

from: Patricia C. Mc Kissack
The Dark-Thirty

The Chicken-Coop Monster

The final story in this collection is different from the rest, because it is semi-autobiographical. I was shattered when my parents divorced, but fortunately I had a loving grandmother and grandfather who helped me through that very difficult time; I've tried to recapture a sense of that relationship here. A West African proverb from the Benin culture—"Fear is the parent of monsters"—has been used as the story's foundation, but there is a Jewish saying that is its capstone: "Love drives out fear."

THE YEAR I turned nine, my parents' ten-year marriage ended in divorce. The grownups never talked about it around me, but I knew what was going on. Mama and Daddy didn't love each other anymore. So where'd that leave me?

As soon as school was out, they shipped me off to the Tennessee

boonies to stay with my grandparents, Franky and James Leon Russell. I didn't want to go, but no one was listening to me.

A monster lived there. I knew it the minute I set foot on their farm. I was the president of the St. Louis chapter of the Monster Watchers of America, and I was an expert on spotting monsters.

It lived in the chicken coop—the tingling in the back of my neck was strongest when I passed by there. Its hot, mean eyes watched me as I played on the back porch. Sometimes I chased my ball too close and smelled its foul breath. This wasn't an ordinary in-the-closet fright or an under-the-bed scare. I'd come upon something really terrible.

I needed help with this one, so I wrote to my friend Jay, who was in charge of the MWA over the summer. Jay and I had been best buddies since we'd started the MWA the year before. By enclosing fifty cents and six box tops from Crinkle cereal, we'd sent away for and received an official MWA Club starter kit, complete with six badges, six glow-in-the-dark ID cards, and a manual containing ten monster rules and everything else we needed to know about creepy stuff. We'd invited Nora, Jeff, Latisha, and Alandro to join us.

Writing to Jay made me feel better. Meanwhile, I had to be careful not to break any monster rules, because that would make the thing stronger and bolder.

One evening Ma Franky called me to the kitchen. "Missy, I forgot to throw the latch on the chicken coop. Go lock it for me, please."

The sun had set, but there was a little light left in the sky. The backyard was already engulfed by a blanket of darkness, but I could see the silhouette of the old chicken shack against the sky.

I stood on the back porch, a statue of fear. This is what the

monster had been waiting for. I heard the whisper of its tail swishing in the straw.

"Melissa?" My own name startled me. "Why haven't you done what I asked you to do?" Ma Franky's voice quavered with impatience.

She was asking me to break monster rule number five: *Get in the house before dark and don't go out by yourself.*

"There's a monster in your chicken coop," I blurted out. "So I'm not going out there."

Of course Ma Franky had other ideas. "Girl," she said, "if you don't stop this foolishness!" She gave me a little push. "Go on, now. Go close the door, or something will get in the coop and scare my setting hens."

Her hens? What about me? "I hate to tell you this, Ma Franky, but something's in the chicken coop already. That's why I'm not going out there."

"Yes you are, this very minute."

Obviously this monster had fourth-level power, because it'd put a spell on Ma Franky. Why else would she fall for the oldest trick in the book? *Monsters make helpers out of unsuspecting victims.*

"But—" I started to say.

"No buts!" And the next thing I knew, my own grandmother had me by the hand and was pulling me toward the chicken coop. "I want to show you there's nothing out here."

I looked into her eyes. "No!" I screamed. "Don't you see? It's made you a helper." I jerked away from Ma Franky and ran into the house. Even though I was breaking monster rule three—*Never let a monster see you crying*—I couldn't stop the tears.

Then I felt big, strong hands wiping my face with a cool wash-

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cloth. "Oh, sweets," Daddy James whispered softly. "There's nothing round here to fear." His eyes smiled. The monster spell hadn't gotten to him. "No need to fret. I closed the door for you."

DARK THOUGHTS flee in morning light. But the old wooden coop was surrounded by permanent shadows, a sure sign that it was occupied by a hateful thing. I had to be very careful. It would do anything to lure me into its evil hole.

"Bring me my clothespins off the porch," Ma Franky called.

Just as I passed the coop the door creaked open slowly. Sunlight pushed away the darkness just long enough for me to see something large and shapeless. But the monster leaped back into the shadows before I got a really good look at it. I must have screamed, 'cause Ma Franky came running.

"What is it? What is it?"

"I saw the monster. It pushed open the door."

Ma Franky said nothing but walked purposefully into the coop. I wouldn't look, *couldn't* look as she disappeared behind the darkness. I never expected to see her again. But within a few seconds out she came holding a tiny little chick.

She gently transferred it from her hands to mine. "But that isn't the monster," I cried.

"I know. There isn't one. Period!"

Poor Ma Franky. She really believed that, I'm sure. "Won't you come in and look around?" she asked. "Come see where the chickens set on their eggs and hatch little chicks like this one."

It was another monster trick, and I wasn't going for it. "No! I'll never go inside!"

Ma Franky sighed and shook her head. "Whenever you're ready,"

she said, and went back to hanging out her wash. My back was turned, but I could feel the creature laughing at me.

DURING THE WEEK, separate letters came from Mama and Daddy. I wrote them back right away—Mama's went to our old house, Daddy's to a new address. Mama wanted to know all about my new friends. Daddy was happy I could swim in deep water and had caught a fish. But I still hadn't heard from Jay, so I wrote to him again.

First I told him about my new pet chick, Tissy, and how she followed me everywhere, answering my voice and eating the feed I threw out to her. Then I told him about the creature. "I feel it's stronger now, because I've broken a couple of monster rules. It's a tricky one, but I'm watching out for myself. Write soon. Missy."

Following rule nine, I didn't go near the thing's lair. In fact I didn't even play in the backyard. But late one afternoon I missed Tissy. I felt she was in danger. Sure enough, the chick was out back, heading straight for the coop. And the door was open!

Tissy belonged to me. The monster knew it. Monster rule six clearly stated: *Watch out for those you love. If monsters can't get you, they will get the ones closest to you.*

If little Tissy went inside, she was a goner! I had to do something—and fast.

"Here, biddy-biddy-biddy." I imitated Ma Franky calling her hens. Tissy heard my voice and stopped. That was the split second I needed. Dashing forward, I scooped up my little chick and swerved to, keep from plunging headlong into the monster's den.

No tears this time. I was mad, so I foolishly broke rule ten—*never let the monster see you angry.*

"Hey, Chicken Neck! You're a real creep, Creep! Why pick on a little bitty innocent chick? Mess with somebody your own size!"

Like who did I have in mind? How dumb could I get? My anger had made the monster swell with fresh power. If I kept breaking rules like that, the creepy thing was going to get me for sure.

AT LAST a letter came from Jay.

July 18, 1960

Dear Missy,

Never got your first letter. The monster must have eaten it. Beware!

The MWA met today. I read your letter to them. We all agreed you're okay as long as you don't break rule one: *Don't face a monster alone!*

The MWA went to see *The Werewolf Returns* five times. We're going again today. We miss you. Come home soon.

Your friend,
Jay

P.S. Are you going to bring Tissy with you?

Hearing from Jay and my friends helped ease my mind a little. The MWA was right. Nothing could happen to me unless I made the number-one mistake. So I stayed on my guard, ready for any tricks.

That evening the six Harper kids came down to play hide-and-peek. Mae Elizabeth, who was my age but three times my size, smelled like lilac talcum powder all the time. She had a likable way about her that made me feel comfortable. During the summer we had become almost friends.

"Come be my partner and hide with me," I said.

Mae Lizabeth pulled me along behind her. I suggested we hide behind the shrubs along the front porch.

"Come on," she said. "Let's hide in the chicken coop!" I jerked away. "No! Don't . . ."

"Why? It's the perfect place to hide." Suddenly my almost-friend rushed toward that dreaded spot.

I could feel the monster's excitement. My warnings didn't stop Mae Lizabeth from going inside. When she disappeared into the darkness, I started screaming. At the same time Mae Lizabeth let go a bloodcurdling cry. I knew without a doubt my friend had been devoured.

Daddy James, moving like a man half his age, reached the backyard first. Ma Franky puffed along behind him fussing, "We're too old to be going through this, James."

Mae Lizabeth staggered forward, terror and pain twisting her face. She was holding her arm. Blood oozed from a deep gash and trickled down her hand.

Well, the monster hadn't swallowed Mae Lizabeth, but he'd taken a good-size bite out of her arm. Actually, I felt relieved. Now everybody would know that I'd been right all along.

Ma Franky scooted me off to the house to get the first-aid kit. "Seems this nail scratched you," she was saying when I got back. And Daddy James looked and nodded his agreement.

A nail? Oh, no! They couldn't be faked out by that old monster trick. No nail had attacked Mae Lizabeth. I moved in close to get a good look at the wound. "It was the monster!" I shouted. "I bet he did this with his sharp claws. Tell them, Mae Lizabeth. Tell them!"

Mae Lizabeth's eyes opened wide. "Huh? Oh, yes, I saw it . . . It got me."

The monster was hiding deep in the shadows, but I felt it stir. Oh, no, I thought. I was breaking monster rule seven: *Never lie about seeing a monster*. I hadn't lied, but I'd made my friend lie.

"Stop, Mae Lizabeth. You didn't really see anything, did you?" said Daddy James.

The girl shook her head.

"And neither did you, Missy," Ma Franky put in. "Tell me the truth. Have you ever really *seen* anything in that coop?"

"No," I answered, but hurried on to add, "That's how they fool you."

"Hush! Hush this minute," Ma Franky said sternly. "There's nothing in that old coop to hurt anybody."

"Oh, yeah?" I sassed back. "Well, what's that running down Mae Lizabeth's arm? Tomato juice?"

Daddy James pulled me behind him. "Don't speak to your grandmama that way," he said in a stern voice.

"I'm sorry for sassing Ma Franky." And I really was sorry. Lies. Sassing. None of this was me! That thing in the coop had made my summer miserable. I wanted to hate it, but that would break rule eight.

The Harper children stared in wide-eyed amazement while Ma Franky bandaged Mae Lizabeth's arm. Then Daddy James and I walked them home.

"It's a water moon," he said on the way back, pointing out how hazy the full moon looked. "It'll rain 'fore morning."

Most of the time Daddy James was right about things like that. He had his own way of understanding the world, and he'd taught me how to see things differently, too.

For a while we walked in silence. "Missy," he said at last. "Tell me about the monster in your grandmama's chicken coop."

What? Was my very own grandfather a believer? I tested him. "Ma Franky doesn't think it exists."

"I know. But monsters are sneaky like that," he said. "They want people not to believe in them."

How lucky could a kid get? My grandfather knew about monster tricks. He listened while I talked about Jay, the MWA, and all ten monster rules.

"I've never really seen the thing in the coop, but I can feel it. And once this summer I saw its shadow. It was big! Since it lives in a chicken coop, I bet it looks a lot like a big chicken."

"Makes sense."

"I imagine it's got two big yellow eyes that glow in the dark, razor-sharp scales, and three-fingered claw hands and claw feet. It stinks like a sewer."

"That sounds like a pretty powerful monster," he said, chuckling softly. "It was a long, long time ago, but a monster like that lived in the crawlspace under my house."

"Really?"

"The thing had me so scared I couldn't even play in my own yard. Then one night I decided to face my monster."

"You broke monster rule one?"

Daddy James laughed. "Is that the rule that says you shouldn't face a monster alone?" I nodded. He went on. "Spec I did. But to keep that ol' slinky, slimy thing from beatin' me down, I had to take it on face to face."

"Was it ugly?"

"It was all the way ugly!"

"Was it mean?"

"Ooooo-weeee. It was mean like a snake. But I found courage that night long ago."

"Tell me what happened!"

"I called that monster out, and when it came, I stood flatfooted and looked at it straight in the face."

"Weren't you scared?"

"At first. But as I held my ground I got stronger and it got weaker. Then I said, 'I'm not afraid of you. Now git gone!' Next thing I knew, it had run off hollering."

"Did it ever come back?"

"Oh, every now and then one tries to scare me. But that monster long ago must have told all its friends that I wasn't easy to scare, 'cause I ain' been bothered too much down through the years . . . till now, that is."

I was so excited. Daddy James was a monster fighter. "Good! Then will you chase the creepy thing in the chicken coop away?"

"I could. But it ain' troubling me. If I run it off, it'll just come back and devil you some other way. To be rid of it forever, you must call it out and face it by yourself."

"You mean break monster rules one and two? That'd be like facing Dracula in his castle, at night, all by myself! I wouldn't have a chance."

"You can do it. You're my granddaughter, and that makes you very special."

The short walk home had taken over an hour. Ma Franky had homemade peach ice cream waiting. I didn't feel much like eating, knowing what was before me.

Mustering my courage, I hugged Ma Franky and Daddy James, just in case I didn't get back. "There is no fear in love," he whispered.

Breaking every rule in the monster manual and trusting my grandfather completely, I went to face the creature within.

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"You Chicken Creep. Come out and face me."

Heat lightning zippered across the sky. Thunder grumbled in the distance. Slowly the coop door creaked open. The monster's foul odor sprang at me from its dark hole. The wind picked up, sending wind eddies scampering in the dust. All at once a scratchy moan followed by an awful commotion chilled me to the bone. "Ssss-flip-kkkkk-flop, ssss-flop-kkkkk-flop!" The thing was at the door. I waited breathlessly, not knowing what to expect. Running crossed my mind, but Daddy James's words helped me stand firm. And I did.

What a surprise to see Ma Franky's rooster flap and flutter out of the dark hole with one of his feet stuck in a tin can.

"Another trick," I said boldly. "You can't distract me."

The wind whipped and churned the trees. The thing's anger roared out of the dark gaping hole. It wanted to get me. Why wouldn't it come? Suddenly I realized it couldn't! I was getting stronger and it was getting weaker.

Armed with the powerful weapon my grandfather had given me, I yelled over the whistling wind, "I'm not afraid of you. You're just a lot of hot stinky air."

I heard scurrying about inside the darkness. I waited and waited, hardly noticing that it had started to rain.

Then calling upon the growing courage within me, I turned my back on the monster, saying with confidence, "I am the oldest granddaughter of James Leon Russell. He loves me, and I know it!"

And that's when I knew that my monster was gone!

