

Dancing Through the Shadows

PTA Reflections Literature Entry

High School Division

Page 2

I have always been afraid of the dark. I don't know exactly when it started. Perhaps it was when I first realized that monsters were real and that there was one was living in my house. Yeah, that sounds about right. I've seen the monster for as long as I can remember. At first, I thought he was the friend that I never had, someone that whilst a lot older than me, I could still play with.

Loneliness chewed my soul into a frayed mess. I was severely bullied at my school, and I didn't have a friend until third grade. I tried everything—first I drowned myself in the inky pages of books, then I threw myself dancing, then listening to music for hours on end. Even playing with my siblings couldn't sew the cloth of my being together. I felt as if I were a loose thread—being pulled out for what seems forever, wondering if this could be the moment I snap.

Then the monster appeared. He was so sweet at first. He stroked my hair and played with me, and talked to me as if I were special. He was older than me, much older than me, but my whole family adored him. I had finally found a friend that I could confide in, a person I could look up to. We played many games together, and I told him absolutely everything. I felt my soul

beginning to piece itself together, knitted together by the monster's claws. I longed for the moment when night would fall when the monster would creep into my room and whisper secrets that only grown-ups knew. Our games of truth and dare were always fun, with just a pinch of fear.

Slowly the monster's claws stopped stroking just my hair, but then other parts of my body. Our games became a little more intimate, and the monster began visiting more frequently at night. At times I felt my tiny fingers clutch on the light switch, and I was more hesitant to go to bed when I knew that the monster would come right after the moon read a bedtime story to the stars. I began to fear the monster.

I always pushed the feeling away, shoving it into my back drawer along with my plastic toys and pens. But the monster always opened that drawer, pulled out the feelings, and toyed

Page 3

with it until they felt small and silly. His voice whispered, "Come on, Rebecca. It's just a game. You don't want to be a scaredy-cat, do you?" I felt hesitant to refuse the monster. He was my only friend, the person I idolized. If I said no, he might leave me and disappear in the morning light. So I played along. But the games pricked at my skin and scoured me with feelings of guilt and uncertainty.

One day I asked the monster a question that had been pulling out the threads that were holding my heart together. "Are you sure this is just a game? I don't think I like it anymore." The monster stopped slowly, and I felt his eyes hold mine. I froze. I had never noticed how menacingly those eyes could burn, how sinister those slitted pupils were when they stared at me. He had fangs that I had never noticed before, and his claws could easily rip me apart. "Rebecca. If you tell anyone about this game, both of us will get in trouble. I could go to jail. Would you like that?"

The monster continued, thinking he had calmed my fears as usual. But as the shadows slipped across my skin, I felt trapped. This was not my friend. This was a monster, in my bedroom. In my house! I felt the urge to come screaming to my parents' next door, begging for help. But as I looked up, I saw iron bars crisscross my bedroom door. Cold air seeped from the windowsill and stole the breath from my lungs. I was trapped, indeed.

I pushed the monster's claws away and leaped for the door. I saw light underneath the door, and I scrambled for air. But the shadows were suffocating, and I was drowning in a web of bottled up emotions and dusty secrets. I refused to turn off the lights at night. Doing so would surrender to the darkness, and the soft shadows in the corners of my room would morph into ugly witnesses as the monster trespassed my bedroom and my body. I still keep my bathroom light on to this day.

But the monster was slowly beginning to become immune to the light. I would see his menacing smile from across the dinner table, drool and spittle dripping from his lengthy fangs.

Page 4

His claws would dig into my thighs in the car, nicking my skin. My family members couldn't see anything wrong with the monster. He was a nurturing uncle, a doting babysitter, and incredibly kind to children. What they didn't realize was that this sickly sweetness oozing off of him was not kindness. Sometimes I felt there were times when someone could see the sour odor radiating off of him. I would stare at them from behind my bars, silently begging for someone to see the monster, to save me from his clutches. But no one came to my rescue. I hurled my prayers to the cold moon and watched as the stars shatter across the night sky in an empty reply.

I realized that no one was going to help me. No one would believe me. That was when I met a new friend, one who slowly squeezed any fight out of my veins. She had always been two steps behind the monster, a column of pallid moonlight glinting in her eyes. Depression was always

lurking behind me, and finally, she latched her teeth into my skull and I felt myself beginning to sink into her arms. When the monster was done with me and sound asleep, I sobbed between my teeth and drained the life out of myself.

I found that cutting was a way to bleed my emotions through my skin, and numb myself so that I would feel nothing but the sting of a knife. I painted wounds across my skin, and as I felt my skin harden into scars, I felt the same occur to my heart. If I couldn't control how the monster would hurt me, I would hurt myself to know that I could control something in my life. I started staying outside all day because inside was worse. I would wander up and down my neighborhood, watching the wind rustle rumors amongst the trees, and as leaves spiraled down around me. I would climb trees and look down at the ground and wonder if I jumped, would that end this all?

My mouth was sewn shut and I felt myself lying all the time. "I'm fine," was a cold stone that catapulted at people, and I felt their believing eyes stab me like broken glass. I stopped caring about grades. I stopped caring about family, or church, or God. Who were these people to me if none of them could help me? Even when I lifted my tongue to temptingly whisper the words, "I need help," I knew they wouldn't believe me.

Page 5

Monsters aren't real, they would shout. You're going crazy, they would whisper. But monsters are real, and they only needed to look to their right or at our family portrait to know that the threat was right under their noses. I felt crazy. Maybe I was just overreacting. Maybe it was all my fault for letting the monster into my life.

My parents pushed me into therapy, as they sensed the blanket of thunderclouds that suffocated me but couldn't understand the source or severity of the storm. I spoke with my therapist, but it was all a facade, an imaginary wisp of steam that would only help so much with my frostbitten heart.

I became bitter, and I spiraled down to the point when I swallowed 13,000 milligrams of ibuprofen. I was tired of shoving my feelings into the drawers of my soul, only to have the monster claw them out and swallow them whole in front of my eyes. My life didn't matter anymore and my secrets were too big to live. In my letter to my family, I wrote all of the pain I had felt over the years. I showed them the monster, and I was willing to die rather than have to tell them the truth and be shunned. I closed my eyes and waited for death.

The next thing I know was waking up in a hospital. I felt my blurred parents touching my arms, the scars and scabs of the truth written out across my wrists in an agonizing documentary of my life. I felt a single tear roll over my eyelid, as I realized that not only had I lived, but my family had read the letter. Here would come the tirade of disbelief...but instead of the anger or hate I expected, I felt love.

“Are you okay?”

A few tears led to more, and a tsunami poured over my hospital bed. Years of bottled up emotions and silent tears sprung forth, speaking for themselves at last. Before I broke down, I felt as if this time I could speak the truth. But that was years ago.

Page 6

Here we are today, and my pencil transformed into a sword that dissipated my monster. My words have morphed into arrows that pierced the silent enemy's heart, and the paper that spelled out the truth tore down the shadows in my room. But 1 in 6 girls has experienced some form of sexual assault. That's why I'm writing this, and sharing it with you. Because I know that someone out there will be able to read this and realize that they too, can fight their monster.

It will be gritty, and sand will sting your wounds, and people will try to scratch the truth and taint it, but they never can. Once you share the words, they can't be sucked back. I'm not going

to squeeze my words and my truth into a more easy package to digest, because the truth about sexual assault is painful. It's painful for me to share, it's painful for you to hear, and it's painful for those around me.

But I know that I am willing to take the risk of being ignored, shamed, or dismissed if I can help just one person. Because that one person matters. Our stories, as a whole, matter. It's what makes us diverse and opens our eyes and hearts to see the world from a different perspective. I matter because I am Rebecca Smith, and this is my story of sexual assault. And despite an army of support and light on my side, I sometimes am still afraid of the dark.

And you know what? That's okay.

I have always been afraid of the dark. I don't know exactly when it started...