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Making Monsters

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Anna Beatrice kept her monsters in the glove compartment of her car, where she kept all her treasures—foreign coins, half of a geode, an ugly wooden bear that her grandfather had carved in the hospital before he died. Even the monsters did not dare to touch them. Ritva dared even less, not because of little-sister hero-worship, but because she knew the extent of Anna Beatrice's strength. It was hard to explain, like a dream, and when she tried to explain it, it slipped through her fingers and she was left with only a faint concept of what she had been trying to say in the first place.

Their grandfather had understood, the one who made the bear. "I knew a girl like Anna Beatrice once," he said, repeating the same story in the same words whenever the opportunity presented itself. This became so unsettling that relatives refrained from speaking Anna Beatrice's name in his presence. "In the place where I am from. She was a storyteller, like Anna Beatrice. She made monsters, you see. But she made them with her mouth, only her mouth. Anna Beatrice makes them with her head and heart, her eyes and hands. Every part of her. Only a monster makes a monster like that. Do you see?"

Ritva saw, but she could not think of it in the way that her grandfather did— as something wrong. He carved the bear to ward off Anna Beatrice's monsters, but Anna Beatrice, who knew how to take an unfavorable situation and turn it into the one she wanted like flattening out a ball of clay with the palm of her hand, picked a third eye into the bear's forehead and cupped it to her heart like a nursing infant until he came alive.

"I made this," Anna Beatrice said then, proud and disbelieving, as the bear pressed its flat face to the sides of her fingers. "I made this."

Next was a semi-corporeal shambling beast made from her own exhaled breath in winter, then a drop of water that she stirred into something like a beetle. She could make wide-awake yellow eyes with her thumbs and scratch feathers into hide with a fingernail; she could make armored backs and soft tummies. The monsters were all voiceless, because Anna Beatrice hated noise. She often said that if she had made Ritva, she would have made her without a mouth. Ritva could only protest that she probably would have given her horns instead, but Anna Beatrice couldn't see anything wrong with that.

"Monsters have to be able to take care of themselves for a long time," she would say absently as she put spade-like spikes on a tail. "Hundreds of years, maybe. They will be here when I am not." Ritva didn't like the thought of anything that would live longer than her, but mortality made Anna Beatrice claustrophobic. She would not make anything weaker than herself.

Anna Beatrice made a monster with the blunt nose of a mountain lion and the wings of a dragonfly on the day that her grandfather died. She would not go to the funeral; instead, she stayed in her car.

"Just think," said Ritva, shamed and awed, "Even as he took his last breath, you were already disrespecting his wishes."

"You can only take care of yourself in this world," said Anna Beatrice, carving sharp teeth with a hair pin. "What do I care about a dead man's wishes?"

"He's your grandfather," Ritva protested.

"I have a greater responsibility now," said Anna Beatrice, pointing to her glove compartment. It stood open, and the monsters were rolling about wrestling, gently biting each other. "See? I made them. I am like their mother."

"But you didn't have to make more."

"The earth did not have to make more trees, but it did."

"The earth was made to make trees."

"I was made to make monsters," said Anna Beatrice. She lifted the three-eyed bear out of the glove

compartment and placed it on her shoulder, where it began to climb the heavy curtain of her hair. “Besides, I thought you liked my monsters.”

“I did,” said Ritva. “But now it’s time to grow up.”

“Grow up?” said Anna Beatrice. “Ritva, I never thought that you would be so grown up that you would say silly things and think that they were right just because a dead man said them.”

“Maybe I’m not as strong as you,” said Ritva. She reached out a finger towards the bear and it bit her with square wooden teeth that bruised but did not draw blood.

“You are,” said Anna Beatrice. She tapped the bear’s nose sternly and it made a grinding, mechanical noise of apology. “You are just not as angry.”

“Angry?”

“Yes,” said Anna Beatrice thoughtfully. “But Ritva, just because I am angry does not mean that I am wrong.”

“You’re just right louder,” said Ritva, laughing. “That’s what Grandpa used to say.”

“You are right,” said Anna Beatrice. “And so was he, and so am I. This, what I did—” She gestured towards the funeral home, now empty of ceremony. “That was wrong. And what he said about my monsters was wrong. But we were both right about other things.”

“I know you loved him,” Ritva said comfortingly.

“I did,” said Anna Beatrice. “I just did not like him very much.” She smiled fondly. “Poor Ritva. Only you were completely right. What a terrible burden.”

“No,” Ritva laughed. “I’m used to it.” A furry monster with spiraling tusks crawled onto her knee. Anna Beatrice looked at it.

“You and my monsters are very much alike,” she said. “I love with my brain, you know. But you love with your heart, as you were made to.”

“Monsters don’t have any heart,” said Ritva.

“Mine do,” said Anna Beatrice. “They have my heart. As do you.”

“You love with your head and your heart, Anna Beatrice,” said Ritva.

“And my eyes and my hands,” said Anna Beatrice, and somewhere among the trees, the voice of an old monster whispered, “With every part of you.”