

What We Keep in the Dark

by Ben Smith-Donaldson

Joe woke with a jolt, his heart pounding.

The room around him was dark and cool with the first hints of sun starting to peek between the curtains. The dream had seemed so real; a good nightmare always felt that way, but this one had been particularly tangible. Joe was running from something, but his legs were sluggish and heavy. The more he tried to move them, the more they stuck to the spot, even as his pursuer continued a steady forward lop. He had seen the face of the Thing he was running from but couldn't envision It; the nightmare of last night was already fading to make way for the nightmare of the workday.

With a grunt and a sigh and theatrical flourish, Joe threw the covers aside and stood up. He still had two full hours before he would need to leave for his job but staying in bed made him feel like a coward, petrified by dreams. He wouldn't be getting back to sleep anyway.

The cure for a bad night's sleep, as far as Joe could tell, began with an excess of coffee. The maker was already locked and loaded with grounds and water from the night before, ready to brew. For a moment, Joe cursed his foresight; he needed things to eat away his time, just a few seconds here and there. He needed to stay busy.

For the next hour, Joe tottered around the house like an Alzheimer's patient, lost in his own home. He watched the coffee brew for a bit, washed the few spoons and cups that had collected in the sink, and went about his daily hygiene rituals; he cleaned his teeth, his body, his hair – all those inescapable parts of himself. He cut the shower short after watching his hands

shake; the dream had mostly evaporated, but his anxiety was still a taut string, ready to be plucked.

By the time Joe had finished his elongated morning routine, there were only a few minutes left before his departure. Although he would call work a nightmare from time to time, Joe was glad for it. Even eight hours of answering calls from angry New Jerseyites was preferable to the abuse he would receive at home with his thoughts. After putting his shoes and coat on and heaving one more sigh, Joe was ready to walk out the door.

Except he wasn't.

There was one last thing to do. Delaying the act hadn't made it any more palatable. He walked to the fridge and opened it, finding milk, cheese, beer, a few other necessities. Most of the space was taken up by stack after stack of thick cut steak. He pulled one out and tore away the plastic film.

The steak was meant for the basement.

Joe shifted the raw meat to one hand and opened the door leading down. A plague of foul odor swept out: the remnants of other meals left to rot. The stairs were dark, and for a moment his hand hovered over the light switch. Maybe the dim glow from the kitchen would be better, enough to see without seeing too much. The wooden stairs creaked as he descended and the light from the top cast Joe into a devious shadow which went slipping further across the concrete floor, into the cage of the Beast, into darkness. Joe wouldn't go that close. He could see the metal of the cage as its corners caught the light from upstairs, but the Thing was still draped in darkness, consuming his shadow.

He wasn't afraid of the Thing exactly; he knew what was in that cage better than anybody. He was *disgusted* by It. "Well look what the cat dragged in," came a smooth voice from beyond the light. "You look like shit."

"Shut up," Joe said. He sat the meat down on the floor in its Styrofoam plate and slid it forward until it hit the cage.

As he turned to leave, the voice called after him, "And thanks for the rancid cow, you cheap asshole!" He didn't answer, just ascended the stairs and left for work, staying as stoic as he could muster until he could at least close the door behind him.

* * *

Work for Joe was one of those call-center jobs that attract people with degrees they can't use. Joe's Art History degree made him the perfect candidate. He had the distinct pleasure of offering technical support to people in twenty-three states, though most calls came from New England. He was sold on a promise of flexible hours and great benefits; after two years at the same cubicle, he was still waiting for either.

Every morning Joe would come in, sit at his desk, log into the computer and don the ceremonial headdress of customer service, that lovely black headset. He threw a pencil into the air and waited for the first call to come in. The eraser struck the ceiling and fell back down. The earpiece beeped, indicating an incoming call had been connected. "Thanks for calling," Joe said as his computer screen populated everything from the customer's name to their credit card number, "how can I help you today?" He didn't bother to say the name of the company anymore; he couldn't stand the feel of it on his tongue.

Rebecca Richards, with her timid voice and generic name, who Joe had never talked to but knew all about, was saying something about her cat and her internet. Some experience had

taught Joe that he didn't need to listen just yet. Interrupting the woman, he said, "Have you tried turning it off and back on again?"

"Well, I can't do that if it's broken, now can I?" Rebecca Richards at 422 South Maple Street with home internet, phone and television services asked.

"Of course not," he answered, "how silly of me. Let's go ahead and start by pulling out the power cord." He threw the pencil again. Last week, Tina a couple cubicles down had gotten one stuck in the foam ceiling tile. It stayed there for two days before falling and landing right in her coffee.

"It's already unplugged," Rebecca Richards said. "It has been since the cat knocked it off the mantle."

"Have you tried plugging it back in?" he asked.

"Hold on," came the reply. Joe surveyed the other items on his desk while he waited: a pencil sharpener, a stack of papers he'd never look at again, an unsolved Rubik's Cube, a wall full of doodles and knickknacks – a Ninja Turtle keychain, an origami crane, a tiny plastic top hat – pinned up like a chaotic mockery of decoration. He looked at the clock. Only seven hours and forty-eight minutes to go, not including lunch; and to think, this was where he found solace, away from the oppression of home. Rebecca Richards came back on the line and said, "Okay, it's working now." Click.

* * *

The call center closed on bank holidays like Veterans Day. Holidays were the worst since Beck left. Workdays were awful, but at least time had a reason to pass. Weekends were also awful, but they were regular and dependable. Holidays, though, they just jump out of nowhere and suddenly the whole day is meaningless ennui. Sure, there were books Joe wanted to read,

shows he wanted to watch, but he didn't want to do any of that. The dirty dishes in the sink held more appeal than indulging in a hobby, and he wasn't going to do those either.

It wasn't that he didn't want to do anything. He desperately wanted to do something; he'd been going over the possibilities for hours until it was almost noon and he was still laid up in bed like his legs were broken. He had to use the bathroom, but he didn't even want to get up for that. If he did, he'd have to go make coffee, get dressed, start a whole new day. The enormity of the thing was overwhelming.

He finally gave in when his bladder threatened to burst. Beck would have had a day planned for them. They would already be out in the world, not dribbling onto the toilet seat through yesterday's boxers. Maybe this way was better, though; there were fewer expectations of him, fewer ways to disappoint. He looked at the toilet seat as an example; he could have just lifted it, been a little more careful, but there was nobody there who cared. He certainly didn't.

A hollow scream came warbling up from downstairs. His Pet was hungry. There's always some expectation, some way to disappoint. He knew he'd always be a disappointment to It. The day had officially started. Now he had to make coffee.

* * *

The beep woke Joe up with a snort. He'd been dozing at his desk between calls.

“Excuse me?” came a clear masculine voice.

“Thanks for calling,” Joe said. “How can I help you?”

“You could kill yourself before you make the world any worse,” the voice said. The screen read Marnetta O'Brien, but this wasn't Marnetta. Joe knew the voice as intimately as he knew his own.

“How did you get out?” Joe asked. His voice was calm but his hands were shaking almost too much to fidget with his Rubik’s Cube.

“You stupid fuck; you locked me in a dog cage,” the voice said back.

There were a million things Joe could have said here but, trenched in rage, he couldn’t muster much. Finally, he sputtered out, “I’m going to find you and fucking kill you.” There was a beep as the line went dead.

From somewhere behind came a voice calling, “Joe, I need you in my office now, please.”

* * *

Joe came home that evening with a box full of doodles and knickknacks and office supplies. There was a shiny new padlock carried atop the box and a brown paper bag crunched under one arm. He walked through the open front door, setting everything on the counter. He worried that the Thing had gotten away but knew It would still be here waiting for him. It had made coffee while he was gone; the half-full pot was still warm. The refrigerator hung open with the remains of Joe’s steak collection spilling out of it.

Ignoring the mess, Joe opened the basement door and flipped on the light. He felt strangely brave descending the stairs, as if he weren’t going to be terrified by anything he could see down there. Even the smell hardly bothered him. “Those extra Krispy Kremes are slowing you down,” said that voice that wasn’t Marnetta O’Brien.

“Fuck You,” Joe said, reclosing the door of the cage and fastening the latch. “You won’t be getting out again.”

“Look at Me,” the Thing in the cage pleaded. “Look at Me, coward!” It demanded. Joe ignored It and went back upstairs for the lock. With some struggling and swearing, he tore away

the plastic packaging. By the time he got downstairs, the cage door was open again. The Thing was still in there, stamped with a smug grin that Joe could feel in the atmosphere without even a glance at Its face.

For one reason or another, cowardice or preservation of his mental state, Joe had never looked this Thing in the face. He had never seen Its wicked smile or hellfire eyes. He couldn't bear to. The Tormentor knew that and would use it against him often.

“I’m hungry,” It said. “When are you going to bring a nice girl over for dinner?”

“Fuck You,” Joe reiterated, snapping the padlock onto the cage.

* * *

“How could you have not told me about this?” Beck asked through her tears.

Joe might have answered with something. He couldn't seem to follow his own words; he wasn't quite sure what he was saying. He should have put a lock on the basement door when he caught the thing. He should have kept her out of there. What was she doing down there anyway?

“What do you mean, Joe? I live here! I sometimes go into the rooms of the house I live in!”

But she had it all wrong. He was protecting her. He had the Thing under control, locked away where It couldn't scare them anymore, where It couldn't hurt them. Beck didn't have any idea how that Thing had hunted him, hunted them both. Of course she didn't understand.

“I don't think *you* understand,” she was saying. “You can't just lock monsters in the basement, literally under your bed, and then pretend they don't exist.”

What was she even talking about? She didn't have any experience with monsters. He was a veteran at fighting this Thing; he knew how It thought, how It worked. He knew what was best. Didn't he?

“No! You obviously don’t!” she said. She said, “you’re acting like you’re the monster. I don’t even know who you are right now!”

He was still himself, of course. Maybe more so than ever, laid bare to her with his secrets. He still didn’t feel seen. How had all his hard work amounted to this? He had done this for the two of them, hadn’t he? He understood her pity and fear, but she seemed so repulsed...

“You don’t feel seen because you won’t show yourself to me. I’m not repulsed by you, but you have this whole...this *thing* that you’ve been pretending didn’t exist, and now I’ve looked it in the eyes, and you want to tell me to ignore it.”

She looked It in the eyes. No wonder she was appalled. Joe shuddered at what she might have seen there. All the things he’d been too afraid to face himself. He wanted to scream. He wanted to scare her and make her run away and never turn back. He wanted to be alone when he cried.

“I’m going to my mom’s for a few days,” she said.

And she did.

* * *

He’s awake by seven, but not for any reason. He hasn’t left the house in three days. There’s no more job to go to, and his friends have gotten used to only seeing him every few weeks since he’s captured that Thing. “You’re a failure,” that Thing was telling him now. “You’re a worthless failure and we both know it’s true.”

“I’m not the one in the cage,” Joe answered. The retort felt as weak as his voice when he spoke.

“Do you know why I’m in this cage, shithead?” It shot back.

“So that I can watch You,” Joe said.

“So that *I* can watch *you*,” It said. “And I do watch you. I know you better than you do. I know you wet the bed until you were ten. I know you’re sad that you never hit on Tina at work. I know you disgust her, anyway.”

“Watch this,” Joe offered, extending his middle finger.

“But you don’t watch *Me*, do you?” It mocked. “You put *Me* down here and ignore *Me*, let *Me* do whatever *I* want.”

“Well,” Joe said, “I’m watching *You* now.”

“Yeah, now that I’m all you have left, you’ll spend some time with *Me*. You’re here, but you still won’t look at *Me*.”

Joe knew the damned Thing was right; It always spoke the truth at the most inopportune times. It twisted all Its lies until they were nearly truths too. That was how It got Its claws in. Gritting his teeth against the impending Lovecraftian horror, fully prepared to lose his mind, Joe looked into the Thing’s eyes.

The face was mostly human, but gnarled and hideous. Where he had expected to see glistening fangs and soul-consuming eyes, Joe saw fathomless pain, sorrow, and solitude. The whole terrible Thing was a mask of suffering, still abjectly horrifying but not at all the sort of horror he had expected. The revelation was much worse than he’d anticipated. Without another word, Joe turned and left, stomping up the stairs then slamming the door.

* * *

Joe woke with a jolt, his heart pounding.

The room was so dark that he could almost feel the dream creeping into reality. This time the dream had a face: an ill-tempered uncle who had stayed with them for a few months when

Joe was seven. Just a stupid dream of things he'd left behind. He turned on the bedside lamp and shook the cobwebs from his head. At least this hadn't been some eldritch creature.

Joe was shivering as he made his way to the kitchen. As soon as he approached the threshold, he could hear that hideous Thing laughing from deep in the basement. It was faint to Joe, but downstairs the Thing must have been howling. He chose to ignore It and filled a glass with some water. He took the water to the bathroom, swallowed some with a small cocktail of pills, and returned to bed.

Sleep was off the menu for tonight, but at least he could be comfortable laying down. The meds would keep him alert and stabilize him so that he could curl under the covers and pretend that he was dreaming of easier times.

* * *

When they moved in, the basement had been one of the selling points. Joe would be able to set up an office down there; he could work from home and have a space for his art, which he'd been neglecting lately. Beck could have the smaller bedroom for her crafts and, who knew, maybe they might put a baby in there one day.

On their first day in the house, there was a note taped to the door: "Rebecca and Joseph, We're so glad to have you moving in! Rent is due on the first of every month! Thanks!! -Margaret." They both had a good laugh at it, even though it wasn't funny. Beck hated being called Rebecca – she said it sounded too generic – and Joe, well, people called him Joe. It was the reminder to be prompt with payment that tickled them, though.

"This place will be perfect for us," she said as she unlocked the door.

Walking in, Joe said, "Yeah, it's really nice." It wasn't nice, strictly speaking. It was a two-bedroom apartment in a duplex with upstairs neighbors, but as of that moment, it was home.

Beck asked, "What's wrong?" Joe hadn't consciously realized anything was wrong but when she asked, he recognized it. He had been so excited for this new start, this new life together, that he had neglected to think about that strange Thing that had tormented him his whole life, that followed and set traps for him. Would It find him here? Would It even come close with another person in the home?

"Nothing," Joe said. "This place is going to be perfect. Let's start unpacking."

* * *

The fear of being followed by that Thing became an obsession. When Beck learned, she was sympathetic. She wanted to help, she just didn't know how. She didn't understand the nature of the Creature that hunted him.

Joe vowed to catch the Thing, to contain It and show It for what It was.

Beck vowed, as diplomatically as she could manage, that he was crazy.

She was so enthusiastic in her arguments that Joe began to agree. She was the reason he'd started therapy and medication, but he knew that wasn't the problem, or at least not all of it. No matter how much he talked and how many pills he took, that Thing was always in the background. He thought that maybe he was crazy, but that was a separate matter.

When Joe finally caught the Thing, he found the task surprisingly easy. He simply lured It into a cage with the temptation of food – a raw steak. "Oh no," It said, "you caught me." Joe's new fear then became why the Thing had wanted to be caught.

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"You're going to get evicted," It said.

"I know," Joe replied.

"You're too ineffectual to even find a new job," It said.

“I know,” Joe replied.

The Thing snorted in derision. “You’re making this too easy for Me. You’ve lost your spunk, spunky.”

“I’m going to kill You,” Joe replied.

“You can’t kill Me,” It said back.

* * *

On Thursday, Joe missed his therapy appointment. He’d missed an appointment with the person who wrote his prescriptions the week before. He had about another week of meds left. He didn’t want to go off them – they helped with his depression and anger – but he also didn’t want to talk to anybody.

What was more important right now was finding a job. It should be relatively easy to get another customer service job; call centers were always hiring. Then again, Joe was so tired of that landscape. He wanted a career in something, he just wasn’t sure what. All the entry level jobs required one hundred years of experience and that Art History degree wasn’t exactly in high demand. With a sigh he began filling out an application for Telecollections Inc.; that sounded... promising.

He was about halfway through the application when he heard an awful shriek from the basement. The sound startled him but left him more angry than afraid. With a little effort, he ignored it. A few minutes later, the shriek came again, longer this time. It sounded terrible, like something dying of melancholy. With a few muttered swears, Joe went for the basement door.

Light flooded the stairs as he flipped the switch on. The Thing was reduced to a sad helpless lump today, but Joe knew better than to trust the façade. He had never known such a

bottomless pit of malice as he kept here, no matter what show It put on. “I’m not feeding You anymore,” he said as he reached the bottom.

The Thing lifted its head out of the fetal position with a wicked grin. Joe wouldn’t hazard a look at that face, but the malicious smile left a miasma in the air that stank worse than all the rotten meat. “You can’t starve me,” It said.

“I can try,” Joe answered. “Now shut up and stop screaming.”

In response, It screamed again. Down in the tight space of the basement, the sound was deafening. Joe didn’t flinch, even as he fought the urge to scream back at it.

“Stop,” was all he said.

The Thing kept right on grinning. “Feed me,” It said. It had been two days since Joe had run out of steaks, and he wasn’t planning to get more. This had gone on long enough. Even from within a cage, this Thing had dictated Joe’s life. It had gotten him fired, cost him relationships, and stifled him in every way It could. Hell, it had been half a year now since he’d been laid, more than two weeks before Beck left. “Feed me, you fat fuck!” It demanded.

“I’m going to kill You,” Joe reminded It, “one way or another.”

He turned to go back up the stairs. Behind him the Thing said, “You don’t have the balls to kill me!” but Joe ignored It.

* * *

Joe was in the kitchen making a sandwich when he heard his phone ring from far away. He looked around, thinking he’d had it with him, but the sound definitely wasn’t coming from this room. No, it was coming from the basement. How in the Hell had it gotten down there? Then the ringing stopped and he could just hear a smug voice from the bottom of the stairs saying, “Hello?”

Joe flung open the door and turned on the lights as the first words of the conversation floated up to him. “Telecollections, you say? That sounds like an absolute shit show.” He descended the stairs, and of course, there It was, chatting away on his phone. “That’s right, sir; I think your company is bullshit and I think you’re just suckling the corporate teat so that you can feel superior to whatever phone monkeys you surround yourself with.”

Joe started fumbling with the lock, his hands shaking too badly to stop on the right numbers. “Furthermore,” It went on, “I’d like to let you know that I’m a colossal fuck up and would run your business into the ground if you hired me.” Joe let go of the lock, still cinched tight onto the bars, and padded back up the stairs. “It was great talking to you, sir,” the Thing said, “but if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go bang your wife while you’re latched on to that corporate titty.”

“Enough!” Joe shouted from halfway up without turning. The Thing at the bottom of the stairs laughed at him. It was a horrible mechanical sound, like it couldn’t muster the real thing but wanted so badly to mock him.

The paper bag had been sitting there on the counter waiting for him for weeks now. It hadn’t moved. If Joe were being honest with himself, he was afraid of it. He treated that bag like it contained a venomous snake. Now he set down his cell phone and snatched that intimidating bag up, carrying it downstairs with him.

* * *

This time, Joe wouldn’t let himself look away from that face. It was worse than he remembered. More human and more dead. The sadness seemed cemented in every line and crevasse, like a sculpture that somehow captured the whole of human suffering. The lips were turned in a perpetual pout, not the mouth of someone weeping, but of someone too proud to cry.

The nostrils were flared in outrage. Only the eyes looked alive, and they were far too bright and active, too alive.

They seemed to plead with Joe to show mercy, to genuflect and steel himself for the trials of a painful world. They seemed to be asking for help. The thing attached to the eyes was not. “You feel big now, do you?” It said. “You feel like you can finally kill Me and everything will be all happily ever after? You’re just gonna shoot the blues out of your head?”

Joe didn’t answer; he just kept staring and kept pointing. In his hand he held a small pistol, the only gun he’d ever owned, bought from a pawn shop the day he’d lost his job. “You can’t kill Me,” the Thing said, and maybe Joe believed It. At the very least, he couldn’t kill that Thing while looking into those deep pools of regret.

“Fuck You,” he told the Thing for the last time. He took aim and closed his eyes. Maybe when somebody saw the corpse of this Thing, he’d get some grace for what he’d been going through. Maybe he’d get some appreciation, even absolution.

When he opened his eyes, It was still there, still sitting up in the cage with that same expression on Its face. A hole had opened up in the middle of Its forehead, but this had apparently done little to change Its mood. “I said you can’t kill Me,” It reiterated. This time, Joe did believe It. He closed his eyes again, trying to picture happier times. If he couldn’t have absolution, he would at least have peace.

* * *

The two of them were standing in the back of the moving truck, now almost completely empty. Two boxes remained to carry in; one for each of them.

“We’ll get these two in and we can start making this place a home,” Beck said.

“Sure,” Joe answered as he closed the door of the truck, sealing them in darkness.

“Come on, Joe,” she said, “I can’t see anything.” He listened to her voice, heard the acquiescence that came in it, and followed it to her through the dark.

“Good,” he said as his arms wrapped around her.

“Good,” she said as her mouth welcomed his.

They were alone then, getting naked on the cold hard floor of a U-Haul, lost in comfortable intimacy. Nobody thought the moment would last forever, but Joe intended to hold on to it for as long as possible. Maybe he actually could hold it forever; maybe he’d just hold on to it long enough.