

World Backwards

In April, Mary Elizabeth MacDonald's kidneys began to fail. They were failing, her doctors said, because of the drugs she was taking for her heart, which had been failing for some time. It was a simple matter of fluid balance. Too much fluid—heart failure; too little fluid—kidney failure. A medical tightrope, of sorts, and she was wobbling badly from side to side.

Dialysis was an option but Mary Elizabeth said “no, thank you, I'm ninety-two.”

“I'm dying,” she told Constance Wetherup over the half cup of tea she was allowed on her fluid-restricted cardiac diet, “of what they used to call *Old Age*.”

Constance nodded. “Multi-organ failure is what they call it now. I saw it written on John Hugh's death certificate. He's still on my mantle, poor bastard.”

Mary Elizabeth scratched her arm. The itching, she decided, was the worst part of kidney failure. “Weren't you supposed to sprinkle him over Italy?”

“Along the shores of the Adriatic, but how am I supposed to get there at my age on a widow's pension?”

The psychiatrist arrived then, a tall handsome man with smooth, dark skin and perfect teeth who made Mary Elizabeth blush.

She winked at Constance. “I should have acted crazy a long time ago.”

He asked her to spell the word “WORLD” backwards, to remember three objects, to name the first Prime Minister, was she depressed, did she want to die?

“D-L-R-O-W, Apple, Table, Penny, John A. MacDonald (no relation!). I love life and I don't want to die, but, if I have

to, I'm bloody well going to do it right," she said.

"Okay," the man with perfect teeth said. In her chart he wrote: *Competent to make decisions regarding medical treatment.*

Free to go is what Mary Elizabeth took this to mean. That's when she decided to take Constance and the late John Hugh to Italy, to the Adriatic, to attend to the sprinkling. She signed herself out AMA—against medical advice—although she did agree to take a prescription for the little blue fluid pills, the ones that kept her from drowning in the liquid her ailing heart could no longer pump.

She flew first-class from Halifax to Bologna, itching and gasping and napping her way across the Atlantic in style. Constance sat beside her, pale and worried, with John Hugh packed in her carry-on luggage.

They scattered his ashes on the beach near Rimini, letting the wind carry bits of him out over the water, the way he wanted.

Mary Elizabeth's breathing was audible now, a symphony of whistles, pops and crackles, the ominous sounds of fluid backing up into her lungs. "This is where I made love for the first time," she said, "right here on this beach, in the middle of a war zone."

Constance brushed a bit of ash out of her friend's hair. "Lizzie, you never cease to amaze me."

"You don't know the half of it," she replied. This was, after all, not the first time she would have to wash traces of John Hugh Wetherup from her hair and clothing.

Evelyn Burtleby, Dragon Slayer

There are things you probably don't know about dragons—things you are better off not knowing if you want to be a proper dragon slayer: how they half-purr, half-giggle when you scratch between the tendrils under their chin; how their fire glands can become blocked when they're exposed to mould or mildew; how they pick at their scales when they're feeling nervous or self-conscious. I have slain my fair share of dragons over the years, but I knew none of these things before I met Eno.

Eno sleeps on a blanket next to the fireplace. He breathes through his mouth: rattle in, wheeze out, rattle in, wheeze out. The sawtooth ridges of his back rise and fall. I sit in my glider rocker and observe him, as I have every evening since his arrival three weeks ago. The light in my living room is dim. I glide. I rock. Eno breathes. Magreb scowls down from her perch atop the book shelf. The warmth of my third glass of Jameson's Irish Whiskey penetrates my tired bones. Rattle, wheeze, rattle, wheeze—and then a change in the pattern: a soft groan, a little snort, a twitch of the wings. His legs extend and his toes, misshapen and fat like half-eaten sausages, contract, as if in his dreams he is swooping down from a grey sky and grasping at something—a still wriggling mackerel, perhaps, or a piglet he has flash-roasted. Outside of his dreams, Eno hasn't flown in at least half a century—or roasted a piglet, for that matter.

We have seen better days, Eno and I. My hips ache. Eno has eaten my laptop computer and the thumb drives containing the first six chapters of my novel-in-progress. Also, I have just confirmed, the yellow sticky note containing my cloud storage username and password. Fifteen months

of my life now sits in the belly of a sleeping dragon. I am slightly drunk. I use entirely too many adverbs. It is impossible to find a veterinarian who knows the first thing about fire glands.

I BEGIN my days by staying away from mirrors. My eyelids droop down over my cheeks like deflated balloons. My stomach feels sour from last night's excess of Irish whiskey. For the third morning in a row I discover Eno in my kitchen, hunched over Magreb's mouse-shaped food bowl. He freezes and looks up at me, his big moist eyes exuding innocence like some scaly green basset hound caught in the act. His long toothy snout overflows with cat-chow kibbles. He blinks.

I point out that he is costing me a fortune in cat food.

He points out that he could always eat the cat.

I point out that I am a dragon slayer of some renown and he had better watch himself.

He sniffs and looks down at the floor tiles. "When I was young, Evelyn," he says, "I would...I would have..."

"You are no longer young, Dragon."

"I am no longer young, Evelyn."

"Cry me a goddamned river," I say. I glance at the cast iron frying pan on the stove, briefly consider clobbering him over the head with it. Just get the whole thing over with.

"Don't," he says, as if reading my thoughts.

He is clever, this Eno, but I am too tired and hungover to slay a dragon this morning anyway. I have already moved on to visions of coffee and dry toast. Eno coughs, sending cat kibbles rattling across the floor. From her perch atop the refrigerator, Magreb gives a plaintive meow.

After breakfast I follow Eno into the living room, fill his bowl with water and a generous splash of Jameson's Irish Whiskey. We have much in common, Eno and I. I get

him settled on his blanket, put some ointment over the raw patches on his belly where he has picked the scales off.

“Are they sore, Dragon?” I ask.

He nods yes. I scratch under his chin and he does the purr-giggle thing. It occurs to me that I am in deep trouble.

“Eno likes your knees, Evelyn,” he says, “you have the most beautiful knees.”

“Flattery isn’t going to help, Dragon,” I say.

“But I really do,” he says. “Eno has this thing for knees.”

“And novels in progress, apparently.”

He sighs. “I’m sorry, Evelyn. Eno does all sorts of terrible things when his fire gland is blocked. When he was younger and could roast things, Eno didn’t cause any trouble.” He extends his wings, flaps them a few times, folds them back in. “It was a beautiful novel,” he says, “if that makes you feel any better.”

Oddly, it does.

ENO is nothing like my three previous dragons (yes, if you must know, I’ve attempted to write a novel on three other occasions and each time, somewhere around the interminable middle, a dragon has showed up out of nowhere and devoured it). The others were more typical dragons, though, all teeth and sinew and talons. They built shiny heaps of my valuable things and set the curtains on fire. One of them ate the neighbour’s German shepherd puppy. There was never any question that *those* dragons had to be slain—even if it was too late to save my fledgling novels. But this Eno character. What kind of dragon apologizes for destroying things? It dawns on me, not for the first time, that Eno is that most dangerous of all novel-eating dragons: the kind you could grow to love.

THERE is one more thing that puzzles me about Eno. In the past, I blamed my dragon infestations on my ex-husband, Barrie. But who can I blame for this strange new dragon, now that Barrie has run off with his tennis instructor? Years ago, when I was still working as a middle-school librarian and Barrie and I were still in love, he would serve me breakfast in bed every Saturday morning. I imagine him now, traipsing up to bed with a cheese omelet and freshly brewed coffee for Svetlana, she of the long, tanned limbs and the powerful forehand. Barrie says I left him for my failed novels long before he left me for Svetlana, but how could I love him properly in the midst of all that dragon-slaying carnage? Especially when he had brought the beasts into our house in the first place. Could he not have waited until things settled down? Did he not believe in the possibility of happily-ever-after?

The phone rings. It's Barrie. In the background someone is playing a piano.

"You have another dragon, don't you," he says. Barrie was never one for small talk.

"How did you...?"

"I drove by the other day and your curtains were closed. I thought it was a bad sign."

"Look, Barrie, I'm okay. This one's, I don't know, sort of elderly and gentle. Almost cute. I'm thinking of keeping it."

"Evelyn."

"Barrie?"

"Has it eaten your new novel?"

Silence.

"You have to kill it, Evelyn."

I try to change the subject. "It wasn't you, was it Barrie?"

"Me?"

"The other dragons."

"No, E, it was never me."

A long pause. The piano player in the background has started singing off key.

“E?”

“Yes Barrie?”

“I just wanted to let you know that Svetlana is expecting. I mean, before you find out through the grapevine.”

“Expecting?”

“A baby, E. I’m going to be a dad.”

Silence. “I’m happy for you, Barrie.”

More silence.

“Now kill that dragon and get back to the novel you were put on this earth to write, Evelyn. Go up into the attic as soon as you hang up and get your dragon-slaying sword down. Don’t let that monster seduce you.”

“I will, Barrie.”

“Promise?”

I hang up and I start to cry and I don’t stop crying for a very long time. The fire is warm but my arms are covered in goose pimples. Magreb, who has never seen me cry, stares down from the top of the stairs, ears pinned back. Eno sleeps on his blanket, belly full of cat chow and Jameson’s Irish Whiskey. In the full light of the morning he looks small and vulnerable, his green scales covered in dull brown patches, not unlike my own liver spots. But Barrie is right, of course. A novelist cannot share her home with a novel-eater.

Later, I retrieve my heavy sword from the attic. Nobody said the path of a dragon slayer would be an easy one. Eno is asleep on his blanket again, snoring and twitching, dreaming his dragon dreams.

He is a prodigious sleeper, this Eno. I lay the sword on the floor beside my glider rocker and pour myself a glass of liquid courage. And another. Eno lets out a long loud fart, then sighs contentedly. My living room smells like spoiled fish and something vaguely sulfurous. Magreb, in her

customary spot atop the bookshelf, wrinkles her nose and sneezes. I pick the sword up by the hilt, feel the familiar heft of it, slice the air in a criss-cross pattern. Barrie gave me this sword for our fifth wedding anniversary. Barrie, who made me blueberry pancakes and told me I had to slay my own dragons. Barrie, who is about to be a father for the first time at the age of sixty-two. I wonder if the baby will inherit his blue eyes. I am slightly drunk. Eno has one eye open and is watching me.

"I'm dying, Evelyn," he says. "So why don't you put that sword away and come over here and scratch my head."

I lay the sword down and kneel beside him. His head rests in my lap. "Good dragon," I say, "there's a good dragon." I weep and I scratch under his chin. He purrs.

"You know what they say when a dragon dies in your living room, Evelyn?"

"No, Dragon, what do they say?"

"Super good luck. Especially for novel writers."

"Do they really say that?"

"No, Evelyn, they don't. Eno is just making this shit up. But Eno wants you to get back to your novel when he's gone. It's a good novel, Evelyn. I wouldn't have eaten it if it were not beautiful."

"It's hard to start over, Dragon."

Eno closes his eyes. His breathing is getting more laboured. His last words to me are these: "Eno didn't eat the yellow sticky note, Evelyn. Your cloud storage password. It's under my blanket."

He lapses into unconsciousness and a few hours later, in the middle of one of his flying dreams, he stops breathing altogether.