
Monsters

by

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When Henry looked in his dad's old mirror, he couldn't see the monster. He touched his reflection. Nothing. No shock, no secret thrill, not even a tingle. Usually his nipples tightened or the insides of his knees would get crinkly and if he were in a certain mood he'd crawl back under the covers and think very hard about women in black strapless bras. But this morning -- zero. He stared at a fattish naked white man with thinning hair and yellow teeth. A face as interesting as lint. He wished for a long purple tongue or a disfiguring scar that forked down his cheek, except he didn't want any pain. Not for himself, anyway. Henry hated looking so vanilla. There was nothing terrifying about him except the bad thoughts, which he told no one, not even God. But this morning the monster was cagy. It wanted to get loose and he was tired of holding it back. Something was going to happen. He decided not to shave.

The gray dacron shirt and shiny blue polyester pants hanging on the line over the bathtub had dripped dry overnight. His nylon underwear was dry too, but the orlon socks were still damp so he draped them over the towel bar. Henry wore synthetics because they wouldn't shrink or wrinkle and he could wash them in the sink. Some days, after wallowing in other people's mung, he boiled his clothes. He liked his showers hot too; he stood in the rusty old clawfooted tub for almost half an hour until his skin bloomed like a rose. The water beat all the thoughts out of his head; nothing wormy had ever happened in the tub. He opened his mouth, let it fill with hot water and spat at the wall.

He owned just five shirts: gray, white, beige, blue and blue-striped; and three pairs of pants: blue, gray and black. As he tried to decide what to wear to work, he had a bad thought. Not a thought exactly -- he flashed an image of himself bending toward a TV minicam, hands locked behind him as he was pushed into a police car. Blue or blue-striped would show up best on the Six O'Clock News.

He petted the shirts. Maybe he was already crazy, but it seemed to him that if he 3:01 PM on 5/19/96 wore blue today, it might set off the chain reaction of choices the creature was always trying to start. He pulled the white shirt from its hanger.

Henry ate only two kinds of breakfast cereal, Cheerios and Rice Chex. Over the years he had tried to simplify his life; routines were a defense against bad thoughts. That's why he always watched the Weather Channel when he ate Cheerios. He liked the satellite pictures of storms sweeping across the country because he thought that was what weather must look like to God. He didn't understand how people could think weather was boring; obviously they hadn't seen it get loose.

After breakfast he tried to slip past the shrine and out the front door, but he couldn't. The monster was stirring even though he had chosen the white shirt. He dug the key out of his pocket, opened the shrine and turned on the light. He was in the apartment's only closet, seven feet by four. Henry bolted the door behind him.

The walls were shaggy with pictures he'd ripped out of magazines but he didn't look at them. Not yet. He pressed the play button on the boom box and the Rolling Stones bongoed into "Sympathy for the Devil." He knelt at the oak chest which served as the altar. Inside was a plastic box. Inside the box, cradled in pink velvet, was the Beretta.

He had bought the 92SB because of its honest lines. A little bulky in the grip, the salesman had said, but only because inside was a fifteen shot double-column magazine. It was cool as a snake to the touch, thirty-five hard ounces of steel, anodized aluminum and black plastic. He wrapped his right hand around the grip and felt the gentle bite of the serrations on the front and rear of the frame. He stood, supported his right hand with his left, extended his arms and howled along with Jagger. "Ow!"

Schwartzenegger trembled in his sights; even cyborgs feared the thing lurking inside Henry West. "Now!" The pistol had a thrilling heft; it was more real than he was. "Wham!" he cried, then let his arms drop. Manson gave him a shaggy grimace of approval. Madonna shook her tits. The monster was stretching; its claw slid up his throat.

He spun then and ruined Robert Englund, wham, David Duke, wham, and Mike Tyson, wham, wham, wham. Metallica gave him sweaty glares. Imelda Marcos simpered. Henry let a black rain of bad thoughts drench him. He'd give in and let it loose on the Market Street bus or in the First Savings where that twisty young teller never looked at him when she cashed his paycheck. He'd blaze into Rudy's Lunch Bucket like that guy in Texas and keep slapping magazines into the Beretta until he had the mass murder record. Only not when Stefan was behind the counter. Stefan always gave him an extra pickle. Or else he'd just suck on the gun himself, take a huge bloody gulp of death. He sagged against Jim Jones, laughing so he wouldn't scream.

"Why me, God?" he said, rubbing the barrel along the stubble on his chin. "Let me pass on this, okay?" But He wasn't listening. Just because He could be everywhere, didn't mean He'd want to be. He wouldn't stoop to this place, not while Henry was celebrating slaughter.

When the music ended, he fit the pistol back into its velvet cradle. He felt split into two different Henrys, both of them moist and expended. Part of him suspected this was nothing more than a bughouse riff, like old Jagger prancing across some stage playing Lucifer. The Beretta wasn't even loaded; he'd hidden the ammo under the sink behind the paper towels. But if this were nothing but pretend, why did it give him more pleasure than a mushroom pizza and a jug of Carlo Rossi Pink Chablis and a new stroke flick? It may have started as a game, but it felt real now. Under the influence of the gun, he was solid as a brick. The rest of his life was smog.

He locked the shrine behind him and went back to the mirror, the only thing he'd kept when he closed dad's house. The creature leered at him. He stuck out his thumb and smudged his reflected eye. The hair on the back of his neck prickled. He thought then he knew what was going to happen. It wanted to touch someone else and he was going to let it.

The new bus driver was a plush moon-faced woman. She didn't even bother to look at him as he slid a dollar onto her outstretched hand, brushing fingertips quickly across the ridges of her skin. He was nobody to her, another zero. The monster's looping murderous rage was building like an electric charge as she jabbed at the coin dispenser for his change. Notice me, pay attention. She dropped the quarter into his palm and he curled his fingers suddenly, grazing her palm. The unholy spark of madness crackled between them. She yipped, jerked her hand away and stared at him. "Oops," he said. "Sorry." She gave him an uneasy laugh, like someone who has just suffered through a sick joke she didn't want to hear. She'd think it was just static -- what else could it be? She couldn't know how good it felt to give away pain. He was still grinning when he swung into an empty seat and saw her watching him in the rear view mirror.

Another monster worked at Kaplan's Cleaners. Celeste Sloboda pressed and folded shirts across the room. Only she didn't count. She hadn't made the choice; she'd been born a hunchback. Besides, she wore her thick black hair down to her belt when she wasn't working, trying to cover her deformity.

She would've had better luck hiding a chainsaw in her purse. What made it worse was that Celeste was tiny, barely five feet; she looked like a twelve-year-old going on forty, complete with sags and wrinkles and a hump the size of a turkey. She smiled too much and hummed to herself and yattered about her cats as if they were smarter than she was. Jerry said she was kind of cute if you pretended she wasn't lopsided but Henry didn't have that kind of imagination.

He knew that the reason Celeste kept honeying up to him was that she wanted to switch over to the cleaning side. Kaplan kept crabbing that there was no money in shirts, that he only took them so that shirt customers would bring in cleaning business. If Kaplan axed shirts, he'd have to axe Celeste too -- or else move her over to Henry's side. But Henry already had a helper and, even though Jerry was a jack-around, at least he left Henry alone.

Celeste perched on a stool, steaming shirts on the form press they called the susie. The laundry had delivered just three mesh bags; usually there were between five and eight. "Guess what I had for breakfast today?" she said.

Henry, at the spotting bench, did not reply. In the six months Celeste had been at Kaplan's, he'd learned to pretend that he couldn't hear her over the rumble of the cleaning drum.

"Broccoli in Velveeta sauce. I know you think that's weird but then you think everything I do is weird. Besides, I like leftovers for breakfast. Meat loaf, potatoes, lasagna, I don't care. When I was a kid I knew this girl poured root beer on her corn flakes so I guess broccoli for breakfast isn't so bad."

Henry followed a trail of coffee splatters up the placket of a silk blouse, sponging them with wet spotter. He blotted the blouse and set it aside for a few moments.

"What if our bodies don't wake up all at once? I mean, the eyes are always last, right? Ears wake up before. I swear I can smell coffee brewing even though I'm asleep. So maybe my taste buds have insomnia or something. Say they're up at two in the morning. By six-thirty, it's lunch time. I can't remember the last time I ate bacon and eggs. What did you have for breakfast, Henry?"

He scraped the splotch on the lapel of a charcoal suit jacket with his fingernail. Some kind of wax -- a candlelight dinner gone sour? The cleaning machine buzzed and the drum creaked to a stop.

Celeste cupped a hand over her mouth. "I said, what did you have for breakfast?"

"You talking to me?" He flushed the wax away with the steam gun. "Cheerios." He tossed the jacket into a basket filled with darks. "With milk." There were enough clothes in it to make a new load. "Jerry," he called. "Yo, Jerry!"

"He's pretending he can't hear you." Celeste giggled. "Probably trying to get into Maggie's pants."

That was his squawk with Jerry. When something needed doing, Jerry was either at the front counter flirting with the cashier or in the bathroom. Henry ducked around the coat hanging beside the spotting bench, grabbed an empty basket and wheeled it to the cleaning machine. As he gathered the warm clothes from the drum he breathed in harsh perchloroethylene fumes. He wheeled the basket over to the empty rail next to the presses. Perk nauseated some people, but Henry liked the smell. It filled his head like Stairway To Heaven.

"How do you clean a syrup stain, anyway?" said Celeste.

"Huh?" He started pulling the clothes onto hangers and setting them on the rail. "You want my job, is that it?"

"Your job?" She buttoned a white spread-collar shirt onto the susie and stepped on the compressed air pedal. With a hiss, steam ballooned the shirt away from the form and jetted from the neck and sleeves. "Don't be paranoid, Henry -- you're the best. Just trying for a little friendly chit-chat, is all." She pulled at her hair net. "Hey, I'm a slob. Syrup's an accident I'll probably have someday."

He grunted and hung the last of the load on the rail. "Sponge it with water then use wet spotter with a couple drops of vinegar. When it's loose, you blot."

"Now was that so hard? Shit, how come getting you to say anything is like moving a refrigerator?" She wiped her forehead. Her work smock, already limp with moisture, clung to her child's body. Pressing shirts on the susie was hot, dreary work. At least on his side, every garment was different. Henry didn't blame her for being bored; he just didn't want to entertain her.

Henry was pitching darks into the machine when Kaplan elbowed the back door open. He was carrying a bag filled with takeout from Rudy's.

"Gonna rain." Louis Kaplan was a pink little man who wore a short-sleeved shirt and a paisley tie that some customer had neglected to pick up -- probably on purpose. He set the bag on a shelf next to a jug of acetone. "What're you doing?" he said to Henry. Without waiting for an answer, he

turned to Celeste. "What's he doing?"

"Getting ready to run a load?" she said.

"I can see that. But I'm not paying him to do the idiot work. Where's Jerry?"

"I didn't know it was my turn to watch him." She pulled a damp shirt from the blue mesh laundry bag beside her and snapped it out. Kaplan scuttled toward the front of the store.

"If that's what being boss does to you, I'm sure as hell glad it's him in charge and not me." She draped the shirt over the susie. "Well, I'm ready for a break."

While Henry finished emptying the basket into the drum, she pulled an assortment of styrofoam coffee cups and cardboard sandwich boxes from the bag and sorted through them. "Want yours now?"

"Not yet." He didn't want her near him. Touching the bus driver hadn't satisfied the thing inside him. Maybe she hadn't felt enough pain. All morning long it had been swelling like a balloon. If Celeste accidentally touched him, he wasn't sure he could keep it from striking out at her. He had never let it touch anyone at work before.

"You get time off for good behavior, Henry."

"I said, in a minute."

She shrugged and went back to her stool, unwrapped an egg bagel with cream cheese and lox. Only when she was settled back on her stool did he pick out his tea with extra milk and the English muffin. Coffee break could be the longest fifteen minutes of the day. He needed Jerry right now to shield him from Celeste. That was about all the kid was good for. What were they doing up there?

"Don't you ever get bored eating the same damn muffin over and over again?" she said.

"It's a new muffin every day."

He was dunking the tea bag when he heard someone up front shouting; the racks of clean clothes muffled the sound. "Shush!" As he strained to hear, he felt a twinge of dread. He hadn't worn the blue but still, something was happening. The noise got closer; he recognized Jerry's whine.

"What do you want me to say? No, really, tell me what I'm supposed to say. I mean, I'm sorry and all and it won't happen again."

Kaplan was the first through the door; his pink face had flushed a meaty red.

"Why won't you listen to me?" Jerry tagged behind like a bad dog on a short leash. "Nobody saw, really. How could they? We were way, way back, behind the 'W' rack."

Kaplan hesitated, trapped by his own machines. If he wanted to keep walking away from Jerry, he'd have to leave the store. He glanced blindly around before deciding his only escape was to dive into a cup of Rudy's coffee.

"Please, Louis."

Jerry tried to come around to face him but Kaplan veered away. He clutched the styrofoam cup close to him and fixed on it as if it were telling him secrets.

"Nobody could've seen us back there," said Jerry. "Go see for yourself. Besides there weren't any customers. Maggie was listening for the door chime. Mr. Kaplan, please say something."

The creature squirmed in delight at Kaplan's distress, watching as he worried at the drink tab on the lid. "You had your hand in her pants."

Celeste used both hands to smother a giggle and Jerry realized he had an audience. Since Kaplan's back was turned, he let a grin slink across his face.

"No, no," he said. You don't understand. Yes, we were kissing. That's what you saw and I'm sorry but it's not what you think."

Kaplan tore the plastic lid off and hot coffee slopped onto his hand and down his trousers. "Shit!" When he tried to dance out of the way, he bumped into Jerry and half the cup splatted onto his shoes. Celeste laughed out loud.

"Okay, okay, so I was playing with the elastic a little." Jerry's smirk curdled what little sincerity he had left. "But that was as far as we were going. I mean, this is a public place. We're not stupid or anything."

"You're right, Jerry. You're not stupid." Kaplan put the dripping coffee cup back on the shelf as if it were a weight he was glad to set down. "I'm the stupid." He finally turned to confront Jerry. "You've worked here for two whole months and done nothing but screw up. I guess that makes me dumb as a box of rocks. But I've learned my lesson, kid. Get your stuff and go. You're finished."

"You're firing me?" Jerry seemed to shrink six inches. "What is this, a joke?"

"I'll give you a week's severance. The check will be ready by closing. You can come back then."

"Oh come on, Mr. Kaplan. Give me a break."

His voice was hard as the sidewalk. "Take your lunch, you can even take your coffee, if you want. But go."

"Henry." Jerry spun toward him in desperation. "You can't let this happen. He'll make you do both our jobs, Henry. Tell him you need help."

Henry was certain that if he opened his mouth the monster would leap out and strangle them all. Jerry plucked a vest from the basket and shook it at Henry. "Who do you think is

going to clean this? Miss Dumpty Humpty?"

"He already does most of your work," said Celeste. "Asshole."

"Celeste," said Kaplan. "Enough."

"No." Jerry threw the vest to the floor. "I'm not going anywhere unless you ask Henry. He runs this place but you're all afraid of him. I'm the only one

he ever talks to."

A sound like the squealing of brakes filled Henry's head. He knew it wasn't real but held his breath, waiting for the crash.

"Celeste," said Kaplan, "I think you should call the police. Tell them we're having a little problem here."

"See, Henry?" Jerry was full of scorn. "They don't even trust you with the phone."

"Get the hell out of my store!" Kaplan stepped toward Jerry.

Celeste edged off her stool. Henry tried to think of a way to stop her. He knew Jerry and Kaplan were very close to fighting; she was going to keep them from hurting each other. When he closed his eyes, Henry saw broken teeth and dark blood beading on the floor tiles. His fists clenched. This was so much better than the shrine. He had never been so close to real violence before.

"Aww, fuck all of you." Jerry snatched his coat. "I never liked working here anyway. The pay sucks and you're nothing but a bunch of loonies and losers." He retreated toward the back door. "Just make sure my check is ready." He stalked out, not even bothering to slam the door behind him.

Kaplan slumped against the spotting bench. "I'm sorry you had to listen to that." Henry guessed he meant both of them, even though he was speaking to Celeste. "I should've taken care of him after work, but I Listen, we're going to have to pull together for a couple of days." He looked about as together as dust. "I'll get an ad in the paper right away. I - I should stay up front today, keep an eye on Maggie. What I think we need to do is keep pushing the cleaning out on schedule, which means you'll have to help Henry. If there's time left, we'll worry about the shirts. No money in goddamn shirts, anyway." He considered for a moment, then gathered himself. "That little weasel." He pushed away from the bench and clapped his hands. "So, then, can we handle this?"

Henry had been flashing Kaplan firing Jerry after work, when there'd be no witnesses. Jerry coldcocked the brittle old man, then straddled him and grasped the pink head between his hands. When he pounded it against the floor, it exploded like a light bulb. The monster was frustrated that nothing had happened. "It stinks," Henry said.

"I'm sorry, Henry. Just give me a couple of days."

"Don't worry, Louis," said Celeste. "We'll handle it."

Kaplan shot her a grateful look and hurried off to keep Maggie from ransacking the till. Henry bent to snare the vest Jerry had thrown. He dropped it in the hamper.

"Look at you." Celeste chuckled. "He's gone and you're still picking up after him."

"It's your fault." He snapped at her. "You laughed, you got him fired."

"That's bullshit, Henry, and you know it. Jerry blew this job off long ago. If you ask me, he got what he deserved. I'm sorry if that bothers you. I'm sorry if you hate my guts. But other people don't make you do bad things. You do them yourself."

Even though she was wrong, he didn't reply; she'd only chew his ear some more. He folded his untouched muffin and rammed it into the cup still half full of lukewarm tea. Of course other people could make you do wrong. Henry was proof of that. And he didn't really hate her. Yes, the grotesque hump repelled him and she had the personality of Brillo but he was also a little sorry for her.

It was the monster who hated her.

"So what do you want me to do?" she said.

Henry figured that the reason it was always dark in church was because God didn't like bright places. His God tended to lurk in the shadows and not say much, like a stranger at a wedding. When He spoke in His midnight whisper, it always took Henry by surprise. God certainly wasn't a rattletongue like Celeste or a smartmouth like Jerry. Henry believed that He preferred the dark because, like Henry, He was shy.

Even though Our Lady of Mercy was only two blocks from Kaplan's, Henry's midday routine was to bring his lunch to St. Sebastian's because the light there was so bad that it was hard for anyone to see him eating. Also, Sebastian was the martyr that some Roman emperor had shot full of arrows; his painting was in the side chapel. Henry liked to sit in the third pew from the back with his regular tuna sandwich, pickle and chocolate milk. The priests usually left him alone because he never made a mess, but sometimes parishioners would crab at him.

The rain had come earlier than predicted, chasing at least a dozen other people into the church, so he had to be cagy about eating. And the clouds had dulled his favorite stained glass; the reds had gone to mud, the blues almost black. Each of the fourteen narrow windows of St. Sebastian's depicted one of the Stations of the Cross. Henry liked to pray to the sixth: Veronica wiping the face of Jesus. Once, years ago, he had wondered whether the impression of His face that Jesus had left on Veronica's handkerchief could be removed with wet spotter, or maybe a hydrogen peroxide soak. It was as close as he had ever come to having a bad thought in a church.

After he finished the pickle, he slid forward onto the kneeler to say a Hail Mary. The monster snuffed the prayer by ramming a fist up Henry's windpipe. He rocked back onto the pew, choking. People turned to stare; Henry put a hand to his mouth and pretended to cough into it. It took a moment before he could breathe again. He sat very still, closed his eyes and tried not to panic. Our Father, he thought, Who art in ... His head snapped back as veins of fire pulsed across his lids; it felt as if someone were squashing his eyes into his skull. He couldn't speak, couldn't even think to Him. Henry had never needed God's help more. Why couldn't he ask for it? Nothing else had changed: Up at the altar, votive candles still flickered like angels and the tabernacle glittered with the gold of heaven. But Henry could not pray. He covered his face with his hands.

"Hey, you. Bum."

Henry turned and blinked at a pale twitchy man in a rain-spattered blue jacket stitched with the name Phil.

"This is a church, scumbag." Phil's voice swelled with outrage, snapping through the gloom like a sermon. "Not some flop where you can sleep off a drunk. You understand? And look at all this garbage. Go on, get out of

here!"

Henry crumbled the sandwich box and the wax paper into a ball. The last place he wanted something to happen was in God's house. He sensed the creature plugging into the man's anger, feeding off it into a frenzy. If Phil tried to hurt him, it would hurt him back. Oh God. He had to get away before it was too late. As he gathered in the milk carton, Phil decided he wasn't hurrying fast enough.

"Now, bum! Or I'm calling the cops." He grabbed at Henry to haul him out of the pew.

He tried to twist away but Phil's hand closed on his shoulder. Henry moaned with dread and pleasure as he yielded to the madness. The spark surged down his arm; muscles spasmed in an explosion of awful strength. He snapped his attacker back as easily as a wet shirt. Phil hit the wall of the church with a sharp crack. He sagged to the floor, face slack, eyes like eggs.

Someone screamed. The shock of monstrous pleasure had left Henry momentarily limp; now he shuddered and flung himself out of the pew past the body. The touch had never been this good before, this vicious. He sprinted through the baptistry out the side door into the rain. He ran five blocks before he realized no one was paying attention to him. Everyone was hunkered down against the weather.

He slowed to a walk. His cheeks were hot; he was in no hurry to get out of the rain. The monster was spent and he was back in control. He hadn't felt this relaxed in weeks. What harm had been done, really? Phil would wake up with a headache and a story he'd exaggerate down at the corner bar for years. So Henry would have lunch at Our Lady of Mercy for a while. Or find an even darker church.

"Hail Mary, full of grace," he said to a parking meter. "The Lord is with thee." He fished a dime from his pocket, cranked it into the slot and the violation flag clicked down. "Deliver us from evil." He laughed. "Amen."

By the time he got back to Kaplan's, he had convinced himself that for today, at least, he'd left the nightmare behind.

It rained that afternoon on everyone but Henry; he was still shining hours after lunch. Even Celeste's yattering failed to rile him, perhaps because she talked mostly about drycleaning instead of her cats and rice pudding and the world's tallest woman. And she worked much harder than Jerry; he was secretly impressed. She may have been a rattletongue, but when Celeste started something, it got done.

He was pressing pants and she was hanging whites. "How long ago did you start in cleaning anyway?" she said. "Ten years, twenty?"

"Before your time."

"Really?" She brightened. "How old do you think I am?"

He didn't understand why she was still honeying up to him, now that she had what she wanted. Henry pulled a pair of gray pinstripes off the rail and ignored her.

"Don't be such a gentleman. The answer is thirty-six, same age as you. Or at

least that's how old Jerry said you were. Unless he was making it up."

"No."

"So how come you never opened a store of your own?"

He stepped on the compressor pedal; steam billowed through the pants. His own shop? That's what his dad used to say. But the thought had never appealed to Henry; he had enough to worry about.

"After all," said Celeste, "you know the business."

"Twenty-five pounder is the smallest rig they make." He nodded at the drycleaning machine. "Cost Kaplan thirty grand." He took his foot off the steam pedal and the pants deflated. "You've got to be smart to play for those stakes."

"So? You're smart. All you need is a rich uncle. Or else hit the lottery. I play my birthday and Madonna's every week. 7/28/56 and 8/16/58. Tell you what: when I win, I'll stake you. Only you have to name the store after me. Sloboda's Cleaners."

Brown gabardines were next on the rail. He said nothing.

"Because it's nice work," she said, "drycleaning. I mean, it's fun because there's progress. You can see what you've done at the end of the day, not like bagging groceries or stitching shoes. You start with something ugly and it ends up pretty. How many jobs are there where you try to make the world a more beautiful place?"

Henry had no idea; he cared zero for the world. He liked the iron tang of steam hissing from the presses, the furriness of wet wool, the backbeat of the spinning drum, the way silk clung like caterpillars to his rough skin, the perfect chemical luster of nylon, the attic smell of shirt cardboards, leather jackets as heavy as raw steak, the airiness of rayon, the delicate crinkling of plastic bags fresh off the roll and especially the intoxicating palette of chemicals at the spotting table. He liked sweating through his tank top in the numbing heat of July and basking in the cozy humidity of the back room at Christmas. What mattered to Henry was that the job filled his senses and kept away the bad thoughts. Mostly.

"Yeah," she was saying, "I like it here just fine even though it's not exactly what I want to do for the rest of my life." She waved her finger at him. "Don't you dare tell Kaplan I said that. I'm trusting you."

A pair of tan suit pants.

"No, what I really want to be someday is a travel agent. That way I'll get to go all over so I can tell people where the best times are. You know, like a librarian has to read all those books? Because I'd love to see the pyramids and China and San Francisco and the Disneys -- all the Disneys. I read where they have one in France now. And learn to ski. And I'm going to try all those warm places where you just lay around on the beach in your bikini and waiters bring you drinks with cherries in them."

The idea of Celeste in a bikini made him laugh. She'd need to buy a third piece to cover her hump.

"Yeah, what's so funny?" She was suddenly brittle, as if a cruel word might shatter her. "You don't think I could do it?"

He had never seen her fold up like this; maybe she had never told him anything that mattered before. He sensed that if he said what he really thought, she might never speak to him again. A couple hours ago he would've killed for this chance. Now he let it pass. "Don't you have to go to school for that?" He waved vaguely toward downtown.

"Probably. I don't know. Never mind." She picked an armful off the rail of hanging clothes and carried them over to the big press. "It's just something I've been thinking about."

She didn't speak, sing, or hum for fifteen minutes. She just hurled clothes around like curses: yanked them onto the press, jerked down the cover, threw them onto hangers when they were done. Kaplan wheeled in a basket filled with dirty clothes from up front and parked it by the spotting bench. He beamed when he saw the long line of finished orders ready for bagging.

"I should've gotten you two together weeks ago." He rubbed his hands. "This is great; I really mean it. Look, it's been a tough day. Go ahead and finish up the shirts and you can knock off a half hour early."

Olive twills.

"Thanks Louis," said Celeste. She watched him go with a lemon expression on her face. "Half an hour early? Shit, we should go home now. We've already done a hell of a lot more than he had any right to expect." Then she chuckled; Celeste wasn't built to pout. "Well, if you'll bag up the cleaning, I'll move over to shirts."

"Sure."

"You're an odd one, you know that, Henry? At first I thought that you didn't like me. Then Jerry said you didn't like anyone. But we talked today and you survived. My guess is that you're just shy."

He hung the last pair of pants.

"Mind if I ask you a question?"

He sighed.

"What are you doing after work?"

It had been three years since Henry had last ridden in a car -- not since he first started having bad thoughts. Now he remembered why. The bus might be crowded and slow but it was safe as the living room couch. Cars were vicious. The streets seethed with tense, drunk, angry, worried, impatient drivers. They were lost, late, stuck in traffic and their windshields kept fogging up. There was no place to park, some scut had just cut them off, so they screamed back at their radios. He could see them jittering behind the steering wheels of their weapons, feel the darkness inside him feasting on their anger.

He should have known better than to disrupt the routines. The monster was back.

"It's because they think I'm their mother," said Celeste, who drove as if she were alone on the road. "For a cat, leaving a dead mouse in the middle of the kitchen floor is the best way to say 'I love you.' They can't understand why

I'm not grateful. Probably think I'm crazy."

Her junker '82 Escort would have lost a collision with a lunchbox. He grasped the shoulder belt with his left arm; his right hand crushed the armrest on the door. Something was happening.

"My mom used to say that there are two kinds of people in the world, cat people and dog people. But come to find out there're all kinds of people. Bird people, fish people, snake people, plant people, even petless people. Bet that's you. You don't strike me as the pet type."

He shook his head.

"See? So what does that mean? That you're not human?"

Riding a tuna wagon down the mean streets was bad enough, but what really spooked him was Celeste's driving. She was barely tall enough to see over the dashboard. He had never realized how big her hump was until he had watched her wiggle it into the tiny car. It forced her forward so that she seemed to be looking through the steering wheel at the road. Except she wasn't. She kept trying to make eye contact with him while she babbled about cats.

"Of course, Slippers leaves most of the little prizes, these days. Figaro isn't quite the mouser he used to be since the operation. They cut a tumor off his chest. Cost me two hundred dollars. So what about your dad? You didn't say whether he's covered by insurance or not."

"We're okay." Henry should never have told her that he always visited his dad on the way home from work. And then he should've realized what would happen when she'd asked what hospital he was in. And then he should've lied about the forty minute bus ride that got him there fifteen minutes before visiting hours ended. He and his dad did not have that much to say to one another anyway.

"Pick a lane, Grandma!" She swerved around a LeBaron with Alabama plates. "That's good, because a hospital bill can kill you faster than any peckerhead doctor. Believe me, it'd be cheaper for him to stay in the presidential suite at the Sheraton. Probably more fun. How is he taking it anyway? My mother died of lung cancer, which isn't surprising seeing as how she smoked like Pittsburgh. She was a okay mom, better than I deserved. But I'll tell you, she was a bitch at the end. It was really hard."

"He's drugged," said Henry. "Doesn't talk much."

She signalled for a left turn and the Escort rattled up the ramp onto the interstate. "See," she said. "Almost there. Dad will have a nice surprise." As the speedometer skulked toward seventy, Henry braced against the floorboards hard enough to leave footprints. "I think the worst of it was when she decided she had to find God before she died. She hadn't been within spitting distance of a church for forty years and the next thing I know she's a born-again Baptist. Three weeks later I buried her. Only I have to put up with this douchebag in a collar who throws dirt on her and talks about how she's eating bon-bons with Jesus in the Kingdom of God. And charging me fifty bucks for the privilege. You're not a believer, are you Henry?"

Henry hesitated, fighting a bad thought. If he touched her now, she'd faint. He could whip the wheel over and they'd jump the median into the oncoming traffic. "I go to church every day," he said.

"Oh." She turned pale, as if he'd said his hobby was drowning kittens. "Me

and my big mouth." She signalled for Exit 7. "Sorry. I guess I fucked up." At the bottom of the ramp, Memorial loomed like a giant's headstone. She pulled up to the main entrance. "See you tomorrow then. Sorry."

"Yeah." Henry bolted from the car before the monster ripped her hump off and stuffed it down her throat.

"You look like a bum." Roger West had been cranked into a semi-upright position and propped in his hospital bed with pillows. "You come in here again, you shave." Cancer had chewed on him until there was only the wrinkled brown pit of a man left. "Why're you here?" His eyes were bright with pain.

"I came to visit, Dad. I always come."

"Not before the pill, you don't. Time is it?"

Henry glanced at his watch. "Four-eleven."

"Jesus God, nineteen years until four-thirty. Go find the nurse, tell her I can't wait. Service stinks in this lousy hospital you stuck me in, kid. I keep begging them for the pill, but they don't bring me nothing." His fingers curled and scrabbled at the sheet. "Why am I here? I hate this."

"You're sick, Dad. The doctor brought you here to take care of you."

"That's right." He licked his lips. "Okay."

"The reason I'm early today is I didn't take the bus. I got a ride over."

His dad closed his eyes. He sounded like he was breathing through a straw; the arms that used to hold Henry were limp as wet cardboard. He sat beside the bed and gazed out the window. At least his dad had the view. The middle bed was empty. The privacy curtain was drawn around Mr. DeCredico's bed near the door.

"What she say?" His dad didn't open his eyes.

"Who?"

"The nurse. My son's coming, don't you understand? I need my pill."

The room got very small then so Henry went to the hall. He leaned against the doorway and listened to the florescents hum. Down the hall someone was watching Jeopardy. The PA system chimed. He scuffed the carpet. It was gun barrel gray.

The wallpaper was beige and shiny and easy to wash. Henry rubbed a hand through the stubble along his jaw. It wasn't a bad thought to want to kill dad. He could do it with a pillow; he wouldn't even need the Beretta. Dad would be grateful for the favor. It'd be payback for everything he had done for Henry, bringing him up all by himself. But this was the only murder the monster didn't lust for and Henry didn't have the spunk to do it by himself. He went back in.

"You're early," his dad said. "You didn't get fired did you?"

"No dad, I told you, I got a ride with someone."

"A ride? With someone?"

The monster hated Celeste and, for the moment, so did Henry. She had done this to them by disrupting the routine. He should've taken the bus and his dad would've scarfed the pill and none of this mung would've happened.

"Time is it?"

"Almost four-thirty."

His dad's laugh sounded like a cough. There was a plant with long shiny leaves like swords that he had bought for his dad by the window. Snake plant, the florist had said. Nothing could kill it. Henry could see the interstate, the bridges and the river glittering like the road to heaven. His dad had a room with a view on the twelfth floor. All the fabric snobs in the worsted wool suits he cleaned would kill for the chance to sit behind a desk with a view like this.

"Know why I can't get a pill? I can't pay. If I still had a credit card, I could charge all the pills I need." He swallowed painfully. "I know what they're trying to do. They're hoping I'll get sick of the lousy service and leave. I should. Just go home."

"You're sick, Dad."

"Don't tell me that. You don't know what sick is. You get a runny nose, you take a day off. But I'm empty. Nothing inside me. At least the pills fill me up." His mouth hung open as he gasped for breath. "But they're not giving me mine because you sold the house. That's why I can't go home, isn't it? I get sick and you let them take everything. I built that house. Where's my furniture, Henry?"

"Take it easy, dad. It's safe in the warehouse."

"You think I can live in some damn warehouse?"

"Don't swear. When you get out, we'll rent an apartment."

"I'm not getting out. You're just like the nurses. Here I'm dying and you want to wait until four-thirty. I don't know why I had you, you useless bum. We would've been better off buying a dog."

"Why Mr. West, good afternoon." The nurse carried a tray with a clear plastic cup of apple juice and a tiny paper cup with the pill. "You're early today." Her acrylic uniform dress was whiter than anything Henry had ever cleaned. There was so much pain in the room, it was hard not to touch her. He flashed on the monster hurling her through the window. There'd be stains on her uniform that would never come out.

"He wants his pill," he said.

"Of course he does, it's four-thirty."

"Don't mind him." Roger West lifted his head off the pillow. "He's having a rough day." He opened his mouth for the pill as if he were taking the sacrament.

Henry was dancing with the boom box. No more routines; it was finally

happening. Guns 'N Roses was cranked to the bughouse level. He cradled the noise to his chest, balanced it across his shoulders like an electronic hump, swung it in a straight-arm loop over his head. Someone was out to get Axl Rose but he wasn't going to take it. Neither was Henry, not as long as Slash was allowed to perform brain surgery with a guitar. Henry's underwear was not as white as a nurse's uniform. He had pulled one sock halfway off. The bathtub was filling up.

He whirled into the bedroom, set the boom box on the nightstand and hurled himself at the unmade bed. He bounced up and sprang again. Again, three, five times, as if the mattress were the plane of sanity that he might crash through, if only he tried hard enough. The song ended, the next one was about drugs. Henry didn't need drugs; he was high on death. He punched the eject button, flung the tape across the room and carried the boom box to the shrine. The door was wide open.

He slapped the Talking Heads into the player and snatched the Beretta off the altar. Wham! No more Louis Farrakhan. Wham! Die, Robert DeNiro. But pretending wasn't enough anymore. He wanted to flash like he had when Phil had put a hand on him. He wanted to feel the gun kick when he pulled the trigger. While David Byrne was quavering about psycho killers, Henry decided to show the Beretta the rest of their nasty little apartment. The boom box came along for the ride. They turned off the water in the bathtub and changed channels on the tv and straightened the picture of Henry and Dad at the lake. They were on their way to the kitchen to look behind the paper towels under the sink when the phone rang. Qu'est-ce que c'est?

As soon as he turned off the music, he knew it was the hospital calling to tell him dad had died. Henry had let him down, hadn't given him what he wanted. It rang five times, six. A hand he wasn't quite in control of trembled over the phone but did not pick up. Ring. He was crying. Ring.

"Hello," he said.

"Henry? This is Celeste."

Hail Mary, he thought, full of grace. "Yeah?"

"Hey look, I'm sorry for what I said this afternoon. You know, about religion and all. It's my problem, okay? It has nothing to do with you."

He dabbed at a tear running down his cheek. "Uh-huh."

"Anyway, I've been driving around ever since then, thinking about what a jerk I was and I just looked at my watch and saw that it was six-thirty and realized I was hungry and I'm just around the block from Angelina's and I was wondering ... I was wondering if you liked pizza? Because I was thinking I'd spring for a large with pepperoni or mushroom or extra cheese or whatever you want and bring it over and we could split it and then maybe I could convince you to forgive me for being such an idiot. I mean, it's okay if you're busy but ..."

"Mushroom," said the monster.

Her squeal of delight made the speaker buzz. "Mushroom? All right! How about something to drink? Beer? Wine?"

"Carlo Rossi Pink Chablis."

"No problem. This is great, Henry. I knew you'd understand. This shouldn't

take long; what if we say I'll be there around seven-fifteen. I mean if that's too soon, I can come later."

"Seven-fifteen," it said. "You know where I live?"

"Sure, 117 Queensberry, apartment 22. Jerry told me. See you then."

The monster hung up the phone and glanced around. The apartment need some straightening up. Things needed to be put in their places. It stuck the gun in its belt and went out to the kitchen to check behind the paper towels.

The bed was made, the breakfast dishes were washed and put away, the living room floor was vacuumed, the door to the shrine was locked and the Beretta was loaded and stashed under a cushion of the couch. The sound of Henry's mewling for it to stop came as if from a great distance, as it opened the door for its guest.

"Pouring out there." The rain had flattened Celeste's hair but hadn't washed away her smile. "It's a good night to stay home."

"Thanks for coming." It took the pizza box from her. "Come in." The top was soaked but the bottom was still hot.

"Ta-da!" She pulled a squat jug of wine from a paper bag. "Took me three stores to find it."

It hung her slicker over the bathtub and saw that she'd changed her clothes. She'd been wearing a red pocket tee and acid washed jeans under her work smock. Now she had on a ramie skirt that hung just above the knee and a fake batik polyester blouse -- a smart choice of fabrics. You could get blood stains out of ramie, as long as they were fresh.

It had already decided not to rush. Now that it was in charge, there was no need to lunge; it could enjoy the moment. Besides, even monsters liked mushroom pizza and it hadn't eaten since lunch.

They sat at the kitchen table and tucked away all but a slice and drank sweet wine out of coffee cups while she babbled about crusts and exotic toppings and Roseanne and the high cost of mufflers and kitty litter. She asked what kind of movies it liked and it told her comedies but that its VCR was broken. She confessed to staying up too many late nights with horror flicks. Her favorite was the Nightmare on Elm Street series.

"Too violent for me." The monster couldn't help but notice that she was watching it like a movie. Her eyes never left its face. She was lit with an expression of fascinated suspense that got brighter and brighter with each cup of wine.

"The problem is," she was saying, "they're running out of ideas. You can watch just so many decapitations before you stop taking them seriously. Half the horror flicks these days play for laughs. The other half are about as scary as Count Chocula."

It offered the jug for a refill. She laughed and waved it away.

"I've still got plenty left. You trying to get rid of it or what?"

"Maybe we should move to the couch?" It was excited now. "More comfortable

there."

She stumbled coming out of her chair and it caught her, exercising so much restraint it thought it might burst.

"'Scuse me," she said, her voice suddenly husky, "Hell of a lot drunker up here than I thought." She steadied herself with an arm around its waist and let it lead her down the hall. Her body was firm under her clothes; it could feel her heart pumping. "Where'd you say we were going?"

It steered her through the door. "You remember the living room?"

"Ah, yes. We were introduced earlier. Miss Lamp." She bowed. "Mr. TV. Mr. Table." She giggled and twisted around in a deft way that took it by surprise. She pressed closer and closer, arching up on tiptoes, stretching until their lips touched. Her tongue nipped against his teeth and she was kissing Henry, not the monster. When he realized he was back in control, he began to tremble.

"I know." She moaned softly and pushed him toward the couch. "Me too," she said. "But sit down first."

He slid as far away from the gun as he could and gaped as she unbuttoned her blouse.

"You probably think I do this all the time." She was wearing more underwear than he had expected. Her bra was white lace, sheer enough that he could see her nipples. Above it was a wide elastic harness made of ace bandages stitched together. He remembered the three piece bathing suit but he didn't laugh. Her skin frightened him. "Well, you're wrong," she said. "I don't get many requests and the ones that do ask are always perverts." She released three metal clips and the harness unwrapped itself and fell to the floor.

The hump on her back unfolded with a sound like hands rubbing together. Celeste grunted and twisted her head back and forth as if she had a crick. "No, it's all right," she said. "They just get a little stiff after being cooped up all day." She shook herself and two pointed masses of flesh dropped low behind her back and then slowly rose up past her shoulder.

She smiled shyly at him and beat her wings; he could feel air on his face. They were double-jointed; he could see outlines of bones that reminded him of posters of starving children.

"Oh my God," he said.

The skin stretched between the needle digits was the same color as her face, flushed an embarrassed red. He could see a filagree of arteries. She had a span of about four feet.

"Can you fly?"

She shook her head. "I'm afraid they're pretty useless." She giggled. "Except maybe as fans."

"I don't ... this is ... my God, Celeste." He shivered. "Can I touch them?"

"Mister, you can touch anything you want."

It was as if he was swimming across the room toward her. The wine burned in his belly like a pool of fire. She turned her back to him and held her wings still. They were covered with downy black hair and were hot as her lips.

"Hey you, I'm standing here in my underwear and you're still dressed." She faced him. "Time to catch up." Her fingers tickled his chest as she took off his white shirt. She laughed drunkenly as she fumbled at his belt.

His legs went out beneath him and he sank to his knees. "Thank you, God." Now he knew he could beat the monster. "You've sent me an angel."

She grabbed a fistful of his hair and hauled him up.

"Listen, Henry." He had never seen her angry before. "I walked in here on my own two feet because you're the only man who never stared at me. Nobody pushed me in here, especially not God. There is no fucking God! Or if there is, he's got to be the most heartless asshole in the universe." Her wings were flapped like pennants. "You look at me. Go ahead. I'm a freak, a monster. I didn't ask to be one and I had to learn to live with these damn things. And nobody helped -- my mother gave me this dumb name -- I still haven't got any god damn help. So if you want to thank somebody, you can thank Celeste Sloboda for staying sane despite the way most everyone stares." She was crying. "So that's the way it is, okay? I've pissed you off, you pissed me off and now we can go home and hate each other."

"Celeste." She could think whatever she wanted. He knew God's work when he saw it. She was full of a kind of pain the monster couldn't use. Only he could. He knew that as long as he believed in this miracle, nobody, nothing could stop him from being himself. "Let go of my hair?"

She released him and immediately stroked the back of his head. "I didn't mean to hurt you." Her gaze softened. "I'm sorry. I didn't want it like this."

He could feel the monster slipping away. "I want you," he said. Her face kept getting bigger until it was the only thing Henry could see. They kissed forever and amen. Henry wasn't sure how he got naked. As he led her to the bedroom he couldn't remember if any woman had ever seen him naked before.

She paused by the bathroom, traced the line of his chin, and smiled. "Henry," she said, "Do you think you might shave?"

Much later, he eased out from under the covers so as not to wake her. He realized where the monster had gone when it left him. He pulled on his jeans, padded into the living room and felt under the cushion. It was in the Beretta. He stared at the gun without comprehension. Even though it was still as hard and black and cold as ever, it didn't seem real to him anymore. His first thought was to lose it in the dumpster behind his apartment, but he was barefoot and it had set him back five hundred and thirty-eight dollars. Tomorrow after work he could pawn it and buy some nice woman thing for Celeste.

He stripped the magazine, picked the shells out and wrapped everything in a green garbage bag. Or maybe he should keep the gun for protection -- God knows there were monsters loose in the city. He hid it under the sink and snuck back to bed with his angel.

About The Author

James Patrick Kelly writes stories, novels, poems, essays, reviews, plays,

planetarium shows and home pages. He is best known for his science fiction and fantasy. Currently he has published four novels (including WILDLIFE from Tor Books, and THINK LIKE A DINOSAUR AND OTHER STORIES from Golden Gryphon Press), and more than forty short stories.

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