

The Monster at the End

a short story

by Kate Reed Petty

The author will start in media res, as I open my bedroom window. I lean on the sill and look out at the sleeping neighborhood. He'll describe the glow of a television in the house next door and the sound of the crabapple tree tapping against the rain gutter. The night outside is colder than I expected; the author will describe my shiver, and dictate my inner monologue as I use the cold as an excuse to retreat; *I just need a jacket or sweater.*

As I search for a jacket or sweater, he'll avoid adjectives, because somebody once told him that adjectives are weak. Instead he'll describe my bedroom in objects. The closet floor piled with both clean and dirty laundry. Alt-rock heartthrobs leering down from the posters on the walls. It's eleven o'clock on a Thursday night, and I have less than ten minutes to meet my friend Jenny. I'm still digging through clothes, clean and dirty; the author will hint that I'm stalling. I'm fifteen years old, and this is the first time I've snuck out of the house. Maybe, he'll hint, I shouldn't go.

And why shouldn't I? While I try on first the jacket, then the sweater, he'll tell you why: Because it's dangerous. Because this is the night I catch a man hanging around outside of our house.

(You know he's only telling you that now to keep you reading. He'll be worried that the decision between the jacket and sweater is not enough to keep your interest, because it will be barely enough for him. He'll hope the promise of a monster at the end will keep you both going.)

To show you why I'm sneaking out, he'll flashback to earlier that afternoon. I was riding home from swim practice with Jenny. The smell of chlorine clung to my fingers as I combed them through my damp hair. Jenny's stack of bracelets chimed together as she changed the radio station, spinning the dial so quickly I couldn't pick out the songs she was skipping. He'll describe how much I like Jenny. How we met last summer, when I first joined the swim team; how last week she offered me a ride home from practice; how I haven't had to take the activity bus since. How I'm still not really sure we're friends. She's a year older than me, impossibly both pretty and kind, a combination I never imagined was possible. He'll describe the way I hold myself back in all of my conversations with Jenny, cautiously watching, as if he knows how a teenage girl shifts her shape.

He'll describe what I felt when Jenny invited me to a party, to watch the Rocky Horror Picture Show at the community college at midnight, tonight. Our first time hanging out outside of swim practice. Of course I said I would go, not mentioning that I'm never allowed out on a school night, or that even my weekend curfew is only ten pm. Of course I didn't mention it to my parents. After dinner I went to my room, as always, but instead of reading I spent two hours trying on clothes, because Jenny told me that everyone dresses up for Rocky Horror. You have to wear something fun and sexy.

The author will tell you that I put a lot of thought into the outfit I'm wearing, which he thinks is funny: I'm dressed in the kind of manic disarray that is a teenage girl's idea of sexy. I'm wearing a puffy black skirt, yellow doc martens, and a t-shirt that shows an inch of stomach

when I lift my arms, so I’m keeping my arms by my sides at all times. And cheap red lipstick from the drug store and expensive eyeliner secretly borrowed from my mother’s dresser, and too much of both.

To top it all off, the author will choose the jacket, which kind of ruins the effect. To him it will be the sexiest thing I’m wearing, but I’ve already decided I’m going to take it off as soon as I get in the car.

I stand in front of the mirror for one last look, and exhale, that familiar giving-up feeling of *good enough*, ready to go.

But then he’ll want to describe the frame of my mirror. I’ve decorated it for years; it’s covered with photos and stickers and notes passed in class from my friends. He’ll describe the picture of me and my big sister buried up to our necks in sand at the beach. He’ll describe the note signed by everyone on the swim team before my first meet, he’ll mention especially Jonathan’s signature, whose tiny scrawled *you rock!* makes my stomach flutter every day.

But he’ll skip over these things too quickly, and focus instead on a photo of the last Halloween costume I wore before I gave up trick-or-treating. It was a T-Rex made of cardboard boxes and duct tape. A truly excellent costume, but to him, it will be more of a metaphor. It’s a costume, a childish thing. And it’s a dinosaur, which, like my childhood, is extinct. You’ll also realize that it’s a carnivore, but that’s something he won’t know how to say.

He’ll describe my face in the photo, a smile full of braces framed by duct-tape dinosaur teeth. He’ll compare it to my face in the mirror right now: nervous, my overnight retainer tucked in my nightstand, nothing on my teeth but some stray lipstick. He’ll hint that tonight, although I’m not wearing cardboard, I am again dressed in a costume. It’s clever, sure, but you’re starting to see through him by now. You know what it is to get dressed.

I'm impatient. I want to be outside, to go. But first he'll describe me stuffing some clothes (some clean, some dirty) under the covers of my bed, shaping them to look like my own body, asleep on my stomach. He'll make the body I shape for myself six inches wider than my actual body. He'll say I'm worrying about my parents coming in to check on me (which never happens, they know I'm a good kid) in order to drag out the drama of deciding to go. I'm amazed at how much space he can find in hesitation.

Finally, nearly too late, he'll be ready. I turn off the light and hurry back to the window and throw one leg out, thinking not about my parents but about Jonathan, who is coming tonight, too.

And here is a strange moment. I pause, halfway through the glass, and look back into my own bedroom, and there, in my bed, is the outline of myself. The author will not have planned this. When it happens, as he's writing, he'll gasp in delight. He will allow himself an adjective, *hallucinatory*, as I sit in my window like Peter Pan, looking in at Wendy on the last night before she stopped being a child. Or, you might notice, like a vampire.

When I was very small, long before the dinosaur costume, I was terrorized by the dark. I spent long weeks of sleepless nights watching the shapes in my room. Strangers saw the dark circles under my eyes and gave my parents sideways looks. My parents begged me to sleep: They told me to say the Lord's Prayer and surround myself with God's love, they left the hall light on, they gave me stuffed bears and lions that they swore would protect me. Nothing worked.

The thing that saved me was learning to imagine myself as the monster. I closed my eyes and reached out my fingers like the legs of the giant spider reaching out of the closet. I licked my lips and felt that I was the werewolf drooling under the chair. I put my fear into the monster staring at me, and I was not a girl, but a dark shape in a bed, a pile of clean and dirty clothes

mixed together that, like clouds or Rorschach tests, took on the exact shape of his nightmares. I was enough to scare the monsters, and I went to sleep.

Now, sitting in my window, looking at my own dark shape in my empty bed, I realize that maybe he and I could both be right. I could be both the lost boy and the vampire at once. The monster at the end of this book could be me.

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Several times, as he's writing this story, the author will think about quitting. The sentences will feel forced, and flat. New ideas will occur to him that will seem not only smarter but faster to write. But he'll remind himself that he's spent these first fifteen years of the twenty-first century finding space in hesitation, dragging out the space between deciding and doing. Now, for this story at least, he's just going to do.

So he'll come to this coffee shop on his way home from work every night and spend two hours at the spot he likes by the window. He'll allow himself a beer once he's written a full page. Some nights he won't get that far. Often, when he feels stuck, he'll move his cursor back up to the top of the page and start again from the beginning, typing the entire story over, stretching sentences out into moments like pizza dough. He'll tighten sentences and cut adjectives. He'll change the word hallucinatory to strange and back again. He'll change my yellow boots to pink sneakers. He'll enjoy tracing over his own work. When he gets to the end and finds himself still stuck, he'll go back to the beginning and start again.

When he finally cracks the story, it's an idea so simple and clear he'll be shocked he's never thought of it before. He'll publish under a pseudonym. He'll choose a woman's name, to remove himself from the work. He'll give himself totally over to me, sweeping away his fifteen

years of rejection letters so that my story can breathe fresh air. He'll publish the story and never tell anyone, ever; it will be his own secret for the dark.

He'll choose the name. He'll scroll up to the top of the page and type it there. And suddenly the words will come tumbling out. He'll stop worrying about what's true. He'll stop worrying what people will think. He'll start trusting himself. And he'll believe that he's right. Sure, he'll think, if he were writing about a sex worker or a refugee, he might doubt his instincts. But he'll feel certain that his imagination can reach at least to the heart of a fifteen-year-old white girl in the suburbs in 1997. He'll feel certain he can imagine the trauma of being watched.

What he won't know is that I spent my teenage years being watched. He, as a teenager, watched himself. He made muscles in the bathroom mirror and admired the basketball swishing through the ring over his garage door and looked for the eyes of his teacher when he raised his hand. He'll have never had a second set of eyes behind his own, won't know that every time I looked in the mirror I was searching not for myself, but for those others.

The author will have looked at himself for so long that he won't think to imagine what it's like to be seen. He once masturbated directly onto a hand mirror. He can only search for new combinations of words to express something long carved in stone, long covered in ivy.

He can only follow me across the roof, because I'm finally gone, scooting across the asphalt shingles to the crabapple tree. He can only describe the night, call it quiet, and hope that a few elegant words will be enough to remind you of a night in your own life, the chill in the air and the smell of cut grass. He can only hope you will remember a night when you, too, were twelve or fifteen or twenty, or however old you were when you first set out in the dark, when you

first set yourself free and stayed up late. He can only hope that your inner life suits his imagination. He can only follow us across the roof; we know our way through the dark.

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He'll put the smell of cologne on the wind. He'll believe this detail will horrify us, that a peeping tom would put on cologne before heading out into the dark, as if for a date. But we know what it is to get dressed.

He'll describe how quickly I descend through the branches of the crabapple tree, a tree I have climbed in the pale light of so many afternoons that the feel of the rough bark is comforting, the branches firm under my pink sneakers. I jump from the lowest branch and land a few feet down, crouching on mulch, and then freeze. He'll describe the sudden strange feeling as an absence, a sound stopping suddenly.

I stand up slowly and see that the shadow in the bushes behind the house is the exact shape of a crouching man.

What else could it be but a monster?

In an early draft the author will write that I think the shape is Jonathan, here to sneak out to Jenny's car with me, here because he loves me. But even to him that will feel false. He'll go back and start again at the top and the shape will resemble a spider. In the next draft it will be a wolf. Both will feel true enough, because the author is my age, we saw the same movies, and the same dark shapes lived in both of our rooms. For him, too, the Lord's Prayer wasn't enough. What worked for him was a flashlight, so he'll put a flashlight in my hand. I raise the light to see the monster for what it is: A plain haircut, a gray jacket, bulky shoulders and short legs, the not-

unpleasant smell of his cologne. A white face, around my parents’ age, well-fed, terrified in the spotlight. I get only a glimpse before he runs, stumbling, into the woods behind our house.

For a few seconds I scream, alone in the dark. Lights turn on in neighbor’s houses. Then my dad comes out with a shovel, followed by my mom in her robe. Her right hand is up to her ear, already on the phone with 911. Her left arm stretches out to me. As I hug her, the author will describe the smell of his own mother’s face wash and the silky feel of her robe, as I tell my mom what happened and she repeats everything for the police.

The author will want this to be the last moment in my life when I believe that my mom could make everything okay. But I’m fifteen years old, and I’ve known better for years. My mother is the one on the phone, already getting help, while my father points a shovel at the dark. And she’s the one, with her bathroom on the first floor, who was watched.

The author will want this night to shape my life. He’ll tell you that I will feel angry when someone startles me, twenty years later. He’ll say I will mostly forget it, but that it will echo in my sex life, that the erotic stories I seek out online will all feature strange men in bushes. He’ll be wrong, but it’s okay — you’ll know. How Jenny and I talked about it for hours. How Jonathan took me out for a milkshake to make me feel better. How everyone heard the story and saw me as the hero, how for years I felt powerful; the girl who had defeated the monster, the thing the monster most feared. How the most honest thing about that night, then and now, is how little I was surprised by what happened.

And then my father stops, seeing something in the bushes. He picks it up, shaking, and holds it out to show my mother and me. The author will describe the object as an asteroid, hurtling out of nowhere to change life on earth forever. He’ll remind you that the symbol of my childhood was a dinosaur, he’ll make this strange object the asteroid that divides my own life, the

end of my childhood and the start of the Anthropocene, the era shaped by man. He won't even realize that he's writing it like a punishment. As if this happened because I chose to sneak out. As if it would have been better not to catch the peeping tom.

“It's a video camera,” my father says, holding out the thing, which is still recording, the little red light is still on. It's the first line of dialogue the author will use, and he'll hope it will snap your attention. He'll be speeding through now, to the end. He feels it pouring out of him and can't wait to be done, to go back and type it again to be sure it's real, that he really has written this. But you're already finished. You already knew it was a camera. You know about the men who want a record, who want to type a thing again and again.

And then my mother steps forward, takes the camera from my father's hands, and turns the red light off.

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