

Monster

by Landon Beadle

CIPHER A: [There are 29 paragraphs, with 29 first letters]

-----, -----.

CIPHER B: [There are 209 sentences, with 209 first letters]

-----, -----.
-----.
-----,
-----,
-----,
-----,
-----.

* * *

The creature is a construct, Hailey thinks. Representative of fear, but not actually fear in and of itself. Usually she would scream, but in this instance it seems unnecessary. There is a monster in her closet, sure, but what does that actually mean? How tangible can an object of fear be when you refuse to let it symbolize that which defines it?

Hailey is nine. 'It', the monster, has shown up on several occasions, now. Defense--her trustworthy blanket--is out of the question, out of commission. Explanation: this means that her safeguarding blanket is in the wash. Someone should have brought it to her, earlier, but clearly there has been a breakdown in communication between Hailey and her (usually responsible) mother.

It growls, interrupting her thoughts. Nearly once a week for the last six months this beast has appeared to disrupt her slumber. Though, to be fair, 'appeared' would suggest that she has actually seen the creature with her own eyes. Hailey may be brave, intelligent, wise

beyond her years, but she still has never been capable of steeling herself for that trip across her sky blue, rainbow-and-pony covered room to peak into the closet door. Even Jake, her remarkably brave and hip older brother wouldn't be able to willfully confront whatever horror lies within those inner walls.

She seems to be presented, then, with a conundrum. In lieu of her usual defense, Hailey feels exposed for feasting (which, she assumes, is what most monsters desire), but she also has found the strength within herself to question the situation at hand. Greatness doesn't happen for those who hide. No, instead she thinks back to earlier events of the day. Instincts drive this state of recall. First, there was breakfast, followed by a story. In this story there was a princess—a character whom is identifiable for the reader—who became lost in the woods. Erroneously. Really, this is (from the books Hailey has read) what most princesses seem to do.

In fact, Hailey can recall forty-two stories in which a princess becomes lost in the woods, or a wooded area of similar attributes. These princesses should probably try to avoid trees altogether.

Side-note: Hailey also questions the validity of children who find domestic stability after felling insurmountable obstacles. These seem quite believable as they are being told, but each falls apart upon closer inspection. A child facing against a dragon, for example, would not be much of a match. Luckily, they would be of little substance as a snack, but that's hardly reassuring. Lessons should be deeper, Hailey feels. Stories should teach usable abilities for the hardships of life.

Now, in this particular fairy tale take, the princess found herself in possession of a shiny, white magic wand that could be used to expunge evil. Except, the catch--as there usually was a catch of some sort--was that she could only use said wand three times. Completing her third evil extirpation, the wand would supposedly

disappear into a plume of smoke. Enabling her to test these magic limitations, the story inserted three trolls onto the path the princess (presumably) required to return home. Strange, Hailey had thought, that the princess had serendipitously found a path around the creatures into the woods, but was unable avoid them on the return trip. She, the princess of the story, waved her wand. It shot forth a lightning bolt at one of the trolls, who instantaneously turned into a rabbit and hopped away. The princess then did this for the second troll. And the third. Then, as promised, the wand shifted in function. It didn't vanish into a whirl of smoke, however. No, instead it turned from a bright, sparkly white into a dark, ominous black. Generally, in these cultural fables, black is a signal--a portent of trouble.

Of course, with the limit on magic reliability reached, this is the point where the princess encounters a fourth troll. Utterly predictable. Really, Hailey had thought, can't they ever take creative liberties?

The rest is as one would expect, which is strange considering this is the predictable part of the story where the unpredictable takes place. Rather, this is where the princess uses the cunning she's gained from her brief vacation with despair—and the lesson it taught her—to gain the upper hand. As the fourth troll approaches, she raises her now-jet-black wand and waves it, frantically, because this thing is different from her, an 'other', and therefore it must be defective in some threatening way. Now, pay attention, because this is where the lesson is bestowed upon the reader. She begins to wave the wand, but before she can do so a loud, tremulous voice fills her head (most likely a man's voice, as gender roles require). "Laura," it booms (apparently the princess has a name, and that name is Laura), "you may use the wand one final time, if you must, but in payment your beauty will be lost forever." Aghast, she throws the wand to the ground. This offer is absurd. Or is she really supposed to think a life lived out in hiding or disfigured would be a reasonable way to proceed? Ridiculous. Yes, she would rather die.

Actually, she finds that with this new resolve she doesn't fear the seven-foot tall, drooling, snarling troll sauntering her way. Caution thrown to the wind, princess Laura walks directly up to the animal. "Here," she yells, unsure of the lingual capacity of your average, woods-variety troll, "eat me. I won't even put up a fight." Excited, the troll bears its fangs, wags its tail, hops up and down on one foot, then the other--then both. Vicious. Except Laura doesn't flinch, not once. Merely, she smiles at the beast. "Eat me, coward!" Now she is madly laughing, which disturbs her foe. *This is unexpected*, it thinks. *Seriously, this woman must be mentally unhinged.*

Slowly, the beast ceases its glowering and feet stamping. Lucidity seeps back into its eyes, followed quickly by confusion and panic. Our heroine, in her vanity-inspired bout with madness, has bested our troll. What is this, the creature ponders, what is happening here? Lost, bewildered, it makes a mad dash for the nearest tree line and lumbers into the distance. Yowls of fear, warnings to other trolls, rise up in the distance.

This tale has a profound effect on impressionable Hailey. Engrossing, she found the story, and the alacrity of the princess taught her two very distinct lessons. Number one, you can out-troll a troll. This teaches Hailey that there are limits to the outward character, lines of demarcation that the inward being is hesitant to cross. A troll may be menacing, but it still has buttons that can be pushed and the ability to feel fear. The second thing she learned is that beauty is of greater importance than prosperity. If you have to choose between saving face and being saved, but defaced, go with the former. Vileness can be hidden on the inside, but not the outside. Everyone has their own strengths, their own interior monsters, and you should learn to mask yours as well as you can.

Ostensibly, Hailey thinks, she is being tested with her own dark beast to keep at bay. Building her inner resolve, she climbs off of her

bed and begins to make the trek across the room. First she steps on a blue splotch of carpet, when suddenly a great roar shakes the room. Unnerved, Hailey leaps up in the air and lands on a carpeted red splotch, a good foot from where she just had been. Silence overtakes her, the bellowing has ceased. *Curious*, she thinks, *could this be causation or merely correlation?* Assuming the former, Hailey moves, swiftly, being sure only to place her weight down when red carpet is underneath her feet. This works. *I am a God*, Hailey thinks. *Oh, fated creature, how you will bend to my will.* Now, fully convinced of her solipsistic superiority, Hailey boldly places her hand on the closet doorknob. She doesn't open it, however, and instead, she pauses.

Reality intercedes for a moment. Eventually, she'll have to turn this knob and there's still the possibility--the smallest possibility--that she will be leapt upon and eaten upon as soon as she does so. Suicide by Monster is not becoming, Hailey decides. Oppression crushes her resolve, leaving her struggling to plan her next move. Luckily, she recalls a similar story that she had encountered before that might help her make the right decision. Very carefully, she eases her hand off of the closet doorknob. Escape may be cowardly, but as she sidles away to take a seat in a small plastic chair, Hailey can't help but notice that the room seems to have doubled in size in the last moment or two, making her feel very small in comparison.

Yesterday she had watched a grainy 16mm film on her Father's projector. It was a cautionary animated tale that imparted a lesson she couldn't fully comprehend or appreciate at the time, but now, after dozens of hours of growth and reflection, she feels grown enough to respect. Essentially, it was the story of a Grizzly Bear, making his way through a dark and lonely forest. Life for the bear didn't seem dark and lonely, however, because it was his forest (and his eyesight, even in dim lighting, was very impressive). During the introductory credits Hailey watched the Grizzly Bear forage through the woods, looking for a bite to eat. It (the bear) had large, worn

paws and long, sharp claws. Normally, this would frighten young children. Grizzly Bears do not make good pets.

Ibid (for that was the bear's name, though his friends often called him Ib for short) loved nature and everything it represented. Nighttime was the best, because that was when the moon called out thousands of insects and plants and fish and nocturnal animals that flooded the air with new smells, sounds and sensations. Sure, he ate a lot of these, but that couldn't be helped. It was in his nature. Grizzly Bears do this. He felt completely justified, and there was always the love of the hunt. That trumped everything else that he could imagine.

Tonight, the hunt was strong with him. He sensed some elusive, rare prey in the distance, and it filled his nostrils with a bloodlust that was difficult to explain to his non-bear friends (or convey through a worn 16mm filmstrip). A primal desire overtook his brain and his heart and his lungs and his guts and sent shivers to his other parts, driving him forward, urging him to his goal. This made him move swiftly and quietly, tuned in, one with the world around him.

In the distance, he could tell his prey was getting closer. Now, the taste of murder was upon him and Ibid felt greater than anything else alive, more filled with purpose and given allowance to do and take anything that he could. Humans were the only other creatures he knew that experienced this, this feeling that your value was greater than that of any other's. Ugly, this sensation, but wholly powerful. Malice justified, Ibid came upon a clearing. Emerald light filled his eyes, from the moon, which was casting a glow on a waterfall that ran into a large lake bed. Sitting there, next to the shore of the lake, was the seldom-encountered prey that Ibid had sought: A Unicorn.

Saliva dripped from his massive grizzly jaws, spooling onto the ground in front of him. Certainly, his eyes were playing trick on him.

Really, he had always believed the tales of Unicorn Meat to be those of legend, told to keep the cubs hard-working and earnest. Everything in his being shouted that this was a trick of some sort, but one he was willing to put to the test. Easing into the clearing, Ibid moved as softly and quietly as he could. Nearly forty-two minutes was spent creeping along the ground, staying out of sight, but with the smallest breaking of a fallen twig, sound filled the air, alerting the creature to his presence. Startled, the white unicorn's head shot up, filled with understanding, and the beast took to the sky.

And that's when Ibid realized that not only were the tales of Unicorns true, all of those tall tales from his youth were. Now the full understanding of his terrible predicament hit him, hard, and it was as if he had taken a physical blow. Deep, rhythmic hums filled the sky as the Unicorn's laser beams began to charge and Ibid had the confirmation of his worst fears, that this was not simply a Unicorn--instead, it was a Space Unicorn.

Clearly he was outmatched, but the bear refused to stand still and surrender. One moment he was there, frozen by the side of the lake, and the next he was gone, galloping through the woods as fast as his paws could carry him. Never did he expect to outrun a demon capable of defying gravity, however, and within moments the Space Unicorn was upon him. Sharp blasts of red light shot past him, digging into the dirt and the brush and demolishing all it came into contact with. Terror gripped Ibid, but he pushed it to the side. Right now he needed the fear to urge him forward. After a few more moments of dodging certain death, he came upon the path he had hoped to find. It wound upwards, sharply, and led to a steep incline where the ground had collapsed under itself, years earlier, during a tremulous shaking of the Earth. Now Ibid could also take to the skies. The claws came in handy for this task as he leapt upwards, burrowing them into the dirt to find the purchase necessary to lift his weight off the ground. Suddenly he was near the top, and he

turned to face his prey.

Oblivious to the Grizzly's plan, the Space Unicorn simply hovered in the sky, curious. Before it could realize the danger, Ibid had spun away from the cliff front and pushed off, flying back through the air with impressive speed. The roles had switched once more, predator-becoming-prey-becoming-predator, and the Space Unicorn barely had time to respond. All he needed, however, was a split-second. Ibid flew through the sky, snarling, claws out-stretched. Nimiety, the Space Unicorn, let loose with a blast of rainbow fury from his eyes. Everything slowed for a moment. Destiny held its breath.

Now, sure, this sort of pause at the moment of climax is standard fare, but Hailey was completely taken in. Only the sound of double-perforated Kodak Tri-X flying through the film screen, twenty-four frames passing through each second, made a sound in the room. Welcome was the resumption of action, which, despite the perception of time's cessation, happened before a few solid blinks of the eye could be made.

Sparing you the drama, Ibid lost. A satisfied Nimiety flew off into the distance, presumably to finish gathering minerals to fuel its return to Spacetopia, where Space Unicorns reside in peaceful unity. Gore--that's all that was left of our Grizzly Bear protagonist. Actually, an outstretched arm survived. Clearly a metaphor of some kind. It was here that Hailey's Father burst into the basement, shouting. This isn't for your eyes! he vocalized, loudly. Yes, this is what shouting is.

That night the scene was reconstructed from memory a thousand times. Hailey was sure the bear was kaput, but kept envisioning a furthering of the fiction in which he could survive, somehow, and take to space for his revenge. Elusive, the moral of this story was.

Recalling this now, on her chair, outside the realm of her own beast, Hailey realizes what meaning could be derived from this tale of woe.

If the bear had kept to himself and left the unicorn alone, he would have survived. Death awaits the brave. Dire, but possibly wise. Letting the doubt from this overtake her, Hailey stands, prepared to return to bed. Except, she finds her feet glued to the floor, refusing to let her do so.

Ultimately, these stories cover pretty similar ground. Parallel material, one might say. Endings are the problem—in one the brave walks away better for it, in the other he faces evisceration-by-laser. Now the understanding sets in... Different results for different tellings—to each their own conclusion. She feels emboldened, again, by this revelation.

Clearly, Hailey feels, she has her own role to fill. Ominous growls rise from her closet door, as if to challenge her new assurance. Hailey gets it, now, and is sure that she can craft her own role--if she can't be a princess, she can sure as hell be a Space Unicorn. Entropy is an art form, chaos is welcome. She walks to the closet without hesitation. Inside, something lurks, unknowable. Only, 'knowable' matters just to those who need rigid definitions. Not Hailey, now.

The door opens, she enters, and it closes. A roar fills the air, rumbling, and is met by the low growl of a child--only this growl builds into a snarl and then a deafening war cry. Kept inside, this hideous wail of creation and defiance would have slowly diminished over the years, fading throughout the rise into adolescence and adulthood. Emitted, unleashed, it is powerful beyond all measure. Satiated, the door re-opens and Hailey steps out, grinning, blood on her teeth, sure, now, as sure as she has ever been of anything, of what it truly means to be a monster at heart.

