

DRAGO WOODS

Everyone in the village called them Drago woods, they had been called that forever, since long before Money Mad Morgan got his hands on them. They all knew that originally the woods had been part of the great forest that had covered the land from Nottingham in the south to Knaresborough in the north. Some even believed it was the true home of the legendary Robin himself, and John, was one of those believers.

Not that we ever found a single arrowhead or name carved in a tree in all the zillions of hours we spent there in perpetual battle against the evil sheriff. But John believed in his hero, and his hero wasn't stupid enough to set up camp within easy reach of Nottingham. No, he would build a camp up north, deep in the forest, just about where our woods were now. What did I believe? I believed in whatever my big brother John did.

But that was back then, back before the stupid accident that took dad and John away from us. To say that Mum and I were devastated didn't even come close to what we felt. Half of our gang was gone, that's what we called ourselves, corny I know but that was how close we were as a family. The first weeks were the worst, mum couldn't stop crying and if she did, some friend, relative or neighbour would call and start her off again. Me, I cried and cried until my eyes were raw and when my tears ran out, sat in a corner trying to blot out the why's and how's. But there were no answers and the questions pounded in my head until I was physically sick.

There was an inquest that posed more questions without answers. The road was straight and clear, the weather fine, the car mechanically sound. Dad didn't have a heart attack nor did they find evidence that he had any other medical condition. Yet they ploughed head on into the tree with no skid marks or signs of braking on the road they left. The coroner even touched on and dismissed out of hand the suggestion that the act could have been deliberate. I think that and the verdict of death by misadventure was what caused the change in mum.

She stopped crying which was good, but what wasn't so good was the way that she seemed normal, but wasn't. She'd scrub, polish and vacuum all day and then at night, I would lie awake and listen to her muffled sobbing in the room next to mine. Oh, I cried too, but softly now, I missed my dad and oh, how I missed my friend, my buddy, my big brilliant brother John.

Mum was forgetful too, or was it a touch of denial, she'd call up the stairs, 'Will! Breakfast will be ready in fifteen minutes,' and if I failed to answer, she call until I did. Then when I came down and sat at the table, she'd pour porridge into four bowls and with a puzzled frown bring two to the table.

It was the same every time we ate, there was too much food, too many plates and four place setting instead of two. That plus the obsessive cleaning and the unfinished sentences – 'Is John...' or 'your dad...' – was I hoped, only a temporary thing. Because if it wasn't I didn't know what I would do, I'd lost my dad, my brother and I was scared that I might lose my mum too.

The funeral service was held in the small village church and after the readings we walked behind the coffins to the double plot. Dad and John were being buried side by side and I was glad, for I knew that neither of them would have like it down there alone.

If I had thought the preceding days had been the worst I was wrong, that day was horrid, I know it was for me and I could see it was for mum. But once it was over things felt different, oh, the pain hadn't gone and it still hurt to think of them down there in the dark. I believe it was seeing the coffins lying side by side that wrought the change. Up until that point, I think we had deep inside believed we were trapped in a horrible nightmare that would end with the sunrise. But there was to be no sunrise and we had finally accepted that the nightmare was real.

That acceptance didn't seem on the face of it to help, but two things that happened a Month later did. The first occurred Tuesday morning, mum woke me early and I came down to find a bowl of porridge and a very agitated mum on the phone. I was amazed I hadn't seen her so animated since before the accident. I listened in; I couldn't do any other as she was only sitting at the other end of the table. Of course I only heard one side of the conversation, but what heard sounded pretty mysterious. – 'When did this happen?' – 'Oh!' – 'That's typical of those city types!' – 'He's going to do what with it?' – 'Surely he can't get away with it?' – 'The money grubber!' – 'He can't be allowed to get away with it!' – 'Meeting? What meeting?' – 'Count me in, I'll be there!'

I looked up as she replaced the phone, her eyes were bright and her cheeks flushed. I was about to ask her what was going on, but she jumped up and ran into the hall.

'Mum!' I shouted after her, 'Where are you going? What's going on?'

'Sorry Will,' she called back, 'I've got to go! There's a meeting in half an hour! I'll explain when I get back! And with that the front door slammed and she was gone.'

I was stunned at the change in her and burning with a curiosity that I knew wouldn't be satisfied until she returned. The porridge was cold and congealed in the bottom of the bowl, I sighed, put my coat on and went out into the back garden. The sky was cloudless and for the first time since the accident the woods looked tempting.

I hesitated then stepped through the garden gate and into the trees. It was strange to walk in silence listening for the first time to the sounds of the woods, the birds singing, the chatter of a pair of squirrels or even just the drowsy drone of a lone bee. When I came here with John it was different, we made that much noise that we wouldn't have heard the wild life, even if they'd stayed around. I followed the path until I came to the edge of the lake and sat down on a rock. It wasn't a lake really, more a large shallow pond with no fish. We'd seen dragonflies, water beetles, snails and frogs, but no fish, not even a stickleback.

Anyway, that was when a strange thing happened, I met the dragon, or I should say that was when he spoke to me.

'I know you're feeling sad, Will, but you'll feel better if you smile.'

‘You don’t know what you’re talking about, you don’t know how I feel’ I said without raising my head.

‘I know a lot more than you know, I know,’

That sounded so silly that I found myself saying, ‘Alright clever pants, I would like to know, how you know, a lot more than I know, you know.’

After I had said it, I ran it quickly through my head, that’s right, I think?

‘I know, because I can read your mind.’

That was so preposterous, that I smiled.

‘See you can smile! Doesn’t it make things feel better?’

I looked up about to say no, but stopped as I saw him, he was lying on a rock not six feet away basking in the sunlight. Oh God! I thought, I must be going mad; I’ve been talking to a lizard.

‘I beg your pardon? Dragon if you don’t mind. Look at me, Will. Now I ask you? Do I look like a lizard?’

‘How do you do that?’

‘What?’

‘Talk without moving your lips.’

‘That’s for me to know, and you to find out, never mind that, answer the question. Do I look like a lizard?’

‘No I don’t suppose you do.’ I said, and he didn’t, now that I took the time to study him closely. His long rough body was brown with black blotches, the brown a little lighter at the top beneath the great jagged crest along his back. He stood and stretched before settling back down, and I caught a glimpse of a black-blotched, orange belly and a silver flash running down his tail.

‘Satisfied?’ he asked.

‘You’re telepathic aren’t you?’ I cried suddenly realising his voice was in my head.

‘Yes, if that means that I can talk to, you inside your head.’

‘I thought dragons were huge?’

‘So they are, if people believe in them.’

‘But you’re only...’

‘Yes I know,’ he said, butting in. ‘How many people do you know that believe in dragons?’

‘Well...’

‘There’s your answer then.’

That stumped me, I didn’t know what to ask next and by the time I had sorted it out in my mind he was gone. One minute he was there, the next he had vanished.

I got back to the cottage at the same time, as mum and I couldn’t wait to tell her about the dragon. ‘I met a dragon today!’

Oh, that was nice,’ she said, her head in the fridge. ‘Cold beef and tomato sandwiches OK?’

‘Yes please,’ I said and realised that I felt hungry for the first time in days, ‘Anyway, I met him by the lake and we had a good chat.’

‘Good, I’m pleased you’ve found someone to talk to, coke or lemonade?’

‘Coke please.’

‘Where did you say you met this new friend?’ she asked, putting a plate of sandwiches and a glass of coke on the table and turning to get her own.

‘By the lake... in the woods,’ I said in-between mouthfuls of beef and tomato.

‘Funny, that’s what the meeting was about.’

‘The lake?’

‘No, well yes, it was about the woods. Mr Morgan wants to build houses where the woods are now.’

‘Farmer Morgan, he can’t do that can he?’

‘Not if I’ve got anything to do with it, he can’t. Anyway he’s not a farmer he’s an accountant, he’s got a manager running the farm.’

As we ate mum told all about the meeting, what went on and who said what and I couldn’t help smiling, she was so determined. I suppose I should have been more worried, but mum had the bit between her teeth and I was glad, it took her mind off things. Besides with mum on their side the villagers would make short work of this Morgan fellow.

By now it was the beginning of the school holidays and I went into the woods everyday to talk to Norbert. I know, it’s a strange name for a dragon, but then Norbert’s a strange kind of dragon. He is the clans’ historian, as was his father, his fathers’ father and all his ancestors before that, way back in time. According to

Norbert in the beginning dragons ruled the world. Then man appeared, a puny race of little men, who cowered in their caves afraid of their own shadows and dragons ruled over them. Dragons were large and powerful back then, with names like Lightning, Thunderbolt, Midnight and Balefire and they reigned supreme, until the day of fire.

It began as any other day the sky orange as the sun began to rise. But it wasn't the sun, it was fire and it blasted across the sky from end to end and when it was gone so were most of the dragons. The few that survived retreated into the mountains to lick their wounds and the puny men emerged from their caves to become strong and rule the lands.

Years went by and man began to hunt the dragons, pushing them deeper into the mountains, until finally the dragons burst out of the mountains and the Great War began. For two hundred years man and dragon fought until they could fight no more.

Then when they were weakened the invaders came from across the sea to the north and dragon and man joined forces to drive them back. They fought long and hard, all the while forming bonds of friendship that would last long after the day when the invaders were finally driven back beyond the sea. So began a period of peace that lasted a thousand years and dragons were big and strong because man lived with and believed in them.

But good times have a habit of ending and so it was with this. As man became more powerful he began to lose his belief in magic, the dragons became weak and man once more began to hunt them down. Those that survived hid them selves away deep in the forests and man eventually forgot that they ever really existed.

All this and much more I learnt from Norbert in our daily sessions by the lake, as he basked on his favourite rock. Each day when I got home I would tell mum what Norbert said. But she was so involve with her meetings that she didn't take it in and I was as bad. I was so wrapped up in my new friend that I ignored what she was telling me. Until one day I came home and found mum slumped in a chair.

'You all right, mum?' I asked, thinking she might be ill.

'Yes, Will,' she said wearily, 'It's just that Money Mad Morgan seems to be winning the fight to build his dammed houses.'

'But he can't, what about the dragons?'

'Oh, Will, dragons, don't really exist.'

'Yes they do, I talk with Norbert everyday.'

'Listen, I'm pleased you've got an imaginary friend, someone you can talk things out with. But it doesn't really help, I can't see Morgan stopping his building work for an imaginary dragon.'

'But Norbert is...'

‘Sorry, Will, I haven’t got time for this, we’ve got one last meeting tonight and if we don’t come up with something to stop him. Morgan will receive his final planning approval on Monday.’

I tried again but mum wasn’t having any of it. I’d show her; tomorrow I’ll take Dad’s camera to the woods and get a picture of Norbert, she couldn’t say he didn’t exist if I had a photo.

The meeting was in the church hall at five o’clock and we got there early to get a good seat. Mum insisted that I go with her, saying that they needed as much support as they could get. Not that I needed much persuading, since this was the last chance to stop Money Mad Morgan stripping the woods.

We got seats in the front row facing the three empty chairs on the stage and waited as the hall filled up, it didn’t take long the hall like the village was only small.

A few minutes before five, Councillor Armthwaite, Mr Morgan, and Mr Pemberton the planning officer, walked onto the stage and sat down. Councillor Armthwaite called the hall to order and began, ‘Ladies and gentlemen this meeting has been called to give you as occupants of the village of Smeaton the chance to question Mr Morgan, and Mr Pemberton, re; the development of twelve dwellings on the land at present known as Drago Woods. But before we begin, I would like say that I along with other members of the district council, welcome any development that will bring new people into the local villages that have been declining as the younger generation move closer to the towns.’

This was greeted with boos and catcalls, everyone knew the younger people were leaving due to the lack of affordable housing in the villages. But this wasn’t about housing it was about losing our small wood. Red faced the councillor, waited until the furore ended then handed the floor to Morgan, who with his long neck, hunched shoulders, and black suit reminded me of a vulture. The vulture smiled and in a surprisingly deep voice said, ‘before we get down to business. I would just like to say that while Mr Pemberton and I am willing to listen to what you have to say and are prepared to answer any query you raise to the best of our abilities. Make no mistake, since this is the last meeting, unless you can come up with a real objection to the proposal I expect that by this time on Monday the final planning will be granted.’

He had hardly finished talking when mum was on her feet. ‘Mr Morgan can you tell me why the housing needs to go on that particular piece of land?’

‘That’s easy to answer. Because all the rest of the land is prime farmland and the woods are over grown and under used,’ He replied, sure of himself.

‘But it’s a leisure facility for the village and a haven for the local wildlife.’

‘May I remind you Mrs Simpson, It is Mrs Simpson isn’t?’

‘You know fine well it is Martin Morgan, I was born and bred here the same as you.’

‘So you were. In that case you won’t need reminding that woods belong to me and the villagers have no right to it’s use. As to the wild life, a couple of crows, a few pigeons and a squirrel are not sufficient reason to prevent me going ahead with the development.’

‘The woods are teeming with all kinds of wildlife and you know it.’

‘May be so, but I’ve had it checked out and there are no protected species in there, so there is nothing you can say that will make a half penny worth of difference.’

‘Mr Pemberton, as a planning officer surely you have a duty to protect the environment.’

Yes, Mrs Simpson I do, but I must do so within the general guidelines that the district council has laid out for the whole of the area.’

‘You’re on his side.’

‘No, Mrs Simpson I am not. Mr Morgan’s application is valid and comes within the guidelines.’

‘But what about the wildlife?’

‘As Mr Morgan has pointed out there are no protected species within the woods, so the planning office has no choice, but to recommend that the application be passed.’

That was it, mum was beaten, I could see it in her eyes. The meeting went on for another half an hour, while others put their questions, but they were just going over the same ground and it didn’t change a thing.

‘Mum?’ I asked as we were walking home. ‘Are dragons a protected species?’

She smiled, ‘Oh, Will dragons aren’t real.’

‘But if they were, would they be protected?’

‘I supposed if dragons were real they would be so rare that they would be the most protected animals in the world,’ she said, ruffling my hair. ‘Wouldn’t that be wonderful.’

That’s all I needed, I knew she didn’t believe in dragons, I didn’t myself until I met Norbert. Next morning after breakfast I headed out into the woods to see Norbert and planned to take his photo with dad’s digital camera, without him knowing. Which was pretty stupid of me since he could read my mind. In fact the first words I heard when I reached his rock was.

‘What’s a camera and what’s a development?’

Wow! That took me by surprise, but I recovered swiftly and tried to block the thoughts in my mind. Camera was ok and I could waffle around development, but I didn't want him picking up pictures of bulldozers ripping up the woods.

'This is a camera,' I said holding it up where he could see.

'What's it do?'

'It takes a picture.'

'What's a picture?'

'A likeness,' I said, but I could tell he didn't get it. His telepathy wasn't always good enough, which was just as well. 'Norbert, look down at the water. What do you see?'

'My reflection.'

'That's what a camera does, it captures your reflection.'

'Oh, then why didn't you say so in the beginning.'

'I, I ...never mind, I would like to take your picture to show mum.'

'Why?'

'Because she doesn't believe you're real.'

'OK,' he said,

I was surprised, I'd expected an argument, but maybe he simply wanted someone else to believe in dragons. Anyway I took his photo, made my excuses and began to leave. I had just reached the edge of the trees when he called after me.

'Wait, you haven't told me what a development is.'

Oh God, I thought he had forgotten. 'I'll tell you tomorrow, I've got to get back now.' I called over my shoulder and hurried off, before he could question me further.

Mum was sitting at the kitchen table using the laptop when I got back. She was busy scanning the web in the vain hope that there might be something somewhere that could help.

'Mum I've got a photo of Norbert,' I said in triumph.

'Oh, that's nice,' she said her eyes glued to the screen.

She wasn't listening; I took hold of her arm and shook it. 'Mum! Mum! You said dragons didn't exist, look at this, I've got his photo.'

‘I really don’t have ... Oh my god is that him?’ she cried. ‘He really exists, I’m sorry, Will, I thought he was only in your imagination.’

‘So now can we stop the development?’

‘Yes, thanks to you and your dragon.’

Mum downloaded the photo and emailed it to the council, the planning department and the ministry of the environment. Then rang the villagers and gave them the good news. She reckoned Norbert was a great crested newt and since great crested newts were protected by law that was the end of the development. As to money mad Morgan’s claim that he had checked the woods for protected species, it was all lies, he was too mean to spend the money.

Me? I’m happy, the woods are safe and they can call Norbert a newt if they want, but me, I know he’s a dragon.

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What's a crocodiles favourite game?

* Snap *