

## The Sandcastle

Melissa's sandcastle was extraordinary. Four turrets rose from four corners, dark and towering above the dry moat. A small window had been hollowed out by a small finger in the eastern tower from which a Princess Melissa gazed with longing. A blue flag waved from the center of the impenetrable fortress, and the moat housed an emerald, fire breathing dragon. If Princess Melissa looked more like a bit of purple crayon than she looked like regular Melissa, and if the fortress were impenetrable because someone had forgotten to build a door, and if the dragon was not necessarily to scale, no one would say. But that didn't mean they wouldn't say other things.

"That's my dragon," said a boy whose foot was planted dangerously near the eastern tower. "Give it back."

Melissa looked up into the setting sun at the haloed boy. "I found him," she said. She had—he had been abandoned under the swings. She had pulled his majestic head from the dirt and constructed a home worthy of his magnificence. Already, Melissa had the sense that the world did not always automatically provide its citizens with everything they deserved. She did what she could. "You left him. Now he's mine."

The boy pulled his sneakered foot back a millimeter, causing the red lights on the heel to flash. "Please give it back."

This tugged at Melissa's quickly beating warrior heart. "I found him," she said, though "found" now had a hitch.

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They stared each other down, Melissa with narrow brown eyes outlined in sun-highlighted freckles and the boy through wide blue eyes set apart by a small nose. His black shirt hid the sand and dirt that clung much more visibly to Melissa's yellow skirt and blond eyelashes. He blinked first, and Melissa took this as a sign of submission. She turned back to the castle, which troubled her. The ramparts needed to be built for the archers, but how was it to be done without harming the structural integrity of the four turrets?

"It's not mine," the boy said, interrupting her planning and causing her to look up again into the sun. "And I really need it back. Please."

She considered this. "No." She moved the dragon closer, so that it was protected under her shadow. She could see the boy look instinctively for a mother to appeal to. All likely candidates, however, were far away on the other side by the swings, pushing babies or hiding behind books, flirting with the single fathers or talking into phones as large as her face. She herself could not have picked her mother from the playground crowd without effort.

"I asked you nicely," he pointed out. She sighed as loudly and dramatically as she could. Peasants, she thought. Always asking for things. This was why princesses had dragons—for eating peasants. "It's my brother's," he added.

"Then why are you asking for it?"

"He told me I had to."

Melissa blinked rapidly. "He doesn't sound very nice."

"He's not."

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Melissa looked from the dragon to the boy and back again. On closer inspection she could see that while his shirt didn't expose any stains, the side of his head did. Balled fists showed signs of scratches, and there was a small tear in the sleeve of his shirt. "Where is your brother?" He pointed to a boy standing with his arms folded about fifteen yards away. He was taller than both of them, and thicker, but not more than a year or two older. She looked at him very carefully and closed her hand around the terror of Princess Melissa's fortress. A princess would stay at her window; perhaps send her dragon to fight the villain.

Princesses were stupid, she decided. Knights. Knights were much better.

She let go of the dragon, stood, and walked over to the larger boy, the smaller one trailing several yards behind her, dragging his feet with dread and curiosity. When she arrived in front of the smirking pink face, she looked into his eyes, pulled back her leg, and kicked him viciously in both knees, one after the other. She felt her toes connect with his bones with visceral self-righteousness. The larger boy fell to the ground shrieking and within seconds parents swarmed the area, pulling children left and right. Melissa was yanked by her elbow by one of the blonde baby pushers and the little boy was pushed aside as one of the red-haired phone-talkers ran to the downed child.

Melissa and the boy locked eyes as she was dragged, barely able to keep her feet on the ground. He looked in shock, but she smiled widely at him and held her fist aloft in triumph, before she was out of sight. Melissa was victorious.

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Peter crouched so low his face nearly brushed the grass. He was looking for crickets, which he had heard were good luck. He felt like he could use some good luck. Peter had only been in school two weeks of his life, and kindergarten was a nightmare. There were other children everywhere. Other children frightened him, because other children all looked like his brother Max, and his brother Max frightened him. He liked coming to the playground because usually he could ignore the children and look for bugs. There were lots of bugs, and bugs weren't scary at all. There were lady bugs and beetles and spiders and caterpillars and centipedes and if you were very, very careful and stood very, very close, you could count all their legs. He used to be able to do that when he came to the playground alone, before he had to go to school with Max.

His brother's feet appeared under his nose. "That stupid girl took my dragon," said Max, his hand coming down on Peter's shoulder. "Get it."

From his prone position in the grass, Peter could see the girl alone in the sandbox. He had seen her at school, and he did not want to approach her. "Why can't you?" Peter mumbled.

Max used the hand on Peter's shoulder to push him all the way to the ground. He crushed Peter's head into the dirt beneath the swings. Peter's nose itched. He could see a little green inch-worm inching its way out of his peripheral vision. He was afraid Max would see it and squish it. "Fine!" he said, and Max let him up. He looked over at the girl but did not immediately move towards her. He looked back at the ground for the inch-worm.

"Hey stupid," said Max. Peter looked up just as Max shoved him. His sleeve tore on a sharp stick when he fell, and it scratched the pale skin of his arm. "Go get it."

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Peter trudged towards the girl, his ears and arm stinging. She did not look at him as he stood over her. She hummed as she packed sand and carved intricacies into the towers. “That’s my dragon,” he said with his best imitation of Max’s authority. “Give it back.” His aching heart vibrated.

“I found him,” she told him. She shaded her eyes with a hand. “You left him. Now he’s mine.”

His shoe was crumbling the sand around the moat. He knew he should threaten to destroy her sandcastle, but he couldn’t. Max would have been better at this. He shifted his foot back. The lights on his second-hand sneakers flashed in his eyes and he closed them briefly. “Please give it back.”

Her brown eyes hit his. “I found him,” she said. But he heard her word catch. Perhaps he could reason with her after all.

He would have liked to sit with her. To watch her build her castle, help the dragon fly. But this was no time for niceties. “It’s not mine,” Peter said, “and I really need it back. Please.”

He watched her hand twitch. “No.” The hand moved the toy closer, and Peter always recognized when he was going to lose. He looked instinctively into the flock of benign adults who did not look back.

“I asked you nicely,” he pointed out. Her eyes rolled up and she exhaled. Her breath sent thin blond hairs into the air. He watched them fall around her round face before speaking again. “It’s my brother’s.”

“Then why are you asking for it?”

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“He told me I had to.”

“He doesn’t sound very nice.”

Peter automatically rubbed some of the dirt from his hair. “He’s not.” Max was not nice, but Peter knew he just had to be better. If he was better, Max would be nicer. Better at what, that was unclear. The start was getting the dragon back, and this Peter had already lost. His vibrating heart began to hurt his rib cage.

“Where is your brother?” the girl asked. She was beginning to stand, sand raining from her knees. She was no taller than he was, but to him she looked like an avenging goddess. Wondering what she had in mind, he pointed at Max, who stood not far off, watching with his arms crossed. Peter could see his red hands, clenched in fists. He loosened his own. The girl did not look at him as she walked away. She was a flash of yellow cotton as she stopped in front of Max and kicked out both his knees.

Peter made a sound he was glad no one heard, as he watched the tyrant fall to the ground. He was knocked down by the careless hips of a rushing parent, and watched as the girl was dragged from the playground. She grinned at him as she was pulled away, but he could only stare. Peter was in love.

Max was bored with his plastic dragon, so he left it in the dirt under the swings. He was always leaving things in the dirt—toy cars, socks, electronic games, vegetables, his brother. He liked dirt. There wasn’t much you could do with it, but it was always there if you needed to make someone mad; other people did not like dirt. Max stood and surveyed. Playgrounds were dirt

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heavens, and provided endless numbers of minions, though he never needed any other than his brother. His brother was younger, and younger was weaker, and weakness was a punishable offense.

The day was hot, and Max did not like it. He couldn't punish the day for being hot, so he found Peter where he was squatting by the slide, probably looking for gross bugs. He pulled Peter towards the swings, where he knew most of the adults couldn't see them.

"That stupid girl took my dragon," he said, putting a powerful hand on Peter's shoulder. "Get it."

"Why can't you?"

Max knew Peter hadn't meant to be loud enough to hear. His stupid brother never challenged him. He ground Peter's head in beneath the swings, which felt good. Peter tried to speak with dust still in his mouth. Max let him up. He watched his brother look for their mother, and Max glared. Mothers weren't supposed to have favorites, but Peter was her favorite.

"Hey stupid," he said. He waited for his brother's eyes to lift to his before he shoved him. He could feel the cotton shirt thin under his fingers, the dirt clinging and shifting with his skin. "Go get it."

He watched Peter reluctantly march towards the girl. Max had not seen the girl at school. A second grader does not see a kindergartner. He saw her now though and felt uneasy.

He watched Peter trudge towards her and was pleased to have sent his brother so effortlessly into a trap. He could not hear their words, but he watched his brother's nervous hand run through sandy hair, the girl's narrowed eyes. He willed Peter to stomp on the ugly thing the

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girl was making in the sand, but he knew his brother was too stupid to do it. It didn't make sense—if you could do something, why wouldn't you do it?

There was a stick near his foot, so he picked it up and started to swing it like a sword. Once he had his dragon he would see if he could pierce it with the stick. Then he would make it fly back to the girl and her sandcastle and set fire to the turrets, smash the drawbridge, and lay waste to the village. Maybe she would cry. His angry heart swelled with anticipation.

Max made his mother nervous. He made his babysitter nervous. He made his teacher nervous. When the girl stood and began to march towards him, she did not look nervous. The confusion he felt caused him to hesitate, and because he hesitated he was unable to use his height and strength to keep the girl from kicking out his knees. He felt the tremors thread pain up his legs into his stomach as he fell to the ground. He tasted dirt and felt the grains scrape against his eyelids. His scream brought his red-haired mother running, and the shame of relief heated his chest as she touched him. He saw his brother's awestruck face as the girl was dragged from him, before he faced his mother's black dress. Max was defeated.

Thomas walked by the playground on his way to his girlfriend's apartment. He was late, because he did not want to arrive. A critic once wrote in the *New Yorker* that Thomas had no heart—that he had sold it for a one-time contract with *People Magazine* in 2008. As he passed the gate, he saw the vivid plastic dragon and the lopsided sandcastle. He pulled out the camera he kept at all times in his leather bag and walked briskly to the sandbox and snapped photos from above, from the side, from the ground. He did not want to touch it—its childish shape and badly drawn finger-carved designs were natural, were perfect, were gold. He took the photos, arrived at



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his girlfriend's apartment. He broke up with her, he blew up the photos with digitally enhanced colors, he talked a lot about them to his new girlfriend, and finally he presented them at a large New York opening where they were noticed by the people it pays to be noticed by. He sold the photos for a sum total of \$420,000 to buyers in Belgium, Japan, South Africa, and Paraguay, but he lost 124,000 of it betting on turtle races in Chicago. Soon after, he was accused of stealing the photos by a new artist in Brooklyn who sued him for a half a million dollars. He won the suit, but not before spending everything on court related expenses. He moved in with his only friend, who turned out to be dating his ex-girlfriend, who reminded him daily that she had never liked the photos in the first place.

The sandcastle remained miraculously untouched for three days following its construction as children respectfully gave it a wide berth, impressed with its careful, neat architectural lines. On the morning of the fourth day, a parent herding three children and a dog through the park stepped on it while chasing down a Post-It with the pediatrician's name and address.

No one knows what happened to the dragon.