The Hoard Behind Dryer Number Three

You know how you put two socks in the dryer and only one comes out? Pull your stool closer and mind the sparks, because I'm going to tell you exactly where the other one goes. It goes to a dragon named Gus. And Gus is, without any doubt at all, the worst dragon at hoarding who has ever lived.

I'm not being mean. Gus would tell you the same thing himself, because Gus can't tell you anything that isn't true. That's sort of the whole story.

Here's how it starts. On Kettle Street, between a shoe repair shop and a place that sells phone cases, there's a laundromat called Bright Monday. It has twelve washers, eight dryers, a change machine that only takes bills if you smooth them out and say please, and a back door with a sign on it that says NOT AN EXIT. Most people believe the sign. Most people are wrong.

The laundromat belonged to a woman named Mrs. Okafor, and on weeknights her daughter Nell sat on top of dryer number three doing her homework, because dryer number three was always warm and nobody ever used it. Nobody used it because it ate socks. Not some socks. Every sock. You'd put in a pair and get back a single, every time, like the machine was charging a fee.

Nell was fourteen and pretty sure she'd figured out the world. She was wrong about that too, but in a nice way.

One Tuesday in October, around nine at night, Nell was halfway through a page of fractions when dryer number three made a noise. Not a dryer noise. More of a polite cough. Then the round door swung open all by itself, and a claw came out.

It was green, about the size of a garden rake, and very gently, the way you'd pick up a sleeping kitten, it took hold of a striped sock that someone had left on the folding table.

Nell did what any sensible person would do. She grabbed the other end of the sock and pulled.

"Oh," said a voice from inside the dryer. "Oh dear. Is this yours? I'm so sorry. I thought it was lost. It looked lost. Did it feel lost to you?"

"It's a sock," Nell said. "It doesn't feel anything."

"Everything feels a little bit lost sometimes," said the voice, sadly, and the claw let go.

Now, here's where you'd expect Nell to scream, or run, or call her mother. She didn't. She leaned down, looked into the drum, and saw that it didn't have a back anymore. It went on and on, a long round tunnel full of soft light, and at the far end of it, squeezed in like a cat in a shoebox, was a dragon.

He was mossy green, with freckles across his nose, gold-flecked eyes, and horns that curled like question marks. He was about the size of a delivery van, which is small for a dragon and very large for a dryer. He was wearing a sock on one horn. It had a cartoon pineapple on it.

"I'm Gus," he said. "Please don't tell anyone I'm bad at this."

Underwash

So that's how Nell found Underwash.

You get there through the back door, the one marked NOT AN EXIT, if you go through it while dryer number three is running. You walk down twelve warm steps, and the air smells like clean towels, and then you're standing on a hill above a valley where the clouds are made of laundry steam. There are little crooked houses with roofs like folded shirts. There's a river so clear you can count the pebbles. There's a market, a bridge, a bakery, a bank run by a goblin named Mrs. Pellwick, and about four hundred goats.

And there's magic. Lots of it. People in Underwash use it the way you and I use spoons. They warm their tea with it, they fix fences with it, they make the bread rise faster with it.

But there's one rule, and it's the only rule that really matters down there: magic only works if you're telling the truth.

I mean it. Say a spell and mean it honestly, and the magic does what you ask. Tell even one tiny fib while you're casting, and the whole spell fizzles out into soap bubbles. Pop, pop, pop. Very pretty. Very embarrassing.

The baker found this out the hard way. She once tried to sell "the finest pie in all of Underwash" with a little glowing spell to make it smell nice. It was a fine pie. It wasn't the finest. The whole market watched her sign turn into bubbles and float away. She sells "a pretty good pie" now, and honestly, business is better.

Gus lived in a cave at the top of the tallest hill, and inside that cave was his hoard.

Now, you need to understand that a dragon's hoard is a very big deal. It's like a report card, a bank account, and a family photo album all rolled into one. Proper dragons sleep on mountains of gold. They count their coins every night. They know if a single ruby has rolled under the bed.

Gus's hoard was: three gold coins, a salt shaker shaped like a lighthouse, a broken umbrella, a jar of buttons, and socks. Hundreds of socks. Maybe thousands. Wool socks and ankle socks, socks with holes and socks with ducks on them, baby socks no bigger than your thumb, and one enormous fuzzy sock that Nell suspected had belonged to a very tall man with very cold feet. They hung from the ceiling on strings, like bunting at a party.

"Where's the gold?" Nell asked, that first night.

Gus scratched behind one horn. "Well. There was gold. There was quite a lot, actually. But Tansy needed a new goat, because her old goat fell in the river. And then the bridge cracked, and Mr. Dunmore had to fix it, and stone is expensive. And then Mrs. Pellwick's roof blew off in the spring storm. And every time somebody asked me, 'Gus, is that for me?' I couldn't say no. Because it would've been a lie, see. It was for them. They needed it more."

"So you just gave it all away."

"I'm terrible at keeping things," Gus said. He said it the way you'd admit you can't whistle.

"Then why the socks?"

He looked at the socks for a long moment, and his gold-flecked eyes went soft.

"Because nobody else wanted them," he said.

The Letter

Now I know what you're thinking. Sweet dragon, nice cave, lots of socks, where's the trouble? Hold on. Here comes the trouble. It arrived the very next evening, on a sheet of paper so thick it could have been a door, sealed with a blob of real gold wax. It was delivered by a very tired pigeon who clearly felt it was beneath him.

Gus read it, and the color drained out of his face until he was the pale green of old celery.

"It's from my Great-Aunt Ormolu," he whispered. "She's coming for the Inspection."

Every ten years, he explained, the eldest dragon in a family flies around to check on the young ones and make sure their hoards are respectable. If your hoard passes, you keep your cave and carry on. If it doesn't, you get taken back to the Ember Peaks for "proper training," which, as far as Gus could tell, meant a hundred years of counting coins and being told to sit up straight.

"I'd have to leave," he said. "I'd have to leave Underwash. And Tansy, and the goats, and Mrs. Pellwick. And you, now, I suppose, if you'd like to be counted. Would you?"

"Yes," said Nell, a little surprised at how fast she said it.

"Then I'd have to leave you too."

"When is she coming?"

Gus looked at the letter. "Saturday."

That was three days away. Three days to turn a cave full of odd socks into a hoard that would impress the grandest, goldest, grumpiest dragon in the family.

The Plan, and the Other Plan, and the Plan After That

You and I both know what Nell should have said. She should have said, "Gus, tell her the truth." But Nell was fourteen, and she'd seen a lot of movies, and she had a plan.

The first plan was simple. Borrow gold.

Mrs. Pellwick, the goblin banker, was very fond of Gus, because of the roof thing, and she agreed to lend him a wheelbarrow of coins for the weekend. The trouble was making them look like his. Nell suggested a spell, the kind that makes things seem older and dustier, like they'd been lying in his cave for years.

Gus held up a claw, took a deep breath, and said, "These are my very own coins, gathered over many years."

Pop. Pop pop pop. The spell turned into a hundred soap bubbles and drifted up to the ceiling, where they burst all over the socks.

"Right," said Nell. "That one was a lie. My fault."

The second plan was to paint the socks gold. They spent all of Thursday on it, which is how Nell learned that dragons are wonderful at many things and painting is not one of them. Gus held the brush very carefully between two claws, the way you'd hold a toothpick, and still managed to paint one goat, most of a rock, and the end of his own tail. The whole thing smelled awful, and by sunset they had about two hundred stiff golden socks that looked, Nell had to admit, exactly like two hundred stiff golden socks. Gus tried to cast a little shine on them so they'd look like real treasure.

"Behold," he said, "my glittering gold."

Pop.

The third plan, on Friday, was Nell's favorite, because it put her in charge. If Gus couldn't lie, she'd do the talking. She'd stand at the mouth of the cave and tell Great-Aunt Ormolu that the real hoard was hidden somewhere very secret for safekeeping, which was the sort of thing that happened in movies all the time.

She practiced on Tansy, the goat girl, who was nine and took her job as audience very seriously. Nell raised one hand the way Gus did and said, "The treasure of this cave is hidden far away."

Nothing happened. Not even bubbles. Just a sad little fizz, like a soda left open overnight.

"You don't even believe that yourself," Tansy said.

"It's not a real spell," Nell said. "I'm not even from here."

"Doesn't matter," Tansy said. "The magic can tell. My gran says a lie is like a hole in a bucket. Doesn't matter how much water you pour in."

That night, Nell sat on the warm dryer back at Bright Monday and didn't do her homework. Her mom was folding a big load of towels for the hotel down the street. After a while, she looked over.

"You okay, Nellie? You've been quiet."

And Nell almost said, "I'm fine." She'd been saying it for months. Since she'd started the new school, where everybody already had friends, and she ate lunch in the library and told her mom she sat with "a bunch of people." It wasn't a big lie. It wasn't even a mean one. But just then, she thought about holes in buckets.

"Actually," she said, "I'm not that okay. I don't really have anyone to sit with at lunch. I've been saying I do. I'm sorry."

Her mom put down the towels and came over and hugged her, warm-from-the-dryer towels and all, and they talked for an hour, and nothing got magically fixed. But Nell felt lighter. Like she'd put down a bag she hadn't known she was carrying.

And right then, so faintly she almost missed it, the lights over dryer number three flickered, and the whole laundromat smelled, just for a second, like clean rain.

Great-Aunt Ormolu

Nell went down the twelve warm steps early on Saturday morning and found Gus sitting outside his cave, wrapped in about forty socks, like a very nervous scarf.

"I told my mom the truth last night," she said, sitting down next to him. "About a thing I'd been fibbing about. It was scary. My face went hot and my voice went weird. But afterward, everything felt lighter. And I think the laundromat noticed."

Gus looked at her for a long time. "Lighter," he said, as if he was trying the word on.

"Lighter," Nell said. "Just tell her, Gus. Tell her what's really in there."

He nodded. He meant to. He really did.

Saturday afternoon came the way bad weather comes, all at once and from the north.

You heard her before you saw her. A deep, booming whoomp-whoomp of huge wings, and then the sky over Underwash went dark, and a dragon three times the size of Gus landed on the hilltop so hard that four hundred goats all said "meh" at the same time.

Great-Aunt Ormolu was magnificent. I won't pretend she wasn't. Her scales were the deep red of a fire just before it goes out. She wore gold on every claw, gold chains around her neck, and a gold crown that had clearly been made for someone much smaller and then stretched. When she moved, she jingled, like a walking wind chime made of money.

"Augustus," she said.

"Hello, Auntie," said Gus, very small.

"Show me your hoard."

Everybody had come to watch. Tansy and her goats. Mr. Dunmore from the bridge. Mrs. Pellwick, still holding the wheelbarrow, just in case. The baker with a pretty good pie. And Nell, standing right next to Gus, close enough to feel how warm and wobbly he'd gone.

And Gus, who had absolutely meant to tell the truth, panicked. I'm sorry, but he did. You would have too, with all those faces watching. So he lifted a claw toward the dark mouth of the cave and said, as grandly as he could, "Welcome, Auntie, to my magnificent hoard of gold!"

He meant to light the torches with it. Instead, a single soap bubble floated out of his nose, wobbled in front of Great-Aunt Ormolu's enormous face, and popped.

Somebody's goat laughed. I'm not saying which goat. But a goat laughed.

Great-Aunt Ormolu's eyes narrowed to slits. "Augustus. What is in that cave?"

And Gus looked at the ground, and then he looked at Nell, and Nell gave him the smallest nod. Lighter, she mouthed. Go on.

So he told her.

"Socks," Gus said. "It's mostly socks, Auntie. I'm terrible at keeping gold. Every coin I ever had, I gave away, because somebody needed it more than I did. Tansy's goat. Mr. Dunmore's bridge. Mrs. Pellwick's roof. I don't regret any of it. I'm sorry, but I don't."

He took a breath.

"And the socks are the things nobody wanted. You know how a sock goes missing, and the other one just sits in the drawer, waiting? I can't stand that. So I keep them. I keep every lost sock I can find, and I mend the holes, and I wait. And sometimes, when I find the partner, I send the pair back through the dryer, all clean and folded. That's my hoard. It's not much. But I love every single one."

And that's when it happened.

Because, you see, it was all true. Every word. And Gus, who'd hardly ever used magic in his life, because he was always too busy giving things away, had been saving up honesty the way other dragons save up gold.

The cave began to glow.

It started small, a little shimmer on the pineapple sock. Then the duck socks lit up, and the baby socks, and the huge fuzzy one, and then all of them at once, thousands of socks swinging gently on their strings, each one glowing softly in a different color, like a whole sky of lanterns. And in every sock, if you looked closely, you could see a little flicker of the person who'd lost it. A kid kicking a ball. An old man reading by a window. A mother walking a baby up and down a hallway at three in the morning.

The light poured out of the cave and spilled down the hill and lit up the whole valley. Mrs. Pellwick dropped the wheelbarrow. The baker dropped her pie, and for once nobody minded. Even the goats went quiet.

It was the brightest thing anyone in Underwash had ever seen. Brighter than gold. Much, much brighter.

The Other Truth

Great-Aunt Ormolu stared at it for a long time.

Then she cleared her throat, lifted one glittering claw, and said, "Well. I'll show you a real hoard. My hoard at the Ember Peaks is the finest in the world, and I am the happiest dragon alive."

You can guess what happened.

Pop.

A bubble. Then another. Then a whole stream of them, rising from her crown, her claws, her chains, until she was standing in a cloud of soap bubbles so thick you could barely see her.

Nobody laughed this time. Not even the goat.

When the bubbles cleared, Great-Aunt Ormolu looked a lot less magnificent and a lot more tired. She sat down heavily on the hillside, jingling.

"I have a mountain of gold," she said quietly. "It doesn't talk. It doesn't visit. I count it every night, and every night it's exactly the same, and I am… rather lonely, Augustus. That's the truth."

And a tiny warm spark flickered at the end of her claw, the first honest magic she'd made in about three hundred years.

Gus didn't say anything. He just went into the cave, came back out, and held up a pair of thick red wool socks, mended at the heels, matched and folded.

"These would fit you," he said. "If you wanted them. Your feet must get cold at the top of a mountain."

Great-Aunt Ormolu looked at the socks. Then she looked at her nephew. And then, slowly, she took off one gold ring and put on one red sock, right over her claw, and wiggled it.

"Hmph," she said. But she was smiling.

What Happened After

Gus passed the Inspection. Great-Aunt Ormolu wrote it down in her big book in gold ink: Hoard of Augustus, inspected and found to be "unusual, but genuine." Then she crossed out "unusual," which, for her, was practically a hug.

She visits now, every few months. She's taken up knitting, which is hard when you have claws the size of shovels, but she's honest about how bad she is at it, so her knitting spells work just fine. She's sent so many lumpy scarves to Underwash that the goats wear them in winter.

Nell still does her homework on dryer number three. She found two people to sit with at lunch, which turned out to be plenty. One of them is now very good at fractions. The other one has seen Underwash, though she's promised not to tell a soul, and she's honest, so she won't. Some nights, the three of them go down the twelve warm steps and help Gus sort the socks.

And here's the part you'll want to remember. Next time a sock goes missing in your dryer, don't get mad. It's not gone. It's hanging in a cave on a hill above a valley where the clouds are made of steam, and a big, freckled, green dragon is mending the hole in it. Give it a few weeks. Maybe a few months. And one morning you'll open the dryer and there it'll be, back with its partner, warm and folded, like it never left.

What's that? You don't believe me?

Careful, now. Every word of it is true. Look at the fire. How do you think I lit it without any matches?