

## DON'T FEAR THE DARK

When I was a child, I looked under beds afraid of what I might find there.

Such strange cowardice we're born with. We trap light in bulbs lest the shadows creep closer, put locks between us and the unknown beyond. Cowardly we tremble before what we can not name, what we can not prove exists.

Nothing to be afraid of, little one.

Beds shed their shrouded caverns as the monsters fade away.

Were they ever there at all?

"You hear the news, Miss Lennox?" Alfred Langsley called to me from his corner cubicle, coffee stained teeth framed by a morbid grin. "A man shot himself and three poor devils down in Westside at the gas station."

"I heard. What's so special about it?"

Stories like these were hardly news worthy anymore. You'd see headlines plastered on kiosks or flashing in neon lights on every street corner, declaring deaths and a myriad of tragedy. Even at the Bellman, the small newspaper I worked for, we often sent reporters around the city last minute to gather blood ridden incidents to fill up the empty spaces in our layouts. They'd sweep across the streets like scout ants, bringing back the gory morsels of shattered human lives for us to dine on, seasoning each with flashy words and bold print.

"The man was raving mad! Went babbling on about some monster before he went and killed himself."

"Sounds like he was mentally ill. Common enough."

Langsley held his hands up in mock surrender. "Didn't say it'd be the story of the century. Just seemed interesting, that's all."

I got home late that night.

The day had passed in a blink of monotonous brevity. The biggest story of the day had been a bullet train crash in Simmons Square. The death toll had been high. As per usual.

I lived in an apartment on the east side of town with my best friend Caroline Adrick and her five year old son, David. They'd moved in almost eight months ago after the death of Caroline's husband. The closet sized kitchen had a leak over the window, and the shower was often cold, but we went on living either way.

You might suppose that we possessed some great strength or endurance, but the fact is that life simply happens whether you like it or not. And anyways, our apartment was a luxury in comparison to the general grime of the rest of the city.

A bundle of blankets came barreling down the hallway as I locked the door.

"Aunt Sam!" it shrieked, clinging fast to my legs and giggling.

"And what are you doing up?" I replied.

"He won't go to sleep." Caroline appeared, exhaustion drawn across her freckled face. "He said he was waiting for you."

"Is that so?" I bent down, tugging gently at the blankets to reveal the little boy's curly head. "You think you can go to bed now that I'm home, Davey?"

"I want a story," he answered. Businesslike.

Storybooks were never good enough for David. He seemed to have gotten it into his little head that reporters were the ultimate storytellers, pulling tales out of their pockets from every corner of the known world. I wasn't much, but he steadfastly insisted that my stories were better than any of the fairy tales to be found on his bookshelf.

I never knew how to start a story, or what kind of story he'd even be interested in. I'd stumble through my memory for a story that had recently circulated around the newspaper office, or an article I'd written that day.

On this occasion I told him about a coastal town, twenty miles down south from us, that had seen a weekend full of hatching turtles emerging from the beaches.

I would never tell him about the bullet train, or the man who'd killed himself after murdering three innocent people. Or about delusions of monsters. Here, in the comfort of his own room, illuminated by his star-shaped nightlight, he didn't need to know about those other stories. The kinds that ended far from happily. He'd had enough of those.

"I want to go see those turtles on the beach," David muttered into his comforter. "Can I?"

"Next time. I think they're probably all gone by now."

"Oh. Gone where?"

"Into the sea. Turtles like the sea."

"I do too. Last time I saw a starfish."

I smiled, tucking the blankets in around him. "And next time we'll look for turtles. Goodnight, Davey."

"Goodnight, Aunt Sammy."

I was at the door when he called out. "Aunt Sammy?"

"Yeah?"

His voice was muffled and quiet, but it carried through the darkness. "Do you believe in monsters?"

I stiffened. Caught in a wave of fear I didn't yet understand.

"What?"

Silence.

"David, what did you say?"

I went back to his bedside, but he had fallen asleep.

For the next week it was the same routine. David, despite Caroline's best efforts, would refuse to go to sleep until I was there to tell him a story.

I tried to come home earlier from then on.

It wasn't exactly out of the ordinary. He'd always liked stories. And except for his question the first night, nothing was particularly strange.

Nothing at all.

Then one day, I awoke to his big, doleful eyes.

"David! What are you doing out of bed?"

He didn't answer at first, just stared. His pale little face was etched with such incredible sorrow that it scared me.

"David?"

“There’s a monster under the bed,” he whispered.

I went down the hall to his room.

There was his little bed, squeezed between the narrow walls. Shadows crowded beneath the blankets, reaching feebly across the floor.

I pulled up the bedcovers in one swift pull.

There was nothing there but dust and a pair of rolled socks.

David peered at me from the doorway, clouded in solemnity.

“I don’t see any monsters.”

I tried to smile. It was ridiculous, really. But still, there had been a part of me that was terrified of what the sunlight might reveal crouching under the bedframe...

David shook his head. “No!”

“No, what?”

He let out a broken sob and ran from the room.

“Davey! No what?”

The next morning at Harbone Elementary, a child was sent to the nurse’s office.

Jennifer Greene had gone into a fit of hysterics during English class, screaming the minute her teacher, Mr. Barrows, walked in the door. The poor girl was inconsolable and the nurse couldn’t figure out what was wrong, couldn’t get her to talk. She’d been sent home to her parents’ care.

Her parents sent a formal complaint to the school, outraged, and demanding that Mr. Barrows be fired at once.

Little Jenny had told her parents but one word.

“Samantha Lennox with the Bellman. I’m here to ask you about an incident that happened here about three weeks ago.”

The gas attendant looked weary, “I’ve already talked to the press. And the police.”

“I’m here for a follow up article.”

“What for?”

I hesitated.

It had been days since the Harbone Elementary incident and the Tristate Tribune had managed an interview with the little girl’s mother, Mrs. Greene. The interview had proven a let down to the vast majority of those who’d read it. Those who weren’t aware of the shooting at Westside’s Corner Gas.

“My poor Jenny was raving on and on about that monster, Mr. Barrows,” Mrs. Greene had said.

*That monster Mr. Barrows.*

I just couldn’t help but think...

“Anonymous tip,” I said. “There could be more to this incident than you realize.”

The gas attendant gave me a curious look. “I was on shift when it happened,” he said slowly.

Deliberately. “That man... he wasn’t sane, ya know?”

“I heard. Do you remember exactly what he said?”

“Crazy stuff. Monsters, he said. Monsters were coming for him.” The attendant squirmed. “Between you and me, off the record and all that if you don’t mind, I don’t think he meant to kill those people at all.”

“What exactly are you suggesting?”

“He was on the run from- from *something* at least. He had a gun, sure, but I think... maybe... he only ever meant to use it on himself...”

A man on the run from monsters.

A little girl convinced her teacher was one.

David and his sudden fear.

None of it made any sense. What had caused these seemingly unconnected outbreaks of delirium? Was it really unconnected? The world a web of interwoven coincidences? Or was there something real buried beneath it all to be feared?

The Bellman was busy. Phones were ringing off the walls with the fervor of people voicing the never ending tragedies of the day. A road accident involving the pileup of seven separate vehicles, and pollutants of

unknown origin in the Ardor River that were leaking into the town's water reserve on top of the typical crimes, murders, and suicides.

I got home late that night.

The apartment was quiet and hung with shadows.

I found Caroline at David's bedside, face pale with evident worry.

"He worked himself into a fever. Cried himself to sleep," she murmured at my arrival.

"What?" I looked at the little boy. His forehead shone under the dim light with perspiration and his lashes were wet with tears.

"He said there were monsters under the bed. Wouldn't believe me when I told him there weren't any. I'm taking him to the doctor tomorrow..." she sighed. "How was work?"

I don't remember what I said in answer. The next thing I knew I was shutting my bedroom door behind me and sinking to the floor. My thoughts were a tangle of nonsensical, half formed theories worked into a frenzy of buzzing emotion I couldn't name.

The lights outside the window were fading fast, before I knew it I was drenched in darkness.

*Monsters.*

If David was in danger- what? What could I do? What can anyone do against an invisible threat you can't identify with any certainty?

All at once I became aware of that dark void under my bed. A darkness that somehow managed to be more complete than the night engulfing the room.

What was I afraid of really?

Like a fool, I laughed at myself for my cowardice. Not understanding the origin of that fear.

The darkness grew.

It crept closer...

closer...

It's fingers tugged at my feet, dark tendrils inched up my legs. The monster enveloped me in its shadowy apparition of a body. In another instant its existence and mine were intermingled in an intricately brutal battle of wills.

The monster was inside me.

I was inside it.

The monster was me.

I was the monster.

When we're young, we fear those dark things that creep within the depths of the caverns under our beds. When we grow up, they don't just fade away. The darkness crawls from its den and into our sheets.

Into us.