



**WHEN  
WOMEN  
WERE  
DRAGONS**

*A Novel*

AUTHOR OF  
*The Girl Who Drank the Moon*

**KELLY BARNHILL**



Also by Kelly Barnhill

*Dreadful Young Ladies and Other Stories*

*The Girl Who Drank the Moon*

*The Witch's Boy*

*Iron Hearted Violet*

When  
Women  
Were  
Dragons



A NOVEL

Kelly Barnhill

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*For Christine Blasey Ford,  
whose testimony triggered this narrative;*

*And for my children—  
dragons, all.*

The dragon is in the barrow, wise and proud with treasures.

—ANGLO-SAXON PROVERB

They were ferocious in appearance, terrible in shape with great heads, long necks, thin faces, yellow complexions, shaggy ears, wild foreheads, fierce eyes, foul mouths, horses' teeth, throats vomiting flames, twisted jaws, thick lips, strident voices, singed hair, fat cheeks, pigeon breasts, scabby thighs, knotty knees, crooked legs, swollen ankles, splay feet, spreading mouths, raucous cries. For they grew so terrible to hear with their mighty shriekings that they filled almost the whole intervening space between earth and heaven with their discordant bellowings.

—*LIFE OF SAINT GUTHLAC* BY FELIX,  
AN EAST ANGLIAN MONK, APPROXIMATELY AD 730,  
IN WHICH THE GOOD MONK DESCRIBES THE ORIGINAL  
OCCUPANTS OF THE BARROW WHERE THE SAINT  
HAD ATTEMPTED TO BUILD HIS HERMITAGE

If I, like Solomon,...  
could have my wish—

my wish...O to be a dragon,  
a symbol of the power of Heaven—of silkworm  
size or immense; at times invisible.

Felicitous phenomenon!

—“O TO BE A DRAGON” BY MARIANNE MOORE, 1959

# When Women Were Dragons

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Being the Truthful Accounting of the Life of  
Alex Green—Physicist, Professor, Activist.

Still Human.

A memoir, of sorts.



### ***Greetings, Mother—***

*I do not have much time. This change (this wondrous, wondrous change) is at this very moment upon me. I could not stop it if I tried. And I have no interest in trying.*

*It is not from any place of sorrow that I write these words. There is no room for sorrow in a heart full of fire. You will tell people that you did not raise me to be an angry woman, and that statement will be correct. I was never allowed to be angry, was I? My ability to discover and understand the power of my own raging was a thing denied to me. Until, at last, I learned to stop denying myself.*

*You told me on my wedding day that I was marrying a hard man whom I shall have the pleasure to sweeten. “It is a good woman,” you said, “who brings out the goodness in a man.” That lie became evident on our very first night together. My husband was not a good man, and nothing ever would have made him so. I married a man who was petulant, volatile, weak-willed, and morally vile. You knew this, and yet you whispered matronly secrets into my ear and told me that the pain would be worth the babies that I would bring to you one day.*

*But there were no babies, were there? My husband’s beatings saw to that. And now I shall see to him. Tooth and claw. The downtrodden becomes the bearer of a heavenly, righteous flame. It burns me, even now. I find myself unbound by earth, unbound by man, unbound by wifely duty and womanly pain.*

*I regret nothing.*

*I shall not miss you, Mother. Perhaps I won’t even remember you. Does a flower remember its life as a seed? Does a phoenix recall itself as it burns anew? You will not see me again. I shall be but a shadow streaking across the sky—fleeting, speeding, and utterly gone.*

—From a letter written by Marya Tilman, a housewife from Lincoln, Nebraska, and the earliest scientifically confirmed case of spontaneous dragoning within the United States



prior to the Mass Dragoning of 1955—also known as the Day of Missing Mothers. The dragoning, per reports from eyewitnesses, happened during the day, on September 18, 1898, as a lemonade social was underway in the garden of next-door neighbors, to celebrate an engagement. Information and data regarding Mrs. Tilman’s case was suppressed by authorities. Despite the sheer amount of corroborating evidence, including the accidental capture on a daguerreotype taken next door which showed in shocking clarity the dragoning at its midpoint, and signed affidavits by witnesses, it was not covered by a single newspaper—local or national—and all studies organized to research the phenomenon were barred from both funding and publication. Scientists, journalists, and researchers were fired and blacklisted for simply asking questions about the Tilman case. It was not the first time such research blackouts occurred, but the sheer quality of the evidence, and the vigor of the governmental effort to suppress it, was enough to trigger the formation of the Wyvern Research Collective, an underground association of doctors, scientists, and students, all dedicated to the preservation of information and study (peer-reviewed when possible) of both spontaneous and intentional dragoning, in order to better understand the phenomenon.

*Gentlemen, it is not my place to tell you how to do your jobs. I am a scientist, not a congressman. My task is to raise questions, carefully record observations, and vigorously analyze the data, in hopes that others might raise more questions after me. There cannot be science without the interrogation of closely held beliefs, as well as the demolition of personal aversions and biases. There cannot be science without the free and unfettered dissemination of truth. When you, as the creators of policy, seek to use your power to curtail understanding and thwart the free exchange of knowledge and ideas, it is not I who will suffer the consequences of this, but rather the whole nation, and, indeed, the entire world.*

*Our country lost hundreds of thousands of its wives and mothers on April 25, 1955, due to a process that we can barely understand—not because it is by its nature unknowable, but because science has been both forbidden from searching for answers and hobbled in its response. This is an untenable situation. How can a nation respond to a crisis like this without the collaboration of scientists and doctors, without sharing clinical findings and laboratory data? The mass transformation that occurred on April 25, 1955, was unprecedented in terms of its size and scope, but it was not—please, sirs, it is important that you let me finish—it was not an anomaly. Such things have happened before, and I will tell you plainly that so-called dragoning continues to this day, a fact which would be more widely known and understood if the doctors and researchers who studied this phenomenon hadn't lost their positions and livelihoods, or faced the horror of their labs and records being rifled through and destroyed by authorities. I know full well that speaking frankly and candidly to you today puts me at grave risk of harpooning what is left of my career. But I am a scientist, sirs, and my allegiance is not to this body, nor even to myself, but only to the truth. Who benefits when knowledge is buried? Who gains when science succumbs to political expediency? Not I, Congressmen. And certainly not the American people, whom you are honor-bound to serve.*

—From the opening statement given by Dr. H. N. Gantz (former chief of Internal Medicine at Johns Hopkins University Hospital and erstwhile research fellow at the National Institutes of Health, the Army Medical Corps, and the National Science Administration) to the House Committee on Un-American Activities, February 9, 1957

# 1.

I was four years old when I first met a dragon. I never told my mother. I didn't think she'd understand.

(I was wrong, obviously. But I was wrong about a lot of things when it came to her. This is not particularly unusual. I think, perhaps, none of us ever know our mothers, not really. Or at least, not until it's too late.)

The day I met a dragon, was, for me, a day of loss, set in a time of instability. My mother had been gone for over two months. My father, whose face had become as empty and expressionless as a hand in a glove, gave me no explanation. My auntie Marla, who had come to stay with us to take care of me while my mother was gone, was similarly blank. Neither spoke of my mother's status or whereabouts. They did not tell me when she would be back. I was a child, and was therefore given no information, no frame of reference, and no means by which I might ask a question. They told me to be a good girl. They hoped I would forget.

There was, back then, a little old lady who lived across our alley. She had a garden and a beautiful shed and several chickens who lived in a small coop with a faux owl perched on top. Sometimes, when I wandered into her yard to say hello, she would give me a bundle of carrots. Sometimes she would hand me an egg. Or a cookie. Or a basket full of strawberries. I loved her. She was, for me, the one sensible thing in a too-often senseless world. She spoke with a heavy accent—Polish, I learned much later—and called me her little *zabko*, as I was always jumping about like a frog, and then would put me to work picking ground-cherries or early tomatoes or nasturtiums or sweet peas. And then, after a bit, she would take my hand and walk me home, admonishing my mother (before her disappearance) or my aunt (during those long months of mother-missing). “You must keep

your eyes on this one,” she’d scold, “or one day she’ll sprout wings and fly away.”

It was the very end of July when I met the dragon, on an oppressively hot and humid afternoon. One of those days when thunderstorms linger just at the edge of the sky, hulking in raggedy murmurs for hours, waiting to bring in their whirlwinds of opposites—making the light dark, howling at silences, and wringing all the wetness out of the air like a great, soaked sponge. At this moment, though, the storm had not yet hit, and the whole world simply waited. The air was so damp and warm that it was nearly solid. My scalp sweated into my braids, and my smocked dress had become crinkled with my grubby handprints.

I remember the staccato barking of a neighborhood dog.

I remember the far-off rumble of a revving engine. This was likely my aunt, fixing yet another neighbor’s car. My aunt was a mechanic, and people said she had magic hands. She could take any broken machine and make it live again.

I remember the strange, electric hum of cicadas calling to one another from tree to tree to tree.

I remember the floating motes of dust and pollen hanging in the air, glinting in the slant of light.

I remember a series of sounds from my neighbor’s backyard. A man’s roar. A woman’s scream. A panicked gasping. A scrabble and a thud. And then, a quiet, awestruck *Oh!*

Each one of these memories is clear and keen as broken glass. I had no means to understand them at the time—no way to find the link between distinct and seemingly unrelated moments and bits of information. It took years for me to learn how to piece them together. I have stored these memories the way any child stores memory—a haphazard collection of sharp, bright objects socked away on the darkest shelves in the dustiest corners of our mental filing systems. They stay there, those memories, rattling in the dark. Scratching at the walls. Disrupting our careful ordering of what we think is true. And injuring us when we forget how dangerous they are, and we grasp too hard.



I opened the back gate and walked into the old lady's yard, as I had done a hundred times. The chickens were silent. The cicadas stopped humming and the birds stopped calling. The old lady was nowhere to be seen. Instead, there in the center of the yard, I saw a dragon sitting on its bottom, midway between the tomatoes and the shed. It had an astonished expression on its enormous face. It stared at its hands. It stared at its feet. It craned its neck behind itself to get a load of its wings. I didn't cry out. I didn't run away. I didn't even move. I simply stood, rooted to the ground, and stared at the dragon.

Finally, because I had come to see the little old lady, and I was nothing if not a purposeful little girl, I cleared my throat and demanded to know where she was. The dragon looked at me, startled. It said nothing. It winked one eye. It held one finger to its lipless jaws as though to say "Shh." And then, without waiting for anything else, it curled its legs under its great body like a spring, tilted its face upward toward the clouds overhead, unfurled its wings, and, with a grunt, pushed the earth away, leaping toward the sky. I watched it ascend higher and higher, eventually arcing westward, disappearing over the wide crowns of the elm trees.

I didn't see the little old lady again after that. No one mentioned her. It was as though she never existed. I tried to ask, but I didn't have enough information to even form a question. I looked to the adults in my life to provide reason or reassurance, but found none. Only silence. The little old lady was gone. I saw something that I couldn't understand. There was no space to mention it.

Eventually, her house was boarded up and her yard grew over and her garden became a tangled mass. People walked by her house without giving it a second glance.

I was four years old when I first saw a dragon. I was four years old when I first learned to be silent about dragons. Perhaps this is how we learn silence—an absence of words, an absence of context, a hole in the universe where the truth should be.