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About 5,200 words

Daughter/Always Afraid
by Paula Wagner

A lot of things scared me about my 4-year old. Most of it came out of her mouth. Nothing scared me so much as when she went skipping through the house telling herself to think happy thoughts. Well, she wasn't so much telling as singing.

And I wasn't so much scared as perplexed. Both, when I thought about it. Why would a 4-year old remind herself in a happy little sing-song to think happy thoughts? I searched my mind and logic. I thought about preschool lessons. Nope. Couldn't see it fitting in there. Why would the teachers need to tell toddlers - they called them Ginkoes) that? What common experience - depression - would call for that advice?

Well maybe someone could, but I couldn't imagine it. And I was around enough as a housewife with two kids (and one on the way in about 7 months) to say pretty safely that I'd never heard the reruns of cartoons she watched on Nick Jr. or the local PBS channel teaching that lesson, singing the song think happy thoughts. (True my husband might have made a better houseparent, if he didn't have to work for our living style, but I was decent enough to feel fairly certain that Ni Hao, Kai-lan and Caillou never sang the think happy thoughts song.)

But she said other things. She asked me "Mommy, what does 'alone' mean?" My bored, tired (of kids calling my name every second) brain could only summon (was only willing to mutter) a "Hm?" And she went on to answer herself.

"It means when you all by yourself," she said. It shook me a little, but not as much as the way she glanced into the deepening blue sky and trees of our 1/4 acre backyard and what she said next.

"I don't want to be in the dark," she said. "I might go in the dark and disappear. I want to stay with my momma and daddy." Though her words gravely frightened me, I did not take them seriously, and I should have. There was still time then.

But her words certainly scared me. For a long time afterward, I was afraid – like the time she sat in a corner of the micro suede couch of brown blah and looked into a very similar sky and trees in the backyard. She seemed to be looking at something in particular. And the anxiety in a 3-year-old's face was almost as chilling as the words that went with it.

“There's a monster out there,” she said. I think she said more after that – something like ‘I don't want it to get me.’ I looked for it, (Her behavior – the certainty in it – convinced me that the impossible might actually be there menacing her). She stopped me.

“You can't see him (not ‘it’),” she clarified. I heard exasperation in her voice. And tension █

Then this year at Christmas she said that the monster was at my parents house (Her maternal grandparents and her uncle, my only brother, live there). She was looking out their windows this time – not ours. But the time of day and deepening blue was right; it was the same. My parents’ blinds cast her face partially in shade.

“Do you want to talk to him?” She asked me, and didn't sound scared. She handed me the lime green animal (Toy companies are being gypped by their public relations people, if they believe that puke color is friendly. I think it was supposed to be a caterpillar). Her ‘grammee and grampee’ (They – actually, my mom called me and asked me or told me that that would be their unique grandparent designation. As if I could make my kids say whatever) gave her 22-month old brother the caterpillar that morning. It had several settings, but only

two I recognized (ABC and a musical note that I assumed meant songs) and buttons made of primary colors. The letters switches made weird, robotic, ambiguous sounds. The clanging purported to assist an age range of children with by phonics. Pushing 'R' made an 'err' sound, 'A' ('eh') and 'Y' ('yuh'). But **putting them together brought a creature into existence that sounded made up.** I heard nothing like the word 'ray', and my ear couldn't pick out any words that came out of the thing. She handed it to me, and her words ("You can talk to him with this") made a foggy observation stark.

Kiddy Ouija board, I thought.

I say that because when I think of the caterpillar Ouija, I always remember my brother playing with it – trying to show my daughter how fun it could be to use. He was sitting on a dark leather couch next to a lamp. He'd laid his Droid phone and black and red-covered thriller to the side on the table beside the lamp. It was Christmas day, and we were doing what my parents' family does in their household – relaxing and watching movies. We were on pause until action in the kitchen resumed again. Soon, we would straggle over and either warm up leftovers from dinner or make sandwiches with the amazingly fresh cold cuts and potato bread my parents were using that visit.

Gene had the thing on his lap, and my daughter stood at his feet. She watched him doubtfully as he pressed the keys. I watched her watching him for a while before settling back into the romance novel I was reading from my Nook. Sunlight was dwindling, and I felt the wonderful heat of it shining through the glass of the patio doors to my left as it bounced off the falling snow. I also felt

the pressure of getting in as much reading as I could before the kids got too restless. The sun was sinking, and I hated artificial light.

He pulled me from a deep sleep –my brother. He was trying to get my attention. I was thirty-two, and he was twenty-nine, and he was still my little brother with chocolate eyes like saucers sitting on my chest and blowing my eyelashes, so that I would wake up and watch Gummi Bears, the Smurfs or (uck!) The Littles. The only good thing about waking up was being charged with making half a loaf of toasted bread with peanut butter for the two of us to demolish at the kitchen table. The only good thing about being pulled away from my Nora Roberts novel was seeing how excited my daughter was about her new toy.

That's when I saw him pressing keys. I was surprised and impressed to find that the caterpillar was a functional speaker. It could, in a manner of speaking, talk. Remember? 'Err-Eh-Yuh'? 'Ray'? Well, that's what the thing was supposed to say when you typed the 'R,' 'A,' and the 'Y'.

It all made me think of a Ouija board because I had just seen Paranormal Activity. The movie was part of it, but the other part was that a Ouija board speaks back. It's meant to speak back to you, isn't? That is, once you connect with the (or, 'a') spirit or something on the other side? You push around a little triangle or whatever it is on the board (I wouldn't know; I never had one and didn't believe in using them) and the little triangle moves back, tells you something.

My daughter asked me if I wanted to talk to her caterpillar, and then I had some idea of how to get the ball rolling.

Before she started saying these kinds of things, my fears were human. They lived on Planet Normal and orbited around the sun of Reality. When I asked her if she loved me, she would answer "Yeeees." It was the kind of unhesitating and sweet baby drawl that probably sounded impossibly poignant when played back on tape years later. She gave the same answer when asked whether she loved her daddy.

"Yeeees." Maybe bigger and louder with a curve of her lips that didn't show her tiny, gapped baby teeth and an eye roll of delight at the thought of him.

Daddy was the nice one. The good parent. On the other hand, she had to think when I asked her whether she loved her brother. She tilted her head and rolled open eyes, weighing something. Whether to tell the truth? Whether she knew the truth? I don't know. But then she would give a grudging and frustratingly matter-of-fact "Yes." No drawl.

I guess that isn't scary. My heart jumped when she said that she wouldn't mind another brother – if he was white (instead of brown). That's probably because we're what you might call black – brown-skinned folk anyway. She had a grandma that was white, and an aunt that married in and maybe even a great-great grandma that was, too. The fear that this thinking generated went hand-in-hand with her angry yell "I don't like my hair. I don't want to be like you!" Again, it probably upset me, because I have curly (some might say natural) hair

that I wear in a short afro that I pick out and sometimes pull away from my face with a silver, many-teethed comb.

"I want straight hair," she declared one day after preschool began. "Like Sophia and Taylor. I cringed at her explanation. A blonde and brunette with sweet natures (generally) and skin much lighter than my baby's own sweet gold. I promised myself I would do what I read about one time. I'd get a carton of brown eggs to go with the white ones we usually buy. I'd call her over and show her what happened when I cracked first one into a bowl and then another. I'd thought about chocolate and regular milk. But they didn't taste alike at all. What would I do? Point to one and say 'That's milk'? Point to the other and say 'And that's milk too'? I could see us both shrugging. In any event, I didn't keep that promise to myself.

Maybe that's why the monsters came.

Before that I woke up in the middle of the night with her daddy's back to me. I felt like I was alone and that I had no one to talk to me who would understand. I was escaping nightmares. Will she start hearing other voices and advice above mine and become another person? Will she separate from us and move to another world we could not understand? Will she take up roots there and become immovable, frozen in the darkness she so feared as a child?

The differences between my two types of fear were like the difference between global and galactic. One is hard and touchable. The other is...unstrung.

She became preoccupied with darkness. Her dad told me that she asked him about being alone in the dark, too. And then one night when I was putting her to bed (as usual, her dad had put her to bed – tried – already several times; and I was the enforcer coming to get hardcore with the baby girl) she asked me about her nightlight. I was wearily dismissive. Cold. I got that way by Wednesday every week, no matter how I tried. She was at the age where it was hard not to exist in an extreme state of myself. I ended up being over-emotional, and her acting out turned me into a cruel grinch or an angry hulk. The other extreme was distance that heard everything as whining. Then I didn't see her angelic face and hear her sweet voice.

Instead I saw the crust on her dry feet (the fault of winter and my unwillingness to pull out a bottle of Johnson's baby lotion and give her delicate skin an extra layer of protection more than once a day). I judged her for the lint in her curly hair (those soft leftovers came from the countless and hated blankets, pants or shirts she had started using to hide her own soft curls – 'head wraps,' we called them with disgust). And I rolled my eyes about the ridiculous layering that made a girl who couldn't have weighed not much more than 30 pounds soaking wet into a peewee football player.

"What?" I asked, hating the irritation in my voice, the curl of my lip, the line I felt creasing the skin between my eyebrows. I paused in the middle of reconstructing the bedding, and my hand went to my hip. She mumbled (she knew I was mad, I thought), and I could only make out something vague again –

about the light. I turned to look and reluctantly headed over toward the nightlight. It had no cover. The clear bulb was naked. Its 7 watts of light seemed incredibly yellow and bright. I wondered if she was worried about something that had stopped to visit and made a web since the last time momma took a moment to vacuum. She had a gate – a tall one recently – that made it hard to get into and out of the room. And honestly, the things she did in there sometimes made my skin crawl.

It wasn't what she did – throwing all of her clothes from every dresser drawer onto the floor or onto her teddy bears and mixing everything (books, dolls, cards, litter, etcetera) together in piles or stuffing them into the plastic, pastel stacking bins that were supposed to help create a sense of organization on a stacked cart. Her daddy and I agreed that none of that was unusual or dysfunctional. It just never sat right with me.

I wanted to clean it up. But I was torn up inside about, because I it fell to me to do it. I should have to. Time didn't allow me to do it often, and it never stayed clean more than an hour. It was hard for a person like me – a person who literally stands over her children with a vacuum hose ready to catch dripping glitter or dough or beans as her children try to enjoy 'unstructured' craft time.

A place for everything and everything in its place. I don't know where I heard that, but it only worked before I had kids. In our small apartment in the city where the entire place – kitchen, living room, bathroom and bedroom – could have fit into our suburban bedroom.

Kneeling down, I winced at the webbing I saw sticking to the bulb and the beige night light base.

Could be worse, I thought with some relief. Glancing over my shoulder, I wondered, but did not say aloud what I was thinking: 'Spider?' Instead, I took a tiny bullet and swabbed the mess with my finger and killed one itsy bitsy spider with my thumb as it tried to make a run for it. I tried not to give anything away as I swiveled in a squat and rubbed the yucky residue against the blue cotton over my right thigh. She mumbled something else about light, and I surged to my feet with a sigh.

That night I moved furniture around. I tried moving the night light (it normally peeked out from the lower left edge of her dresser drawer as you faced it) to a place where it had more exposure.

Once I was totally satisfied, she was confused. Light bathed most of the walls and the ceiling in light. But my baby pointed out something that made me jump. When the sun is below the horizon and artificial orangey light is washing over walls and ceiling, there are shadows. Tall, strange shadows that connect to things round and edged. Fast-moving creatures like you, but more humanoid than human. I held my breath on a scream, and forced myself to freeze so I wouldn't turn and let my baby see my eyes.

I heard something about a shadow once (I mean heard about it on a Stephen King audiobook, Full Dark, No Stars). It was one that was taller and thinner than its owner, a fat and dirty Santa Claus of a man called Elvid. The man had thick hands that I imagined with hot dog fingers, but his shadow had a witch's

bony sticks sprouting from its palms. I was pretty sure that the man casting the sinister shadow in the sinking sun is a 'thing' and that the thing's sobriquet is an anagram.

This didn't strike me as a demon shadow. It was worse, because it was my daughter and me scaring me half to death – our shadows, the way my daughter talked about it with such breathless apprehension and because I knew she was right. The setup could not and did not stand.

I moved everything back, and though I didn't know; I knew. It was the monsters in the dark we had been talking about and trying to escape yet again.

I had a little freak-out when that caterpillar – the Ouija for toddlers – ended up where it wasn't supposed to be. I can remember taking it out of the gift bag I had put it in from the car, one with Tiffany & Co. blue ribbed ribbon (with a popped balloon at the end) tied to the rolled cream handles. We went to the first birthday of family friend's child at Dragon Court in China Town (His name is Bear – Austin Bear, and his parents doled out gift bags with carved crystal bears with hearts in the middle in Tiffany blue boxes and bear-shaped jars with angled openings that made the twist tops seem like slanted top hats – cute right?). After the party, I piled some of the weird crap that had piled up in the car during holiday road trips – shoes, socks and toys – into that goodie bag. And that toy. The caterpillar Ouija board.

I brought the bag into the house during my baby's first day back to The Education Grove, her preschool (where she attends Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from nine o'clock to noon). It was after Jacob (my 22-month old) and I

dropped her off and picked up some things at the grocery store, but before we had a morning snack (Classic Lays with French onion dip from our marketing adventure) and headed back to get her. The sun was shining on a frigid day with perfect blue sky above – beautiful. The bed was messy (nothing new), and I sat the bag at the end of the striped comforter made of many blues and a couple shades of green. I took the caterpillar out and laid it beside my laptop, gingerly. When I saw it later, the bag was on the half door breaking up our galley kitchen and dining room. I tried to shake off the clenching my heart did when I saw its ostensibly cheerful, smiling face and blue eyes (they're dotted with white) peeking up from the bag like a reminder.

It was a warning I felt when I saw it again. Something changed fundamentally when I did. It was stuffed back inside the gold favor bag with the white rolled straps and the Tiffany blue ribbon dripping down the half door. Its wood gleamed in the winter morning sunlight. The popped shreds of the blue balloon (not Tiffany, but close) was still choked off by the knotted end of the ribbon. I needed to polish the floors, I recognized when my eyes fell to the rubber carcass. Something had shifted before that, though. When I saw the caterpillar.

Something pulled away from land and left me on an island alone. Or, maybe I should say I was on another planet populated with aliens and different rules for living – like Predators (the Adrien Brody episode that tried to finish off the loose ends of the one Arnold Schwarzenegger started. Same music, a stand-in for the girl from Guatemala, etcetera). Maybe, in the new world that I found

myself in when I faced the caterpillar Ouija in a place I had not left it; the sun would not set and the water would do whatever had unsettled Brody and the stand-in (I never did figure that out).

After I took the caterpillar out of the bag and moved it back to the place beside my laptop where I was determined it would stay (its blue eyes stared a blank challenge up at me – until I covered those white-dotted single quotes with my palm); my baby came to me. She patted my right thigh the way babies do. She had taught Jacob to do the same, repetitively.

"Momma, come help. Come help." She sounded urgent, but the patting and the following demands were always the same. They were urgent about nothing, and the underlying need was the same; they wanted my attention all the time. They winked to get it. They said I love you to get it. They sang songs and my name (Well, 'momma') to get it. And they tapped their little hands and little fingers on my thigh or my forearm to get it. She took me to the half door where the gold gift bag was still perched. I licked my lips and let out a caught breath when I realized that my eyes were playing tricks on me and the caterpillar Ouija was not sticking up from its depths. I walked around the door, following her on irritated auto-pilot.

"Look, momma. Help." My little, pigeon-toed angel squatted down effortlessly. I followed more slowly, feeling weakness rush up with a tingling tremble of hot energy through my skin and face. If the doorbell had rung right then, if the microwave timer had gone off, if the then napping Jacob had

awakened from sleep with his customary cry ('Daaaaddy'); I might have had a heart attack.

There was a new carcass at the end of the Tiffany blue ribbon, and it was a plush teddy bear (I called it grey, while she called her bear brown) with blue at its paws and feet and a fondly-chewed snout. Around his sewn eyes dark, cartoonish shapes had been drawn. I was appalled to see that my right hand had lifted from my thigh without letting me know it was going to. My left hand clenched over my left knee as my right hand's index finger trembled toward those things. I frowned hard enough to feel pull the skin above my brows taut. My lips thrust out and up toward my nose. Partly because the dark ink (it was blue I found once I rubbed the wet, stiffening fur) scrubbed into his coat made shapes like single quotes. They overwhelmed his benignly lifeless brown eyes. Partly because of something else I saw. I bit my lip.

"Momma, why did he do that?" My daughter asked me, and I bit down harder. It was the word 'he' that did it.

"What do you mean?" I was inhaling as I spoke, and it made my voice thin. I hoped she would hear me and understand, because I couldn't ask again.

"Draw on him? Draw on his eyes." She stretched out the last word plaintively with a distressed pout. I collapsed back onto my butt, making a ring around my knees as they fell open with arms. My right hand clasped my left fingers tightly. I didn't think I could hold the pose long. My eyes did not move away from her teddy bear. I had not wrangled it from the ribbon, and I thought she would ask me to do it soon. I hoped I would be able to. She folded down

with her little legging-encased legs and bare feet folded to her right side. Her tiny fingers worried the ribbon until I couldn't take it anymore – seeing it anymore.

There, on her tiny little hands were smears of what I was sure was dried blue ink.

I bent over, though it hurt my back (having 2 kids under the age of 5 and one on the way will do that to you), reached my hands under her little arms (She was layered as usual, red tee shirt with the blue-striped likeness of that dog on the cartoon that she never watched (Blue's Clues, my husband put in when I tried to describe this all to him later) and pulled the little nothing of her in for a hug. She melted – became spineless and lost the bones in her legs and arms. She trusted me.

I realized we had a psychic connection on the day she was born. She looked into my eyes, and I could see that she was from Heaven right away. I could see that she had seen God and was too wise to be mine right away. I felt my eyes prick as she tipped her head back like the notion of strain was foreign to the tendons there. I smoothed back the soft fluff of her hair. It was black, but the sun showed you the mysterious red she had inherited from me. Who knows who I inherited my highlights from. She was a licorice strip of gold with glossy brown eyes, curly lashes, dimples and perfect little pink lips.

She and her brother were the kinds of angels who made people stop us in the grocery store to mostly scare them and make their natural animation dry up. They wanted to say aloud that they had noticed the same things that awed me a million times a day about my kids. Oh, look at their deep brown eyes! That

perfect brown skin! Look at that face! (This could mean anything. If it was Jacob, it might be a reference to the expression he made – mostly in the presence of women – with his chin down, looking up from beneath his lashes and grinning so that the funny little dimple near his left eye peeked out). With my daughter it was probably just an exclamation at how pretty she was.). She was beautiful.

I read in a magazine for expecting moms that hugged babies are secure babies. I didn't hug her enough, but I only remembered that when I was hugging her. As I hugged her that way, promising myself to untie the noose from her defaced teddy bear; I almost convinced myself that the unruly nightfall I felt coming was the result of stress. I untwisted the Tiffany ribbon from Teddy bear's throat and pressed him into my daughter's back. The first three fingers of her right hand went into her mouth, and she smiled around them as she turned to take her prize.

"Go watch your cartoons," I told her. "I'll be right back." I went to start folding the three baskets of clean clothes in my bedroom. I was still folding (and felt like I would never finish. It was like a nasty trick – the Devil putting just one more shirt or sock or pair of undies at the bottom of the basket that needed putting away) when her daddy got home.

"Hey, babeeeee," I heard him call out from the mudroom. I'd already been alerted to his arrival by loud-mouthed parakeets, cockatiels and our single green-cheeked conure. Grundy, the conure, could say 'Hey, babeeeee,' too. And he did whenever the garage door rose in the evening.

I was folding by the comforting, orangey light of his bedside lamp. When he came into the room wearing his usual business attire – khakis and a button-down shirt – he gave me an uncertain look.

"Everything okay?" He asked. I thought he wanted to get the night off to a positive start but wasn't sure that I felt the same. My brows rose as my lips rolled into an unfortunate line. My lips slipped down as I continued to stare at the monotonous, frustrating work.

"Yup," I said, feeling unnatural as my lips sucked closed on everything ugly that wanted to gush out.

"Oh. Okay. Good." He smiled brightly, and I nodded. I kept on nodding as he turned his back on me to take off his pants and belt and shirt to hang. [come back to this]

My daughter drew a picture one day. She told me it was a self-portrait (it glowed with yellow crayon sun hair, wore a blue suit that she called a dress and had a simple blue smile to match. She later altered that friendly curve with red, cage-like wire), and her daddy thought it was a clown. I hung it on the fridge over another, older one. That same day, Jacob was almost killed. Twice.

Well.... I have to admit that I put the fold-out stepping stool in a precarious place – leaning against our old, plasticky cabinet next to my little boy (he was following me as I pulled curtains against night shouting out 'dark!' every time I whipped another pair of drapes together). I was pulling the kitchen curtains in when I first heard my daughter wander in...and the stepping stool hit the floor. When I whirled around, I was sure the thing had crashed down on him.

I don't know if it hit him or not. The stool was there on the yellowing linoleum floor. Jacob's sweet brown toes were curled down and in. Maybe they'd been hit, or just escaped being smashed. I lifted the stool and moved it to a safer – albeit still **iffy** – position (it was pressed more fully against the side of the bank of cabinets then) and tried to hurry. My daughter, who left after Jacob was almost hit (she did it with a little laugh. Kids are always thinking that something is funny, and their laughter convinces other little folks to forget fear or pain and laugh too), came back. She had a little kiddy keyboard with her. The primary colors and black and white keys faced us. She was smiling as the stepping stool flew down toward her brother. My eyes jumped to her. I blinked away quickly – as soon as I realized what I was thinking.

In the picture I'd just put on the fridge, there was a sad little blue ghost of a guy looking unhappy and hovering in the upper left-hand corner of the page. He didn't belong in the same drawing with my daughter was my first thought. I asked her was that her brother. She was always drawing her brother as detached from the family, smaller and less detailed. I figured it took her a long time to accept that he was staying after he was born; it would take some time to realize she loved the little guy that she drew as a withered twig while she drew the rest of us vividly and with adoration. But my daughter told me when I asked her was it Jacob that it was not. She didn't say who it was.

I was thinking when I blinked up at my daughter that maybe she...or whoever it was – the monster maybe – didn't want Jacob around. It took me a

long time to grasp the implications of my **slapdash** **explanation** **[right words**
here?].

We were tag-teaming – her daddy and I both trying to put her to bed one night when she had plenty of reasons to talk at full daytime voice, reason why she must come out of her room (She had to pee, she needed an extra hug, that kind of thing).

The lamp we got her, one with a wooden base and post made of blocks with letters and numbers and a shade with painted bears and similar symbols had been returned to working order recently. It was never broken per se, but we needed a splitter, if we wanted to turn it on at night and run the tall black heater too. We kept it in her room that extended from the back of the house. She hated the red light (she called it an ‘eye,’ and the anthropomorphism always disconcerted me) that blinked on when it did its work. But her room was an island that stayed cold in winter and hot in summer. She went to the potty. I gave her a hug and was about to kiss her cheek when she started pointing at mine.

"What's that?" She asked. It looked to me like she was asking what was I – ? – as in what had I become, because she wasn't seeing me. My take on it morphed several times in milliseconds as my heart stopped and squeezed and restarted. But I was not through being **shaken up**. As I pulled away without full, conscious thought, I began to see that she was not pointing at me...but at the shadows being cast.

"That's a shadow," her tired Daddy said, bored and irritated and tired. I jerked around in time to see the shadows move. Mine moved down the hall. Others disengaged as her daddy moved to put her back in her bed. Shadows again.

I'd seen winter shadows like these before. I saw one of the more interesting specimens on the walk back from the fitness center as it was beginning to snow. It was about seven o'clock on a January morning, and the morning traffic was really beginning to go. There was some light, but not enough to keep me from jerking around suddenly when paranoia told me that I ought to check and see if I was being followed by one of the bums in town.

We have at least one regular homeless guy. I actually saw him sleeping on the ground in his clothes near a softball field in a park behind our house one summer. He keeps busy from what I can see of him pacing up and down the main four-lane road that runs in-front-of our house. Another time I saw a man on a bike too small for him. He reminded me of a clown with all the colorful mess he was wearing. He had a hood, too. There's something sinister about men in hoods. It gave me a jolt to see him coming down the empty street toward me as I was walking to the gym for my spinning class. It was something about the slow way he was wobbling that too-small bike down the road. And the hood. A hooded man came close to stalking me at the trail where I ran when it was fall and still decently warm.

Hooded shirts and sweaters became a favorite after my daughter started to hate her hair and to love the head wraps that her daddy and I outlawed 'during the day'.

My shadow went skating by me that chilly January day as I tripped through the powered snow that an almighty hand had sifted onto the cement sidewalk. It was pinned helplessly to the headlight of a passerby's car and moved

briskly through morning light. I'm not good at comparisons, though I learn well with most visual aids (not graphs, goodness please, not a god doggone graph!). I think that shadow was probably twice my size, and it stretched in the brightness like something out of Dickens' A Christmas Carol coming to warn me to change my ways.

"It's not a shadow," my daughter disagreed presently. She was being tucked beneath her homemade comforter. (Her daddy's mom and her daddy's brother, Ali had used what were, to my mind, 'Navajo colors' to make the Christmas gift for her and tied on the large bows of fringe themselves). Her daddy didn't answer. I just watched my shadow (I actually moved my head to make sure the tall ribbon topped with a globe-shaped orb was 'mine') until her daddy turned out the lamp on her dresser. Suddenly my shadow was small and lifelike and much closer to me as it hung from the hallway ceiling. So was his, as he stepped over her gate to join me on the walk back to our bedroom.

"I love you, Mommy and Daddy," she said, quietly. We both whispered back in our own different ways that we loved her too.

I couldn't keep it to myself forever. I had to do something, and I told her daddy.

"I think I should try to talk to it. Maybe we should try together." He wanted to know if I was...sure about everything.

"What do you mean?" I asked, running the words together. He hesitated before answering in a tone the hedged.

"I mean.... Don't you think that all children generally go through strange things? Get afraid of monsters – ? –"

"– So what? Do I look like I give a good goddamn about what other kids are going through? I don't care if they're putting their hands on snowy TVs and talking to poltergeists in the microwave! I'm talking about –"

"– I know. I don't care either. That's not what I'm saying. I'm asking you.... Look, you're taking care of these kids all day –"

"– Mmhm." I crossed my arms. I was not appeased by the acknowledgement – if that is what he was trying to do; I felt patronized (whether he was trying to make me feel that way or not).

"Well, it's hard to be with these kids all day –"

"– I know that," I said, and the stress I put on the first word broke it into two whiny pieces that grated on me as much as I wanted them to grate on him.

"I know. But there is no monster, babe. You can't talk to it with that caterpillar." He pointed at it, but I didn't look. I couldn't. It was like the time the Mexican troupe of workers came out and cut down what was referred to in our contract with the tree care company as our 'large Elm tree in the S-W corner of

front yard'. As the largest part of it collapsed to the ground, it boomed through my house and my body. The impact gripped my heart and sent echoes of that shock washing through my body. His casual mention of the kiddy Ouija caterpillar and the fear that it startled out of me froze me in the same way that old tree giving way stopped me mid-step. My lips smacked together. I felt my tongue scraping the roof of my mouth. There was something heavy there, like psychic peanut butter.

“Okay,” I said, “I will admit.... I know how crazy it sounds. But you’re not here. I mean...you haven’t heard it –”

“– I have to work – ! –”

“– That’s not where my mind’s at! I know that!” I took a deep breath. “I’m talking about.... You have to hear her say this stuff herself –”

“– You mean...? Are you talking about – ? –”

“– Our daughter! You have to hear her talk about them. It. Him.” I whispered the last word and took my hands off my hips. “She gave that thing to me and asked me if I wanted to talk to it. Him!” I will never forget the perplexed look he gave me then. His lips twisted. There was pain in every line my words (no – my emphaticalness) etched into his face.

“Honey, she’s four years old.” Each word – after the endearment – was a hammer of judgment. Each one made me flinch. I felt doubt then. I was a writer (or at least, I aspired to write). My imagination accounted for many things – why I saw the functionality of an Ouija board in a toddler’s toy caterpillar, why I could shrink down and step inside my daughter’s fears when she shared them with me.

Stress could indeed explain the other things – the caterpillar having moved from its place beside my laptop and back to the half door. Hell, maybe I never even put it beside my laptop...until I actually put it there. Maybe it didn't stay put the second time, so much as staying put once I actually put it where I intended to put it. There is no getting around faith – with God or the vivid imagination that it takes to suspend disbelief. Sometimes that faith is so strong that it feels like fact. Schizophrenics have deep faith in that the conspiratorial notion that the recipe on the cake box is sending them messages, too. That is to say, their belief in the insanity that marks their **madness/derangement** is really no different from the flights of fancy and mental pressure that might make someone believe his fears (or his child's) are a matter of reality.

But then my doubt made me angry. My cholera flared briefly until a particular recollection stole its necessary oxygen.

"Momma, that's not heaven," my daughter said with no particular emphasis. "That's not heaven." Emphasis on not. She said it in response to my warning that she was about to be sent to her room (the last resort as far as a location for time-outs). I thought of this exchange and did not share it with her daddy. Never had been able to. Instead, I did what I always do. I sank into the chilling thought. There was no way I could talk about it and share the way I felt.

"Heaven," I asked. "Heaven? What does that mean?"

"I don't know," she said, in that quick way she had that made me think she was worried about telling me the truth. Like she realized it might not be wise.
That was my paranoia, of course.

There was a pause. Then,

"Heaven's not my room," she said. Her room. The island that likes hellish hot or cruel cold. It was the room she said "Momma left her babies in. In the dark." (On many days during my final pregnancy, I over-napped my children into the late afternoon. When she called me on it that way, I rarely felt more evil).

Later I realized why he wouldn't have understood or even wanted to comprehend what I thought our daughter's words meant. Her daddy isn't a Believer. He isn't religious either, but that's not it; it's because he doesn't know who God is.

He doesn't need to know or believe or recognize man's structure for morality to know why her words chill me.

I say he is, and I assume he still is – her father. After the night of the second blizzard in January.... After walking out the front door without a coat and carrying two of my children, current events and I parted ways.

Her daddy said sometimes, when he got a certain feeling, “With these kids all day, I don't know how you stay sane.” (I thought of it as him 'feeling charitable', but who's to say what it was?). Deadpan, I would answer, “I don't.”

And I didn't.

I was always afraid that my failings – my emotional distance, the coldness I could slip into, my impatience with others' needs – would ruin her soul and steal her away.

But it came out the other way around when I went out into the snow without a coat and Jacob in my arms. He – it – the monster came to live in our home, started popping up in her drawings, and beckoned me (through my daughter) to communicate with him.

There was always that part of myself that said things like, ‘Stop trying to make me look stupid.’ Or, ‘Whatever you may think, I'm intelligent, rational and logical.’ My cool-headed self didn't say these things, because she didn't technically believe in them. Nothing could ‘make’ me do anything, Cool-headed me said to Hot-headed me. My daughter's daddy said the same thing to Hot-headed me, and I would wish Cool-headed me would've kept her thoughts to herself (or, at least, away from him).

Hot-headed and Cool-headed me agreed that her daddy wasn't smarter than me. Well, while he was more skilled at some things; he was never a see-the-

forest-for-the-trees man. No man is (I think I learned this as an anthropological fact in an undergraduate class.). They're good at parallel parking and the games section of the LSAT. I, of course, was horrible at parallel parking – before I learned the trick of pulling until my passenger window lined up with the back windows of the car I would park behind before cutting the wheel. And though I took the Law School Admission Test as many times as I took the bar exam, I eventually passed the former.

“Something’s happening,” I said. A crack in my voice split both words. “When I’m talking to you, I feel crazy...and I don’t. Because even now – when you’re here, and the lights are all on – I know that it was real. That...primitive feelings you have at night, like normal rules of life have buckled and nothing’s holding it all in place anymore.... Well, my belt is busted now. Bad things can be anywhere. You don’t have to believe it.”

“Well, let’s try it.” He gestured toward the caterpillar. “Turn it on. Let’s see if it talks to us!”

“Look! What makes you think – ? – No! I know it won’t work with your attitude.”

“I thought there was no buckle or belt or whatever! But there’s a hard and fast rule of how I’ve got to feel when we talk to it? Or it won’t talk back? That’s why it won’t talk back? Not because I’m right, but somehow (bizarrely) because you are? Convenient.” He sounded like me, and I didn’t want to talk about it anymore. It came to me, in my silence, that that’s not what it was. I had thought

it wouldn't speak because of his bad attitude, but a nasty little possibility occurred to me.

It won't speak, because it doesn't want you to know. This is just between the monster and me...and our daughter.

But I did speak to it. Unfortunately, it spoke back.

I pushed the sliding yellow button over until it snagged the letter symbols, “ABC”. I slid the other one over from the filled circle that means “Off” (for some reason). And the kiddy Caterpillar Ouija came on. It (he said that it was a she, but **monsters/demons** aren’t humans...or even animals; they **are/have** no gender) told me it had a name.

You may call me Nelfla, it said, keys tapping on their own. It spoke in broken, **retarded** fragments of sound with a ruined, mechanical **voice**. You will appreciate my **nickname/pseudonym**, I think. It answered my only real question too:

I live in the eternal night of things forgotten – subjects and people – and I came to your daughter because you left her alone in the dark. She didn’t at first, but now she wants me here. She warned you. Well, I plan to stay until all of your souls are forgotten and extinguished.

The second blizzard started the day before she turned to me with eyes that were bright and smiling in a way that made them look like ink bubbling over fire. She was pointing to the monster in her drawing – the one without a face and slashes of violent blue crayon for eyes and a cape – and telling me that it was her.

Her eyes wouldn't look away from me as I tried to pretend that I hadn't thought she meant to say something unnerving.

“Where's your brother?” I asked her, my eyes searching the disturbing, colorless page. Everything was hard-edged. Heads were tall, oblong rectangles. Straight, slits had been ripped across the stark creatures for mouths. Their bodies were untinted aprons. None of her drawings had ever been like that. For some reason she had chosen to use black construction paper and only the white and blue crayon to mark upon it. She had rubbed them until the ends were both flat.

“I don't have a brother,” she said, smiling sweetly. Still, those eyes watched me. They were careful, waiting to catch a hint of my comprehension, my surrender to the truth.

“What – ? –” – Her words shook me, and when I heard it in my voice, I changed tack and asked another question.

“But where's your family?”

“Family?” The word seemed to confuse those eyes, and they glazed over. Her smile became wooden. After a pause, she went on as if she had found the right internal button to press and untangled my brain-teaser.

“Well, I think Daddy will stay with me.” There was a question in her voice, but I focused on the emphasis placed on the word ‘me’. It sounded like my daughter was telling me she was someone new....

Thing. Something new. The thought whispered through my mind, and the warmth returned to her little, heart-shaped angel’s face.

Cool-headed me short-circuited. She shut her mouth in the face of the transformation of my daughter. Because I believed I deserved it.

I left her in her room. I didn't buy her the robot ('Alphie' or some damn thing) she wanted. She loved to say, "I am a robot," over and over. She sounded like a delicious, malfunctioning machine.

The change I saw in her scared me about as much as what the demon told me and (though it was a million times different) how she sometimes dismissed me.

"I don't wanna color with you, Mommy," she might say on one of the rare occasions that I invited her to sit with me at my writing desk. Because I didn't love her as much as I did when it was only her; because I didn't feel compelled to read with her twenty minutes every day (do you know, before she was even six-months-old, I read *The Lord of the Flies* aloud to her from the seat of our un-cushioned bay window?); because she couldn't read her own name – out of context; and because I didn't always appreciate the random kisses she saved for whatever part of me she could reach.

That's why Nelfla came in the dark to take her.

"Who broke this crayon?" She interrupted my thoughts. I heard my style in that. I talked like that, and the intimidating aspect of the tone made the interrogative into an **interrogation**. I was better at seeing things than saying them (Funny – given that my greatest dream was to write), and I saw a television interrogation room when my daughter mimicked me in that way. It was the kind they always have – a monochromatic gray, maybe trimmed in royal blue; with a

stone or ebony utilitarian table and chair or chairs; and a one-way mirror that everyone (the cops, villain, district attorney and television viewers) know is an observation portal.

With my daughter's voice, she spoke. From my daughter's lovely face were the nonsensical words uttered. I frowned, disbelieving. Her question tugged my head up.

There was a broken crayon tip in her curled left hand. Orange, I think it was and wrapped in the purple paper of Disney princess characters. Her daddy's dad brought those for her fourth Christmas.

"I don't know," I said. I sounded normal.

"Maybe Jacob did it," she said. I heard her considering retribution.

"Maybe not," I said. But I hesitated, and my voice tiptoed, checking for fractures.

A few weeks before Nelfla spoke through her toy, my daughter began to write her name differently. Her name has eight letters. She used to write her nickname, which we taught her because it is only three letters long. Then one day she insisted that her name starts with an ‘N’. I looked at her hard when she said that, pointing to the letter insistently. I remember that it made me strangely angry...and confused. Sternly and without gentleness, I corrected her. I wrote her name three times – with one capital letter and two lowercase letters; in all caps; and with all lowercase letters.

“That looks better than what you wrote before” is all I would say when she wrote all but the first letter perfectly. I was still inexplicably mad.

I glanced up. What I saw through my peripheral vision took me by the collar and jerked my heart into painful fist. Suddenly, a bubble inside my chest started dancing on the tip of a sharp blade. What I saw was what Nelfla had done to my baby – how it had changed her. Physically.

I shook the vision right out of my head, but her eyes – what it had done to her eyes – stuck. They were swollen.

Bee stung by evil. Beneath her big **brown** eyes were shadowy pockets of skin that looked like they had been injected to within a breath of leaking. (I imagined they would leak infected mucous, if pricked – poisonous yellow or green **fluid**). Above her eyes, the skin of her lids was pinched tight. The sickly saddlebags pulled her eyes nearly shut. Tiny, ragged welts danced along those **swollen** **pockets**. Instead of bright whites, I saw dim red in her eyes when I peeked at her from the corner of my eye. Seeing her beauty and innocence overtaken gave me a headache. I felt nauseous – unless I was careful to look at what Nelfla had made of my daughter straight on. It was like making certain I kept my viewing goggles in place when I was watching a 3D movie. My efforts – trying to hold back my vomit as well as an urge to look away – left my neck stiff.

The night I ran pregnant and with a boy not yet two into the stormy crime scene where they found the mess a cola brown tractor-trailer made of us; my daughter chased me.

I don't think my instincts change much over time. I like to rearrange the pictures in our house periodically – something I learned from advice about our birds: “Move the toys around,” a PetSmart worker told us once, shrugging. “You don't have to always buy new toys. Just change it up, and they'll appreciate it. And you'll save some money.” So, I started moving our framed photos and posters (cheap, but very pretty Monet and Van Gogh knockoffs). The process forced me to acknowledge and deal with the dust that accumulated on and around the precious items, which was an added bonus. At the end of the day, however, it would come to me.

This is where I hung you before, I would think, staring at a starry sky or vase of sunflowers. For the most part, I just moved the mementos and artwork back and forth. I realized, as I stared at the pictures of my daughter, her daddy and me (we had been bad about printing out and hanging pictures of Jacob) in the collage picture frame. There was one with her in her puffy, lime green coat. (It was too big for her when it was taken, and she didn't wear it when it would have fit). She kept her face buried in the gray collar of her daddy's navy winter coat. (He doesn't wear the old thing anymore, and a fondness for the ugly, shapeless thing sprung up like a dandelion in my heart). I'd moved the walnut frame from the very same spot before moving it back. It took away some of my sense of achievement.

I had to shrug it off though. In some ways I didn't change much, if at all. I ran when someone or something ran after me – my brother when we were little, a dog when I was on my Strawberry Shortcake bike with the handle streamers and training wheels that kept me leaning right; or my cousins when we were playing tag. It didn't matter whether my 'pursuer' was littler than me or **harmless**. That didn't change when I heard my daughter's little feet pounding behind me.

She stopped in the dark, and I couldn't see her face. By the looks of her rapidly rising and falling chest, I thought she was breathing hard. Or, she was excited.

I wanted to pretend that I didn't know about Nelfla and ask her what she thought she was doing. Like I was her mother, and she was still just my daughter. But the thought I had about her possible **excitation** – as it fed on my fear – froze my vocal chords. I could barely find it in myself to back away. When I did, she followed me. Slowly, she came into the light. Her pigeon toes. Her slender calves. Her tiny, toddler hands and fingers. Her shoulders. But her face never came into the light. Even in the direct illumination of light from the compact fluorescents heating the room from one of our inexpensive floor lamps, her face was an impervious shadow that swallowed all the beauty and sweetness and wisdom God had taken from her daddy and me and gifted to her.

It was all gone.

I turned to run.

There is a place where a mind from a throne knows that Nelfla had no right to take my daughter's **soul/salvation**. Neither had any other dark angel. She wasn't able to decide. There is a place where the Omniscient is **praised/glorified** at every turn by creatures with wings that perceive the air they fly through and never sleep.

No demon took my baby, though I lost faith in her; I gave her away when I doubted my ability and right to be her mother. Nelfla picked up a seed in its hand and blew it into my ear where it took root in my mind. In my own ways, I nurtured it, and the night time shadow monsters were born. They obscured and infected my ability to discern the truth.

In so doing, I stole life from our boy, Jacob; existence from our unborn child; a wife from my husband; and a mother from my daughter. Nelfla used her as a portal to the heart of my fear, which is not of God. It drove down the bumpy road into my home, and my insecurity welcomed its iniquity. It burned down my house with me inside. It meant to take my **soul**, but my faith in God – though tattered and stained by the devastating smoke left in the wake of the blaze – was not dead. The gift of Sacrifice and my very peculiar faith did not preserve my life, but it certainly saved me from hell.

I know that now.

Why would a Being Who created not only me, **but also everything else I don't understand, care whether I believe? Well, that's just something else which only He knows.**