

Monster

by F.R. Southerland

France, early 1800s

The first word I ever spoke was “monster”.

It was a word I’d often heard spoken. Perhaps I thought it was my name. I was called by nothing else.

Looking back, I suppose it made sense that it was the first intelligent sound to ever pass my lips. It wasn’t, however, the best word to build the foundation of language and communication.

Compared to the development of most other children, I was far too old to be only just learning to speak. Birthdays were never celebrated. I may have been five. I may have been eight. Whatever age I was, it made no difference. “Monster” was what I heard. “Monster” was what I was called and thus I repeated it.

There was no praise for it. No sort of recognition save for narrowed eyes and a backhand across my temple. The blow stung and I learned retribution. They were allowed to say this word, among the many other words and sounds that came from them, but I could not. It was a lesson quickly learned.

It was only when darkness fell and the small sliver of light that shown through the thin crack that served as a window had fallen away and I was alone that I tried out the sound again. It felt strange, my tongue heavy and my lips parting only enough to quietly utter it. Practice, I suppose.

I repeated the word over and over again, until it finally felt right coming from my mouth. Even so, the connotations were harsh. Somehow, even with limited language and understanding I knew this word was not kind. It was not something to be proud of saying.

But it was all I had.

I was very small on the day I learned I was different, when I first discovered the meaning of that word.

My life was isolated. There was only one who would come to me. A female, soft and warm, with clothing that made a swishing sound when she moved.

Her face wasn’t kind, but she was beautiful. High, angular cheekbones, wide-set eyes in the shade of a clear sky, moonlight colored skin. Her hair was silken and like sunshine; I touched it once, but it lacked the same sensation. That was also cause for retribution. I was not to touch. Only look.

Her mouth was always set in a line, her lips thin and nearly colorless. This was the only face I knew she had. I never saw her smile or even laugh.

She came once a day, or every other day, but never longer than a few. I measured time by the light that filtered in. The light would reach the wall and climb up in a fascinating shimmer and then the door would open and she would appear. Some days, the light would climb the wall, then higher, and the darkness would fall again, and still she would not come.

When she entered the room, scents would follow her. They were pleasant odors, overall. There was a scent I associated with her, something soft and pleasing. And then there were the smells of food.

There was always a pain in my middle, and it seemed to tighten when I smelled food. My instinct was to eat it and more. The food she brought to me was never enough. It only provided necessary

sustenance, but the gnawing in my middle told me I could've had that and much more before I could be satisfied.

This time when she entered, she didn't bring food. The scents were absent. The tightening I felt only grew and I made a small sound of distress. It had been some time since she had been here, since she had last brought food. The light on the wall had moved many times.

She wasn't empty handed though. There was an object, something wrapped in an old black cloth. I wasn't aware of what it was, only that I was very curious about it. Despite that, I didn't move. I remained where I was, seated on the cold floor. I stared up at her and waited.

Her thin lips pursed slightly. She didn't move, save to shut the door behind her. She stood before it, as she always did. I knew better than to try to approach it. Twice, I had tried to go through the door after her, and twice I had been left with a painful touch that lingered in ugly colors on my bare arms. Retribution. Lesson learned.

I kept my attention on her. A small sigh escaped her as she finally moved forward. She spoke something, her voice and tone conveying a quiet sort of command. Though I could not understand what she said, I moved forward anyway. Another lesson learned regarding disobedience and more bruises. I would rather avoid it.

The closer I got to her, the sterner she set her mouth, until it appeared nothing remained of her lips. I trembled, awaiting some sort of punishment. For what, I did not know. My gaze fell on the object she carried, and despite my apprehension to be near her, I was fascinated.

The folds of the cloth were opened to reveal a shining, shimmering surface. At once, I was transfixed by the smooth object and my hand reached out for it before I could stop myself.

There came a sharp sound from her, then another that coincided with my hand being struck. I drew my hand back quickly, and the next moment, I was in the furthest corner of the room from her. I had moved faster than I could remember having moved before.

The look on her face was complete shock. Rarely had I seen her display these features before—her mouth agape, her eyes wide—nor had I scented such a sour aroma. I couldn't define it, but it was overpowering enough that it became etched within my memory and associated with her reaction.

Oh, I had done something terrible, I realized. Something beyond the simple punishments I had received before.

I was correct in my assumption when she made a gesture with her arm, her face screwing up in an ugly grimace. I had seen this face before, just before being struck. Unbidden, a small whimper came from me and I buried my face against my shoulder, shutting out my eyes.

She spoke faster, the unknown words flying at me. I couldn't understand them, but I knew the tone behind it. Anger.

I didn't move. I trembled. I kept my face down and my eyes closed. It didn't stop me from hearing her usually gentle footfalls become hard clicks across the stone as she neared me. Her hand closed around my upper arm and I was jerked roughly to my feet.

I kept my eyes closed. I did not want to see her face. I did not want to see the blow coming. It was inevitable and I didn't want it.

Something, instead, was thrust against my chest. It was smooth, cold through the thin, dirty fabric of the shirt I wore. Her fingers were still biting into my flesh, surely leaving more of those ugly colors where her digits pressed.

Surprised by the object now against me, my fingers automatically sought it to keep it against me. Still, however, I did not open my eyes. I would not look.

Having no words, the only sounds that came from me was that wounded sound, a cry of distress and pain. It seemed to serve to only make her voice rise higher in volume and I felt my fingers relax around the object. It began to slide from my grasp, but it was pushed against me again.

At her insistent tone, I forced myself to open my eyes and look down. It was the object from the black cloth—the smooth, round, shining thing that had so taken my attention. I had no understanding of what this was, or what it meant, but she had given it to me.

Among my confusion was curiosity and fear. The former could be sated, and the latter only repressed. The object shook in my small hands and I lifted it, once more expecting a blow. I stared at the object.

No. I stared into the object.

It was unlike anything I had seen before. The surface seemed to hold the light that came in through the crack, and that was what caught my attention. Fascinated and confused, I looked from the object, to the crack, then back again. It was the same.

How was this possible?

And this was my first experience in seeing a mirror.

The woman made a sound of displeasure, and more words I didn't understand was spoken. I gave a sudden gasp when her fingers suddenly tangled in the hair at the back of my head and the object was jerked from my hands in a sudden angry motion. It was held up, thrust right into my line of vision and then I saw. For the first time, I saw it.

My reflection.

Wide, deep blue shimmering eyes were locked on me, unable to escape my vision. They were the brightest thing I had ever seen, even brighter than the glimpses of pinpoint light outside the crack when the rest of the world had gone dark.

I reached out to touch them, but my fingers only grazed a smooth, cold surface. My fingertips shown in the image and I withdrew them. I was beginning to catch on. What this thing held within it was also held outside, showing all of the truth that surrounded it.

Tentatively, I reached out again. I touched the surface where I saw skin, withdrawing to touch my own face and feeling the difference of flesh and bone verses glass. Slowly, my fingertips ran along the bridge of my nose, the tip of it, my lips, my teeth, my chin. Then, I began to touch along the side of my jaw, feeling the hard protrusions I saw within the glass. I had touched them before, had felt this natural configuration of my features, but I had never given it a thought. It was simply was.

There was something about this. Some reason why she was holding this glass to my face with a patience she had never revealed to me before. Even with my limited knowledge, there was something unsettling about this. What was I meant to learn here?

Very slowly, I lifted my eyes to stare at her face. Her lips were like my own, I realized. Thin, straight-lined. Her eyes, however as deep as the sky, were unlike my own that had shimmered so beautifully in the reflection. She had a nose, as I did. Her skin was the same as mine.

I began to understand. I began to see. We were alike. These were our similarities.

Before I could stop myself, I began to reach out. My fingertips touched the side of her face. She flinched away and I jerked my hand back quickly at the movement, startled. What I felt of her jawline in that all too brief moment of contact was smooth. Lacking in something I had and she didn't.

She didn't have the protrusions on her face.

My brow furrowed as my undeveloped mind tried to struggle with this new information and my head dipped until I found myself staring once more. There it was. My face. My terribly different face.

I once more looked up at her to see that grimace again, that sneered that showed her teeth. A word was spat. I could feel the spray of the spittle thrown into my face at the vehemence of that one single word.

And that was when I reached a new peak in understanding. That was when I understood that word with such clarity it took my breath away.

“Monster.”

It was such a revelation to me. I could only stand there, staring at my reflection in the glass until I could no longer see clearly. My face was wet again. I blinked and more tears fell on my cheeks.

She repeated the words with finality, as if to sear it into my mind and make it known that this was what she had intended me to learn all along with this cruel lesson.

I learned. And just like with everything else I had learned, of the retributions and punishments and harsh sounds and deep bruises, I wouldn't soon forget it.

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