



# HIC DRACONIS EST

by Meaghan Craven

**M**y piano teacher's house was filled with her mother's paintings. Hanging above Glenda Stillings's piano was a painting of Christ floating over a lake, held up by an open parachute. Below Him, in the shallows of the lake, were three naked women—and one other, set apart. Her face was upturned and flushed, her flesh glistening from a recent dip in the lake, her eyes closed, her lips parted. The more I viewed the painting, the more ardently I longed to feel the happiness of that beautiful lady.

I didn't know a thing about Christianity, but I developed a habit of praying before bed. I began crossing myself in secret and first coveting, then stealing my friends' Sunday school books. I was not above ripping out pages from these texts, especially the ones featuring pictures of Jesus. I forced my sister to hold a sheet above her head, parachute-style, and jump from the top bunk while I fainted against the dresser. I always prayed for the same thing—that He would visit me too.

ILLUSTRATION BY LARRY BOWHAY



It wasn't long before my secret escaped into the unforgiving circle of the neighbourhood children's court. I was waiting for my lesson at Glenda's one day, reading a book. Kate Cridlow was finishing her massacre of Für Elise when Glenda left the room for a glass of water. Rigid with righteousness and hissing through her mistakes, Kate asked, "Why would He come to you anyway, Lara McDonald? You haven't even been baptized," and then, "Your parents are heathens." She looked over her shoulder to stick her tongue out at me.

Overcome by the forced revelation, I dropped the book and began to cry. She was right, I was not a child of God; I had no hope. And there was no goddamned way my furiously atheist parents would let me slip down to the local font for an initiation into God's kingdom. I looked up at the picture above the piano and through my tears, its beauty seemed a criminal temptation.

Glenda returned at the climax of my sobbing, and after looking at both of us, thanked Kate and sent her on her way. It was 5 o'clock on a Wednesday, time for my lesson, but instead of inviting me to the bench, Glenda joined me on the couch. She asked me what was wrong, and,

defenceless, having given up on my dream completely, I spilled my unrealized hopes to her, pointing shakily at the painting as I did so.

Instead of holding my hand and telling me that Jesus touches everyone in his own way, or that miracles do not happen very often anyway, instead of

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telling me that Jesus loved me even though I wasn't baptized, that we would all meet Him in the end, Glenda told me a story:

Glenda and her twin brother Timothy were inseparable. The small room they shared was lined with low bookshelves, above which hung the carefully stuck and mounted bodies of butterflies, caterpillars, moths, beetles, and grasshoppers. The glory of their collection was also the final addition, which had its spot above Timothy's bed. It was the whole and continuous skin of a rat-

lesnake that the pair had found abandoned in the field north of the house one warm and wonderful afternoon, shortly after the miracle occurred. Some say, and Glenda still maintains, that despite all other evidence found, it was the only true relic of the miracle. In fact, not only was it the only relic, but it was like the greatest of miracle relics. Like the pieces of cloth and bits of bone that crusaders and pilgrims once exhausted their horses to view.

It was a lovely skin, long and translucent with faint tone gradations that must have adorned the body, just before. It bore no warriors, like Cadmus's great dragon, but it shone. Beautiful. Glenda would fall asleep on her side, looking at the skin, encased in glass, bathed in and reflecting light from the summer moon and stars outside the window. While Timothy still slept in his bed, the snake allowed Glenda to sleep with a sense of completion.

By the age of seven, Glenda thought she knew all the miracle basics—the Burning Bush, the Parting of the Red Sea, the Ecstasy of Theresa, the Feeding of the 5,000, Lazarus. And of course, she knew all about other kinds of miracles because of their neighbours, people like Harry Wolfe and his wives and children who believed Christ was the first American missionary, the first great proselytizer. Ted, Glenda's father, a fallen Jesuit missionary turned Communist schoolteacher, avoided all religious activity.

But Glenda's artist mother, Judith, though Anglican, struggled to find the poetic in Mormon doctrine and miracle. Judith was most fascinated by the story of Jesus appearing to the natives in South America, and tried to incorporate this theme into her own paintings. Of these, Glenda's favourite was entitled simply "Miracle." It was a painting of a lake and an ecstatic woman watching Christ descend by parachute, His bright halo scorching the silk. The ecstasiant bore a striking resemblance to a small-town hussy whom Judith used as a model from time to time, which always made Ted somewhat nervous.

The miracle occurred on a Saturday in August 1940. Saturday's main activity of that summer was picking vegetables in Mr. Prin's garden. And that was what they were doing when it happened. Mr. Prin would let the children pick vegetables and berries for themselves if they also pulled the weeds that surrounded the vegetables. They sat on the ground, back to back in their play clothes, digging their toes into the earth, and searched for the surprise of a red berry beneath a green leaf. This was their first fertile summer; they were children of the Depression. Still, they were frustrated by how difficult it was to find strawberries that day. By the end of an hour they had only half-filled one of their buckets, and the space between their fingernails and fingertips was hard-packed with dirt.

They stopped to loosen the dirt from their fingers and to brush away the clumps embedded in their knees. When they stood up and stretched, they were suddenly overcome by that darkness when blood all rushes somewhere in a hurry.

But it was from no common head rush that they recovered. When they felt sunlight again, the big lady was standing in front of them.

She looked like their friend Lucy's older sister, with the same big nose and straggly hair, but she had a beard and bushier eyebrows, and smelled like rotting vegetables and stillborn calves. She seemed very happy to see them, as though she had been looking a long time and found them just as she was about to give up. When they saw her, they immediately felt a wave of nausea, the smell of death. "What is that smell, Tim?" Glenda whispered, "Is it her?"

"It's him, all right," Tim replied. For she was He.

He wasted no time. In a voice both shriek and whistle, He said He was Jesus Christ the son of God, the King of the Jews, and then, assuming they knew Latin and ancient cartography, added, "Primus, hic draconis est. Hic draconis est." He took their hands in His, gathered them unto Him, holding their fingers like one might hold fragile flowers, rare coral, and looked intently at their faces the way their mother looked at them when she was saying something she thought they would remember for the rest of their lives. While they squirmed and tried to remove their fingers from his sticky, dirty hands, He smiled and said that He would be taking Timothy soon, but that He would leave Glenda to live to a good old age. He said something about twins and the benefit of having half your soul in Heaven and half on Earth. Letting go of their hands, He stood back, breathing death and dust and squished grasshoppers and depression and the threat of separation into their lungs.

The sky gathered into a dense wall behind Him, his halo coloured by the deepest belly of a thunderhead. He draped darkness around Himself. He wrapped Himself in a starless, still, cloud-shrouded night.

Glenda and Timothy looked from his eyes to their hands and trembled. Then the sky thinned and the sun shone again and He smiled and released himself from his terrible persona. He asked them what they were doing. When they loosened their tongues enough to say that they were picking berries for their mother, He said, "May I have one to taste?" They held their buckets behind their backs. Tim said, "Jesus, if you want one, there are plenty on the plant. It took us forever just to get these."

"Yeah, Jesus, get your own," Glenda added. He wasn't

taking Timothy anywhere and He sure wasn't getting any of her strawberries.

He smiled again, showing His crooked, ugly, stained teeth, bent over and reached His hand into the patch, pulling it out fist full of red-ripe-soft berries. He put all of them into their empty buckets, save one which He popped in His mouth, a cavernous maw that looked ready to swallow just about anything. Then He walked away, through the berry-bushes, snagging His smelly, raggedy clothes on the raspberry branches as He went.

Tim and Glenda looked at each other full of awe, knowing suddenly and without question that it was Jesus, the one they heard their father curse and their mother invoke. They murmured the words



"hic draconis est" and laughed nervously, holding their arms crossed in front of their chests to still their shaking.

An hour later found them showing Mr. Prin exactly where Jesus had approached them. The berry patch looked the same as before except for the barrel of fresh fish, still moving, just barely dead, and the crate full of steaming, freshly baked bread.

"Loaves and fishes," he whispered, "You have met our

saviour, children. What did He tell you?"

"Heek dragons ess, that Glenda will live to be old, that He will take me away," Timothy said solemnly. "And he smelled like the devil, too."

"What will you do with all the fish, Mr. Prin?" Glenda asked, pinching Timothy's elbow, taking short, quick breaths to restrain herself. The whole incident had put the giggles in her. She had half-decided that it couldn't have been Jesus after all. When Jesus came to visit mortals he was clothed in white and held his hands up so that everyone could see the holes. And his beard was long and clean. He wore sandals over his long toes, not scuffed old oxfords. And his eyes were deep and warm and he was followed by the sound of trumpets and soft, white lambs. Besides, as bad as her father said He was, He couldn't be as terrible as the person they had just met. And fish. Who wanted fish, anyway?

Mr. Prin sent for two boys to help him bring the bread and fish back to his house. But when the boys went to

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collect the barrel and the crate, they found only a stack of stones; upon each stone was carved the same rune, a big one. A snake.

Over the next week the local Baptist community rallied around the twins, asking them again and again what had happened, how He

was dressed, what He had done. How He had appeared to them. Ted Stillings was sure it was all nonsense—

"Probably just some hobo trying to find work in the fields, trying to play a prank, scare some kids... Judith, don't let them out of your sight for a while." And under his breath to her, "Maybe this guy really does fancy taking Tim."

Judith remained silent but painted more and more "visitation" pieces. She tried to imagine what the children must have felt when He spoke to them, and seeing their frightened faces, knew that it probably wasn't the rapture she had portrayed in "Miracle." Perhaps not everyone reacted to Christ in the same way. She became obsessed with finding the perfect emotional response to a visit from the Lord. The thought that Jesus might take Timothy away, that Timothy might die, was far from her artist's mind.

Mr. Prin collected the stones and called in an expert in

all things biblical, a Mr. Josiah Deptford from Lethbridge, to try to understand what had happened, and why. Deptford spent about four days with the runes in Mr. Prin's front room, then took them to Lethbridge with him, claiming that he had some references there that he would need to verify their meaning. No one heard from him again, but later Martha Bartley saw a photo of him in the Salt Lake City newspaper that her sister sent her every month. Deptford was pictured in a finely cut suit, a glamorous blonde attached to either arm. The caption read: "New Money Feels Good—Canadian Miracle Hunter Makes it Big!"

Soon the miracle was featured not only in the small newspapers of the area, but in the *Calgary Herald*, and across the mountains in Vancouver. There were editorials. Words like "hoax" and "fraud" and "country bumpkins innocent to set-up" were used, and it was the subject of much debate for at least three weeks. And then there was silence, and the twins were alone with themselves again. There was silence between them then too. After making promise after promise never to leave each other, never to let anyone take the other away, there was not much to say. After taking turns night after night watching over each other, fearful and remembering the smell, they were mostly too tired to speak.

Ted maintained that they should stay near, never leave the house without him or Judith. But, tired and afraid as they were, after weeks of confinement they were restless.

On that wonderful, terrible Saturday Judith announced that she would paint "the apple tree in the back yard" and Ted went to the store for a newspaper. As soon as their mother was occupied with her work and their father had made the turn in the road, Glenda and Tim looked at each other. Their fear of being separated quashed by the blue sky and the warm sun and the small, slight breeze sliding down the mountains, they set to work. One took water, the other took bread, one out the back door, one out the front. They both ran, knowing where they would meet—the usual place behind the granaries, north, up where the wheat fields crackled softly.

They met on the cattle path leading there. "I think that we should catch a dragon fly today, Glennie. Maybe that was what He meant about dragons," Timothy wheezed, breathless from the run. It was the first time either of them had spoken directly about what Jesus had said to them.

"Maybe. Maybe we'll catch a big one," Glenda ran up behind him and pushed him aside, "And I'm gonna catch it without you, ya Stinky Jesus!"

They ran, Glenda pushing ahead the way that she always did, until, out of breath, they reached the grana-

ries, recently cleaned, hopeful, ready for the September wheat to be poured into them. They sat to rest on a large stone and it was then, while Timothy was pulling the water out of his bag that Glenda saw the snake.

“Timothy,” she hissed, “Look!”

The snake, new shades of beige and brown shining even in the shade of the wheat plants, was slowly slipping out of its skin. Eyes once cloudy with old scales brightly surveyed the children. Pushing itself labouriously around a rock not five feet from them, its head met its tail-skin, then, shaking free of its former coat altogether, it contemplated whether to attack or rush to the field, through the wheat to the corn beyond. Beautiful. Earth and air and fire and water. The best, most perfect gift. Strong and silent and terrifying, it promised a quick and pointless death. The snake turned its head to them, its eyes dilating. It tasted the air just once before moving into the expanse of wheat which bent to swallow it, then straightened.

“Oh, Timmy, come here. Come now!” Glenda was already lifting the snakeskin from around the rock. “It wasn’t dragon flies that He was talking about at all!”

They picked up the skin carefully, so long and fresh they could still smell snake body on it; they smelled the nothing smell that took away the odour of Jesus which had lingered in their nostrils. They could hear rattling and the hiss of a forked tongue pushing out past pointed teeth. They could feel coiling muscles and a stream of air, dusty from its nostrils. They emptied the bag that held the bread and carefully folded the skin into it, then sat, flushed, triumphant, on the stone around which the skin had curled. They ate bread and drank water, in their excitement spilling crumbs and liquid, dampening the earth with libations where they sat. They were silent together, but happily, and threw bread to the gulls that had gathered to eat the decade-old grain spilled by the bins. But slowly, through their silence, they knew.

They walked home holding hands. Timothy carried the bag containing the snakeskin. He held it away from his body as he walked; he did not swing it. He held it as if it contained something precious. Something like eggs, or fine china, or a puppy still eyes closed.

When they arrived home Ted and Judith looked at them. They saw the snake, and looked away. Judith told them to wash their hands. Ted took the snake to his study, shaking. He thought about the old map he had seen when he was a boy in Oxford, walking through the Bodleian with his father. Those small words printed on the parts where no one had been. *Hic draconis est*. “Here be dragons.” Who would go to dragon-haunts? Who would seek that out? As a boy had he wanted to go to

those places, as a young man he did. Now in retreat within this great, open, seemingly spiritless country, he feared them. As he laid the snakeskin down upon his desk, at that very moment, he discovered that he had become paralysed with fear.

The next day Ted bought some glass and a board upon which to mount the snake. He nailed it up directly over Timothy’s bed. The scales still crisp beneath the glass. The children loved it and hated it, prayed to it for protection, knowing it meant frightening things. They looked at it night after night before they fell asleep, half expecting something from it. Hoping for another miracle. Ted told them the story of Cadmus, how he sowed the teeth of the serpent his men killed and about the warriors that sprang from those teeth. About how those warriors helped him to build the city of Thebes and to appease the gods. But, the redemption that Cadmus gained from his dragon they could only faintly discern. Glenda thought she could see warriors balancing carefully in the scales that hung above Timothy’s bed. She dreamed about the city that she and Timothy would build.

Glenda sat on her small bed on the night that Timothy died, looking at the skin, then down at a fever-distraught Timothy, then to the skin again, to the moon that was shining in from the outside. *Hic draconis est*. She looked up to the moon and across to Timothy until at last she realized that Timothy wasn’t there any more.

After she told me the story, Glenda rose from the couch and moved to the piano. She pushed the Mozart bust aside, revealing another small painting. This one was of a family—a mother, a father, a girl and a boy. Judith had found the truest expression on meeting the Lord. They stood, terror written on their faces, surrounded by wheat fields and dragons. Jesus was nowhere to be seen.

**Meaghan Craven** lives, writes and mothers in Calgary. *Hic Draconis Est* is taken from a work in progress.

