

Monster in the Closet

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Through the crystal droplets of rain on the window pane, Teresa May watched the storm. Tiny brown bangs dangled down by her eyes as she stared into the wild darkness of the tempest. Behind the clouds, flashes of lightning illuminated the epic world above, revealing the vast chasms and canyons of the clouds overhead. An instant later, the roar of thunder came passing over the house.

Teresa's eyes opened wide at the thunder and she laughed. In her bedgown, she hopped down from her window seat and ran to the closet. She threw open the door and faced into the absolute pitch blackness inside. "Did you hear that? Did you hear it?" she squealed with delight.

"I did."

It was a deep voice. Guttural. Bestial. Animalistic. Dangerous.

Leaving her door open, Teresa went running back to the seat. She leapt up with some agility and pressed her young face to the window, hands flattened against the glass. "Storms are so cool." Another flash of light lit up her pink gown and she giggled with delight, squealing as the thunder rolled over the house again. "That one was close."

"It was." The voice drew out from the blackness of her closet. Stepping out was a living shadow. In the vague shape of a wolf, the gangly monster had abnormally long legs, ending in oversized paws. Its mouth of death was set beneath eyes that glowed slightly and a warped body shifted with each methodical step.

Tall enough to almost reach the ceiling, the nightmare approached the window and looked out along with the young girl. In the nighttime light, the towering beast was rendered translucent, almost clear, with only the slightest black outline of its form and its glowing eyes to give any indication of its presence. As well as its breath. It had long, slow breaths like some ancient, vengeful thing.

Teresa closed her eyes, straining to remember. "If you take the seconds between the lightning and thunder, and divide it by five, then you get how far away the lightning was in miles." As she remembered the formula, a flash of light washed over her face. She opened her eyes to an immediate roll of loud, booming thunder. She grinned at the sound as still more lightning tore overhead.

"Storms like you," said the monster, its voice low and quiet.

"Well that's good because I like storms," Teresa grinned. She craned her neck straight back to look straight up at the monster. "Do you like storms?"

The beast was silent, its wolf-like head tilting thoughtfully to the left. "I suppose I do."

Teresa grinned. "Want to sneak out and play in the rain?"

"I ate a storm once," remarked the monster.

"You did?" gawked Teresa. "What did it taste like? Did it taste like cotton candy?"

"I've not had cotton candy," said the monster. Its eyes lit up when lightning flashed, while its body completely disappeared for a brief instant. The lightning was followed with a rapid succession of smaller bursts, causing the monster's body to almost flicker into and out of visibility like a strobe light.

"Why did you eat it?" asked Teresa.

"It was misbehaving," the monster told her. "I was sent to bring it down."

"Oh wow," breathed Teresa.

Footsteps came from behind the door at their backs. The monster turned. "Your mother has heard you."

"You need to hide," Teresa whispered panicked.

The monster only said, "I do not."

The bedroom door opened and the monster disappeared as the light flooded the room. A woman of beauty, showing the signs of a long day and not quite enough wine, saw Teresa at the window. "Honey, get into bed," she reprimanded with more exhaustion than anger. Teresa hopped down immediately and dove into bed, scampering like a rabbit under her blankets. "I know you want to stay up and watch the storm but you've got your first day back at school tomorrow."

"I know," said Teresa.

Her mother bent down and kissed her on the forehead. "Go to sleep, baby."

"Okay," Teresa appeased. She stayed down until the door was shut. Its light wiping away into darkness, the monster became semi-opaque again. Teresa immediately sat up and whispered, "Do you want to come to school with me?"

"Why?" asked the monster, watching the curiosity of the door.

"Because school is fun," said Teresa. "We'll do math and read. Maybe science."

"You've been there before then," reasoned the beast. It moved closer to Teresa, practically straddling the bed as it looked down over her.

"Before I went to the orphanage, yeah," said the girl. She yawned a giant, wide yawn, covering her mouth with both hands. "While I was there, I went to school at the orphanage. It wasn't fun." Teresa laid still and stared up, not at the monster but passed it. "I didn't have a window to look out." She yawned again and her eyes began to fade. "What will you do tomorrow while I'm at school?"

"I will sleep," said the monster. "I may work if I wish."

"Will you sing me a lullaby?" she asked.

"I know no lullabies," said the monster.

"They're easy," said Teresa, mumbling the beginning of a melody as she succumbed to sleep.

The monster watched over the little girl for a while, until she drifted into a deeper sleep. It slowly turned its nightmarish head towards the door. Stepping over the little girl's bed with its long, spindly legs, it exited the room, passing through the door without thought or effort.

The tall monster exited into the lighted hallway by way of a small shadow cast by the doorframe. Within the light, blinding as it was, the monster elected to be totally invisible. It passed unseen and unnoticed down the hallway, walking with slow and methodical steps down the middle of the house. It arrived at the mouth of the hallway into a modest living room to see a pile of junk. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, a man with a shaved head and obsessed eyes was trying to combine two devices that had no business combining. Behind him, on the recliner, the woman – Teresa's mother – was reading on a tablet computer.

The house was simple but nice. Moving boxes sat half-unpacked throughout the floor of the front room. On the mantle over the cold

fireplace were pictures. The monster stepped over the pile of junk to see them more closely. A picture of the two adults covered the mantle. An inventor's fair's second-place award. Battle of the Bands runner up. That one time she met her idol as a bassist. His biggest invention sold on late-night TV. All the big moments of their lives.

Only one picture had Teresa.

As an infant, she was standing atop a large play castle; hand-built and ingenious. The picture was barely of her and more of the construct that had been built for her at an age far from then. The monster studied the pictures closely, its reflection captured in the panes of protective glass as if it were perfectly visible. Its glowing eyes especially were perfectly clear. It turned back to the two adults and saw them sharing the space but not together. It asked in its bestial voice, "How did Teresa come to be at the orphanage?"

The man's hands slowed. Grease-covered fingers grew distant as his mind traveled to other thoughts and he put the tinkering down. He half-turned to the woman. "You know, I was just thinking about Teresa."

"Hmm?" said the woman, sipping her wine, not taking her eyes off the screen.

"How did we let things get so bad that Child Services had to take her away?"

The woman froze in place, the wine glass to her lips. She swallowed and placed the glass down. "Where the hell did that come from?"

The man only shrugged. "Just...just thinking about it." He seemed untroubled by the sourceless thought. Meanwhile, the monster waited and listened for their defense.

The woman set her tablet aside. "Dave, we promised we wouldn't talk about it until we were ready. Until we were both ready." Her voice was shaking. So were her hands. Dave stayed quiet before relenting. He went back to the machine parts.

The monster focused on the woman, on Teresa's mother. "You did it," he realized. "You both had a hand, but it was your fault."

"I didn't mean for it to happen!" she suddenly barked at Dave.

"Lisa," he urged her, glancing back at the hallway. "You'll wake up Teresa."

"I didn't mean for it to happen!" Lisa repeated insistently, whispering loudly and fiercely.

"That isn't true," accused the monster. "You knew it would happen, knew it should happen, but did not think it would happen." Lisa didn't speak. With a trembling lip, she fell back into her chair and put her hand to her chin. She stared away, her face passive as tears caressed her cheeks. "A mother who forgot about her child's well-being," realized the monster.

"I'm awful," breathed Lisa.

"You're not awful," Dave tried to comfort his wife.

"Yes, you are," the monster proclaimed. "For I was sent to take your child and yet it is you who should be taken." The monster lowered down, its spindly legs bending with surprising flexibility. Its face came close enough to Lisa that she could feel its wrath. "My mercy on your child is all that spares you the agony of true loss. The true loss you deserve."

"We don't deserve her," whispered Lisa. She opened tear-stained eyes and looked angrily at her husband.

Dave took the accusation personally. He stood up and backed away from his wife. "I'm no saint," he told her, looking down on her in every sense. "But I didn't...I'm not the one who—"

"No, you are the one who forgot your daughter existed," accused the monster, turning its attention now to him. "Your mechanical toys mattered more to you than your own childling." The monster turned around entirely from Lisa towards Dave. "Neglect is its own special form of abandonment. Think otherwise at your daughter's peril." Dave only fell silent, unable to meet his wife's gaze or even finish his statement.

"Your child preservers," said the monster, slowly departing. It ambled unhurried back towards the hallway. "My mercy and her might make her endure. But the scars she carries will reopen." The monster stopped and looked back at the two adults. "Have you two the strength to confront those horrors? Horrors she would have been spared had you lived up to your roles?" The monster turned back to the hallway. "I think not." It stepped through a shadow cast by the entertainment center, disappearing entirely.

"I'm not sure what to do for her, not from here," Dave told his wife.

Lisa said nothing. She only averted her gaze and her own attention, focusing instead on her wine.

Into the rainy night, the monster walked. Raindrops danced around its tall, skinny frame as it exited the house. It departed by way of the shadow of a tree, created by a street lamp on the far side of the house. Into the rain it walked, wet soil not needing to give way to its dark steps.

Out from the clouds came the storm to meet it. Massive and stalwart, the giant landed in the backyard, crunching the brass nozzle of the lawn hose left carelessly amongst the grass. Broad humanoid shoulders and no head atop stubby legs, its attention and focus was still easy to tell. Made of muscle, sinew, and might, the behemoth was nearly the height of the house and wider than a car. It spoke without hesitation or rush. "Dereliction." Its voice was like the rumble of thunder, more force and echo than true sound.

"I have been assigned to a death," the monster told the storm. "I have selected to revise the time when the death should be attained."

"Impotence," said the storm.

"It is my domain," maintained the monster, its glowing eyes unblinking and locked on the storm. "And it is not your concern."

"Correct." The storm began to turn away, but paused. Its boulder-like shoulder turned back towards the monster. "Currently."

That caused the monster's eye to open wider on its right side. The hackles of its tall, disproportionate body began to rise so slightly and its form grew more opaque. "She will not be taken," decided the monster. "You and your kin linger about her," it told the storm. "You recognize that she does not deserve such."

The storm's only answer was, "Collateral."

"The cumulative good cannot be the only standard we observe," said the monster. "One does not deserve harm so that two may mature into their proper forms."

The storm stayed for a thought before turning away. "Prerogative." It began to walk into the rain. "Currently." It disappeared into the falling rain. The monster watched it go before turning as well.

The tall monster ambled thoughtfully back into the shadow cast by the tree, departing inside Teresa's room. Without a single droplet of rain upon it, the nightmare returned to the closet. It began to enter the blackness inside when it heard movement from behind. Teresa shifted under her

comforter and looked towards the monster without opening her young eyes. "Are you there?" she asked sleepily.

"I am," said the monster in a quiet, deep voice. "I will always be, for the rest of your life," it both promised and threatened.