

REAL MONSTERS

by Dan Armstrong

I knocked reluctantly on the door that led from the garage to the kitchen. There was no response from the other side. I gently squeezed my eleven-year-old daughter Melody's hand and stared down at my feet. The last thing in the world I wanted to do was go through this door.

I turned to Melody. She was already looking at me.

"It's alright, Daddy."

I forced a smile and leaned over to kiss her on the forehead.

"There are no monsters in there," she added in a whisper.

"I know," I said, thinking just the opposite.

Melody took hold of the doorknob, pushed open the door, and led me by the hand into the kitchen.

Pamela stood at the sink, her back to us, the water running. Pamela spoke without turning around. "I thought you were going to be here at six?"

I took a deep breath. "The piano lesson ran long."

"Mom," exclaimed Melody. "Mrs. Walker wants me to play in the senior recital the week after next." She released my hand and took a step toward her mother. "We forgot the time trying to decide what I should play." She danced pixie-like across the center of the kitchen to give her mother a hug.

The hissing rush of water cut off. Pamela turned slowly into Melody's embrace and faced me. She wore an apron over a white dressing gown. Her brunette hair was pulled back in a loose ponytail. She must have just bathed. I could smell the perfumed fragrance of her body powder all the way across the room.

"That's wonderful, Melody," said Pamela staring at me. Her brown eyes dipped down into our daughter's. "When will it be?"

"Tuesday. Seven o'clock. *In the high school auditorium!*"

Pamela sparkled so much with her pride for Melody it hurt. “What are you going to play?” she asked.

“That’s why we’re late, Mom. We’re still deciding.” Melody spun out of Pamela’s arms. “Maybe Beethoven!”

I put my hand on the doorknob. “I’ve got some late business that night, Mel, but I’ll be there.”

“I know that, Daddy.”

She blew me a kiss good-bye, tucked her piano books under her arm, and skipped down the hall and across the living room. I heard her bedroom door open and close with a grim nostalgic finality. “I’d better go,” I muttered pulling open the door to the garage.

“Where did you get those pants?”

The slack tone caught me halfway out the door. I stopped and slowly turned around. “I’ve had these pants six months. Something wrong with them?”

“It looks like you have no butt.”

“Then maybe you should be wearing them.”

Pamela turned abruptly back to the sink, presenting me with the object of derision.

“I love your ass, Pamela. Sorry, it was just a joke.”

Pamela looked over her shoulder and spoke, flat and cool. “Like your commitment to Melody.”

I stepped all the way back into the kitchen. Then very evenly said, “I’ll be there Tuesday night.”

“Not with what’s-her-face.”

I looked up at the ceiling.

Pamela turned all the way around. “You wouldn’t.”

“I haven’t been out with Helen in two months. Christ, Pamela, leave it go.”

“She was a control freak wasn’t she?”

“Control freak?”

Pamela ignored the suggestion. “How is she in bed?”

I felt myself swell with a thick auric heat. “Give me a break.”

“I heard she was frigid.” Her eyes spiked out with snapping flames.

“Pamela, please.”

“A perfect match for you.” She undid her apron and tossed it with a sensual carelessness on the counter.

“Bye, Pamela. I’ve got to go.”

She made no acknowledgement of my leaving and sashayed out of the kitchen as if a long, finned tail snaked behind her. From down the hall, she called over her shoulder. “By the way, the health insurance premium went up.”

She caught me halfway out the door for a second time. “How much?”

She continued down the hall without an answer, her invisible tail slapping against the walls.

“Pamela, how much?” I felt the horrible Hyde-thing waking in me. I let go of the door. “*I’ve got to go now. How much?*”

No answer. Christ!

When I caught up with her, she was standing before the dresser mirror in what had been our bedroom. Our eyes met through the glass.

There was something monstrous in her image in the mirror. Like the quicksilver portrayed the animation of her psyche. “How much more money do I owe you?” I asked directly to her reflection. “Twenty-five dollars?”

“More,” she said, averting her eyes and pulling the hair band from her ponytail. As she shook the hair loose, it seemed to be mixed with snakes, waving and snapping about her head.

“This isn’t the Price is Right, Pamela. How much more?”

Her eyes flashed up at me in the mirror. “Seventy-five a month.”

“It went up a hundred and fifty dollars a month?”

Pamela undid the tie to her gown, opened it slightly, exposing that she wore nothing beneath, and re-tied it. I saw this in great exaggeration in the mirror as a deliberate tease.

“We *are* splitting the insurance, right, Pamela?” I stared at her reflection. “Right?”

Pamela ignored the question and began to brush at the snakes entwined in her hair. She took several long slow strokes, then turned to face me directly. “Have you made love since the divorce?”

The hackles stood up thick on my back. “*I’ve got to go.*”

“Don’t get uptight, Jason.” She moved over toward the bed, still brushing her hair. “I’m just curious. I *was* your wife for fourteen years.” As she sat down on the bed, her robe split open nearly to her hip.

Fuck. I turned abruptly out of the room and into the hallway. Pamela continued on, “Well, have you?”

I stopped in the hall, then stomped right back in. “Fuck you.”

“A little touchy? Must not be getting any,” she laughed a loud horsy laugh and fell back on the bed with extravagant immodesty.

“Christ, Pamela!” I started to turn away again, but the unsettled beast had begun to rise in me.

“You got a problem?” She sat up, leaving her robe wide open.

“Just you. I’m out of here.”

“Are you getting an erection?” she half-whispered, half-tittered, staring at my crotch. I looked away from her, adjusting my pants. “You are! You pervert.” She laughed again.

I closed the bedroom door and lowered my voice. “Pervert? You’re the one playing the sex game. Cover yourself up.”

Pamela stood, wrapped her robe tight around her, and stuck her face into mine. “Like you think I’d want to play any kind of sex game with a man I fucked for years into a dry, dreary boredom. You’re the one getting aroused. Look at yourself.” She shook her head, chortling. “I need to get dressed.”

“Then I better get the hell out of here.”

Pamela strode to her closet and with her back to me announced. “I have a date tonight.”

I turned my rage to the mirror. The wolf-thing of myself glowered back at me, salivating and aroused. Behind me, in the madhouse reflection, Pamela, with snapping and hissing snakes dangling down to her shoulders, removed her robe. Off her backside a long scaled fishtail switched from side to side. I turned away from the reflection and faced her straight on. “Who’s watching Mel?” I said it with as little emotion as I could.

Pamela bent over, pushing her hand through an assortment of shoes and clothes on the closet floor. I stared at her bare ass as she fished out a pair of purple bikini underwear and stepped into them with one leg. “I haven’t heard from the baby-sitter yet. I was thinking of

asking you,” she replied, turning around and stepping through the panties with the other leg, snapping the waistband.

I swear I could smell her as she did this. I think my mouth fell open. I wanted viciously to fuck her right then and there.

Pamela read my deep, red leer. She pushed some loose hair behind her left ear. *“If you weren’t leaving.”*

“I am leaving,” I said, staring at her bare breasts. She squeezed the right one absently with her hand. I turned away from her for what I was thinking. And there she was in the funhouse mirror again, snakes waving in her hair, her breasts elongated, swollen and sweating, nipples upright. Below she balanced on a thick mermaid’s tail. The ugliness only turned me on more.

“Wouldn’t you like a few more hours with Melody tonight?” She looked at me through the mirror like an entity from Hell. My wolf-man’s erection stood out horribly in the reflection like a lurid one-eyed Iguana. “I’ll even pay you.”

“Fuck you,” I gnashed at her.

“No, asshole, three bucks an hour like the regular sitter.”

Aggrrrhhh. I spun around. “Damn it, Pamela, put on your clothes.”

“God, can’t you even watch your ex-wife get dressed?”

“Fuck! Like you’re not doing this strip tease on purpose.”

“I thought my ass was too big?” she sneered, giving it an exaggerated shake, unraveling just a bit more unfinished business.

I couldn’t stand it any longer. I furiously yanked open the door and stalked out of the room.

Out in the hallway, I pulled myself together as best I could then crossed the living room to Melody’s bedroom. I tapped out a light shave-and-a-haircut on the door.

“Come on in, Dad.”

I opened the door partway and stuck my head in. Melody sat cross-legged on the bed, looking back at me. Her piano books were open and spread around her. Torn-from-magazine-pictures of heartthrob rock stars plastered the wall directly behind her. On the wall to the right

was a single black and white poster—a silhouette of Beethoven before a rippling set of piano keys. Black notes rose from the keys like a formation of birds.

I smiled at her. “I need some protection.”

“From Mom?” A little smirk played in her eyes.

“Yeah. She’s on my case again.” I came all the way in and sat on the bed beside her. She leaned over and hugged me. I kissed her on the top of the head and breathed in the scent of her hair.

Melody released her hug and looked up. “You know, Dad, Mom isn’t always mean like she is to you.”

“I know, Mel. I know. It’s as much me as it is her. It’s not good.”

“Didn’t you use to love her?”

“Yeah.” I gazed deeply into her eyes. “So much as to want you.” Melody was so beautiful I wanted to cry. “Hug me again,” I asked.

And, thank God, she did.

“Your mother says she’s going out tonight,” I said, wondering what the anger between her mother and I was doing to Melody. “You mind if I keep you company?”

She looked up at me in disbelief. “You’re kidding, right?”

“About your mother going out?”

“No. If I would mind your staying. Of course I want you instead of that spacey teenager Linda Holgate. Dad, really.”

“I just didn’t want to take anything for granted.”

“Dad?”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” I looked down at the piano books. “What are you going to play at the recital?”

“I’m not sure. If you stay this evening, I’ll play the pieces I’m thinking about. You can help me decide.”

“I’d love that. Maybe I should go tell your mom I’m going to stay before she sets up something else.”

“Do it, Dad.”

I got up from the bed, patted her on the head, and exited from the room with one last glimpse back at her. Her attention had already returned to the music books laid out around her. I smiled painfully and closed the door.

I stood in the center of the living room. I could hear the clink of plates and silverware in the kitchen. I felt like quickly walking out the front door and avoiding any further confrontation.

Instead, I took a deep breath and walked down the hall. I peered into the kitchen. Pamela held the remote phone to her ear with one hand and unloaded the dishwasher with the other.

“Nancy, how are you?” she said into the phone, putting a coffee cup on an upper cabinet shelf. “I left a message with Linda yesterday about babysitting tonight.” As she reached into the dishwasher for another cup, she noticed me leaning against the kitchen doorjamb. Something in the room thickened. Pamela just continued to talk. “She hasn’t called back. I was wondering if she got my message.” She picked another cup from the dishwasher. “Oh, good...Is she there now?”

“It’s fine, Pamela,” I interrupted. “I’ll stay tonight.”

Pamela continued on. “Great. Let me talk to her.”

I entered further into the kitchen. “You don’t need a sitter,” I said with measured firmness. “I’ll stay. I’ve already spoken with Melody.”

Pamela gave me a glare. She was wearing high heels. A nearly sheer, white silk blouse, and—I couldn’t believe it—the shortest, tightest skirt I’d ever seen her in. She looked so good I felt sick.

She turned her back to me, swishing her fishtail across the kitchen floor like a sidewinder, and put away a cereal bowl. “Hello, Linda,” said Pamela, tucking the phone beneath her ear. “Can you sit Melody tonight?” She opened the silverware drawer. “In about an hour and a half—until eleven.” She took a handful of utensils from the basket in the dishwasher. “Fantastic. I’ll see you then.”

“Why did you do that, Pamela? I said I’d do it.”

She hung up the phone and, with her back to me, began to drop forks and spoons into the open drawer.

“I already told Melody I was staying. *Why did you do that?*”

Pamela put the last spoon away, closed the drawer, and faced me. Her hair curbed and hissed with snakes. “I thought you were on the way out, Jason. You *were* in a hurry.” She brushed a loose snake behind her ear. “I don’t really want you here anyway.”

“What do you mean, you don’t want me here?”

“I don’t trust you in my house.”

“Trust me in *your* house? Christ, Pamela, what kind of bullshit is that? Not ten minutes ago you asked me to stay with Melody while you went out on your...*date*.” More than our anger-altered-egos, a third presence began to invade the psychic space. “*I want to stay*.”

“I don’t care what you *want*. I just made plans with the sitter. Now *please leave*.” Our dynamics were so ugly sometimes we could induce a kind an energetic thing of itself. A frightening psychic monster when we really got it going.

Pamela turned away from me and took a large mixing bowl from the dishwasher. She knelt down to put it in a lower cabinet. Her skirt hiked up her thighs and tightened around her ass.

“That dress makes you look like you’re selling it.” I spit it at her. “Do you really have a date, Pamela, or are you just going out to walk the streets?”

She turned her eyes on me like they were white-hot lasers. “Eat me,” she hissed.

I gave her the finger, and like a signal to the yawning maw of perdition, the beast leapt out right between us—the product of our roiling beings—an upright wolf with a long tail of shiny scales and a mane of writhing snakes. It hesitated a moment, then advanced on Pamela and hunkered up on her from behind.

“What, you getting another stiffy?” mocked Pamela, ignoring the presence, sliding another large bowl from the dishwasher into the cupboard.

The thing rose up off her and stared at me, sizing me up. Was this my own reflection or was it really what I feared? A creation borne of the two of us. It dove full out at me. Sinking its teeth deep into my shoulder and kicking at my groin with its feet.

“Fuck!” I shouted. “Is dick all you think about?”

Pamela stood up. “That’s right. Penis fills my every thought.” She adjusted her skirt with an exaggerated shifting of her hips and sneered at me. “I’m not even wearing underpants I’m so hot for it tonight.”

The horrible monster let go its grip on my shoulder and turned to leer hungrily at Pamela.

“Bullshit. I saw you put them on.”

“Yeah?” She started to lift her skirt.

“Stop, Pamela.” I turned away and took two steps out into the hall, but the beast went the other way, diving snout first up Pamela’s dress.

“Christ, Jason, you jerk. I’m kidding.”

I strode back into the kitchen and snapped. “What’s the joke?”

The animal pulled its head from between Pamela’s legs and wiped its mouth with the back of its huge paw. “You Jason. You’re the joke,” snarled Pamela. The beast stood up on its hind legs, nearly eight feet tall, and flicked its long tongue out at me. “It would be best if you left.” Like that the thing was across the room, its jaws at my throat.

It was all too much. The skirt halfway up her thighs. Her nipples hard and visible beneath her blouse. The red lipstick smeared past the edge of her mouth. She looked awful. But whatever vile thoughts ran through my mind—or hers, it seemed, the serpent-tailed wolf enacted. Fair damnation for our madness!

“This is so god damn typical of you, Pamela. I come here and you set me up. Make an offer, get me to go for it, then retract it.” The beast turned on Pamela now, pinning her up against the cabinets, driving at her wildly like a dog. “You’re fucking out of your mind with this sex game shit too. It’s making me nuts.”

“Does this look like a game, you ass?” She brushed her hair out of her face. “Raising a child alone and working a full-time job.” The beast continued to jack-hammer at her. “*Does this really look like a game?*”

The fiend suddenly stopped in its work on Pamela and cocked its wolfen head. All that was ugly riot stilled.

A door hushed open on the other side of the house. All the snakes on the mane of the beast became alert. One hundred and one sets of eyes turned in unison and stared through the kitchen entry down the hallway.

“That’s Melody, Jason. Please leave. Before she comes in here and sees us like this. Please.”

The beast rose up off Pamela. It gave a look to me then Pamela, grinned, and licked its chops.

“She’s already heard us, Pamela. She knows we’re fighting. I’ll be damned if I’m walking out of here without explaining to her myself why I’m not staying.”

“Get out, Jason. NOW.”

“NO.”

Eyes agleam, the beast growled with malevolence, then ducked down through the doorway, and raptor-like stalked with clear purpose out of the kitchen. Pamela and I just glared angrily at each other as the serpent-tailed wolf disappeared down the hallway headed for the living room.

“I won’t leave without talking to her.”

Pamela lowered her head in frustration. “Please, Jason, just leave. Please, just leave.”

“No. I told Melody I was staying.” I left for the living room. Pamela grabbed me by the arm. I pulled free and continued down the hallway to the living room.

“FUCK YOU, JASON.” She screamed it down the hallway. “GET OUT OF MY HOUSE! YOU’RE MAKING IT ALL WORSE!”

When I reached the living room, Melody sat at the piano, eyes closed and hands over her ears. Across the room stood the leering beast, mouth agape and phallus erect.

“Melody,” I whispered.

Melody opened her eyes but kept her hands over her ears. She looked from me to the monster and back to me.

Pamela walked up from behind. “Leave, Jason. Or I’ll call the police.” The fiend sprang across the room, landing right behind Melody. It turned to Pamela and me and winked. With a single claw, it lifted a ribbon of blonde hair from Melody’s head. Melody squeezed her eyes shut again.

“Your mother doesn’t want me here tonight, Melody. I’m sorry.”

The monster slurped and pushed its red erection up against Melody’s back.

“Stop Jason, you’re making it worse.”

“Then why did you ask me to stay in the first place?”

Pamela turned away and strode to the phone across the room. The beast stuck an exploring claw into the neckline of Melody’s cotton dress. Pamela punched two numbers into the handset.

In two strides, I was in her face like a clenched fist. “GOD DAMN IT, PAMELA!” I snatched the phone from her hand before she could punch in the third number and threw it across the room. The monster leaned over Melody and began to lick at her neck and right ear.

“YOU ASSHOLE, JASON!” Pamela ran for the phone. I was right after her. The beast slid a scaled paw down Melody’s side to the hem of her dress.

Pamela and I both dove at the phone, wrestling on the floor for it, cursing and spitting at each other. Somehow Melody rose up out of this maelstrom of hatred. In an act of pure will power, she lifted her hands to the piano keyboard.

I yanked the phone free from Pamela’s grasp, and she slapped me across the face. Two beats after the smack of Pamela’s hand on my cheek, the first few notes of Beethoven’s *Fur Elise* trailed out across the room like a string of doves. We both stilled. Even the beast lifted its paw from Melody’s leg and stood upright warily, ears erect, uncertain, caught by the music.

Melody continued to play, each note, each chord, beautifully, delicately. Filling the room with her own otherworldly quaver. I looked at Pamela. Tears began to form in her eyes. I bowed my head in wonder and frustration. The music was slowly dispersing the psychic ethers. You could feel it clear as day. Like warm sunlight evaporating a morning mist...and suddenly the beast was gone.

Humbled to the bone, I slowly raised my head. Pamela looked at me through bleary eyes. For untold minutes, me still gripping the phone, we sat on the floor beside each other and listened to the music, alternately watching our daughter play and looking into each others faces, wondering at the horrible thing we had created between us.

When Melody finished her piece, the house was silent. She turned a forlorn glance at her sorry parents, then stood from the piano bench, and without a word, returned to her bedroom. I stood up and offered Pamela a hand. She accepted and I pulled her up. She adjusted her blouse and skirt and pushed the hair out of her face. I exhaled a deep breath. “I guess I better go.”

She nodded, but her eyes stayed to mine. There was genuine sadness streaming back and forth between us. It was too painful. I turned and walked out of the house. We’d done all the damage we could do for one day.