

TWO

I was pleased to see that Rick was standing dumbfounded, his mouth agape. His silence was puzzling. I couldn't tell if he was shy or angry.

Melanie laughed. "I still remember that stupid movie!"

"So do I," I said.

"Remember the part where the old lady goes into her pantry and..."

"Yes, I remember it too well. Let's not ruin our appetites."

Rick was still holding his jacket. I'd hung Melanie's on the doorknob. Melanie took Rick's jacket from him and turned to put both their jackets in the hallway closet. I caught her hand before it reached the doorknob.

"Don't open that," I admonished. "The apartment's in order because I crammed all the stuff in there." I turned to Rick. "Family skeletons," I explained.

Melanie laughed. "Any I haven't met?"

"Quite possibly," I said, taking the jackets and hanging them on the doorknob. "I'm still uncovering them myself."

"Like that monster Grandma and Grandpa used to keep locked up in their cellar?"

"Worse," I told Melanie. "Worse than any special effects wizard could dream up, that's for sure."

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“You and Mom had a name for the monster: Charlie, or something like that, wasn’t it?”

“No,” I said, “that was your father. Our family pet’s name was Sam.”

“That’s right. Do you still have the picture of him, with you and Mom?”

“No doubt it’s around some place.”

“You ought to bring out the family album, Unc, for Rick to see. We keep talking about people he’s never met.”

“Not on an empty stomach,” I advised. “Come on. Let’s not stand here all evening. I’ve got to check on supper. You can tag along if you want.”

Melanie and her boyfriend followed me into the kitchen. “Smells good,” Melanie said.

“It better,” I remarked. “You’re the one who taught me how to make it. Either of you want a drink?”

“Yes,” Rick said. “Please.”

I wasn’t too surprised by his quick response. Any discussion of our family always made me reach for the bottle. “You better make the drinks,” I told Melanie. “I’ve got my hands full here. Better make Rick’s a strong one. Getting introduced to this family is like a hazing. He’ll need all the courage he can muster—even the false courage of the bottle—if he’s going to last halfway through dinner.”

Melanie laughed as though I’d been kidding her. As they sat on the stools at the kitchen counter and sipped their drinks, I conveyed to Rick the importance of having...

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. . .A Beast of One's Own

Grandma and Uncle Ernie and Mother and Father were happy to leave the Mortons' house early. My sister Connie and I had provided them with an inconvenient excuse: we had gotten sick on the rich whipped-cream pastries and thrown up on the Mortons' Persian carpet. Mother didn't blame us. "You can never be sure about catered food," she said. "Anyway, to be a proper affair, they should have done the work themselves."

Connie and I leaned our heads out the rear windows on the drive home, swallowing air like a couple of cocker spaniels, just in case we got sick again. We arrived home too late for Uncle Ernie's favorite radio program and too early for bed. Everyone's disappointment with the evening was now complete.

The beast in the Mortons' cellar was not as unusual as we expected. The Mortons had talked it up for so long and had got all their friends and neighbors into such a fever of anticipation that we looked forward to nothing less than Beelzebub himself. But theirs was such an ordinary monster—so conventionally clawed and fanged and hairy and smelly—that there was almost no point in their turning out the lights. Of course we expected its eyes to glow like fierce red lanterns. It would have been remarkable only if they didn't.

Connie and I were nevertheless thrilled to see the creature, for we didn't yet have a beast of our own except in make-believe. Our opinions did not count for anything, though. The adults had

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not been impressed with the Mortons' beast, and that was sufficient to declare the evening a great disappointment and a total waste of time. "Not to mention the waste of gasoline," Father added, pulling down the garage door.

My sister and I put on our pajamas and went down to the basement to have one last look before being marched off to bed. The cracks in the basement floor, like the branching fractures made by tree roots in the sidewalk, had grown longer and a little deeper. We knew this was so, and not just our imaginations, for we had marked the ends of the cracks with chalk. Whatever was down beneath the floor was getting bigger.

Grandma did not condone the current rage to excavate beasts and monsters from out of your cellar. In her day, she said, tracing the genealogical outlines of your family tree satisfied most people's urges to go digging up the dirt on their families.

Connie and I were naturally disappointed to learn that all these beasts and monsters and chimaeras and bogeymen belonged to the adults. As children, my sister and I had quite a complement of nocturnal bugbears and hobgoblins lurking in the shadowed recesses of our old, creaking house, but, as Mother had explained to us, they were only imaginary. "Nightmares can't really hurt you," she would tell us, smoothing back the matted hair from our sweaty foreheads. "Now get back in bed before I call your Father in here."

Our father was scarier than anything we could imagine, slipping off his black leather belt one loop at a time, slowly and deliberately. Connie and I never felt the smack of the leather on our bare bottoms, because we always made that happen to someone else. Still, we didn't want to be there to

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see it. So we quickly climbed back into bed before Mother summoned up the monster we called Ralph. We called him that because he looked like Ralph Kramden and he was a bus driver, too. Ralph hung his chrome coin-changer from his wide leather belt and always counted the money in the morning to make sure we hadn't stolen any nickels.

Uncle Ernie was the most sympathetic to our disappointment at not being able to conjure up any beasts of our own. "You two are still too young for that. Monsters take a long time to grow. They have to come back to scare you many times before they take on their final shape, finding out what scares you the most. Be patient. There's plenty of time for growing up," he advised us. "Now run along, and don't let me catch you leaving food down in the cellar again. Monsters only eat children. The food scraps will just attract rats and cockroaches. Now, get, before I lock you in the coal bin again. Only this time I'll forget where I put the key."

Besides learning of the long gestation period required to bring monsters into the daylight world, Connie and I discovered some more rules governing these beasts. One was that they had to be born in the house where they had first been imagined. Most often they were born down in the cellars, but not always. A deep, dark closet or a cluttered attic full of old dolls and headless tailor's mannequins were also likely places for the conception of monsters. This led to the somewhat awkward situation faced by a lot of families who no longer lived in the houses where they grew up as children. The beasts that came up from the cellars and down from the dusty attics belonged to somebody else, often to complete strangers.

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Whenever we could sneak in from outside, Connie and I slipped down to the cellar to see if the beast was ready yet. We picked away at the loosened gravel to help it along, but when we got a handful of pale, crusty scales we stopped digging.

Mother was getting excited about the coming of the beast. It would finally be our family's turn to show off. She began making tuna casseroles and putting them in the freezer. Grandma baked several loaves of sour-dough bread and wrapped them in aluminum foil and put them in the freezer, too. Mother started in on her famous cherry pie, borrowing several pie tins from the neighbors.

She came down to the basement for another container of lard and caught my sister and me picking away at the cracks in the floor. She said we had to be punished this time, for she'd used up all her warnings. Father was at work, so she couldn't conjure up Ralph. She made us kneel in the corner on the cherry pits. When Connie grew faint and passed out, we got to go to our rooms for the rest of the day.

We weren't allowed to come down for supper that night. Grandma must have felt sorry for us; she promised to smuggle something up later.

Grandma brought us slices of raw onion and a glass of milk gone sour. Then she stirred some chili pepper into the curdled milk.

"Now, I'm just going to stand here until you eat it all up, because, if you don't," she said, grinning, "I'm going to call your Father up here and tell him you tried bribing me to sneak you something with stolen nickels."

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She jingled the coins in the pocket of her apron with the appliques of tomatoes and carrots and cucumbers on it. We looked at the pictures of those other vegetables, pretending the onion tasted like them. We also pretended that the clotted milk and chili powder was a strawberry shake.

“Care for seconds?” Grandma asked, cackling like a dry-throated witch. Our name for her was “Miss Gulch”.

“No, Grandma,” we said.

“I thought not.”

It hadn't made any difference, playing Grandma's game. Miss Gulch never replaced the nickels in Ralph's coin-changer. We got in trouble for that. And Mother got mad at us for throwing up again. She had to pit some more cherries, more than she needed.

The beast finally emerged from the floor of the cellar on Friday. Connie and I found him first. He wasn't very big, for a beast: about like Officer Matthew's police dog, except much broader at the shoulders and across his slowly heaving chest.

My sister and I named the beast before the others knew he had even come out of the ground. We called him Pop-up Sam, because he just popped up and because Sam was the name of Officer Matthew's dog.

Pop-up Sam looked like a big lizard. He didn't seem very strong, but he was very stubborn. Scales covered his body from head to tail, except for the patch where Connie and I had accidentally ripped them off. The scales were pale and translucent, like very thin seashells.

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Father and Uncle Ernie struggled to get Pop-up Sam upstairs. Several times they got only handfuls of scales. The fresh wounds oozed a pale, viscous fluid. It was sticky like pancake syrup.

Uncle Ernie stepped on Sam's hind foot. We could hear the bones crunch. Poor Sam opened his wide mouth to let out a beastly bellow, but all that emerged was a pathetic squeal. They got him up the stairs and into the dining room, but they caught his barbed tail in the basement door. Pop-up Sam could not tell them what was wrong, that he wasn't just being stubborn again. They pulled him along by the ears and horns and ripped his tail right off. His second squeal was even less convincing than the first.

Mother began calling up the relatives and neighbors to come to Pop-up Sam's coming-out party, set for Sunday afternoon. Father tied the timid beast to one of the big carved legs of the mahogany dining room table.

Uncle Ernie strutted around the house for the next two days. Mother cooked him his favorite dish at every meal: liver and onions. Connie and I had to wait on him hand and foot: fetching him another bottle of beer, changing the radio station, and bringing in his newspaper. Mother even allowed him to smoke one of his big Havana cigars in the living room. When my sister and I weren't waiting on him he wanted us out of his sight.

The reason Uncle Ernie was afforded all these privileges hinged on the assumption that the beast was his. Father hadn't grown up in the house and Grandpa Linder was already married when he had the house built for him and Grandma. But the monster could as well have belonged to one of Uncle Ernie's two brothers or his sister. Yet no one questioned the beast's arising from the cellar

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out of Uncle Ernie's childhood imagination. Someone had brought honor and status to the family with the arrival of the beast. It may as well have been Uncle Ernie.

At mealtime Father taunted Sam, holding out morsels on his fork and snatching them back at the last instant just as Sam was about to get his Jurassic maw around the tidbit. Sam made one attempt to singe Father's hand, but the fire had so little effort of lung power behind it that the small orange flame barely curled past his lips. Sam burnt his own nose, letting out another cry of pain that sounded more like a belch.

Father and Uncle Ernie got into an argument over Father's mistreatment of the beast. Mother and Grandma took their sides against Father. The shouting and banging of fists on the table went on until Father threw off his napkin and stormed out, tipping his chair over onto Sam's head.

That night, Connie and I whispered in our beds about how we could help Sam escape. When wheezes and snores came from each of the three bedrooms, I sneaked down to the basement and got a crescent wrench from Father's tool rack. I loosened the bolt on the table leg to which Sam had been tied. Sam lifted his head to watch me for a moment. He sighed and dropped his head back onto his clawed paws. I left the kitchen door open a crack and climbed back upstairs.

The next morning, Sam was still in his leather leash, though he had managed to wrap it twice around the table leg. After church, Mother and Grandma set out the buffet lunch on the sideboard. Aunt Edna came by early to lend a hand. The final cooking of the casseroles and the baking of the bread and pies made the house smell wonderful, all except for Pop-up Sam's corner of the dining room, which was suffused with his beastly stench.

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Father and Uncle Ernie set aside their differences for the moment and assisted one another in getting the beast riled up, so that Sam would put on the best possible show for the company. They took my sling-shot and aimed cherry pits at his tender nose. They whacked his flanks and backside with a piece of radiator hose. Sam retreated further into the corner, making no effort to defend himself. Father and Uncle Ernie tired of their sport and went down to the basement to devise a contraption out of an old toaster with which they intended to deliver electric shocks to the sorely harassed beast at the appropriate moments.

Father discovered that I had used his wrench. It was not hanging on its customary hook. He did not want to punish us on such a special day, he said, but he warned us that we would get what was coming to us later—with interest.

The company began arriving, and Connie and I were instructed to help out in the kitchen. We had to admit that, under the glare of the dining room chandelier, Sam looked pretty impressive. His scales gleamed like polished metal. If only he weren't so cowering and hunched into himself, he might have managed to throw a scare or two into the elder aunts on Father's side.

Uncle Ernie sent an electric shock into Sam's hindquarters with the device they had rigged up. The switch was concealed on the back of the big old radio cabinet so it would look like he was just tinkering with a loose tube or finding another station. Sam lurched and jumped onto all fours, letting go one of his belching squeals. At that very moment—the timing was certainly no coincidence—Aunt Edna came into the dining room bearing a steaming cherry pie. She shrieked enough to satisfy both Father and Uncle Ernie. But she also dropped the hot cherry pie on the carpet.

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There followed such a tumult of confusion and shouting that poor Sam was beside himself with fright and did not seem to know which way to turn to escape the uproar. He got himself wound up in the leash again and tugged at it frantically. Connie and I hoped this would be the perfect opportunity for his escape. But the massive table leg held fast and Sam managed only to get the leather cord wrapped around his neck. His face turned a sickly blue and he collapsed to the floor with a heavy thud.

“Sam’s choking,” I shouted.

“Sam?” Uncle Ernie asked. “Who the hell is Sam?”

Connie began crying. I pulled at the leash to loosen it from around Sam’s throat. Mother was wringing her hands, Father shouting, and Grandma directing a brigade of mops and scrubbing rags. Uncle Ernie found it all highly amusing and continued to deliver electric shocks to the unfortunate beast.

Sam remained still, even as the current crackled across the edges of his scales, and the metal fittings of his leash glowed with the charge. “Stupid beast!” Uncle Ernie hollered, kicking him in the ribs. “You two! You did something to him. I’ll get you. Come here!”

Father and Uncle Ernie dragged us down to the basement and locked us in the coal bin. Connie begged them not to turn the lights out, but they did anyway.

I found an old packing crate and a burlap sack and made a bench for us to sit on. Connie trembled. She didn’t like to be in the basement with the lights out. I told her I would protect her, though I had no idea how. She leaned against my shoulder and her crying subsided, though from

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time to time she let out a gulping sob. I told her not to worry about anything in the basement now because the monsters were all upstairs. Connie laughed, and I was happy that I had made her laugh.

Once the commotion upstairs ebbed, we could hear the squeak of the floorboards as the company walked past the sideboard and marched around the table. We could imagine nothing else but their going back for slice after slice of cherry pie, until there was none left.