

Under the Bed

by James Lynn Smith

Gusts in the night blew rain against the window. Rolling thunder followed flickers of distant lightning in the unseen clouds above. From my bed, those brief flashes revealed the clay beast I had fashioned earlier glaring at me across the room. Atop the dresser, my handiwork bared its teeth with the sinister intent of a true T-Rex. Though not real, I pretended it was, a creative motive causing the outer world to take form from the inner one. The beast was a creature for the play of a prepubescent boy, bored with television, homework, and comic books. Molding clay into creatures like snakes, alligators, monsters, and dinosaurs gave me more pleasure.

I remembered Mom's warning. "Son, you'll warp your mind by always imagining monsters. Things held in mind have a way of becoming real in our life."

I looked again toward the dresser; the toothpick teeth in the beast seemed longer and—had it moved? The T-Rex appeared closer, nearer to the edge than I placed it. Suddenly a "splat" sound on the floor, followed by a flash of lightning, showed the dresser top vacant. I drew the covers around my neck, goose bumps raising the thin, short hairs on my arms. *How did that happen?* It wasn't so near the edge that it would have fallen off. Then, underneath the thunder, I heard faint, small steps on the floor, approaching my bed. Throwing a pillow toward the sound, I then heard scurrying as something raced under my bed. My involuntary yell made me think about the storm. *If I call for help, will anyone hear me?*

Supernatural things only happen in movies and books. *But what if imagination becomes real, like my mom said?* In the light of day, it would be

absurd. Maybe that's because it's hard to believe those things in daylight, so the mind doesn't let them happen. But on a stormy night, fear creates things suppressed in the day. *Sunlight must deaden fear's power.* I tried to think of sunshine and outdoors. Visualizing myself on the front porch, sitting in the glider, I almost began to enjoy the dreamy back and forth motion until it suddenly stopped.

The purple petunias below the porch were calling to me with alarm. "Behind you. Don't let the dark come," they pleaded.

A shadow lurked closer as my heart began rapid thumping. The light over my shoulder dimmed, and I could sense something behind me. A painful tickling moved through the nerves of my whole body, making me unable to move or speak.

A flash of lightning broke the spell, and I sprang up in bed. My pulse pounding, I listened for any sounds aside from the rain and thunder. The room seemed normal for the moment. As my heart rate returned to normal, I gained more confidence and lay back, again pulling covers over me. In time, I felt drowsy and concern about imaginary creatures diminished. I turned over on my side, tugging the covers.

But the tug didn't stop. Something was pulling the cover toward the side near the wall. As the cover vanished, I bolted upright, afraid to put my feet on the floor lest something reach out and pull me under the bed. I wanted to run for the door, but what chance did I have?

Fight it. Hit, kick. I turned toward the wall. Not knowing how, my mind could actually *feel* some strange presence under the bed. The smell of dead bones and decaying gore drifted to my nose. Maybe if I kicked or struck hard in that direction, I could then leap off the other side of the bed and safely reach the door. *What can I use to keep from touching it?* A picture hung on the wall above the headboard. I faced it on my knees and reached up in the dark, feeling for the frame and glass cover. Once the picture was in my hands, I debated the idea of enticing

the thing below to move upward between the bed and wall so I could thrash it. *If I hit it, will it go away, gain power or suck the life from me?*

The presence was growing in my awareness, focusing my mind on death, decay, and sadness. *Is this thing making my thoughts?* I wondered if freewill were an illusion. Which is real, my daytime feelings of cause and effect, or this nighttime chaos that's dragging my soul into a hell?

What boy asks such questions even before he is a teen? Earthly maturity had no bearing in the state I found myself. With no answers, I edged toward the side of the bed near the wall, again *feeling* the unknown entity creeping upward. I swung the picture down, crashing against something, and sprang off the bed, dashing for the door.

It wouldn't open. I sensed a thick miasma spreading over the floor. Panicking, I bounded back to only safe spot I had known, the bed.

The more I tried to escape this nemesis, the stronger it became. *What can I do?* A notion to stop trying to fight came to me. Forcing myself to lie down, I pulled cover from the space it was lodged in, and tried to relax.

It worked, at least for a while. Then I wondered. *Can imagination kill someone?* There seemed to be at least two different worlds, existing simultaneously. A person might live in one or the other, depending on—what?

Having no answer, I turned over on my stomach with my hand near the bed's edge. Except for the diminishing rain and now distant thunder, all was quiet. Growing weary, I nurtured the notion that I had merely been dreaming and became curious about what object may have fallen and rolled under the bed. Slowly, I reached downward from the side of the bed and touched the floor. Nothing was there, so I leaned over and felt farther underneath.

Something *was* there. Cool and larger than a cantaloupe, but smaller than a basketball, and with contours. Some softer areas were prickly—like a shaved

beard.

A face! I was feeling a cold, dead face. Jerking my hand back, my fingers were wet and sticky. From the bed, I raced to the door and again tried to open it. My hand was too slippery to turn the knob. Reaching for the light switch, I already knew no light would come on, and the air was thick from the horror emanating from underneath the bed. My voice barely made a sound when I tried to call out. Thoughts came to mind about chindi, evil spirits that separated from the soul at death and lingered nearby. The Navajo thought one could get chindi sickness from corpses, even worse. *This thing wants to eat my soul.* Paralysis overcame me and I slumped to the floor, where a toxic malady oozed nearer. Something began shaking me.

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“Wake up, Nakai. Wake up, you’re off your blanket and moaning.” The darkly tanned visage bent over me, deep fissures in his face telling his years. He shook my shoulder again and I roused. It was still dark, but the firelight illuminated his concerned face.

“Where am I?” I asked, then remembered. Sani, whose name means Old One, had taken me on an overnight camping trip to celebrate my birthday.

Though we lived in a modern world, he loved to talk about the ways of his Navajo ancestors. We had come into Arizona to hike and camp near Window Rock, where he had contacts in the Navajo Nation. He told me stories handed down through years of tradition. But sometimes, he seemed to be leaving parts out. His face would appear darkly disturbed and he excused himself before continuing. I had suspected for some time that he did more than study the Navajo. He might be a practicing shaman.

Despite being a young boy, acts of shamanism were hard for me to believe. But on a dark night, in the spaces between buttes and mesas, not so hard. Feeling

safe again, I lay back on the blanket. Yet Sani continued sitting and appeared anxious.

“What’s the matter, Sani?” I asked. “Why don’t you lie down and get some sleep?”

“I thought I heard something, but don’t worry. I just want to know what it was. Maybe a coyote.” He pulled a long knife from his boot and placed it by his side.

Turning over, I began to doze, but a word kept playing through my mind: skinwalker. A hunched but agile shapeshifter, part wolf and part witch. Sometimes it wore an animal skin, sometimes becoming the animal. *Why am I thinking this?* I wondered if Sani were projecting thoughts. He once told me he believed I could read thoughts, which was dangerous because visions and urges of sick and insane people could haunt me. Could that be why some of his tales were interrupted? Was he trying to avoid sending bad thoughts? This was only fanciful thinking on his part, I had figured—but now? I turned over to face him and propped on my elbow.

Sani was gone. No longer where he sat nor on his blanket. “Maybe a pit stop,” I muttered and lay back down. I waited for him to return before closing my eyes, but the minutes kept passing by. After a quarter hour, I got up and began looking around. “Sani,” I called. Nothing. Then louder, “Sani, where are you?” A glint caught my eye.

It was his knife. He was too careful to have casually dropped it. The fire seemed less bright and a drumming pulsed in my ears. The air became heavy and made breathing difficult. Without intent, I heard myself pleading, “Sani, come back.” I stared into the blackness. *What if I disappear? Who will look for me?* Then I realized I had no memory of anyone other than Sani, nor even how I met him. No parents, no relatives, not even places I had lived. *Something’s eating my mind.* I could no longer endure such dread and ran blindly into the dark.

Soon exhausted and bruised by stumbling into boulders and brush, I stopped and caught my breath. Turning toward the camp, I started back, eyeing the distant light from our fire. I never felt so sad and alone. As I neared the camp, Sani's blanket appeared to be hanging on the branch of a nearby scrub.

No, it was hanging on a *form*. "Sani," I yelled and ran forward. It was cold now, and his back was turned to me with the blanket draped over his head. "I thought you had gone away." Immensely relieved, I took his slight movement to be a nod and began to collect brush for the fire. "Looks like this is about burned out."

With the fire blazing again, I approached Sani, curious as to why he hadn't spoken. His form turned toward me.

A monstrous, scaled face stared back at me. Wide-set eyes with slits for pupils narrowed their gaze upon my head as the huge mouth opened, showing rows of long, sharp teeth dripping strings of saliva. I backed away toward the fire as the thing's forearms rose, displaying long, sharp claws where fingers should be. It was crouching to lunge so I raced to the other side of the fire. When it turned to intercept me the other way round, I moved in the opposite direction. Turning again, the creature roared and the blanket fell from its hideous head. But, rather than engaging with my survival ploy, it faced me directly across the fire. *Lord, it's going to jump through the flames.* A burning branch was sticking out from the fire and I grabbed it. When the beast crouched again, I ran backwards before it leapt. As it landed at my feet, I stumbled and fell. Turning its head sideways to better see me, the mouth line appeared to have a cruel grin, displaying bone-crushing teeth. Then the monster faced me and opened those huge jaws, the head moving back slightly to make a forward plunge upon me.

I jammed the burning branch into its open maw. Wooden teeth were instantly set afire. Then it was engulfed in flame, and vapor steamed from its clay body. The large toothpick teeth dwindled to glowing embers and it collapsed—

almost. In one last protest, the creature raised its head toward me, opened its charred mouth, and a loud thunderclap burst from its throat.

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When I awoke, the mattress felt like a board. Groping around, I realized I was *under* my bed. What happened previously and who I saw prior to being here, I didn't know. Gradually, Sani and the camp returned to memory. That and the creature were a dream. *Or was it? How do I know when I'm asleep or awake? Do dreamers always wake up just before they die?* I wondered if a vicious nightmare consumed my soul, would people think I died peacefully. Sadness moved over me again, I needed answers, but felt adrift, not knowing where reality lay.

The floor swayed, then leveled. Again it swayed, and I felt it become cold as I sank into it. I was flushing down into a maelstrom, swirling helplessly. I had awakened from one dream into another, but knowing this did *not* ease my alarm. *My own mind will kill me.* Else an ominous force was driving me insane.

Something in the whirlpool bumped into me. Twisting around as best I could, I stared at a cold, dead face, the sticky blood washing away. Then the vortex sucked it downward and swallowed with a bone-crunching sound. That was my destination too—I felt something tugging at my shoulder.

*

“Mommy said it’s time to wake up and get ready for school,” a voice said.

I opened my eyes to see my little sister, pulling the shoulder of my tee shirt. It was morning, and the face now before me was the most beautiful one I had ever seen.

She laughed. “The storm last night scared me and I got in bed with Mommy and Daddy.”

Looking at the dresser, I saw the clay bust of the dinosaur I put there yesterday, complete with broken-off toothpicks for its carnivore teeth. I grabbed

my sis's cheeks and gave her a big smack, then bounded onto the floor. As she left the room, I went down on hands and knees and looked under the bed—nothing more scary down there than a couple of dust bunnies.

I thought about those precocious questions in my dreams. Now it seemed simple. *Dreams don't kill; you just wake up or have another dream.* And how do you know if you're really awake? Maybe that's a question for the doctors where they put psychotic people. For me, however, it was obvious. *Awake, I have a memory that goes back and back.* In those dreams, a limited sense of the past was merely that—a vague sense. I seemed lost in an eternal present. Now, I knew who I was and what was real because I could recall my parents, vacation trips with them, and who my teachers were. Even when not thinking about the past, memory's still there as a subtle glow in the background. *It's the mind's daylight.* I walked to the closet for clothes and glanced at the monstrous action figures and clay shapes on the shelf. From now on, I was going to sculpt pretty maidens and dashing princes.

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