

“Sergio sat up on the edge of the bed and reached for his cigarettes,” Sean typed. “He closed his eyes, unable to tell the rustling of the palms outside from the rustling of the sheets as the beautiful stranger shifted on the bed behind him.”

“No,” said Sean under his breath and deleted the line.

“Sergio blew smoke rings at the ceiling. The beautiful woman in bed next to him rolled onto her side and smiled without opening her eyes. She was the only witness he had. When she awoke, he knew he would have to take her down to the station.”

“Nope,” he said slightly louder than before and deleted the line.

“Sergio,” he heard her whisper. “Wake up darling.” He awoke to the beautiful stranger astride him. His own gun was pointed at his face.”

“No way!” Junior said. When Sean turned on him angrily he shrunk into the armchair where he was curled up with his school-issued ipad. “Oh, sorry Dad. I didn’t mean to distract you. Charlie just texted something really funny to me.”

Ever since they cancelled school, Sean and his son had been sharing an office. Normally Sean had the house to himself all day. But now Junior had set up his ipad and books just a few feet away. Sean’s wife Maggie had taken over the dining room. It was an even bigger mess than the corner office at the law firm she co-founded.

“Hey guys,” said Maggie poking her head into the office. “Ooh. I like this music you two are listening to.”

Junior sat up on his knees and started bouncing in the enormous chair. “Isn’t it awesome? Dad found it on Youtube music. It’s called Deep Focus. It’s perfect for writing!”

“It’s our compromise playlist,” Sean said. “How’s work?”

“Nuts,” she said. “All my finance people are slammed with this new government funding for businesses. And I can’t imagine how many people are going to sue each other when this ends.” She looked at her watch. “Oh God, it’s 2:15. Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt,” she winked. “Please give my apologies to Detective Sergio O’Donnell.”

Sean was a freelance writer. Articles for trade publications. CEO speeches. He had been a reporter but the last magazine he worked for full-time had folded two years earlier. He was successful but bored. Maggie was making money hand-over-fist at her firm so there was no money pressure. He had told her a few months earlier he was dusting off his idea for a series of novels. It was set in the South of France where a Spanish/Irish hothead cop solved murders that involved vintage cars and beautiful women. He had a drawer full of rejection letters from agents, publishers and contests going back to the early 2000s. He and Maggie had agreed he would block off the 2:00 hour every day to work on his fiction before he walked down to the school to pick up Junior.

“So,” said Junior. “What’s going on with Sergio, Dad?”

“Forget about Sergio,” said Sean. “Tell me what you’re working on.”

“I’m writing a novel,” said Junior. “Just like you! Usually at school we have study hall where we have to work on assignments. But because of coronavirus now we can just do whatever we want as long as it’s creative. One of my friends is making imovies. This girl I know is making sculptures. Charlie is making GIFs and memes.”

“GIFs?” said Sean. “For school?”

Charlie and Junior were close. Sean had never met the parents. Sean walked Charlie to and from school. Maggie pretty much handled everything else. The meetings. The open houses.

The play dates. Junior had told Sean plenty about Charlie. Sean knew Charlie had his own iPhone, iPad and laptop and no limits on social media. "I don't want to see any GIFs," said Sean.

"Here's my story," Junior handed him the iPad. "We put our creative projects on this app called Chalk. The teacher can look at what we make. And if she approves it, she can share it with the whole school district. So, like, all the 3rd graders from different schools can look at each other's stuff and get inspired. Every time I write a new chapter, my teacher posts it on Chalk. Yesterday 245 kids looked at my story. Isn't that awesome?"

"Really?" said Sean. "That is awesome."

There was a tally in the top-right-hand corner of the screen. Sean saw the number tick from 245 to 247 in just the few minutes he spent skimming the story. Kaito: Season of Dragons. The setting was mythical but resembled 1990s Japan. A young boy named Kaito is walking to school one day when his village is destroyed by a dragon. Kaito's family is killed. But he discovers that he is descended from dragons (there was a time in this world's history when humans and dragons could marry). This gives him various advantages when fighting or negotiating with the dragon lords in the long human-dragon war that ensues.

"I'm impressed, bud," Sean said. "Well. It's 3:00 on Friday. Let's call it a day."

They both heard the ping of an inbound text. "Dad," said Junior. "Let me see the iPad. That's probably Charlie writing me back."

"You know what?" said Sean. "Charlie can wait. In fact, you've spent enough time on the iPad this week. You can spend the weekend getting fresh air."

"How?" said Junior. "Um, Coronavirus much?"

"You'll think of something," said Sean. "Besides, screens stunt your growth."

"Nuh uh," said Junior. "I'm already almost as tall as Mom."

"Do a craft project or something," said Sean.

"Can I make you a martini?" said Junior.

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Junior made the first martini just like Sean had taught him. Sean made the next three himself. After a family movie, Junior and Maggie were asleep. Sean was too wired from the gin. He wandered to the office with the intention of writing.

He grabbed his laptop and fell into the armchair. Junior's school iPad was sticking out from the cushion. The battery was running low. There were unanswered texts from Charlie.

3:05-*"Bro, why aren't you answering my texts?"*

4:21-*"Bro, is your Dad not letting you use your iPad because it's after school hours?"*

5:32-*"Your stories are so sick. I just read the latest one on Chalk."*

6:19-*"Season of Dragons is awesome!!! I just looked on Chalk and like 500 people have read it now."*

8:05-*"Whoa!!! Are you seeing these comments on Chalk?????"*

"Eight o' five," said Sean. "Where are this kid's parents?"

8:11-*"Text me back. Are U mad at me???"*

8:30-*"Your story is blowing UP."*

8:32-*"OK, since your parents are Amish and don't let you use technology I am taking over."*

8:50-*"Done. Just got you set up on twitter. How was @AuthorSeanWard not taken already? amirite???"*

9:01-*"OK, put up screen shots of every Chalk page of your story as a separate tweet."*

10:00-*"Whoa...YOU ALREADY HAVE 100 FOLLOWERS!!!"*

The ipad went dark.

"Little brat," muttered Sean and stuck the ipad in his desk drawer. He looked at his watch: 10:18. He pulled out his phone and opened twitter. @AuthorSeanWard had 745 followers.

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Sean and Maggie were awakened the next morning by the clacking of typewriter keys. The old Adler typewriter had belonged to Maggie's mom. Unearthing it from the basement and repairing it had been an early quarantine family project. Maggie rolled over and kissed Sean without opening her eyes. "Isn't it wonderful that early bird can just get up by himself now?" she said.

Sean wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. "Totally," he said. "I can remember when he was little. Getting up to turn on Thomas the Tank Engine for him at like 5:00 am."

Maggie dozed. Sean rolled over to his bedside table and opened his phone. It was 9:45. @AuthorSeanWard had 2,537 followers. He must have gasped because Maggie asked, worriedly, "what is it?"

"Nothing," Sean said. "Just, you know, Trump." She groaned and went back to sleep.

He clicked on @AuthorSeanWard's mentions and found hundreds of congratulations and thousands of retweets. He slipped out of bed and put his robe on. He couldn't wait to show Junior. By force of habit he opened his e-mails as he walked to the landing. He froze.

"Dear Sean, I hope you don't mind I tracked you down on LinkedIn after reading Kaito: Season of Dragons. Then I found your e-mail on your freelance website. Amazing stuff! I'm a literary agent and I specialize in young adult fiction. I'd really be interested in discussing your work..."

"Dear Mr. Ward, I'm the fiction critic for the Times. We are doing a story about how creatives are dealing with quarantine. Let me know when you are open for a zoom meeting..."

"Sean, I'm with Brightline books. I don't know if you remember but we had an e-mail exchange a few years back on that detective project of yours. It wasn't right for us at the time. But I'm really excited you've switched over to YA. Are you working with an agent or can we talk directly?"

The clacking of the typewriter had stopped. "Dad?" said Junior. Sean couldn't speak. "Dad, are you coming down?" He heard Junior gallop from the playroom to the espresso machine and flick the kettle on. "Do you want an Americano?"

A few minutes later they were seated at the counter. Sean's coffee steamed.

"How is it? Did I make it right? Americanos are easy. I want to learn how to make Mom a latté. Will you show me later? I love writing on the typewriter. I'm glad you hid my ipad. This way of writing is so much more fun. Plus, I have so many ideas for my book. It's awesome. You can just take pictures of the typed pages with your phone and post them on Chalk for me,

right? Can I eat a piece of cold pizza before Mom comes down? Do you want another Americano?"

Sean had muted his phone so he couldn't tell if the constant buzzing he felt against his leg was texts, calls or e-mails. Junior took the last bite of the piece of pizza and threw the crust to the dog. "Can I go out and ride my bike? I promise to wear my helmet. And I won't get close to anyone. I'll just go around the block."

Sean must have nodded because he heard the garage door open and close. He reached into his pocket and powered his phone down to make the buzzing stop. He went into the playroom and sat down at Junior's typewriter. Two typed pages were stacked to the side. Junior had been showing him the story for a week. But Sean hadn't been reading very closely so he didn't know exactly where he was in the plot.

There was a girl involved now. Her name was Tomoko. She was quick with a knife. She and Kaito had been classmates. She was more popular and had been ignoring him back in the old days. Before the dragons. Now that they had become friends Kaito learned that she too was descended from dragons. She had kept it a secret so as not to be shunned by the other popular kids.

"You can't fight the dragon guild alone," Tomoko said.

"I have always been alone," Kaito said. "I learned long ago that I don't need friends."

She set down her throwing knives and sat next to Kaito on the railing of the bridge. They looked into the water below. Golden koi fish looked up at them. The fish wondered where all of the old people who used to feed them every day had gone.

"Everyone needs friends," Tomoko said.

"I only had one," said Kaito. "I only needed one. My Dad."

"What are you doing?" said Maggie.

"Jesus," said Sean. "You scared me."

"Are you cleaning up this mess?" she said gesturing to the playroom with her mug of tea. "More power to you. It looks even worse than the dining room."

When Junior got back they all went to walk the dog. Sean's mind raced.

He couldn't respond to the agents and publishers whose e-mails were starting to pile up. But he couldn't let them talk to Junior, either. He was a kid and there had to be, like, child labor laws about this kind of stuff. Besides, this was just a school project, not a real novel. But it was good. And who cared whether it was good or not? It was hot. And @AuthorSeanWard was up to 7,619 followers. The agents and publishers who'd been rejecting him for years had all told him. The only way to get a book published was to have a platform. @AuthorSeanWard had a platform.

No, Sean thought: Charlie had the platform. Was Charlie getting DMs from the same agents and publishers that were reaching out to him? Little brat had probably already negotiated a deal with Netflix for the adaptation. Would the story being written by a kid make it sell better or make it seem like a gimmick? Face it: agents and publishers wouldn't want to work with a kid. He let his mind wander.

"Sean Ward, welcome to Fresh Air."

"Thanks, Terry. Good to be with you."

"You dedicated the first book in your Kaito series, Season of Dragons, that has now become a worldwide phenomenon and been adapted as a series on Netflix, to your son Sean, Jr. Why?"

"Well this whole thing started last year during the quarantine. Junior and I had to share an office so it was a great time for us to bond. We have always bonded over creativity. He was the first person to read my Kaito stories. It was just something fun for us to do together and the rest is history."

I mean, that's basically true, Sean thought. He showed it to me every day. Plus, even if it got published under his name the publisher would bring in a professional writer to punch it up anyway. He'd be saving Junior money on a ghostwriter.

"Of course, as you know, the release of Kaito: Season of Dragons has not been without controversy online."

"Terry, I try not to focus on the trolls."

"But what about Charlie Abelson? He was not just some online troll. He claimed he was your son's best friend and that it was actually your son who created Kaito. Charlie said this all in a TikTok video that was posted before he and his entire family disappeared."

"As I have said through my lawyer Maggie Ward many times, Terry, our family has no knowledge of young Mr. Abelson's whereabouts and his accusations are entirely without merit."

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When they returned from their walk, the house phone rang.

"We have a landline?" said Junior.

Maggie walked across the kitchen to pick it up. "Hello?" she said as Junior ran back to his typewriter. "Oh, wow, yes. Sorry, yes. Just one second."

She put her hand over the receiver and whispered. "It's a literary agent. He says he wants to talk to you about your book. Oh my god this is so exciting! Do you want me and Junior to leave so we don't bother you? We'll just leave, it's cool. Ahh! So cool!" She pulled out her cellphone and took a picture of Sean's face. "I don't know why I just did that! I love you. Break a leg. Is that what people say?" She chanted as she backed out the back door with Charlie: "Ser-gi-oh! Ser-gi-oh!"

"Hello?" Sean said.

"Sean Ward?" said the agent.

He couldn't speak.

"Sean Ward?" said the agent. "The writer. Do I have the right guy?"

"Yes," said Sean.

"You need to make a deal now," said the agent. "And I hope you take my figuring out your home phone number not as, well, stalkerish. But as a sign that I am the kind of agent who will always go the extra mile for my client."

Sean didn't say anything.

"Love it," said the agent. "You let me do the talking. Man we are going to work wonders together. I'm talking TV rights. I'm talking movie rights. I'm going to email you a contract."

Another long silence.

"Love it!" said the agent. "I'll call you back in a few hours."

Sean ran up the stairs to his office and opened his laptop. He logged into the parents' web portal for Junior's class where the other families' numbers were listed. The Abelsons were the first on the list: Meyer and Winnie. He dialed. It started ringing.

Before Junior was born and Maggie was still an associate at her first job, she got a million-dollar settlement for a client. They went out that night to celebrate. She revealed after a glass of champagne that her entire strategy in the negotiation had been to bluff.

"Hello?" said an old woman.

"May I speak to Charlie please?" said Sean. "I'm the father of one of his friends."

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said. "You just missed him. His grandpa took him fishing. Needed to get him away from all those computers you know? I'm sorry who did you say you were?"

"My name is Sean Ward," he said. "My son is also named Sean. We call him Junior. I'm not sure what your son calls him. And you must be Winnie?"

"That's right," she said. "I'm Charlie's grandmother. Meyer and I adopted him and his sister years ago when my son and daughter-in-law passed away. I can't believe we've never met. Charlie talks about your Sean all the time."

"Well," said Sean, unsure of his next move. "That's great that Charlie and Meyer are out fishing."

"Like I said," said Winnie. "It's all we can do to get him away from those darned computers."

Got it, thought Sean. "That's actually sort of why I was calling Winnie. See, Junior's computer was targeted by an online scam. He opened an e-mail with a virus."

"Oh dear," said Winnie.

"Now, I've decoded this virus," said Sean. "I work in computers, you know. Now this virus will infect whatever computer my son's device is in contact with most often. That would be Charlie's of course. It gets a little technical after that. I don't want to bore you with the details. How long do you think they will be gone fishing?"

"Oh, it could be hours," said Winnie. "Charlie didn't seem too excited about it. But Meyer is going stir crazy in the house. I made them promise to find a pond where there wouldn't be any other people around. So, I assume they are going well outside the city."

"Hmm," said Sean. "That's too long. By then it will have infected all of Charlie's devices. You know, I would be happy to clean them for you. Cleaning is the technical term we use, of course. Did he take his phone fishing with him?"

"No," said Winnie. "Meyer made him leave that too."

"Well," said Sean. "If you want to just leave them outside in a box or something I can come by, clean them and get them back before they get home. The only problem is I'll need his passwords."

"That's no problem," said Winnie. "I made him write all of his passwords down after I got that letter home from the school about kids and technology?"

Sean found a laptop, ipad and iphone (plus passwords) in a box on their front stoop 15 minutes later. He came home, through the front door and bounded upstairs to find Maggie sitting at his desk.

His laptop was open. She was reading his e-mails. He collapsed in the armchair.

"So," she said. "It doesn't take Sergio O'Donnell to figure out what's going on here."

"Let's face it babe," said Sean. "Sergio would still be laying on a beach soaked in grappa while the evil father gets away with stealing his son's novel. And his advance. And the TV rights."

"What's in the box?" she said.

He told her everything.

She walked downstairs and returned with a legal pad.

"OK," she began making a list. "Here we go. Theft of intellectual property. Theft of one laptop computer. One Ipad. One Iphone. Elder abuse."

"Abuse?" said Sean. "Come on."

"OK," she said. "Not abuse. But it's elder something-or-other. It's a white-collar crime. Not my area. I'll have one of my people look it up."

"You're not the DA, Perry Mason," said Sean.

"Oh, I know," she said. "Though I'm sure the DA will get involved. I'm actually a private attorney. I represent Sean Ward, Jr. The @AuthorSeanWard."

"I surrender," said Sean.

He found Junior at his typewriter downstairs.

"How are you doing bud?"

"I miss school," said Junior. "I miss Charlie."

"I have an idea," said Sean. "Why don't you make him a card telling him you miss him. We can't talk to him but."

"Because of social distancing," said Junior.

"Right. But we can leave it by his door," said Sean. "I borrowed something from his Grandma. And I need to drop that back off anyway."

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"Junior," shouted Sean wrapping his blazer close against the early October wind. "Get in here dude it's about to start!"

Junior had been throwing a tennis ball to the dog while Maggie and the radio producer made small talk over zoom.

"It was nice to meet you," said Maggie as the young woman stood up and walked away from the screen. Terry Gross appeared and sat down in her chair.

"Hi," she said. "You must be the Wards."

"Hi," said Junior. "I'm Sean Ward, Jr. These are my parents. This is Maggie my mom. She's a lawyer. And this is my Dad Sean, Sr. I'm named after him. He's a writer too."

"Nice to meet you all," she said. "Now from here on out we are recording, OK? And I like that blazer, Sean, but you know this is a radio show, right?"

"Well you have to get these things out of the closet every six months or so or they stop working," said Sean. His and Maggie's hands found each other behind Junior's back. She squeezed hard. He fought the lump in his throat back down.

"I'm Terry Gross and this is Fresh Air. My guest today is Sean Ward, Jr. He is the author of the Kaito series of young adult novels. The novels feature a young boy who battles dragons to rescue his friends and rebuild his civilization in an alternate world that—minus the dragons—

is very much like our own. The first book in the series, Season of Dragons, is currently being made into a movie. He is 10 years old. Ward family, welcome to fresh air.”

“It’s good to be with you Terry,” said Junior.

“Sean, Jr., I want to start with you. Tell me what inspired you to start writing this series of novels.”

“I started writing it after they cancelled school right before spring break last year,” Junior said. “It just really felt like the world was ending. And, I started thinking about how bad it felt to be alone all the time. I started worrying that I wouldn’t have any friends when school started again. And then I started worrying that school wouldn’t start again at all. I mean, it didn’t this year. But that was back before we knew that would happen. Anyway, and, my Dad is really funny. And I can’t use the internet very much. So, like, I couldn’t look up coronavirus or anything about it. And it’s so new it’s not in any of the encyclopedias that we got after my Grandma died and we got all of her stuff. So I asked my Dad what coronavirus was. And he said it was a dragon. And I believed him for like two hours.”

“Hang on,” said Terry. “Sean, Sr., is this true?”

Sean hesitated. He vaguely remembered teasing Junior about the virus. He hadn’t wanted him to worry. He must have been trying to distract him.

“Yeah,” said Junior. “It’s totally true. My dad is really good at making things up. And the way he says them he looks totally serious so it’s like impossible to tell whether he is teasing or not. And he told me the coronavirus was a type of dragon. And that some people believed it was built by scientists in a military lab. And that some other people believed that a farmer in China had caught it when it was a little baby and went and sold it in the market because he thought it was harmless. And some people didn’t believe in it at all. Anyway, when my Mom got home later that night I told her about it and she laughed. I was embarrassed and she told me all about what it really was. But then, when I was in my bed, I got really scared about it.”

There was a long silence. Sean and Maggie looked at each other with concern. Junior composed himself.

“And I was so scared that I even, like, started crying. Because I was feeling really lonely and I didn’t know what was going to happen. And then I started thinking about my Dad. And how he told me that whenever he is sad or worried that he writes in his journal. So, I got out of bed and got my flashlight and my school ipad. And I like imagined that there was a dragon who was destroying everything. And it was making it so I couldn’t go to school and so I couldn’t see my friends. And I just wanted to destroy it. And then that is when I got the idea about fighting a dragon. And that is how I came up with the story. I guess, basically, it was all my Dad’s idea.”