

The Monster Within

It happened that at precisely 4 o'clock in the morning of her sixteenth birthday a knock shook the old farmhouse; Torie waited to hear the scurry of feet on the stairs, but it seemed her parents had slept through the disturbance. Sighing heavily in her reluctance to move, she glanced out her window at the beautiful snow-capped mountains: they felt so distant, and yet in them she felt a surge to leave the small town of Windsor Creek, to leave the judgmental cliques of swine that made up its citizens. She had felt for years that something was coming from over those high rising peaks, and although she had no idea what it was, she looked out day after day in patient anticipation.

As her toes touched the icy wood, she winced, wishing the intruder would have come at a more reasonable hour. Still, she did not want whoever it was to freeze out in the cold, so she quickly pulled an old sweatshirt over her head and made her way downstairs. As she opened the door, her breath was quite stolen away by the stranger's odd appearance.

An indistinguishably aged man towered before her, clad in a feathery black coat which wrapped around his shoulders and ran down to his large, aquamarine boots. On his egg shaped head sat a lopsided top hat, which he tipped courteously towards her as she studied him in baffled silence. A nervous smile crept up his face and caused his white mustache to twitch.

"Hello there! You must be Miss Torie Blix!" His voice shook her in its resonance, and she glanced anxiously upwards toward her parents' window.

"Afraid so," she returned, shivering as a chill swept in and wrapped itself around her.

"Ah- and you've grown so much! How proud she'd be to see you now- but I'm getting ahead of myself." The stranger, who only seemed to grow continuously stranger, rummaged his pockets, which there must have been at least twelve of, until his hand seemed to finally settle on

something. “Here it is!” His hand reappeared with a small present in it; Torie looked up at him in wonder. “Someone far away misses you *very* much. She hopes you will find some of the answers you may begin to wish for in this small gift: the last she could send, I’m afraid.” At this, Torie was certain that the man was fighting back tears; however, his disposition brightened as he looked at her. With great importance he straightened himself, stretching the gift toward her. Taking it slowly into her palms, she let the weight of it sink through her entire body.

“But-” She bit her lip, overwhelmed by the situation. “Who sent it? Are they somehow related to me? It isn’t something ridiculous like a secret admirer or something, right?”

Her fears were dismissed by a stifled laugh from the man. “No, no, nothing like that. Unfortunately, it is not my job to explain this meeting to you. Much of the journey to come, and it will be a long and trying one, will need to be faced on your own. She knew you would be bright and able to understand, but all the same she wanted to be able to guide you in some way.” He motioned towards the package she now held.

Catching his eye, she grew the courage to speak. “Her? You keep saying that, but who *is* she? Why would she want to guide me?”

“Oh, if only I had enough time to explain,” he replied, looking nervously behind him and rubbing his hands together to keep them warm. Again, a dolorous haze clouded his lively features. Torie could hardly bear it. “I must be off-”

“Can’t you stay any longer? Just five minutes- I could brew some water for tea or hot chocolate, and maybe you could tell me more...” Torie’s voice dried up within her throat as she spoke, realizing her pleas were useless. For some reason, he could be of no more help to her.

“That sounds lovely, but I must decline at this time. Hopefully another day, Miss Adira. You’ll have a lot on your plate for the next few weeks. I wish you the best of luck; there are

many people wishing the same for you, please don't forget that." His words hypnotized her the same way the mountains often did, and all she could do was nod, the rest of her body paralyzed, and then he was gone.

It felt as though she floated back up to her room, blind to the familiar faces of snotty cousins adorned in Amish fashion modesty that hung about the house in black rimmed frames, juxtaposed to pictures of church picnics with a handful of gossiping women clearly visible in the background. Once within the privacy only her room allowed, Torie ripped the paper off the gift, her eyes devouring the torn scraps that fell about her ankles in their ravenous curiosity.

"Oh—" she uttered softly as she pulled the final bit of wrapping off. In her hands sat a glass case with a little house inside made of intricate gears. On the side of the box, her fingers hit a small knob, golden and slick under her anxious touch. Sitting incoherently on the edge of her bed, she flipped the box over to find the inscription: "Turn the knob to the left." Without a thought, Torie obeyed, and she watched in amazement as the miniscule gears began to move. The sound of music drifted slowly up into the rafters above her. "This melody- where's it from? I could have sworn I've heard it somewhere before..." The notes moved back down into the air around her head, consuming her mind in a trance of undistinguishable nostalgia. As she racked her mind in a futile attempt to remember, the song wound down, and the house, it looked so familiar to her now, began to open towards her. "Wait, what's happening now?"

From within slowly came a subtle and distant glow, as if a heart were beating deep inside the house. Its brightness increased with every successive note. As her fingers struck the final chord, the glow burst into a shower of light. Torie threw one hand over her face to shield her

eyes, whimpering at the pure brilliance of it. After a moment, however, she felt the light dim, and let her hand fall to her side. She nearly screamed at the apparition that now stood before her.

From within the walls of the tiny box had emerged a creature of light and shadow, its body fluttering slightly like that of a butterfly's wings upon landing. Its features appeared slightly human, with a face that contained two black eyes, and a head covered in waves of moving white hair that reminded Torie so much of sea foam. Some pieces of hair fell to its shoulders and wisped away at the tips, while others flowed downward onto her body and seemed to compose her clothing. Everything about her rippled effortlessly to some unknown rhythm, as if she were still within the music box, her heart tied to its conducting. Although this nymph was so unlike anything Torie had ever encountered, it reminded her of someone: a woman, but she could not place who.

Torie found it hard to breath. The creature, its feet hidden in its white gown, stared at her patiently. She had no idea what she was supposed to do. "Um...what are you? I mean, where are you from; why did you come *here*?"

The specter's white face lit up and Torie's room was immediately filled with its undulating light. "I'll show you."

Pain stabbed through Torie's torso and prickled down her spine as the spirit shot into her. A scream pierced the frigid air, and she fell to the floor, sweat trickling down her back. "What the hell!" she shrieked, water rushing into her eyes from the agony that surged through her entire body. But within moments, it subsided into a dull ache, and Torie gained enough strength to sit back on her bed, just in time for more knocking, but this time on her bedroom door.

"Torie, are you alright?" came the muffled voice of her mother. She could picture her, standing strong, her broad shoulders and heavy build ready to protect her daughter from any

harm. Torie thought of how easy it would be to run into her arms, and explain all that had happened. But her parents would never believe her. Instead of listening to her, they would look at each other as they often did: conversing mentally on her mystifying behavior. They would accuse her of making all of it up, and she would just end up in more trouble. How often she wished her parents could be what they appeared and indeed at times pretended to be.

“I’m fine, I just... had a bad dream, and fell out of bed, I guess.” Lying was easy, as she had to do it all the time, but the horror of her situation had her throat in its icy hand.

She heard a grumble from her father, who apparently followed his wife to see what was going on, heard his daughter’s meager tale, and felt the injustice of his disturbed sleep. From her mother she felt a bit more concern, but it quickly fled and Torie was left to deal with her birthday present alone.

But the hours trickled by, and there was no movement or noise from the creature within her. Torie, truly exhausted from the morning, laid down for a moment, and within seconds her heavy eyelids fell and sealed her from the rest of the world.

A haze filled Torie’s eyes. She rubbed them, but the fog did not clear from her vision. To her left, she noticed a creature: the spirit from the music box. Its dark eyes lifted as if it were smiling, but then it turned away from her and glided down a sort of eternal grey tunnel. But it ended quite rapidly, when all at once Torie’s foot felt the gentle twist of grass beneath them. This sensation made her realize how little she felt of anything else, and how weightless her body seemed to be. Looking up she saw that she was surrounded by hills of earthy greens and browns, and the same house as the one inside her music box stood directly in front of her. Its thin chimney rose high into the air, a mixture of smoke and vapors billowing outward into the crisp evening. *I must be dreaming*, she thought, although she tried to speak it aloud, and found that she

could make no sound. The specter now hovered before her, and it motioned to her as she drifted to the house. But then it faded away; Torie tried to scream for it to return and not leave her alone in this strange place, but she remembered her inability to make any noise in this world. Deciding to find out to whom the home belonged, Torie sailed to one of the first floor windows, and peering through it, she discovered a small living room. Inside, a stunning young woman sat at work, a large book of concoctions set beneath her thin nose. Her long platinum hair fell in locks around her heart-shaped face, and her dark brown eyes searched eagerly through the book's pages. A small cry echoed through the house and she lifted her head, a glow filling her face. As she walked to the stairs, the flowers in the window bloomed fuller and more vibrantly. Torie moved soundlessly behind her, realizing she could walk through walls and glide through the air.

On the second floor, the woman turned into a room splashed with pinks and airy greens, a crib leaning against a wall under a large window. *Everything looks so familiar; I could have sworn I've been here before.* Scooping the tiny baby into her arms, the mother spoke inaudibly to it in soft coos. The child immediately ceased its fit of tears and just stared up into the radiant face above it. And then her voice was heard, a powerful voice that seemed capable of shaking the earth or calming a hurricane. "I brought you something. I got it from town." She paused for a moment, her smile fading. *They don't like her in the town. They accuse her of terrible things,* Torie thought as she watched the woman's features darken, and she wondered how she would even know something like that. But it was not important at the moment. The woman shook off her gloom and reached into her pocket to retrieve a glass music box; to Torie's bewilderment, it was the same as the one she had just received. As the woman held it out before the infant's eager eyes, the gears making up the house began to move of their own accord. *She didn't even have to turn the gears.* "Someday, when you are ready, I'll teach you how to move such things with

magnificent power. But for now, it is best that you sleep.” The child, calmed by its mother’s words, drooped its head forward in an almost instant stupor.

“Torie!” A male voice shook Torie from her sleep, and she woke gasping at the dream she had just been given.

“What on earth-” She pushed her hand to her forehead, crushing thick, blond curls to her temples. The bedroom door opened, without even a knock this time.

“Come on, Torie, aren’t you hungry? It’s nearly 11 o’clock! You don’t want to sleep through your birthday, do you?” His smile usually made her want to laugh, but right now it just irritated her. He was being so forceful: leaning in without even knocking. Why couldn’t she come downstairs at her own pace? Sleeping in in the Blix home was a breach in the rules, but it was her birthday after all. And what a birthday it had been so far.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m coming, just give me a sec,” she replied distractedly, but at second thought she raised her head anxiously, ready to be shamed for her rudeness.

Instead, her father nodded with almost a worried look. Before he could hurry off downstairs, Torie blurted,

“Did you hear anything this morning? Like someone knocking at the front door or something?”

Her dad’s concerned look grew. “No. Why?”

“Oh, never mind then. I must have imagined it,” Torie said, trying to laugh. She considered making a joke about being excited for her birthday and thus listening for anything unusual, but the words crumbled on her lips. Her dad smiled weakly, mumbling something about hurrying downstairs before the guests arrived. From below she heard hushed whispers from her

parents, and she once again felt a surge of loneliness caused by the peculiarity they seemed to find in her.

Dressed in the red wrap dress her mother had picked out for the occasion, Torie checked herself in the mirror, wondering if her features bore any mark of the new life within her. To her relief, she looked the same, although the skin beneath her eyes drooped under the weight of the morning's events.

"Happy Birthday, Torie! How's it feel to be sixteen?" Her mother sat across from her at the table, spooning more eggs onto her already filled plate.

"Thanks," she lied. "Ah, same old same old, really. Just another day gone by." Staring out at the mountains, Torie wished more than ever to escape to their solitude. Her boring life had taken a turn for the worst.

After an excruciating day of busy relatives stopping by to wish her a happy birthday with little presents here and there, none staying more than five minutes, Torie went out onto the porch, the setting sun beating down upon her shoulders. Breathing in its dying warmth and shivering at the chill creeping in after it, she wondered when the spirit would show itself again. Her mind could not push out the image of the woman from her dream. What was she, some kind of witch? The more she thought about her dream, the more she knew she could never tell her parents; for some reason, they hated any mention of witches, wizards, fairies; anything of the magical sort infuriated them, perhaps because they found it so illogical and against all the doctrine to which they fervently clung. Her questions began to overwhelm her. Why did that man bring her the music box, who had sent it, and why on her sixteenth birthday? Now that she

revisited the event, she wondered why he had called her Adira. Perhaps that was her name, or maybe he had given the box to her by mistake. Her toes seemed to freeze and she curled them towards her in fear of losing them; if the box were not meant for her, then the spirit would surely be upset and likely to harm her until it found its rightful possessor. Either way, there was only one option: Torie had to find out what the spirit was trying to show her.

“What are you doing out here all alone? Tired from all the visitors?” Her mom sat down beside her, smiling in a tired way. Torie detected worry in her features.

“I’m fine, mom,” she began, trying to keep her voice high and out of the bog of truth. Lying had become such a pain when she felt so desperate to tell the truth. At the same time, it was nice to keep something from her parents; her whole life she had felt that they looked at her differently, as if they did not know what their daughter truly was. Even now, when looking up at her mom, she knew for a fact that she was worried, but not out of concern for Torie. She stared down at her, inspecting every detail of her appearance, in a way that made Torie feel as though she suspected a horrific change. “I think you’re right. I’m just tired from seeing everyone.”

“Yeah,” her mom softly replied, breaking her mental interrogation. She tried a smile, but it did not fit her face correctly. “Why don’t you go rest for a while. I’ll get you when dinner’s ready.” Torie nodded. A nap sounded nice.

Something was off. Torie was once again inside the house, and the young woman sat in the nursery, her child, looking to be about two years old, now walking about the room, picking up toys and bringing them to show off to her mother. Although she beamed down at the infant, it was clear in the way the woman’s hands fluttered about that she was anxious. “Come here, love.” She lifted the little girl into her arms, rocking gently with her for a moment before speaking. “I

don't know what's going to happen to us, but I want you to know that no matter what, you will be able to endure it. There are monsters out there, Adira, creatures that will try to make us very unhappy." She took in a deep breath, tears collecting at the corners of her eyes. She let them fall, let them blind her vision. "People are afraid of what they don't understand."

A deafening crash shook the home. Running to the window, the woman gasped, covering her mouth with one of her free hands. Torie followed her. "No, no, it can't be. Not yet—" the mother wailed. Down below stood a large group, who had now successfully broken the front door down. Crouching so that they could not see her, the young woman hurried to the crib to grab blankets for the child. She also grabbed a large bag from the changing table, throwing various bottles into it, all different colors and sizes, and what looked to be some kind of provisions. Pulling on a long coat, the mother ran to the nursery door, child pressed closely to her chest, bag slung over her right arm.

"There she is!" roared a large man near the front door, barring her way. "On the second floor, to the right of the stairs! Looks like she's gonna make a run for it."

Without delay, the woman took off into another room, and into a closet that was surprisingly large inside. Locking it behind her, she set her child down, and rummaged through her bag. Torie sat beside the little girl, feeling the burden of the child's dismay filling her entire body. She knew exactly the fear that was striking at the poor infant. Pausing for a moment, shock crushing her face, the mother came to some realization. Something that she needed very much had been left behind. The sound of heavy footsteps shook the floor. They were coming, and there was nothing that could be done about it. Torie shivered, feeling as though she had been in this place before, as though some part of her unconscious knew something dreadful was about to happen.

“Come here, Adira. I want to tell you something,” she whispered to the child. Obediently, the young girl went to her mother. “These beasts may take you away from me, and I just hope they take good care of you and see you as a human being. You will learn to love them, if so, because you are a good girl and very smart. But someday, you will change. It will be an incredible stage in your life.” She spoke even softer now, the footsteps coming closer. “But they won’t understand it. They will begin to fear you. But don’t let them change you; don’t let their hatred turn your heart bitter. You are amazing, Adira. You were born for so much more than they can even understand. Do you know what your name means, dear?” The child shook her head; Torie leaned in closer. “It means strong, noble, but most of all powerful. I love you, my darling. I love you so much—“

“Dinner’s ready!”

Torie woke with tears in her eyes, gripping the pillow fiercely in her hands. She called her Adira. So, that must be her daughter. Whoever this music box belongs to, it must be from her mother.

“TORIE! Come downstairs, we need to talk to you,” her father yelled from below.

Suddenly it hit her. Images of conservative relatives all uneasy to stay long enough to really talk to her, the unspoken disconnect she felt between herself and her home and parents. Standing up so fast the rush of blood nearly causing her to faint, Torie ran to the mirror. Beside it stood a picture of her parents. She picked it up, her hand trembling. Slowly she looked from her reflection to the picture, and with each glance she became more aware of the lack of similarity between her face and theirs. Her hand began to shake wretchedly, and she dropped the frame

onto the ground, cracking it right between the two of them. “Who are you, then? Oh my god,” she cried, “who am I?”

Rushing down the stairs, hitting every juttred corner and object in her path with tears obscuring her vision, Torie broke into the kitchen. Her father glanced at her and then jumped backward towards the fridge, grabbing the counter tightly.

“Torie, what’s going on?” Her mother asked sternly, trying to keep her voice steady, but all of them could hear the quiver breaking it into a million shards of useless sound.

“You tell me! Is that even my name?” Her voice roared from within her, and the strength it brought sent radioactive waves throughout the room. A stovetop pan teetered and fell to the floor, the old wooden calendar fell from the wall, all its pieces scattering on the linoleum tiles. Her anger left her blind to the chaos around her. “Did you think you could hide me from the truth my entire life? You took me from her didn’t you,” her voice caught on the words. “You took me from my mother.”

The silence between her parents only filled her with a new supply of fury. “What am I?! Why won’t you tell me? Are you afraid of what I can do, of what I’m capable of? Do you see me as some sort of monster now? Or wait-“ Her eyes narrowed towards them as they cowered in the corner. “Have you always seen me as some sort of beast, an animal that needed proper training, correct grooming in order to turn out like you?” She spit the words out, hoping they would spark into flames. Her head ached, but she was too angry to stop now. “What happened to her, after you found us—what did you do to her!”

The woman who had once called Adira her daughter now burst into tears, her husband staring blankly at the floor as sweat poured over his brow.

“Answer me!” Adira screamed. And then her head snapped towards the ceiling, and her eyelids closed, but she could still see: not the kitchen, but the room with her mother and her infant self. She watched the monsters tear down the door, and drag her mother out. She screamed, and begged to be allowed to hug her daughter one last time. The beasts just laughed at her, as they tied her hands behind her back, shoving a pill down her throat to drug her and then they gagged her. Tears burned down her cheeks, and also the child’s who watched. Young Adira hollered as they ripped her from the floor.

One of the women, the one who would for fourteen years from that day call the child her daughter, slapped Adira’s face. “Silence! You will learn that we have done you the greatest justice by taking you away from this wretch. She is not worthy to be a mother, the insolent heathen- she has led you away from the light. She deserves to burn for her wickedness.”

A cheer of agreement was heard throughout the house. A man with a torch came forward, the crowd parting for him. All seemed to fall silent for a moment. The drug had set in on the prisoner, and she no longer screamed through the cloth in her mouth. And then, the man held the flame high into the air, and the discordant voices rose together again, louder, and not stopping this time.

“Don’t do it, not in front of her! At least cover her eyes,” Adira’s mother pleaded, her eyes heavy with tears. But no one responded to her, and all at once, the man took a bottle from his pocket, poured it over her head, allowed it to seep through her clothing, and then dropped the torch on her lap. An immediate explosion of light filled Adira’s small eyes, and her mother’s screams and melting frame made her shriek in dismay. The mob, happy with their work, filed down the stairs and out the door.

Her soon to be mother began to follow the others, carrying the child in her arms; but she turned back for just a moment towards the smell of burning flesh. “And so the world is thus cleansed of one more impurity.” As she resumed her stride to the stairs, Adira watched her beloved mother, who had sat so still as they murdered her, throw herself towards her bag. From within she drew out the music box, and whispered something into it. Adira saw as an infant and adolescent a white vapor float into the box, and the extinguishing of the flames that had consumed her mother. Her body slumped to the floor, bare with its skin peeling in thin, charcoaled flaps.

The white spirit appeared before her, now. It stepped closer to her, opening its mouth to reveal fangs that dripped with blood. The eyes glowed a deep red, and it stretched its hand towards her, the fingers gnarled and burned.

“What’s happened to you?” Adira sobbed.

“They are weak, Adira. They have injured both of us greatly. Weed them out, my child, weed them out.” The fingers grew increasingly warped, and the teeth grew longer as Adira watched it. It continued to chant to her, “You now have unspeakable power. Weed them out, they don’t deserve to survive after what they have done.” It circled around her, filling her with a sense of power, and a hunger for death.

“No!” She screamed, covering her face from it.

She opened her eyes to see her parents’ horrified faces. They had witnessed her possession, and had heard her screaming through it. The words of the spirit still called to her, and her energy grew fiercer. The sound of the TV crashing to the floor was heard from the living

room, a pipe under the sink exploded, water pouring around their feet. Light bulbs flickered and shattered. “I won’t! I won’t kill them; that’s not the answer!”

She ran to her room, slamming the door. Anger still surged through her veins, and sorrow shook her entire body. She grabbed the music box, and tried to wind it, tried to have the music calm her. But no music escaped from it, and her frustration grew. Without even comprehending it, the glass shattered in her fingers and the house cracked in half. She shrieked in unison to the spirit as it was torn from within her and fell to dust on top of the remains of the music box. All rage subsided.

“No, it can’t be broken! The only thing I have that shows me who I am, and it’s destroyed.” As she sobbed, she realized that it was probably for the best. In her discovery of her false parents, her anger had fused with that of her dying mother’s. The spirit had turned into the bitter hatred that had overtaken her mother in her final moments, the same hatred that she had warned her daughter against in the memories that she sent to her. Looking down at the splendid messenger, and thinking of all the love that it resembled as her final act for her child, Adira smiled through her sobs. “Poor tormented soul-“ she cried, watching the spirit’s ashes burning on the floor just as her mother had.

The sound of tires peeling out on gravel pierced her ears. Running downstairs and out the front door, Adira caught sight of her parent’s car zooming recklessly down the street. Fear stopped Adira’s heart: the rain from the previous night had frozen over, and all the weather channels had warned about hazardous driving conditions. Before she could utter a word, their car hit a patch of black ice and began to flip.

“No!” Adira screamed, running across the street, hurrying into the woods where their car continued to roll. By the time she reached the bottom of the hill where the car had finally

stopped, her parents sat lifeless in the destroyed vehicle, which had fortunately landed right side up.

“What do I do, oh my gosh—” She pulled at the driver’s side door, and checked her father for a pulse. “It’s so faint. No, it can’t be. It can’t end like this; talk to me, please!” Tears streamed down her face as she crept over him and checked her mother. She could not find a heartbeat. “There must be something I can do...” Adira tried to think clearly through her shock. Pulling out her cell phone, she dialed 911. After talking to them, she placed one hand on each of her old parents’ hearts. Taking a deep breath and praying for success, she tried to surge energy from her own heart into theirs. Her heart felt as though it would rip from her chest, but she continued. She kept surging her own life force into the people who raised her, who thought they were doing what was best for her. At last, as her heart began to stiffen, her skin translucent with the lack of blood, she felt a pulse in the bodies under her.

The EMTs carefully laid the two people onto stretchers and lifted them into the ambulance. Standing far away, at the edge of the wood, Adira watched in silence. Although the two beings who had called her their daughter for so long would never know that she had saved their lives that day, Adira did not care. She knew that her mother would be proud. For the power that she had spoken of so many years ago was the ability to choose to forgive, to love those you care about, even when they have done you outrageous wrong.

Adira stooped down to pick up her backpack, loaded with all she would need until she reached a safe hotel. Although she had no idea where the rest of her life would take her, she knew she was not safe here, not yet. At some point she would come back; she would prove to all

these misguided people that she was not a monster, but just as human as any of them. But now was not that time.