

The Monster

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It is a monster; an ugly, dark green monster, with razor-sharp yellow fangs and twisted, knotted jet-black fur. Its voice is loud and harsh, it shakes you to the core and makes your ears and mind ache. You cannot escape, because this monster is different. This monster is not confined to under your bed or your closet, and he is not confined to the dark depths of the night.

Oh, no, this monster permeates your skin, blood, bones, and your very soul, which he makes sure is no longer just yours but is his, too. He works all hours, not stopped by a radiant sunrise, nor the light of twinkling stars.

This monster likes to make you think you are crazy. He watches you turn your straightener off because you always turn your straightener off, and you know you turned your straightener off, but then he convinces you that maybe you didn't. Maybe you didn't turn it off, and maybe your house will burn down, and maybe it will be all your fault. So he'll make you turn your car around, even though you're already late, and you have people in your car, and now they'll think you're crazy, and you know you're crazy because he has made you crazy, so you turn your car around, and you check your straightener, because he says you should, and so you have to.

But he does not stop with the straightener. You hear his maniacal laughter in your head as he squeezes the rational part of your brain with his long, wiry, strong blackened fingers, and forces you to go back and make sure the doors are locked, the space heater is unplugged, the candles are blown out, the stove is off, the refrigerator is shut, the windows are locked, and everything is locked and everything is off. And then he makes you check it all again.

And he especially likes when some Very Bad Thing happens on the news, like a murder or a kidnapping. He snaps his fingers, and, just like that, you obsess over the Very Bad Thing. You find out everything about the Very Bad Thing, scaring yourself more with every word you read, but he makes sure your eyes are glued to the screen, scouring page after page of gruesome details. He'll tell you that the more you learn, the more likely that the Very Bad Thing will not happen to you, so you'll keep reading and terrify yourself. But then again, maybe you're jinxing it, he tells you, and maybe your panic-spurred obsessing over the Very Bad Thing will happen to you anyway. He tells you that Very Bad Things have to happen to someone, why not you? And so you live in fear, and he is happy.

He loves when you see your friends. As soon as you start to feel comfortable, his strong, dark, oozing arms wrap themselves around the gears of your brain setting your nerves on fire. And then as your mind whirls, your hands shake. They shake so bad you cannot hold anything, and you're surrounded by people, but you cannot let them see because they will not understand that your monster makes you crazy, that it isn't you, and if they see your erratically quivering hands, they will just think you are crazy. Your heart follows your hands, pumping frantically, racing so fast, it's almost as if it's running from him, but it is not running from him, because nothing can get away from him. So then your arms go numb and you'll think you're having a heart attack, no, you'll know you're having a heart attack, but you know it's him making you feel this way, and how can you explain your monster to 911? Maybe you are going crazy. Maybe it's you. Your throat is tight and the breaths

can barely get in, and for one second, he makes you sickly jealous of people who die from anaphylactic shock because at least they have a medical condition explaining their symptoms, and what do you have? Just your monster and no one sees him except for you. And so you pant and you cry and you throw up and you shake and you wonder how it will stop because you cannot live with this, you can't.

You've never gotten in an accident, and you've never gotten a ticket, and you drive safe, but what's that to him? So he makes you think about the possibility that you might hit someone, and maybe you should just stop driving altogether because you'd rather let him take that freedom from you than endure his constant badgering you about what could go wrong in that huge, dangerous killing machine you used to call a car.

It's exhausting, what he does to you. But no, sleep does not come easy. No matter how tired you are. He whispers in your ears at all hours. Did you study enough for your test? Do you think your mom is mad at you? Do you think maybe your teacher is mad at you, too? Did you laugh too loud at lunch? Did you drink too much at the bar? What more could you have done wrong, you'll think, but then you'll hear him laugh and he'll leave the past alone for a few minutes and launch into the future. What if you accidentally sleep through your Psych class tomorrow? What if you run out of your hairspray before the dance on Friday and so your boyfriend thinks you're not as pretty anymore and likes someone else? What if you have to miss your friend's dinner party tomorrow because you feel sick, but won't she be so furious?

And when you finally do fall asleep, he nudges you awake at 3 am whispering hushed, angry words into your ears describing a creaking floorboard, a noise in your house that should be quiet. He'll grin widely, his ugly teeth glistening their rotten yellow, as you shoot out of bed in a panic, adrenaline coursing through your veins, no, not your veins anymore, his veins. He'll watch you stack chairs and books by your window because you read that deters burglaries and he's convinced you that if that noise you heard wasn't a person in your house yet, someone else could be, no, will be, soon and you will be taken unless you lock everything and block everything. You'll dive back

under your big blankets, wishing they could protect you, but the real monster, your monster, is inside of you still, and no amount of locks can save you.

He makes you study weeks in advance for your exams, missing time with friends because if you do not start studying at least two weeks in advance you will fail your test, you will fail out of school, you will never get a job, you will never get married, you will never have kids, you will never be happy, or at least that is what he tells you. But then when you get the test, he will make you feel like no matter how much time you spent studying, it was not enough, and he will squeeze the tears out of the corners of your eyes as you look around you at everyone typing and writing and think of how you're behind and you probably won't finish the test and you're not going to get an A but you need an A, or you will never be happy, right?

He especially loves when your friends are busy. Then, he can tell you that they're not busy, they just haven't answered their phones because they're mad at you because you're a stupid, annoying person, and they never wanted to be friends with you anyway. He'll convince you to text your friend a long message asking what's wrong, and asking if she's mad, and what you can do to make her happy again, and then she'll answer and say nothing's wrong, but now it's too late, your embarrassed because you were stupid and crazy and he won't let go of you and he revels in your distress.

People will try to make your monster go away. You'll see people who specialize in your monster, but the strategies they give you won't work. Because you'll know so well how irrational this monster makes you, and how you should not believe him. You'll get it. But then he'll speak again and there's nothing you can do. So then they'll give you pills in the morning to quiet him during the day, and pills in the evening to save you from his words while you sleep. But he's too strong, for both their words and their pills, and you keep moving, the two of you, side by side, his mangled meaty hands with those spindly, crooked fingers clutched with a death grip around your throat, squeezing, squeezing, squeezing...