

DRAGON BREATH

Halt, foul dragon!”

Billy stared at the tall stranger, a ghostly figure draped in dark chain mail. He looked like a knight of some kind, like a toy box action figure come to life. But what was he so mad about? *Could he be yelling at me?*

The knight swung a sword in his right hand. Its brilliant blade flashed in the sun, and his armor jingled all over his body, echoing his swift, skillful moves. With a wave of his shield he barked a challenge. “I fear you not, fiend, nor your hellish fire! Come to battle, and we shall see whom the Creator will protect!”

Billy opened his mouth to answer, but he couldn’t talk. His throat burned like a sizzling sidewalk, and acid bubbled up from his boiling stomach. With a convulsive shudder, he belched a plume of hot, steamy gases, blistering his tongue and scorching

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his lips. A second later a raging river of fire blasted through his gaping mouth and hurtled toward the knight.

The warrior jerked his shield up and tucked his body behind its protective armor. The flaming torrent splashed around the shield's edges, tearing the sword from his hand and enveloping his sleeve. The knight shook his hand and flapped his blazing arm. "Cursed lizard!"

Billy clamped his hand over his mouth and tried to suck cool air between his fingers to soothe his swollen tongue. *What's going on? Did that fire come from me? Does he think I'm the dragon?* Billy looked at his hands. They were normal, eight fingers and two thumbs, no scales or claws. But something was different. A ring glittered on his right index finger. Somehow it looked . . . familiar.

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In the ring's center a dark red stone stared at him like a bloody luminescent eye, the prophetic eye of a mysterious old man, a deep cauldron of swirling scarlet. Billy felt the cyclonic vision drawing him closer and closer, and his mind swam in the dizzying whirlpool. The stone reflected everything around him, even his worried face. As the eye's red glow deepened, Billy's features morphed. His ears grew long and pointed, and his mouth stretched out wide and toothy. Within seconds the transformation was complete. "I *am* a dragon!" he shouted.

The knight appeared again from behind the shield, holding his bare arm away from his body. His sleeve had been scorched to ashes. An angry, reddish brown welt on his forearm oozed curling strings of smoke like the rising fumes of a cattle brand.

"Of course you're a dragon," he bellowed. "Do you think me a fool?" He raised his sword again. This time it cast a laser-like beam through its point, shooting high into the sky, and the

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knight tightened his jaw with renewed strength. "I still fear you not, neither your fire from hell nor your demon wings!"

Wings? Did he say 'wings'? Billy swung his head around. Wings! He tried flapping them. They worked! He flapped them harder, and he felt his body lift from the ground. Ten feet. Twenty feet. He watched the shrinking knight wave his sword, but he could no longer understand his shouts; he squeaked like an enraged mouse, and his words scattered in the wind, becoming a ringing sound, more like an alarm clock than a bellowing knight. It slowly faded away like the sound of a tambourine in the hand of a dozing player.

Billy flew higher and higher until all light seemed to melt away, leaving him floating through a black canopy of calm. The air thinned to a bitter cold vacuum, and his wings flapped against nothingness, finding no air to grab to keep his body aloft. Without warning they collapsed and shrank to the size of butterfly wings. Billy felt like an airborne penguin, frozen and flightless, and he dropped through the vacuum like a sock full of marbles. He flailed his arms, desperately trying to grab something, anything, to stop his fall. He tried to scream, but his voice died in the hollow void. Could anyone save him? Any second he would crash into trees or rocks below, breaking every bone in his body. He closed his eyes. He was falling, falling . . .

Billy shot up to a sitting position. His eyes bulged to read the dim surroundings. He panted, his tongue hanging out like a thirsty spaniel's. Instead of the horrible, cold, falling sensation, he felt softness underneath and warmth over his legs. He sucked his tongue back in and groped through the covers with trembling fingers. With heavy gasps he spat out words of relief. "I'm in bed! It was just a dream!"

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He rubbed his palms against his sweat-dampened cheeks. *No scales!* He craned his neck to get a glimpse of his back, and he tried to reach with his hands, but his tossing and turning must have twisted his pajama top enough to restrict his motion. He jumped to his feet and tiptoed toward the light switch, dodging his half-finished pencil sketches, small wrinkled ghosts in the dawn's obscure glow. With an upward swipe he slapped at the wall. *Missed!* He slapped again. *Ah! Light!*

Billy squeezed his eyes shut and then blinked at the two bulbs in the ceiling fixture. With a series of one-footed hops and careful steps, he maneuvered through his art-strewn room and headed for his mirror, almost afraid to look when he turned his back toward his reflection. He breathed a huge sigh of relief. *No wings!* A sweaty pajama top clung to his shoulders, wrinkled and wet, but it lay flat against his otherwise bare skin. He remembered his fiery breath in the dream and smacked his hot, dry lips. *I feel like I fried that knight and ate him for breakfast!*

With his school clothes tucked under his arm, he shuffled down the hall toward the bathroom, thinking about the dream. It was already fading fast, like fog chased away by a bright morning sun. *Was it a knight? I don't remember. Was I really a dragon?*

Still smacking his lips, he flicked on the light and looked around the bathroom countertop. *Ah, there's the mouthwash.* He grabbed the plastic bottle and read the writing on the side. "Makes your breath sparkling, clean, and cool!" *Well, it works for the guys on television.* Billy swished and gargled several times, but his mouth still felt like used charcoal. *What was the song they sang on the commercial? Oh, yeah. "Tired of that old doggie breath? Make it clean with Super Fresh!"* At this point, doggie breath would have been an improvement.

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Billy frowned at his reflection and slammed the plastic bottle on the countertop. *Nothing helps.*

With one palm on the sink, he leaned toward the mirror, rubbing his chin to feel for any telltale signs of emerging whiskers. Not today. But the zits were under control—that was good. As he straightened his body, he examined the hair on his arms. It seemed thicker and more reddish than ever, even though there wasn't a hint of red in the company of brown follicles on his head, a flattened, ragtag mat of unruly strands that needed a dose of discipline. He brushed his hair with a quick sweep of his fingers, and his thick, short nap perked straight up and then wilted to one side.

Looking closely at his reflection, he leaned forward until he could see the individual pores in his skin. With his mouth open wide, he breathed on his image, straining his eyes to catch any results. The mirror didn't fog up. *Third day in a row!*

He drew back and blew softly on his knuckles. "Ouch!" He shook his hand and doused it with cool water. *Scalded by my own breath!* A red blister appeared under the water's spray. *Wow! My breath's never been this bad before!*

Was it finally time to tell his mom and dad about the problem? Would they make him wear a surgical mask to keep everyone safe? Some of the kids at school already called him "Dragon Breath." He didn't want a new name, like "Lizard Lips" or something.

Maybe it was a fungus, some alien life form that took up residence in his cheeks to create a new civilization. When he ran his tongue along the roof of his mouth, it felt like he was licking glazed pottery, a series of slick ridges that didn't register his tongue's caress. *Aliens that live off saliva? I guess stranger things have happened. I just can't remember when.*

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“William!” Billy heard his mother calling from downstairs. “Hurry up! You still have to eat breakfast before the bus gets here!”

Billy sighed and pulled on his clothes, starting with his favorite pants—the off-white ones with deep pockets on the sides of the lower legs. The right-hand pocket still held two pens and a mechanical pencil, all tightly clipped to the opening. After throwing on a shirt and hurriedly tying his shoes, he headed toward the stairs, pausing for a minute to pet Gandalf. The long-haired cat yawned and arched his back to fully take in Billy’s deep strokes. “I guess you’d never call me Dragon Breath, would you?” Billy rubbed the purring cat one more time and then bounded down the stairs, jackhammering every second stair on the way down. With a long-legged leap, he skipped the last four steps, bringing his tennis shoes in for a slap landing against the wood floor.

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◆ He stopped and listened for a second. *Mom’s humming. That means something good’s cooking.*

He followed the sweet sound, and his nose picked up the delicious smells of morning. He inhaled deeply, relishing the delightful aromas of fried bacon and fresh coffee, and his mood perked up, prompting him to whistle along with his mother’s song, a tune he had heard recently in a movie. *What’s that song called? Something about remembering the past, I think.*

As soon as he walked into the kitchen, she turned toward him and held up a foil pouch and a tall glass of orange juice. “Your father’s having bacon and eggs,” she said, “but I didn’t know if you’d be up on time, so I didn’t make you any. I don’t think there’s time for me to make more.”

Billy grimaced at the silver pouch. “Pop-Tarts again?”

“The early bird gets the hot breakfast. You’re the one who just had to stay up late, you know.”

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Billy took the pouch and glass, leaned against the counter, and sipped the juice while absentmindedly watching his mom bustle around the kitchen. Since his recent growth spurt, he no longer had to reach upward to take something from her hand. Her slender, five-foot-seven frame matched his own, except for the obvious differences, of course. She was definitely female, with shoulder-length hair, lighter than his own, but not quite blonde. Her skin also displayed a lighter tone, with a hint of German or Swedish facial features.

Billy glanced at the breakfast table. His father leaned back in his chair munching a piece of toast while gripping the newspaper with his strong, hairy hands. Billy carried a true blend of his mother and father, his own skin tinted with his dad's tawnier coloring. He had always thought Dad had British ancestors, though when he asked one day, his father had said, "My complexion's too dark, and I'd never be able to get the hang of drinking hot tea."

Billy shook himself out of his trance. "Mom, can I help you with the dishes or something?"

She had just put a frying pan in the sink. "No, thanks. Your dad's going to do them after he eats." She squirted a stream of soap into the pan and turned on the faucet. "Were you working on the poster for the festival last night?"

"No, I wanted to finish that portrait for Dad's friend."

"The one of the basset hound? Dr. Franklin's dog?"

"Yeah, I left it on Dad's—"

"Present and accounted for," a deep voice interrupted. "I have it right here."

Billy swiveled to see his father holding up a large sheet of paper.

"You did a great job," he continued. "It looks just like Maggie."

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With two long strides, Billy stepped over to the table and sat down, placing his glass of juice next to his elbow. “Thanks,” he said, reaching for his dad’s cup of coffee. With his fingers wrapped around the warm mug, he waited, displaying a big smile and a “may I please have a sip?” look. His father glared at him, but Billy knew it was just an act. Although his father’s thick eyebrows had curled downward, and every line on his forty-something face had taken a hairpin turn toward his chin, the gleam in his brown eyes gave away his playacting.

Billy took a long slurp and watched over the edge of the cup while his father hid a big smirk and pretended to be interested again in the drawing. Billy set the cup down, let out a satisfied “Ahhh!” and wiped his mouth with his father’s napkin. “The photo of Maggie that Dr. Franklin gave you was small,” Billy explained, pointing at the paper, “so I blew her up real big on my easel.”

“Old Doc will love it. How do you want to be paid this time?”

Billy took a long drink of his orange juice before answering. “Just tell him to send a check to the Humane Society and put my name on the memo line. They’ll know what to do with it.”

“Now you’re including your name? What are they doing, constructing the Billy Bannister wing for stray cats?”

“Well, they *are* expanding. Gandalf’s buddies need a better place to live, you know.”

“Yes, I remember when you chose Gandalf. Those cat cages were stacked higher than my head.”

“So they need all the help they can get.”

“True, but don’t you want to keep some of the money for yourself?”

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“Not really. I should get plenty at the festival tomorrow night.” Billy smiled and stared at the coffee cup. “Maybe I’ll get enough to get my own coffeemaker.”

His father peeked around the drawing and casually tipped the cup forward to get a look at the penny-sized splotch of coffee remaining at the bottom. “So how much should I tell him to send?”

“I don’t know,” Billy replied, shrugging his shoulders. “Twenty dollars?”

Billy’s dad held up the portrait and gazed at it again. “This may be the best you’ve done yet.” After wiping the table with a clean napkin, he placed the drawing on the surface and began rolling it into a tube. “I’ll ask for fifty. That shouldn’t be a problem for Doc.” He lodged the cylinder between the salt and pepper shakers and picked up his folded newspaper.

“Fifty would be great,” Billy agreed.

“Right. Gandalf’s friends might want to buy you a coffeemaker for Christmas.” His dad let out a broad smile and whacked Billy playfully on the head with his newspaper. Billy tried to grab it, but his father snatched it out of the way just in time. Billy lunged forward, wrapped his arms around his father’s neck, and pulled him to the floor. A world wrestling championship match had commenced right there in the Bannisters’ kitchen, but it wasn’t very convincing with both competitors laughing so hard.

“Boys,” Billy’s mom called from the foyer, “I heard a motor. I think the bus might be here. Kind of early, though.”

Billy jumped up and gave his father a helping hand off the floor. He loved the feel of the larger hand and the manly grasp, and he swelled with pride at his own ability to pull him up, even

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though his dad was at least five inches taller and maybe forty pounds heavier. Not much fat in Dad's pounds, though. Billy made sure of that with their frequent tussles.

"Better keep working out, Dad! One of these days, I'll pin you!"

His father pushed his fingers through his thick, reddish brown hair and laughed. "Not a chance."

Billy didn't bother with his own mussed hair and guzzled the rest of his juice. Just before he reached the hallway, he spun around, walking slowly backwards as he spoke. "Will you still be able to change tomorrow's schedule so you can help me at the festival booth?"

"You bet. Remember what I said when you asked me before?"

Billy smiled and pointed his finger at his father, who pointed right back at him.

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"Count on it," they said at the same time while winking one eye.

They both laughed, and Billy turned again to try to catch the bus. He handed his mother the orange juice glass, gave her a quick peck on the cheek, and grabbed a backpack before dashing out the front door. She winced and rubbed her face, then quickly recovered and waved.

Even in his rush, Billy noticed her pain. He waved back and continued in a fast trot, but he couldn't help thinking that he might have revealed his secret—the secret of his scorching breath. He had been careful to keep his mouth safely away while wrestling with his father; any slip-up could make it obvious.

Billy glanced down Cordelle Road, the two-lane street in front of his house, but the bus wasn't in sight, only a dark blue Cadillac idling at the corner a couple of hundred feet away.

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Strange. Had he already missed the bus? He sprinted across the street to the stop and searched the other end of Cordelle. No bus that way either.

The Cadillac began rolling slowly his way, and Billy stiffened. Did this guy mean trouble? Maybe he was just lost. He squinted and tried to catch a glimpse of the driver, but the rising sun painted a glare on the windshield. A heavy uneasiness churned in his stomach, not nausea or indigestion; it was more a deep-seated worry, a nest of shivers growing in his belly, like a hundred hovering hummingbirds.

Billy was about to cross back to his home side of the road, nonchalantly, of course. He snapped his fingers and shook his head, pretending he had forgotten something, and he took a step onto the asphalt. The Cadillac gunned its engine, and Billy jumped back. The car lurched forward with a tire-biting screech, but at that moment the bus came around a distant bend in the road.

The Cadillac screeched again, this time stopping within ten feet of Billy. The driver's door popped open, and a short, stocky figure stepped out. Billy turned and quickly stepped in the direction of the school, hoping the bus would pick him up a bit farther down the road. *Probably faster than trying to go home. Besides, I can't miss the bus.*

"Bannister!" the driver shouted. "Stop!"

He knows my name. But I don't know him. Just keep walking.

Billy heard the bus engine, and he turned to see the yellow boxy truck pass the Cadillac. It pulled up to his side and stopped.

"Bannister!"

Billy turned. The Cadillac driver was now jogging in his direction. The bus doors swung open, and Billy hopped up the

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steps, feeling the hair on his neck sending a shot of tingles down his back. He waved at the bus driver. "Mr. Horner, close the doors quick."

Mr. Horner pulled a lever, and the door's two panels swung together. Billy looked out the vertical windows. The Cadillac driver stood on the sidewalk with his hands on his hips, staring at the bus. Billy couldn't read his expression. Was he angry? Disappointed? As the bus pulled away, he leaned over and looked again. Would he run back to his car and try to follow?

Billy turned to the bus driver and gave him a questioning look, wondering if he noticed the man. Mr. Horner had never been much for words, but he communicated his thoughts with a masterful collection of at least a thousand prune-faced frowns, one for every negative human emotion imaginable. Today's frown said, "Hurry up, Bannister. I spilled hot coffee on my pants, and I'm in no mood to watch you dawdle."

Billy sighed and looked down the bus's long center aisle. Out the back window he could see the shrinking figure of the Cadillac driver as he walked back to his car. The quaking he had felt in his stomach spread out into his limbs, and he shook all over. *Who was that guy? What did he want with me?*

As he stepped toward the seats, images from the weird dream once again haunted his thoughts. He remembered his hot breath and his mom's pained expression, and he winced at the boiling cauldron still simmering in his stomach. He felt pursued by phantoms, a swarming host of invisible fears. And now a physical stalker lurked close to home, bold and real.

Billy shivered and pulled his backpack up higher. *I feel like a hunted animal, but who's the hunter?*