

The Dragon in Her Eyes

by Rosanne Bane



Prologue

I am part of all ages, the wide-eyed terror of the child woken in the night, the self-conscious awkwardness of the adolescent, the desperate plodding of the middle-ager trapped in a meaningless job, the despair of the senior's unbearable isolation; and I am part of all people, the orphan and the outcast, the misfit and the malcontent, the wall-flower and the wimp, the widow and the pensioner, the alcoholic, the addict, the friendless, the fearful, the helpless, the hopeless; I am the negative pole, the maladaptive aspect, the remembrance that causes the mental wince, the recurrent nightmare, the horror without end.

I am inner anguish incarnate.

I am the water worm and I am in control.

(A Daughter)

She fought against waking, but the sound was insistent. She was now half awake, but she still couldn't identify the sound. It was a new phone and it didn't really ring, but rather chirped. She rolled over, and opened one eye to stare uncomprehendingly at the clock-radio.

7:13. Dark. Still in my work clothes. What day is it? Must be Friday. Friday night.

The phone chirped again.

Damn. I'm not here.

The phone insisted.

Really, I'm not here. I'm not at all all here.

The chirping was relentless. Sighing, she rolled over and reached for the phone.

I'm not all here, you know.

She picked up the receiver and growled, "Whadya want?"

"Boy are you in a good mood!" The voice on the other end was relentless too, relentlessly bright and cheerful.

Her voice was still low and raspy with sleep. "Heinlein says that waking a person unnecessarily should not be considered a capital crime, for a first offense, that is." You are well beyond your first offense, Sharon, this had better be good."

"Jeezz! No wonder Beth and Pete are ticked at you."

"Oh?" She was too sleepy to care.

"Beth said they picked you up last Sunday to see that new Bruce Willis movie, and that they liked it, but all you did was complain about what a rotten movie it was."

"It was. It sucked. Negative five stars," she rasped.

Sharon continued. "And Beth said what got them ticked was the way you insulted them because they happened to like the movie."

"This is it? You woke me up to tell me this?"

"Well, I'm sorry! I just thought..."

She heard the pain in Sharon's voice and felt the usual wave of guilt. "Hey, no, I'm sorry. I've had a hell of a week at work, the cat's been sick all over the damned apartment, and I feel like shit. I shouldn't snap at you." Without warning her mood changed and her voice became animated. "But, Beth and Pete can shove it. Is it my fault that they haven't got a brain between 'em? I'm sorry, but the movie was trash. The filming, the editing, the writing, the acting. The acting! What anyone sees in Bruce Willis is completely beyond me!"

"Well, at least you're awake and giving me more than one word answers."

"Sorry."

"Don't stop now. Mad is better than unresponsive."

"I'm am so sick of those two. You think they were the first and last people in the world to reach mutual orgasm."

Sharon laughed. "You used to think they were cute."

"Twenty-three-year-olds have no business being cute! Do you know what it's like sitting a theatre alone with two newlyweds hanging all over each other?"

Sharon stopped laughing. "Yes," she said quietly.

"It's disgusting!" She suddenly noticed how quiet Sharon was on the other end.

Shit, how can I be so stupid.

Sharon finally spoke. "So, have you seen Jack since..."

"No," she answered without giving Sharon a chance to finish the question.

"Have you talked to him?"

"No."

"Haven't you gone in to rent a movie or anything?"

"No. I really don't want to talk about it."

"Well what happened? I thought..."

"I don't know. I don't care."

"Oh. Well, what's happening at work?"

"It's Friday, and I don't have to think about that place for two days, and I don't want to talk about it."

"Oh."

Shit. When did it get so hard to talk to Sharon? Right now she's wishing she'd never called.

"So, Sharon," she said, trying desperately to make her voice light, "What's up with the new job?"

"Well, remember I told you that I was having some trouble with Mike, he seemed jealous of the projects I was getting after only two weeks, well, I was talking to him, when was it, Wednesday, I think, and we got to talking about things and..."

Much as she tried, she just couldn't listen. She couldn't keep track of who was who, and the accounting aspects just didn't interest her anymore. But if she just said 'huh-huh' at intervals, Sharon seemed happy. She stopped trying to make sense of it, and it became a stream of babble in her left ear. The stream finally dried up.

"Hey, wait a minute." She set the receiver down and, pressing her palms hard against her temples, whimpered. Suddenly, she shook her head, and wiped the back of her hand angrily against her cheeks. She picked the phone up again.

I'm back. Not really, I'm really not back, I'm not all here. I'm not, I'm not, I'm not. "Hey, the cat's sick again, I gotta go."

"Are you O.K.?"

"Sure." *Not really. I'm not, I'm not, I'm not.*

"I'll call you later."

"If you want."

"You gonna be all right?"

"Yeah."

"We're back to one word answers?"

"No. Listen, I gotta go."

"I'll talk to you later."

She hung up the phone. She knew she should get up and change. She tried sitting up and grabbed her head in pain. She sat, hugging her head and rocking slowly for a few minutes until the pressure eased. She crawled under the covers. The cat jumped onto the bed easily, and curled up on the pillow, purring.

(The Water Worm)

She created me, she gave birth to me. But I am in control now, and like all true dragons I feed on the rotting carcass of she that bore me. I look up, my metaphorical mouth bloodied, my claws tearing and rending her.

Not her body—her mind. I am inner anguish incarnate. I am

an idea, an idea grown to full term, and in control of the mind that conceived me.

(A Daughter)

She ducked into her cubicle Monday morning with a sigh of mixed resignation and relief. She had managed to get up, get dressed and get to her desk without incident.

Maybe today won't be such a bad Monday after all.

She turned the pages of the desk calendar and it hit her.

Month end! Friday was a month end and I forgot to submit the schedule for the summary jobs!

She hid her face in her hands and bit her lip.

Oh God! I'll have to beg that snotty programmer to run a backup or restore or whatever the hell it is, and then submit the schedule, and hope they can run it this morning so I can balance before I go home. Oh damn!

She was halfway through the schedule forms when the phone rang. It was her mother.

"Where were you yesterday?"

"I don't know, why?" *How does she do it, turn any question into an accusation?*

"What do you mean, you don't know? You missed the party."

"I sent a card."

"Everyone was asking where you were."

Somehow that didn't surprise or comfort her. "I just didn't feel up to it."

"Dear, I don't know why you let yourself get into these moods. You should get out more. You've just got to stop indulging yourself and snap out of it."

Snap out of it. Snap out of it.

"Are you there?"

"Yes, Mom."

I'm not all here, so I must be there.

"After all, you are Scotty's godmother."

The closest I'll ever come to motherhood.

"I can't talk right now, Mom."

"Oh. O.K. Well, do you want to come for dinner?"

"I don't think I'll be able to make it. I'll probably have to work late."

"Again? You put in an awful lot of overtime."

How do you tell your mother you're incompetent and about to lose your job? *Well Mom, it's either work O.T. or move back in with you and Dad? I gotta go.*

"Well, stop by tonight. Maryann sent a piece of Scotty's birthday cake home with me to give to you."

Oh good, seconds on the gull. Thank you, Maryann.

"I'll try." She only half heard her mother's good-bye before she had the phone hung up.

Oh Lord, I couldn't make it yesterday, and You didn't make a housecall, but please, please, let me get past my supervisor's desk and into the ladies room before I start to cry.

(The Water Worm)

I had a very tenuous hold on her mind in the beginning, I was just a vague trace of mental disease. And bless them, they all told her to simply 'snap out of it'. Snap out of it. Snap snap snap. She could hear the echo of me in her mind. Snap snap snap. While others heard the laughter of friends, she heard the faint sounding of something snapping shut. A faint metallic click. The sound of, of, of the metal latch gate, found on the end of a dog's lead, snicking shut. Snick snick snick. Just snap out of it. And by this time, she had grown accustomed to the feel of me waiting in the back of her mind to pounce, and when she felt me there, she'd see the dog leads, and she'd snap them tightly around me. Of course, to bind something, it must have a form, and thus she gave me mine. Not entirely to my liking. She created me eyeless and limbless, a squirming luminescent green worm. A helpless worm, she thought; she unknowingly created me, the deadly pre-dragon in her mind. And such was her love for me, her conception, that she aborted me and saw me thrown and imprisoned in a visualized tank, my watery dungeon.

But a pre-dragon doesn't drown, and the dungeon turned out to be a labyrinth of tunnels of dismal guilt, caverns of sharp anxiety,

and pits of bottomless fears. This became my domain. Here I was nourished on the salt of her life's fluid, her tears. Not the tears she actually shed, especially those that were shared with a friend, those were dilute and singularly distasteful and unsatisfactory. I do not allow her to share tears any longer. But the tears she sheds into her pillow at four in the morning, draining her when her life's ebb is lowest, these have a delectable flavor of despair. Ahh, but better still, richer and sweeter, are the tears that well up behind her stinging eyes, never to be shed. This nectar I lap up, undiluted by release, these are best.

For the early part of my life, before I came to power in my domain, I subsisted on tears and silences. Now, I can prey directly on her crumbling mind. Indeed, I must. I have grown from a worm to a dragon. I must prey upon her mind, if only to make room for my growth. But I am still eyeless, and unable to view my realm.

(A Daughter)

She had awakened at 4:05 and tossed for half an hour before getting up. Aimlessly, she pulled on her jeans and jacket and started in the pre-dawn chill across the park.

She pressed her palms against her temples for a long time before shoving her hands deep into her pockets. She shivered in her thin jacket and shrugged her shoulders up to her ears. The voice inside her head mocked her pain, singing the hymn.

And He walks with me, and He talks with me, and He tells me I am His own...

He walks with me! Where are You?

He talks with me! I can't hear You!

And He tells me I am His own! If I'm Yours, why don't You take better care of me?

She fell to her knees and sobbed aloud. Face awash with tears, she stared up at the ice-white stars in the dead-black sky.

Where are You? I need You, damn You!

The voice in her head began singing again. Talk about God and His mercy. For if He really does exist, then why did He desert me? In my hour of need, truly I'm indeed, alone again, naturally.

Alone again. Still. Yet. Where the fuck are You? Damn You. Don't You care? Of course You don't, You don't even exist.

She shivered violently. Her body sagged forward until she fell on her side in the damp grass.

I hate You. Go ahead, strike me dead. I dare You. You wimp. You uncaring selfish bastard. Why me?

She whimpered.

Don't You care about me? What have I done? I can't stand it any more.

She curled her arms around her knees.

I can't stand it. I wanna die. I wanna die. I wanna die. Death, death, death, death.

She screamed aloud, "God," as she sprang to her feet, "I wanna live!", but the early morning fog muffled the sound and there was no response except for the voice in her head.

Alone again, naturally.

With the naked trees etched starkly against the pinking sky at her back, she staggered back to the apartment building, and above her tear mottled cheeks, her eyes glowered with a strange bestial gleam.

(The Water Worm)

Before, I had no need of eyes, I could feel and smell my way through the dark corridors of her mind. And now, I control her eyes. I have seen the sun rise.

(A Daughter)

She suddenly realized how fed up she was with making polite evasions to Maryann's not so polite intrusions. *What is she saying now? Something about Scotty writing a thank you note soon for the card and money I sent.* She gripped the phone until her knuckles turned white.

"...But how did you know so early in the week that you wouldn't be able to come on Sunday? I hope you weren't sick all week..." She knew Maryann's concern was just a pretense.

"No. I wasn't sick. I knew I wasn't going to be able to stand the ordeal." The band around her head tightened.

"Yes, well, all the kids running around, making noise can get to you, if you're not used to it." Maryann's smug tone grated on her nerves. Maryann was used to it, Maryann could handle it.

"It isn't the kids..."

"Especially Jason and Jessica. My God, how Peggy can stand it, and why Jerry puts up with it, I don't know. I know my Greg wouldn't. But then, your brothers are two very different people. At least, Jerry is different, isn't he?"

She cleared her throat and was waiting for Maryann to stop laughing before she let her have it. "You know what I can't see, is how Peggy can stand..."

"But she does manage, doesn't she? Though Lord knows I'd never let my house get into such a state..."

"...You?"

"What?"

"I don't see how Peggy can stand being in constant competition with you."

"But she's not,"

She felt a strange thrill at the wounded tone of Maryann's voice.

"You're the perfect little wife and mother, aren't you? Always ready, dustcloth in one hand, cookie sheet in the other, to pass judgement on Peggy and me."

"No!"

"Yes! And Peggy, well at least she's on the right track, right? But me? Why, I'm not even close, am I?"

"I don't believe..."

"You've managed to turn my parents and brothers against me, haven't you? I hope you enjoy it, you conniving little..."

She had heard the shuffling of the phone at the other end and had raised her voice to compensate, but she was brought up short by her brother's voice in her ear.

"What the hell are you ranting about? What is going on?"

"Greg? Tell your wife I said 'Fuck you'..."

"Now wait a minute..."

"And fuck you too, Greg!"

Her hand trembled as she slammed the phone down, and if Maryann or Greg had seen the fire in her eyes, they would have trembled too.

(The Water Worm)

I have learned that having complete control of her eyes is an enormous benefit. Any perception can be slanted to provide food far sweeter than mere tears: self-loathing, overwhelming guilt, delusions of persecution, an endless variety of anxiety and fears. I have complete control, but I must be ever watchful, for she must be preserved. She is, after all, my food source, my shelter, my existence. I must guard her well from those who would harm her, and, more importantly, from those who would help her.

(A Daughter)

There came the day, when for no apparent reason, she was relieved. She slept through till nine thirty on a Saturday and woke to sunshine streaming through the window, feeling amazingly refreshed. Her body felt healthy again. The nausea was gone, the pain in her chest disappeared and her former fears and indecisiveness seemed ludicrous. She felt good, good about herself, good about life, good about everything.

Hey God, thanks. It's beautiful. Indian summer. I love Indian summer. What a great day for a long walk.

For the first time in a long time, breakfast seemed like a good idea, and she hummed as she scrambled

the eggs. While eating, she noticed that the pressure in her head was gone and her eyes didn't burn and itch. Her eyes were no longer on fire.

After her long walk, she lay back in the grass and watched the clouds float by and wondered at the change.

Somehow I've managed to wrest control of my own eyes from the worm and I can see the beauty in the world. Umrrrrrr. What a glorious day. I wish this day could last forever. But it won't. Even that is an admission of the worm's presence. Oh God, please no.

If thy right hand offend thee.

Please God, let me be happy. For more than just a day. Is it really so much to ask?

If thy right hand offend thee.

It's only temporary. It's happened before. I've had good days before, and then I only fell further.

If thy right hand offend thee.

I don't think I could go any lower than this last time. I don't want to live like that any more. The control is temporary and the world is fresh and new and if thy right hand offend thee...

A bottle of Vallum now, and in an hour or so, the worm will never reign again...

Epilogue

We thought that in destroying herself, she would destroy me. It was my greatest fear and her last hope. But those last moments of her guilt, remorse and anguish were the sweetest treat of all. Like no food I'd ever known before and more than enough to sustain me in the hibernation necessary to find another home. And at the very last, she knew that the pain was for nothing, that it takes more than temporary loss of shelter to destroy the water worm. And that was ambrosia.

There will always be other dark, drowned corridors to roam, other flooded dungeons to reign over. All the world is connected by water. There will always be a mother's tears. There was a mother's sorrowing kiss on a daughter's cold lips.

MZ

