

## My, How You've Grown

It had started when my daughter refused to go to bed. Casey was never the sort who was afraid of invisible bumps in the night and seemed to be born a fiercely independent child. However, when we'd told her it was time to bed that night, she refused to go.

"There's a monster in my room!" Casey urged. "She came out from under my bed last night!"

"I told you not to let her watch so much TV before bed," my wife sighed at me with a frustrated glare. She turned back to our little girl and touched her shoulder. "Casey, there's no monster under your bed."

"I saw it! It was crawling around my room all night!"

"Come on, Case-a-base," I chuckled. "Let's go do a monster check, alright? Your old dad is an expert when it comes to beating monsters."

Casey followed me to her bedroom, hiding behind my leg and glancing towards her bed. I walked over to the closet door and opened it wide. "No monsters here...just your clothes and toys."

"She's under my bed!" Casey said, pointing to her bed and making sure I was between her and the dark void.

"Alright," I said, humoring her. I got down on my hands and knees, taking out my phone and flipping on the flashlight. Casey quickly backed away and hid in the hall behind the door. Rather than a space under her bed, I saw a pair of glowing red eyes and a sharp-toothed smile. My blood went cold as the monster spoke to me with too much familiarity.

"David?" The monster under the bed asked. "Come closer so I can see how you've grown..."

The raspy voice took me back to when I was almost six. When I was a child, I saw long shadows that would flit about my room like bats or spiders. If I stayed up too late, I would hear the low grumble of something horrifying under the mattress and the tapping of claws against the hardwood floors of my bedroom. It would whisper threats in my ear about eating me or taking me away under the bed with it to the Monster Lands. I would hide under my blankets until I fell asleep only to find no evidence of my midnight visitor when I woke up. I had only ever seen it in parts, but the long claws, the slithering neck, and the mossy, green fur never amounted to anything I could picture concretely. Not knowing had always been more terrifying.

When I'd finally had enough, I told the monster to leave me alone and rolled over to sleep. Peering through one eye, I saw the long, slinking shadow pass out of my bedroom through the window. I told myself I had dreamed it, but I slept better every night after I had driven the monster away with my declaration. Now, my nightmare creature was back and under my child's bed.

Green fingers with onyx claws reached out from under the bed, digging into the carpet and pulling the long, flat body out from under the bed. Thick, green fur covered the monster's body like moldy carpet and the long neck stretched out like a snake. The face had a sharp bird's beak and glowing red eyes. The razor-sharp teeth could have been a smile, but the memories that surfaced when seeing my monster made me instantly distrustful. The further the monster came out from under the bed, the more I wanted to run.

"You have a beard like your father..." the monster hissed, almost warm. "And you're still wearing those big glasses. It was so easy to recognize you and I was...overwhelmed with nostalgia."

"You look just like I remember you. Your name was...Grinner?"

"Gristle," the monster smiled, excitedly. "You do remember..."

"How could I forget?" I asked, backing away a little. "You gave me nightmares and sent me screaming into my mom's room."

"Daddy?" Casey asked. I'd nearly forgotten her, but she was hiding behind her hamper by the door.

"Just a minute, Casey," I called back. "Go to your mom..."

"If I had known you were Casey's father," Gristle assured me as Casey's footsteps padded away. "I would have stopped in to say hello."

"How are—why are you under my daughter's bed?"

"Well, times are hard," Gristle said, hissing and showing their teeth. "People are so quickly moved in and out of apartments and condos that it's hard to form an especially lasting relationship. And the problem with single-family homes is that a monster can't move in somewhere that children won't be afraid of them. Most people can't afford houses in this area until their children are in their teens and no longer afraid of monsters. I blame the housing

market and all those evictions...”

“So this is like...your job?”

“Of course,” Gristle said.

“So, monsters under the bed—”

“And closets!” Gristle corrected with a slight snarl. “Or under sinks and in basements... anywhere with dark places for us to hide.”

“But you’re...paid to scare children?”

“Pay’ is such a...human concept,” Gristle said. “For monsters, it is the purpose of our existence to scare children.”

“But not adults?” I asked.

“No,” Gristle said. “Why would monsters scare adults?”

“Why scare children?” I retorted, indignant.

“Children need to learn how to be afraid,” Gristle said. “Monsters have been teaching fear for centuries.”

“Children are afraid enough without monsters!”

“It has been getting hard to scare children,” Gristle said. “But the point isn’t just fear...”

“I don’t understand.”

“How to translate this for you?” Gristle grumbled folding her claws together. “Monsters don’t just exist to scare children. That would be cruel. When you were a child, you decided that you no longer afraid of me.”

“Because I told myself you weren’t real!”

“Though I was. And your decision to stop being afraid was why I scared you in the first place.”

“I don’t—”

“Are you afraid of death?” Gristle asked. “Or falling deathly ill? Or a meteor crashing out of the sky? Are you so afraid of those things that you can’t sleep over them?”

“No, but—”

“And those scared you as a child, yet you decided not to be afraid of them.”

“What?”

“Monsters teach children not to be afraid. We teach humans that fear of the invisible things comes with a choice. Some grow out of their fear at three and some take until their almost thirteen to learn not to fear what they cannot see. If you do not learn to cope with fear as a child, how could you navigate the world as an adult?”

“So you scare us to teach how not to be afraid?”

“Children learn to fear, for safety,” Gristle said. “Monsters teach children to conquer fears and still be safe.”

“But does it have to be so...scary?”

“How else would we learn what fear is? How else will we learn where fear sits? The fears of the head hurt differently than those of the heart or the stomach. Fears of discomfort resonate less dangerously than fears of safety.”

“But you threatened to eat me!” I snapped. “You were going to grab me by the ankles and drag me to—”

“And risk my license?” Gristle asked, shocked.

“You need a license?”

“Everyone needs a license to work with children! It would be absurd to just let any monster into a child’s bedroom!”

“But you said—”

“Monsters whisper many things,” Gristle said. “Yet, we don’t act. The worst I ever did was scratch up your floors and hide your dirty clothes.

“So...monsters don’t eat children?”

“No,” Gristle shook her head. “Too stringy and not enough meat on their bones.”

“And there’s no Monster World?”

“Oh, there is a Monster World,” Gristle said, “but you wouldn’t like it, I’m sure.”

“So...you didn’t intend to hurt Casey?”

“Never...” Gristle said. “But don’t tell her that, it defeats the whole purpose.”

“You want to keep scaring my daughter?”

“Well, the way I see it? You can have me do it or you can have some strange monster do it. If it were me, I’d rather have it be a familiar—if frightening—face.”

“I guess,” I frowned. “As long as she’s safe.”

“Agreed,” Gristle bowed her long head and started sliding back under the bed, her long head curling up towards the head of the bed.

“Remember,” the raspy voice snickered from under the bed. “A fake scare now will make her braver in the future. It made you brave, after all.”

Swallowing, I stood up and started walking out of the room. Casey was sitting with her mom on the couch, both of them looking terrified. I could have explained everything about my familiarity with Gristle, her benign intentions, and the purpose behind the scares in the dark. Then I realized, maybe Gristle was right. Casey was a brave kid, but that was only when her mom and I made her feel safe. She was independent, sure, but she needed to be confident enough to face her fears. And I would rather have it be someone I know.

“There was a mouse,” I said, throwing up my hands with a sigh, “but it rushed off into a hole under Casey’s bed. I’ll have to call the exterminator in the morning, but I plugged it up for the time being.”

“See?” My wife said. “There’s nothing under your bed that can hurt you.”

That had a ring of truth to it. Hesitantly, Casey followed me up the stairs and let me put her in bed. As I tucked her in, I spoke to her in a quiet voice, aware that Gristle was listening. “The thing about monsters, Casey, is that sometimes we make them worse in our minds than they are. That little mouse seemed scary, but it’s just a mouse.”

“But I’ve seen it!” Casey urged. “It crawls around my floors and wants to eat me.”

“Sometimes being a grown-up means facing those monsters,” I said. “Whether it’s real or not, we all gotta face our monsters.”

Casey frowned, but nodded, casting a suspicious look at her bed.

“And if it helps,” I said, loud enough for Gristle to hear, “any monster that tries to take you will have to tussle with me first. But I know you can face this thing on your own. OK?”

“Kay,” Casey said, a little reluctant. “Goodnight, Daddy...”

“Night, Case-A-Base,” I said. Before closing the door to her room, I looked back one more time and saw the red eyes and yellow smile of a pleased Gristle under my daughter’s bed.