**Dragon Party**

Lisa Alletson

My five-year old, Cassie, strode into the princess party dressed as a dragon, her two-foot-long pleather tail knocking over the mansion’s soapstone carvings.

“I’m going to eat all the princesses,” she roared.

The pink-gowned, coiffed kindergarten girls turned their backs to her, closing into a tight flock of gossip and stares. Not much for small talk, Cassie didn’t care. She was the dragon in a room full of royalty. “A princess is just …not me,” she’d insisted when we got dressed.

Ignoring the Belle-for-hire with her shiny voice and hair, Cassie sat with the adults and ate all the cupcakes. Slipped crumbs to a one-eyed Labrador at her feet. She tested the parents on their knowledge of Africa and when the Congo changed its name. Recited the alphabet backwards for them, again and again.

At our next appointment, the developmental paediatrician handed me tissues. Explained that he had diagnosed Cassie with autism. But it was based on her strengths as much as her social and sensory challenges.

Five years later, at a hotel lunch in Calgary, I introduced Cassie to an old friend who was also on the spectrum. Like her, he was hyper-focused. She reminded me of him.

When he and I were teens in Toronto, we’d build bonfires on the lake beach and count satellites. He’d tell me how Earth is dying, and one day we’d go to Mars. Reaching his arm to the stars, he’d bring his forefinger and thumb together as if holding the solar system in his hand. As if he already held that kind of magic, that day, at nineteen.

Over our lunch with his family in Calgary, Cassie drew planets on the back of a napkin. Looked up at us to ask, “How do I turn pretend into real?”