

CHAPTER ONE

The kitchen was dark, decorated with cherries and red plaid. All the wood, the floors, chairs, cabinets, were all light oak finish. The windows had white valances with lace along the edges. Even the kitchen chair seats were decorated in deep red pleather. It was an '80s family kitchen, with a stool in the corner for the naughty child, and clumps of fur from the family golden retriever. The tablecloth had red checks with blue ribbon detailing.

This is where we came together to eat for every meal, us kids. It was where we hatched our plans. It was the center of our command, where we would plan to fight dragons and save princesses in the little wooden cathedral playset at the park. We'd go there, to the park, to escape parents, duties and trouble, to hide from the yellings, sometimes worse. It was our refuge from dad and his rages, Brenda and her melodramas. Both of them when drugged up.

Brenda didn't know this, but my Dad knew her thoughts. All of them. He could read her mind, her mood, her meanderings. He could bring her back on track or let her feel stupid. More than that, he could make her feel the deepest shame possible, with the flicker of his mood. But he was not in the mood for games tonight. He wanted results, and fast. He also wanted some power.

He planned to make dinner for the family, and intended to show that his slattern of a wife could collapse but he was a Man, and *would* provide. So he murmured a few tricks and turns to get her mentally back on the same page, playing the game, after all.

"Brenda, hon, I know you're tired from a long day." Crashed from the speed and wine she'd had earlier while partying with her friends after work was more like it. "Why don't you rest? I'll whip something up."

He could hear her arguments starting before she ever opened her lips, bubbling up in her mind – You're tired too (that was nice, he thought); We'll just order out (this was her trying to save her ass, trying to keep some kind of power balance, and he was not amused); This is a trick (here we go, he thought, that's the one she'd say out loud, in some version or another).

Sure enough, she started in on him, passing on anything kinder to say. "You were supposed to give me money for the grocery store," she said in a strained voice. Good, he thought, she already knew she was going to lose this one.

"When would you have gone? While you were at Cindy's living it up?" he demanded, laying tinder for the gaslighting he had planned.

"On my way home!" Her voice raised stubbornly.

“Then we would have had dinner at 8, and you know that’s too late! I have to be in bed by then. The kids have to be in bed by then. And I tried to give you the money but you wanted nothing to do with me this morning and wouldn’t take it.” So there, he thought, it’s your fault. He took delight in her re-imagining the morning (he chuckled to himself – he never tried to give her money but how was she to know?)

He heard her thoughts, relenting. Questioning herself. Thinking about how she’d have failed. Trigger shame. Job done. He had one more parting shot, “maybe you should go easy on the beer tonight.” There. One more insecurity poked in the name of Caring, and she slunk off. He began opening cupboards, looking for what he could pull together, and opened himself a nice cold beer and lit up his weed pipe.

Dinner! The three children came running in. It was a little sad, the ketchup-basted meatloaf sagging in its bread loaf pan, just a little too black on the edges, canned corn and peas on the side, with some day-old bread to round it out. They started passing plates around with a clatter, the steam rising and their growing child’s hunger never quite fulfilled, not in this house, left to waft in angry pangs at night once the steam was long gone from their memories.

Everyone forked a bite and began to eat, in their spots around the circular table.

CHAPTER TWO

There were dragons in the park. Small ones, that only we could see. They were as small as Tinkerbell, but as fierce as wasps. The other children in the neighborhood could see them as well, but the adults no longer believed and so couldn’t see them.

We would bring the fairies candy from the corner grocery store, so that they would tell us sweet secrets.

“If you eat enough of the woodberries in the forest,” they’d ply us, “you become invisible to the dragons.” It also helped fill us up between sparse meals, but we didn’t tell the fairies that.

My brother Terry would catch the dragons in a Mason jar, then hold the lid or a plate over the end and shake it up and point it at me and Greg. Somehow the dragons knew, and Terry ended up the most burnt, but Greg was a slow runner and occasionally would get caught by one, which would latch on with its tiny talons and burn the fuck out of whatever it could breathe flames onto. Greg would have welts the size of quarters that would never heal properly. Terry had dozens of these burns, but no one really cared – he brought it onto himself.

The sun was shining fiercely through the window, the day already warm even at this early hour. Much to Brenda's delight, we were washing windows and vacuuming floors for candy cash. Hours later, when we'd finished cleaning the entire house down to the bathroom floors, we each received our \$2. We skipped all the way to the corner market, arguing over what candy to buy. Different types of candy appealed to different fairies, who each told different sweet secrets. Aside from Elmina, all the fairies had good advice to give, and strategy mattered.

"Not Boston Beans," I groaned. "They are disgusting. No one likes them."

"That's not true!" Greg argued. "Hadina and Elmina both like them!"

"Don't buy anything for Elmina," Terry shouted sourly from way behind us. "She bit me yesterday."

"You deserved it!" I interjected savagely, even though I actually agreed with him. Terry never listened to me, didn't mind my advice even though I was 18 months older than him.

We arrived at the store and made our purchases, buying tiny boxes of red hots and lemonheads and, yes, boston beans, this time.

CHAPTER THREE

One day, we needed candy for the fairies but Dad and Brenda were "blotto." That's what they would call themselves when they needed naps to rest or to leave on a "quick errand." Blotto = unavailable.

So we would be sent to the backyard, and that's when Terry first thought to catch the tiny dragons in the Mason jars. He was just starting up his antics again when a familiar neighborhood noise caught our attention.

"Hey, it's the truck that plays music!" I cried one afternoon as the tinkling weaved up our street. We were in the fenced-in backyard, the dining room slider firmly locking us out there.

Terry looked at me with scorn on his face. "It's the ice cream truck," he said snottily.

"Oh yeah? Go get some ice cream then!" I dared him. He clambered over the fence but came back empty-handed, just like I knew he would.

“They want money.” We three shuffled our feet then, me, Greg and Terry. It was such a hot day out. Ice cream sounded dang nice. “I’ll get us ice cream! I know how to get in!” Terry finally declared and clambered back over the fence before I could react.

At least 30 minutes must have gone by while Greg and I sweated out both the sundry summer day and the stress of whatever Terry was up to. The not knowing drove us nuts.

Finally he came crawling back over the fence, shirt off and tucked into the elastic waist of his shorts, three popsicles in hand. FireRockets. We had never had such a thing, and let me tell you, the having was sweet.

Later that night, the three of us were lined up like the popsicle sticks and wrappers we’d buried underground in the yard to hide. But it was our hide in danger now. Dad had out his belt, because Someone stole money from Brenda’s wallet and no one would ‘fess up.

That night he whipped the boys 8 times each on their bare behinds while I was forced to watch, for “my part in things.” Then we were sent to bed without supper.

I was appalled. My mother never whipped me, and I had never stood in such a line-up before. I nearly wet my own pants, and here I was at 9 years old. Greg was only 5, a baby.

Greg and I cuddled in bed while I whispered Dr. Suess to him by heart in the night. I had to get out of here.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sometimes we’d go out to Brenda’s sister’s house to play with Terry and Greg’s cousins, Jeb and Perry. They had a mean dog usually chained to the fence. There were a few dead cars in tall grass that we would hide in when we played hide-and-go-seek, but we usually stayed away from the dog and the cars.

On this pleasant Saturday, though, we were locked outside and set to our own devices, told not to return until lunchtime, when they would whistle for us.

Bored, Terry caught some dragons in a jar, shook it, and let them out. He got burnt three times, and Jeb once, but no one went inside to tattle. We played tag. We played hide-and-go-seek. We played everything we could think of with no toys or outdoor play equipment. Finally, Terry picked up a loose bit of dog chain and started swirling it around mindlessly. “Terry, stop!” I hollered. “That’s dangerous!”

Terry didn't care. He came closer to me, still spinning the chain around and around until it had worked up its own momentum.

I tried to grab it once, twice, three times, and then got clocked right in the forehead with the chain. I passed out for some amount of time, because when I came to, I was alone and the boys were all inside.

Brenda came marching out to me in a huff, grabbing my arm and wrenching me to standing. I started sobbing.

"Oh be quiet, you're only crying because of the blood," she snapped.

"There's blood??" I cried, wailing hard now, having noticed quite a lot of blood all over my shirt and hands.

"Look, don't tell your mom. Just lie down on the couch and I'll give you some ice." She gave me a wet paper towel to swab up my own blood, and then handed me an ice pack. Her sister was laying a sheet on the couch to protect it from all the blood, I guessed. I lay down, and once my head hit the pillow, I was in and out of consciousness all afternoon.

"Aren't you going to punish Terry?" I bleated plaintively at one point.

"No," said Brenda. "It's your own fault for trying to stop him."

I still have a divot in my forehead from that event.