In a metal rack on top of the counter there was a brochure for the aquarium. A bright blue fish swam across its cover.

“How far is the aquarium from here?” I asked the man behind the counter.

“Bout five blocks.” He said, flipping the page of the comic, not even looking up.

“What street?”

“This one,” he dismissed me by burying his face in the book.

I snatched a brochure from the rack and went out onto the street again. The man hadn’t told me which direction, so I let the salty air lead me to the water.

My steps were hurried and anxious, bringing me to the wharf quicker than I’d expected. Everything was dark, except for the street lights, and the aquarium was closed. I knew it would be closed. It was quiet and I could hear the waves gently rocking against the sea walls. I walked up to the entry doors and put my face against the glass, cupping my hands around my eyes to see inside. The lobby was dimly lit by security lights along the ceiling. I noticed something affixed to the wall behind the information desk, a palette of reds that shimmered in the muted light. My eyes focused on the poster and my feathers trembled in recognition. A weakness swept through my body and my heart sank like an anchor. There was the stranger with his rippling fins, the charlatan of the ocean: my bright red sea dragon.