

Monsters in the Closet

Humans are animals. I think sometimes people forget that. It's our own human brain, our own belief that somehow we're exempt from the rules of this planet that sometimes gets us into trouble. We've forgotten we have survival mechanisms programmed into us. An animal in the wild isn't confused when he gets goose bumps, or when the hair on the back of his neck stands up. He doesn't ignore it, put on a blanket, and drink hot cocoa and tell himself to relax.

He doesn't do any of that because he knows there is a predator in his midst.

He has one of two options: bare his teeth, or run and hide.

I'm choosing the latter. It's 3:02 in the morning, and I'm wide awake in my bed with the sheets pulled up to my chin. My eyes are growing larger with each pounding heart beat.

A moment ago, I was jolted awake by something. I didn't consciously hear a noise or see anything, but the hair on the back of my neck stood up and, through that sixth-sense that we sometimes forget about, I got the awful feeling I wasn't alone in my bedroom.

I haven't been this scared since I was a child. It wasn't the monsters under the bed I was worried about back then, it was the ones in the closet. But nothing ultimately happened back then. No monster ever materialized. Nonetheless, I'd often have episodes where I could *swear* something was moving. After a while I could hear it breathing. What I found even more terrifying at the time was how my body shut down—I literally couldn't get out of bed to run and get my parents.

My parents; they'd know what to do, right? This was all my dad's fault. He was out of my life now, whether or not that's for the better has yet to be seen. Either way, he had a vivid imagination. He'd often keep me up at night, much to my mother's chagrin, telling me tales of aliens, monsters, beings from other dimensions. Sometimes, the way his gaze would drift off into the distance, out the window and toward the stars, I wondered if he was really making them up. He'd even give me tips and tricks to escape these things, as if he'd survived countless encounters with these monsters before.

"Don't look in their eyes," he'd tell me. "Your soul will burn."

The look of terror in his own eyes often scared me, until I started to cry and my mother had to come rescue me. That's how the closet phobia started.

In another life, he may have been a story teller. In this one, he was locked up.

Have you ever had a dream where you were scared? Trying to run from somebody, or something? Like you're running through taffy?

Once, I had a dream some kind of creature was in the basement. I went down to investigate, and the hideous being looked eyes with mine. Running up the stairs felt just like running up an escalator the wrong way. I don't remember if I made it or not, I just remember waking up.

Maybe I'd wake up this time?

Not likely. There are things about a dream that let you know you're dreaming. Usually, you don't know enough to look for them, so you casually accept them. A pink elephant strolling through the room, after entering through the window? Happens all the time. But since I'm actively aware that this could potentially, *hopefully* be a dream, I'm waiting for that pink elephant.

It hasn't come yet.

Something moved.

Something near the closet.

I pull my thick down comforter up a little more, up past my nose. Very slowly, and as quietly as I can, although I'm not really sure of how quiet I'm actually being because I can't hear much with the blood pounding through my ears.

Maybe if most of my face is covered, whatever it is won't see me.

Hopefully it won't even know I'm here. Take it's time. Survey the room and leave.

Something occurred to me.

Why does it have to be a monster?

Why is it always something inhuman?

Did I lock my front door before I went to bed? I have a bad habit of that sometimes. Maybe I'm being robbed. In which case, the burglar wouldn't need to kill me if I didn't even see him. No need to add murder to breaking and entering if the owner of the apartment you're robbing doesn't even see you, anyway.

But can I close my eyes? I'll try.

Please, God, let me close my eyes.

Gently, so as to not make any noise.

No. I haven't blinked in two minutes. The clock now reads 3:04. My vision is starting to go blurry as tears build up to soothe the irritating dryness.

This is crazy. *Nothing moved.*

My eyes are finally shifting, pointing toward the closets in the left wall. The moonlight is filtering through the Venetian blinds in front of me, casting a soft light that illuminates the clothes hanging through the doors I always keep open.

Nothing's there.

I see clothes, I see open closet doors, I see empty hangers. I see my dog's crate where he sleeps. In the crate I see his chew toy, essentially just a long rope that was once tied into a bunch of knots. Through dry, crusty eyes I see a lamp, on the far end, near the wall. A lamp with a lamp shade. No pink elephant.

I sigh. It feels so good to sigh. I blink once, and, that feels so good, too, that I just hold my eyes shut, enjoying the burning sensation of the dryness being overcome by moisture. Tears line the creases in my lids.

Maybe it was a dream after all? Not what I just went through, obviously that was a little panic attack. But caused by what? An intruder? No, this is my place. In fact, I distinctly remember locking the door. Any intruder in this place would have to be some kind of animal, right? Even humans, even monsters? Surely monsters know the concept of territory. This is my territory. Mine, and my dog's, who isn't even barking.

No, nothing to worry about. All this was just preceded by a dream I'll remember in the morning. One of those silent ones that jolt you awake with terror even though you have no idea what the dream was about.

That's all.

Something woke me up later that night.

This time, it was a noise. Not a feeling. The feeling came, the goose bumps, clammy skin, and raised hair, but it came afterwards. No, the noise woke me up, I was sure of that.

I thought it was a thunderclap. If I hadn't been wide awake moments before, stimulating my nervous system, I probably would have missed it and stayed asleep. But my eyes shot open again.

This time, I looked around the room.

The pale light coming through the window had moved a little as the moon made its way across the sky, but most of my clothes were still illuminated. The lamp in the corner of the room was darkened, as was my dog's crate where he slept.

I made a clicking noise with my tongue against my teeth, trying to get my dog to wake up.

Schtick, schtick, schtick. Hey boy, you there?

If I woke him up, he could use his animal senses that aren't filtered through years of human arrogance and tell me immediately if something were wrong. He wouldn't question himself and wonder if it was just the memories of his father spooking him.

Koopa, wake up. Schtick, schtick.

For such a small dog, he usually packed one hell of a bark. And he'd usually wake up at the drop of a pin. Except that time, nothing happened.

My eyes opened wider. I sat up in bed, pushing the comforter down toward my legs.

"Koopa?"

I looked at his crate. It was empty.

I wasn't startled at first, just a bit confused. Did I forget to latch the crate door, and he decided to take a snooze in the living room?

All right, I should get up. If for no other reason than to just calm my nerves. I was getting more and more jittery by the minute. I pushed the comforter off my legs and threw them over the side of the bed.

I'm not quite sure what made me look at the lamp—either I glanced at it before it moved, or I glanced at it *because* it moved. Either way, it moved.

I froze, my arm still reaching for the light switch.

Through the dark, the moon was the only source of light as the lamp shade began tilting to the side, like a dog's head when it's trying to make sense of something it's never seen before. Then, something started to happen to the pole. It's sides began to come apart, as if it was made of three vertical slabs of metal and the outer two were coming loose from the bottom, up. Like a banana being peeled upside down.

I jumped to my feet, and flipped on the light as fast as I could.

The lamp turned on, but was on the floor, as if someone pushed it over. The shade itself was still attached, but pushed inward, allowing the bright bulb itself to be seen. There was a green dot in the middle of my vision for the next few minutes.

This couldn't have just happened, I thought, because there was no noise when I turned it on, like it had been this way for a while. It occurred to me that the noise of the lamp falling was probably what woke me up.

I surveyed the room, my heart pounding.

The light from the tipped over lamp cast an eerie shadow on everything. Shadows that were once ordinary and harmless now shot up the walls at odd angles, much darker than they should be.

I decided that if I could get the lamp upright again, the prickling sensation in my legs might go away. So I made my way across the room. Slowly. Reached out for the lamp, stood it upright. Turned back around, all the while waiting for my eyes to readjust to the light.

I heard a whining from underneath the bed. Like a small, wounded animal. I suddenly put it all together.

“Koopa,” I said loudly, as if I had just determined it was safe to once again make noise. It turned out that I must have forgotten to latch his crate after all, and he had escaped, knocked the lamp over, gotten scared, and ran under the bed.

I walked over and got to my knees, then lifted the bed skirt.

“There you are,” I said, and put my hand in to get him.

He growled at me. Instincts kicked in, millions of years of evolution. I stopped in my tracks, and the hair on my neck stood up. Fight or flight?

Flight? Come on, this was my dog.

“Koopa!” I scolded. “No!” I began to move my hand again.

Another growl, this one meaner. He raised his little Schnauzer gums, showed me his teeth.

For some reason, I realized he wasn’t looking directly at me. Something else was bothering him, and it wasn’t my hand.

I saw it in his eyes—a reflection, something over my shoulder.

Time slowed down in that instant, like my brain kicked into overdrive.

Whatever was behind me had eyes. It was tilting its head to the side. Somehow, we made eye contact off the reflection.

I spun around, not really expecting what to see. I had my eyes shut as I knocked into something. Something cold, clammy.

I made the noise you make when a swarm of bees gets too close to you during the summer. The same noise you make when a huge centipede crawls over your foot, or a big June bug starts flapping around in your lamp shade on a humid night.

I couldn’t get to my feet, so instead I tried my knees.

I fell over. My eyes wouldn’t open all the way. This is, no doubt, another defense mechanism built into us, protecting my face from whatever threat was in front of me. It occurred to me that if our eyes really are the gateway to the soul, I’m sure it was protecting that, too.

I squirmed around, still making that warbling noise, kicking my legs. For a split second I thought I could still be imagining things, then my foot connected with whatever was there, reassuring me that this was, in fact, for real.

I heard Koopa start to bark, and tried again to open my eyes. This time, they complied. Slowly, at first, as if not to reveal too much too soon.

Nothing was there.

But Koopa’s head was now sticking out of the blue bed skirt, barking wildly. He’d bark, jump his front paws up as far as he could,

then land again, spread them apart, and growl with his bare teeth. He was looking up at *something*.

The thought of it being a ghost occurred to me. It was so strange to have that revelation. Suddenly I pictured myself on one of those History Channel or National Geographic specials about people who see ghosts. The ones who you know truly believe, just by the look in their eyes. The ones they also subtly portray as a little crazy. The ones that always reminded me of my dad. Was I destined to become one of those people?

For some reason, I heard my dad's voice.

He *was* one of those people you'd see on one of those shows, trying to convince some contrived interviewer that he was for real.

That all that *stuff* that goes bump in the night is for real.

Thanks a lot, dad. I'm going crazy at 3:39 in the morning because of your stories. Because of the one line that made me cry that night when mom had to come take me out of your arms and put me to bed herself, with the closets wide open so nothing could hide.

Sometimes, you can only see them with the lights off.

I had to see. I jumped over Koopa, who was still barking in the direction of the closet. His throat was getting audibly sore. I lunged at the light switch as Koopa's head began to move, until he was almost looking right at me.

The light went off. The thing that looked like my lamp was right in my face, not three inches away.

I knew what it was, although I didn't quite believe it at first. I'm not sure anybody would. I kind of thought it was someone playing a trick on me, dressed in some sort of mask.

But masks didn't move. Masks didn't shape themselves into facial expressions, didn't have iris' that dilated.

The thing's oversized, oval shaped eyes burned into mine, and I couldn't look away. I cowered onto the ground, screaming over Koopa's barks. It's large head seemed to pull it's neck down, until it was bent over at it's hips. It's head turned again, looking at me like an animal might if he had never seen a screaming human before.

Screams are supposed to be a defense mechanism, too. They're supposed to be loud enough to scare away whatever is making you scream.

Except, this thing—this ghost—this *alien* creature wasn't phased. Seconds later, in fact, it even began to mimic me. It's slit for a mouth began to open.

Whatever noise it made wasn't a scream. It was a noise that was meant to *sound* like a scream. It wasn't real. It burned into me, made

my ears pop. The shrill sound send chills up and down my body. It's mouth opened wider to allow more noise to escape. It was terrifying, yet I couldn't make myself close my eyes to look away.

It tilted it's head from one side to the other, still studying my scream. It's face began to contort and the skin, which only appeared gray in the moonlight, started to shrivel and move, as if a balloon was being deflated. It's forehead shrunk, and his nose grew. Suddenly his mouth, which had no teeth, which was just a black hole seconds before, appeared as if someone was blowing a high-powered leaf blower into it.

It's lips turned pink, and an inordinate amount of white teeth appeared. His bottom jaw lowered and something red and slimy that could only be a tongue emerged, then went back in.

After a few seconds of this, I realized I was looking at what was becoming my own, screaming face.

Suddenly, I felt Koopa jump onto my abdomen. I stopped screaming and a lump formed in my throat as I realized he was protecting me. Barking.

The being stepped back, stood upright, and stopped screaming. It tilted it's head again, and looked at my dog. It's face looked like some genetic human mutation experiment gone horribly wrong. Like a copy machine that distorted a picture of my face. My eyes were too big and elongated, my nose too defined, and my mouth too large with an insane under bite that sent it's bottom jaw jutting outward. It's lips didn't even seem like they could touch if they wanted to.

It barked. At least, it tried to. It looked just like it sounds.

Koopa tried to stay on top of me as even as I rolled onto my side, attempting to get to my feet. Eventually I pushed him off.

The being's gaze followed me. His gangly arms swung by his side, and his oversize head bobbed back and forth like it was too heavy to support. It looked like an overgrown, deformed kid waiting to play.

At that moment, I had enough of flight. I decided to fight.

I jumped for it, quite literally going off my feet with my arms outstretched in front of me. I wasn't sure what I was going to do until I crashed into it. It's arms came up and it's hands wrapped around my wrists as we both fell into the closet. Some of the clothes were pulled off their hangers, others just got in the way as I tried to get back to my feet.

Instinctively, I shut both of the closet doors. I looked down and saw Koopa's chew toy that was now just a long rope.

In a matter of seconds, I had the rope wrapped around both closet door handles. It wasn't strong enough to hold someone who was determined to get out, but I didn't know what else to do.

I shook my hands and bounced up and down, like I was trying to shake off that centipede crawling on my foot, except they were on my hands—all over my hands.

I ran out of the bedroom and slammed the door shut.

I tried putting on my shoes, but I couldn't get them on. I kept thinking I heard movement in the bedroom, and was waiting for the door to open. I finally just held my shoes in both hands as I went out the front door, down the stairs, and into the parking lot, wearing nothing but my boxer shorts.

I looked up at my window on the third floor. It was open, as I often kept it in the fall.

I realized that Koopa was still up there, and that there was no more barking.

I kept waiting for a pink elephant.