

# The Creature in the Woods

Justin Gray

The routine never changed: dinner at six followed by an hour of television, then my father would slip away into his bedroom at eight with a sleeve of Chips Ahoy or a bowl of ice cream. He would continue to watch television and snack until sleep overtook him. My mother would do dishes or fold up laundry or some other household chore, never resting. Soon she, too, would go to her bedroom and watch her programs. The house would then be my own private universe, defined primarily by their absence.

It wasn't that I didn't love my parents or that they didn't love me; circumstances simply made it difficult for us to communicate. My father always seemed to be working. He was a police officer, so his hours were varied. To make ends meet, he picked up security jobs at the local grocery stores. As I entered into the teen years, he had difficulty finding extra work and when he was at home he silently brooded over the bills. Most of the time, he was simply too exhausted to talk and existed in a somnambulist fugue state.

My mother was bi-polar, which meant I was never sure who I was going to get; the paranoid rage-monster that stalked the kitchen, tossing pots and pans and shouting obscenities or the peppy Pollyanna character who cheerfully baked cinnamon rolls and brightly proclaimed that, "It will all work out fine in the end!" She was raised by a strict Baptist welder whose brutal beatings had become legend as I was always reminded how lucky I was that the ones administered to me never drew blood. Both tried as best they could to create a warm and loving environment, but ultimately biology, psychology, and economy created an atmosphere within the home that strained our relationships.

Not to say that I was a picnic to be around, either. A fat, pimple-faced outcast at school, I had become a surly, private teen who increasingly found solace in isolation. The three of us occupied our own little worlds and when we bumped into each other, the effects proved to be combustible.

So, after they disappeared into their bedrooms, I would sit in the living room with the television on, but the flickering images on the screen hardly mattered. I was not watching. I was waiting.

Once I was certain they were asleep I would go into the backyard and sneak a cigarette. I luxuriated in the still, muggy air and watched as the smoke climbed straight up, like a line of ants crawling through a stream of molasses. It was there that I first encountered the creature.

It happened only a couple of weeks after we had moved

into the house. It was a four-bedroom manufactured home on a plot of land directly adjacent to the modest-sized Helen McDougal Park. The home, while technically ours, rested on a plot of land owned by the city of Celebration Palms. The park was notoriously seedy, but a wall of thick trees lent the area an almost ethereal, fairy-tale quality. Almost. But it couldn't cover up the park's true nature. It was a destination for drug dealers and illicit sexual encounters. Teenagers would pile into the park late at night and play loud music and drink cheap beer. We would find their empty bottles and cans strewn about in the mornings.

I was fourteen years old and had just started high school. I stayed up late watching Saturday Night Live. When the musical guest came on, I snuck out back. I strained to move through the house as silently as possible. I felt like a ghost haunting my own home. The thin, creaky material of the manufactured home groaned with every step I took. The back door, hollow and made of plastic, always surprised me with its weightlessness, and it would give with only the slightest provocation.

I sat down on the wooden steps and lit up my cigarette: a full flavored Camel Wide. I was lost in the world and felt an anxiousness that existed at all times deep in my stomach. I remember reading once about a man in Nepal who had the hiccups for forty years, well into his fifties with no break. This was how I felt, except instead of hiccups, I was plagued by a voice in my head that constantly reminded me of how I was failing as a student, a son, and a man.

As I smoked my Camel Wide, feeling the warm sting of smoke settle into my lungs with every lazy drag, I heard a rustling in the woods that lay behind the fence of our home. I got a little spooked, but pushed my fear down into my stomach, assuming the rustling I heard was just a possum or rabbit or something else small and furry. A pair of red lights flashed in the distance just behind the thick of trees. I assumed it was some teenagers who had somehow snuck their car into the park. The red lights appeared to hover in the air languidly without any change in intensity until the distinct feeling of being watched began to creep into my bones. I began to realize that there was no car sound that accompanied these lights, and, as I peered closer, a dark shadow surrounded the lights, hiding a copse of trees behind it. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I realized I was looking at some kind of being. The dark mass of shadow was a body, and the red glow I had mistaken for break lights were eyes staring directly at me.

I yelped into the darkness, stubbed the cigarette quickly on my shoe, and flicked the butt past the fence. I clumsily threw the door open and disappeared into my home. Collecting myself, a swell of shame spread through my body. I felt like a coward. Steeling myself, I returned to the backyard, but there was no longer any shadow or glowing red eyes. The creature was gone.

I returned to the backyard every night for the next two weeks before it finally reappeared. Past the chain-link fence I saw its shadowy body and its red eyes. I walked hesitantly to the fence and coaxed the creature to come nearer in my softest, most soothing voice.

“It’s okay. You can come closer. I’m harmless, see?” I raised my hands over my head and turned around slowly, communicating in the pulpy language of B-movies and cop shows.

It watched me with interest, and I began to understand that it was just as apprehensive of me as I was of it.

We repeated this scene several nights in a row before it eventually lumbered forward. As it came closer to me, I realized just how large the creature was. Easily over seven feet tall and with a wide, square body like a linebacker. Still, even as it steadied itself a foot from my face, I realized that I was not seeing a silhouette of the creature, but that its body was shadow. It had round, long arms like a gorilla, thick legs like tree stumps, and broad shoulders and barreled chest, all made of shadow. Its head was wide and boxy. However, its outline suggested a hairy animal, like a Bigfoot or a yeti.

I cased my hand out, palm upward in a show of peace, and the creature leaned over to sniff it. I felt its hot breath and particles of snot, and I knew, at the very least, it was real. The creature put its shadowy hand on mine. It was warm, and I felt something pulse beneath its flesh that was not blood but something ethereal and hard to define, as if I was somehow feeling its soul. As we stood there, holding each other’s hands, I remembered my father holding me as a boy. In that moment I could feel the sharp bristles of my father’s beard, the protective warmth of his embrace, and his hot breath on my neck.

Over the next few years, the creature and I visited regularly in the backyard. Always late at night when the rest of the world slept. I would make funny faces, and the creature would snort in approval. I would talk to the creature, emptying myself of all of my fears and anxieties. I would tell the creature of my victories and losses at school and describe to it the tentative first steps I took

into adulthood: the first love, the first job, the first beer, the first fight, the first car, the first heartbreak—all of the firsts that come in violent waves during those tender, adolescent years.

The creature was there for me when I got in the fistfight with Billy Shanks after lunch period. It soothed me after Melody Bloom broke up with me at McDonald’s. The creature couldn’t speak, but its eyes said volumes. In those glowing ruby eyes of the creature, I felt love.

As I became closer to the creature, my relationship with my parents grew more tenuous. Most of our conversations ended in fights and door slams. We couldn’t connect, and I often wished I could talk to them the way I talked to the creature: freely and without judgment. I felt that I was on raft adrift at sea and they were on a shore on the horizon that was slowly fading from view.

One night, my father found me out back looking for the creature. It was three in the morning. I never went out that late, but I had a strong feeling in my gut that the creature needed me. I don’t know exactly how to explain it, but I felt that there was some kind of psychic link between the creature and me, and I could sometimes feel him calling for me, like a dull thud in the back of my head that I couldn’t quite shake. I rushed out back as quietly as possible but could not see the creature anywhere. I called out to him, but no glowing red eyes appeared and no shadowy blackness blocked the trees. When I turned around to go in, my father was at the doorway, his large frame outlined by the yellow glow of the laundry room light.

“You still up?” he asked with a note of accusation in his voice.

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“What the hell are you doing out here?”

“Thinking.”

“Who were you talking to?”

“Myself.”

My father looked at me as if he were trying to solve a puzzle. He then focused his gaze past me and into the thick of the woods.

“Well, do you still want to talk?”

“No. I’m going to bed.”

I eventually left home and after college, settle in New York where my trips home became less and less frequent. Everything from high school—the music, the clothes, the classmates, the crushes—it all slipped away, and the creature, likewise, slipped away with them.

I returned home to care for my father after my mother passed. Although I have heard from friends that after the contentious teenage years they found common ground with their parents, this was not my experience. If anything, we were more at odds than ever. They took my decision to live in New York as a personal attack. They considered the city a degenerative influence, an opinion that was buttressed by the fact that I never married.

“So, it must be nice living so far away from your parents?”

“Mom—”

“I know, I know. We are not pleasant to be around. Neither was my father, if you remember the stories. But we stayed close to family. That’s what people used to do back then, I guess.”

“Oh, come on, its not like that.”

But sometimes I wondered, was that the reason I moved to New York? Just to get away from them?

My mother and I ended up having a huge falling out, over a birthday card of all things. She said she never received it. Said I didn’t love her and that she never wanted to speak to me again. I thought it would all blow over and figured once her mood swung back in a more reasonable direction that the lines of communications might be re-opened. She refused to speak to me for two years before cancer got her at the age of seventy-one.

My father called me two weeks after she passed. He asked me to come home. He needed help.

“This house is too big,” he said. “It’s just too damned big.”

I left three days later. I took a leave of absence from the law firm where I clerked and was lucky enough to find someone to sublet my apartment. The conversations with my father were as stilted as ever, but we began to build an uneasy partnership as we acclimated to life without my mother.

The first thing I learned was that oxygen tanks are surprisingly heavy. In the Wal-Mart parking lot, I attempted to switch out the empty one with a new tank while my father shouted insults at me.

My father is a heavy man. Like me, he has always carried an extra bit of weight. That weight used to signify a kind of quiet,

unarticulated strength that promised safety and protection. On that scooter, though, he appeared saggy and gray, like a piece of fried chicken left out overnight in the rain. Decades of smoking and eating junk food had stranded him on his little mechanical island. When I looked at him, I worried that I was looking at a future version of myself.

“Hurry it up. I can’t breathe!”

“I’m going as fast as I can, Dad. Patience, patience.”

“I’ll be patient all the way to the goddamned funeral home.”

Sweat beaded and dripped from my forehead as I fumbled with the tube that snaked from the clear, plastic mask my father wore on his face to the spigot of clean, fresh air. The more I struggled with the plastic tube, the more I sweat.

“Christ. Thirty years as a cop and I’m going to suffocate on nothing in a fuckin’ Wal-Mart parking lot because my clumsy son can’t attach a tube. Jesus!”

I was finally able to get the tank all set up. I placed the oxygen tank in the tank holder on the back of my father’s scooter, leaving a greasy smear of dirt and sweat in the shape of my palm on the face of the tank. “See? You’re all set and ready to live another day!”

“We’ll see. Day ain’t over yet,” my father said and then rolled off into the parking lot, charging toward the Wal-Mart, leaving me behind to toast under the impossible heat of the Florida sun.

That was how our days proceeded. I would bear the brunt of his assaults with little retaliation. I knew he was in pain and this was how he was attempting to deal with the loss of his wife. But, I also felt a deep well of guilt for having left, for having let the relationship with my parents become so stagnant. I believed I deserved every insult my father hurled at me, and I accepted his lashings with an ascetic pride.

It wasn’t until moving back in with my father that I began to think of the creature again. After some time, I began to think I had imagined the creature altogether. I even remember consulting a few zoological books about it, but I never found anything that even slightly resembled the creature. I chalked it up to a hazy, mistaken memory. I had returned to the backyard every night after returning, but the creature did not appear.

For nearly six months after my mother died, I cared for my father. And then he, too, passed away one night, peacefully in his own bed. He was always an early riser, so I knew in my gut that he was dead when I awoke at 9 a.m. to the terrifying silence of

this creaky, fragile house. I opened his bedroom door to find him spread out in his underwear, his bulky mass now appearing surprisingly small on the king-sized bed, looking for the first time in his life as though he was actually at rest.

We had spoken the night before and had an openhearted conversation that was rare. He confessed that he missed my mother very much. We spoke about the past. We commiserated over the distance that had grown between us. We both felt responsible.

“I just wanted to clear the air and to apologize.”

“Dad, you have nothing to apologize for. It’s just, I don’t know, one of those things, I guess.”

“I used to have dreams, back when you still lived here. I dreamt I was a monster and we would have long conversations, the kind I always hoped we would have. You would tell me everything about yourself.”

“A monster?”

“It was just a dream. Speaking of, I’m going to bed.”

“Good night, Dad. See you in the morning.”

“Good night,” he said. He rested his hand on my shoulder and then walked with heavy steps to his bedroom.

It is a strange thing to find oneself suddenly parentless. To reach a point in which the only human beings that might possibly be said to know you at your most primitive and naked were gone and whatever feelings of disconnect haunted before were now consumed with a penetrating isolation.

The following weeks remain a blur. I held an estate sale to get rid of the assortment of crap my parents had accumulated over a lifetime. They had few objects of any real worth, and the estate sale was more of a glorified garage sale. The land the manufactured home was on belonged to the city, and the home itself was valued at nothing. I signed the deed for the place over to the Celebration Palms, and they tore it down. No sign of my family’s life on that land existed anymore.

A few days later, once all of the legalities were taken care of, I returned to New York. On the way to the airport, I asked the driver to take me by the old place. A doleful feeling overcame me as I surveyed the empty plot of land where my home once stood. The chain-link fence was still up, so I walked over for one last glance into the woods. The sun was setting and a purple twilight glow cast the area in a mournful silence. Directly ahead of me I thought I saw a pair of red eyes blinking in the dusky silence. A shadowy form lurched between the trees. I called out to it, but in a blink of an eye it, whatever it was, disappeared. A gust of wind swept through and shook the limbs of the trees.

On the airplane, I watched Celebration Palms grow smaller and smaller and eventually disappear from view. In the sky I was untethered and no longer had any ground to stand on. The plane floor felt solid. So did the seats and the tray table, the book in my hand, the drink that rested on the tray in front of me, but at that moment up in the air none of these objects had substance. I was floating high above the earth and I wasn’t sure if I would ever see land again.