



# The Monster Men

He carefully hung the worn field jacket in the closet next to the kitchen pantry, then, skillfully negotiating the tiny aisle between the battered formica table and the old wooden high chair, he walked up and encircled her in his arms from behind.

“Where is she?”

His wife let go of the pot she was scrubbing and leaned back into his embrace, secure in the knowledge that the more she relaxed the tighter would become the cradle of his strong arms, to the point that every now and then she would play with him, teasing him by going limp, then lifting her feet from the floor. Never once had he dropped her, nor, for that matter, even said a word other than to whisper in her ear, “I love you,” and it was the great joy of her life that she knew he would never let go, and the whisper would always be there.

She snuggled for a moment, sighed, then, her feet allowing that the brief respite must end, reached back to continue attacking the pot, “She’s upstairs, last I talked to her she was under the bed with her doll.”

He knocked on the door, announcing, “It’s your dad, I’m going to come in, okay,” then gently twisted the ancient porcelain knob. As usual, he immediately altered his movements so that instead of lifting his feet to walk, he kept them flat on the floor and slowly shuffled into what to him seemed absolute chaos. The

habit had been born after he had “murdered” one of the room’s tiny denizens, and for the rest of his life he wanted never again to suffer such an indictment.

Brushing an assortment of books, toys, and other things he couldn’t begin to identify from the cushion, he lowered himself into the sofa chair alongside her little bed. The thought occurred to him of how many times he’d sat in this chair and read her to sleep, only then himself to nod off, exhausted from the long hours he’d spent working overtime on a particularly hopeless case. He smiled at the sense memory of the two of them cuddled in the chair, then stirred himself to the task at hand.

“What is it, Kitten? What’s got you moved in under the bed?”

“The Monster Men, Poppa ... they ... they went by in their truck again.”

He paused for a moment, thinking that while, in truth, the third time might not always be the charm, it, indeed, was a time that called for a different approach.

“The big red truck? The one with the lights and the horn?”

Her voice muffled, he could picture the blue-patch quilt his mother-in-law had brought to the hospital so they could bundle her up for the long ride home, “Yes. There was a big one, then a really-really-really big one with a ladder, then ... I think two more, little ones.”

“Oh.”

A petite hand reached out and five tiny little fingers began to play with the laces of his shoe, “I could see the Monster Men, standing on the back of the big truck. There were some more of ‘em inside, but I didn’t see them so good.”

“Oh.”

A shock of red hair appeared, pigtails sticking up like two leftover cornstalks in a parched dry Iowa field, then, accompanied by a couple of soft grunts, the attached child twisted around and he found himself looking down into the exact same eyes her knew were also downstairs diligently attempting to discern the last molecule of roast burnt on a battered old cooking pot.

“Poppa?”

“Yes, Kitten?”

“Who are the Monster Men?”

He sighed, but so that she couldn’t hear him, “I tell you what, Sweetheart, instead of me telling you the story again, how about we have an Adventure? How’s that sound?”

She loved Adventures. There had been the Adventure to place with all the strange animals, the Adventure to the big tall building from where at the top he had showed her the whole world, the Adventure to the place he worked, where when any of the busy-busy men and women had walked by them they looked at

him the same way his mother did when she knew he wasn't looking in her direction, there had been ... well, she thought to herself, another Adventure would be great fun.

"Yes!"

"Good. I'm going to go downstairs and hug your mom until her face gets kinda of red and sweaty and she yells at me to stop bothering her, you get dressed up and when you're ready meet me in on the front porch, okay?"

"Okay, Poppa!"

He was half-asleep in his aluminum lawn chair, playing over and over in his head one of his favorite tunes, "Go away, you horny octopus man, I've got a pot needs cleaning ... go away, you horny octopus man, I've got a plot needs cleaning," when a wriggling meteor landed in his lap.

"Wherewegoingfortheadventurelet'sgolet'slet'sgo!"

Lifting her miniature form so that their faces were almost touching, "Do you trust your dad, Kitten?"

She instantly screwed her expression up to a the setting which indicated she was very serious, "Yes, Poppa."

"Okay, then let's be off for an Adventure!"

As he guided the antique pickup truck into the parking space, careful to leave it in gear after he had turned off the engine since he hadn't yet completed restoring the emergency brake cable, she stood up on the seat and stared wide-eyed at the huge building.

"Um ... um, Poppa?"

"Yes, Kitten?"

"Inside the giant door, over there, I can see one of the red trucks."

"I know, Kitten, I see it, too."

"But ... um ... are there Monster Men here?"

He pulled her over to his lap, wrapped his arms around her, and responded, "Do you still trust me?"

She hesitated, glancing for a second back into the garage, "Ah ... yes, Poppa, I trust you."

"Good. As long as I'm holding you, do you think a Monster Man could hurt you?"

She had watched her mom do it enough times, so she knew how to press herself closer to him so that his arms became a great fortress surrounding her, "No, Poppa, I know you're not afraid of the Monster Men."



As they entered the dark coolness of the building's interior she looked up over his shoulder and saw that over the giant opening there were letters and numbers. They were out of sight before she could try to sound them out, but she noticed that there was a funny little picture with a "2" and a "4" in it. She was trying to put the two numbers together, the way Mrs. Myrtle, the Olden Lady who was her nice teacher at SmithStreet ElementarySchoolRoomFour, had been trying to teach them, when she became aware that there was someone talking to her father. She could smell something smokey, like when the time her dad was burning up the big pile of leaves in the back yard and it had started raining and he had looked up at the sky and yelled a bad word. She kept her face pressed up against her dad's neck, and huddled closer, because it made her nervous when Someone New looked at her, but she knew that the tighter she scrunched up her eyes the better she'd be able to listen to what her dad and the New Person were saying to each other.

"Hey, Bill haven't seen you since ... well, since the guys from the outfit got together, what was it, two years ago?"

She felt her dad's shoulder move, and she risked peeking down across his chest. Two hands met, her dad's, with the strange little cut mark across his thumb, and the Other Man's, a hand at which her mother would utter the warning, "Take that outside and wash it under the faucet before you come into my clean kitchen." Odd, she noticed, upon one of the fingers of the other hand was the exact same funny big ring that her dad wore. She had asked him about that ring, once.

"Poppa?"

"Yes, Kitten?"

She played with it for a minute, "This ring means you and Mom are married, right?"

He put down the paper in which he'd been engrossed, and, holding his hand in front of her, said, "Run your finger around it and tell me when you get to the end."

It was a minute or two before she looked up to find him smiling at her, "Silly Poppa, it doesn't have an end."

"Right, Kitten, that's why it means your mom and I are married."

"Oh."

He waited, with her something he learned to perfect doing.

"Poppa?"

“Yes, my do-you-ever-stop-asking-questions child?”

“Poppa, what is the other ring for, on your ... your Right hand?”

His big thumb rolled the large ring around, and for a second he seemed to forget she was sitting in his lap.

“It means something else.”

“Oh.”

“Poppa.”

“Yes, dear?”

“We’re you married before, is that what the big ring means?”

“No ... no ...”

He got a faraway look in his eyes, and, for a moment, she thought he was going to cry, like the time when the phone rang and after listening for a few minutes he began to bawl like she did when she was scared or fell off her little bike and hurt herself, or when she woke up in the night because a Bad Dream had so terribly frightened her.

“I mean, yes, Kitten. It means I was married. A different kind of married, like ... well, like there were a lot of men like me in a big club, and we had a lot of fun, but ... but, there was a lot of hard work to do, and ...”

His voice became very soft, like when she could hear him and his mother at night through the closet wall, they would whisper things she couldn’t quite make out, and his mother would giggle and laugh, and she always liked that because she could would go back to her bed and fall asleep so easily and always have a wonderful dream.

“... and, then the club was over and some of us weren’t here anymore, so we wear these rings to remember.”

She looked up at him, and she wanted so much to ask him what had made his eyes get so sad wet, but, while she didn’t know why, she knew that the best thing to do was to just hug up to him, so that’s what she did.

“Oh.”

The men shook hands, not letting go of one another for some time, which she thought to herself, was not the way she saw people shaking hands at the place where her dad worked. This ... this was different, more like when he held her hand while they were walking down a busy street.

“This is my daughter, Kate. You’ll meet her in a minute or two, soon as her curiosity gets the best of her. You guys’ve been flyin’ down the street scarin’ the bejesus outta her with all the noise you make, don’t you have anything better to do with your time, you know, like m’be polish the trucks or play cards?”



The Other Man laughed, and then her father began to laugh, too, and then the two men were laughing together, and she knew beyond any doubt that it was a mysterious secret language they were speaking to one another, like the weird tongue of the strange people who had moved into the old house at the end of the street, and she wanted so desperately to understand what they were saying that suddenly she found herself turned around in her father's arms, facing the Other Man.

He was a Monster Man!

He was wearing a big, black Monster Man coat, with huge clasps on the front. It flowed down way past his waist, down to his thick legs which were covered up in Monster Man pants! He was covered in black soot, like how she got when she brought her dad more charcoal for the grill, and her mother would always yell out the window, "Why do you let her do that, you know how dirty she gets!" He was wearing great Monster Man boots, and tucked under his arm was a set of thick Monster Man gloves. Even more dreadful, tipped back on his head was a frightening Monster Man hat, a big badge on it's front with the same funny picture she had seen upon entering the building.

"Kitten, I have to breathe ... please, please, can you let go just a tiny little bit!"

"Shy, huh?"

"No, I told you, for some reason she's got in her head that you're a monster and that little red toy of yours you and your pals drive around in is a monster wagon."

"Oh."

Then, face buried even deeper in her dad's neck, she noticed something odd. Usually, when things like this happened, the Other Person laughed a lot. Instead, all she could hear was the sound of him smiling, exactly like when she made a burp at the dinner table and her mom would say, "Excuse you, please," but before she did, without looking, she could hear a little smile escape from her dad, at which point the little ritual always called for her mother's completion, "Don't encourage her."

"I've got you, Kitten. 'member, you said you trusted me."

She had, and she did, and she'd over timed learned that when she was in his arms there was no room left over for doubt, so she turned to face the Monster Man.

She noticed immediately that he had a greasy black streak across his face, so that he looked like Rocky the Raccoon on the cartoon show, and before she could stop it a tiny giggle escaped her.

His eyes widened, great huge blue eyes, sad eyes which were somehow filled to brim with happiness, happiness that washed over her, filled her, made her feel suddenly confused because she knew her father was holding her. The Monster Man slowly unhooked the front of his great coat, then carefully removed it and tossed it aside. It made a loud sound when it landed, and looking at it lying on the glistening clean concrete, she wondered how anyone could possibly remain standing while they were wearing it.

The sound of the smile drew her attention again, and, drawing her gaze from the coat, she turned to find the Monster Man looking at her. Except ...

... except, he wasn't a Monster Man! He was just a man, one who had just removed his giant coat and was standing in front of her looking like a clown in a pair of oversized trousers. She saw that he had a line across the side of his face, exactly like the mark on her father's thumb, but much longer, and his hair was cut the same as her dad's, short on the side and so flat on top that she knew she could play around with him, too, by putting one of her story books on his head and seeing how long it would remain while he read the paper.

"You look like a raccoon clown!"

He reached his hand to his face, and wiped his fingers across his dirty cheek. Reaching out the distance between them, he gently brushed her cheeks with the tips of his fingers, touching soft, soft, soft like when her dad came in when she was pretending to be asleep and put his lips to her forehead and said "I love you" in a different way than all the other ways he did when she was awake.

"There, now you look like a raccoon, too!"

And he laughed, and then her dad laughed, and then she laughed, and then they were all laughing and laughing and laughing and trying to put soot on one another's faces and climbing all over the great fire engine and exploring the inside of the fire station and meeting the Fuzzy Cat who slept in an upside down hat and for the rest of her life never again would the Monster Men be anything but a faint memory which immediately returned her to the comfort of her dad's loving embrace.