

Your Own Monsters

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Your

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“Can’t you tell everyone is ignoring you because you’re too short and too annoying?”

My cheeks burn from the humiliation of everyone laughing at me. I’ve seen Stacy bully other girls, but this is the first time she has ever bothered me. I look around, hoping to find some sort of support from friends, but they are all laughing at me, too. Am I annoying? I tend to ramble when I’m nervous, does that bother others? I’ve never been called short before, is there something wrong with the way I look? Stacy takes a step towards me and shoves me. Before I can attempt to catch my fall, someone trips me from behind. I crash to the ground, hitting my head on the tile floor. Bystanders rush in and dump their trays on me. It feels like the room is closing in on me and when I look up at Stacy, she’s gone. And it’s the monster I’m looking at.

Suddenly I’m startled awake. My body is covered in sweat. My heart is racing. I shouldn’t be frightened of dreams like these since they aren’t real. I’m also 13 years old, so I should be over elementary school fears. I don’t even go to that school anymore. The bullying was so severe that my parents moved so I could have another chance.

This time, I don’t talk too much. I also grew a few inches so I’m taller now. Plus, there are more kids, so I blend in more. My parents moved to a district with more money and there aren’t as many bullies in this new school. Or at least, there aren’t many that I’ve seen. But it doesn’t matter, because the memories still follow me. And so does the monster.

All I wanted was to be good enough. I didn’t need to be friends with Stacy or any of the other kids, I just needed to be accepted. I have never been good enough for anyone, not even myself. I tried so hard in school, but the kids mostly made fun of me for doing so well. Or they’d tell me how I didn’t deserve to get good grades. They’d say I was the teacher’s pet, that everything was just *given* to me. That was after the incident with Stacy. After what happened that day in the cafeteria, my friends and classmates rejected me forever. I can’t even please my parents, who want nothing from me except for my happiness. The monster is right; I’ll *never* be good enough.

Tomorrow will be the first day of school. I’ll be starting eighth grade. I’ll also be starting high school. My anxiety is all-consuming. My parents keep telling me that this could be a new start, that I might be able to truly make some friends. I don’t know how they can be so optimistic. There are so many things to worry about. Kids are always really loud on the first day of school. The monster likes a lot of noise.

My counselor told me that I should imagine a bubble around me and to practice not letting others bother me. She said that I am really sensitive, which is okay, but I can’t let others’ feelings or actions get into my bubble. She doesn’t understand that the monster has sharp teeth and that it will tear its way into my bubble. She also doesn’t realize that all the oxygen is inside of my bubble, so when the monster attacks, all the air leaks out and I suffocate. A group of older kids threw me in a locker once back in fourth grade. They taped a poster on the outside so that no light could get in. That was during recess and no one found me until the end of the day. They might have left, but the monster stayed with me the entire time.

My chest hurts when I think about all the times I’ve been trapped in compact spaces. My ears ring when I think about all the times I’ve been screamed at. I realize that I’m thinking about my pain too much, but before I can change my train of thoughts, the monster is here. It rises in the corner of my room next to my door. When it detects me watching it, it begins to grow. I try, but I can’t close my eyes. It’s the middle of the night and I need to be sleeping. I’ve learned that there isn’t any way I can stop the monster. The only escape is sleep. It is growing so fast that it now takes up half of my room. I sit up and fumble for my pill container. There isn’t even time to find my water bottle. I seize

the pills in my mouth and swallow just before the monster reaches me and it isn't long before I'm out...

My parents had me on a strict sleeping schedule for the last two weeks, in preparation for the school year. It takes a while before I remember why my body doesn't want to wake up. The anxiety/sleeping pills take a while to wear off. My head feels fuzzy as I roll out of bed. I find my water bottle on the floor next to my bed and I take a long drink. Now, it's time to get ready for school.

This is my first time walking through the high school during the day (the open house tours we went to were in the evening). To my surprise, the hallways are lit with natural light, ascending from rooftop windows. I look around but don't see the monster. There are, however, a *lot* of people. I try not to make any eye contact as I walk to my assigned locker. I'm closing my locker's door when someone walks up to me. I look up to see an older boy. He looks me in the eyes. My heart starts to pound, but before my body goes into full panic mode, he smiles and says, "I like your sweatshirt. It's cool."

"Th-thanks..." I respond

"My name is Brandon, by the way," he states

"I'm Hazel," I reply

"Nice to meet you, Hazel. I'll see you around!"

He says as he waves goodbye and walks away. I can tell that my eyes are wide and that I probably look ridiculous, but I can't believe that someone just *talked* to me. Without being condescending. I look around again, but the boy is gone and I *still* don't see the monster. I decide to walk to my first-period class. I look down at my sweatshirt as I do. It is a gray, long sleeve hoodie with a black, Chinese dragon twisting around my left arm. I get to my class and sit down in the back of the class. The bell rings and the school day begins.

I think about the compliment on my sweatshirt throughout the day and, for some reason, school isn't so bad. The kids in my classes don't act as bad as I expected them to. It seems like they are mostly just trying to fit in. Like me. For the first time in years, I don't see the monster at all during the day.

The next day, I don't see the boy again, so I go to my first hour. The classroom isn't open yet because I got to school early today. I notice a girl with dark skin and curly brown hair standing next to the locked door. I reach to take my phone out of my pocket, but she starts talking.

"Your name is Hazel, right? My name is Stacy." She smiles at me, but I jump when I hear her name.

"Uh, yeah. Um, what's up?"

I don't want to carry a conversation, but I don't want to be rude.

"Oh, nothing really. I just realized that you've been in our school district for a while and I've never really talked to you. Are you glad to be in high school or did you like middle school better?" she asks, shifting her notebook and supplies to her other arm. I can't believe I've talked with two people in two days without feeling unwanted or lonely. And I didn't feel very anxious when she asked about school. I usually hate it when adults ask me about school or other dumb questions like, "What do you plan to do after you graduate?" but I don't seem to mind as much when it's from someone the same age as me.

"Yeah, I moved here towards the end of elementary school. I thought I'd hate high school, but it isn't so bad so far. I guess it's only the second day, though." My own words amaze me. I usually think a lot about what I say and only talk when it is completely necessary. Yet, here I am, having a conversation with someone I just met. Stacy and I talk for a few more minutes before our teacher comes and lets us into class.

That's how my high school career started. I'm almost an entire month into school and I haven't seen the monster once. I also have a favorite, lucky sweatshirt and kids I can call my friends.

We aren't close, but I can talk with them and sit with them at lunch. That is where I am now. Stacy is on my left and Bradon on my right. Shawn and Callia are two others that joined our table. Callia and Bradon are laughing about one of the recent mishaps that occurred in their play practice. They are in our school's winter musical. The rest of us are laughing too when we hear someone yelling.

A girl with short black hair is walking in our direction. She stops at our table and starts cussing at me. I only see her for a split second because the monster takes her place. I'm shocked at how fast it can appear after being gone for so long. The screeching cries are deafening to my ears. My body is rejecting this sight in every way. I can feel the color drain from my face. Sweat soaks the back of my shirt and my head begins to pound. Just as I'm reaching the peak of my panic, a name interrupts my thoughts. The name is "Stacy" and I realize the monster isn't after me; it's after Stacy. I look to my left and see tears welling up in her brown eyes. Even though her skin is several shades darker than mine, I can see that the color has drained from her face, too. Surprise washes over me and I realize my heart is now pounding differently. I can feel my face getting red. But I'm not embarrassed or scared, I'm mad. I look at the monster in its dark, soleless eyes.

"Why are *you* here?" I demand, in a voice I've never used before.

"To get rid of this ugly, pathetic human being. Look at her hair, she probably doesn't even brush it." She says, lifting her arm. I can sense that she is going for Stacy's hair. I'm on my feet, blocking her reach of Stacy in seconds.

"No." My tone isn't threatening or weak, it's compelling.

The monster's face shifts and I can see the original girl's eyes.

"You have no right to come over here during our lunch hour and try to hurt one of my friends. I don't care what you think about Stacy, she is one of the kindest people I have ever met and I'm not going to let you bother her." My voice is steady, but my stomach is turning. I think I'm going to throw up. I look down and see that the rest of my table is watching me with wide eyes. Bradon snaps out of it first and turns toward the monster-girl and tells her to leave. Callia is next, "I agree too. I think you should leave. You obviously have something else going on and probably don't mean what you just said." she says with sincerity. I look up, and the entire existence of the monster flickers. I see the Stacy from my old school, and the faces of kids who used to bully me before all that is left is the black-haired girl.

Her reddening cheeks are in sharp contrast with her pale skin. She looks at all of us before turning and walking stiffly away. I sit down and take a deep breath. I look at Stacy and see that she is in complete shock.

"I hate bullies," I say, quietly.

"Well, that was...unexpected... Are you okay, Stacy?" Callia asks

"Yeah, what about you, Hazel?" she says

"Yeah, but I don't feel very well...I need to go to the bathroom," I explain, walking away and clutching my stomach. The uneasiness I'm feeling is overwhelming. I make it to the bathroom just in time to vomit in the nearest stall. I'm still sweating, and I feel incredibly weak after losing all the contents of my stomach, but this is the first time I don't feel hopeless after encountering the monster. I feel empowered.

I use the sides of the stall to pull myself up. My head is dizzy, but I gain my balance in a short amount of time. When I'm ready, I go to the bathroom sink to wash out my mouth. I'm splashing water on my sweaty cheeks when I hear someone crying in a stall. I can see the black boots and jeans of someone sitting on the tile in the last stall.

"Are you okay?" I ask, not sure of what to do. A face peeks out from the stall door and, to my surprise, it is the girl with the black hair. Her face contorts, and she scowls.

"Why would you care?" she spits out. Unsure of how to answer, I ask,

“Why wouldn’t I care?” I ask, deflecting her question because I don’t have a real answer. I walk over to the stall she is in so I can see her better. I reach over her head and pull some toilet paper out of the dispenser and hand it to her so she can dry her tears.

“You don’t have to feel this way. I don’t know you at all, but you seem like someone who knows what it is like to be hurt. I am from the same circumstances, and there *is* a way out of that seemingly never-ending cycle of mistreatment. I need to go back to my friends now, but I hope you think about what I said. You can’t become the monster if you want to escape the terror. It doesn’t work that way.” I say, standing up. I turn to walk back to the cafeteria.

“My name is Hazel, by the way. Again, I don’t know you, but we could become friends if you change your mind about monsters. You deserve to feel loved, too, you know. You *are* good enough.” I look her in the eyes once more, wanting her to feel the weight of my words, and then I push open the bathroom door. I’ve learned a lot in the first month of high school. So, maybe now I can help others control their own monsters.