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The Seventh Dragon
by Sheila Finch
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First published in Fantasy Book, 1985

Fictionwise Contemporary
Fantasy

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Thomas saw the first dragon when he was six and on the way to the dentist with his big sister Margaret. It stood at the intersection of Cherry Avenue and Pacific Coast Highway, on the southwest corner of Signal Hill, and it was waiting for the light to change. It had little eyes and twinkly green scales like the sequins on Salome's costume that Margaret wore in the Sunday School play.

Thomas was enchanted. "Look!"

Margaret didn't see it, but she'd spent all ten years of her life on the Hill -- a two square mile town of oil wells and palm trees and drilling supply companies smack in the middle of the city of Long Beach -- which made her an expert on dragons.

"There's lots of dragons on the Hill!" she told him scornfully.

"One's nothing. You have to see seven for it to count."

"What happens then?" Thomas asked.

But Margaret seized his hand and dragged him another block -- he was hanging back, looking over his shoulder to see if the dragon got tired of waiting and ran across, the way Gran did sometimes when she forgot she was supposed to be setting an example.

He did his best to be brave when the dentist started poking in his mouth, because his Sunday school teacher read them a story about a special man who made friends with a lion, and Thomas thought dragons couldn't be much different from lions. The only way he knew to be special was not to bite the dentist's fingers when he really wanted to. But he didn't see the dragon again on the way home, even after they passed the sign that said "Welcome to Signal Hill." He felt very sad that he wasn't special enough yet.

Gran's reaction when he got home and told her was rather different. She took him by the ear and led to the kitchen where she washed his mouth out with soap.

"That's what you get for telling lies," she said as his sobs came out in rainbow bubbles.

"I did see a dragon," Thomas bravely insisted. "But only once."

Gran pushed his face back into the sudsy water.

Afterwards she made him sit on a little stool in the corner by the refrigerator that shook the floorboards every time it turned on. He didn't usually mind this, because there was a crack in the wallpaper that went right through the wooden planks of the wall so he could see outside, and if he squinted hard he could even see an oil pump on the Hill riding up and down under the palm trees. Thomas particularly liked watching this pump because it

had been painted to look as if it had a face with feeler-things made out of some springy stuff that bobbed about as it moved. It reminded Thomas of the real dragon he'd seen. In fact, it was probably that very oil well that made him decide to work in a gas station when he grew up. But it was hard to concentrate on screwing his eyes up properly when he kept tasting soap.

* * * *

Thomas fidgeted on the hard leather couch in the new glass medical building that now stood where the dentist's office had once been down on Atlantic in Long Beach. He had been very careful to tell the story right and not make a mistake because he knew it was important. But so much concentrating was hard work. Behind his desk, Dr. Sigmund Angstrom made a steeple of his long fingers.

"And your mother?" he prompted.

Thomas thought back over the more than thirty years since he first saw a dragon. "Mom was busy with the twins -- they were about two years old then, and a heap of trouble. And she had to work long hours at the Bide-a-Wee Motel on Pacific Coast Highway after Pa left. Pa was a rigger for Petrolane Oil Company, but he got a better job in Saudi Arabia."

Dr. Angstrom wrote something on the small pad in front of him, and Thomas saw him out of the corner of his eye. Thomas was supposed to be lying with his eyes closed, but they kept on opening.

"Is that part about Pa important?" He raised himself onto one elbow and looked at Dr. Angstrom. "He sent us a postcard once, a real nice one with a camel on it."

"What? No, no. A reminder for myself merely. It's time I had a checkup for these old fangs of mine."

Dr. Angstrom's face folded up in a smile that made him look like Gran's fake Japanese fan that Oil Patch Liquors over on Willow had given away to advertise Japanese beer. Gran hadn't approved of alcohol, but the sign said the fans were free to customers and since she was buying a newspaper Gran felt she should get one. It wasn't a Japanese newspaper either, but the store owner didn't want to argue with Gran. Nobody ever did.

Thomas lay back. He couldn't afford more than the one visit. It was up to him to tell Dr. Angstrom the right things so he could figure out what was wrong with him and cure it. There must be something wrong with him (even though he felt all right) because it wasn't natural for a grown man to keep expecting to see dragons on Signal Hill. His boss had told him that just last Monday. His boss was from Armenia or Arabia, some place where they knew all about oil, but he didn't understand about dragons. He'd said if Thomas kept looking for dragons when he was supposed to be pumping gas, he was going to have to look for some other job. Thomas didn't want another job. He liked this one very much; he enjoyed filling the cars up with gas. This is all good oil from under our very own Hill! he'd tell the motorists -- though of course he was smart enough to know that some of the gas came in by tanker truck from Texas and Oklahoma.

He realized his hands were rubbing each other worriedly and made them lie one on each side of his body on the couch where they couldn't touch.

"Well, go on."

Thomas had known early that he'd never be as smart as Margaret, so he'd decided not to be as naughty as the twins; that way, he could be better than somebody in the family. But it hadn't really worked because the twins were so cute growing up in their pink dresses with big bows in their blond curls that even Gran pretended not to notice when they were bad. And Mom kept asking when he was going to be the man around the house now that Pa was gone. Only no matter how hard he tried he was never as good as Margaret at figuring out how to do things -- like stop the washing machine from peeing foam all over the floor when he did the laundry. Or how to cook hot dogs for the twins when Gran was resting so the water didn't boil away and burn the hot dogs on the bottom of the pan.

Even his Sunday School teacher slapped him when he couldn't learn to

recite Scripture with the other kids: "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see -- " He could never remember what he was supposed to say they would see. She wrote on his report card, Thomas should pay more attention. And when he got home, Gran slapped him all over again, just for good measure, she said.

Then he grew up and got the job pumping gas at the station on the corner of Willow and Cherry. Nothing to tell there but work. He had few friends because most of his old school mates had either moved away to Los Angeles or they spent all their spare time in the poker parlors of Hawaiian Gardens, and both places were too far for Thomas to go on his bicycle.

He spent Sundays when the station was closed on top of the Hill where the oil wells were clustered thick. Each summer, some of them would be all shiny with their new coats of paint. It was pretty up there; lots of little wildflowers came poking up through the big clumps of dirt under the palm trees. He used to be able to walk all over the top, looking for dragons. His mutt, Snoopy, chased rabbits and barked because she couldn't catch them. And he could look down into Long Beach and see the oil tankers from Saudi Arabia coming into the harbor. Thomas liked to think that perhaps his Pa had helped pump some of the oil -- it made him feel closer. Then they started taking the oil pumps out and putting condos in, and Signal Hill wasn't the same. Snoopy died about then, too, and Gran wouldn't put up with another dog at her age.

"That's all there is really," Thomas said. He made his eyes stay closed this time so he could think better. "Except that I couldn't stop looking for dragons."

"Most children live in a fantasy world part of the time -- even those who don't live on Signal Hill," Dr. Angstrom said. He was reaching for his pipe and ashtray. Thomas had seen them on his desk, and he recognized the sound the pipe made when Dr. Angstrom knocked it against the ashtray to get the cold ashes out.

It made Thomas feel kind of funny to have to go down to Long Beach to be cured, but he didn't think there even were any of that kind of doctor on the Hill. The foreign name had sounded very fine too, when his boss read it to him out of the yellow pages.

"This is one time when it's an advantage to be perfectly ordinary." Dr. Angstrom made a noise that Thomas knew was supposed to be laughing. "I don't really think you need to be concerned about seeing one dragon!"

"I saw my second dragon when I was nine."

"Ah."

Thomas could smell the pipe smoke now. He'd never learned how to smoke -- not even a cigarette -- because Gran considered it a filthy habit, and his Sunday School teacher had told him it was a sin for a man not to honor his parents. Since he had only his Mom and Gran, he'd figured this meant Gran too.

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

Thomas sat straight up and stared at the ceiling. She'd said it was a sin to tell lies, too. "That was only partly true. Really what I saw was the skeleton of one."

Dr. Angstrom paused with his hand halfway to his mouth, ready to put the pipe back in. "I don't understand."

"We went on a trip with the school. To the La Brea Tar Pits in Los Angeles. The dragon was right there in the middle of the big hall."

"I see. Did the teachers tell you it was a dragon skeleton?"

"They kept calling it something else," he said, overcome again by the sadness of it. "And when I kept telling them they were wrong, they sent me to the principal. I told him what it was too. But I never went on any more field trips."

"Hmm," Dr. Angstrom said. "Well, our time is running short and I have clients waiting -- burning up with need, so to speak -- so we'd better make good use of it. Did you see any more dragons after that?"

He sounded very stern and Thomas thought carefully before he answered. "There were three more -- but they weren't very big ones, and I didn't get a

real good look at them. Do you want me to tell you about them?"

Dr. Angstrom waved his hand about in front of his face.

"And there was another one just last year," Thomas said very softly.

"It was a bit bigger."

Dr. Angstrom didn't seem to hear. "May I ask why this is bothering you now? After all, childhood imagination's one thing, but you're -- "

"Candy," Thomas said shyly.

"Candy?" Dr. Angstrom looked puzzled.

"My girlfriend, Miss Candace Sheree Lipp. Isn't that a pretty name?"

"You have a girlfriend?"

"Well -- " Thomas tried to be as truthful as possible. "She's going to be my girlfriend. But she says she won't go out with me until I stop talking about dragons. She says I'll never get up to seven. Better get dragons off my mind and make room for something else, Candy says."

Dr. Angstrom muttered something about not asking what, but Thomas wanted to tell him anyway.

"She says I have to get a better job if I want to afford a girlfriend. She says it doesn't count when I come into the bar where she works to talk to her. She says we would have to do things. Like go to the Queen Mary or take the ferry boat to Catalina Island, things that cost a lot of money."

"Perhaps she's giving you good advice?"

"But I like my job! I like seeing the little numbers go round on the pump when I fill the gas tanks. I like to polish the windshields so the drivers can see to drive safely. I like -- "

"Yes, yes!"

Dr. Angstrom checked his watch. His eyes looked very tiny behind the thick glasses; they reminded Thomas of Margaret's hamster's eyes. Thomas wanted to bust out laughing. Then he remembered what happened while he was looking after it when Margaret went away to camp.

"Listen carefully, Thomas. I think we can take care of this rather quickly. I'm going to explain something to you, and I want you to try very hard to understand. Okay?"

Thomas nodded.

"Sometimes we use something to stand for something else, something we're afraid to come right out and say. Deep inside we know what's hurting us, but we call it by this other name. Sometimes we even get so clever at this -- game -- that we forget we're playing it. We begin to dream of this game -- this something -- I mean -- "

Dr. Angstrom seemed to be tangled up in a very difficult explanation. Thomas decided to help him out.

"Is that being special?"

"You could say that. Anyway, Thomas, I think you might be using dragons to stand for people who are hurting you. Do you see what I'm getting at?"

"No."

"Look at it this way. Dragons are big and fierce and mean, and in the old days knights had to kill them, right?"

"Not all of -- "

Dr. Angstrom ignored the interruption. "And sometimes people can be that way too, but we can't go around killing them, or even thinking about doing it."

"But -- "

"Think, Thomas. Who was mean to you when you were a boy? Your grandmother? Your Sunday School teacher? Margaret?"

"I don't think that's right," Thomas said doubtfully. But then he stopped. Who washed his mouth out with soap? That certainly was a mean thing to do, especially when he didn't deserve it. But not Margaret. She'd always been his protector.

"What about your boss at the gas station? What about Miss Candy Lips?"

"Lipp," Thomas said, but it was beginning to make sense. "But I don't think Candy -- Maybe the principal who wouldn't let me go on any more field

trips?"

"What about me for heaven's sake?" Dr. Angstrom said. "Tell the truth now. Aren't you a little bit afraid of me?"

And of course, Thomas was.

"You see, Thomas?" Dr. Angstrom beamed at him over the glasses. "When you're afraid of people, when what you'd really like to do is hit back at them for hurting you, you imagine dragons instead. Then you can safely go turning them into skeletons in your mind. It's a very special trick you've learned."

"I only saw a skeleton once," Thomas said. Then he thought about special. "That makes six. Who's the seventh dragon? Not my Mom."

Dr. Angstrom thought for a moment. "Your twin sisters?"

"There's two of them," Thomas pointed out.

"Seven is just a number, Thomas. Perhaps there'll be six, perhaps eight -- "

Thomas shook his head. "Margaret said something special would happen."

Dr. Angstrom consulted his watch again. "It could be anybody in your life -- a teacher -- a cop -- "

"I never had any trouble with policemen!" Thomas said indignantly.

"No, of course not -- "

"They used to come to the Bide-a-Wee Motel all the time to talk to my mom about the clients."

"Well, look at it this way. You've met your seven dragons, Thomas. And so you came to see me, and now it'll be all right. That's what special, you see."

"Six," Thomas said stubbornly. It was important to get that right. "I've only seen six so far."

"It'll come to you in time. Now, if you'll excuse me -- ?"

Dr. Angstrom stood up and Thomas stood up too. Dr. Angstrom came round the desk and patted Thomas on the shoulder as he steered him to the door.

"Just remember to be brave and stand up to those who are hurting you, Thomas. Fight back and you won't have to think about dragons."

Outside Dr. Angstrom's consulting room, the receptionist had her hand out for the money already. Thomas counted out the new dollar bills one of the twins had given him that morning. They looked after his money for him, and took turns coming by to see if he needed anything now that Margaret had moved away. He straightened out the creases and put all the faces the right way up.

The receptionist snatched them from him before he'd hardly finished. He started to walk out of the office, then changed his mind. Stand up to people, Dr. Angstrom said. What was the good of paying all that money if he didn't take the advice?

"That was very rude of you, Miss. You should wait until I'm finished. Thank you."

The receptionist left her mouth open while she stared at him.

Going down in the elevator in the big glass building on Atlantic, Thomas thought about what Dr. Angstrom had said. He didn't really wish his sister Margaret were dead, he decided, even if she had pulled his hair and pinched him when she'd found out about the hamster. She'd always looked after him. It was Margaret who'd kept him home after Gran passed on and Mom started to get as old as Gran used to be, when the principal had wanted to send him away to a school for slow learners. He really missed Margaret now that she was married and moved to San Pedro. The twins were all right, but they didn't have time to have fun with him the way Margaret used to.

As the doors opened on the entrance level, he thought of something awful. If Dr. Angstrom were right, there might be more than seven dragons in his life. After all, hadn't Pa hurt him by leaving when the twins were born? And his friends, when did they ever offer to take him with them to play poker in Hawaiian Gardens? He didn't have to swallow down his anger at them any more. And as for Candy, why, she was the one trying to get him to leave his job. Dr. Angstrom had given Thomas a whole new way of looking at his life. But

there wouldn't be anything special happening.

Margaret had said there would be seven. And she never told him a lie. It was a difficult problem to think about.

Crossing to the big glass doors, he began to feel very sad. Things just wouldn't be the same any more, now that he knew how he really felt about his friends. There weren't any dragons, just a bunch of people being mean to him. That was some joke, thinking he could be special! Thomas rubbed angrily at tears that were squeezing out of his eyes. Everybody back on the Hill was probably laughing at him. "Dumb ol' Thomas, thinks he sees dragons!" It really couldn't be true, could it?

At the door, a big clump of people came shoving their way in past Thomas, and he stood aside to let them, his shoulders slumping. Dust and old bits of newspaper blew in with them,

He had one last hope. Margaret would explain it to him. She'd always made him feel better about things.

Outside, there was a public telephone. Thomas felt around in his pockets for the emergency phone money the twins always made him carry. He listened to the coins clanking down inside and carefully punched out Margaret's number. It gave him a warm feeling to hear her voice.

"Margaret? Remember when I saw my first dragon and you said -- "

"What?" Margaret said.

"Going to the dentist that time I was six," he explained. "You said I had to see seven for it to count."

There was a sound at the other end that reminded him of Dr. Angstrom laughing.

"Margaret? What did you mean?"

"I just made it up, that's all."

"What will happen when I see the seventh?"

"Listen, Thomas," Margaret said. "It's time you put that nonsense out of your head. You're a grown man now."

"They were real dragons, Margaret -- "

"Silly!"

"But you said -- "

Margaret said in a calm voice, "So I lied."

For a moment, he couldn't understand. How could Margaret tell him a lie?

"Why would you do that, Margaret?"

"Maybe I just got tired. You were a difficult kid to look after. It's hard on people dealing with you."

That meant Dr. Angstrom had told him the truth. Nothing special was going to happen in his life. There was no seventh dragon. He put the phone down.

Thomas walked slowly along Atlantic toward Signal Hill, seeing all the cracks and patches in the sidewalk. Nothing seemed worth hurrying for any more. An oil truck went by, making the street tremble and choking him with diesel fumes. He came to a stoplight.

On the corner of Willow and Cherry, right at the edge of Signal Hill, the seventh dragon blew silver smoke rings against the pink evening sky while the light went from yellow to red. Catching Thomas's gaze, the seventh dragon winked a large eye in which all the wonderful green-gold colors of oil swirled together. A scarlet-tipped claw extended lazily toward him.

"I've been waiting for you, Thomas," she said.

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