

THE LITTLE RED BOOK

It came in the mail this morning. The little red book along with a picture of my grandmother in her youth and a few little knick knacks. The letter from my mother was short and to the point.

Harry,

I found these lying around when I was going through her things. I don't suppose they're of much value but I think they would be worth something to you, if only for their sentimental value. The rest of her belongings go under the hammer next week, the money will be divided equally between your sister, yourself and I.

Please come up and see me soon, I won't be around next weekend but any other time after that is fine. I hope you are keeping well and your job is secure enough. I bumped into your father yesterday in the village, he was asking after you, please drop him a line, he has gotten himself a computer. His email address is r.vaughan@mymail.com.

*Love,
Mum.*

P.S What's all this nonsense I hear about you working on a novel? I wish you'd go out and find a proper job, you will never get anywhere with your writing. Your father could put you in touch with a good engineering firm in London who are looking for graduates.

The little red book. I ran my finger down the spiral binding and smiled. The cover was red and truth be told it wasn't that little. A4 sheets of paper punched by hand and inserted between an old binder that had been split down the middle and fashioned into covers. Back in 1940 there were no such things as affordable binding machines, let alone binding combs and if there had been, bread and meat were more important.

I remember this book well. My grandmother came to live with us when I was five, the Vietnam war had just ended and I was watching North Vietnamese tanks crashing through the gates on tv when we heard a tap at the door. My mother muttered something under my breath about the time of night and hurried to the door.

I knew it was her, I heard her voice in the landing but it was strained, high pitched and I half turned as I heard my mother's soothing voice. Eventually she came into the living room and I saw she had been crying.

"Grandma?" I raised an eyebrow, "are you sad?"

"My boy," she pulled her glasses off, "how can I be sad when I have you?"

My mother looked from one to the other and smiled tightly.

"Your grandmother has come to stay, for a while," she shot her a look and although I was too young to understand the subtle nuances of the adult world, I could feel the underlying tension. But I was too young to be told she had found her husband with another woman, all I knew was that she was hurting and I didn't like my grandmother hurting.

That night she cuddled me in bed and read to me from the little red book. It was not like the books my mother read, those books had pictures in them and were always religious, David and Goliath, Noah's Ark and other bible stories. Ever since my father had left suddenly she had taken to instructing me in the ways of the Lord and although she allowed me to read secular books, she scanned them religiously for any sign of blasphemy. This book however had no pictures, just words and at first I yawned and smiled sleepily.

But then she began painting pictures with her words, images of a sleepy eyed dragon who lived in a world that was not unlike our own but far removed from our world, the world of Naitrun. I had never heard of Naitrun and asked her to show it to me on the globe sitting on my desk. Grandma spun the globe slowly and eventually stopped at a place just east of Finland.

"I think it would have been here," she eventually spoke quietly, "but the land was different then, it was a long time ago."

"Before Adam and Eve?"

“Adam and Eve?” her eyes lit up, “I should think not, maybe somewhere between Adam and the big flood, it was a time of magic, dark powers stalked the land, the people cowered in fear and all looked for a hero. But all they could find was a lonely little boy and a sleepy eyed dragon.”

“Did his father run away like mine?”

A shadow crossed her face and she returned to the bed.

“I don’t think he ever knew his father,” she flipped the pages, “no, there we see, well how about that?”

I was hooked. Connor, the boy who became a king and the leader of the whole world, well almost. He was pretty big in Naitrun, but even the surrounding kingdoms knew of his mighty exploits when he battled the mighty frost giants who were stretching their icy fingers over the world, drawing the landscape and all who walked on it into an eternal winter. The rivers and lakes froze, the birds dropped from the trees, and people huddled in huts for warmth. You would have thought they would at least light fires but the frost giants had forbidden fire, lest it melt the ice and snow and so they sent forth their ice wolves, giant wolves that tore down the huts and extinguished the flames, driving all before them. And everywhere the wolves went, their masters followed, bringing legions of ice warriors to root out the people and make them into slaves.

But just when it seemed all was lost and evil had triumphed a hero arose. A young boy who had never known his father, he had been raised by his father’s sister and her husband, rose up to do battle with the frost giants. He killed one that first day and was forced to flee for his life, deep into the frozen wilderness, but just when it seemed he was going to die at the hands of the ice wolves, a sleepy eyed dragon awoke and yawned, belching out fire that melted the wolves.

And so the story went on and on. I can’t remember how long it took to tell the story at the time, I know now it must have been a few weeks at least but it seemed to go on for months. The battles raged back and forth across the frozen steppes until at last Connor faced the king of the frost giants, who had come forth to do battle with him. It was a terrible battle and the sleepy eyed dragon was terribly wounded but as he lay on the ice he breathed fire around the frost king’s feet. The ice melted beneath him and he began sinking into the same ice field he had created years before.

Connor was ready with his shining blade and although the dragon was wounded, he was able to breathe fire on the sword until it was white hot. As the head of the frost king drew level with his blade, Connor sliced it through with one clean swipe and at that same moment, the ice started cracking all around them, until they were floating on an iceberg in the middle of a clear blue sea. The dragon recovered from his wounds, thanks to the magic of the elf queen, and when Connor returned to the city he was hailed a king of kings and lived for many years with his sleepy eyed dragon.

All good things must come to an end however. When Connor died, the sleepy eyed dragon flew into the north and found a cave and went to sleep, but it is rumoured he is only awaiting the birth of a new Connor to do battle with the forces of evil again.

I was hooked. I heard that story over and over and over again. I would correct her if she missed a word or tried to pretend she had read a passage. She would smile and apologise and make a joke she was just a sleepy eyed dragon.

I would fall asleep with my arm wrapped tightly around the little red book and my other hand would sometimes reach out for my plastic sword. At other times it found my stuffed polar bear, the nearest thing I could find to a dragon, I would wake in the middle of the night to find the book by my bed and my covers tucked tightly around me.

Connor became so much a part of me that I envisaged ice giants and snow wolves behind every corner. My mother would hear a scream and a crash and rushing through, would find me battling with the clothes hoist in the living room. At first it was faintly amusing to my mother and I know now that she had other things on her mind. But after a few months it became tedious, and when I tripped and fell on my face outside one day, her patience snapped.

“You and your blasted book,” she fumed, “you’ve filled that child’s head full of nonsense.”

“Not nonsense,” my grandmother bent down and examined my face, “we all need dreams, without visions the people perish.”

“Dreams are worthless without the wherewithal to bring them to life,” she screamed in reply, “you alone know that, you who sat night after night on that blasted typewriter. Where are your dreams

now? Wrapped up in cheap cardboard and read to an impressionable kid who doesn't have the heart to refuse you."

It was cruel, perhaps the most vicious thing my mother had ever said to her mother. Mother and daughter eyed each other over me and in the silence I thought I heard a sob and then rising, she nodded and moved inside.

"Perhaps you're right," I thought I heard her say, "perhaps you're right."

She never read the book to me after that, telling me that perhaps I was old enough to read it for myself and make up my own mind. My mother discouraged it. In her mind the idea that magic could be used for good was anathema to good Church of Scotland teaching. She began an insidious campaign to rid me of foolish dreams. At first it was subtle but as she encountered resistance her attacks became more vitriolic until at last she consigned me to the pits of hell forever when I turned sixteen and found rock and roll music.

It was perhaps the best thing she could have done. The dreams given life by my grandmother began to flourish without her icy breath. Ambient and everlasting, they lived and moved and had their being deep within the restlessness of my soul. I realised then that the sleepy eyed dragon was always there to protect me, my grandmother had never said it outright but it was implied in her everyday speech. I suppose in a way I became a product of two mothers, one light and one dark.

The book smelled of her, that same lavender perfume she wore constantly. I stared at the picture of a young woman sitting in front of a typewriter a big smile on her face and the first typewritten manuscript lying in front of her typewriter.

The first rejection had hurt her deeply, I think my mother's outburst that day put the final nail in her hopes and dreams.

I smiled as I opened the cover, it was time for the sleepy eyed dragon to awake, a hero had come to do battle with the hidden demons of the night.

The word processor beckoned as I carried it through to the study, the smell of grandma's lavender perfume still rising from the manuscript.

Written by Alastair Rosie 2007 ©