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Sandy Feinstein

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The Book of the Dragon

by Sandy Feinstein

Morgan Library MS Teleri VI

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The Book of the Dragon

I've never thought of gardening as a treasure hunt. Hoeing and sowing aren't games, at least that's what my father says when I try to balance on the string that marks his rows of peas or lettuce. The garden could be a circus I think: rabbits running in and out, woodchucks diving into holes, ants piling up mounds, and me on the high wire. A circus with lots of animals, but not a pirate ship or ancient tomb or cowboy heist. I never confused any of the vegetables with jewels or gold, no matter how yellow the squash or red the tomatoes.

My favorite job is to pick what grows because I'm allowed to eat what I find. Berries before the birds get them, peas before they pop, tomatoes before they rot, sometimes the stems of lilies and mint leaves. I don't know why I agreed to weed—I was probably just sick of being inside and needed an excuse to go outside.

Whatever the reason, I began to weed my corner of the garden where the green tomatoes were getting big and heavy. I lifted them from the ground where they lay and leaned them against a couple of stone slabs, tying the less weighted branches to dried out bamboo. I needed to get under them. I thought there might be weeds beneath the green fruit, and I was on a mission. When I get a thing in my head, I do it all the way.

I have cute purple gloves, but I didn't wear them. Which was stupid because the cucumber's prickly stems rubbed my fingers raw. But I kept on anyway. I found one plant as stubborn as I am. Bamboo. Bamboo shoots sprout straight up like grass. They're not hard to see, so they seem easy to get at. If you think breaking them off takes care of the problem, you'd be very wrong. They're the worst.

Grab a shoot of bamboo and try to find its root. It's not like a dandelion with dirty hairy strands that spread out like frizzy hair. Bamboo roots grow sideways. You pull its taut root only to find more of it and still more of it. I'm not strong enough to yank it all out at once, so I just pull it little by little, following the root to its end. It was taking a long time.

The sun was in one part of the sky when I began pulling the bamboo at the edge of the garden. If I look up, there's got to be a reason, and the only reason would have been getting to the end of the root. When I finally did look up, I had no idea where I was, and the sun had moved low, eye level. It made the ground at the end of the root seem to glitter when I pulled it away.

The sun went a little lower, but the hole where I'd pulled the root from still glittered. I stared at the hole, wondering what to do. One thing I don't like about weeding is all the squishy worms. I don't use a trowel because I hate cutting them in half by accident. Not wearing gloves, I was being a little more careful than usual. But I didn't see any worms. The earth was dry.

I extended my index finger to try to touch the shininess. It felt solid, though more like dust than dirt. My finger glowed with teeny bits of what looked like mica and other teeny bits that looked like gold. I forgot about the worms and dug.

As I dug deeper, the little slivers of silver and gold got bigger. My hand scraped against first pebbles then rocks. I picked one up, and it was blue. I picked up another, and it was red. A sapphire and a ruby? I pulled out diamonds and emeralds and bigger and bigger chunks of silver and gold. Still, I kept digging. The hole was almost as big as me and looking darker and darker. I could feel all sorts of things, but I had no idea what until I pulled something out. I wondered how much is in there?

The sun was no help either. The sky was already dusky. I should have been scared, but I wasn't. I'd left a trail—a long line of all that pulled bamboo. I still had to see the rest of what was under the root's end. Suddenly, a little light appeared, just for a moment. Then another. Slowly, a display like small Christmas lights blinked on and off. Fireflies. I tried looking in the hole by their light.

There were golden stairs with a zillion jewels all the way down. I didn't try to go down those stairs yet. I just leaned over the edge of the hole and stared. I noticed that at the very bottom was something that looked like a jewel box. Was it really a box? Only one way to find out.

I stuck a foot down hoping to find a safe place to put it. I poked in all directions, toward the stairs and away from them. Sometimes I hit something hard, and then I'd hear the tinkle of metal, pebbles and rocks falling. The stair seemed just out of reach. I didn't want to go in if I couldn't get out again. If there were just something to grab onto and pull myself out with, something that would keep me from losing my way, too.

That's when I got up, felt around for the end of the bamboo I'd already pulled, and looked to see if there was anything to tie it to. How could I not have noticed all the trees? Staring at the ground while weeding, that's how. It was only as I watched the fireflies flicker on and off that I realized how many trees there were, and one not very far from where I stood. I took the end of the bamboo and counted off ten paces to the nearest tree. I wrapped it around the trunk and triple knotted it. Then I walked ten paces back to the hole.

I lay down on my stomach at the edge, holding the bamboo in my hands. I put one hand below the other on the bamboo, almost the same way I had yanked it to get to the hole in the first place. Slowly, slowly I let myself down until I could feel something under my feet. It was the stair.

The fireflies flickered, each blink revealing a huge mound of gold and jewels. I held onto the bamboo and walked down the stairs very carefully. Tripping down all those sharp little rocks, pretty as they looked, would hurt I thought.

The thing that looked like a box wasn't so far down. It had lots of big jewels on it, too. It also had a clasp. It looked like a gigantic claw or tooth. I wondered if I should try to open the box down there in the hole or pick it up and take it with me. It was hard to see. So I took the box.

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I remember when I first unclasped the claw and opened the box. Inside was writing. The writing was gold and silver. It was beautiful. I couldn't read the writing though. The words were scrunched together, making it hard to separate one from the other. There was something that looked like a 3 among the letters and something else that looked like a b sitting on a p. Not one exclamation point or question mark or comma and not very many periods either. The sentences, if that's what they were, seemed to go on forever.

The pages were all loose, too. They weren't paper. They weren't white but a pale blue. They seemed more like clothing, maybe a scarf or a shirt.

The handwriting on the first page looked like that of a child, the shapes of the letters weren't uniform, the o of the b and p and d and g and q and o varied in size and shape. The words didn't always go in a straight line across the page either.

After the title was a long sentence. It said,

As told to be Princess of Rochellia Nova, Granddaughter of be King and Queen of Krakovia and Kievskia on her Father's side and Granddaughter of be King and Queen of Romaney and Perse on her Mother's side, having been captured and held by be Dragon of Oakwood Isle, here records its history as required by be terms of her imprisonment.

There were so many things I wanted to know, and I couldn't figure out how to find the answers, except by reading more.

It soon became clear that the book wasn't written like a normal book. I mean apart from the loose cloth sheets, the gold and silver writing, the strange letters, and the long sentences. The story was interrupted on almost every page by a heading: **SAY BIS**.

"Say" what? Bis? Pis? Make a ¶ for Is? I kept reading. From the sense, I worked out that the word was "THIS" and the odd-looking letter was "th". Once I realized that, it wasn't all that hard to read if I read aloud, or at least moved my lips as I read.

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SAY BIS

Proem

Now it is my own fault that I am here and doing the bidding of a Dragon?

I was out in be castle gardens when I saw the prettiest bird: blue and purple and green and red, like a bright painted bunting. I wasn't supposed to leave the castle keep, except with my nursemaid or tutor. But be bird hopped right in front of me. It hopped a few steps away when I talked to it. So I followed. When it went through the postern gate, I squeezed through the bars after it. It would flit or hop and I would skip and jump. Be castle got a little farther away a little farther still until finally it disappeared. But be bird had alit on a mound of dirt. I said bad bird see what you made me do.

Suddenly in a flash of color be bird flew up up up, and I looked up, too.

I lost sight of be pretty little bird.

Instead, I saw a huge wing. It was attached to an even bigger body. It looked nothing like any bird I had ever seen. Then I saw its head, which was pointed and had lots of teeth. It opened its mouth. I did not know what to expect. Certainly not.

"You. Who are you?"

"I am a princess."

"Pat means you, Princess, are now my prisoner."

I am supposed to write down exactly what we said but I cannot remember everything and I am sure all that really matters is the question the Dragon asked and what came after it.

"Can you read and write?"

"Of course," I said, though I am forced to confess I had only learned my letters and had mostly written princess...princess...princess...hundreds of times.

"Good. You will write My History. When you finish, you can go home. Until then you will be my prisoner."

"What will I write with? What will I write on?"

The Dragon bent down and put its huge scaly paw into a big mound and pulled out one gold rock and one silvery one. With the free paw it scratched two smallish holes in the side of a boulder and put the golden rock in one hole and the silver in the other. Then with one slow breath of flame from between all those Dragon teeth the solid metals oozed into liquid gold and silver. Then the Dragon stared at me. At my brooch and my clothes. I was wearing my favorite dress with a pale blue mantle. He lowered his head and nodded toward the brooch and my dress and said

"Use them with these."

I looked down and up. I unpinned my pretty brooch. I stuck the wire that had been holding my mantle together into the silver liquid. I bent over to pick up a dried leaf by my foot.

"No."

"To practice."

"No."

I held tight to my mantle and tried not to cry. Dragon leaned down again and bit an almost perfect little square out of it.

"Use that."

"What am I to write?"

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SAY PIS

Primo

"I was an egg. I was inside a hard shell. I have forgotten what it felt like. I cannot even remember breaking through it. The first memory I have is the island. No one else was on this island so I was left here or I fell from the sky onto it. I do not know how I got here because no one ever told me.

"I remember once when I saw a boat near my cove. A sailor pointed right at me and said Dragon. I had my head on a big boulder. I slipped behind the rock and heard another voice say dragons are a myth which seemed to be a way of saying I was not real at all. That is why I have to have my story written down.

"That is why I am telling you my story and you must write it down as I say it. Without parents and without friends no one knows about you and you don't know about yourself. I am here and I have a story and I want at least one princess to know I exist.

"I am not a pretend dragon.

"My island exists, and the sea exists, and the mound with my treasure exists right here.

"So that is where I begin."

* * * * *

SAY PIS

Secundo

"I had to learn how to do everything myself. I didn't know there was anything strange or unusual in that. My first memory was being hungry. My second was of trying to stop that feeling.

"I tried everything. I licked the place where I was born. It tasted dry and bitter. I nibbled a clump of grass. I bit bushes. I tried berries and peaches and apricots and apples and some leaves. Birch and mint were okay. Anise was best. It is still my favorite.

"One day I heard SPLAT and turned to see a shell crack open and out come not someone who looked like me but an oozy liquid. I tried that. I liked it. But I had no idea how I would get more. I tried a bit of *my* shell, which was terrible.

"I soon learned eggs often fall out of trees. When they did, I lapped up what came out. There were lots of birds and lots of eggs.

"I stopped being hungry when I ate."

* * * * *

SAY PIS

TERTIO

"I kept trying þings. At first my legs were weak and I sort of tumbled when I moved so I only explored near where I was born.

"I did not like tumbling. It made me dizzy. Sometimes I would roll into a sharp stone or tree root and þat hurt. But my legs were small compared to þe rest of my body. Sometimes I became so frustrated I would kick and fall down.

"Once while kicking angrily I flipped over backward and getting up again was a problem. My tail had softened þe fall and I rested my head on its tip. I looked around. I saw birds in þe air and on þe ground and in þe water. Unable to stand I watched þem.

"Every bird moving on the ground gripped with its toes and picked up one foot from the ground just a little and set it back down a little forward of where it had just been. It did þe same wiþ the other. Rocking a little back and forth and side to side þey went forward slowly. Sometimes they seemed to skip or run but þey never kicked. When þey wanted to go really fast þey flew.

"I saw no birds napping on þeir tails but none had a tail like mine. Birds used tails to balance on þe ground and in þe air and even in þe water.

"After rolling side to side for awhile I decided to try to use my tail to get up. It was bigger and stronger þan my legs. I concentrated really hard and pushed my tail toward þe ground while keeping þe tip pressed against my head and pushing it þe oþer way. Suddenly I was back on my feet.

"Once I was up, I tried moving my tail back toward þe ground and side to side as I picked up one foot just a little off the ground and put it down a little forward of where it had been. I did þe same wiþ þe oþer. I practiced all day by walking in a big circle starting from where I was near þe sea. Around and around in smaller and smaller circles I went until I found myself in þe middle of my woods. I sat down. I was very tired."

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SAY PIS

QUARTO

"I had learned to walk by being still and watching. It had seemed natural to kick but wrong to fall. Now unexpected to learn to walk by first doing nothing. I wondered if I could learn to swim þat way.

"I walked straight to þe shore wiþout circling because I wanted to get to water quickly and

walking in circles had taken a long time. When I got to sand I sat down and looked out to sea. I watched birds land on the water and turtles bob. I noticed the water birds all held their tails up out of the water unless they dove, which not many of them did. They also kept their wings folded at their sides. I could not see what they did with their feet.

"I had seen a lizard waddle along shifting its weight in one direction and then be over on its way to the water. So I tried lying down and twisting through the sand, but my head and my wings made me feel so heavy I could hardly move. Finally, I figured as long as I was already lying down I might as well keep going a little farther into the water and look around.

"I lifted my wings a little to make myself feel lighter, then swished my tail right and left until my mouth touched water. After a gulp of saltiness, I kept my mouth closed and breathed through my nose. Not good either. I tried holding my breath and discovered I was pretty good at that.

"I still had to get my whole head under water. I wasn't sure if I would be able to see anything once I did but I lowered my face all the way in. Once I got used to the sensation and accustomed my eyes to the initial sting I saw lots of feet: Duck feet in pairs and turtle feet in fours and fish with waving fins, which looked a little like wings and a little like feet. Everyone was kicking feet or flapping fins.

"I slid the rest of the way in on the wet sand, careful first to lift my head and keep my wings and tail out of the water. Then I kicked all four of my feet and went forward easily. I practiced just using my forepaws and just using my back paws. I could go at different speeds depending on how hard I kicked. My wings and tail kept me balanced on the water and I could also use them to change directions.

"The water felt so good I paddled around the island ten times. My tail began to droop and it got difficult to hold my head up. My energy was almost gone but I was happy. When I crawled back onto dry sand, I closed my eyes. I was so tired.

* * * * *

SAY PIS

Quinto

"As I lay there too tired to open my eyes I became aware of all sorts of sounds. Lap lap lap of waves. Woo woo woo of wind. Trills and chirps and peeps of birds. I tried to understand them all. The wind and sea seemed only to speak to one another. The louder the woo of wind the louder the lap of waves. Opening an eye I saw how when the wind blew leaves or sand the sea made big waves. Lapping was lowest when wind hardly seemed to blow at all.

"Birds talked to one another. At first the songs all sounded very different yet always seemed to speak to what was happening near where they flew or nested. When a big bird got close to a small nest, the sounds got louder. When a gull or catbird dove for food and another bird went for

þe same crumó, þe sound was of one or tuo voices. Some birds seemed to sing to one anoper in long elaborate calls as if showing off or wanting attention. Even wiþ all þat variety what was said seemed to be variations on For Me Me Me or Go Away way way and ðANGER ðANGER ðANGER. No matter how elaborate þe song, it seemed to come down to þose þree messages.

"When I heard a bird coming my way, I reached out my paw and I heard ugly squawks. ðANGER ðANGER ðANGER. I tried to make bird sounds. I sang badly. I wanted to sound like a robin I had heard singing, but I sounded more like a crow or a gull. Everything I sang sounded like a call of ðANGER or Me Me Me.

"My legs still felt wobbly from all þat swimming so I listened some more. I heard a new sound. It was coming from þe water. I opened my eyes and saw a big wooden vessel, and in it creatures made noise. It was þe first time I saw and heard humans. Þeir sounds varied. Some went on and on like wrens or warblers. Others were short and staccato like crows or jays. Þe first word I understood was No.

"I sat up and practiced No No No No No. Þe speakers let go of þeir big wings and tail and þe vessel twirled around into þe wind and waves. Þey began jumping into þe sea and swimming away from my island. Þe vessel floated toward me.

"I spent þe rest of þe afternoon taking þe vessel apart. It was like a fallen tree. But at þe very bottom were lots of shiny þings. I made a pile of all þe sparkling stones and glittering rocks. I wasn't sure what to do wiþ þem yet so I dug a hole and put þem inside to keep þe wind and þe waves from taking þem back.

"Þe next time I heard human sounds I was more careful to hide behind a boulder. I listened to what I heard and once in a while took a quick look. I learned a lot of words þat way. I also learned my name. Dragon. Some would not believe what þey saw. Some would not believe what they heard no matter who spoke."

* * * * *

say þis

Sixto

"My early history has come to an end.

"You can go home now.

"It will be easy for you to find your way back to þe castle. Just follow þe root. You can see its shadow since þe soil is so sandy. I'll watch for a while from here as I learn to fly."

"You could learn to fly by taking me home. It would be good practice."

"Write that down and his. I have heard some sailors say Kings slay dragons. Your father the king might try to kill me."

"You told me other sailors say you are a myth. If we leave late at night during a new moon, I bet no one in the castle would see you or believe it if they do. Please please please."

"Write these last words. Listen. We will see."



The Arkenstone
by Daniel Thompson