

## **The Monster From My Childhood**

That year was the summer of the Monster. We called him that because he had terrible scarring around his jaws and upper lip. When the teacher was not looking, we would taunt him, mimicking the grunts and mispronunciations of words that he made.

I don't really remember his name now, not until I saw the video. He was always the Monster to us. He entered our Grade 3 classroom in the second half of the year, transferred from some big city metropolis that seemed to impress the teacher. No one really asked the Monster why he looked the way he did or moved to our rural town in British Columbia. The adults had the good sense to keep their curiosity at bay, but they did not have the good sense to prepare us for the fear that would soon consume us.

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“Hey, you! Are you a monster?” Bobby McCormick was the first to use the moniker.

The Monster stared at Bobby and walked away from the playground that first recess when the anomaly came to our school. But Bobby was not one to give up so easily.

“Hey, I am talking to you, Monster!”

The nickname caught on quickly. By the end of lunch break, the new kid was the Monster to us and stayed that way until he left.

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Bobby was my best friend since we were babies. We were a packaged deal: you couldn't get one without the other come barrelling from around the corner, demanding to be let in on the fun. He was my brother from another mother.

“You can't come here!” Bobby glared at the Monster who was standing at the edge of the field.

“Yeah! Monsters are not allowed in Human teams!” I called and grinned as I kicked the soccer ball hard towards the Monster’s face.

The Monster ducked just in time. A chorus of laughter bubbled around us as the rubber ball hit the school wall and rolled back. Bobby and I high fived each other. By now, the other kids were joining in.

“Go away Monster!”

“Go back to Monsterville!”

By the time Bobby and I turned back, all we could see was the retreating back of the Monster, his dull brown hoodie disappearing behind the wall of evergreen trees. There was something about the way the Monster’s shoulders were hunched and the manner he was dragging his feet that triggered a buried sense of pity in me. I hadn’t realized I zoned out until Bobby’s voice interrupted my train of sympathetic thoughts.

“Quit standing there, Jemmy, come play!”

I could feel my lips pull upwards as my focus zoomed in onto the single thought of beating Bobby in the game. As I jogged back to the group, the image of the Monster dissipating into the thicket of my mind, just as he had done a few minutes before.

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I woke up in the middle of the night drenched in cold sweat, my chest heaving up and down. My mother came running into the room, her eyes blown wide with worry. Only then had I realized I was screaming.

“Jer-Bear! Another nightmare?” My mother knelt beside my bed and took my face into her hands.

The gentleness in my mother’s voice brought me back to reality: no monsters, just the safety of my own bedroom. I threw my arms around my mother and started bawling.

“Shh... shhh.. there, there, Jemmy sweetie,” my mother began to rub comforting circles on my back. “It was just a dream. It wasn’t real. Could you tell me what it was about?”

I nodded and pushed out of my mother’s embrace. Rubbing my eyes and hiccupping at the same time, I tried my best to recount the jumbled heap of a big, terrifying shadow, towering over me, chasing me down a never-ending hallway. I couldn’t remember anything else other than the twisted grin stretched over its stitched-closed mouth and the suffocating horror consuming me from the inside.

I had forgotten all about the nightmare by the time I went to school the next day. But one look at the Monster’s scarred face, the sharp jagged lines of the scars twisting up the Monster’s jaw and mouth, reminded me of some deep-seated fear that remained unnamed.

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“Thank you all for coming in today, Mr. and Mrs. Harris; Mr. and Mrs. McCormick; and Ms. Hirst,” Mr. Robinson, the school principal, said as he closed the door to the office. “As you know, this meeting is to address Jeremy and Bobby’s unruly behaviours.”

Bobby and I didn’t mean for the Monster to fall that badly. It was supposed to be a light jab to the side, startling him in order to get him to trip on his feet. But nobody saw that particularly sharp rock until it was too late. Nobody noticed it until the girls screamed out of fright and blood was gushing from the gash on the Monster’s forehead.

The meeting was really a formality. The principal had already announced that the Monster would not be returning next school year, but what Bobby and I did still warranted a stern warning of suspension. I knew I was going to be grounded when I returned home. Tuning the grown-ups’ voices out, my eyes fixed on the Monster who was sitting silently beside his mother whose face was serious and unfriendly. I obsessed on the scars crisscrossed

down his chin, the cream-coloured bandage stuck onto his forehead, and his black eyes that were always cast downwards. I suddenly realized that he was taller than me.

After an extremely long talk, we finally received the verdict: two-day suspension and no recess break for the rest of the school year. During the whole ordeal, Monster never said a word. He stared out the window as the grown-ups discussed his tormentors' punishments, but he seemed uninterested in the proceedings.

Needless to say, my parents grounded me for a long time, so long that I got used to not having any playdates, after-school snacks, and birthday parties, not even in the summer. Eventually, April turned to May turned to the next school year. Since Monster transferred shortly after the school conference, Bobby and I went about picking on someone else. We were not always the trouble-makers though. Somewhere along Grade 7 and 8 when Alicia Evans took both Bobby's and my breath away, we smartened up.

The monster was, by then, a distant memory, except in my dreams.

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I wake up with a sharp inhale. Once again, the stitched-closed mouth monster has plagued my dreams. I groan and wonder how a recurring nightmare keeps haunting me from childhood. No matter what methods I use, it just won't go away.

My wife is in the kitchen when I come downstairs, my eyes puffy from lack of adequate sleep. "Morning," I murmur listlessly while pouring myself a strong mug of coffee.

She waves her spatula at me and hums in response.

I sit down at the table and swipe open my phone. There is a message from Bobby. Oddly, instead of his usual late-night rants about how pesky teenagers have trespassed on his farm again, this message contains nothing but a video link and a caption.

Bobby is never reticent, so my curiosity is piqued. I click onto the link and wait patiently for it to load. It is an interview with an apparently renowned plastic surgeon and his philanthropic endeavours.

*“...When I was a seven, I was a victim of an awful car accident that killed my father and maimed my face permanently. As you can see on the screen behind me, I lived with the terrible scars of that fateful night...”*

*The interviewer interrupted the doctor. “Middle school must have been torture.”*

*“Well, nothing was worse than never seeing my father again. After I had the scars surgically laser removed, the process gave me self-confidence that I could love my reflection and not cause others to do a double-take when they pass me on the street. I decided to devote my life and career to others with scars. Thus, my organization, PhaseFace, is dedicated to providing plastic surgeries in third-world countries to children with facial deformities...”*

I have stopped listening by now. I stare at the contact information displayed on the bottom of the video, and finally, I obtain a name to put on a face that has haunted me for so many years. With trembling fingers, I open my email and start writing to Dr. Hirst.

The rest of the day goes by in a blur. As I lie in bed that night thinking about what I had done as a boy, I can not remember why I was never nice to Raphael. I eventually drift off and wake up content and energized the next morning. I am not sure why, but perhaps it is because, for the first time since I was a child, I cannot remember what I have dreamed of the night before.