

Introductory Note: Frank Langella is a stage and film actor. He has appeared in several monster movies.

The Monsters in My Head

I was sure he was coming to get me. First a hard step on the gravel and then a foot dragging behind. Step-drag, step-drag. I lay frozen in my bed. The long alleyway between our family house and the neighbor's was hardly three feet wide; dark, covered with black dirt, gravel and tufts of weeds and grass just barely able to survive the sunless space. The two windows of my room faced the clapboard wall of our neighbor's house, and Venetian blinds remained permanently closed against the nonview.

It was the mid-1940's. I had just seen a movie about a mummy. I don't remember the name of it. Just the image, so powerful even still, of a man wrapped in grayish cloth around his ankles, legs, body up to the top of his head. Eyes and mouth exposed, one arm drawn up against his chest, elbow close to his side, hand clawed. The other arm dangling alongside the leg that dragged. Several strips of cloth hung loosely from that arm, swaying with each step-drag, step-drag. I don't remember where he was coming from or going to in the movie. It doesn't really matter. I knew that he was coming for me.

For so many nights I heard him as I lay alone in my bed. My heart pounded as I waited for the good foot to land. A pause, then the slow drag. I would get up from the bed, pull the blind as little as I could away from the glass; and, with my chin just a little over the window ledge, I would stare hard into the dark alley. There were no outdoor lights, so I never could see him clearly. But he was there. He stopped when he saw me. I would get back into bed and wait. He usually left. Sometimes I fell asleep, and he returned, waking me. Other nights, he spared me and moved on.

I never told anyone about him. I don't know why. Shame, I suppose. It was that he seemed to be my private terror, and as much as I was frightened of him, I was also frightened of losing him. One night, he deserted me forever, and I was not to think of him again for 40 years, until my own son, this year, at age 4, began calling out in the night: "Daddy, daddy! There's a monster in my room. Come kill him." His room, several floors above the street, looks out over a New York alleyway to a brick wall. The windows are covered with louvered shutters. I found him sitting up in bed, eyes wide, staring at the tilted louvers, pointing at his monster. "He's coming in the window, daddy. He's going to get me."

I grabbed a pillow and did a dutiful daddy fight with the monster, backing him up against the closet door, beating him toward the shutters, leaping onto the window seat, and driving him back out into the night. He was a sizeless, faceless creature to me. My son told me he was blue, with big teeth.

This ritual went on for weeks. Sometimes, several times a night. I continued my battle, and, as I tucked him back under the covers, I explained that daddy would keep the monster from him always. I was bigger and stronger; as long as I was there, no monster

was going to get my boy. I was wrong. No matter how hard I battled, the monster returned when my son wanted him to. I was forced to accept the fact that my macho approach to protecting him from his fears wasn't working. My dad never told me he would save me from my monsters. I don't think he knew they existed.

As I thought back to my mummy and his eventual disappearance, I realized that he had never really gone away. He was with me still. He changed shapes as rapidly as I grew up. He became a wild bear at the foot of my bed. Then, later, an amorphous flying object swooping over my head. In later years, he was my first day at kindergarten, the agony of my early attempts at the diving board. He was hurricanes and the ocean, a mysterious death next door to us, my brother's ability to outdo me in all sports. He was hypodermic needles, even early haircuts. Still later, my first date, my first night away from home, at 16, alone in a small boardinghouse as an apprentice in summer stock. The first woman to say no, the first woman to say yes. And then, he became my ambition, my fear of failure, struggles with success, marriage, husbandhood, fatherhood. There's always a foot dragging somewhere in my mind, it seems.

My son called out again. This time I went into his room, turned on the light and sat down facing him. His eyes were wild with fear, wilder than the earlier nights we had gone through this ritual. I asked him to listen, but he couldn't hear me. He kept screaming and pointing at the windows. "Kill him, kill him for me, daddy!" he cried. He grabbed the pillow and tried to get me to do my routine. I felt I needed to speak to him without the ritual's having happened first. When, at last, I could quiet him, I said with trembling voice that I was never going to kill the monster again. I explained that this was his monster. He had made him up, and only he could kill him. I told him that the monster was in his head and leapt out whenever he wanted him to. I said that he could make him go away whenever he chose, or that he could turn him into a friendly monster if he liked. He sat expressionless. He had never stared at me so hard. I said again that I would no longer perform this particular battle for him, but that I loved him and would always love him. A slow and overwhelmingly beautiful smile that I shall never forget came to his face and he said: "You mean, I can make him do anything I want?" "Yes," I said, "you're in charge of him."

I went back to bed and lay there waiting for the return of the monster. He didn't come back that night and has never again appeared in that form. Sometimes he's being driven from the living room by my son with his He-Man sword aloft, its scabbard stuck down the back of his pajamas as he cries out, "I am The Power." And sometimes he is under the covers in the big bed when the whole family plays tent. We just ask him, politely, to leave. He stays for dinner now and then. He's everything from 10 feet tall to a small tiny creature in the cup of my son's hand. He's blue, green, and sometimes he's a she.

As my son grows, I know we will be able to face his monsters together. And now, when all I was once so sure of has become a mystery to me, I'm hoping he'll be able to help me face the unknown ones yet to visit themselves upon me.

ESSAY TOPIC: According to Langella, what are "monsters," and how do they change as a person grows older? What might be the unknown monsters that Langella mentions in his last sentence, and how could his son help in facing them?