

Blue Dragons

On the lawn sloping down to the cove, Jessie sat uneasily beside her Aunt Terry. She badly wanted to say something wise beyond her years about her uncle's death. But she hadn't known Uncle Louis. Her own mother met her sister's husband only once, a couple of years before, flying out to California from Maine. California was a word with a sound like music, unlike Maine, which sounded like a hammer hitting a nail.

But she didn't know what to say about her uncle because all she had to go on was that Uncle Louis had a moustache.

She heard about the moustache the evening her mother returned from Los Angeles those years before. "Hey," her mother had said breathily, as she crashed in the front door suddenly, not looking at her daughter.

"Hey Mom."

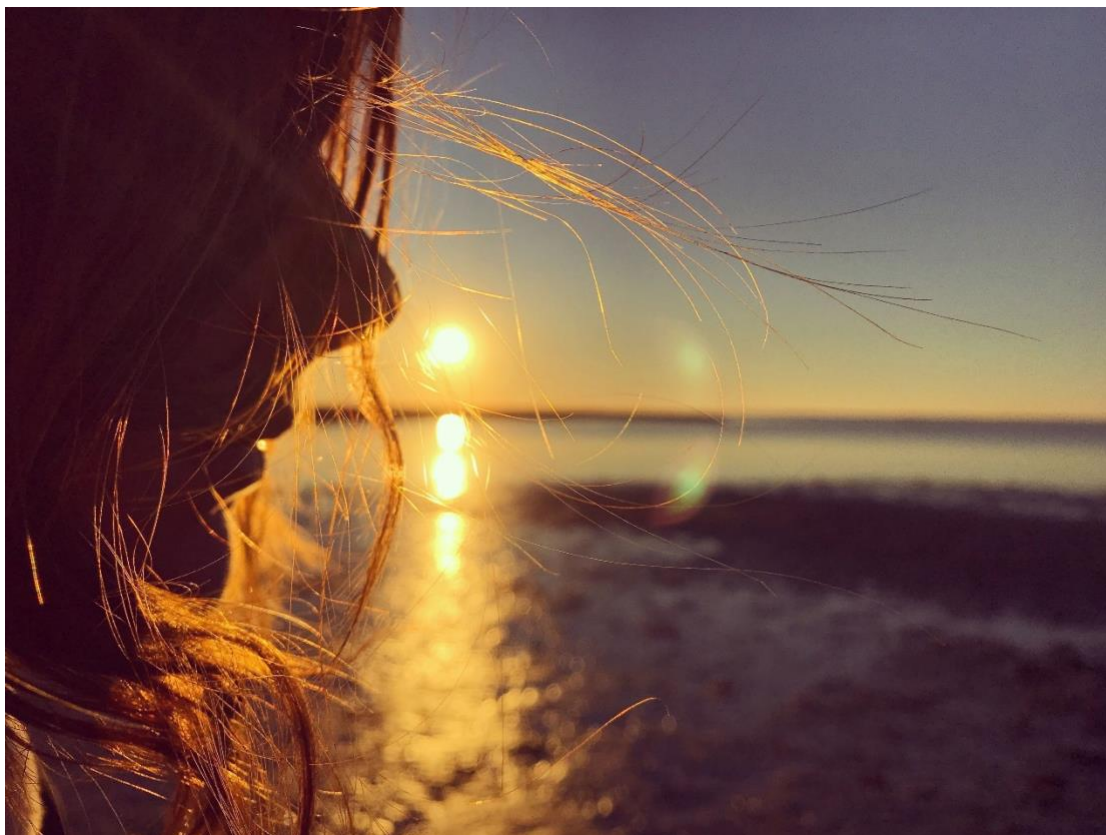
"So nice to be back home," her mother continued, in her sarcastic voice. "How are you?"

"Fine," said Jessie, shifting uneasily, "How was California?"

"Nice, if you like that sort of thing."

"What does that mean?"

"No, honey, it was fine."



“How’s Aunt Terry?”

“Aunt Terry is OK. She really is right now. She asked about you.”

Her daughter smiled, faintly. “Oh.” Her father struggled in the door with bags.

“Did you eat?”

“Is it beautiful out there?”

“No, not beautiful. It’s a huge city and the traffic is unbelievable.”

“But Aunt Terry likes it, right?”

“Well, she likes the guy she’s with. Louis. I met Louis, her new friend. He’s from there.”

“Is he nice?”

“He’s fine. Aunt Terry seemed to like him, and that’s all that matters.”

“What’s he do?”

“He’s a contractor.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Builds houses. He seems to do quite well.”

The girl said nothing, looking at her mother.

“But, honey, if you’re OK food-wise, I think Daddy and I are going to sit on the porch and catch up. You want to go up to your room? Please stay home tonight, OK?”

“All right.”

“Give me a hug, for Pete’s sake.”

They lightly embraced. “Honey, go upstairs for a little while. Daddy and I need to talk.”

It was the usual routine, on warm evenings. Her parents sat on the porch in their white rocking chairs, right below her window. She always eavesdropped, though she missed words.

“*So, Marty Penn is saying –...*” she might hear her father declare, but then his voice would trail off. “*Muggy,*” or “*beautiful evening,*” would somehow be audible amid everything else he said that was not.

The night her mother came home from California, Jessie lay in bed, listening.

She heard her mother say “*Terry,*” more than once. At one point, her father said: “*Ridiculous!*” At another point, her mother said, sighing, loudly: “*It goes so far back.*”

She also thought she heard her mother say, strangely, “*never never land.*”

After a while, she began to lose interest. But as she was about to turn on the TV or computer or go to sleep, her mother let out a peal of laughter. That was totally unexpected. Her mother wasn't even much of a smiler. It was like she'd suddenly revealed a hidden ability to speak French.

Her mother's laughter stopped, abruptly, as if she'd clamped a hand over her mouth. She heard nothing for several moments. Then, suddenly, her mother blurted out, “Oh Tom, that *moustache!*”

Her father chortled, pleasantly, happily, supportively.

Jessie thought: Louis, Aunt Terry's boyfriend, had a moustache.

He hadn't been her uncle that night. That only happened the day he died when he and Aunt Terry got married.

Upstairs, cross legged on the bed, she'd just opened her laptop when her mother appeared in the doorway. “Come downstairs with us honey.”

“Why?”

Her mother turned and walked away. She followed her a minute later. They were in their white rocking chairs, like always. Her father brought out one of the crummy chairs from the kitchen for her. They'd been laughing just a little while ago. Now they looked very solemn.

“Jessie,” her mother said, “There's been a loss in the family.”

They told her Louis had “passed away.” Aunt Terry had married him just a few hours before he died. “So, he’s your uncle now.”

That was how she found out about it. “But he died?” she asked, vaguely, realizing right away that it didn’t matter if he was alive or not because he’d married Aunt Terry right before. That made him her uncle.

She thought about his moustache, how they’d laughed about it. In fact, as soon as they told her he died, his moustache seemed to float into Jessie’s mind, independent of his unknown face.

It was why as she sat with Aunt Terry, she didn’t know what to say, though she felt she should say something.

Aunt Terry broke the silence between them. “Just like your mother to leave us stranded here, isn’t it, Jessie?”

The sun sank. An ingot of red light burned on the darkening gray surface of the cove. “It is like Mom to do that,” Jessie said, feeling grown-up, conspiratorial. “Just to leave like that.”

A flock of pipers swiftly banked, scissor winged. Trees shushed in the warm breeze, and she heard a dog’s distant, frantic yelping. Her mother had walked them down to the green-striped deck chairs on the lawn and left. She could have stayed, aware that Jessie and Aunt Terry barely knew each other. But her mother kept her distance on a lot of things. She would talk around them. Or walk away from them. Still, if her mother had her flaws, Jessie realized that her initial thrill to have criticized her behind her back for abandoning them didn’t last. Aunt Terry, after all,

was a stranger. They'd met twice at family gatherings, in New Hampshire, where her grandparents lived. Both times, her aunt had asked her about school, what she liked to do, that sort of thing. The second time, she'd called Jessie "willowy." But that had been as much as she'd experienced Aunt Terry. She felt uneasy to have said something pronged about her mother.

The two sisters didn't look alike at all. Aunt Terry was shorter by inches than both her sister and niece. Jessie admired her fuller figure, and her thick black hair, which fell to her shoulders. She'd cut her bangs so that wisps intruded on her vision, and she would brush them away. When she looked at Jessie, her brown eyes glowed in a way her mother's cool blue gray did not. She tended to dip her head down a bit, giving her a look like she was slightly amused. At the same time, she seemed sad. It was a slowness in her movements, even in how she blinked her eyes.

Jessie thought maybe she could say "*I'm sure you miss him.*" But she pulled back. It might set her aunt off, make her start crying or something.

"You don't have to say anything," her aunt said, quietly.

She'd read Jessie's mind. Startled, she mumbled, "I – ", but she didn't know how to continue. She stopped and looked down and away.

After a moment, Aunt Terry said: "I wish you could have known him."

"Yeah," Jessie whispered.

For a long time, then, in the gathering violet of the evening, she and her aunt said nothing more.

Jessie thought about the idiots. Her friends called themselves that. They'd be gone if she didn't leave soon. They'd wander away from the meeting place, in the bleachers at the football field. She felt bad thinking about that with her aunt beside her, who had so lost her Uncle Louis.

After a while, Aunt Terry asked: "Can I tell you a story?"

"Yeah. Sure."

"It's a weird one."

"That's all right."

"You may even think I'm a little crazy after I tell it to you."

"I don't think I would think that."

"You might."

Her Aunt paused, looking at her closely. She said: "All right then. It was in New Hampshire, near the house we grew up in. Where your Uncle Percy lives now. It was an evening very much like this one. Purples coming into the air. Nearly twilight, but not quite."

Yellow lights on the second floor of one of the big houses ringing the inlet went on, including a tall arched window, glowing like in a church.

"I'd had a terrible fight with your mother that night."

A crow screeched from somewhere in the trees, rude, oblivious.

"Your Grandmother had taken your mother's side, like she usually did. It was about something like dividing up the chores. I barely remember at this point, and it certainly doesn't matter."

Caw! screamed the crow.

“So, I had stormed out.” The light fell rapidly. “I went to this field. It was no more than a mile from town, but out where the forests start. The summer before, I’d found this rough path into the woods, that led to this meadow. In the spring, it had been just covered with flowers. I don’t even remember how I found it the first time. I’d never seen anyone else there. I’d go on nice days and just lie there. On my back, looking up at the sky.”

Windows of other homes on the inlet also filled with bright light.

“I was that kind of kid. Dreamy.” The crow again, sharp, annoying. “I guess lots of times I wanted to get away from people.”

Jessie flashed on the idiots. They’d be gathering now for sure. She wondered if Matthew would be there. He hadn’t called or texted since the last time she’d seen him, two nights before. They’d kissed for a long time, but he stank of smoke and beer. There was a trip to Canada or something he had to take with his family.

“They’ve probably thrown up condos in it by now,” her aunt said, with a light laugh.

Jessie nodded vaguely, wondering where her aunt’s story would go and if she could get away before she missed them, the idiots. *I wish you could have known him*, she’d said.

“It really was like now. Getting dark, but not so dark that you couldn’t see. In the summer, light stays in the sky a long time when it’s twilight.”

Jessie looked at her, but her aunt didn’t look back. She told her story with her head faced forward, toward the cove, like she was talking to herself.

“It was chilly, because I hadn’t worn a coat, and you know how cold it gets up there even some summer nights. I walked out into the middle of the meadow, and I was just terribly agitated. I was really furious.”

On the deck of a sailboat lying low in the water of the cove, Jessie saw sudden stabbing columns of light, apparently spotlights. A dark form appeared in silhouette, seeming to throw ropes or an anchor overboard.

“So, I just stood there. Just – mad. Sometimes I brought a blanket out there with me to sit on and read, or just to lie around. But that night I had nothing. So, I just stood there.”

Jessie suddenly felt a chill. Like she was in the meadow too.

“And that was when I heard something really, really strange.”

Inside the pocket of her jeans, Jessie’s cell phone vibrated. One of the idiots, trying to reach her. A few seconds later, there was a single jolt from the phone, meaning someone had left a message.

“What I heard,” her Aunt said, speaking slowly, deliberately, “Was the sound of what I thought was an animal, and it was coming toward me incredibly fast, like a horse, or a dog, though I knew, right away, it was neither one. I could tell by the sound of it, by the feet, which had a heavy, kind of blunt sound. And that only made it even more terrifying, because I had no idea what it was.”

The crow had shut up. Stillness around them in the dusk. Her aunt’s story began to make her a little nervous. It was that Uncle Louis had died, and that her aunt was now telling her this, after that. She knew nothing about death. Her father’s mother and father had died, her

grandparents. They'd been killed in a car accident years before she was born. There was a picture of them on the mantelpiece, above the fireplace. They were standing in some European place, before a huge church, her grandfather grinning straight at the camera, her grandmother beside him, just cracking up, literally doubled over with laughter.

“And, Jessie, this is where it gets stranger.”

When she did not continue, Jessie felt she was supposed to give permission for her to continue. “That’s – OK,” she said.

After another pause, Aunt Terry said: “I guess I just say it.”

The joyful faces of her grandparents, in her mind.

“Jessie,” said Aunt Terry, her voice becoming almost a whisper, “All I can tell you is that then everything went dead.” She paused again. Jessie said nothing. “I thought it had gone away,” her aunt then continued. “And that seemed like a relief. That seemed to just make sense, that I’d scared it away or something.”

After a moment, Jessie asked softly: “Had you?”

“Oh no,” said Aunt Terry, immediately. “It was there. It was there right beside me.”

They looked at each other, their faces outlined dramatically in the dusk.

“Jessie, there was – a dragon. A blue – dragon.”

Fear coursed through Jessie, electric, liquid, the mild momentum of their discourse thrust someplace else entirely. It was like earlier that summer when she’d awakened in the middle of the night in a rainstorm and, in a flash of lightning, she thought she saw the figure of a skinny man in her bedroom window. She couldn’t take her eyes off her aunt, who returned her gaze

quizzically, tilting her head slightly. She said: “Have I frightened you, Jessie? Please don’t be afraid of what I’m telling you.”

Jessie could not speak. She shook her head slightly, not sure why she did, quivering, wanting to get away. She thought, she’s crazy, maybe, from her sadness, and it frightened her.

“Maybe - ” Aunt Terry began, in a low voice, but then she stopped, until she said:

“Your mother would kill me.”

Low on the horizon, Jessie saw a first sprinkling of tiny, pinpoint stars. Not wanting to risk further upsetting her aunt, and as a way of maintaining a degree of detachment from the freakishness of what she had just been told, she said: “About what? Why would she, kill you, I mean, it’s OK, Aunt Terry.”

“It’s not because of what happened,” her aunt said, gently. “It’s not because of Uncle Louis passing. That didn’t cause me to go off the deep end or something.”

“I didn’t think that,” Jessie lied.

Aunt Terry said, very quietly: “It *was* - a dragon. And it was blue. Just about up to my chest,” and she gestured with a flat palm to show the dragon’s height, and then, settling back again into her tale, she continued, in a faraway voice: “It wasn’t big, not frightening in that way. Blue, like the color of sapphire. That blue. Not a dark blue, a sky blue. Daylight blue. Azure. Or turquoise. And it had the biggest, friendliest eyes.”

A blue dragon.

With big, friendly eyes.

Inside the pocket of her jeans, Jessie's cell phone vibrated again, and, within a few seconds, there was another jolt.

Her aunt looked at her. Jesse thought she was about to comment on her phone. But she said: "Its skin had a kind of shimmer in it. I thought of touching it. But I didn't. I've always wished I had. I think it would have felt like – satin. I always felt that, for some reason."

She wanted to be somewhere else. With them. They would be in the bleachers by now. Kara and Luke and Fird, whose name was Ferdinand, but they called him Bird. Maybe Matthew would be there. And Pancho, who was Vietnamese, despite his Mexican nickname. She wanted to be with them.

"And then," her aunt said, "It did what dragons do."

Snapping back to what she was being told, Jessie whispered, "What, what was it?"

"It had *wings*. Which I hadn't *noticed* before, somehow. Folded in on it, huge, and when the creature spread the wings, they glistened, like there were little many-colored lights in its skin, like Christmas lights. And when the wings opened, I could see the white underneath, a kind of pearl color. And with just one, hard – push, of the wings, down, he rose in the air, and then it was like it had been yanked up by a rope, because it rose so fast, Jessie, so very fast, up into the air, throwing this blast of wind that really practically knocked me down, it all but knocked me over."

The phone in Jessie's pocket vibrated furiously.

"And then it was gone."

They'd leave, she thought, she'd never catch up to them.

"I tried to follow it up, but in a second, less than a second, it was just a speck."

For a few minutes, they sat in silence.

“I’ve never told anyone else in the family about this, Jessie.”

When her aunt said nothing more, Jessie asked what she thought Aunt Terry expected her to ask: “So why did you just tell me?”

“I think, maybe you really might actually believe me.”

Jessie nodded, but it did not mean she believed.

“But,” Aunt Terry said, smiling a little. “I don’t really expect you to.”

Jessie wanted to get away. She wanted to go find the idiots. She would tell them.

They’d find it hilarious.

“Just a few months ago, I told your Uncle Louis,” said Aunt Terry. “Only that recently. Right before we knew he was sick.” She laughed, softly. “He said I had a screw loose. But then he said if I said I’d seen a blue dragon, that was good enough for him.”

Jessie looked at her aunt. In what remained of the violet light, she could see tears in her eyes.

“That meant a lot to me. That he would believe me about this, like that. It was a big reason why I loved him, and why I married him. Married him right at the end. I never really wanted to marry anyone, you know. Because of how he believed me, and that he believed in me.”

She looked at Jessie.

“Love is about believing in somebody. That’s what it’s all about. And then believing in you. If you have that, you have everything. If you lose it, you lose everything.”

“Hey!” It was her mother, bearing down on them. “You two still out here?”

She stood before them, a flashlight at her side, pointed to the ground.

“Come up to the house for some dinner? We were wondering what happened to you.”

Her mother had said nothing about dinner when she’d removed herself earlier, but Jessie and her Aunt obediently rose to follow her.

“You two are quiet,” her mother said, when neither spoke a word as they walked up the lawn. “Everything all right?”

“You have a wonderful daughter,” Aunt Terry said.

“I know, isn’t she?” said her mother, earnestly.

At dinner, they talked about the family in New Hampshire. Terry said she wasn’t sure whether she would stay on the west coast. Maybe she would move east, to New York, or Boston.

“What would you do there?” her mother asked.

Jessie realized she had no idea what her Aunt did.

“I’ll find something,” Aunt Terry said.

They talked about how it was going for Jessie’s father at the law firm. The heavy workload, long hours. Her mother talked about teaching kids with reading problems, which was

what she did. Nothing about Uncle Louis came up. After dinner, Jessie went up to her bedroom. The adults sat in white rocking chairs on the porch, murmuring.

Jessie slipped out the kitchen door, circling around the house, as she sometimes did, to head into town. She flipped open her phone. But then she couldn't answer any of the messages she'd gotten. She realized she couldn't talk to anyone. She walked down to the town. Tourists, unfamiliar faces, drifted, sauntering past the shops on Main Street. Couples held hands, lackadaisical in the warm night air. Families meandered, little kids running ahead, until a parent shouted, "*slow down!*" At the small harbor, tied up boats knocked against the pier. She walked backstreets, under the pale light of lampposts. She felt lonely, but not in a way that made her sad. Two men who looked high, wavering in the doorway of the Handy Mart, in ratty jeans and tight t-shirts with something about motorcycles on them, eyed her as she passed, their mouths curling into a snarl. One cupped a hand over his crotch.

Again, and again, the phone vibrated, but she ignored it.

Two days later, Aunt Terry returned to California. Before she left, she and Jessie saw each other only in passing. They were never alone. They would glance, passing on the stairs, or at dinner. Jessie felt the secret between them, but she had no idea what she was supposed to do with it. She didn't believe there had been a blue dragon. The story made her feel uncomfortable. Aunt Terry embraced her at the door as she was leaving for the airport, but Jessie felt tense, awkward.

The night after Aunt Terry left, Jessie went to see the idiots.

“You seem like totally sad,” Bird said.

“Maybe.”

“What’s the matter?”

“I don’t know.”

After a moment, she added, a little surprised to say it: “My uncle died.”

“Whoa, I didn’t know you had an uncle.”

“Bird, why wouldn’t I?”

“I don’t know.”

Then Kara said, in her fake valley girl way: “What about Matthew leaving? Is that what’s bothering you too? You know he didn’t say goodbye to anyone, not just you. He had to go to Canada or something.”

“I know.”

“Did you know his parents found pot in his room? They made a whole big deal about it.”

When she didn’t say anything in response, Pancho said, “We kept calling you the other night, like about a hundred times, but you never answered.”

“I was with my aunt.”

“Matthew tried to call you.”

She shrugged. They teased her about Matthew. When that didn’t arouse anything in her, they changed to acting like they were comforting her about him leaving without saying goodbye.

When she remained unresponsive, they gave up on her, and Bird produced a joint. She didn't smoke any, and after a while she whispered, "Good night."

As she walked home, she thought of her aunt telling her uncle about the blue dragon. She wondered whether he'd really believed her, or just said it. Either way, she thought, what he'd really said to Aunt Terry was that he loved her.

Aunt Terry was right about that. He believed in her. Like Aunt Terry said.

About a week later, she was at dinner with her parents.

"Jessie?"

"Yes Mom?"

"That night down on the lawn, with your aunt."

When her mother didn't continue, Jessie asked: "Yeah?"

"Honey, what did you two talk about?"

She could tell she wanted something, because she rarely called her "honey."

"She – what did we talk about?"

"Yes. You were down there a long time."

"We talked – I guess we talked about her and Uncle Louis."

"Mm hm."

"Yeah."

“Nothing else?”

“No. Not really.”

After a moment, her mother asked: “What did she say about Uncle Louis?”

“Uncle Louis?”

“Yes, Uncle Louis. What did she say about him?”

“That she loved him, I guess.”

Her mother nodded. “Well, Jessie, I really think Uncle Louis was the love of your Aunt Terry’s life.”

The love of her life. Jessie had heard the expression, but it seemed an unusually romantic thing to hear from her mother. They ate for a few minutes without speaking, until Jessie asked: “How – how did he die?”

After a moment, her mother said: “It was cancer. Uncle Louis passed away only three months after he was diagnosed. When I went out to California and we met, he was so handsome, so fit.”

But you made fun of him, Jessie thought. Of his moustache.

For another period of time, they ate in silence, until her mother spoke. “Jessie – that night. I want to ask you if your aunt said anything a little funny.”

“A little funny?”

“I mean strange, not funny like a joke. Something peculiar.”

“I – what do you mean?”

She felt her mother's gaze. She returned it.

"Your aunt – your aunt has always had a very vivid imagination."

"Meg?" her father said to her mother. "Where are you going with this?"

"Tom, let me –"

He cut her off. "You know, maybe just leave it alone."

"I don't want to leave it alone. She is my sister. I have a right to know everything I can at this point about her state of mind."

"What are you guys talking about?" Jessie asked.

"I just want to know if anything came up that night that was unusual."

Could they know? But Aunt Terry said she had told no one but her and Uncle Louis.

"Jessie, I need you to be honest with me."

"She didn't say anything strange," Jessie replied, evenly.

"You're being honest with me?"

"Yes. I'm being honest with you."

"Well then let me ask you..." but her mother didn't continue. She moved in her chair uneasily. She glanced at her father, who looked down. Her mother looked at Jessie. "Dragons, Jessie. Did she say anything about dragons?"

"About - what?"

"A dragon."

Jessie knew shock had registered on her face.

“She did, didn’t she?” said her mother, seeing her daughter’s expression.

Jessie grabbed at what had flown out of her eyes, and she pulled it back, and she set her face. She refused to give it away to them, she would not, the night above the cove, what she’d been told and then held inside for nearly a week. But then she realized: Aunt Terry had lied to her. They knew about the blue dragon. They all knew. It wasn’t a secret at all.

“I need to know, Jessie,” her mother said coldly.

“I don’t get what you’re saying,” Jessie said, looking down.

“You know what I asked you.”

“You said a dragon.”

“That’s right. A blue dragon.”

“Aunt Terry said nothing about a blue dragon.”

“Listen. Jessie, this is not a game. It’s a serious matter. Aunt Terry’s blue dragon is not new. It’s something she’s been falling back on since we were children, to, to cope, with certain matters, certain aspects of her, her personality. Your aunt has been ill at times. She has had difficult times. And this is how it starts, every time. Please, just be honest with me.”

“I am, I am being honest with you.”

“Maybe you really might actually believe me,” her aunt had said.

“If you care about your aunt, you’re not helping her if you don’t tell the truth here, Jessie.”

Jessie said nothing. Frustrated, her mother fell back in her chair. Jessie said, “This is weird. Why haven’t you said something about this before if it’s so important.”

“Right now, Aunt Terry is not answering her phone or responding to any email or texts or anything. I’m worried about her. We’re worried about her.”

“Maybe she doesn’t have anything to say to you right now.”

Her mother took that in bitterly, as her father shook his head. “And, maybe she’s wandered off. She’s done it before. Several times. Gone missing, for years. Into a fantasy world. She’s gotten herself into trouble, serious trouble.”

For a moment Jessie wavered.

“That’s what we desperately want to avoid now. Your aunt is in danger. I hate to tell you this, but she is an unstable person. And we are afraid that the shock of her loss could push her over the edge. Please tell me what you know.”

Jessie pictured her aunt wandering somewhere like the town, where the men were always in front of the Handy Mart. Her aunt could be at the mercy of people like them, she thought, with no one to protect her. But she couldn’t bring herself to tell her mother what Aunt Terry had said.

“What she talked about was how much she loved Uncle Louis.”

“You’re lying to me.”

It angered her, to hear her mother say that. She glared back at her like she never had before. “You know what she said? She said he had a moustache.”

“She said what?”

“A moustache. She said he had a moustache, and that she thought it made him handsome.”

“She talked about his moustache?”

“She kept talking about it. It was one of the reasons she loved him, she said.”

“Jessie, I’m dead serious here.”

“Leave it alone now, Meg,” said her father.

That night, as Jessie lay in bed, she could hear her parents arguing on the porch. They never argued. Several times, with unaccustomed ferocity, her mother said: *‘she!’* She heard her father say, *“blue dragon,”* in a tone of disbelief, frustration.

Jessie felt indifferent.

She thought about Aunt Terry and Uncle Louis. Marrying as he lay there dying, though they both knew they would never be together. If someone ever asked her to marry him, she thought, she would tell him about the blue dragon. How, on a summer night, out on the lawn above the cove where she’d lived in Maine, she’d seen one, taking flight, on bright wings.

If he believed her, and only if he believed her, Jessie thought, would she say Yes.